

# The Ceremony Can(Not) Be Found in the Serpent(ine)

## Zairong Xiang

### WITH

The following should have been written in the scorching heat of Berlin. This is a strange cluster of words because Berlin *canicules* are uncommon. During the six years I lived there, I experienced only one. It was in 2018, and electric fans were sold out for the first time, as the sudden heatwave caught every Berliner off guard. “Every Berliner” used to include myself. I did not receive this title from “*Ich bin ein Berliner*” nor “*Wir sind alle Berliner*.<sup>1</sup>” Instead, I received it from a quirky lady at the Bürgeramt Mitte, in one of those quaint DDR buildings on Berlin Alexanderplatz. She smiled at me with a niceness atypical for bureaucrats of this once-divided city, which I would go on to call home for the next six years, and said “*na, jetzt du bist Berliner!*”

When Huang Yong Ping put two books into the washing machine for a two-minute cycle in 1987, Berlin was still separated by an artificial border—the infamous Berlin Wall. The books were the *History of Chinese Painting* by Wang Bomin and *A Concise History of Modern Painting* by Herbert Read. This simple gesture could easily invoke the much hailed idea of “cross-cultural dialogue,” the buzzword which would circulate in the decades to come in the neoliberal global (art) market, as central to its “order-stabilizing/legitimizing symbolic codes.”<sup>2</sup> However, in the case of Huang’s gesture, the symbolic replicator codes of art histories (one Chinese, one modern) were rinsed of their very legibility.

Three years earlier than Huang’s provocation, Sylvia Wynter wrote her “The Ceremony Must Be Found.” It’s unlikely that Huang read Wynter, but he seemed to hear her call for a ceremony nonetheless. (Art) History is dirty and therefore needs to be washed. However, the more one washes the books, the dirtier they become. Book-washing therefore “is not about making culture cleaner; rather, it tries to make its dirtiness more evident to the eye.”<sup>3</sup> After two minutes in the washing machine, words disappeared, and images were destroyed. A ceremony was found.

Like a prophecy, Huang’s iconoclasm of 1987 augured an age that would claim itself to be the end of history as a result of the triumph of neoliberalism across the world, securing the “continued hegemony of the bourgeoisie as a Western and westernized transnational, planetarily extended ruling class.”<sup>4</sup> However, in Huang Yong Ping’s typical gesture of irreverence, this meeting of East and West literally looks like a lump of excrement. Of course, no one knows what Huang did with the washing

<sup>1</sup> The first sentence is from US president John F. Kennedy at the height of the Cold War in a divided Berlin; the second is the title of the 2015 exhibition at Savvy Contemporary that aimed to commemorate the 130th anniversary of the Berlin Congo conference in 1884 in which European colonial powers partitioned the entire African continent without the presence of a single African nation (*Wir Sind Alle Berliner: 1884–2014: A Commemoration of the Berlin Congo Conference*, Savvy Contemporary: The Laboratory of Form-Ideas, <https://savvy-contemporary.com/en/projects/2015/wir-sind-alle-berliner-1884-2014/>, accessed September 6, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Wynter, “The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoetic Turn/Overture, its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extra-territoriality of (Self-)Cognition,” in *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles: Essays in Critical Epistemology*, ed. Jason R. Ambrose and Sabine Broeck, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015, pp. 184–252, here p. 204.

<sup>3</sup> Hou Hanru, “Change is the Rule,” *Walker Reader*, October 1, 2005, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/change-is-the-rule>, accessed September 6, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Wynter, “The Ceremony Found,” p. 234.

machine, the symbol of the bourgeoisie *par excellence*. Where did he, in 1987, get the washing machine from? After all, few families in China back then could afford to have such a modern gadget, let alone leave it to be potentially destroyed by art and letters!

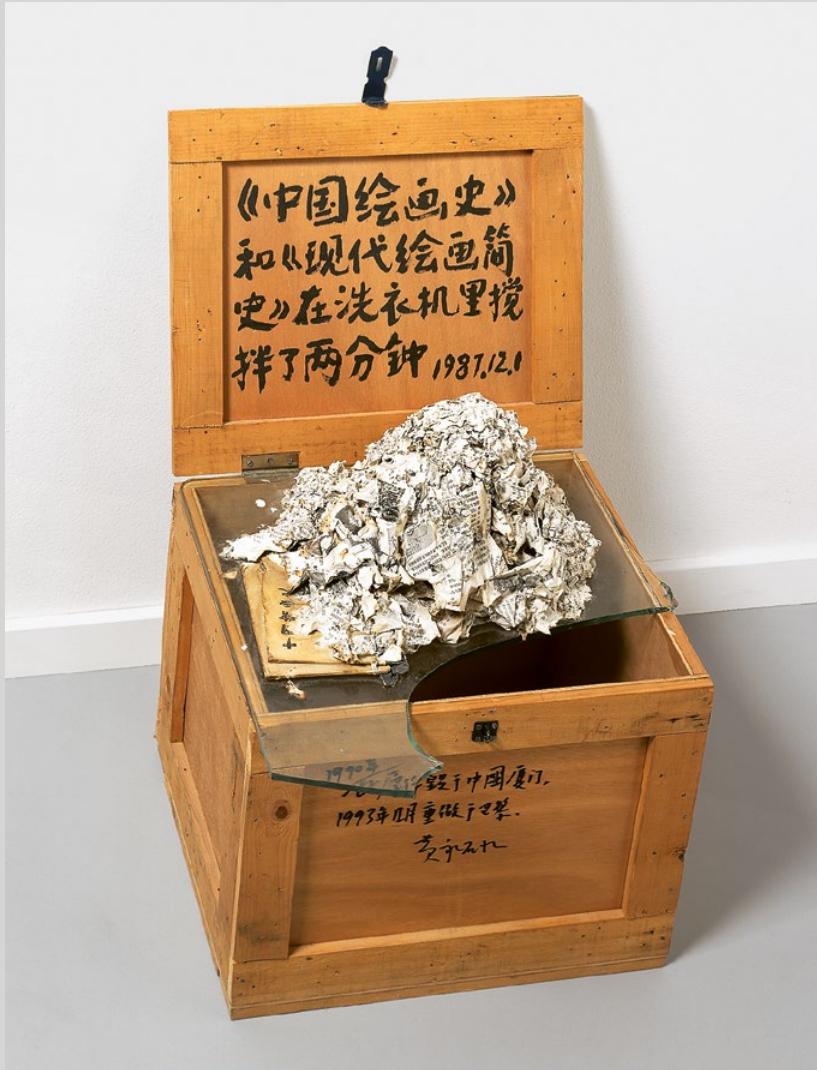


Fig. 1: Huang Yong Ping, *The History of Chinese Art and A Concise History of Modern Painting Washed in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes*, 1987–1993, chinese teabox, paper pulp, glass, 76.84 × 48.26 × 69.85 cm overall

<sup>5</sup> This assault on institutionalized art had already begun during the Xiamen era of Huang Yong Ping, in particular his participation in the Xiamen Dada collective: “To a great degree, the series of combative collective actions its members performed reflect other characteristics of Huang’s work: dematerialization, emphasis on process, critique of the museum as institution, and attacks on conventional ideas through collective action.” Fei Dawei “Two-Minute Wash Cycle,” *Walker Reader*, October 1, 2005, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/two-minute-wash-cycle>, accessed September 6, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Michael P. Steinberg, “Aby Warburg’s Kreuzlingen Lecture: A Reading,” in Aby Warburg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblos Indians of North America*, trans. Michael P. Steinberg, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016, p. 86.

<sup>7</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition, London: Verso, 2016.

