Performance on the Way: Oracular, Thingly, Burning, Off-time, Necro-aesthetic

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The necessary change is so profound that we tell ourselves it's impossible. So profound that we tell ourselves it's unimaginable. But the impossible it still to come. And the unimaginable is on the way.

Paul B. Preciado, *An Apartment on Uranus*

If there is something that the novel coronavirus outbreak and ensuing global pandemic has reminded us with cruel clarity is how the realm of matter and the realm of nature are not at all isolated from the world of human affairs and its many performances. The pandemic has demonstrated what happens when the ongoing ecological devastation entangles with the expansion of highly populated urban centers that typify our ever-expansive capitalocene: contact between non-human animal species and human populations increases, facilitating inter-species contagion. The trajectories of the pathogen across the planet, killing millions, also remind us of something else: a virus does not move from body to body solely on its own accord. Not at all. Rather, lines of infection drift, swerve, deviate, are blocked or unplugged according to very specific, very human, indeed political *decisions*—some taken by governments, some by individuals, some by social groups.

In these conditions of so much planned destruction (of the environment, of other fellow humans, of other fellow non-humans) and so much (preventable) dying what is left for performance art to do? What can an art that is so dependent on proximity, embodiment, participation and quite often on collective acts of contact create, propose, and mobilize in times when the (mis)management of virulent contagion is also being used to ramp-up renewed technologies and techniques of vigilance and control over the movements of populations within and across borders? What can performance art do when the organization of killing (through sanitary policies or nonpolicies, through open warfare or structural economic exploitation, through racial and gender discrimination or climate inaction) has become the primary motor of contemporary (necro) political (non)relations?

For sure performance art—indeed art in general, and therefore curation—can no longer rely on the operation that French philosopher Jacques Rancière has called the "distribution of the sensible" —an essentially modernist gesture of re-scrambling the established rela-

tions between expressive surface and meaning and that seems to be absolutely insufficient under the current logic of planetary neo-liberal necro-power.[1] Rather, performance art must find ways for establishing *something else* and create the conditions for this something else to proliferate. Here, the recent contributions to a politics of aesthetics by the Brazilian philosopher Peter Pál Pelbart are instrumental. Drawing from the ideas of the French philosopher Étienne Souriau, Pélbart sees the function of art today as not one of merely installing itself in a space (even if with provocative works) but of "establishing modes of existence that do not exist."[2] I would add to Pelbart's proposition that, once those other modes of existence are established by art, then the other task at hand is of finding ways to proliferate those modes, to create alliances, to invent escape routes from organized will to kill, and proliferate *unimaginable* actions and *impossible* imaginations that refuse, with care, what is no longer tolerable.

Finding ways to another logic of art, another logic of aesthetics, and therefore another logic of approaching, understanding, and relating to matter and its (many) natures: this is the task at hand. In these new logics, performance art helps us remember to remember that our planet, its living beings, and its non-living things are all oracles and agents of our collective future. In this remembering, performance art also helps us reimagine how to exhibit and curate, proposing unsuspected directions for these practices. In this sense, the works of the five artists that I discuss in this text—the Colombian Maria José Arjona, the Basque Itziar Okariz, the Brazilian/Argentinian duo Marcela Levi & Lucia Russo, and the North-American mayfield brooks—all propose alternative logics for making, approaching, and thinking performance art. And therefore, they ask us to reimagine, alongside the unimaginable—alongside with what "is on the way," to use Paul Preciado's expression—, a different logic for curating.

In what follows, I will focus specifically on these five artists' very recent pieces, created between early 2019 and end of 2021. What I hope will become clear as I discuss *Como es adentro es afuera* (As it is inside it is outside, 2021) by Arjona (based in Bogotá), *Las Estatuas* (The Statues, 2019) by Okariz (based in Bilbao), *Deixa Arder* (Let it Burn, 2019) by Levi and Russo (based in Rio de Janeiro), and *Viewing Hours* (2019-ongoing) by mayfield brooks (based in Brooklyn) is how lines of experimentation and logics of presentation explored by these artists are deeply predicated on a reimagining of what we understand by matter and of what we understand by time.

