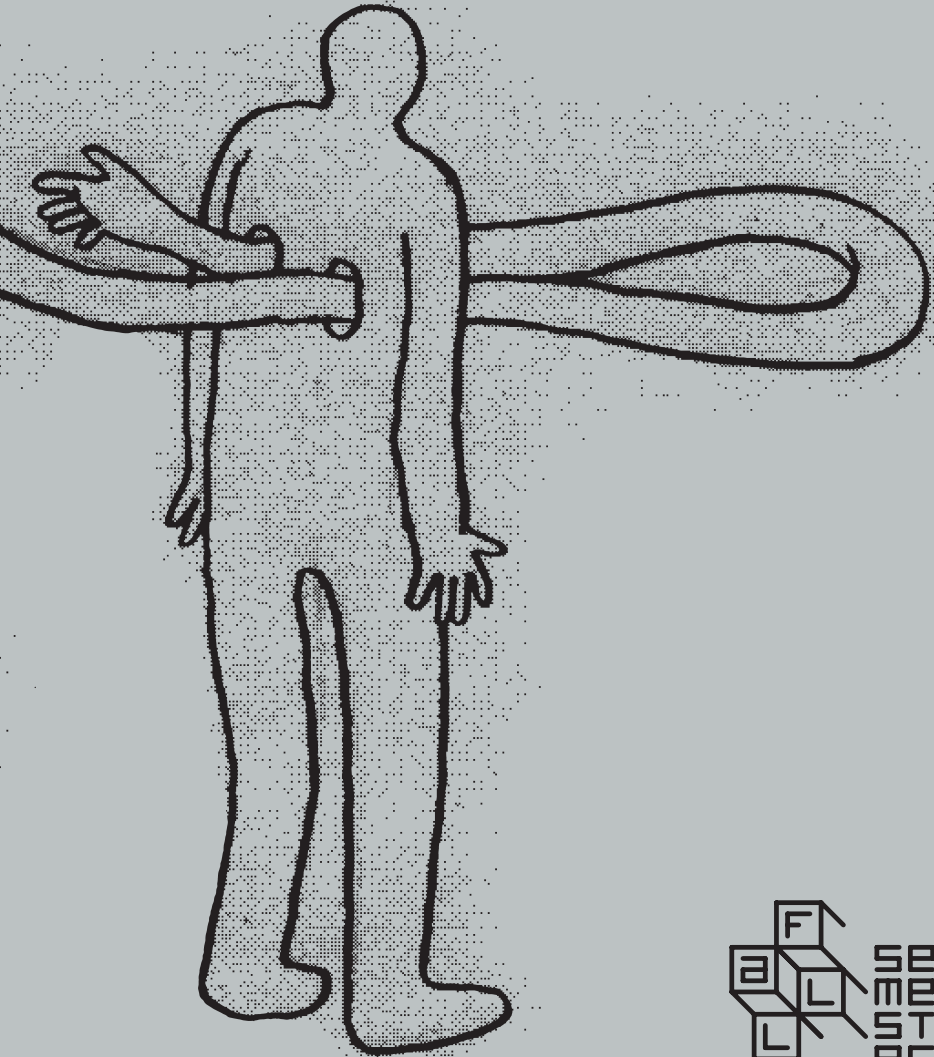


Victoria
Ivanova

On the
Ineffable
Allure of
Achieving
Systemic
Agency





***Disclaimer:** What follows is an attempt to think through a praxis that is directed towards transformative impact on the basis of existing potentialities. The choice of fields that are woven into this strategy brief – finance, human rights and contemporary art – is a product of this author’s direct or tangential involvement in these spheres as a practitioner and researcher. The aim of this strategy brief is to use the mechanics of DIY-theory to engineer an actionable framework.¹*

Speculative Temporal Horizons

In “The Time-Complex. Postcontemporary,” Armen Avanessian and Suhail Malik propose that the ever increasing complexity of techno-social infrastructures and modes of governance² is underwritten by a reorientation in the very logic of time.³

Instead of the past giving way to the present, from which in turn the future is to be constructed, “the past, the present, and the future enter into an economy where maybe none of these modes is primary, or where the future replaces the present as the lead structuring aspect of time.”⁴ The disorientating effects of this temporal restructuring are perhaps most evident in the neutralization of the present as the foundation upon which to gain traction and agency.⁵ Within such an ecology, systems that claim speculative futures hold a privileged status.

