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Like Knives in a Block

Hannah Black

After the Ferguson uprising in 2014, and even more forcefully after the George Floyd uprising in 2020, reverberations of black riot reached the art world. In a revaluation of history approaching mass psychosis, cultural discourse attempted to grapple with the foundational role of anti-blackness in the construction of contemporary life. The curatorial response was clear: exhibiting work by racialized artists provided the museum or gallery space with a safely individuated but still-relevant quantum of mass struggle. Easy as this is to trope, even to mock, across its many instances this curatorial turn included gestures that were opportunistic and/or sincere, extractive and/or supportive, marked by the art industry's customary ambiguity in relation to politics. Despite the bathetic tendencies it engendered, the shift in focus from the political content or intent of the artwork to the political identity of the artist rendered the artwork a symptom not only of the artist's internal struggle with history but also of history's emptiness, ready to be filled by collective activity unfolding outside of the sphere of art.

This moment inspired a strong counter-reaction in the form of wide-ranging critiques of woke. I'm using the word "woke" as a shorthand, not as a joke or criticism. Anyway, we are now post-woke and can take a moment to look back on what we have learned. The word originated in black America and, despite now circulating to the point of meaninglessness, it remains evocative of how the black riot and its aftermath figured in mass culture (somewhat improbably—there have been so many awakenings) as disturbing the peace of the famous national dream of progress that, as Freud says of dreams, is bent on preserving a state of somnolence. "Father, can't you see I'm burning?" the Minneapolis police precinct cried out in the national sleep. Woke's Jacobins were the avatars of "cancel culture," a grassroots, spontaneous, disorganized movement handing out summary albeit symbolic executions for thought crimes. This was the political deployment of shame, a social tool long used by the less powerful.

Its reach extended by the internet, it was reimagined as a specter of psychic annihilation, almost as haunting as communism in its exaggerated fidelity to the relation between present pain and the horror of history. Woke's heady dose of *jouissance* also made it highly expressible as art.

According to woke art discourse, the art institution is always already ethically bankrupt in its relation to blackness and indigeneity. The goal was therefore to constructively demean the art institution, treating it as a distinctly non-autonomous store of values ripe for redistribution. At the "bad end" of woke, this became entirely conflated with the amoral assertion that "the artist must eat," reified into the narrow political horizon of representative success for tokenized individual black and brown artists.

But woke art discourse also opened up space for what Marina Vishmidt has termed "infrastructural critique," a modality that goes beyond critique of the institution to consider the whole field of the social. It did this by positing the racial both as a claim on value (blackness as a form of intellectual property right) and the horizon, at least, of value's destruction, a powerfully negative historical imaginary that is activated by and in turn activates struggle. The obvious political regressions of the first aspect, the expanded claims on art values, might be depressing, but they also bear a non-coincidental resemblance to the political limits of redistributive social democracy in the Global North, where the revenue from socially progressive tax codes at home funds experimental bombs and torture elsewhere, undermining any presumed moral arc of domestic socialism. Meanwhile, the mobilizations inspired by the other, more profoundly antagonistic pole of woke—I mean by blackness as the negative dimension of subjectivation—were closer in form to Marxist-feminism's denaturalization of social reproduction as painfully constitutive of labor, rather than labor's absolute Other. By identifying and addressing the institution as an infrastructure of domination, the woke art era took up a general social negativity that transcended the limits of institutional critique and moved toward the infrastructural. In a sense, the question of the autonomy of art developed into the question of the autonomy of the racial—autonomous in the sense of presenting distinct and conflicting historical time zones.

To repeat Vishmidt, infrastructure is that which repeats. Infrastructure is form. Playfully and a little perversely, Vishmidt's concept of the infrastructural gives art criticism back its traditional sphere of formal ekphrasis. Form, in this case, is clocks and prisons, gender and race. Form is antagonistic and contested. Any artwork that registers this antagonism of form is one of the moments of thought that concretizes and particularizes the transcendental social repetitions of capital, gender, or race as infrastructure, and is therefore subject to intervention and transformation.

