PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY

POETICS OF FRICTION

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Note for the reader: This interactive work can be navigated in multiple ways, in resonance with the proposition of friction as a mode of engagement with words and images. The use of diverse methods and styles is intentional, and seeks to create space for open-ended thinking from which multiple meanings arise. We recommend you move back and forth between passages, excerpts and video clips.

You can also view the online version, where the sections are shuffled in a new order each time you view the page: https://performancephilosophy.org/journal/article/view/441/556

Chapter 0: Intro to a Poetics of Friction

How can current problems in our lifeworld, such as climate change, poverty, and phobias, be addressed, worked on, or even be solved? What are the possibilities and difficulties of performance philosophy to contribute to reflections on the crisis-ridden, everyday situations we find ourselves in, through our embodied existences, and with our thoughts, fears, hopes (and even prayers), both inside and outside art and academia? Called by these questions, our contribution collaboratively explores corresponding responses within a *poetics of friction*. The three contributors—a multimedia artist, a cultural theorist, and a philosopher—perform with their spoken words, screened images and handout materials to participating audience members at the Performance Philosophy conference and the readers of this contribution.

Just as the wheel needs the concrete surface against its rubber to spin in movement, or the piece of wood needs the wooden stick rotating against its bark to spark a flame, we—the performance philosophers—need frictions. These frictions enable the philosophy of performance, performance-as-philosophy, and philosophy-as-performance, to rub off against each other, to move, spin, carry on, reflect, struggle, doubt, aim, and spark flames of inspiration. This is attempted from our being-correlated or, as the case may be, being-situated-dialogically with others. In-between, a poetics of friction is rehearsed, acted out, and tried out in a setting where forces come into play that resist relative motions of solid approaches and beliefs sliding against each other. Creative and critical ways of collaborating develop that are informed by the friction of our existence.

While the sources of such an inspiration are manifold, four of them come into movement and display during the rehearsal, the performance, as follows: (1) reflection, (2) excavation, (3) meaning, and (4) sense.

Chapter 1: Reflections I

What is friction? The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2024) locates it in medical treatment, as the action of rubbing the body, for example, especially the limbs, or as in a cold bath, "with friction and little exercise" (*OED* 'friction', sense 1.a). Other locations can be found in hairdressing, "as a massage movement in which the fingers press and rub the scalp surface, imparting their effect in depth," which is "very popular in the gentleman's saloon, where they may be considered as invigorating and beneficial in that they tone up the debilitated scalp" (*OED* 'friction', sense 1.b). Generally speaking, it's the rubbing of one body against another; *attrition*, "as the rocks below that are worn many feet deep by the constant friction of the water" (*OED* 'friction', sense 2).

Double movement

There are multiple similarities between walking and thinking. Whether our journey is mobile or motionless, we can in both cases follow pre-defined paths, get off the beaten track, go around in circles, encounter rough terrains as well as favourable grounds, face a dead end, have a goal, or stroll haphazardly.

Distinctions between thinking and walking become inextricable when they work concomitantly. They feed each other: the movements of our body combined with the perception of our physical environment affect our reflection (enhancing or disrupting our thoughts), whereas the walk we make is colored by our preoccupations as we start moving.

Going underground—a vertical study

This contribution to the project "Poetics of Friction" intends to explore this double movement: from the inside to the outside and the other way around. The three-part video *Excavations* takes the spectator on an underground journey, from the subjective point of view of speleologists.

The idea of exploring the subsoil found its origin after a visit of the Slovenian Škocjan caves. While walking through a maze of vast cavities, a sensation of mise-en-abîme came up, until it became clear that every step in that cave was also a progress in one's own body. Disrupted scale, uncanny sensation of exploring the inner architecture.