The question of what constitutes the matter(s) of time is so present in all the pieces discussed here that even though these are all "recent works," I would not say that they fall into the category of the "contemporary" (or even of the "extemporary"). Rather, pregnant as they are with the urgency of the now (and not at all caring with the urgency of the new), plunging right into the epicenter of the many storms that inform our historical present, the works gathered in this essay not only address the epoch out of which they emerge, but they also reveal a kind of anticipatory or oracular capacity, an off-time mode of existing. To be off-time: first step towards precipitating the impossible that "is still to come," as Preciado reminds us. Indeed, all the pieces discussed in this essay can be said to perform what Susan Buck-Morss once called "fore-history," which she defined as "ur-phenomena that can be recognized as precursors of the present, no matter how distant or estranged they now appear."[3] As ur-phenomena of a necessarily changed epoch still to come, the performances presented here are less ephemeral than anticipatory. In that sense, they correct Preciado's epigraph. They say, or rather, they enact, the following proposition: *The impossible, the unimaginable, are already here. Join us in making both proliferate.*

1. Oracular Acts: *Como es adentro es afuera*

One way of thinking about performance as "fore-history," as anticipatory of a time to come, is to consider its components and actions as oracular. And "oracular" is exactly the term used by the Colombian performance artist Maria José Arjona to refer to her most recent series of works *Como es adentro es afuera*—which blend live performance,

1. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004).
2. Peter Pál Pelbart, "Por uma arte de instaurar modos de existência que não existem," in *Como Falar de Coisas que Não Existem* (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2014).
3. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 219.

video installation, dance, sculpture, and drawing recently presented at NC-Arte and at Atrio, in Bogotá. How does the oracular operate in Arjona's complex and transtemporal series? At the end of 2018 the artist found herself walking on the sandy shoreline near Guahaca in the northern coast of Colombia. At the time Arjona was not necessarily in search of any thing in particular. However, as she perambulated, it became clear that some things were looking for her. 307 things to be exact. Discarded broken bits of larger objects, dejects of our capitalocene washed ashore, dried up parts of former living beings, animal, or plants. Once those scattered things and the walking artist found each other, one at a time, as she perambulated, they refused to let each other go. These were to be long-lasting encounters between human and non-human matters. 307 things, 307 encounters. Each asking the artist to surrender as much as possible any fantasy she might have had of possession. Particularly the fantasy of authorial self-possession.

A few weeks later, in early 2019, Arjona carefully distributed on the ground the 307 things, creating provisional constellations with them. The prone position being the closest to the experience of being just mere thing, Arjona spent several days lying next to them. Actively waiting, actively listening to the whispers of what supposedly has no voice, becoming thing among things as days went by, Arjona drank elixirs prepared with herbs and flowers from La Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. She surrounded herself with carefully composed shamanic gestures and vibrations, entering in composition with other logics of existence. Accessing a supra-sensorial plane of matter, the 307 mere things revealed to Arjona their capacity for oracular revelation. They indicated to her a future direction for the work to come, otherwise unimagined by the artist.

In late 2021, at NC-Arte in Bogotá, Arjona showed a large video installation comprised of 36 different four-channel video works that included scenes from nature, the cosmos, stills of her collages based on the Colombian flora, large drawings of irregular polygons, blocs of monochromatic fields, and furtive shots of Arjona dancing in a very dark, enclosed space and in a very luminous open room. Sometimes, some of the 307 things she called oracles appear in the film—rapidly flashing at the edges of the projected images—held in Arjona's open hands. Before the public could enter the projection space, they first had to go through two procedures in the gallery's first room. In the first procedure, a member of the audience representing the whole group, and with the help of one of Arjona's collaborators, held a golden pendulum over four metal plates set on a table, each plate carved with a specific symbol. Depending on the oscillations of the pendulum, the audience then moved to another table where another collaborator gave to all members of the audience a few drops of an essential oil extracted from native plants from the Amazon flora and specially prepared for the exhibition. The specific scent the audience inhales was determined by the procedure involving the golden pendulum. The pendulum also defined which of the 36 films was to be projected for each audience group.