The meeting of these two blocs, the cultural East and West and the geopolitical North and South, occurred in 1989 at the exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* (curated by Jean-Hubert Martin at Center Georges Pompidou Paris and the Grand Halle de la Villette). Huang was one of the three invited Chinese artists. For the work in this show, entitled *Reptile*, Huang washed newspapers, and molded the resultant pulp into a papier-mâché tomb, with a form typical of tombs in his native Fujian province. Prior to the *Magiciens* exhibition, Xiamen Dada, a group of which Huang was part, called in 1986 for art’s destruction: “不消灭艺术,生活不得安宁!” (“Until art is destroyed, life is never peaceful!”). And with *Reptile*, a burial for art was performed.<sup>5</sup> What was buried (again and again) was art as a genius *creatio ex nihilo*, a self-sufficient, bourgeois institution for *isms* or contemplation belonging exclusively to the “aestheticizing history of art” and “the formal consideration of the image.”<sup>6</sup>

In keeping with the exhibition title, *Reptile* performed magic. Sprawling across the space of the exhibition hall La Villette, it seemed to create life from death: newspapers—the quintessential object of an “imagined community”<sup>7</sup>—first became a pile of excremental papier-mâché,



Fig. 2: Exhibition view of *Reptile*, in Huang Yong Ping, Amoy/Xiamen, MAC Lyon, February 15–April 14, 2013

8 “Du Bois’s ‘Color Line,’ as a now biocentric *Line/Divide* then projected as ostensibly the expression of a *by-Evolution different* [...] form of co-human negation within the terms of the new Liberal-humanist variant (of Renaissance humanisms’s *Man(1)*) legitimizing of the bourgeois reinvention of *Man(2)* as *homo oeconomicus*.” Wynter, “The Ceremony Found,” p. 187.

then this useless lump was turned into a tomb, before finally they transformed into an enigmatic animal that lives between land and water, life and death, yin and yang. A serpentine creature embodying border-making/defying transformative power was born, as both form and referent.

In the proceeding years, the serpent followed Huang’s work, appearing in myriad ways, as a larger-than-life representation of a giant serpent sprawling across architectural spaces and natural landscapes, as a sign of guidance on a baton referencing biblical and Chinese myths, as a metaphor or incarnation of empire, albeit always “laid bare,” stripped to the bones, in skeletal forms. The serpent(ine) stands out as pure *Pathosformeln* in these works, resonating with a classical function of its symbolization, that which connects elements that should not be connected, transforming them and itself. While the skeletal form that connects all these different apparitions of the serpent conveys Huang’s strong critique of neocolonial globalization that stripped “illegal” immigrants to their bare life/death. Hasn’t the *kunstwissenschaftliche* critique of traditional disciplinary divisions delivered by Aby Warburg, the German snake-charmer, been framed and propelled by a proto-decolonial critique of the border regime, the “border police bias” of art history? The serpent(ine) traverses these boundaries, as a pharmaceutical dialectics of poison and cure, as messengers of truth and agents of death, as ceremonies and burials, as stubborn survival-defying historic changes, as snakeheads trafficking humans across the border. It is dangerous and politically ambiguous if not transgressive. It is the “color line,” the Line/Divide itself,<sup>8</sup> and that which is able to traverse this line.



Fig. 3: Huang Yong Ping, *Carte du monde* (World Map), 2000, wood, metal, paper, vinyl, 1100 × 400 × 400 cm

## BETWEEN

Since the biblical Genesis, the serpent has been a function of some kind of border, albeit one relegated to symbolizing evil. Always evil with a twist, its form curls and swirls so that even its malice cannot be straight-forwardly pinned down. It coils into the garden of Eden. In Albrecht Dürer’s engraving *The Fall of Man (Adam and Eve)* the snake seems to have “wedged structural oppositions” in Wynter’s sense: the first man and the first woman are connected in the composition by the entwined snake and the tree, while it also seems to install a separator between the innocent (Adam) and sinful (Eve and the snake), or perhaps more precisely (and here is the twist) between the ignorant (Adam) and the enlightened/knowledgeable (Eve and the snake).

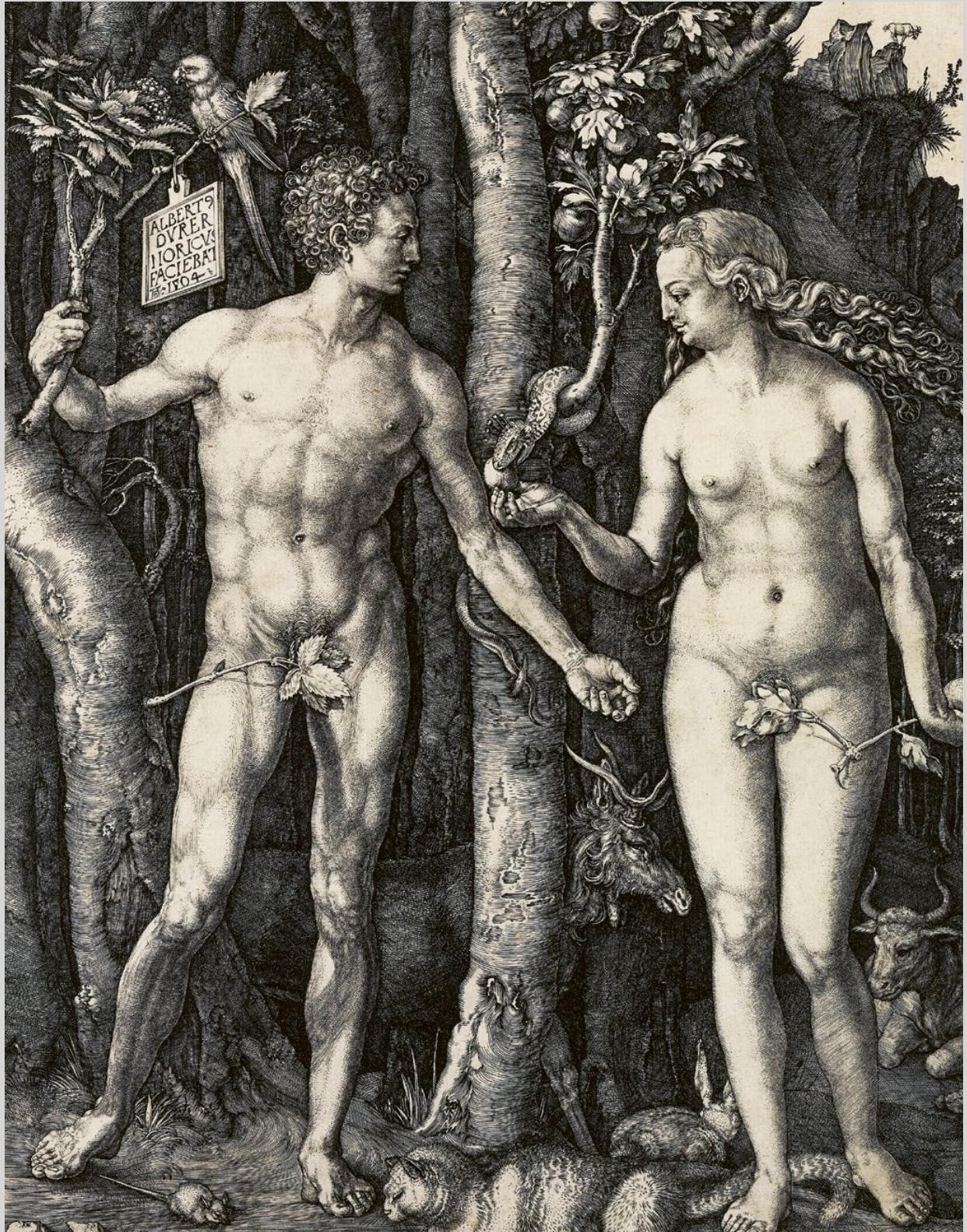


Fig. 4: Albrecht Dürer, *Der Sündenfall (Adam und Eva)* (The Fall of Man [Adam and Eve]), 1504, copperplate engraving on handmade paper, 25.1 × 19.4 cm

The serpent is the ceremony itself, the first heresy patrolling the garden of Eden, and it is what makes it possible that for the founding structural oppositions of societal order to potentially overturn that order.