🎥 Watch: https://vimeo.com/819807004
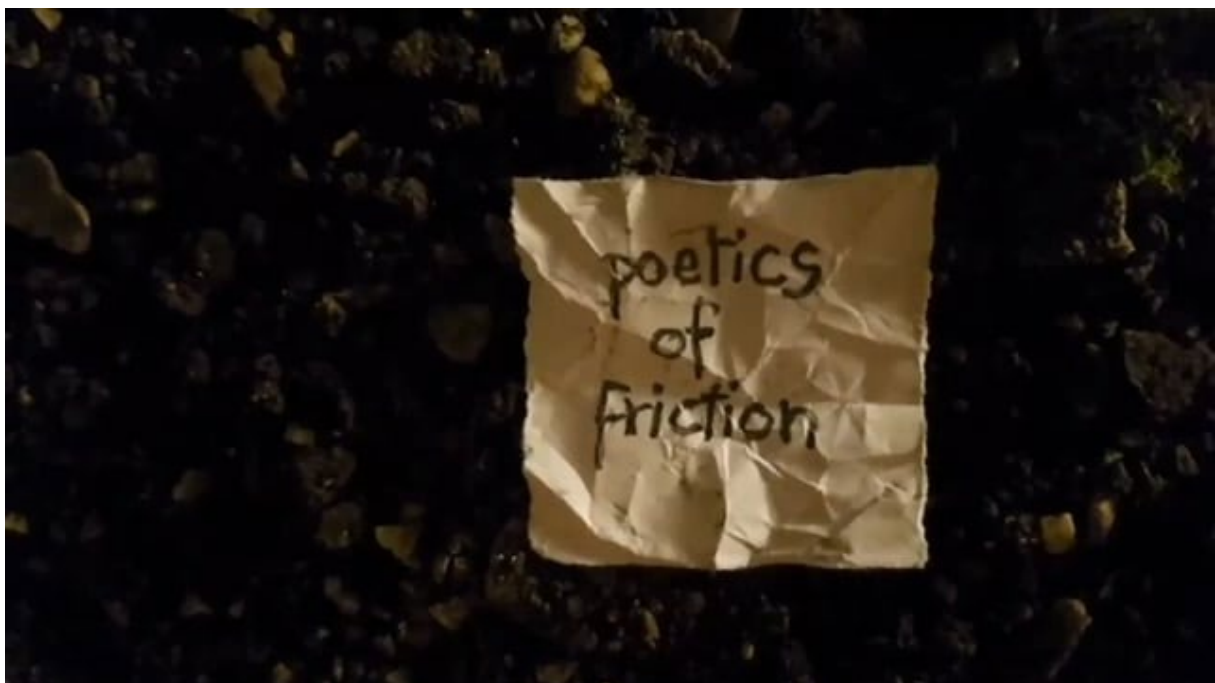
SUBJECTIVITY HERE, ART THERE.
ALL THINGS TIDILY IN PLACE.
POSTMODERNISM IS MESSY.
SCIENCE HERE, OBJECTIVITY THERE.

ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) can be triggered by animals, humans and machines. When ASMR is effected by machines—such as a vacuum-robot—it works not only not only *for* humans, rendering their lives more effective, but it also works *on* human's neurotransmitters (cf. Richard 2016). It can provide a special benefit to something as delicate as their sense of relaxation, but also makes them uncomfortable independently of the machine's original utility.

The University of Nebraska Medical Center (2022) defines ASMR as "a term used to describe a tingling, static-like, or goosebumps sensation in response to specific triggering audio or visual stimuli. These sensations are said to spread across the skull or down the back of the neck and, for some, down the spine or limbs." The effect is a kind of involuntary reaction to a machine's sounds by a person experiencing ASMR, caused by "activating the brain regions and releasing neurochemicals normally associated with affiliative behaviors" (Lochte et al. 2018). A set of sensations triggered by frictions of many kinds, ASMR does not work on everyone in the same

ways. Rather, it depends on the individual whether they experience ASMR-typical effects if they are confronted with audio and/or visual expressions, such as:

- Talking softly or moving slowly
- Tapping or typing
- Close personal attention or eye contact
- Massage, hair brushing or hair cuts
- Humming or chewing
- Light patterns
- Slowly turning a page or folding paper
- Scratching, crisp or squishing sounds
- Squishing or crunching sounds
- Applying makeup to the face.

(University of Nebraska Medical Center 2022)

For many—fellow felines and humans alike—a cat's purring constitutes ASMR. This invasive "work" on other's brains and bodies has an involuntary effect that cannot be withdrawn from through will. This suggests that the bounded whole of humans is an illusion, that the category of 'human' actually includes non-human parts such as animals and machines (cf. Morton 2019). Descartes "denied animals any conscious life and made them into mere machines" (Cassirer 1957, 63). Consciousness is identical to pure reason for Descartes, it is "the act by which the ego apprehends and constitutes itself as a thinking being. Without this fundamental act of pure reason there can be no act of sensation, perception, or representation" (Cassirer 1957, 63). According to the rational thought ingrained in the Cartesian thesis, the "clear and distinct idea" is the only "valid criterion for all postulation of existence" (Cassirer 1957, 63). By contrast, in the "earliest stages of consciousness" the world is "experienced as a chaos" of frictional "sensations", but those sensational distinct qualities such as "light or dark, warm or cold" cannot be perceived (Cassirer 1957, 64). Rather the earliest "experiences of pure expression are not of a mediated but of an original character" close "to the phenomena of the animal consciousness" (Cassirer 1957, 65).