The artworks and struggles within art to which Vishmidt's infrastructural critique pays attention are not treated as metonymic moments in a zeitgeist, each containing the whole of the contemporary moment in miniature, but as expressions of particular antagonisms that reveal the non-contemporaneity of the conjuncture, in which multiple temporal and historical registers are simultaneously active.[1] The kinds of anatopic anachronisms—events that both disrupt and structure time and space—that are relevant to Vishmidt's "infrastructural time" or "temporal infrastructure" include, for example, Saidiya Hartman's concept of a persistent afterlife of slavery that creates an excess or drag on black subjectivity and even on subjectivity as such,[2] or Eqbal Ahmad's comment, "at the dawn of decolonization, Palestine was colonized. I recall my utter confusion at this irony of history."[3] These odd repetitions are not just hauntings and, in fact, are not really anachronisms but are the really existing infrastructure of thought, the unconscious in which nothing is past versus capitalism's abolition of the future. The overlapping histories of race and the colony resemble, to borrow a phrase of Vishmidt's that she meant more literally, "time zones invented to synchronize the sun's uneven impact."[4] And the imaginary of race itself has something to do with the combined and uneven impact of the sun. Infrastructure expresses this prevailing modality of space/time and infrastructural critique pays attention to the aporetic gaps that structure this repetition.

"Infrastructure is made out of time insofar as infrastructure is that which repeats," writes Vishmidt, I repeat. She continues: "the repetition is normalized into everyday routine, and when it stops functioning, an aperture is cut into its artifice—through which history and power relations can be seen. Think of the global financial crisis; think of the water disasters in Flint and Detroit."[5] Vishmidt was constantly thinking about and looking through these apertures. Her post-2008 interest in mechanisms of speculation and finance was later complexified by her interest in the anti-black infrastructures and black anti-infrastructures of the US and elsewhere. The former incorporated, among other things, debt/credit as the closure of time, and the mutual imbrications between art and speculation that delineated a financialized subjectivity: hyper-adaptable, inventive, and mortgaged to an impossible future. Vishmidt took the paradigm of racialization seriously as a similar aperture within the supposed normal function of subjectivity, attentive to Stuart Hall's contention that "race is the modality by which class is lived," though she cautioned that "maybe the dimension of class, in all its modalities, can only register as class struggle, and not any kind of identity."[6] The total entanglement between capital and racialization is "not a scandal or a polemic but a humdrum historical fact."[7] While the racial might analytically relate to surplus on the level of space and bodies, on the level of time and historicization, it is not extraneous but the central motif of struggle, revealing class as "a relation, in relation, as a moment or a pattern."[8] As I hazily and perhaps wrongly remember Vishmidt saying

at a conference in Amsterdam circa 2014: "on an abstract level, all states are colonial in relation to their populations." The colonial and the racial don't just organize surplus, they also organize the interior of labor, and this remains the case whether a particular racialized or colonized population is deployed as labor or not. Of course, we all know now, this is what a border is. Anyway, race qua race is less interesting to Vishmidt as lived subjective experience than as the blockage or impasse of experience itself, the current hard limit of what can be done with subjectivity.

The patchwork or discontinuous historical time of the racial grounds the centrality of theories of white supremacy to Vishmidt's speculative account of infrastructural critique. Her interest in the black radical tradition, especially the work of Fred Moten, was partly made possible by the standpoints that anchored her critique: pro-insurrectionist left communism and Marxist-feminism, analyses that incorporated struggles with a negative or antagonistic—that is to say, an infrastructural rather than institutional—relation to labor. Racialized populations infrastructurally undergird the official space of politics, a relation unchanged by the entry of particular individuals into and out of the matrix. It is this that gives the racial and the colonial the force of "now-time," to use Walter Benjamin's term, a time that erupts into the homogenous and empty time of capital—rendering it asymptotic, like in quantum physics when the particle temporarily abolishes the wave. As Vishmidt says of the artist Uriel Orlow's video *Yellow Limbo* (2011), the temporal discontinuities of colonial or racial domination and resistance to it offer "a chance to splinter history into several constellations"—in the case of Orlow's video, the Palestinian cause as of 1968, a cause "that is at once the origin of the story and the present moment: a truly mythical time of limbo, or purgatory."[9] In order to repeat, something must first stop. Only then can it begin again. History proceeds by its bad side, in that it proceeds only where it is completely blocked and knotted.