In *Como es adentro es afuera* the artist becomes less a creator than a vessel of impersonal forces and vibrations: animal, mineral, viral, floral, and gravitational. This surrender of authorial will to the will of things had implications for the curatorial process. When setting up the exhibition, Arjona *asked* each of the 307 things, using the same golden pendulum, whether they wanted to be exhibited. 30 things eventually replied to her, through the movement of the pendulum, the following: they wanted to be in the gallery where the films were being projected, but they did not want to be displayed to the public. Thus, the 30 pieces were buried in specific locations inside the gallery's walls. The public was not even informed that they were in the gallery, invisibly. Prolonging this line of authorial dis-possession of the work, Arjona also created series of relatively large (yet quite light) copper sculptures. These were suspended by very thin copper wires in the wide space of the top floor of Atrio, one of the tallest buildings in Bogotá. Rather than simply exhibit the sculptures as *her* work, Arjona invited instead 30 young artists to do whatever they wanted with the forms. To do with them what Arjona could not possibly imagine herself. Rather than imposing her hand on matter and bending it to her will to create a stable form, an object, and therefore *her* exhibition, Arjona asked her guests, her audience, and herself to engage in a deep exercise of seriously listening to the call of supposedly silent and inert things. And in that listening, for everyone to become recipients of the will of things and strangers to their *selves*.

2. Conversing with Things: *Las estátuas*

If we were to find ourselves perambulating on a cold January day in 2019 in the labyrinthine entrails of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, we would perhaps note one of its visitors standing in

deep concentration before a statue—more precisely, an early 16th century Dutch painted wood bust, *Reliquary Bust of a Female Saint*. Not an inordinate event in the context of a museum. However, if we would then just slow down a bit, and dedicate a little more attention to that mundane episode, we would most likely be drawn to pause, and linger for a moment, intrigued by the unusual duration and quiet intensity of the apparently ordinary scene. We would then wonder about that visitor's seriously concentrated gaze, her resolute face-to-face with the wooden bust, her intent demeanor, and ponder why furtive smiles would suddenly flash across her face, usually followed by a quick lowering of her head, as if she had just heard an intimate confidence from the supposedly inert object before her. Eventually, as we lingered, and observe further, we would have to acknowledge that the woman facing the statue was less a beholder of a work of art than its active *interlocutor*. We would have to come to grips with the fact that the woman, in a discreet and yet eager and sincere way, was literally having a conversation with the wooden statue before her. Not only talking to it—but listening to what the statue had to say.

This interaction between object and subject, artwork and viewer, discreetly happening as an almost invisible event, was a consistent practice of the Basque artist Itziar Okariz the year before the pandemic hit. Talking with statues, listening to statues. Seriously. Without irony. For real. Okariz took this procedure to the 58th Venice Biennial, along with two statues: a 1948 bust by the Basque sculptor Jorge Oteiza, and a contemporary work by the Peruvian Antonio Andrade Tudela. As one of the two artists featured in the Spanish pavillion Okariz had several sessions of conversations with these two "invited" statues. Videos of other conversations Okariz had with art objects throughout 2019 were also shown: not only the already mentioned conversation with the wooden bust at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but also with more contemporary works, such as a conversation with a geometric, non-anthropomorphic sculpture by the Basque artist Sergio Prego. During the 58th Biennial, Okariz also had conversation with ten other statues present in Venice, including Brancusi's *Infinite Colum* and Giacommetti's *Surrealist Head of a Woman*.

Curatorially speaking *Las Estatuas* is not to be taken as an early 21st century theater of the absurd. Rather, the seriousness and integrity of Okariz' discreet action prompts an important question: What does it mean to create an unannounced performance to vocally address the inanimate and to listen to what the inanimate has to say? In rhetoric, such exchange between a human and an object falls under the concept of apostrophe, "a figure of speech in which a thing, a place, an abstract quality, an idea, a dead or absent person, is addressed as if present and capable of understanding."[4] The only corrective to this encyclopedic definition is that in the case of Okariz, there is no "as if." There is no make-believe, no metaphor, no playacting, no pretending. Okariz listens to what statues have to tell her. And then, Okariz replies.

Las Estatuas advances crucial questions to our times of neo-necro-liberalism: What happens when we actively listen to the histories of those who supposedly have no voice? How do we listen to the voices of those who are treated (socially, historically, ontologically) as if they were voiceless? What kind of new history of art, but also, what kind of new history of the world, would we then be able to co-write, after we listen to the voices of things? Perhaps we need to reinvent our ears, as well as our mouths, and in this process, radically transform what we understand language is, and what language does. In an email exchange with Okariz, she wrote me the following: "What interests me the most is *what can you do* as a subject speaking with another, inanimate, subject… What can you do with that veil of norms. That interests me deeply." Acts of listening to those who are deemed not be proper subjects of language. Tearing down no longer sustainable systems of embodiment, subjecthood, and meaning-making. Creating face-to-face events that remind us how to let it all go down in flames. Strategies so that another possibility of being, another world, another relationality, may emerge—the necessary unimaginable performances calling for a different kind of life.