The neo-Cartesian version of evaluating human intelligence—i.e. the "non-embodied version of intelligence"—views the human not as opposed to the technological. Rather, it proposes the view that the "human has always been technological and thus "treats the human body […] as the replaceable substrate of a formal system" (Caputo 2018, 256–257). The transhumanistic delusion of uploading a human consciousness to a machine and expecting it to become the same existence can only be viewed as a rejection of the significance of embodied experience (cf. Loh 2018).

The "embodied version of intelligence", in contrast, is "materialist and biological and organizes how much of being-human is non-formalizable and non-programmable. It is much more hermeneutics-friendly, which is why Jacques Derrida wrote a book on the animals that we all are" (Caputo 2018, 257). Derrida's cat explores the animal-human divide, finding that the divide is not between animal and human, but between the human-animal and the animal. It is merely a gradual divide on a "continuum of analogous behaviours" (Caputo 2018, 257). "Human exceptionalism" is not all that

exceptional after all (Caputo 2018, 257). Cats are there with us as part of our 'companion species' (cf. Haraway 2016), "they have faces, they look at us" (Caputo 2018, 257), and they are gathering with us if a new structure is erected on their 'turf'. They are sitting around it, observing it curiously but cautiously. The cats in the video are devouring the sinuous line, tracing the curves with their movement in a tidy fashion from both sides; the nourishment of animals works in line with the curve. The sinuous line is Cassirer's metaphor for different modes of perception and interpretation—mythic, religious, linguistic, artistic, scientific. What does the line signify for the cats: play, hunt, being treated? Does the vac-bot's drawing of a sinuous line suggest its capability of interpretation or is it the mimicry of the cat's capability?

The anthropomorphizing of machines suggests that they interpret and produce art that would be comparable in all aspects to human-made art; this became underwhelming to most people as early as in the 1960s. The vacuum robot as an actor is performing in a way that is supposed to chisel the viewer: that it is making sense, repeatedly and thinkingly, changing meanings by disclosing and concealing words seemingly at its own will. However, the viewer is not fooled by this charade today just as they were not fooled in prior decades when cybernetic art attempted to do the same for a brief moment, until everybody got bored, because it is not about creating a radical alterity but about simulation and the power of suggestion, about a sleight-of-hand magic.

Here, the vac-bot constitutes a technique of suggestion, repeating the artist's technique of choice proven in ancient times: the artist's machines created visual, tonal and linguistic effects. As long as these were deemed impressive and artistic, they were thought to be on the right track (cf. Rauterberg 2021, 30).

Chapter 4: Reflections II

Further possibilities of *friction* can be found in physics and mechanics, as "the resistance which any body meets with in moving over another body: Polished substances have less friction than rough ones" (*OED* 'friction', sense 3). In design friction points to the users' experience within a digital interface that interrupts their journey and slows their progress; this is in opposition to *frictionless* design that optimizes the users' experience as quickly and as seamlessly as possible, following the supposedly best practice possible: "Do not make me think!" Friction also has a figurative dimension, especially of the jarring or conflict of unlike opinions or temperaments. An example can be found in Henry James' novel *Roderick Hudson*: "He felt the friction of existence more than was suspected" (James 1876, 15).

🎥 Watch: https://vimeo.com/819807076

Terra incognita

We manage to explore territories that are light years away, but we are unable to dig a few hundred meters down below. We are capable of dissecting every object of our environment, although our most intimate thoughts stay out of reach. Our unconscious remains as inaccessible as the Earth's core: the terra incognita we live on, and the mysterious material we are made of, resist.

A search in the dark: in the video *Excavations*—as well as in the Škocjan's caves—the surroundings are plunged into darkness. The headlight allows the viewer to see only a restricted part of the spaces (glimpses which they can't control), whereas most of the walls remain in a deep shade.

Clawing fingernails

Get your hands dirty, scratch your skin against the walls. Starve for air. Put yourself in danger in order to stimulate your potential. Arouse the problem.