Vishmidt declared herself unconvinced by the ontological claims of black radical thought, but she took them seriously as an important challenge to the theorization of struggle. The dangers of ontologizing racial oppression as historical essence are horrifically epitomized by Zionism, and in this case we might want to side with Ghassan Kanafani and say that the anti-assimilationist tendencies within European Jewry were always already Zionist; or we could side with Moishe Postone and think of European Jewry as embodying a particular historical tension or surplus—*jouissance*, basically—around the formation of the modern nation-state, a tension that was tragically abolished by the success of the Nazi genocide. Only at that point did any putative ontology of Jewishness get emptied of the revolutionary potentials that helped originate communism and psychoanalysis, and join the side of capital's wholesale murder of the future. I think about this a lot, and I still don't know what I think. The

fact is that while reification of identity is doomed to become an ossification of struggle, it is also one of struggle's primary social means. These patterns of ossification and reopening are time zones, not final destinations. The appearances and disappearances of identifications from the political stage activate different zones of historical time. These identifications are both contingent—produced by particular moments of struggle—and determinate—they are a matter of descent.

The limits of peak woke's attempt to radicalize the liberal institution through either the redistribution or the destruction of art value have become even more painfully apparent as the predominant focus among politically committed artists and art workers has shifted from the historical afterlife of transatlantic slavery to settler colonialism in Palestine and imperialism in the Middle East. There are many continuities between the woke era and this, the time of its inflection by Gaza—for example, both moments register the ongoingness of original accumulation, against persistent tendencies all across the left spectrum to treat colonial or white supremacist violence as an unfortunate atavism—and the emphasis on the colonial has reactivated the concept of black America as an "internal colony," a thought-figure that was central to the highly politically repressed and truncated Third Worldism of the black Civil Rights movement.

However, some of the discourse around anti-blackness was mobilized as a revitalization of the art market through the injection of fresh outsiders, and this magic trick cannot be performed for the Palestinian cause, or at least not yet. The politics of the latter are in direct conflict with state institutions and laws, a situation that reveals the homogeneity and continuity of colonial law everywhere from the settler colonies to their administrative centers. Everywhere, the law defends the colony in order to defend value itself. The Palestinian cause has pushed to breaking point the vestigial autonomy of art and the attendant autonomy of the racial. The whole matrix has reached some kind of apotheosis, with a majority of art institutions implicitly or explicitly revoking the radicalism of the woke era and choosing to side with the colonizer.

This new era has also inverted the prevailing ethics of the image. The black movement benefited from the wide circulation of devastating images of violence, a dissemination of "lynching images" that provoked a variety of responses. Against liberal demands for a proliferation of police-images via body cams, radicals problematized the public's willingness to consume images of black people dying violent deaths and placed these within the history of lynching as spectacle, lynching postcards, etc. This popular critique saw the lynching spectacle as a white performance demarcating the outline of the human as non-black. In the art sphere, the black uprising registered as a block on the free circulation of the lynching image, sabotaging the comfortable delineation of whiteness.

The situation of the image is quite different when it comes to the Palestinian struggle. In this case, Palestinian journalists have worked to convey images of Zionist brutality, a historic effort that, alongside the heroism of the armed resistance, has contributed to a renewal of the Palestinian national cause even as the Zionist state commits open genocide. "The cameras will not be extinguished, we will chase the image everywhere,"[10] as Ezz el-Masry, the brother of the martyred photojournalist Hossam el-Masry, put it.