Avanessian and Malik put forward the concept of postcontemporary as a means of delineating an episto-political⁶ territory that is interested in “[understanding] and [operationalizing]

the present from outside of itself.”⁷ The question for any transformation-motivated project is then how to achieve systemic efficacy in the context of the postcontemporary. If a system like credit-based finance is wired to consume a future before the future present has arrived,⁸ how can we capture and learn from the mechanisms of that system’s success? Equally, what does it mean to have success within the postcontemporary ecology? Could the postcontemporary require a concept of “systemic agency” in order to get to grips with the structural systematicity that the former presumes?⁹

It is proposed that operationalizing the present from outside of itself is a key requirement for achieving systemic agency. Consequently, the theoretical task of locating the demands of the future(s) must be intricately tied to the praxis of capturing these futures by devising and embedding systemically-oriented active forms.

Keller Easterling defines the concept of “active form” as an infrastructurally integrated informational disposition that has the

capacity to become multiplied in different contexts and settings.¹⁰ Easterling draws on the examples of architectural active forms encapsulated in spatial determinations that are replicated in the construction of free trade zones across the globe, as well as the organizational meta-ordering that is procured through the worldwide adoption of quality regulations issued by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO).¹¹ It is clear from Easterling’s examples that the potential for an active form to become absorbed and systemically replicated depends on a number of contingencies, not least the relative power of the abstractions that underwrite a certain system. From the vantage point of individual and collective agents, cunning, compromise, persistence and luck emerge as some of the key traits that lubricate the activation of active forms that are aimed at hacking the system rather than purely re-consolidating its hegemonic logics.¹²

Equally, however, active forms may spin off in unforeseen and perhaps undesirable directions as systemic agency becomes

detached from the presumed intentions of its engineers. This is the juncture at which the ambition of human intention and the complexity of the interplay between various flows of matter, of which human intention is just one component, come into tension.¹³ On the one hand, individual and collective agencies presumably require that the potential consequences of an active form's operability are pre-mediated. Yet, on the other hand, the possibility of intersecting with a multitude of environmental dynamics and/or unforeseen events that disturb previously fixed points of equilibrium renders intentionality inherently unreliable. Systemic agency emerges as the more relevant notion in considering the evolutionary trajectory of active forms.