3. The Body Burns as a Hyper-Link: *Deixa Arder*

A statement of fact: Marcela Levi and Lucia Russo's half hour long piece *Deixa Arder* is simply impossible to be performed. And yet the extraordinary Tamires Costa has no problem in embodying and dancing it. Ideally presented in a small black box space, with audience

4. J. A. Cuddon, "Apostrophe," in *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 51.

relatively close to the dancer (sometimes Costa will be dancing merely a couple of inches away from an audience member), *Deixa Arder* enacts in front of our eyes what it means to activate a human body to such a pitch of feverish hyper-connection with the off-time of things and matter that its dance literally undoes the very figure of the human before our eyes. In this undoing, in this embodiment of the impossible, the fact that Costa is a young Black dancer is no mere matter of chance. She embodies what Black sociologist Aimee Cox has called "shapeshifting": a very particular modality of movement that Cox links to the lived experience of young Black women and where, by moving, they "stay in their bodies to rewrite the socially constructed meanings shackled to them. The body [...] can be by turns a space of safety and protection or one of instability and expulsion."[5]

Shapeshifting between stability and instability, intensity and expulsion, corporeally rewriting meanings, choreographically breaking shackles, Costa's Black body is already moving, already twerking, already jerking, already sweating, already dancing, already stomping, already grimacing, already repeating when the public enters the black box space filled by the loud and repetitive rolling of sampled drums. In that space, the movement of flesh, the movement of sound, the movement of the (non)color black are all sutured so tightly as to fabricate a very particular timeless place, timeless because filled to the brim with resounding matters. In the black box where a Black body is already moving, it's as if there is nothing but accumulation of what the sociologist Simone Browne calls "dark matters"[6] in endless superpositions of pasts, presents, and futures—in wave after wave of gestures, expressions, grimaces, tremors, agitations, convulsions, twerks, partially recognizable dance steps from the repertoire of Black pop music, partially recognizable movements from the repertoire of contemporary experimental dance, partially recognizable steps rising from the living archives of Afro-diasporic gestuality. All of which Costa incorporates so to excorporate them otherwise—in waves after waves of proliferating repetitions.

Crisscrossed by all those historical allusions and stimuli, Costas' body is less an archive than a burning hyper-link. Scorching through her dance, flickering sequences of references or quasi-references burst forth in quick succession. Costa becomes a kind of trans-historical and yet hyper-present vortex, a moving repository of gestures accessed at the speed of fire beside and beyond past-present-future. She expels particles of times out of hinges, spewing fleeting, almost recognizable half-images through a body that will not be shut down and a mouth that does everything a mouth does except falling into articulated speech. Costa does tell stories—but without ever uttering words. Standing inches from us, mouth foaming, throat groaning, lips contorting into improbable shapes, we all perfectly *get* what Costa tries to say. There is no need for language. Her feverish guttural-kinetic testimony embraces opacity, because to be opaque is the only ethical gesture for precipitating a history that is off-hinged and that can only be told through a body that hyperlinks disparate events across the non-time of the off-time and burns it all down—so to alloy it all as a new element: *something else*. In that burning, in that fever, in that off-time of a young Black woman's shapeshifting choreography, Costa will also give us plenty of occasions to laugh and relax and enjoy her labor of love of dance. This is Costa's and Levi's and Russo's immense gift to us. Costa's burning is also a burning of love. The piece consumes itself quickly, taking an eternity. In paradoxical rhythm, where duration meets instantaneity, *Deixa Arder* performs the dismantling of ordered time.