Excavations is a do-it-yourself archaeology, put together from a simple desk; a journey towards the centre of the earth and the inner body. The trembling picture betrays the anxiety of the explorer; their search is frenetic, like in apnea, as if the air was going to miss. The viewers are witnessing their quest to find a way out – or maybe in.

Chapter 6: Hermeneutics II

‘Strong thought’ is planted in the mind by
Metaphysics, God, Pure Reason.
‘Weak thought’ means no timeless meanings.
We do not DISCOVER the WORLD
through interpretation, we CREATE it
through DESCRIPTION with WORDS. (cf. Caputo 2018)

The hermeneutics of the poetics of friction

How can we bring together the intentional interpretability of performance art and the philosophical need for clarity of an argument in performance philosophy? Problems with doing are, it is true, often the source of desirable reflexivity, creativity and new thought. Since we are living in a high-time of post-truth, when ‘truth’ is often held to be a substantially subjective everlasting category thought of as being able to conquer, conserve, and defend against everything including reason and solidarity—and therefore it is viewed at the same time to be subject to relativism—it seems more than risky to perform thought ambiguously. What if my performance philosophy argument is not legible in the larger context of public discourse due to means and media that favour not only non-academic, but also non- linguistic modes of perceiving and understanding, such as artistic or mythic ones? Can we afford to be misunderstood? Poststructuralism has always favoured ‘weak thought’, because "the interpretative quality of being is not relativism, but our very chance at remaking our world in better ways" (Zimmermann 2015, 140). Productive friction only works if both needs—artistic and academic—are met. Meaning is frictional. Friction scratches the surface of meanings, displaces some meanings in favour of others, renders meanings void or significant.

In the body politic, on the distal side of the continuum of liberal-minded poststructuralist thought, can those located there afford to be understood? Can ‘we’ afford not to understand—in the sense of reading and seeing through ‘them’ as a vantage point for an act of resistance? Mind you, not in order to arrive at a "fusion of [interpretive] horizons", as Hans-Georg Gadamer (2013, 350) puts it. That would mean that ‘we’ are discursively integrating ‘them’ in a hermeneutic circle, i.e. in a continuous spiral, thereby normalizing ‘strong thought’. Merely the vac-bot can afford going in hermeneutic circles, a movement between parts and whole, waltzing along to the music. The spiral or circle is never just one thing: the vac-bot's spiral is also a metaphor for the ideal learning process: revisiting what it knows and going in a new direction, adjusting its knowledge, repeating.

Terry Eagleton (2015) interprets and criticizes the formalist construction of poetics as pointing beyond the immediate context, referring to some deeper truth. But poetics is about principles. Exploring the principles of friction, one finds that it generates all energy, division, progress, destruction. Those are the creative elements that are part of a phenomenon that is not (necessarily) a process of art, the phenomenon of friction.

Chapter 7: A Game

The Odd One Out - "Who do you think is the odd one out?"

*Welcome to this game! Please, join in!*

Playing along according to the rules is important if you want to play in the first place. Less rules does not equal more game, but it equals no game at all. Even more generally, we have no choice other than to interpret the signs we are presented with in life as in art (cf. Caputo 2018). The selection of images is a presupposition of the creator's own categories of understanding and interpretation that we accept, because we are no spoilsports, we are good sports—we play along.

Take a look at the first frame of images: Which/who do you think is the odd one out?
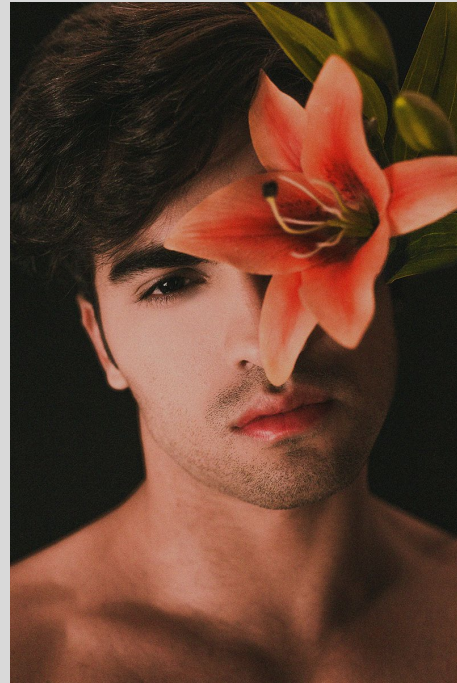
What caught your attention? The "obvious" CELEBRITY? But then again, RED LIPS always send a signal that demands to be interpreted. Is HAIR still even notable? How about that, if combined with questions of 'ETHNICITY' or 'RACE'? Now intersectional: Is GENDER on your mind, or does it pale by comparison when the expectation of CIS-GENDER is challenged by your perception?

