Grand Gestures and (Im)modest Proposals

A Project for AND AND AND
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Pedro Lasch
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“Three great shocks are shaking up the assumptions of the international system, affecting the ability of the United States to impress its vision upon the system . . . The first shock was the 9/11 attacks, which changed the idea of physical security for nations, where now the greatest threats come from non-state actors and failed states, not other governments. The global financial crisis of 2008 undermined global financial security and exposed the flaws of a failed currency in the European Union. The third shock is the uprisings throughout the Middle East and North Africa . . .”

CONDOLEEZA RICE
I have been telling a lie for more than ten years: I claimed that the New York Twin Towers were being rebuilt to scale as living, functional memorials in different cities around the world. My long-term speculation matched the desire of those who wanted the icons to rise from the ashes with the propensity of others to project them onto every cultural, political, or military landscape around the world. In my telling, new WTC buildings were appearing in Budapest, Baghdad, Paris, Guantánamo Bay, Liverpool, the Darfur Region refugee camps, Montevideo, New Orleans, Panmunjum DMZ (North-South Korea), and Gaza City. I chose these sites for their global significance during this period, or because they had actually commemorated a 9/11 anniversary with gigantic twin light beams over their skyline. Dozens of prospective sites were added to the list as other people joined the project over the years because of their own interest or because they participated in competitions and other social processes I designed. The story began to take a life of its own, drawing in people from a wide range of worldviews and political standpoints and from a variety of class, cultural, and professional backgrounds.
“I shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts, which I hope will not be liable to the least objection.”

**Jonathan Swift**, “A Modest Proposal”
“If the public applies something like an economic rational calculation about war, how inelastic is the public’s ‘demand’ for war?”

CHRISTOPHER GELPI, PETER D. FEAVER, AND JASON REIFLER,
“Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq”
“It is difficult to conceive of the United States actually going to war against any country that would honor the Geneva Convention. Despite the enormous groundswell of support for an attack on France, for example, we probably won’t invade France. The only people America ever goes to war against are utter savages.”

**ANN COULTER, How to Talk to a Liberal**
“Here near my cabin, in complete silence, amid the intoxicating perfumes of nature, I dream of violent harmonies. A delight enhanced by I know not what sacred horror I divine in the infinite. An aroma of long-vanished joy that I breath in the present.”

PAUL GAUGUIN, letter to Andre Fontainas, 1899
I created this multinational Twin Tower franchise project and its accompanying urban developments as a labor of love and a genuine memorial to those who died in recent global tragedies. But the work was also meant to go beyond healing and commemoration, toward a goal only half-jokingly announced by the grandiosity and immodesty of this essay’s title. I wanted to incite the confrontation and contestation of our very sense of reality. I am not talking about paranoid visions or echoing Baudrillard’s now-dated arguments of total simulacra. Instead, I have been intently working on a construction process that emerges from the ruins of the very modern/colonial system that produced the Twin Towers in New York and that also shaped the ideological battle that led to their brutal destruction. The structure I speak of is defined by an inseparable relationship between coloniality (a systematic military expansionism and exploitation of the planet) and modernity (a worldview of linear or dialectical progress, racial hierarchy, and enlightened rationality). Epistemes occupy very large historical scopes,

“This flood of convergences, publishing itself in the guise of the commonplace. No longer is the latter an accepted generality, suitable and dull—no longer is it deceptively obvious, exploiting common sense—it is, rather, all that is relentlessly and endlessly reiterated by these encounters. On every side the idea is being relayed . . . repetition, moreover, is an acknowledged form of consciousness both here and elsewhere. Relentlessly resuming something you have already said. Consenting to an infinitesimal momentum, an addition perhaps unnoticed that stubbornly persists in your knowledge.”

ÉDOUARD GLISSANT, The Poetics of Relation
“Working in a regressive, deliberately ‘Orientalized’ Social Realist style reminiscent of Komar & Melamid from decades past, this Mexican-born artist takes up painting in order to insert the World Trade Center’s twin towers into various settings, including Budapest, Baghdad, Guantánamo and Kabul, Afghanistan. The results are more magazine illustration than art, but, as such, creepily effective.

ROBERTA SMITH, The New York Times
“Art becomes politically effective only when it is made beyond or outside the art market—in the context of direct political propaganda.”

BORIS GROYS, *Art Power*
and the modern/colonial episteme far exceeds the current period of U.S. hegemony, or the narrow time frame most people refer to when they speak of globalization. My approach in this project has been to cannibalize the iconography of Western visual culture as far back as 1492, a crucial moment of this history when Europeans unified the planet through their multiple expansionist ventures. The varied works in my series invoke and highlight the mythologies and materiality of this broader pictorial canon, as well as more recent strategies such as military disinformation campaigns and psychological operations, and the media practices of both state and transnational corporate media.

Given the mendacity I’ve already admitted to, I would understand if some readers doubt my honesty in this publication. But I hereby solemnly swear that I tell in it only what I know to be truthful and factual. This final publication in the project produced for Documenta 13 as part of the AND AND AND series marks the end of the long lie, and the transition to the final, more transparent stage of my *Phantom Limbs* (2001–2011) and *Twin Towers Go Global* (2006–2012) projects. Both
of these works have always been as real to me as any other artwork. As critical works of art that are also a public memorial, they needed to be approached with passion and caution, emotion and careful consideration. It was never my intention to engage in unnecessary controversy or purposeless deception, especially given the difficult and sensitive subject matter of September 11, 2001, and the other global tragedies they reflected upon. I see these works as part of a long lineage of artistic endeavors by writers and visual artists who have created things that defy an easy separation between fact and fiction. We resist this ethically comfortable separation for various, at times contradictory, reasons: to reflect a reality where facts are uncertain and beliefs questionable; to bring together publics who otherwise never share a forum; to insist on our right to the imagination; and to show that art can bridge the presumed gap between myth and science, religion and empiricism.