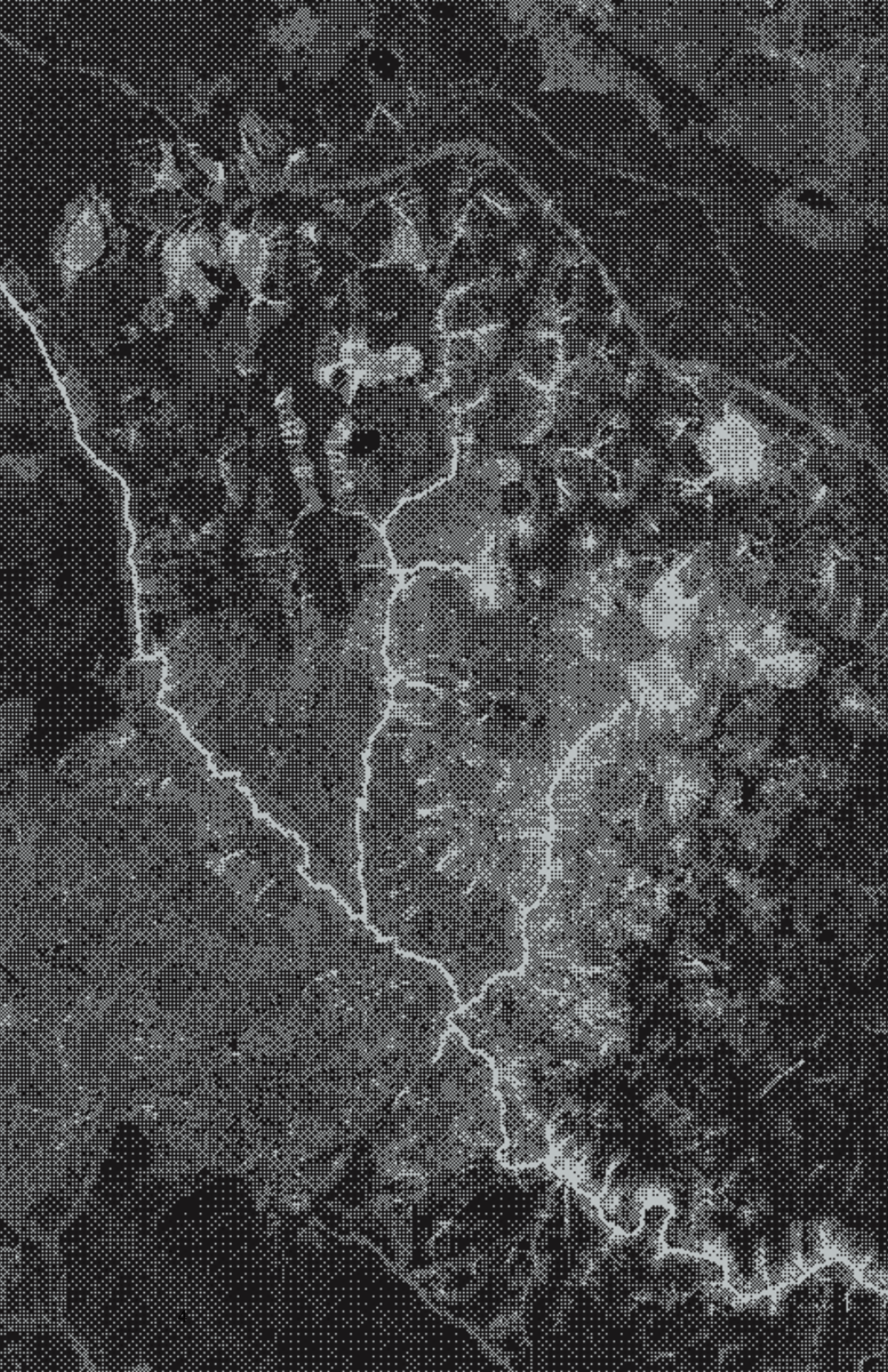
Future Abstract

Becoming

The objectification of abstract risk through finance offers an instructive example.¹⁴ If the historical rationale for speculative operations was to mediate risks associated with

the unpredictability of the future for industry and trade – whether in the form of drought, war or inflation – then the eventual detachment from the productive interests of industry and trade in favor of value extraction from financial circulation¹⁵ signaled a profound reconstitution of financial instruments as active forms. While numerous factors contributed to this transformation including the increased reliance of the Euro-American non-financial sector on drawing profits from financial circulation¹⁶ and the deregulation of the financial sphere,¹⁷ the shift in the ordering of global economy procured through financialization presents an evolutionary trajectory that cannot be grasped through recourse to the intentions and agendas of individual/collective actors alone but needs to be analyzed from the perspective of the modifications incurred by the active forms of finance in the various stages of their evolution.

At the same time, the question of the compositional and evolutionary complexity of systemic agency is somewhat separate from the question of future-binding as a precondition of achieving such agency. While the former



points to the need to reassess the basic presumptions around human intention in the construction and application of ideological and political projects, the latter points to a locus of power. In the case of finance, future-binding is what makes it a powerful system for ordering reality regardless of what it intentionally set out to do. By the same token, future-binding is effectuated through processes of the active form's de- and re-territorialization, which in turn demand abstractions as vehicles for traversing and shifting between different scales.¹⁸

Since abstraction is a means of going beyond the inherent limitations of immediacy,¹⁹ abstraction is what allows the present to be operationalized from outside itself.

The Trap of Fixing the Transcendental

Mediation regimes are episto-political landscapes that shape and are shaped by movements of abstraction. Human rights and contemporary art are two examples of mediation regimes that institute and

reproduce different strands of liberal ideology.²⁰ The human rights mediation regime operationalized the abstraction of a global legal subject – on the one hand, a decontextualized place-holder endowed with inalienable rights that was molded out of an idealized humanist subjectivity of its western proponents, on the other hand, an entity reliant on the existence of a globally integrated legal infrastructure.

Looking back at how the human rights system has functioned over the past six decades, it may be said that its success as a mediation regime has been largely defined by its failings. It failed to construct a globally functional legal infrastructure,²¹ but it did propel the institution of regional systems such as the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the African Union, which in turn reproduced and embedded the system's structural logics and foundational limitations, while paving the way for systemic agency of the human rights regime as a whole. At the operational level, the ECHR may be a slow-moving motor for achieving modulations of national legislative and

executive functioning but it offers a procedural trajectory for scaling up from individual claims to systemic modifications at the level of governance. The African Union may be similarly dismissed for the dysfunctionality of its internal politics, yet as a platform for formalizing political agendas through a legal discourse, it has strengthened the systemic agency of the human rights regime as a site for institutional reflexivity of its abstractions.

