

Segment Introduction

Isabell Otto

“I got sick in Paris on Wednesday, March 11, before the French government ordered the confinement of the population, and when I got up on March 19, a bit more than a week later, the world had changed. When I went to my bed, the world was close, collective, viscous, and dirty. When I got out of bed, it had become distant, individual, dry, and hygienic.” (Preciado 2020a)

With these words Paul B. Preciado, philosopher, curator and transactivist, who is also a thought leader in the fields of queer studies and philosophy of the body, begins his observation of a social transformation a few days after he recovered from his Covid-19 disease. He describes – in an essay published almost at the same date in *Libération* and translated into English in *Artforum* – an impression “between fever and anxiety”, according to which a new form of reality had emerged after a ‘great mutation’, that forever changed the structures of the social and the relationships and patterns of desire: “The mutation would manifest as a crystallization of organic life, as a digitization of work and consumption and as a dematerialization of desire.” (Ibid.)

In a second essay, published in the Spanish daily newspaper *El País* under the title “Aprendiendo del virus”, Preciado references Michel Foucault and Roberto Esposito in his reflections on the epidemic’s management in light of historical routes of biopolitical regulation as well as medical and political dimensions of immunity. Noting that a “process of global mutation was underway “before the appearance of Covid-19”, Preciado describes the societal and political change using Gilles Deleuze’s concept of a ‘control society’ as a process of medial transformation which leads to more subtle forms of digital surveillance of individuals:

“The subjects of the neoliberal technical-patriarchal societies that Covid-19 is in the midst of creating do not have skin; they are untouchable; they do not have hands. They do not exchange physical goods, nor do they pay with money. They are digital consumers equipped with credit cards. They do not have lips or tongues. They do not speak directly; they leave a voice mail. They do not gather together and they do not collectivize. They are radically un-dividual. They do not have faces; they have masks. In order to exist, their organic bodies are hidden behind an in-

definite series of semio-technical mediations, an array of cybernetic prostheses that work like digital masks: email addresses, Facebook, Instagram, Zoom, and Skype accounts.” (Preciado 2020b)

It is not surprising that both essays are included in the German translation of *An Apartment on Uranus. Chronicles of a Crossing* published in spring 2020 by Suhrkamp under the title “Postscriptum (2020)”. The book includes essays written between 2013 and 2018 mainly published in *Libération*, which documents and reflects on daily political and cultural events before the background of Preciado’s transition from Beatriz to Paul B. The essays on the corona crisis are thus placed in the context of a political writing that seeks to grasp the practices of transition in new terms, in a new grammar. In *An Apartment on Uranus*, Preciado designs a nomadic writing self, which in the most radical sense is situated in the in-between, on the journey between countries and cities, in the transition between differently gendered statuses of the body.

This writing self struggles with a side-taking in this permanent state of transition and it often marks the extremes between which change takes place in a surprising binary order: between a ‘before’ and ‘after’ of the transition, between different attitudes towards transformation of a not further specified ‘we’ and a ‘they’, designated as “gurus of old colonial Europe” (Preciado 2020c: 43): “They say crisis. We say revolution.” (Ibid.: 44) Even the Corona crisis offers in this way of thinking the potential to act as a nucleus of political struggle. Preciado’s diagnosis of a social transformation ends with activist appeals:

“Let us use the time and strength of confinement to study the tradition of struggle and resistance among racial and sexual minority cultures that have helped us survive until now. Let us turn off our cell phones, let us disconnect from the internet. Let us stage a big blackout against the satellites observing us, and let us consider the coming revolution together.” (Preciado 2020b)

When in this segment “Queer Thinking” is considered as a mode of taking sides, we want to ask about the dilemmas that arise when positions are taken for and in transformation. Preciado’s essays stand in the tradition of queer thinking both as a philosophical practice and as a form of protest, both as mode of thought and a rebellion against any normalization and categorization of subjects. In this way of thinking, an ontology of gender is rejected. It is replaced by the performativity of gender, the play with gender clichés and the constant transgression of the supposedly normal. This way of thinking not only refers to the categorization of gender but includes all forms of classification and subjectivation based on the hegemonic consolidations of ‘gender’, ‘class’, and ‘race’.