Many aesthetic and ethical complexities arise when a work of fiction removes the literary and artistic framing mechanism that separates it from everyday life. Friendships and alliances are made and destroyed in this risky endeavor, and this project is no exception. In the first
“The international aspect was key: It was the World Trade Center, after all, and people of many nationalities had perished there. We even proposed that, in solidarity, similar light towers be erected in cities around the world: London, Paris, Buenos Aires. The original towers were destroyed. Now virtual ones would sprout up all over the world.”

GUSTAVO BONEVARDI, from “Tribute in Light Explained: A designer of the WTC memorial says it’s too early for a permanent one”
“Baroque techniques . . . favor ‘expansion’ over ‘depth.’ . . . The baroque has undergone a naturalization, not just as art and style but as a way of living the unity-diversity of the world. This process of naturalization prolongs the baroque and recreates it . . . to extend it into the unstable mode of Relation . . . the ‘historical’ baroque prefigured, in an astonishingly prophetic manner, present-day upheavals of the world.”

ÉDOUARD GLISSANT, *The Poetics of Relation*
generation of invented stories, I created faux corporate and nonprofit websites, which I linked with real websites produced by others, and whose content was beyond my control. These external pages and platforms gave content and legitimacy to the work, just as the semifictional material I produced was written about and recirculated as factual by mass media outlets such as the New York Observer. A second generation of reports further established the plausibility and facticity of the international Twin Tower reconstructions. Press releases were distributed within specialized circuits by respected art institutions like Documenta, as well as trusted grassroots organizations like the Twin Towers Alliance. Names of real people, with real Facebook profiles and Twitter accounts, were put in conversation with made-up characters on those same social platforms. An ongoing stream of stories published on the fictional Twin Towers Go Global (TTGG) blog regularly interwove imaginary and actual events, boosting the organization’s online presence and creating overlapping audiences. The fiction was further supported and promoted by publications, pedagogical displays
and presentations, architectural models and renderings, and exhibitions of paintings, sketches, and documentary materials. I strategically evaded any assumed political certainty, ethical purity, academic authority, or artistic autonomy that could be ascribed to the work. To further complicate matters, TTGG staged a real competition in 2011 to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the WTC attacks, which invited participants to submit proposals for where they would like to see the Towers rebuilt. Almost sixty people submitted their ideas.

It is only at the end of this decade-long experience that I can speak openly about some of the conclusions and realizations of the work. On a personal level, I received attacks and praise from unpredictable areas of the political and social spectrum. I learned that silence and evasion can be an unintended negative result caused by the confusion of fact and fiction. In a purely professional sense, most people engaging with these works had some difficulty in seeing them as a whole, focusing instead on the more apparently artistic elements as if to isolate them by medium, topic, social circuit, or even tendency (object art, social art practice, etc.). A New York Times review of the Phantom Limbs portion made no connection between the paintings and the Twin Towers Go Global competition in 2011, or the organization and its website, even though the gallery press release referred directly to it. The articles that appeared outside of an art or cultural section, on the other hand, missed the fictional dimension of the work because they were intent on seeing the everyday political and social dimensions of the work rather than its obvious artistic framework.

It is clear, then, that these techniques easily lead artist and audience into a dangerous realm of lies, deception, simulation, dissimulation, fraud, and complicity. But even if we accept the negative judgment implied by these terms, a fictional framework inserted into our everyday reality can have positive social
“The relief and design of structures appears more clearly when content, which is the living energy of meaning, is neutralized, somewhat like the architecture of an uninhabited or deserted city, reduced to its skeleton by some catastrophe of nature or art. A city no longer inhabited, not simply left behind, but haunted by meaning and culture, this state of being haunted, which keeps the city from returning to nature.”

JACQUES DERRIDA, Writing and Difference
results, allowing so-called factual or documentary elements a way to co-exist with the imagination and offering a more cohesive and lasting circulation. Lies can be categorized by their motivations: they may be told to hide something or to trigger a specific reaction. In this case, the lie is intended to be forgotten once it has served its purpose. To give a recent example from the political sphere, no one in the post-invasion context should care anymore if there were ever WMDs in Iraq or not. But there are also lies whose function is to displace a specific truth or fact. The lies I have been spreading and will describe more do not belong solely to either one of these categories. They do not attempt to replace any specific content of our collective sense of factual reality, but rather express a need to participate in its overall transformation. Once exposed as artistic fictions, they are meant to stop existing as lies, and claim a life and meaning beyond their original function. We may think of them as stubborn performatives that force a suspension of disbelief, opening up spaces for collective invention and possibility. It is in this space of potential images and economic projections, of

“Wars can affect lines, colors, shapes and form.”

WALID RAAD
“The Impressionist sits on the bank of a river and paints that which he sees before him.”

THEODOR DURET
artistic and financial speculation, in the very ruins of modernity and colonality that we inhabit, that I would like to locate the first of two core ideas in my essay.

A VIRUS IN THE COLONIAL IMAGINARY:
OVERIDENTIFICATION, MIMICRY,
AND DECOLONIAL THOUGHT

This text is written from the perspective of a cultural practitioner for the use of other practitioners. Whether we see ourselves as producers, activists, artists, hackers, culture jammers, or educators is not so relevant. It is the enactment of our theories that matters, the centrality of doing something that materially and socially affects the contexts we inhabit. In the following section, I will disentangle the concept of reality from philosophical traditions that have tied it too closely to the concept of truth. But before entering the established turf of theology, philosophy, and the sciences, I will venture into the land of mythmaking, speculation, and the colonial imaginary, a place where I hope an artist will be allowed a word or two without immediate dismissal.

I already stated how my Twin Towers Go Global and Phantom Limbs projects mirrored the “story and image production” models of state and corporate media campaigns, as well as military disinformation and psychological operations. But the role of economic plans and projections is perhaps even more powerful to cultural mythmaking. We have seen the end of two decades—1987 to 2006—of prophetic statements and economic forecasts by Alan Greenspan, former chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve. Known to many by the nickname of “The Oracle,” Greenspan’s irreverent trickster style and his role as champion of deregulation and Ayn Rand’s objectivism serve as a good starting point for this section of my inquiry. Along with Milton Friedman, Alan Greenspan is perhaps the most iconic representative of a self-declared and incredibly powerful class of future projection experts. Indeed, economists’ power to produce realities has been growing for
“I am all for transparency, but this is Iraq.”