Who did you interpret to be the "odd one out"? Did you solve the riddles or did you understand the game? Have you found the right and true answer yet? Every attempt at understanding, e.g. presenting a frame of images, is already an act of interpretation. What were your categories? What was your choice of categories informed by? Knowledge, habit, experience, the neighbour's opinion, pre-judgements, stereotypes? The competition of categories and the competing systems they are informed by necessarily exist in a relationship of meaningful friction.

Race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and sexuality in intersectional intertwining can make for conflicting interpretations, understandings, and perspective in a 'queer postcolonial hermeneutics' a term which was used by scholar Sara Salih (2007) in connection to her recounting the reactions to a clashing of anti-queer versus colonial attitudes in the infamous 'Jamaican dance-hall DJs case' of 2004. Some Jamaican DJs employed anti-gay lyrics in their songs, and were criticized by local and Western LGBTQI+ organizations to incite physical violence against Black gay men. As a result, the UK, USA and Canada turned away from their borders some Jamaican DJs, and surveilled others, which was criticized by those defending the DJs as "Western interventionism" and neo-colonialism (Salih 2007, 1). The reactions display a rhizomatic net of heteronormative discrimination and oppression as well as colonial racism. Salih articulates this as homosexual panic (Salih 2007, 1; cf. Harper et al., 1); she argues that inciting violence against queer people, as perpetrated by the Jamaican DJs in this case, is wrong; but so is "border panic" (Salih 2007, 1), the nationalist-racist discrimination of former colonizer's states (here: UK, USA, Canada) who reject their former colonial subjects from their borders, in this case due to the applicants' anti-queer attitudes.

Anti-discriminatory perspectives in terms of sexuality, gender and race which are increasingly extant in the same individual—and then more often than not residing comfortably side-by-side— enter in friction in a postcolonial setting and context. It is seen as neocolonial racism, and usually met with anti-colonial criticism, when a white European/North American member of a formerly colonizing state tells a formerly colonized society how to be inclusive and enforcing their views through border policies. And it is patriarchal, heteronormative and discriminatory towards queer people for hegemonic males, such as the DJs, to dismiss and slander queer individuals and spread hatred towards victims of HIV/AIDS. Some commentators support them anyway because the Jamaican society should arrive at queer inclusion on their own terms, instead of being dictated to by their former colonizers.

It seems that in order to allegedly further their own ends all have done themselves a disservice. Has anti-discrimination, whether in favour of sex, gender or race and ethnicity been misused for furthering their respective own ends, insisting on one anti-discrimination at the expense of another, amounting to a zero-sum game for individuals who are not merely one thing or the other, but for which discriminations intersect? Is the Jamaican DJs' charge of neo-colonization towards the

international human-rights regime spear-headed by Western former colonizing forces used merely as an excuse to maintain the powerful status of male heteronormative patriarchy in their own Jamaican society? Is the political measure of closing the borders to their former colonial subjects on the charges of violating human rights a pretext in order to demonstrate Western superiority in an attempt to re-justify colonialism and keep out the former colonial subjects from their homelands in an ethno-nationalist effort, hiding their own societies' structural discrimination of queer and transgender people? It seems that as long as one is insisting on only one convenient aspect of a constructed identity at a time, as if identities were "clearly-defined entities" (Salih 2007, 2), truth becomes hegemonial, because the wrong ones, those who are in power in a given context, win, and so, first, the marginalized—but ultimately everybody—loses.

Every time the intersectional friction of aspects of identities is denied, smoothed over, drowned out, reduced to a convenient essence, e.g. playing out race against sexuality, anti-discrimination efforts are doomed. Sexuality and race and their discrimination cannot be tied in a binary to colonialism and anti-colonialism either, so Jamaicans who base anti-queer sentiment on their Christian faith and defend it for their anti-colonial persuasion, conveniently forget that it was Christianity that came with colonialism and slavery to them, as Salih reminds us (ref). Similarly, the "buggery" clause of the Jamaican constitution is a copy of the English "Buggery Act" in effect until 1861, rendering sexual relations between men a crime (Salih 2007, 2). So, the culturally relativist argument does not work, maintaining that anti-queer attitudes are indigenous to African-Jamaican culture and therefore hard to understand for anyone else. Rather, they are a souvenir from Christian colonial culture itself. Colonial nationalism displayed by the colonizers in this setting, is not the only form of nationalism at play here. Rather, there is also diasporic nationalism which holds dear the ideas of "masculinity, reproduction and genealogical descent" which is at the forefront of Western national thought, and criticized through postcolonial queer theory, notably Salih (2007, 3) and Gayatri Gopinath (2005). In summation, a constructive instability of identities is at the heart of postcolonial hermeneutics. The 'fricticious' constructions of "queer postcolonial, queer diaspora and / or queer Jamaican are not oxymoronic […] subject positions" (Salih 2007, 4).