What is often cited as the biggest failing of the human rights regime is its capitulation as a framing cause for military intervention (e.g. NATO intervention in Yugoslavia in 1999)²² or as the ethical face of economic interventions into the functioning of developing states (e.g. through International Monetary Fund's loan agreements, formerly known as structural adjustment loans).²³ Yet these failings are also the human rights regime's biggest successes in so far as wars and negative effects of free market politics on localities have generated new demands for the subject of human rights and a corresponding

expansion/consolidation of the human rights regime's institutional complex. To state that the reproduction of the causes of human rights abuses leads to a further consolidation of the human rights industry is not to so much to reveal its hypocritical stance and inbuilt structural violence, but to point out that the abstraction of a global human legal subject may achieve systemic agency even if that agency effectuates unpalatable realities that contradict its presumed ethos.

Viewed from this angle, what undermines the human rights regime aren't its prima facie failures but the increasing loss of traction of the global human subject as an active form. Firstly, the regime fixes its subject in relation to a set of normative reductions that emerge from western liberal ideological formations and which have been discredited for their obfuscated structural violence when elevated to the status of universal law.²⁴ Equally, the centrality of the transcendental human subject makes the episto-political landscape of the regime too fixed and restricted to be

capable of retaining traction in a future-binding temporality.

Expansive Self-Confinement of Contemporary Art

The contemporary art mediation regime, by contrast, achieved systemic agency through institutional and semantic expansions that strove towards a globally consolidated socio-institutional ecology while discursively affirming difference, context and hybridity.²⁵ The latter continue feeding and enriching contemporary art's circulatory ecology, which as the main source of its cultural and financial value generation is also its most potent active form. In this sense, socio-institutional and market expansions march hand in hand, while globalism is posited as an essential criterion for operating within the contemporary art field, both ideologically and as a business model.²⁶

The allure of new markets is as much about expanding the semantic possibilities of contemporary art as it is about tapping

into new networks of locally/regionally formed elites. The proclivity of the contemporary art field to perpetually seek out novel domains from which to extract semantic and financial value is what propels it towards autonomy-seeking circulation.²⁷ At the same time, contemporary art's flattening out of past/present/future temporalities relies on the suppressed abstraction of a timeless contemporary. It is procured through contemporary art's critical model of semantic reorganization; an active form that allows for the construction of potential worlds detached from the underlying realities as far as the explicit content impact of the former on the latter is concerned.²⁸

Framing and circulation are the critical mechanisms for an entity being contemporary art. These strategies rely on the logic of second order observation – observing what others observe as a means of orienting oneself.²⁹ When raised to the level of abstract circulation, second order observation ecologies have a proclivity to elicit herding, producing clusters of reflexive resonances.³⁰

Reflexivity allows certain networks of actors

and ideas to gain augmented visibility, endowing them with a power status within the field. The clusters are networked into a larger constellation of similarly concentrated zones of reflexive activity, which delineate a “field” and boost the status of pre-existing entities with weighty reputation as these become the links through which new clusters fashion their appearance. This is the logic of contemporary art’s systemic agency.³¹

Expansion-oriented extraction of value, reflexivity, flattening out of temporalities, all feed into the present semantically usurping the future while remaining agnostic about the future of the underlying reality. It is a future-binding technique that not too dissimilarly from finance or human rights is first and foremost committed to securing the regime’s existence in the future. While without a doubt an important strategic consideration for institutionally embedded mediation regimes, it leads to the reactionary tendency of controlling the future in the name of the regime’s survival rather than opening up systemic agency to the

transformational potential of a future present that has not yet arrived.

The Posthumanrights Prototype

Let’s try to bring the various threads of the strategic brief together. The argument puts forward the notion of “systemic agency” as a means of grasping a system’s operational power. It may be detected if one approaches finance, human rights and contemporary art as regimes of mediation embodied in socio-institutional agendas and practices that operate on the basis of certain abstractions – e.g. abstract risk, abstract human subject, abstract contemporary. Active forms are in turn the informational inputs that manifest themselves in codes of practice, protocols, modes of infrastructural and logistical functioning, and various other socio-institutional modi operandi. Active forms are on the one hand constrained and structured by the abstractions underlying the regime in question, on the other hand, they may be construed as sites for modifying mediation regimes and the nature and functions of its underlying abstractions.