**WADIH AL-ABSI**, general manager and co-owner of First Kuwaiti General Trading & Contracting (FKTC), the company contracted to build Fortress America

centuries. In 1730, several decades before the appearance of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, Jonathan Swift published what I like to see as one of the earliest pieces of culture jamming. Swift’s famous essay, commonly referred to as *A Modest Proposal* (originally it was entitled *A Modest Proposal for preventing the children of poor people in Ireland from being a burden on their parents or country, and for making them beneficial to the publick*), uses the rational and statistical discourse of early projectors and economists to persuade its readers that the poor should simply sell their starving children as food for the rich, rather than see them suffer. Cannibalism meets market philosophy and compassionate conservatism in this visionary and fantastic parody of economic theory.
Swift’s enactment of critique via an overblown espousal of the very doctrine and worldview that he is criticizing puts him in the age-old tradition of political parody and satire, but the circulation of his pamphlet removed any framework that would clearly label it as either a piece of literature or a pure economic argument. It is this absence of a fictional framework that makes his work so radical to this date, putting it in direct conversation with more recent theories and practices of culture jamming, artistic interventions, happenings, performance, and social practice. Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* is also an early example of what has come to be understood as overidentification by both critics and practitioners of the above-mentioned modes of cultural production.

Theorists such as Slavoj Žižek and BAVO (Gideon Boie, Matthias Pauwels) borrow the term overidentification from the field of psychology, where it is used to speak of a specific pathology, to describe a cultural practice that mirrors power by fully enacting its ideological premises and inherent impulses. It can be seen to encompass an incredibly wide range of projects and cultural practitioners, including NSK (Neue Slovenische Kunst), The Colbert Report, and Santiago Sierra, as well as Roe Rosen and other artists included in the Jewish Museum’s exhibition entitled *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art* (2002). All of these projects demonstrate the usefulness of the strategy of overidentification in the critique of normalized structures of power. However, there remain evident shortcomings in the existing theories and current practices of overidentification. Here I can address only what I see to be its most glaring blind spot: the inability of its theorists to see the crucial connections between overidentification and the critique of the coloniality of power. The concepts of “passing” in race theory and “mimicry” in postcolonial studies (Fanon, Bhaba, Taussig), and the subversion of the “colonial imaginary” in decolonial thought (Quijano and Wallerstein, Mignolo, Bonfil Batalla, Cusicanqui) are critical intellectual structures for any field of inquiry that engages overidentification. But there are older concepts and bodies of knowledge that ought to be central to overidentification theory, and yet remain unlinked: Fernando Ortiz’s

“When you ship overnight, do you use the postal service or do you use FedEx? Our corporate goal is to do for the national security apparatus what FedEx did to the postal service.”

**Erik Prince,**
former Blackwater CEO
“For us, the fear and disorder offered real promise.”

MIKE BATTLES, former CIA operative and co-founder of defense contractor Custer Battles, talking about post-invasion Iraq
“Our core argument is that the U.S. public’s tolerance for the human costs of war is primarily shaped by the intersection of two crucial attitudes: beliefs about the rightness or wrongness of the war, and beliefs about a war’s likely success. The impact of each attitude depends upon the other. Ultimately, however, we find that beliefs about the likelihood of success matter most in determining the public’s willingness to tolerate U.S. military deaths in combat.”

CHRISTOPHER GELPI, PETER D. FEAVER, AND JASON REIFLER,
“Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq”
“The borderless world opened up to us by the digital information age will afford huge challenges and limitless possibilities.”

RUPERT MURDOCH
transculturation, Edouard Glissant’s creolité and his poetics of relation, the early-twentieth-century cultural cannibalism from Brazil known as antropofagia, and Joaquín Torres García’s work from the 1930s and 1940s, to mention only a few. Linking overidentification and coloniality produces an ethical and analytical framework that helps us distinguish crucial aspects of practices that otherwise remain muddled. Santiago Sierra’s often exploitative art practice based on remuneration, for example, can here be examined through his status as a Spanish artist working in the former Spanish colony Mexico and producing most of his early work for the criollo heirs that constitute that country’s art elite. Can the colonizer become critical or liberatory by overidentifying with his own racist, oppressive power. I would argue that he cannot. When the colonizer performs his role, he is not overidentifying but
“It is when we watched on TV screen the two WTC towers collapsing, that it became possible to experience the falsity of the ‘reality TV shows.’”

Slavoj Žižek, Welcome to the Desert of the Real
simply being himself. Likewise, can overidentification be a critical method when applied by the agent, rather than the victim or object, of the forces that are to be criticized, resisted, or transformed? I would say that it is highly unlikely, just as it is hard to imagine the n-word becoming anything other than racist and oppressive as long as it circulates through the mouths and commands of white supremacists.

To refine things further, let us look at the Chinese artist Zhu Yu’s performances of cannibalism. Current understandings of overidentification focus almost exclusively on the controversies surrounding his extreme performance, which is meant as a criticism of China’s use of its population as a commodity. This is similar to how Swift has been read in relation to capitalism, or as earlier Chinese novels like A Madman’s Diary (Xun, 1918) and The Republic of Wine (Yan, 1992) have been read in relation to the Chinese political system. If we take into account mimicry and the coloniality of power, however, a simple online search reveals that his cannibalism work has largely circulated through the viral processes of openly racist British, American, and European anti-Chinese social networks. It also circulates through the U.S.-Eurocentric art world’s more liberal obsession with China as a version of the primitive colonial subject. I consider both of these global networks of circulation to be a crucial part of the work, but they are entirely invisible to current overidentification theory as it fails to see Zhu Yu in relation to the broader colonial structure to which China itself has been subjected.