Take a look at the second frame of images: Which do you think is the odd one out?
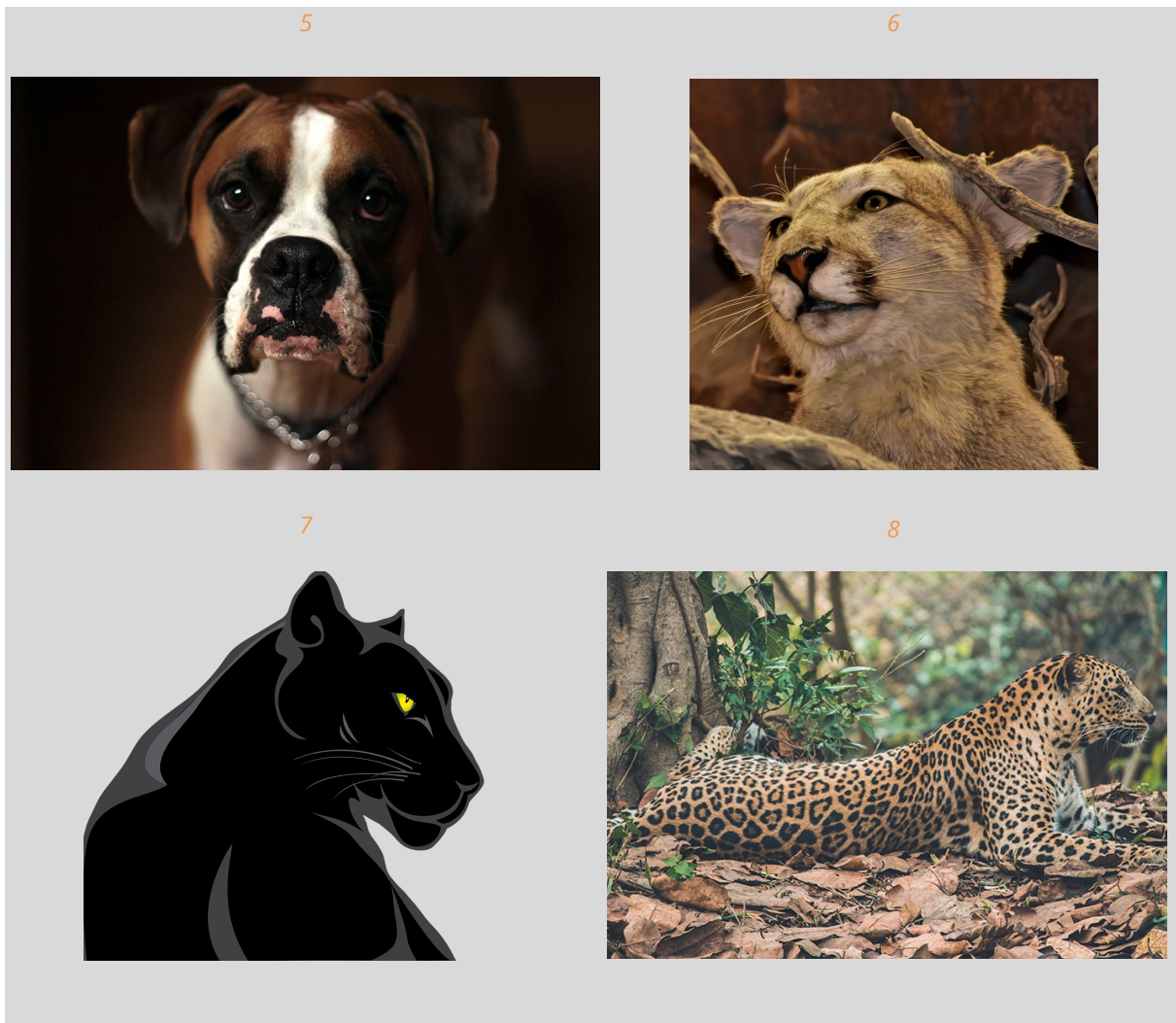
What was your interpretive horizon when looking at these images? Did you think of WAR, TANKS and WEAPON SYSTEMS—abstracting from the animal's actual existence? Or did you take those images at face value, responding to the difference between SPECIES or between STAGES OF MATURITY? Or did you detect the MATERIAL differences of the analogue IMAGES, almost indiscernible in the digital medium?