The brief exposé of the three selected mediation regimes – finance, human rights and contemporary art – shows that there is a distinction that needs to be made between systemic agency as a means of wielding power or ordering reality, and the practical consequences of its operability. The former is an assessment of the regime’s structural dynamic, while the latter attends to that structural dynamic’s relationship to reality. The structural dynamic of finance exhibits the strongest future-binding qualities given that the abstraction of objectified risk is supported and reinforced by financial instruments as active forms that propel the financial mediation regime’s colonization of the future. In comparison, the all-consuming present of contemporary art procured through semantic reorganization is a soft form of future-binding, while the entrapment of its active forms in recursive self-reflexivity means that the present is operationalized to only reconsolidate itself. Finally, the human rights regime is incapable of orienting itself towards the future given its commitment to a static

“transcendentalized” reference point, however, the active forms of its institutional frameworks have been incremental in entrenching the regime’s infrastructures in the landscape of globally-oriented governance.

Despite the various problems that these systems exhibit, they also hold important lessons for understanding what it might mean to prototype a mediation regime with systemic agency that extends beyond its own consolidation of power and towards responding to the demands of open speculative futures. Let’s call it the posthumanrights regime.

While the reference in the name assumes an ethical dimension rooted in humanism and its codes, what is actually borrowed from human rights is its infrastructural ethos. For example, the feedback structures of the ECHR system and the platform-leverage dimension of the African Union (as well as many other structural-organizational aspects of the regime) could serve as important reference points in fashioning structured feedback mechanisms between different socio-institutional scales.

However, the reactionary nature of the human rights' liberal-humanism encapsulated in the centrality of the transcendental human subject and reflected in the determination of individual freedoms, emancipation trajectories, predetermined agents of violence and modes of reparations, means that the system is incapable of self-transforming reflection. The spirit of semantic reorganization of the contemporary art regime could then be applied to the various "truths" of human rights in order to de-essentialize and open up the static/oppressive forms of legal over-determination. The other important lesson from the operation of contemporary art regime is the strategic use of the socio-institutional reflexivity as a means of achieving visibility and generating value, which strengthens a regime's systemic agency.

The final lesson stems from the financial regime's future-binding

capacity, however, with two important caveats. Firstly, the question for a possible posthumanrights prototype is whether a speculative future present can in itself contain the desired transformation. For example, a prototype that responds to a speculative future present in which the Universal Basic Income is a reality uses a hyperstitional logic that already embeds within itself a disruptive over-determination.³² This allows to think through the active forms that might need to be modified or produced from scratch, and in so doing re-imagine the socio-institutional ecology in a manner that's geared towards praxis-driven productions of abstractions. Secondly, prioritizing speculative futures while also retaining openness and responsiveness as to their actual future present manifestations, means that selective (self)sabotage and reinvention emerge as the key traits for mediation regimes that deploy systemic agency towards other aims than their own reproduction.

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Endnotes

- 1** The ideas presented in this brief are largely owed to exchanges of varying brevity and intensity with Antonia Alampi, Kader Attia, Armen Avanessian, Diann Bauer, David Xu Borogonjon, Dustin Breitling, Neringa Cerniauskaite, Joshua Johnson, Keith Tilford, Konstantin Leonenko, Suhail Malik, Renzo Martens, Gean Moreno, Alexandra Pirici, Patricia Reed, Mohammad Salemy, Benedict Singleton, Nick Srnicek, Kathleen Elizabeth Tan, Christopher Kulendran Thomas, Young Curators Workshops participants 2016 (as part of Berlin Biennial 9), Alex Williams, Tirdad Zolghadr and Natalia Zuluaga.
- 2** See B. Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016); N. Srnicek and A. Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London/New York: Verso, 2015); E. Esposito, *The Future of Futures: The Time of Money in Financing and Society* (Cheltenham/Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2011).
- 3** A. Avanessian and S. Malik, "The Time-Complex. Postcontemporary" in *The Time-Complex. Postcontemporary*, ed.
- A. Avanessian and S. Malik (Miami: [name], 2016).
- 4** Ibid
- 5** See Srnicek and Williams, *Inventing the Future*.
- 6** The concept of "episto-politics" is owed to curators and writers Bassam el Baroni and Mohammad Salemy.
- 7** Avanessian and Malik, "The Time-Complex. Postcontemporary."
- 8** E. Esposito, "The Construction of Unpredictability," in *The Time-Complex. Postcontemporary*, ed. A. Avanessian and S. Malik (Miami: [name], 2016).
- 9** The concept of "systemic agency" is largely inspired by the work of Niklas Luhmann.
- 10** K. Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London/New York: Verso, 2014).
- 11** Ibid. For the structuring effects on labour, see N. Rossiter, *Software, Infrastructure, Labour: A Media Theory of Logistical Nightmares* (New York/Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).
- 12** Easterling, *Extrastatecraft*. See also M. Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
- 13** M. de Landa, *A Thousand Years of Non-linear History* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2000).
- 14** E. LiPuma and B. Lee, "Financial Derivatives and the Rise of Circulation" in *Economy and Society*, 34:3, p. 420.
- 15** C. Deutschmann, "Limits to Financialization" in *European Journal of Sociology*, 52:3, pp. 352-355.
- 16** G. R. Krippner, "The Financialization of the American Economy" in *Socio-Economic Review*, (2005)3, p. 174.
- 17** D. MacKenzie, *An Engine, Not a Camera. How Financial Models Shape Markets* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), p. 172.
- 18** A. Williams, "The Politics of Abstraction" presented at *Speculative Aesthetics Event*, Bloomsbury, March 2013.
- 19** Ibid
- 20** V. Ivanova, "Fractured Mediations" in *The Time-Complex. Postcontemporary*, ed. A. Avanessian and S. Malik (Miami: [name], 2016).
- 21** R. Freedman, *Failing to Protect: The UN and the Politicisation of Human Rights* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2014).
- 22** D. Chandler, *From Kosovo to Kabul and Beyond. Human Rights and International Intervention* (London/Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2005).
- 23** B. Ghazi, *The IMF, the World Bank and*