The succès de scandal of Exposición No. 1 (2007) by the Costa Rican artist Guillermo Vargas Jiménez, a.k.a. Habacuc, further reveals the need for a broader theory to understand such works. This elaborate piece was inspired by the death of Natividad Canda, an indigent Nicaraguan addict who was killed by two Rottweiler dogs in Costa Rica, while the news media filmed and police and security guards looked on. Shown in a gallery in Nicaragua, the piece included an emaciated dog tied to the wall, next to a text reading “Eres Lo Que Lees” (“You Are What You Read”). The work produced an immediate international outrage.
“Once it provided structure to a building so that life could be lived inside of it. Now, in front of the Regional Command East headquarters, it will continue to provide structure in the mindset of troops.”

**GEN. STANLEY MCCRYSTAL**, Commander of NATO’s International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, speaking of a World Trade Center I-beam brought from New York to Afghanistan to serve as a memorial in Bagram on June 1, 2010
as images of the starving dog circulated online, promoting the false sense that the dog was dying when in fact he was only tied up for three hours and then released. More than a million people joined a petition to help the dog and ban the artist, but almost always failed to bring up Canda’s death. Western Internet audiences mistook the operation of overidentification in Habacuc’s work, and identified with the dog rather than the human being at its heart. Without a consideration of the coloniality of power in theories of overidentification, the desire of overidentification to connect the individual with a larger society will remain a mere ghost of its potential. So long as it keeps ignoring the practices and theories produced by the world’s majority, the darker-skinned planet that surrounds the United States and Europe, the true potential of overidentification in critical art will never be realized.

In my research for TTGG and Phantom Limbs, I uncovered a genealogy of the theorization and practice of decolonial overidentification. From its very title, Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks may be seen as a great foundation for these debates. The recent three or four generations of Brazilian artists and intellectuals working with the modernist proposition of anthropophagy—cannibalism as cultural production—shed new light on overidentification theory as they insist on performing the roles proscribed by the colonizer, radically transforming them in the process. The Mexican phenomenon of “balmoreadas” in the 1930s, extensively researched and written about by Esther Gabara, presents another fantastic example. Balmoreadas were elaborate hoax events instigated by the prankster Conchita Jurado, who would switch from woman to man and poor to rich by posing as a rich Spanish man called Don Carlos Balmori. He/she thus tricked people into all kinds of corrupt dealings and revealed great truths about a corrupt society. It is crucial to include too the subjects of colonial power who reside within the U.S. and Europe. Spike Lee’s Bamboozled is perhaps the best-known, and I will say more about this work later, but I am also thinking of artists such as James Luna, Kara Walker, Fred Wilson, Carrie Mae Weems, William Pope L., and Jimmie Durham. All of these artists creatively
“It only stands to reason that where there’s sacrifice, there’s someone collecting the sacrificial offerings. Where there’s service, there is someone being served. The man who speaks to you of sacrifice is speaking of slaves and masters, and intends to be the master.”

AYN RAND, architect Howard Roark speaking in The Fountainhead, 1943
“The heart of Documenta beats in Kabul.”

CAROLYN CHRISTOV-BAKARGIEV, quoted in Art Spezial: Das Kunstmagazin
disrupt Western categorizations of knowledge, including fact and fiction, to confront the historical and contemporary forms of racism established by the modern/colonial world-system, which undergird its vision of reality.

My work also employs what some theorists have called *mimicry*, here defined as the necessarily failed attempt by colonial subjects to imitate and outperform the cultures and habits of their masters. In *A Sculptural Proposal for the Zocalo* (1999), *Come Paint the White House* (2000), *Naturalizations* (2002-present), *Latino/a America* (2003-present), *Black Mirror/Espejo Negro* (2008), and *Evo in Istanbul* (2009), I suggested the inversion of the relations of visibility of specific power structures that decide what is worthy of display. By including a mediating element that prevents the viewer from easy identification with either the powerful or the impotent, the colonizer or the colonized, the past or the present, these works subvert the colonial imaginary by highlighting the undervalued and obscuring the fetishized. *Black Mirror* does this by placing underappreciated indigenous works on display and relegating Spanish Baroque paintings to the background. Unlike these other projects based on reversal, *Phantom Limbs* and *Twin Towers Go Global* employ *overidentification* and *mimicry*, with the latter’s explicit relationship to colonial impositions, to inhabit and perform the role of the powerful. While *TTGG* and its choice of media (the Internet, social platforms, architectural design, urban planning, etc.) allow for the overidentification of artist and participants with global real estate and investment banking, transnational corporate culture, and military expansionism, *Phantom Limbs* permits the mimicry of a more historical pictorial repertoire, with all that may be implied by this troubled imitation and simulation of power.

As citizens of this failed modern/colonial system, we are indoctrinated by the structures and messages of Wall Street and Hollywood as much as by Renaissance and Modernist painting. But like the colonial languages we speak centuries after independence, I argue that the lasting elements of the visual modern/colonial regime—what most people
“The question isn’t who is going to let me; it’s who is going to stop me.”

AYN RAND, The Fountainhead
"With resource scarcity and climate change providing a steadily increasing flow of new disasters, responding to emergencies is simply too hot an emerging market to be left to the nonprofits—why should UNICEF rebuild schools when it can be done by Bechtel, one of the largest engineering firms in the U.S.? Why put displaced people from Mississippi in subsidized empty apartments when they can be housed on Carnival cruise ships? Why deploy UN peacekeepers to Darfur when private security companies like Blackwater are looking for new clients? And that is the post-September 11 difference: before, wars and disasters provided opportunities for a narrow sector of the economy—the makers of fighter jets, for instance, or the construction companies that rebuilt bombed-out bridges. The primary economic role of wars, however, was as a means to open new markets that had been sealed off and to generate postwar peacetime booms. Now wars and disaster responses are so fully privatized that they are themselves a new market; there is not need to wait until after the war for the boom—the medium is the message."