The differences between these two relations to the image have to do with a multitude of factors, including Palestine's contingent entanglement with the Holocaust industry and its reification of suffering, and the relative differences between anti-Palestinian and anti-black racism—the most trenchant claims of Afro-pessimism are not a matter of degree of suffering, but of the psychic infrastructure of race and its real limitations of solidarity. However, in the end, clearly the political impact of the images produced by "the first live-streamed genocide" is indexed to the genius of the Palestinian resistance; the former cannot do more than the latter. And the same is true of the black image or non-image. The defeat of the 2020 George Floyd uprising temporarily paused the development of this particular set of political meanings, but the wound might become generally available again in future and teach us new things. (Of course, no one wants to have a generally available wound, that's why the entire legible space of politics should be treated with a kind of contempt or even horror.) It is the racial infrastructure of time that makes wounds eloquent, a miracle that remains possible as long as a history is remembered by more than one person. The profound political negativity of the standpoint of blackness must be held alongside the necessity and reality of political struggle. The fact of anti-blackness is not a referendum on the possibility of struggle, nor a misplaced theoretical fixation, but one of struggle's basic conditions.

As Kerstin Stakemeier says of Vishmidt's methodology, "Nothing is dropped. Nothing can be dropped. All is both cutting tool and glue."[11] Vishmidt's theoretical ethics posit the simultaneity of all aspects of collective history. To quote her essay on her own methodology, the "missing chapter" of her book on speculation: "The speculative proposition constantly poses and withdraws meaning, but all the withdrawn meanings pile up, probably in an ungainly fashion, and their interactions are unforeseeable."[12] This resembles an unconscious of struggle "in which," to quote Freud, "nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one."[13] The unconscious does not subjectively experience the passage of time. But, let's remember, neither does a clock. Jacques Lacan radicalizes Freud's impossible city of the unconscious beyond its implication of mere storage, describing the unconscious not as "hold-all, heteroclite" but as a "discontinuity" with no prior continuity, appearing as "impediment,

failure, split," an accidental fissure that is imbricated with the repetition of the symptom in that it "occurs […] as if by chance."[14]

Time is movement bound to repeat itself. History splintered into constellations, to paraphrase Vishmidt. In his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis, Lacan describes constellations splintering into history, at the origins of what he calls the "structuralization of reality" (i.e., science):

> The function of the stars in the delirious system […] shows us, just like a compass, the polar star of the relation of man to the real. The history of science makes something similar seem plausible. Isn't it strange, paradoxical even, that it was the observations of shepherds and Mediterranean sailors of the return to the same place of an object that might seem to interest human experience least, namely a star, that revealed to the farmer when he should sow his seeds? […] it was the observation of the return of the stars to the very same places that, repeated over the centuries, led to the structuralization of reality by physics, which is what we mean by science […] that first demand that made us explore the structuralization of the real down through history in order to produce a supremely efficient and supremely deceptive science, that first demand is the demand of das Ding—it seeks whatever is repeated, whatever returns, and guarantees that it will always return, to the same place.[15]

The repetitions of the orbits of planets are repeating configurations that provide an infrastructure of possible meaning. Always returning to the same positions, they provide a guarantee of the persistence of human culture—there will always be the movement of the stars to start again from—and the literal infrastructure of time: a day is the sun's apparent arc over the Earth, a month is the moon's movement from empty to full, and so on. Lacan laments, albeit somewhat ironically, the failure of the paternal law to continue to backstop this guarantee as modernity continually, entropically disperses and fragments it. It could be that there is not enough No, paternal or otherwise, in the world system: the countervailing forces of proletarian struggle, a reality principle that at times produced a check on capitalist annihilation, have been tendentially dispensed with since the neoliberal and neo-imperialist reorganizations of the 1970s, in favor of a bad infinity of accumulation, its only imaginable endpoint total ecological collapse.

What is important about the psychoanalytic symptom is that it repeats and, in this sense, is infrastructural. The Thing is the beyond of the signifier, a remainder of the fundamental division of reality into the tripartite structure of Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary. The Thing is a primordial function of unconscious representation. Primordial, but not originary. Lacan is in many ways anti-origin. He believes, with Freud, that there is an uninterpretable navel of the dream. So, while the hole or lack at the center of the unconscious has something to do