It is therefore, on the flip side, the border itself. W. J. T. Mitchell divides borders into two kinds (a bordering practice itself): “actual and virtual, literal and metaphoric, material and imaginary,” while emphasizing their permeability and mutual transaction/translation.<sup>9</sup> The serpent(ine) (I elide the two words to indicate the convergence of referent and form) is the border-drawing line. Mitchell’s reflection on the “deeper logics and structures that produce [borders and the waging of border wars]” takes to task the German Enlightenment man of letters Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, and specifically his influential treatise on “the limits of poetry and painting” in which literature and art are talked about in political terms of sovereign territories: “the language of ‘domain,’ ‘peaceful settlement,’ and ‘borders’ makes it clear that the arts [...] are something like countries, even nation-states, with distinctive political cultures.”<sup>10</sup> In fact, Lessing’s 1766 book title, translated as *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, already contains the German word for “border,” *die Grenze*: *Laokoön oder über die Grenzen der Mahlerey und Poesie*. It is not a coincidence that Lessing’s reflection rests on the ancient statue of *Laocoön and His Sons*, an iconic representation of three figures trapped by gigantic serpents. However, instead of looking at the *Grenze* between plastic art and the word, Aby Warburg was reportedly influenced by Lessing since an early age, so much so that his,

argument for the necessity of restraint in visual modes of representation—the sigh of the cultured figure of Laocoön as he is attacked by serpents, as opposed to the agonized screams in Virgil’s poetic depiction—drew Warburg into the study of visual art.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Steinberg, “Aby Warburg’s Kreuzlingen Lecture,” p. 79.

<sup>12</sup> Wynter, “The Ceremony Found,” p. 224.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

In her analysis of the fundamental role myth plays in any given societal order, Wynter takes recourse to Maurice Godelier’s study of the Baruya people of Papua New Guinea, in order to suggest that “foundational myth [as] part of the overall mythic complex [...] functions to mandate and legitimate not only the respective role-allocations structuring of the [...] societal order, but also as well the inequalities between its subjects.”<sup>12</sup> She further references Judith Butler’s theory of the “regulatory practices of gender coherence” and suggests that they function “to legitimate the large-scale inequalities between men and women as an always-already, cosmogonical and mythically chartered inequality.”<sup>13</sup>

However, Wynter seems to foreclose the possibility of openness or resistance on the part of foundational myths themselves. Is it really true that, as she suggests in the case of the Baruya, the “genre-specific autopoeisis thereby enables the subjects of the Baruya societal order to experience their respective role-allocations as ones which [...] cannot be questioned [...and] because (until the coming of the Western colonizers) [its cosmogonic and mythic complex was] the *only possible order*? ”<sup>14</sup> Or, to return to the book of Genesis, is there no reason to presuppose that the cunning reptile would not be able to *also* sneak out of Wynter’s assessment?

Genesis 3 seems to be a salient example of how foundational myths serve to legitimate societal orders, including unequal ones. Yet, the snake does not only wed structural oppositions—the primary meaning of “ceremony” in Wynter’s terms—it in fact inauguates such oppositions. “And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die; For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.” (Genesis 3:4–5, KJV). The blissful ignorance of the Garden of the Eden is broken. The very foundational myth of the Fall of man and woman hides a series of subversive turns and overturns, like serpentine twists. The snake speaks first to Eve, the



Fig. 5: *Laocoon and His Sons, Antiphantes, and Thymbræus attacked by sea snakes*, marble, ca. 40–30 BCE, 208 × 163 × 112 cm, Vatican Collection

15 Ibid., p. 198.

16 I borrow the concept of “pluri-singularity” from Catherine Keller, also in this volume. See her *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.

17 Manthia Diawara and Édouard Glissant, “One World in Relation: Édouard Glissant in Conversation with Manthia Diawara,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, vol. 28 (2011): pp. 4–19, here p. 5.

18 Sylvia Wynter, “The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism,” *boundary 2*, vol. 12, no. 3/vol. 13, no. 1 (Spring–Autumn 1984): pp. 19–70, here p. 25.

woman, not the man, unlike in most patriarchal social orders that would have the snake approach the man first, or even sometimes exclusively so. For sure, there was no “overrepresentation of Man” in the Garden of Eden, nor could the story so far really serve as a “sociogenic replicator code of symbolic life and death”<sup>15</sup> for the patriarchy that claims it to be. In fact, there was no representation at all. For their eyes were shut prior to the fatal bite of the forbidden fruit, which we might infer from what the snake has said to the woman, later confirmed by the pluri-singular voice of Elohim, “and the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil” (Genesis 3:22).<sup>16</sup> Note that the primary Subject is quite certain He (They?) “consents of not to be a single being and attempts to be many beings at the same time.”<sup>17</sup>

Nothing so far in the biblical story (*mythos*) really works to confirm a normative order that often takes recourse to biblical authority for the legitimization (*theologos*) of, say, the subordination of women. Not only in terms of compositional cross-over, but in terms of how, when the snake speaks, nothing impedes Adam from hearing it even though the snake approaches Eve first. The Jester who initiates the “founding heresy” which lies “in its break with the higher system of divinely sanctioned identity and with its absolutized world views or ratiomorphic apparatus”<sup>18</sup>



Fig. 6: Caravaggio, *Madonna dei Palafrenieri* (Madonna of the Palafreneris), 1605–6, oil on canvas, 292 × 211 cm

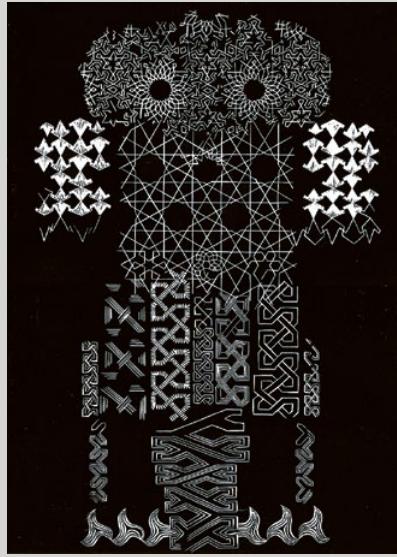


Fig. 7: Mariana Castillo Deball, *Coatlicue*, 2010, linocut on cotton paper, 50 × 70 cm, edition of 5 / II

19 Ibid., p. 27.

20 Steinberg, "Aby Warburg's Kreuzlingen Lecture: A Reading," p. 101.

21 Ibid., p. 113 note 66.

22 Zairong Xiang, *Queer Ancient Ways: A Decolonial Exploration*, Earth: punctum books, 2018; Octavio Paz, "Diosa, Demonia, Obra Maestra," in México En La Obra de Octavio Paz III: Los Privilegios de La Vista, Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1977, pp. 39–58.

is not the snake, but the man, who tricks both Elohim and generations of readers into believing his lie (that is, his rhetoric), "and the man said, The woman whom thou gavest *to be* with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat." (Genesis 3:12). Adam, the first "rhetorical man," has heard whatever the snake had said to the woman and therefore simply eats the fruit without needing to hear any persuasion:

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. (Genesis 3:6)

(Art) History and the consequent mythopoeia of the Christian and Christianized world gradually made the snake a symbol of pure evil, "original sin," not inaugurating or crossing between two realms, but that which needs to be put under control: "the interdiction of any ceremony which might yoke the antithetical signifiers and breach the dynamics of order/Chaos."<sup>19</sup> The snake (if not the serpentine) has tilted toward one side, the side of darkness and death. It moved from the mid-air twisting around the trunk of the tree, as in Albrecht Dürer's engraving or indeed in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel fresco (1508–12), to the ground, often crushed under the foot of a saint or the virgin herself, as in Caravaggio's *Madonna dei Palafrenieri* (1605) where Madonna tramples on the snake that crawls out of the darkness. As Michael Steinberg writes, setting the tone for an analysis of where Warburg might have stood when delivering his influential lecture on the Hopi Snake Ritual: "The biblical serpent, from the Garden of Eden onward, represents the root of evil, sin, and satanic power, similarly, the death of Laocoön represents the revenge of demons."<sup>20</sup> This lost ceremony of the one-dimensional snake is entangled with colonial history. Separated by the "color line," the snake now firmly resides on the side of irrationality and chaos, a "symptom of a completely backward humanity [...] incapable of life, crippled by a dark superstition" (these are Warburg's own words in an early manuscript of the *Schlangenritual* lecture).<sup>21</sup> If it ever tries to sneak in, like in Caravaggio's painting, it is crushed down.

While the biblical Genesis holds at best a narratively ambivalent but theologically antagonistic attitude toward the snake, the non-Christian/ized worlds, including antiquity in Europe, hold strongly the serpent(ine) as embodying that ceremony-found quality of establishing, traversing, and/or uniting opposites or even contradictions. The worship of the snake was, among other non-Christian exotica, a proof of Indigenous evil, squarely situating non-Europeans in the sphere of "death" (chaos, irrationality, etc.) during colonialism; rendering their culture a death-cult that needed to be enlightened or simply eliminated. The serpent(ine) in colonial encounters needed to be crushed or buried such as in the case of the *Coatlicue Mayor* of Mexican antiquity.<sup>22</sup> It is a pagan myth standing in opposition to theology/religion, and from time to time even threatening to undo the latter. The Brazilian charismatic church leader Marcelo Rossi was pushed off a stage some years ago during a mass ceremony. The media-savvy *sacerdote* was not hurt, however. He seized the opportunity to speak through a television broadcast and uttered: "*Maria passa à frente e pisa na cabeça da serpente*" (Maria comes to the front and crushes the head of the serpent!).

There is no reason, however, why colonial theo-political scripts (despite the biblical ambiguity) need be religiously followed. Indeed, "art history" has not univocally stood on the moral ground of theological orthodoxy to condemn the serpent(ine) and whatever it could be made to symbolize. In fact, it is difficult to find any examples of this happening at all. Steinberg, continuing his reading of Warburg's Kreuzlingen



Fig. 8: Aztec deity, *Coatlicue*, ca. 1439–1441, andesite,  
252 × 130 × 115 cm, National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City

lecture on Native American snake dances, states that the serpent for the German art historian is “the site of violence and regeneration combined,” traversing between the Ancient Greek medicinal Asclepius and the Hopi snake charmer. Unsure if he was an “art historian” or “cultural historian”<sup>23</sup> and vocally opposed to (disciplinary) border policing, Warburg would hardly stand by Brazilian priest Padre Rossi of our day to “*pisar na cabeça da serpente*.” In fact, “the serpent is Warburg.”<sup>24</sup>

## AGAINST

Killing a snake is an important ritual in Afro-Cuban carnivals, especially on the Día de Reyes, which is vividly recorded by Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén’s famously enigmatic poem “Sensemayá, canto para matar una culebra” (Sensemayá: Chant to Kill a Snake). “Sensemayá,” it is said, represents “a reenactment of a magical snake rite of the Cuban Mayombe sect [...] of Central African Bantu origin.”<sup>25</sup> Superficially, the poem seems similarly directed against the serpent, just like Padre Rossi, when he declared “*Maria passa à frente e pisa na cabeça da serpente*,” aiming at suppressing, eliminating, and therefore killing what the serpent, signifying the non-Christian heathen world of evil, stood for. There is no reason, however, why the poem should be interpreted as following this theo-political script, especially considering that it is set in a cultural context of the formerly enslaved. “Black’ African and Afro-mixed descent peoples [...] now made into the iconic embodiment of this now extreme form of (*racialized*) *Human Otherness*.”<sup>26</sup> In this scenario, the serpent(ine) would precisely be the color line itself against itself, the “the *Line/Divide*, what Du Bois defined as its opposing ‘lighter’ and ‘darker’ sides [that] had therefore to be conceptually and institutionally ‘unweddable.’”<sup>27</sup>

As Wynter points out, “the African mode of cultural reason was seen as a non-reason, and his internment in the plantation system as slave labor, as being carried out for the purpose of rationalizing him/her as an inferior mode of being in need of rational human baptism.”<sup>28</sup> Her analysis finds a concrete example from her native Cuba. As Thomas F. Anderson shows, Afro-Cuban culture has been under the constant threat of elimination through the desire and concerted efforts of the Cuban intellectuals and the Cuban administration “to rid Cuban society of everything from *comparsas*, to *brujería*, to *ñaniguismo* [... and other emblems] of Cuba’s atavistic Afro-Cuban traditions.”<sup>29</sup> Guillén’s chant to kill a serpent therefore lent itself to being read as an allegory of the elimination of “Afro-Cuban cultural manifestations that the snake represents [... such as] the processions, communal rituals, initiation ceremonies, chants, dancers, etcetera that were performed by the practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions or the members of the Abakuá secret society.”<sup>30</sup> The ritual of serpent killing and the poem that records it therefore leaves a puzzle.

Around the same time, in republican China, modernization-minded intellectuals and artists launched similar cultural wars against an array of socio-cultural manifestations of “Chinese tradition” in fields as diverse as the writing system, medicine, sexuality, and cross-dressing in theater, which they deemed as symbolic and symptomatic of the illness of the Chinese nation steeped in feudalist superstition, victim at once of its own decadence and of Western colonialism. A purge of tradition would soon become more generalized in the ensuing years of the Cultural Revolution in the newly founded socialist China, during which some of these same intellectuals would have been subjected to severe purging rituals and political persecution.<sup>31</sup>

These purification rituals for the construction of the modern nation state, the foundations of which often relies on the very mythopoëia of its overcoming of, and secularization against, “pre-modern” superstitions, are never a once-for-all done deal.<sup>32</sup> In the context in

23 Steinberg, “Aby Warburg’s Kreuzlingen Lecture: A Reading,” p. 98.

24 Ibid., p. 102.

25 Josaphat Kubayanda, *The Poet’s Africa: Africanness in the Poetry of Nicolás Guillén and Aimé Césaire*, New York: Greenwood, 1990, p. 105.

26 Wynter, “The Ceremony Found,” p. 187.

27 Wynter, “The Ceremony Must Be Found,” p. 186.

28 Ibid., p. 35.

29 Thomas F. Anderson, *Carnival and National Identity in the Poetry of Afrocubanismo*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017, p. 101.

30 Ibid., p. 101.

31 For more on the turbulent process of modernization, as reflected in the specific case of reception of the “Lady White Snake” story (mentioned later in this essay), especially in the theater reformation initiated by Tian Han, see my “Conquering the Fairy Homosexualesque on the Early-Twentieth-Century Chinese Stage” in *An Opera for Animals*, ed. Cosmin Costinăș and Claire Shea, London: Sternberg Press, forthcoming.