NAOMI KLEIN
“The question of the archive is not a question of the past. It is not the question of a concept dealing with the past that might already be at our disposal. An archivable concept of the archive. It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise, and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive, if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come; not tomorrow, but in times to come. Later on, or perhaps never.”

Jacques Derrida, Archive Fever
call the Western canon—can be even more overpowering and subtle in their influence than more recent manifestations. I intentionally created *Phantom Limbs* “under the spell” of this Western canon; the full installation, which features paintings of scale WTC replicas in selected sites around the world, references iconic artists, styles, techniques, and visual idioms from 1492 to 2001. Absurdly time-consuming for the standards of contemporary art—they took ten years to research and paint—and not outsourced to India or China for their production as some viewers have assumed, these paintings hope to trap the viewer primarily by their existence as image-objects, in their very fabrication.

A viewer contemplating an anachronistic Impressionist palette and brushwork comes to recognize exploding buildings surrounding the new *WTC Gaza City*. *WTC Budapest* displays a Venetian style reminiscent of Canaletto and Guardi, speaking of centuries of contact and overlap between Europe and the Ottoman Empire. Set in the Green Zone, next to the largest U.S. embassy in the world and Saddam Hussein’s most ambitious monument, *WTC Baghdad* is painted in the grisaille and color glaze techniques that bridged French classicism and Orientalism through the lineage of figures like David and Ingres. Gauguin’s exoticism and Matisse’s Moroccan period are set to wrestle awkwardly in the Cuban jungle reconstructions of *WTC Guantánamo*. The only non-painted work, *WTC Darfur*, is made to look like the engraved black marble of Maya Lin’s Vietnam Memorial, featuring the names of those who died in New York on September 11, 2001, interspersed with the names we know of hundreds of thousands massacred and displaced in the Darfur genocide. In *WTC Paris*, the Eiffel Tower and her new twin companions are seen from above, subjected to both modernist abstraction and aerial perspective through an overlay of state population controls, satellite imagery, Google maps, and aerial bombing, all part of the colonial military repertoire. Blurry, photorealist towers à la Richter hover above the Ninth Ward in *WTC New Orleans*. Various pop art tendencies give form to *WTC Panmunjum DMZ*, as the world’s most militarized border on the planet was drawn during the very years this
“...the ghost at the banquet of all public commemoration is always politics—above all, the mobilization of national solidarity.”

DAVID RIEFF
“As a general rule the torturer does not use the language of the violence exerted by him in the name of an established authority; he uses the language of the authority . . . It is a language which repudiates any relationship between speaker and audience.”

**GEORGES BATAILLE**, *Erotism*
style emerged. The painting that began the cycle soon after U.S. and coalition forces invaded Afghanistan in 2001, *WTC Kabul* incorporates the perspective and techniques of fifteenth and sixteenth-century Italy, the place that Walter Mignolo has so brilliantly theorized in *The Darker Side of Renaissance* as the origin of the modern/colonial adventure. The many visual conflicts, material processes, and emotional contradictions at play in *Phantom Limbs* cannot be summed up here, as the tone and movement of the project rely upon a fragmenting explosion of referents and psychological identifications. The sketches, visual research compilations (assembled into “research quilts”), and the many notations reveal this process, and bridge the *Phantom Limbs* and *Twin Towers Go Global* series. Yet the future lives of each project could not be more different. As a participatory work happening mostly on the Internet and its various social platforms, *Twin Towers Go Global* will stop existing in its original contexts now that its media cycles have ended. *Phantom Limbs*, on the other hand, will only flourish and grow through its inclusion in the slower and more long-term processes of the very museum and gallery institutions it overidentifies with.

**DECOLONIAL COMMONS, REALITY AS PROPERTY, AND THE ARTIST AS PRODUCER OF SURPLUS VALUE**

My contributions to the AND AND AND platform of Documenta 13 consisted of the development of the *Phantom Limbs* and *Twin Towers Go Global* projects over a period of three years (2010–2012). To complement this individual work, I co-organized, with Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri, a highly concentrated collective event entitled *Five Decolonial Days in Kassel: Transforming Our Realities*. Held at the platform’s Turnhalle space in Kassel, Germany, from July 11 through July 15, 2012, this series of walks, presentations, discussions, screenings, and workshops bridged questions of coloniality/modernity with the topics of the common(s), revocation, and non-Capitalist life that were to be explored throughout the hundred-day duration of AND AND AND. Following
“September 11 is also the anniversary of the military coup in Chile . . .
will an homage to the victims of the military coup in Chile be paid in the
middle of Manhattan, and will the U.S.A. artists, civilians, and politicians
recognize the U.S.A. administration support to the military dictatorships
in Latin America? Will a reproduction of the Palacio de la Moneda be
installed in cities all over the U.S.A., with support and funding from
Documenta 13?”

MARCELO EXPÓSITO, quoted with permission of the author from email response to the idea
of rebuilding the Twin Towers around the world, circulated on September 11, 2010.

a presentation entitled “Beyond the Colonial Unconscious” by Suely
Rolnik, the five-day exchange included Ayreen Anastas, Dalida María
Benfield, Heath Bunting, Maribel Casas, Sebastian Cobarrubias, Teresa
Díaz Nerio, Rene Gabri, Pedro Pablo Gomez,* Karen Hakopian, Brian
Holmes, María Iñigo Clavo, Pedro Lasch, Alanna Lockward, Walter Mi-
gnolo*, Raúl Moarquech Ferrera Balanquet,* Tanja Ostojic, Claire Pen-
tecost, Harout Simonian, Miguel Rojas Sotelo,* and Catherine Walsh*
(*denotes long-distance contributions). The range of approaches and
topics covered broad ones, such as epistemic disobedience (Mignolo),
the politics of naming (Walsh), the mapping of migratory struggles
(Casas and Cobarrubias), decolonial aesthetics (Balanquet, Gomez,
and Rojas), as well as located, particular ones, like blackness in Europe
(Lockward), coloniality in Brazilian cinema (Iñigo Clavo), sans papiers
in Germany (Ostojic), the ongoing forms of racism in post-colonial
and post-revolutionary Mexico (Nerio), and Elinor Ostrom’s work on
the Commons (Benfield). On the fourth day, María Dalida Benfield
led a very rich workshop in which all contributed ideas for decolonial strategies, which will be assembled in a shared archive. Throughout the five days we strived to create a commons that could in itself be decolonized by making room for truly global forms and philosophies of shared property and collective labor, including kilombos, ejidos, caracoles, comités de oriundos, and ayllú. The workshop countered the erasure and subsumption of the specificity of these forms by some liberal and neo-Marxist discussions about U.S. and European forms of the commons.