4. Necroaesthetics: *Viewing Hours*

We live in the wake of the ongoing effects created by the extractivist, ecocidal, and genocidal forces that have been shaping the planet since the advent of settler colonialism and the formation of what the Cameroonian philosopher and political theorist Achille Mbembe has identified as a persistent "necropolitical" assemblage moved by three elements that, despite historical changes, remain structurally in place, in self-reinforcing loop: Black enslavement (today upgraded to structural anti-Blackness and racism); extractivist capitalism (today expanded to total extraction of not only labor, but affect and desire under techno-control of social media); and colonial modernity (or, neo-colonial post-modernity).[7] In this context, the extraordinary work of the North-American queer Black choreographer mayfield brooks *Viewing*

5. Aimee Cox, *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 29.
6. Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

Hours (2019 - ongoing), is exemplary of what it means to create and to curate under and against the violent regime those forces have set in place. It is also one of the clearest cases of understanding art not as the gesture of merely installing some "dissensual" object or body in a space but of "establishing" (to return to Peter Pál Pelbart's expression) a mode of existing that did not exist before. An act that "refers less to creating for the first time and more to set some thing "spiritually," guaranteeing to that thing a "reality" in its own mode of existing."[8]

On April 6, 2019, at The Kitchen in New York City, the self-described "choreographer and urban farmer" disrobed themselves (brooks uses the third person plural as preferred pronoun), laid on a long table, carefully prepared mentally and emotionally for what was to follow, and then asked several assistants to bury brooks' naked body under forty pounds of compost, decaying flowers, and fruits—along with all the little critters that inhabit such micro-ecosystem. Leaving their head and hands unburied, keeping their eyes closed and maintaining a highly composed demeanor, a quietly vibrating stillness, brooks held for two hours short viewing sessions of about fifteen minutes for small groups of audience. In a leaflet printed for the occasion and distributed in advance to the public, brooks wrote: "*Viewing Hours* challenges the currency and flippancy that makes black death and black grief profitable. We are now faced with the dissolution of sociopolitical systems touting blatant white supremacy, ecological systems altered by climate change, while human physiological systems become more vulnerable. Humans are facing unspeakable violence."

At the same time political art, social oriented art, activist art, performance art, social sculpture, dance, and ritual, but also transcending all those forms, reshuffling them into a powerful rearticulation of another kind of event, proposing another relation no longer between art and life, but between art, life *and* death, *Viewing Hours* remains one of the most powerful recent expressions of what Paul Preciado, in his essay "Feminism is Not Humanism," has called "necroaesthetics." The way Preciado defined this term, five years before brooks creates *Viewing Hours*, creates a kind of temporal vortex, since the definition of necroaesthetics seems to be an exact description of brooks' beautiful work: "A solemn assembly of plants and flowers around victims of history and humanism."[9] Necroaesthetics then is not an art of sad affects. It is a simultaneously rebellious, beautiful and necessary act of "transform[ing] necropolitics into necroaesthetics," a "queer and indigenous [...] system of interspecies communication."[10]

By explicitly calling their audience to a assemble around a Black body performing death, brooks enacts what it means to truly bear witness to the millions of victims (past, present, and future) of the Great White Project of Enlightened Humanism, the great transformation of the planet into an endless crime scene and mass grave. In brooks' choreographed assembly, the art audience is turned into a witness of history. As such, the audience is asked to perform, along with brooks' prone body, a *vital* solemnity—one that requires a direct engagement with what the Black philosopher Christina Sharpe has called "wake work": an analytic coming from Sharpe's approach to both Black art and Black life and that allows us "to imagine new ways to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery's afterlives, to survive (and more) the afterlife of property. In short, I mean wake work to be a mode of inhabiting and rupturing the episteme with our own lived and un/imaginable lives." [11]

Sharpe's and Preciado's insights on what it means to live within the historical legacies of racial humanism allow us to understand brooks' extraordinary still act as a powerful performance filled with mourning force *and* life force. *Viewing Hours*' careful attending to soil and to the floral as well as to the audience and the tiny critters crawling on the compost covering brooks' body as being all equal co-composing partners of this still act, offers us an aesthetic premise that is also a political promise: to linger in the off-time of the wake is to roam with Black lives—as well as to move with and being moved by all those who died while engaged with the perseveration of Black Life. In its quiet resoluteness, in its extraordinary sculptural beauty, *Viewing Hours* performs, establishes, in the off-time of the wake, what Sharpe calls "the knowledge of the wake": to reveal "a past that is not past, a past that

7. Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no.1 (2003): 11-40.
8. My translation from the Portuguese. Pelbart, "Por uma arte de instaurar modos de existência que não existem," 250.
9. Paul Preciado, *An Apartment on Uranus* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 92.
10. Ibid.
11. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 18.

is with us still; a past that should not be pacified in its presentation."[12] Short-circuiting past, present, and future, recasting the present as oracular fore-history, brooks' piece reminds us, urgently and caringly, that in our current condition, such knowledge of the wake, such assembly around the victims of Western humanism, is the task for performance on the way.