32 In fact, as early as the so-called *Chaoskampf* of the Babylonian Epic of Creation, *Enuma Elish*, one of the first written accounts of cosmogony, the purging of the “evil” primordial Tiamat (relegated to “chaos”) by the self-endorsed hero Marduk needed to repeat itself both with the epic and through the recursive recitations of the epic on the new year’s celebration. For a discussion on the queer potential of the order-resisting “chaos” see Chapter 2 of my *Queer Ancient Ways*, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Anderson, *Carnival and National Identity*, p. 94.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>36</sup> Vera Kutzinski, *Against the American Grain: Myth and History in William Carlos Williams, Jay Wright, and Nicolás Guillén*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, p. 142.

<sup>37</sup> Anderson, *Carnival and National Identity*, p. 106.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

which “celebrating the traditional snake chants [...] that Ortiz and many others had maligned as symbols of African primitivism and backwardness”<sup>33</sup> so much so that Ramón Vasconcelos, for example, “advocated the ‘killing’ of [...] Afro-Cuban cultural manifestations with categorical statements: [...] ‘the infirm does not have a cure. Extinction is the surest approach [...or,] ‘Dead dog, no more rabies.’”<sup>34</sup>

Thomas Anderson argues that Guillén was following Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier in his “act of literary rebellion against Cuba’s cultural mainstream.”<sup>35</sup> In Carpentier’s *Reino de este mundo* (1949) (The Kingdom of This World), the death of the enigmatic Macandel enables him to transform into the myriad of things that exist everywhere, unkillable, as the animals, insects, and flora and fauna of Haiti. Macandel’s death is thus “a transformation that signals the triumph of the poem, not over death in general, but over slavery and cultural imperialism.”<sup>36</sup> The lawlike, unbreachable Life/Death divide needs to be breached. The killing of the serpent, like the death of Macandel, is an act “that symbolized rebirth and continuation through death.”<sup>37</sup>

As I am ruminating on the ritual killing of the serpent against the purging ritual of the secular nation states as “a symbolic regeneration of one of their [Afro-Cuban] most sacred manifestation of divine power,”<sup>38</sup> a gigantic white cobra was burnt to death by a rampant forest fire in the city of Chong Qing, one of the signs of a rapidly accelerating global environmental catastrophe. The internet video that recorded the firefighter’s discovery of its corpse invoked “Lady White Snake,” a popular Chinese myth about a snake-woman who has the magic power of raising water from a river and summoning rain. She uses her powers to flood the temple of a moralistic monk named Fa Hai, which translates as “Sea of Law,” who has been stubbornly and obsessively trying to separate her from her beloved human husband, because such a queer union is “against nature.” Her deluge against the monk inadvertently kills many innocent villagers, and the monk seizes upon this as an excuse to condemn her to confinement under a pagoda. Now the monk does not need to continue his queer-eradicating effort because neither is there much water left in the rivers, nor is the dead white cobra able to perform any magic with the rain. Chong Qing is still waiting for the rain to fall on its desiccated mountains and rivers.

Almost a hundred years has passed since Guillén wrote “Sensemayá.” The death of the white cobra in Chong Qing can no longer be seen as a ritual killing for regeneration as in the Afro-Cuban case, but rather as an ecological burial that sacrifices first and foremost the *damnés de la terre*, no longer for regeneration, but for the stubborn refusal to die of the undead modern/colonial capitalist world. “The daily sacrificing of the interest of the referent ‘We’ of our *species being*—as well as potentially that of other species of living beings” continues and is intensely felt with the apocalyptic fires across the world.<sup>39</sup> “The non-human living world is on the verge of a ‘sixth extinction’ that threatens various forms of amphibians; water-based plants and animals; reptiles; birds; and mammals,” reports Wynter via the idea of the “anthropocene,” where the serpent(ine) creeps into her text under an imminent threat of distinction.<sup>40</sup> She cautions against this environmental theory’s complicity with the “existential imperative [...] securing and table replicating the now purely secular genre-specific interests of Western-bourgeois, ethno-class *Man(2)*.”<sup>41</sup> In a footnote, Wynter further contends, “from the perspective of the Ceremony Found’s new answer to the question of who-we-are, the non-natural processes directly causal of this potentially impeding ‘sixth extinction’ are themselves driven by our continued performative-enactment of the mono-humanist conception of Western-bourgeois, ethno-class *Man(2)*.”<sup>42</sup>

David Wojnarowicz wrote that “the world is set-up in such a way that it seems I’m constantly working against it, rather than alongside it.”<sup>43</sup> In

<sup>39</sup> Wynter, “The Ceremony Found,” pp. 239–40.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 240.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 240 fn. 58.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Eric Davidson, “David Wojnarowicz: Life Inside His Burning House,” *Please Kill Me: This is What’s Cool*, May 18, 2021, <https://pleasekillme.com/david-wojnarowicz/>, accessed September 8, 2022.

44 Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p. 200.

45 David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*, New York: Vintage Books, 1991, p. 108.

46 Edward P. Richards "The History of AIDS and ARC," *The Climate Change and Public Health Law Site*, online, <https://biotech.law.lsu.edu/books/lbb/x590.htm>, accessed September 8, 2022.

47 Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, p. 106.

48 Wynter, "The Ceremony Found," p. 234.

49 Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, p. 99.

50 Lydia Cabrera, *Anaforuana: Ritual y símbolos de la iniciación en la sociedad secreta Abakuá*, Madrid: Ediciones R, 1975; Anderson, *Carnival and National Identity in the Poetry of Afrocubanismo*.

51 Miller Ivor, *Voice of the Leopard: African Secret Societies and Cuba*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009, p. 52.

52 Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, New York: Zone Books, 2007, p. 324.

53 Aby Warburg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*, ed. Michael P. Steinberg, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995, p. 38.

54 Anselm Franke and Erhard Schüttelpelz, *A Kind of World War*, Leipzig: Spector Books, 2021, p. 34.

55 Ibid., p. 3.

56 Floyd, *The Reification of Desire*, p. 216.

his *Close to the Knives* (1991), Wojnarowicz recorded the crime scene of the "neoliberal assault on social collectivity"<sup>44</sup> during the AIDS epidemic. In both his writing and art in a wide range of forms, including graffiti, collage, installation, and video work, Wojnarowicz launched a sharp critique of the devastation of queer and other disenfranchised populations created by the neoliberal "killing machine called America"<sup>45</sup> that chose to do nothing about the virus perceived as a "gay disease" (AIDS' initial name GRID stood for Gay-Related Immune Deficiency).<sup>46</sup> He had a dream of a snake biting the side of his nose the night when his beloved mentor, friend, lover, and "father figure" Peter Hujar died of AIDS. Later in the diary, he recalls a newspaper article about "the politician in Arizona saying on the radio, 'To solve the problem of AIDS just shoot the queers.'"<sup>47</sup> Here we can readily draw an analogue with ritual killing, not for regeneration, but for the vampiric death-cult of neoliberal necropolitics, as the "cure" for our (Neo) Liberal-humanist projected Malthusian-Ricardian transumed postulate of a 'significant ill' [...] of *Man(2)kind's* threatened subordination."<sup>48</sup>