Our Five Decolonial Days in Kassel were centered around the idea of putting the theories, cultural phenomena, and artworks we were concerned with directly into collective processes that alter our lived reality. And it is this desire to transform reality, one of the grand gestures referred to earlier, which I can now begin to address in this essay. What does it even mean to say that we want to transform reality? The Cambridge American English Dictionary definition of reality is suspiciously laconic and vague: “the state of things as they are, rather than as they are imagined to be” (http://dictionary.cambridge.org). We find here the form of evasion that Barthes explored in The Obvious and the Obtuse: people pretend something is obvious or has no need of definition when they want to avoid an open debate about its meaning (Barthes, 2009). Most of us would claim to understand what reality means, but few know that this word’s first use in English (circa 1550) was a legal concept referring to a “fixed property” as determined by the Crown (Merriam Webster Dictionary). So the foundation of our reality is quite literally built on the idea of territorial property and its subsequent colonial expansion and accumulation. It is not by chance that nineteenth-century thinkers and revolutionaries launched their attacks directly on the theory and practice of property and ownership. Pierre Joseph Proudhon’s famous slogan that “property is theft” has received great attention as a political and economic statement since it was first published in French in 1840 (Proudhon, 1970). I view his motto as a means to shake the very aesthetic and cognitive aspects of reality, and argue that it is this understanding of the territorial and hierarchical origin of reality rather
“For globalization to work, America can’t be afraid to act like the almighty superpower that it is. The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist.”

THOMAS FRIEDMAN,
The New York Times Magazine,
1999
“History suggests only that capitalism is a necessary condition for political freedom . . . It is clearly possible to have economic arrangements that are fundamentally capitalist and political arrangements that are not free.”

MILTON FRIEDMAN
than notions of fact and truth which we may best use in our current struggles against capitalist accumulation, racism, social injustice, and other outcomes of colonialism. I would argue further that this reality’s pretense to stand for both fact and truth needs to be seen as part of what Aníbal Quijano has defined as the colonial matrix of power. Any claims that “there is no alternative” (to quote Margaret Thatcher) need to be recognized simply for what they are: incredibly powerful and at times extremely violent fictions. It is not by chance that Ayn Rand, one thinker who has most influenced the neoliberal establishment, produced most of her political theories in the form of novels. I believe that our opposition to such powerful political formulations needs to be matched with our own storytelling and a general refusal to accept the conventional binary opposition between reality and the imagination so clearly expressed in the Cambridge definition.

We also need to pay attention to the social theaters of action in which our fictions are placed. In this regard, J. L. Austin’s speech-act theory and Erwin Goffman’s work on everyday theater are relevant and helpful. Truthfulness for Austin exists as a social performative, an act that is effective or ineffective within a specific social structure. Likewise, our interventions into reality and the colonial imaginary are not abstractions or statements that may be isolated, but the enactment of specific performative frameworks. Truthiness, coined by the U.S. comedian Stephen Colbert, describes an “act or quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than those known to be true”; it quickly gained popularity in the United States and other English-speaking countries. It was declared the “2005 Word of the Year” by the American Dialect Society (http://www.etymonline.com). First coined during the initial years of Operation Iraqi Freedom, when false intelligence claims were used to persuade the populations of the United States, United Kingdom, and other countries in the coalition to invade another sovereign nation, truthiness continues to be used. It recently served as the intellectual framework for an exhibition curated by Elizabeth Armstrong for SITE Santa Fe (July 8, 2012–January 6, 2013).
“We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.”

RICHARD BAKER, Republican Congressman from New Orleans
and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (March 3–June 9, 2013). Real? Art in the Age of Truthiness includes the work of many contemporary artists whose work resonates with the spirit of this essay, and it is the clearest example of how the art establishment embraced Colbert’s concept. Pierre Huyghe’s elaborate social productions, the actual and fabricated archives of the Lebanese Wars in the work of Walid Raad and the Atlas Group (Smith, 2003), decoy World Trade Organization websites and false corporate statements of all sorts staged by the Yes Men (http://www.gatt.org/yes.html), Cornford and Cross’s proposed pipelines going through Afghanistan (Cornford and Cross, 2005), email campaigns by the Homeland Security Cultural Bureau denouncing an exhibition closure of Gabri and Anastas (http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0209/msg00060.html), and a growing critical literature on this kind of work are only a few of the many contemporary interlocutors for both Phantom Limbs and Twin Towers Go Global. As important as these voices are, however, I think it is key to not let them be subsumed by the obsessive periodizations and institutional demarcations of the professional art world. In addition to the earlier discussion of the removal of the framework neatly separating fact from fiction, I believe that many of these projects’ and artists’ radicality lies precisely in their refusal to work solely within the bounds of art and its institutions.

