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ABOLITION FORMATS AND INCOMPLIANCE AESTHETICS

... "compliance," the prison's favorite word ...

—Avery Gordon

In lieu of—or alongside—understandable paroxysms of outrage and the furious jotting of briefs against any further normalization of the status quo and its insensible reproduction, a coterie of artists has turned to the curriculum as a site of intervention and scripting the future. But it's a turn that takes the curriculum less as a medium than as a node in a network of outlets, one element in a web of practices and material supports which are all calibrated to channel and spread a politics of abolition and reparations. Moored by this specific intention, this turn is somewhat different from, or at least a peripheral subset of, the much-discussed "educational turn" in curatorial and artistic practices. Three curricula, all developed by artists in the past ten years, elucidate elements of this particular inclination. In projects conceived by Evan Bissell, *Mirror/Echo/Tilt*, and Chicago Torture Justice Memorials, the transmission of knowledge is put into service of actual and specific repair.

As part of their multifarious project *Mirror/Echo/Tilt* (2015–present), which engages and collaborates with "people who are court-involved, formerly incarcerated, or otherwise affected by the criminal justice system," artists Sable Elyse Smith, Melanie Crean, and Shaun Leonardo developed a curriculum that centers personal narrative to empower those caught in the vortex of this system.¹ Their methodology employs visual and performative storytelling to turn these personal narratives into a vehicle for denaturalizing the stigmatizing projections that arbitrarily fuse certain racial and class designations to criminality. The curriculum elaborates exercises that take apart the recurring representation of "the criminal" in pop culture—that shabby instrument that jams things in compositional standstill—and rethinks archetypal narratives so as to enhance confidence in the potentials of personal agency as an immediate task of subjective repair. In so doing, it centers on translating individuals' stories into bodily gestures to be reenacted over and over, often by others, until something gives and a new perspective—a tilted angle—on them becomes available. In repetition, a kernel of nonidentity surfaces. What may have once been taken as an unbendable given opens to contestation and reassessment; what seems like a natural assumption instead reveals itself to be an artificial, and often

¹ Melanie Crean, Shaun Leonardo, Sable Elyse Smith, *Mirror/Echo/Tilt*, http://studycollaboration.com/static/uploads/pdfs/MirrorEchoTilt_lesson_quotes_KvOIA5t.pdf, also reprinted in this book.

denigrating, attribution; what feels immediate and authentic is discerned as a replica drawn from a limited and limiting inventory of ascriptions. External forces and ingrained, stigmatizing projections are rendered as readable patterns.

The formidable challenge in all this lies in having emerging insights, all blooming out of the work being done, retain their empowering dimension. How does one instill confidence in the conclusions arrived at in this emphatic swapping of predicates and improvisational soundings of self? The curriculum is guided by faith in the body's intuitive and capacious intelligence, and the sense that its expressive capacities secure validity for this form of knowledge. Here, the body is understood as a differential field capable of reconfiguration through shifts in intensities and emphasis; as a fluid spread where things-in-the-making are abuzz and can be actualized through an unraveling that in the very not-knowing of what is coming finds the not-known it needs to be.

Two more things worth highlighting. The first is that the curriculum invites those who are involved with it to graduate into facilitators who can then take it to new locations and circumstances. This invitation disallows any claim to the curriculum as property, intellectual or otherwise. The thing is there to be passed along, held in common, activated without a demand that its chain of benefits lead back to its authors. It's there, in other words, to fall off the continent of art. The second thing is that this curriculum, while in the artists' hands, operates within a constellation of other outlets: performances, videos, presentations, custom design, archive, texts, etc. It wastes little effort on making a claim to autonomy and discreteness. It functions, instead, in the weave of multiple interfaces and at the service of goals that exceed the space of expression we usually associate with cultural artifacts.

Obviously, this kind of artistic production, in its prioritizing of use and amelioration and its disregard for self-enclosed form, exists leagues away from the kind we associate with traditional mediums and their reconstitutions. With this in mind, we can hazard a correlation between the closure of a historical moment—that is, the emergence of a new set of circumstances precipitated by deindustrialization and the rise of law and order politics—and the rescission, at least in certain quarters, of any aesthetic contract invested in medium, post-medium conditions, postmodern self-referentiality, and their awkward afterlives in zombie formalisms and the like. Modernism's self-critical tendency, for instance, at least as it peaked in its American variant, found vital bounce in a historical moment characterized by a solid industrial economy, the unfurling safety net of the Keynesian state, and the expansion of civil rights. The optimism of this moment, fueled by both veracity and fantasy, freed a great deal of cultural production to explore its own conditions and conventions.

The subsequent disintegration of the shared drive to demolish impediments to the flourishing of a larger range of human capacities (alongside the dissipation of the attendant fantasy that made this shared drive's power and efficacy seem greater than it was), and the inability of cultural producers to properly address this vanishing amid the unraveling of the modernist project and alongside the crisis in manufacturing, eventually consigned most contemporary art to a general indeterminacy in relation to its use and meaning. In place of explorations of medium and post-medium conditions, these circumstances have spurred an urgent instrumentalization of art that aims to enlarge the tool kit and the space

of amelioration and resistance before state-sustained, racialized social catastrophes intensify as capitalism's crisis management. Instrumentalization, in this case, is objectified by a multiplicity of material outlets rather than discrete objects, and is formulated as a reparative and dismantling endeavor, a cogent response to a specific state of affairs: the management of surplus populations and the stress they put on the social plane through the state's (and its corporate sidekicks') mass production of prisoners.