with the mother's body, the mother's body as both originary and forbidden, it is also nothing at all. Similarly, to use an observation Vishmidt borrowed from Michael Denning, expropriation comes before exploitation. The infrastructure of slavery and colonialism precedes the factory, landlessness/deprivation of means of survival is the precondition of proletarianization, producing the hole around which political desire is organized. But neither the individual nor the collective relation to lack is solved by sentimental over-valuations of reproduction and care—tradition dies with its lifeworld, however many zombie forms it survives as, just as the meaning of the maternal body is laundered by loss into the symptomatology of sexuality. There is no direct line back to the source. It can only be circled, spiraled around, revisited from another angle. Perhaps, to quote François Tosquelles, "the proletariat could stay with the unconscious, and not with raising consciousness."[16] "The unconscious is politics," says Lacan, yet this unconscious "is not a substance concealed in the individual," but a trans-subjective infrastructure of social life.[17] Despite and because of its refusal to accept the objective facts on the ground regarding the impossibility of desire—that what and who is gone is gone, that the cake cannot be both held and eaten, that our enemies are triumphant—the unconscious is the means by which the very possibility of the social reproduces itself over and over again in each irreplaceable and singular human individual. An infrastructure.

Infrastructure repeats, I repeat. "Infrastructure is that which persists and makes possible, insofar as it also makes impossible," and, for Vishmidt, it is therefore profoundly linked to "regimes of governmentality" whose purpose is to make live and let die.[18] It "can be said to materialize […] the inextricability of domination and care."[19] Infrastructures such as race, the family, and the state generate impasses often articulated in theoretical positions that seem almost antipolitical in their condemnation of the wounds that make politics possible: for example, Afro-pessimism or insurrectionism. We could also think of some forms of abolition, such as family abolition or abolition of the state. This is the zone of melancholic ontologies and defiantly improbable demands. They are not liveable or practical, they offer no realistic program, and, even worse from the point of view of self-declared realists, they strive to bludgeon the programmatism of more legible and sober politics with their depressive ethical claims—ethical in the Lacanian sense of a total fidelity to the real and depressive in the sense that they make you not want to do anything.

But don't politics' bad conditions make politics necessary? Yet, by the same token, the negativity of necessity is fugitive from all measure and institutionalization. The symbolic foreclosure that woke strives toward, whether as infrastructural critique or as a specter—especially in its insistence that subjectivity be produced politically and vice versa—renders all legible politics psychotic. What is dead cannot be made to live, and the stains of mass torture can only be

washed out by the annihilation of history. This is the undeniable but decadent negativity of woke, feared and derided by those who nevertheless seem unable to do without it as an object, an object performing the function of internal discipline demarcating acceptable action as well as delineating the void into which politics could fall if not maintained as useful activity, if not correctly tailored to the presumed rationality of a hallucinatory ordinary person. The mad and the dead are officially deplored and the focus is on triaging viable bodies into an improved life. To put it in a sketchy Lacanian way, the symbolic and the imaginary are knotted through a fantasy of Actual Politics and the real is cast out as inconvenient. Meanwhile, for their part, the Afro-pessimists and ultras are gothically repelled by the humanism of utility, their commitment to correct analysis of the most devastating aspects of the social often almost fascistically blind to the material fact of historical change. The imaginary and real are twinned but the symbolic is refused as a kind of betrayal.

Despite these extreme characterizations, which are more suggestive sketches than proper diagnoses, almost everyone knows on some level that the search for perfect strategies and attitudes at present seems doomed to produce at best bathetic subcultures and at worst the structural collective psychosis already described. This is a generalized doom that extends from the ballot box to the black-market AK-47, from the United Nations to the riot. In this self-evident situation, the prevailing mood underneath rhetorical denunciations of this or that extreme is quite a different relation between negativity and pragmatism. While Charmaine Chua is absolutely right, in a recent sympathetic critique of insurrectionism, that "ungovernability is an impossible wish as a permanent condition under the realities of ongoing state violence,"[20] from the perspective of the infrastructural, which makes possible only insofar as it also makes impossible—to give this insight all possible valences—the impossible wish is not the negation but the precondition of affirmative politics, signaling an encounter, inevitably spasmodic and impermanent, with the real of structural impossibility and antagonism. While in the unconscious everything is possible, there is no time, no infrastructure; the real on the other hand is what resists integration, it is the implacable insistence of the unassimilable. Far from negating legible political activity, the negativity of the real could be—and often functionally is—understood as what generates a productive "unconscious of struggle" as the intermittent, contingent appearance of usable pasts rather than foreclosed fantasies. But the ultras, anarchists, left communists, Afro-pessimists, and family abolitionists are not the better angels of struggle, any more than unconscious life is a repository of accurate instinct. Rather, it is the fundamental turbulence that guarantees any link whatsoever between concepts and bodies, symbols and actions. The ultras of all kinds "keep the dead like knives in a block,"[21] to quote Ben Krusling, ready to pierce activity with the impasse of its necessity. Oriented toward the paradox of everyday life, the rites of these high priests of