Two producers of grand gestures and immodest proposals reveal how this type of practice operates beyond art and outside of our immediate period. Mixing traditional illusionism with televisual storytelling of global proportions, David Copperfield became one of the most celebrated magicians in history, matched perhaps only by Harry Houdini. Receiving the Chevalier of Arts and Letters from the French government in 1994 and named a living legend by the U.S. Library of Congress in 2000, he is famous for many reasons, including the ownership of eleven Guinness World Records. The productions that best complement my interest in truthiness and overidentification—Levitating Over the Grand Canyon (1984), Vanishing of the Statue of Liberty (1983), and Walking through the Great Wall of China (1986)—resonate with earlier
radical experiments like those of the Yippies. All three were massive, globally televised events, coordinated with a live-audience component, like something between a Super Bowl game and one of Christo and Jean Claude’s monumental wrappings. If we do not count Nixon’s presidential visit in 1972, then *Walking through the Great Wall* made Copperfield the first American to produce a TV special inside China. Copperfield’s piece prefigured other mass spectacles that have become iconic of the end of the Cold War, such as Roger Waters’s (Pink Floyd) *The Wall—Live in Berlin* (1990), and the *Beijing Olympics* (2008). Copperfield’s *Vanishing of the Statue of Liberty* now stands as an uncanny premonition of the destroyed Buddhas in Afghanistan and of the emptiness left by the collapsed Twin Towers in New York.

Copperfield himself looked for inspiration in the work of our second example, Orson Welles. While many ideas relevant to our topic are explored in Welles’s film *F as for Fake*, I only examine his *War of the Worlds* (1938) because it became a direct intervention into reality. Adapting H. G. Wells’s story of the same title for radio, Welles’s immediately famous experiment presented news of an alien invasion in an actual news bulletin format, uninterrupted by commercials. This was so effective that it created fear, scandal, confusion, and anger against the deception, offering a classic case for media ethics studies ever since. Regardless of any debates on the artist’s intentionality, Welles’s *War of the Worlds* is one of the earliest examples of a growing tradition, of which both *Phantom Limbs* and *Twin Towers Go Global* form a part; this tradition puts the media and formats associated with “the real” at the service of full or partial fiction. We may observe political differences and contradictions among these artists and producers, but Copperfield’s and Welles’s work serve as a reminder that the art of the transformation of reality does not obey simplistic political categorizations of left and right, progressive and conservative.

We live in an age in which collective action and solidarity are already threatened continuously by that most pernicious and complex figure of neoliberalism, modernity, and coloniality: the individual and
“I think we have a clean sheet to start again. And with that clean sheet we have some very big opportunities.”

JOSEPH CANIZARO, New Orleans developer
individualism. It is through the figure of the individual that I will return to Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled* (2000). In this intellectual and political tour de force, we see the story of an African American television producer who invents a modern minstrel show to spite his racist boss. The immediate success of the show sets off increasingly violent and complex situations. Always trying to out-Herod Herod by overidentifying with new racist clichés, our character ends up producing his own tragic downfall. The film brilliantly embodies many of the methods and ideas I have discussed in this essay, but there is still a fictional framework here: the distinction between the artist and his character. So the conclusion of this essay must address the figure of the artist as a key vehicle and subject matter in itself. What is an artist within a cultural practice that sets out to transform reality, a practice that eliminates the frameworks that separate art from life and truth from fiction? What professions are we dealing with when we attempt to speak of producers of reality? Can the figure of the performance artist still play this role at a time when artists like Maria Abramovic contain their performances in our most conventional and sanctimonious art spaces? If we insist on the removal of the protective framing device that separates fact from fiction, art from everyday life, then we would have to ask Spike Lee himself to produce the minstrel show for TV, rather than doing it through a fictional character in a film. Such a direct enactment, suicidal risk, and permanent ethical confrontation can of course be found among various working artists today. The most famous of these is perhaps Sasha Baron Cohen, but even he uses pseudonyms and personae in his everyday scenarios for *Ali G*, *Borat*, and *Brüno*.

With similarly grand ambitions and much fewer resources, I decided ten years ago not to use a fictional character or pseudonym to produce my work related to September 11, 2001. I have since lived with both the positive and negative consequences of this decision, but I had very clear reasons for making it. As I conclude this essay, I can only mention a few. Placing myself as a real artist in the midst of the troubled history of 9/11 and the other global tragedies seemed not only the ethical thing
“It is not that humans have become any more greedy than in generations past. It is that the avenues to express greed had grown so enormously.”

**Alan Greenspan**, Federal Reserve’s Monetary Report, July, 2002
to do, but also the only formal and affective way to integrate the more traditional media and exhibition contexts of *Phantom Limbs* with the broad and unwieldy social circuits of *Twin Towers Go Global*. As troubled as I am by their histories and associations, I love the art media that I work in, and I am a believer in the *pleasure of text*, to quote the old Roland Barthes classic. In addition, while these works question any simple or stable relationship between facts and fiction, or reality and the imagination, I do believe it is dangerous to abandon the sense of a common framework of facts and its implied social reality entirely. It is a fact that hundreds of thousands of people in the United States and around the world still think the Twin Towers should have been rebuilt, and their very diverse reasons for wanting it so should not be caricatured. Most people ignore the fact that the powerful twin projections from the New York *Tribute in Light* transformed the skylines of Paris, Budapest, Liverpool, and Montevideo during commemorations of 9/11 in subsequent years. The battleship *USS New York* was actually built from scraps of the Twin Towers and assembled in the New Orleans area after the devastation of Katrina, only to sail back to New York in a recent ceremony. During the first month of the invasion of Afghanistan, U.S. soldiers requested that a large remnant of the Twin Towers be put in the center of the first military camp in the outskirts of Kabul. Almost ten years later, a WTC I-beam was actually donated for the current
9/11 exhibition at Baghram Air Force Base. Each individual who died in New York during the WTC attacks has a dedicated webpage. For those killed in Darfur there are no individual pages, as we only know a few names and are still debating years later whether there were a hundred thousand or several hundred thousand. The Arabic writing on a watchtower at Guantanamo marked the direction to Mecca, allowing the Muslim prayer. Next to it, however, stood another tower with the star-spangled banner, making all those who prayed bow to the U.S.A. The list of meaningful facts is endless and will continue to grow.