The dream with the snake provides a strangely calm moment in Wojnarowicz's diary full of agony and anger, as he writes "I'm bending over in a semi crouch waiting patiently thinking of its poison flowing into me but no real fear of dying or anything."<sup>49</sup> Perhaps he found temporary solace, however symbolic, not in the serpent's Christian/colonial code of evil (which more than often includes the queers, like all the other disenfranchised human others divided by the color line), but in its medicinal dialectics of poison and cure, the bite that doesn't hurt, the poison that doesn't kill, the serpent(ine) that helped liberate Aby Warburg from the Sanatorium of Kreuzlingen, the one hidden in the rhythmic "Sensemayá": "La culebra viene y se enrede en un palo" (the snake coils around a tree). Connections have been made between the Afro-Cuban serpent (*majá*, the Cuban boa, also related to the Yoruba *Yemanyá*, and the birth of *ñáñiguismo*) and the ancient Greek Asclepius's staff,<sup>50</sup> as well as, more historically and culturally probable, with the several interconnected images of tree-wrapping snakes with healing power from the Kongo and the Abakuá, cross-fertilized in Cuba.<sup>51</sup> The serpent(ine) maintains its transformative power as "a primordial element in the religious representations and practices of humanity [...] capable of displacing and repressing what is 'ambivalent' in nature, dead and living, visible and invisible"<sup>52</sup> across different lands and waters. Instead of sacrificing the snake, Moki dancers of the Pueblos Indians at Walpi, as Warburg reports in his Kreuzlingen lecture, "through consecration and suggestive dance mimicry, transformed [the snake] into a messenger and displaced so that, returned to the souls of the dead, it may in the form of lightening produce storms from the heavens."<sup>53</sup>

The snake ritual was under threat by the "white tourists from settler societies and the so-called modern world, [who] like the snakes were a deadly danger."<sup>54</sup> The aggressive colonial state/snake would eventually devour the Pueblos Indians and the non-modern world they represent:

For the Hopi, a disruption of their ceremonial order, and thus the destruction of their social structure, was to be averted by all means, and that involved opposing the state's claim to legal regulation of education and medicine, and especially the pre-scribed creation of property through individual land allocations that contradicted all previous rights and obligations.<sup>55</sup>

The serpent(ine) is twisted again here to symbolize the border, the lethal guardian of the modern nation state, whose central image is a "fantasized homogeneity of middle-class, white, private, life, a paradoxical identification with a privatized nation, as the fantasy of a 'one-tribe nation,' a fantasy legitimating and perpetuating what for Wojnarowicz is a national 'killing machine,'"<sup>56</sup> which operates from settler colonialism

to the neoliberal state, from land-grab to murder, from legal to cosmological assimilation.

In Indigenous America, Wojnarowicz found not only solace but alliance in his insurgency against the neoliberal state, in which he grew up under constant domestic violence in childhood, and as a homeless social outcast hustling on the streets of New York City in his early adult years. Wojnarowicz had to contend with the violence inflicted on the queer and the dispossessed heightening during the AIDS crisis, which due to the lethal nonaction of the government claimed lives of many, including his own. A defiant Moki dancer holding a snake in his mouth and a Humiskachina doll are both featured in his collage *The Death of American Spirituality* (1987) and the figure of Coatlicue, the Aztec deity, “the one with the serpent skirt” appears in a collage called *Mexican Crucifix* (1987), which would be animated in his video *Fire in My Belly* (1986–87), in which “Mexico provided the prognosis that forecasted a diagnosis of global terminal disease.”<sup>57</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Jennifer Tyburczy, “Queer Acts of Recovery and Uncovering: Deciphering Mexico through Archival Ephemera in David Wojnarowicz’s *A Fire in My Belly*,” *Text and Performance Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2015): pp. 4–23, here p. 21. I want to thank Yindi Chen for bringing this text to my attention.

<sup>58</sup> Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, p. 81.

In the ruination of colonial modernity and racial capitalism—the scene of the neoliberal crime carried out by the modern nation state—the biting snake is no longer fearful or even poisonous. It too, is the victim of the violent world. One year before his premature death of AIDS, in his text “Being Queer in America: A Journal of Disintegration,” Wojnarowicz’s rage against the murderous bourgeois order and the nation state creeps, like a snake, into the middle-class household, emblematic of the nation state and its privatized borders,

I crawl across freshly clipped front lawns, past statues and dogs and cats containing your guardians. I enter your houses through the smallest cracks in the bricks that keep you feeling comfortable and safe. I cross your living rooms and go up your staircases and into your bedrooms where you lie sleeping. I wake you up and tell you a story about when I was ten years old and walking around Times Square looking for the weight of some man to lie across me to replace the nonexistent hugs and kisses from my mom and dad.<sup>58</sup>



Fig. 9: David Wojnarowicz, *The Death of American Spirituality*, 1987, spray paint, acrylic, and collage on plywood, 205.7 × 223.5 cm



Fig. 10: David Wojnarowicz, *Mexican Crucifix*, 1987, acrylic and printed paper collage on panel, 306.07 x 205.74 cm

59 Dave Itzkoff, "Video Deemed Offensive Pulled by Portrait Gallery," *New York Times*, December 1, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/02/arts/design/02portrait.html>, accessed September 6, 2022.

Wojnarowicz manages to continue haunting the bourgeois order posthumously. In 2010, *Fire in My Belly* was shown in the exhibition *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. In the work, Jesus is depicted dead and abandoned to an army of crawling ants. It was quickly removed after protests from the Catholic League and some members of the House Republicans for causing offense to Christians.<sup>59</sup> In his defense against the allegation of blasphemy, already following the release of his video in the '80s, Wojnarowicz made an argument which resonated strongly with liberation theology: "Jesus was a symbol of human suffering and frailty. He took on these physical and emotional states for the good of all people."<sup>60</sup> The suffering Jesus continues to upset the contemporary Pharisees of Christian conservatism's bourgeois order, even almost twenty years after Wojnarowicz's death in 1992 of AIDS, offending the same people whose "murderous 'moral' fury"<sup>61</sup> was behind the government's longtime indifference to the epidemic.

## IN

I am still in China, writing down these words without knowing if I will even be allowed to travel to Berlin for (the) *Ceremony*. The General Consulate of Germany in Shanghai rejected my application for a "researcher visa," the one I had from 2012 to 2020, first as a PhD candidate and then as a postdoctoral researcher. In the summer of 2020, I left Berlin—my home for eight years with the "researcher visa." Two years later, I am supposedly a potential threat to the security of Germany. Supposedly also a threat to the European Union, if I am correctly interpreting the reason behind the consulate's demand that my host institution:



Fig. 11: Anonymous, *Assembly of the Animals*, ca. 1965-75, oil on canvas, 133.4 x 92.4 x 3.7 cm

60 Wojnarowicz, quoted in Tybureczy, “Queer Acts of Recovery and Uncovering,” p. 21.

61 Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, p. 6.

62 Email sent by the Visastelle on July 13, 2022.

63 Wynter, “The Ceremony Must Be Found,” p. 21.

64 Ibid., p. 21.

commit itself in writing to assume the costs incurred by public authorities for up to six months after the termination of the hosting agreement for the foreigner’s subsistence during an unauthorized stay in a member state of the European Union and a deportation of the foreigner.<sup>62</sup>

In and out, the border regime of the postcolonial state of the modern empire continues to imagine the world in the way of the Ethiopian painting. (Fig. 11) I fell out of the first frame, from the orderly parliament of anthropomorphized animals to the chaos of bestial barbarity, potentially menacing to the world above the line of great division. Central to Wynter’s project of finding/founding a ceremony is the decolonization of knowledge, which she traces to the “founding heresy of the original *Studia Humanitatis*.<sup>63</sup> “If we are to abandon categories and institutions that belong to a vanished world,” a world which is now burning and facing imminent ecological collapse, “then knowledge must be rewritten.”<sup>64</sup> Germany (as part of the EU and the democratic liberal world) prides itself in being the world-leader of knowledge production, a characterization which I have not only benefited from but also contributed to.