In remembering both frames together, the hermeneutic sense succeeds, that demands of the mind to make sense of two frames of diverse images. Machines, animals, people historically rendered slaves or subaltern others—they have a history of being exchangeable in the coercive services of the essentialized universalized 'human'.

Is there no friction at all? Are all answers relative to each other depending on the categories we employ? Do we understand the different ways in which other people may interpret the frames of images? Or, is the sheer attempt to understand another person's opposing position an act of

violence on our part? By integrating another's position into our own, do we commit an act of ethical trespassing? Must we avoid hermeneutic friction for the sake of practicing ethical behaviour and to avoid (cultural) appropriation? So, is Derrida's radical hermeneutics right, when it prohibits—like Emmanuel Levinas' radical hospitality—to interpret another's communication in order to assimilate their views into my own interpretive horizon?

Correspondingly to Levinas and Derrida, Édouard Glissant proposes a 'tracing thinking', "a thinking without system", which is "neither dominant, nor systemic, nor subjugating/conquering", but rather "perhaps a non-systematic, intuitive, fragmentary/brittle/fracturable, ambivalent thinking" (Glissant 2005, 76; our translation). Glissant turns away from the imperative of understanding. Much like Derrida's radical hermeneutics, he writes that for him, to understand the other is not necessary, since "understanding" is an act of reducing the other "to a model of my own transparency in order to live with this other or to build something with" them (Glissant, 2020, 45). Understanding is a colonial and dominant gesture, akin to Derrida's own ascribing of understanding as violence. Glissant insists on the "right to opacity" in a postcolonial context, based on the experience of enslaved people from the African continent, who did not bring any historical artefacts or archives with them when they were enslaved; this is in contrast to European settlers who brought their histories with them. Instead of the imperative of imagining African historical pasts of pre-enslavement that lend legitimacy to African cultures in Western thought, Glissant advocates the "right to opacity", to not understanding, which to him therefore means "the most obvious sign of non-barbarity" (Glissant 2020, 45), as it defies the logic of the practice of colonization which justified its colonial enterprises with bringing culture and history to the allegedly 'uncultured' Africans, who were deemed less than human, and therefore exploitable, for their alleged 'lack of culture'. For Glissant, the "right to opacity" constitutes the way into the future for everyone including literary contexts since it leaves room for identities to be defined by mixtures of transparency and opacity.