12. Ibid., 62.

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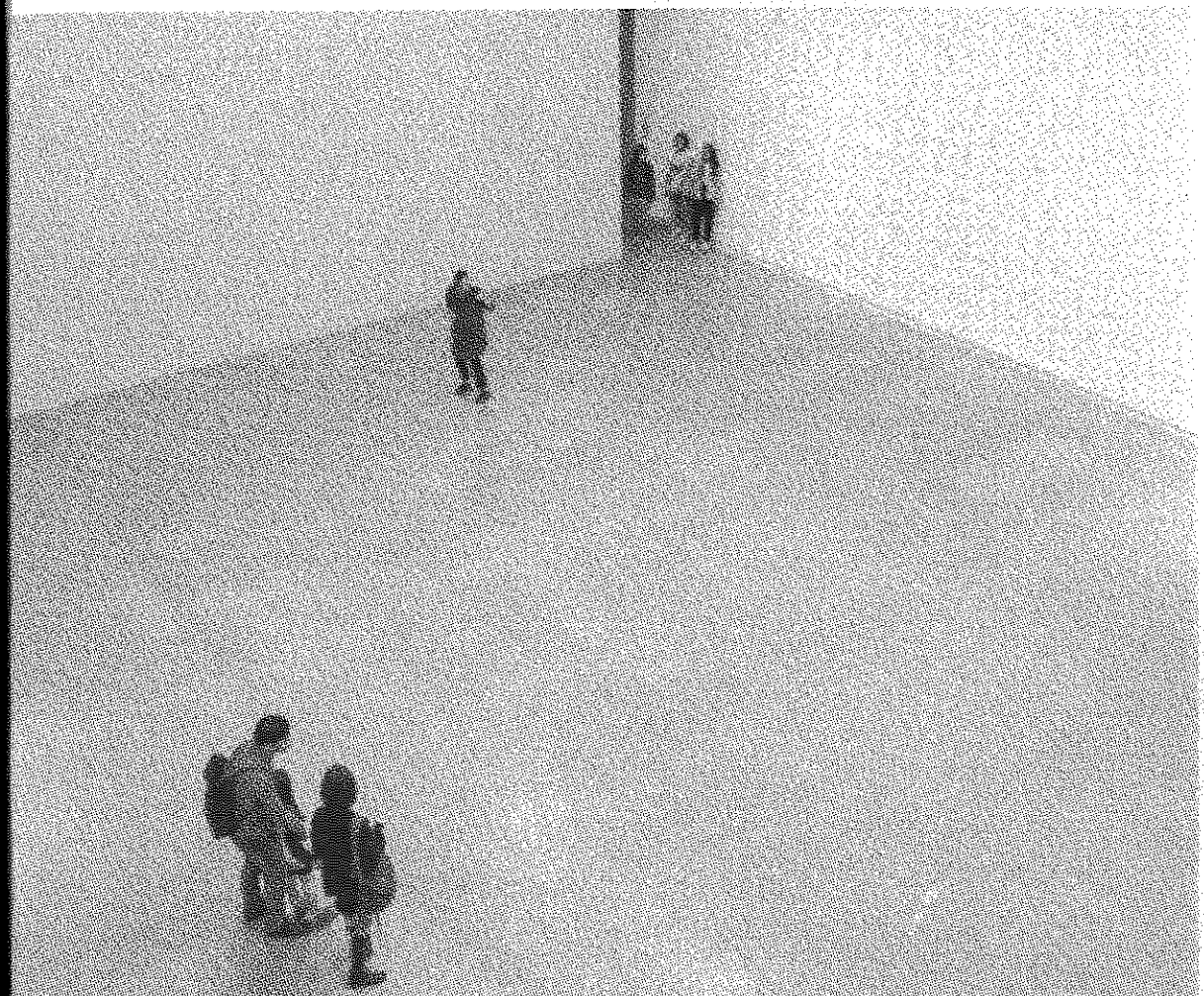

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