rupture are at least as critically infrastructural as the conditional optimism of the enthusiastic bureaucrats. In the same way, the near-mechanical historical repetitions of leftist strategy cannot be simply moralized as failures and are not just "hard, boring, unglamorous work," to quote a popular humblebrag, but planets orbiting the real's insistence, an orbit whose recursiveness has its own inherent, disavowed melancholia or negativity.

History moves but it also does not, or: it only moves because it does not. There is nothing new to say, only appearance and disappearance and its historical syntax—the form of time that we assimilate as language. The paradigmatic contemporary position rejects universally applicable strategies and maintains a robust, despairing openness to doomed methods and forms as a means of temporalizing, rather than repressing, the sad passions of the false eternity of the unconscious of struggle. Ideally, realistic activity and radical negativity are not opposed but co-constitutive, possibility generated by its encounter with the impossible, and vice versa.

NOTES

1 Marina Vishmidt, “The External Cause of the Image,” in *Uriel Orlow: The Short and The Long of It* (Mousse Publishing, 2011), available at https://urielorlow.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Vishmidt-External-Cause-of-the-image.pdf.

2 Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006).

3 Eqbal Ahmad quoted in Esmat Elhalaby, “Toward an Intellectual History of Genocide in Gaza,” *The Baffler*, March 27, 2024, https://thebaffler.com/latest/toward-an-intellectual-history-of-genocide-in-gaza-elhalaby.

4 Vishmidt, “External Cause,” 16.

5 Marina Vishmidt, “Between Not Everything and Not Nothing: Cuts Toward Infrastructural Critique,” in *Former West: Art and the Contemporary After 1989*, ed. Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh (MIT Press, 2017), 265–69, here 265.

6 Marina Vishmidt, “Melanie Gilligan and Marina Vishmidt, A Conversation,” in *Not Working: Reader*, ed. Maurin Dietrich and Gloria Hasnay (Kunstverein München and Archive Books, 2020), 21.

7 Vishmidt, “Gilligan and Vishmidt,” 30.

8 Vishmidt, “Gilligan and Vishmidt,” 31.

9 Vishmidt, “External Cause,” 19.

10 In a video by the journalist Azar Bsisah posted on Instagram, August 26, 2025.

11 Kerstin Stakemeier, “Marina’s Cues,” *e-flux notes*, May 31, 2024, https://www.e-flux.com/notes/611821/marina-s-cues.

12 Marina Vishmidt, “Art, Value, Subjects, Reasons: Some Aspects of Speculation as Production,” in *Aesthetics of Equivalence: Art in Capitalism*, ed. Simon Baier and Markus Klammer (August Verlag, 2023).

13 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (W. W. Norton, 1961), 17–18.

14 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (W. W. Norton, 1978), 24–26.

15 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (W. W. Norton, 1992), 75.

16 Mireia Sallarès, dir., *Potential History of Francesc Tosquelles, Catalonia and Fear* (2021).

17 Jacques-Alain Miller, speaking at the Eighth Congress of the World Association of Psychoanalysis in 2012; the text has been translated and is available at https://www.lacan.com/newsletter2a.htm.

18 Marina Vishmidt, “From Speculation to Infrastructure: Material and Method in the Politics of Contemporary Art,” *On Curating* 58 (March 2024).

19 Vishmidt, “From Speculation to Infrastructure.”

20 Charmaine Chua, “We Can’t Wish Away the State,” *Dialogues in Human Geography* (2025), https://doi.org/10.1177/20438206251364984.

21 My notes, based on my attendance at a reading in London organized by Danny Hayward, November 2025.