The authors of this section negotiate two central issues arising from this activist positioning and theoretical reflection. On the one hand: Taking a side for transfor-

mation threatens to put a stop to this very change and even introduce new binarisms. How can a queer way of thinking, which always includes one's own position as a researching, teaching, and writing scientist, avoid leading to new solidifications and categorizations? On the other hand: Transformation can be understood as an ambivalent process of de-subjectification, which implies being thrown into change and puts at risk the security of clear subject positions. How can we think of change in all its facets and discontinuities?

Athena Athanasiou opens this section with her contribution "Taking Sides as Taking a Stand: Critical Conditions of Co-Implication and Im-Possibility". She addresses fundamental aspects of *Taking Sides* as a gesture of positioning contradiction and equally a violent classification or (self-)categorisation. Athanasiou asks how the problem of positioning can be dealt with without extrapolating ideas of a previous, intentional subject and by instead locating positioning, in all its ruptures, at the core of becoming a subject itself. Therefore, she explores the concept of 'taking a stand in time', which combines movement and momentary standstill. She illustrates this with the example of the social movement "Women in Black" in former Yugoslavia, where standing still is used equally as a physical form of protest and taking both a side and a (public) site.

Side-Taking as a process of violent (self-) classification is in the foreground of Lann Hornscheidt's paper "Re-Nouncing Violence – Differentiating Linguistic Violence". Hornscheidt focuses on structural violence based on language, such as divisions according to gender or nation, appeals, addresses, or attributions. She shows how fixations of subject positions are effective even in everyday language use and in this way examines the problem at which queer side-taking is directed. In a constructivist and discrimination-critical perspective, the article distinguishes between three forms of linguistic violence: symbolic violence, subtle violence, and epistemic violence and shows how constructivist speech analysis can make this violence visible.

The next article in this section focuses on violent categorization of subjects not only in structural dimensions but also as physical action. In her article "A Side Taken. Relating to Slavery in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*" Ulrike Bergermann designs, with precise historical references, taking sides as a challenge to all of us, descendants of profiteers and/or victims of slave-owning societies, to be involved in the history of slavery and thus in a history of violence. In her analysis of the novel *Kindred*, Bergermann not only focuses on numerous references to black power activism but also takes literary writing itself as a form of involvement in the history of oppression, in which violence overrides the temporal order of the past and the present. In Octavia Butler's novel, as Bergermann shows, 'remembering' becomes a 're-mem-bering', a violent inscription on a black body that sees itself thrown back into history.

The theme of writing as remembering is also central to Julia Bee's contribution "Writing through the Milieu: Social Mobility and Queer/Feminist Critique as Existential Practices". In her discussion of Didier Eribon's recent theoretical-autobiographical books, Bee shows how queerness, as a motor of social mobility, can escape the power structures of French class society, although the social background remains inscribed in the body in the form of shame. Bee takes this continuation of a social side-taking, which is as it were an act of self-exclusion, as an opportunity to reflect on our own practices of teaching and learning in the German education system. Bee looks at the practice of writing as an experimental form of resistant side-taking in order to render social power structures visible and transformable.

The possibilities and limits of transformation through practices of experimentation are discussed by Isabell Otto in her contribution "Change by Changing Smartphone-Users? The Fairphone as an Experimental Side". The impulses of queer thinking are asserted here in order to focus on the complex intertwining of resistant practices and subject formation for the question of media participation as a smartphone user. The contribution shows how questions of positioning and its possible transformation continue in everyday practices and shape our entanglement with digital networked media.

Sophie Vögle's article "Dissident Participation and its Post-Colonial Implications. An Exploration of Positionalities of Critique Considered in Reference to the Institution of Higher (Art) Education" closes the segment. The article discusses the concept of critique in Judith Butler's reading of Michel Foucault and asks how a critique understood in this way, which remains closely embedded in the power structures of subject formation, nevertheless creates possibilities for dissident participation. She directs this question to the findings of an empirical study she co-authored on privileges based on social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and body, as can be observed at Swiss art schools. Taking Sides, as the authors of this segment show, is thus always a gesture that affects us in its challenges and ambivalences as scientists in our practices of teaching and writing.

References

- Preciado, Paul B. (2020a): "The Losers Conspiracy", in: *Artforum*, <https://www.artforum.com/slant/paul-b-preciado-on-life-after-covid-19-82586>, last access 9.19.2020.
- (2020b): "Learning from the Virus", in: *Artforum*, <https://www.artforum.com/print/202005/paul-b-preciado-82823>, last access 9.19.2020.
- (2019): *An Apartment on Uranus. Chronicals of the Crossing*, South Pasadena, semio-text(e).