Apart from his own "poetics of chaos" (Glissant 2020, 53), Glissant may sympathize with a poetics of friction. He proposes the fractured, the non-systemic, and also understands poetics as a practice of art and culture that is "a way of living, acting, and imagining prematurely" (Glissant 2002), prior to any secured knowledge or analysis. In such premature and thus liminal states, 'fricticious' encounters that have not been fully made sense of, that are not yet embedded in closed epistemes, are thinkable.
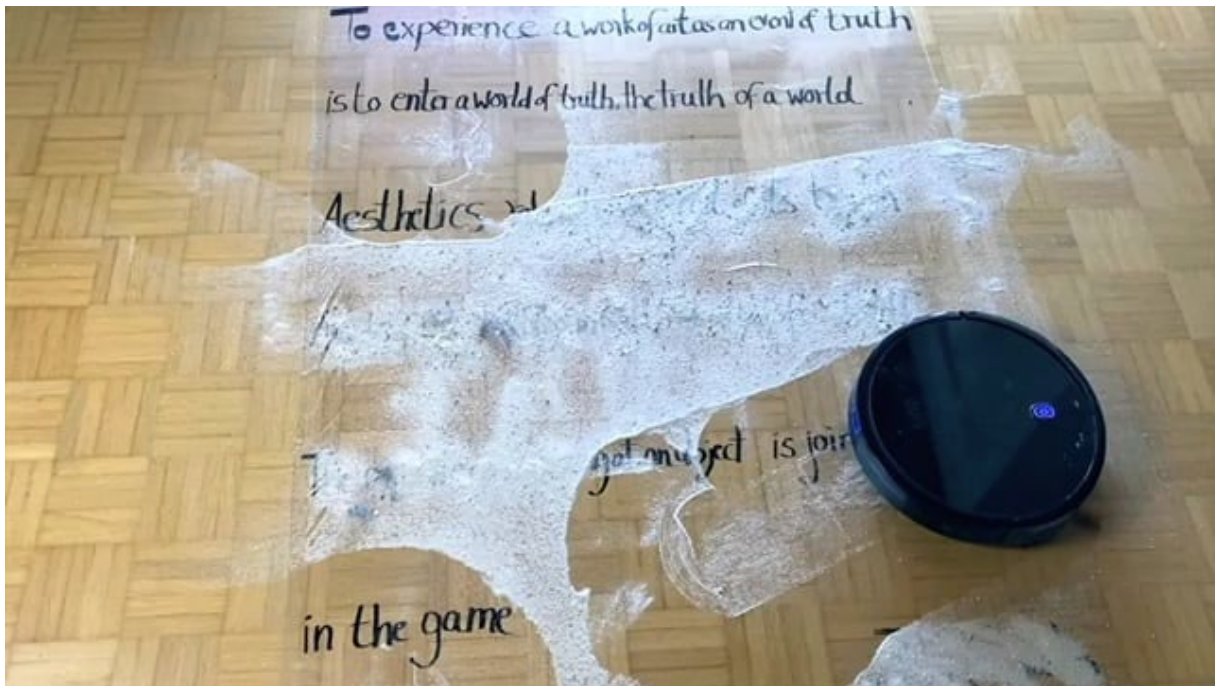
To experience a work of art as an event of truth
is to enter a world of truth—the truth of a world.
Aesthetics robs the work of art of its truth.
A work of art belongs in and to daily life itself.
The opposite of gaping at an object is joining
in the game. (cf. Zimmermann 2015, Caputo 2018)

Chapter 9: Excavations III

Nocturnal animals

Assembling clues, completing sentences like pottery shards: along their progression in this confined environment, the speleologists encounter fragments of texts. These buried words are preceding them as if they were waiting in darkness for completion—for their eyes to be read, their mouths to be spoken.

In *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1977), Roland Barthes evokes language as a touch-sensitive phenomenon, loaded with desire, an epidermic message/massage, capable of merging sense and sensation.

Baptiste Morizot, a French philosopher born in 1983, talked about working and thinking as an intentional, resolute endangerment. Problems are the source of solutions. The fuel which is needed in order to generate the required tension, this "state of anxiety" that helps us to escape the caves.

The search resembles a video game: every layer has a riddle to solve, a sentence that needs to be completed to access the next level. The progression results also from destruction: the successive layers must be pulled to pieces in order to gain ground, until you reach the last step, where, like in a platform game, you get the chance to meet the big boss. Once you're there, the disappointment might be brutal: it's only you in the mirror.

🎥 Watch: https://vimeo.com/819807192

Chapter 10: Reflections IV

Whereas the concept of friction figuratively points to conflicting tensions, the concept of existence phenomenologically describes something *concrete* and *richly interrelated*, so as to avoid the dualisms both of psychological processes of consciousness and of physiological mechanisms. Following Maurice Merleau-Ponty, it is made explicit such that the unity of body and soul is not any arbitrarily arranged connection between 'subject' and 'object' but, rather, that it is "enacted at every instant in the movement of existence" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 89). As disclosed from this experience bit by bit for every human existence bound up with the body, the *theory and praxis of perception* is one of being situated in the world, a world in which those Others permanently possess an *alteritary* imperative: the otherness of the Others is both demanding and inevitable. It is an opening in the openness in which friction occurs, friction with the Others surrounding us, with whom we have to deal with, in efforts, performing, adjusting, neglecting, convincing, discussing, creating. Right there, in this openness, we have to take a close look, also by looking back. Our orientations then point us to the future, to what we are moving forward. "They also keep open the possibility of changing directions and of finding other paths, perhaps those that do not clear a common ground, where we can respond with joy to what goes astray," as Sara Ahmed stresses in her queer phenomenology (Ahmed 2006, 178). And this is the direction Performance Philosophy hopefully takes, in-between friction and frictionless, convenient and inconvenient, to slide against each other to spin, to move, to carry on, to reflect, to struggle, to doubt, to aim, to spark flames of inspiration

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