Having lived for fourteen years in the EU, I often found myself translating between its native members, once in Seville, translating between French and Spanish, once in Switzerland, between Italian and English. I am more European than them, clearly. But here I am, unrecognizable in front of the guardians of the border, experiencing the cold, humiliating, “grenzpolizeiliche Befangenheit” (border-police bias) not against art history, but against the outside of Fortress Europe. Outside of its border, what counts as “research,” is not up for academic discussion and artistic intervention. It is solely decided by the BAMF (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees) and the Visastelle itself, as is stated in the rejection letter, “das Haus der Kulturen der Welt ist nicht auf der BAMF List der anerkannten Forschungseinrichtungen” and in the most chilling and confident tones about my curatorial work, “weiterhin entsprechen die in Ihrem Arbeitsvertrag genannten Verantwortlichkeiten keiner Forschungstätigkeit.”

In 1989, around the time the Berlin Wall was about to fall, as a provincial symbol of the triumph of globalization and some sort of “ceremony found,”<sup>65</sup> French curator Jean Hubert-Martin went to China and invited Huang Yong Ping and two other Chinese artists to participate in the aforementioned groundbreaking exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* that would arguably inaugurate “Global Art.” The recently opened-up China still strictly controlled the movement of its people. Few possessed a passport, let alone had traveled beyond the strictly sealed border of the socialist country. As an artist, Huang Yong Ping had no “work-unit” affiliation. In order to apply for the French visa, he would first have to get himself a passport. He needed to explain the purpose of his visit, just as all Chinese citizens now need to do, at a time when, in the name of “COVID prevention,” the Chinese state practically bans all so-called “non-essential travel” by restricting the issuing of passports and border-crossing:

“What is your job?” the officer of the local committee in Xiamen asked Huang Yong Ping.  
“I am an artist” said Huang.  
“You are an artist? So why are you planning to go to this event? The invitation letter clearly states it’s for magicians!”

65 Néstor García Canclini, *La globalización imaginada*, Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2000.

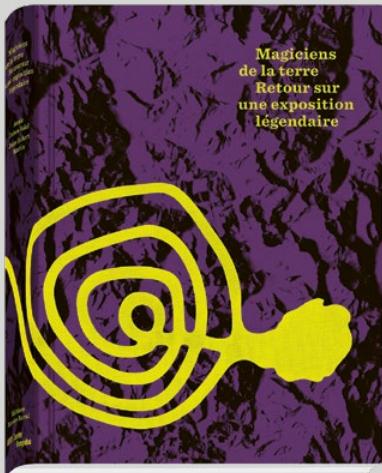


Fig. 12: Centre Georges Pompidou, ed., *Magiciens de la Terre: Retour sur une exposition légendaire* (Magicians of the Earth: A Look Back at a Legendary Exhibition), Paris: Éditions Xavier Barral/Editions du Centre Pompidou, 2014, cover

Central to this infamous anecdote, then, is a low-ranking bureaucrat, of the kind who have recently regained power over people’s freedom. During the unnecessarily draconian two-month Shanghai lockdown, which is partially responsible for my being stuck in China, the bureaucrats

66 “Mao’s voluntarist philosophy held that through concentrated exertion of human will and energy, material conditions could be altered and all difficulties overcome in the struggle to achieve a socialist utopia.” Shapiro explores the Mao’s war against nature through several analytic lenses, one of which being that of *dogmatic uniformity*, “or imposition of “one-knife-cuts-all” [yi dao qie] models that ignored regional geographic variations and local practices toward nature.” Judith Shapiro, *Mao’s War against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China*, Studies in Environment and History, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 3–4.

illustrated Hanna Arendt’s famous “banality of evil” on a daily basis, by mindlessly following instruction in a manner called “one-knife-cuts-all,” which in her history of the disastrous campaign of Maoist politics of “man conquering nature,” the environmental historian Judith Shapiro calls “dogmatic formalism,” causing unnecessary sacrifice, tragedy, and farce.<sup>66</sup> Never had I expected the same dogmatic uniformity would happen again in the international metropolis of Shanghai, much less so in the hands of the self-congratulating harbinger of liberal value, for which freedom of movement should be an unalienable right.

Before receiving my new passport, which the Bureau of Exit and Entry issued within forty-eight hours, my main fear was that the Chinese border would represent the most significant hurdle. The fact that I was invited by a state institution as a guest curator together with my own “Western and westernized academic/intellectual” outlook had convinced me that issuing the visa would be a simple matter of logistics for the German Consulate. The fact that friends, upon learning I was stuck in China, repeatedly asked whether I was rejected by China or Germany, is indicative of the level of trust in the mythopoeia or “cosmogonic/sociogenic replicator code” of liberal democracy. The underlying assumption, which I previously shared, is that it would be the communist state and not the free democracy which would control my freedom of movement to “rewrite knowledge.”

The Artist is not a Magician.  
Curation is not research.  
History repeats itself, always as farce, never as tragedy.

## THROUGH

Geopolitical tensions are on the rise. New Berlin Walls are being built everywhere. As I put down these words, the Russian invasion of Ukraine continues and Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan has provoked a series of military drills by the People’s Liberation Army around the island. Meanwhile, the German Air Force just made its first-ever flight to the Indo-Pacific. Every nation state is flexing its military muscles. “A kind of world war” looks imminent. What is to be done?

Against all seriousness, may *Ceremony* be ceremonial. Kidlat Tahimik, the Filipino director who often finds gravity in the humorous resignification of language (not unlike the Rastafarian overturn), extends his indie filmmaking beyond the screen. An ensemble of wood sculptures with varied constellations often accompanies his screening performances. Tahimik referred to one such mixed-media piece as *Kultur War Between Two Goddesses*, the first two words of the title intentionally mixing German and English, in a manner akin to how his friend and mentor Herzog unintentionally mixed Native American language and Tagalog in the film *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*, in which Tahimik performed the “Indio,” whose name is “Hombrecito.” It is no small detail. The *hombre-cito*, or *homunculus* (little man) was a humanist/racist representation which served to subordinate New World people “to the exigencies of a discourse whose function was to legitimate their internment [...] which ordained that they should be ‘natural slaves.’”<sup>67</sup> Indeed, in the brief scene in which Tahimik makes his appearance as Hombrecito in Werner Herzog’s film, a freakshow host introduces Hombrecito as “an untamed Indian from the sunny shore of New Spain,” and asks him to stop playing his flute but say something in his native language.

Tahimik is of course not a passive victim under the German director’s lens. They are friends after all. The “Indio” performed by the young Tahimik utters something incomprehensible to the freakshow host, the intended audience inside and outside of the film, and very likely also the director Herzog himself. Like the boa *majá* of Guillén’s “Sensemaya,”

67 Wynter, “The Ceremony Must Be Found,” p. 34.



Fig. 13: Kidlat Tahimik as "Hombrecito" (left) in Werner Herzog's film *Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle* (*The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*), 1974, 110 min.

68 Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, p. 151.

69 Richard Bolisay, "Beyond the Canon: Perfumed Nightmare + The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser," *BAM Blog*, March 5, 2020, <https://blog.bam.org/2020/03/beyond-canonical-perfumed-nightmare-enigma.html?m=1>, accessed September 6, 2022.