In September 2011, just as my Phantom Limbs paintings were shown for the first time to the New York public at Stephan Stoyanov Gallery in the Lower East Side, Simon Critchley was presenting his film Ten Years of Terror at the Guggenheim Museum. Composed of reflections by key canonical thinkers such as Saskia Sassen, Noam Chomsky, this film includes a segment where Michael Hardt speaks of the Twin Towers as apparitions, an image he uses for the mistaken centrality of the WTC attacks in so many people’s understanding of global affairs during the last ten years. It is this powerful illusion that I wanted to wed with the politics of reality as I have presented it here, in its old territorial sense of a fixed property, through the mines at the DMZ, the scale of U.S. embassy in Baghdad, the stench of Katrina still plaguing New Orleans, and the land emptied of life in divided Sudan. As I see it, our revised
figure of the artist is one who can speak the language of repressed facts and political fictions. Diedrich Diederichsen and others have argued that art and the figure of the artist are functioning more and more as direct producers of surplus value. If we also see artists as producers of reality, then reality itself may be defined as potential surplus value. Such experiential speculation can of course lead to the deepening of colonialism and capitalism, much like the absent towers have served these enterprises. But I hope this text and the artworks it accompanies have also pointed to other paths whose collective potential we are just beginning to witness.
Unless otherwise noted, all texts and images are part of *Phantom Limbs* (2001–2011) and *Twin Towers Go Global* (2006–2012) by Pedro Lasch. Winners and participants of the 2011 Open Call of *Twin Towers Go Global* own the copyright to their contributions, but have lent permission to use their work in published materials by participating in the competition. Information on each image in the book is listed under the page number where it appears.

All paintings belong to the *Phantom Limbs* series and, except for *WTC Darfur*, are oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches (unframed). *WTC Darfur* is oil on laser-engraved black acrylic sheet of same dimensions. Sketches for these paintings are either small works on paper, or oil on prepared surfaces of 22 x 30 inches. Research scrolls are 12 x 60 inch editions of prints on paper based on original notes and writings. Research quilts are 36 x 60 inch editions of prints on paper compiling selections of visual materials related to each fictional WTC site or reconstruction. Images and materials from the *Twin Towers Go Global* website and social platforms exist mostly as documentary materials of variable dimensions circulating on the internet in an unlimited fashion.

* * *

Frontispieces

Detail of *WTC Darfur* painting, showing selected names of those lost in the Darfur genocide, as well as the WTC attacks in New York.

Detail of *WTC Paris Research Scroll*.

2 Detail of *WTC Budapest* painting.

3 Frame detail and engraved plaque for *WTC Baghdad* painting.

4 Detail of *WTC Paris* painting showing location of new Twin Towers facing Eiffel Tower.
5 Detail of WTC Guantanamo painting.

7 Detail of WTC New Orleans painting.

8 Detail of WTC Gaza City painting.

9 Detail of WTC Panmunjum DMZ painting, showing monumental flagpoles on North and South sides of the border.

10 Detail of WTC Paris painting showing Google Earth coordinates icon, Phantom Limbs series.

11 Detail of WTC Paris Research Quilt showing Hiroshima’s ground zero and El Lissitski’s “Story of Two Squares.”

12–13 Details of WTC Paris painting.

14–15 Details of WTC Budapest painting.

16 Detail of WTC Budapest Research Quilt, showing twin light beam commemoration in that city, as well as tourist postcards, Canaletto paintings, and set for sinking Titanic film on US/Mexico border.

17 Detail of WTC Budapest painting.

18–19 Details of WTC Gaza City painting.

20 Detail of WTC Gaza City Research Quilt.

21 Detail of WTC Gaza City painting, showing impressionist towers of smoke and Palestinian civilian buildings under heavy Israeli fire.

22–23 Details of WTC Baghdad painting, showing Saddam Hussein’s “Arms of Victory Monument.”

24 Detail of WTC Baghdad Research Quilt, showing the largest U.S. embassy in the world now located in that city, soldiers celebrating by Saddam Hussein’s “Arms of Victory,” and depictions of Hussein celebrating the WTC attacks that were used by U.S. media and politicians to falsely persuade Americans that Iraq was behind this brutal act and therefore should be invaded.

25 Detail of WTC Baghdad painting, showing grisaille and color glaze technique associated with the French Academic Orientalism of Ingres and David’s Neo-Classicism.

26–28 Details of WTC Panmunjum DMZ painting and engraved plaque.
Detail of WTC Panmunjom DMZ Research Quilt, showing U.S. Pop Art historical references and North Korean mass rallies.

Details of WTC Kabul painting, showing Italian Renaissance layering techniques and the perspective that Mary Louis Pratt’s has spoken of as the ‘Surveyor of All’ in Imperial Eyes.

Detail of WTC Darfur painting, showing other Phantom Limbs works and installation space reflected on the piece’s black marble-like surface.

Detail of WTC Darfur painting showing Twin Towers arches formed by names of Darfur and New York September 11 victims.

Archive of sketches and notes for Phantom Limbs and Twin Towers Go Global series.

Detail of WTC Guantanamo painting, showing watchtowers with marked direction to Mecca in Arabic forcing Muslim prayer to also be a bow to the American flag.

Detail of WTC Guantanamo painting, showing camp prisoners as Matisse’s bathers, also on large blue rug based on Yamasaki’s original Islamic-influenced theme for the Twin Tower façade.

Detail of WTC Guantanamo Research Quilt, showing references from Gauguin’s exoticism, Matisse’s Orientalist Morocco works, as well as images related to history of refugee, military, and internment camps.

Details of WTC Guantanamo painting.

Details of WTC New Orleans painting, showing blurry Gerhard Richter-like photorealist rendering of the Twin Towers rebuilt in a redeveloped, yet still flooded 9th Ward.

Final installation view of the complete set of Phantom Limbs paintings (WTC New Orleans not visible here), shown with period frames, memorial plaques, and red wall paint modeled after Western historical museums like the Uffizi in Florence, the National Gallery in London, or the Museo del Prado in Madrid.


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