the Question of Human Rights (Leiden: Brill | Nijhoff, 2005).

24 J. Rancière, “Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?” in *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103:2/3, 2004, pp. 297-310.

25 See Hal Foster, “Contemporary Extracts,” 2010, accessed on Sept. 11, 2016. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/contemporary-extracts/>

26 N. Horowitz, *Art of the Deal. Contemporary Art in a Global Financial Market* (Princeton/Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2011).

27 See I. Emmelhainz, ‘Art and the Cultural

Turn: Farewell to Committed, Autonomous Art?’, 2013, accessed on Sept. 11, 2016, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-and-the-cultural-turn-farewell-to-committed-autonomous-art/>

28 S. Malik, *On the Necessity of Art’s Exit from Contemporary Art* (Falmouth: Urbanomic Press, forthcoming).

29 Esposito builds on Niklas Luhmann’s theory of observation in *The Future of Futures* (2011) in describing the manner in which financial markets function, however, the observation seems to be equally fitting in regards

to the contemporary art field.

30 Once again, Esposito develops the Keynesian observation in *The Future of Futures* (2011) in relationship to the futures markets.

31 V. Ivanova, “Mirror, mirror on the wall... Some Notes on Contemporary Art Market Rituals”, 2016, accessed on Sept 11, 2016. <http://echogonewrong.com/mirror-mirror-on-the-wall/>

32 The example is owed to Benedict Singleton and his lecture at the Goldsmiths MFA speaker series in February 2016.

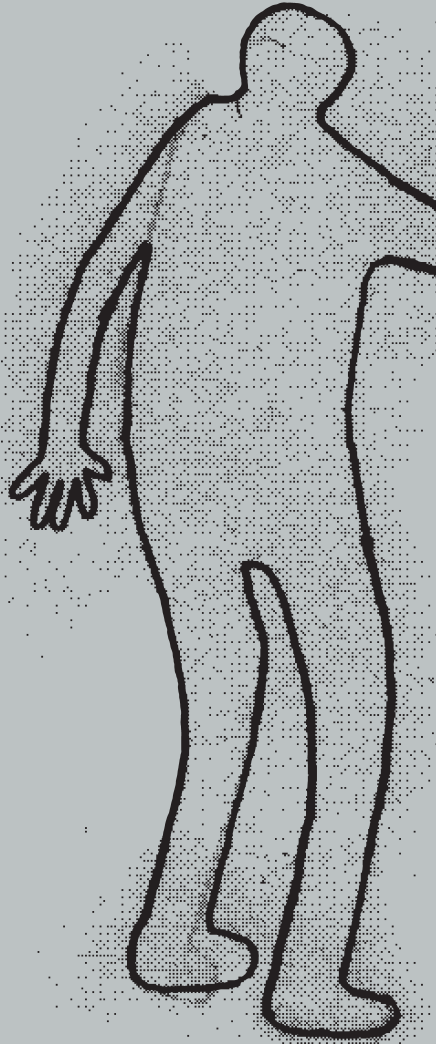
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