70 Quoted in Wynter, "The Ceremony Found," p. 184.

71 Tahimik, Kidlat, Stefanie Shulte Strathaus, and Tilman Baumgärtel, "Balikbayan #1: Memories of Overdevelopment Redux III," *Forum/Forum Expanded 05 - 15 Feb. 2015*, Berlin: The International Forum of New Cinema, 2015, pp. 17-19, [https://www.arsenal-berlin.de/assets/Legacy/user\\_upload/forum/ebooks/ebook2015/45th\\_Forum\\_2015\\_en.pdf](https://www.arsenal-berlin.de/assets/Legacy/user_upload/forum/ebooks/ebook2015/45th_Forum_2015_en.pdf), accessed September 9, 2022.

hidden in rhythmic symbolism and translingual puns, the *homunculus* of the Southeastern Asian Sea allied himself with the Native American fantasized and infantilized by the European director and also his spectators, smuggling a spell through the smallest cracks to the "Universe of Neatly Clipped Lawn"<sup>68</sup> in the form of a household Tagalog saying: "*Bato bato sa langit ang tamaan ay huwag magagalit.*" During a screening of *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* in Manila in 2017, "the Cinematheque audience, engrossed in the seriousness of the period film, roared with laughter."<sup>69</sup> They heard the familiar Tagalog proverb which means "throwing stones in heaven, whoever gets hit don't be mad" inserted inconspicuously by Tahimik into the colonial freakshow. It gives a humorous decolonial twist to the "gravity of language," an important concept that frames Wynter's "The Ceremony Found." Ira Livingston might as well be commenting on colonial arrogance when she states that:

it is not the poets and critics of scientific rationality who deny the pull of gravity [...] but the scientists who deny the gravity of language [...] Those who practice this denial distribute its damages widely but the joke is on them too.<sup>70</sup>

This scene reappears in Tahimik's magnum opus *Balikbayan #1 Memories of an Overdevelopment* (1979–present), toward the end of the ongoing film in the form of a reediting/rewriting of the Battle of Mactan, in which the Indigenous leader Lapu Lapu led his tribe villagers to the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan. In Tahimik's cinematic circumnavigation, which has lasted more than forty years, the Indigenous is finally recognized as the "Indio Genius" (Tahimik's word), embodied by Enrique de Malacca, the first person, *Balikbayan #1* claims, to actually circumnavigate the world.<sup>71</sup> Enrique was not only the enslaved shepherd of Magellan, the overrepresented "first man" of the modern mythopoeia of the heroic voyage across the seas, but in fact he is the one who made Magellan's odyssey possible with his talents in translation, cooking, Indigenous wave-reading and navigation, finance, fundraising, and even renaissance art modeling.

Outside of the screen of the film, Tahimik's *Kultur War* takes various formats and compositions. It crucially features Inhabian, the goddess of the wind of the Ifugao Islands, and Marilyn Monroe, the goddess of Hollywood. Inhabian blows the wind, her weapon against the invading colonizing culture, in the shape of a sexualized idol. It provides "defense



Fig. 14: Kidlat Tahimik, *Kultur War of the Goddesses*, 2019, wood, rattan core, figurines, ritual objects, bamboo loom, fiberglass, dimensions variable

<sup>72</sup> Franke and Schüttelpelz, *A Kind of World War*, p. 44.

against an existential danger, seen from within, a kind of world war.”<sup>72</sup> What is enigmatic is the fact that the colonization of the mind by the film industry, symbolized by Monroe’s uplifted skirt, could be said to be enabled by the wind blown by the wind goddess Inhabian. Even more enigmatic is Tahimik’s profound critique of cinematic mechanical reproductive itself: the *Kultur War* is recorded by a bamboo camera hollowed out from within and held by two figures who represent the dead on their journey to the afterlife on a boat which is often featured on the lid of Manunggul Jars, which are used in secondary burials in the Philippines. Why would those on their way to the other world turn their boat back, and record the war between the two goddesses on the sea, using an apparatus which is essentially a void? Has the burial of an undead world already begun in the form of this ontological rebellion against the industrialized cinematic image-making and circulation as the colonization of the mind?

One crucial task remains for my own strangled *journey to the West*. I need to sneak Xiyadie’s paper-cut *The Blossoming Yang* (2021) into Berlin, not because it might be censored and confiscated at the border in an effort of ideological or fiscal control (although it might), but because shipping costs have skyrocketed due to the pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This unsanctioned mode of trafficking might be the most appropriate way to deal with a work of art to which the artist has attributed first and foremost healing power. Xiyadie (the Siberian Butterfly) was suddenly struck by a memory of a night many years ago in November, in the scorching heat of a Gay Sauna in Beijing, of how he saw, touched, tasted, and enjoyed countless slippery serpents. Flora and fauna unleashed a spring inside the microcosmos of a queer autopietic turn/overturning.

How might I act as the snakehead of the artwork and myself, trafficking both out of one wall and into another? May I momentarily break from my role as cultural translator, and simply copy and paste these following words that might be incomprehensible to some, but are crystal clear to many others?

西伯利亚的寒流将这座千年古都冻得似乎比往常更加残酷无情。进京游荡了一整天，即使寒冬腊月，西亚蝶恋花，东宫的花花草草，迟迟不舍离去，乐不思通州，错过了最后一班回边城的公交车。比严冬更加无情的便是太阳落山以后，迅速到达的黑夜和刺骨的寒气。“身上的路费既不够打车也不够开房”，西亚蝶试图从回忆的玄冥中找出夜会的前因后果：“这时东单公园出来一个小伙，他也没赶上末班车……我们实在冷的不行，他要带我去一个浴池过夜、他说最便宜又不冷”。

于是二人结伴而行，穿过那无尽的夜色和寒风。黑暗包裹着一切，藏匿着一切，也就包庇着一切。那些平日理直气壮的歧视和暴力都被暂时祛除，就像基辅下的那场雪，不仅暂时盖住了俄罗斯发起的战争的恶与耻，也盖住了家破人亡的乌克兰人民的伤与痛。而不论“歧视”还是“偏见”都是基于视觉经验，对于异己的鄙夷。入于目，塞于心，偏见让人误入歧途。还好，夜幕降临，那些男儿身再扭捏骄躁也无所畏惧，暗光保护着被平日凝视的不羁。夜的无情不是它柔软的庇护，而是它的转瞬即逝，拂晓时分随时准备让一切昭然若揭。

就在这忽明忽暗的拂晓，西亚蝶眼前灵光闪动，外面寒天冻地，这里春光乍泄，浴室取了正直俗气的皇家名字“开阳”，所谓“三阳开泰”，春冬之交也算应景。“开阳”正红色的大门里蒸汽和精气润开深冬的不堪。多年以后，浴池早已不复存在，回忆涌上心头，那夜纵情的灵光跟着西伯利亚蝴蝶的双手和剪刀一起在宣纸上重新勾勒出那片满园春色：很多人，很多双眼睛，他们站着、躺着、半蹲着、匍匐着，从一个人生到另一个人，每个人体又是繁枝茂叶所以寄生的温室，人与人的连接如此自然坦荡，落落大方。那些颠鸾倒凤、姹紫嫣红的勃勃生机，沉浸在晨光暧昧的深蓝色背景中。此刻，每一句古雅都如此的淫荡，每一种淫荡又如此的典雅。古已有之，不必责怪。

开阳以外的世界一如既往的肃穆枯乏，笔直的华表，笔直的卫士，笔直的现代文明，笔直的假阳具。开阳永春的小宇宙里，那些交泰的真阳是如花似锦的根茎，是通透的一窍，这里九窍皆通，通人通地通天，宣纸通透，软硬兼施，在它脆弱的边角坚毅地宣告那种穿越玄黄，勾连天地的力量。在锦簇的暗光里，那些莹莹的目光，看向我们，邀请我们，陌生人，来，这里一视同仁，多阳交泰，日新惟良。



Fig. 15: Xiyadie, 开阳 *The Blossoming Yang*, 2021, Xuan paper, papercut, 300 × 140 cm