Although the examples that David Joselit employs to illustrate what he calls "formats"—Pierre Huyghe's reconstruction of John Wojtowicz's story in *The Third Memory* (1999), Liam Gillick's structures, and Isa Genzken's accumulations, among others—seem so distant from what we are dealing with here, the definition he offers is useful: "Simply put," he writes, "a format is a heterogeneous and often provisional structure that channels content." Formats "are configurations of force rather than discrete objects. In short, formats establish a pattern of links and connections."² They are the material of dynamic processes that replace or subsume medium and the conduit through which content is captured and circulated across platforms and scales. (Peter Osborne, in a different vocabulary but conceptually akin, would call this the "transcategorical"—"a complex distribution of artistic materials, across a multiplicity of material forms and practices, the unity of which constitutes a singular, though internally multitudinous work."³) Joselit's description, or Osborne's, is helpful here, since the curricula we are looking at are always one among many outlets or interfaces, enmeshed in networks of production and presentation to address an underlying politics and its demands. These curricula emerge from constellations of relational interplay, through fields of different and shifting intensities, and patterns "of links and connections."

In assuming this condition of format, or something like it, these curricula make it difficult to determine where the work of art as such is located. Is it the curriculum? Is it the intellectual syntheses and growth in those it affects? Is it the web of interconnected efforts that they belong to? The art, as such, would seem to be somewhere amid the conversion of lesson into subjective repair work into collective liberation, as well as within the transit spaces and phase-shift thresholds between these conditions (and maybe their breakdowns and restarts, too) and the flexible networks of outlets that the political core of these projects articulate. That said, maybe asking *where* the art is located is the wrong way to pose the question, as what these projects instead ask us to conceptualize is an underlying consistency that articulates itself, flickering in and out of presence, through its different outlets. These outlets can be curricula, but they can also be texts, archives, protests, performances, images, etc., and each is possibly a proxy for the others. It's the connective tissue between them that matters—a tissue that allows the desire to disseminate emancipatory possibilities to remain constant while simultaneously migrating "across a multiplicity of material forms and practices," and also enables this desire to itself be a transcategorical "form" that is fugitive and distributed and always there.

This distributive quality is underscored by the manner in which *Mirror/Echo/Tilt*'s lesson plan functions as a flexible instrument. Though the group is currently engaged in an ongoing collaboration with the Brooklyn Justice Initiatives and has worked in New York's

² David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 52, 55.

³ Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), 110.

South Bronx and Queens, one can imagine their curriculum being used almost anywhere, and that other media, such as video or theater, could be easily incorporated into it. Similarly elastic, the curriculum that accompanies Evan Bissell's *The Knotted Line* is scripted for students ranging anywhere from 14 to 23 years of age. It is structured for use in a classroom setting, where students are asked to activate an interactive website and engage in a series of group activities that guide them in mapping their personal experiences onto a timeline of punishment in the United States. The project's broad target audience has allowed it to be employed at many educational levels, including undergraduate courses at the University of California, Berkeley.

Developed with a series of collaborators, *The Knotted Line* uses a series of fifty paintings that depict "the history of colonization, Christian hegemony, slavery, the birth and growth of the prison system, criminalization and immigration" as bedrock.⁴ The project places these paintings on a website accessible to students in an effort to present American history as a set of "relationships between events/forces/themes." By knotting not only the past and present, but also events initiated at all strata of society, it challenges the neat, linear chronology and parade of individual achievements that passes for mainstream history. "When you dig deeper," its text explains, "each painting reveals a list of historical facts. They are both acts of oppression—for example, the imprisonment of 19 Hopi men in Alcatraz in 1895 for refusing to send their children to boarding school—and self-determination, such as the occupation of Alcatraz by over fifty Native American tribes over seventy years later." The project is animated by the concurrence of aggressive operations by dominant forces and the concomitant, antagonistic acts that push toward self-determination from below. The dialectical entwining of these two forces not only reinstates the complex interplay expunged by the smooth—but incomplete and distorted—narrative progression in textbooks, but also provides a rich backdrop that can be extruded and connected to current struggles and situations.

The Knotted Line aims to develop in students the ability to bind personal circumstance and local incident (and media literacy/ideological critique) to larger historical narratives and systemic forces. It empowers them to understand how ideology enframes and interpellates, how power fosters and feeds on these framings and interpellations, and how history itself is written by those who accrue power and attempt to reinforce the structures that will perpetuate the social hierarchies they have established. The hope is that students come to understand that the blow of an insubordinate interpretation, or the clandestine introduction of a repressed episode into mainstream history, can make the thread jump the spool and unravel into an arabesque of complex relations.

In contrast to the contextual versatility of *The Knotted Line* and the curriculum put forth by *Mirror/Echo/Tilt*, "Reparations Won: A Case Study in Police Torture, Racism, and the Movement for Justice in Chicago" was designed specifically for the existing infrastructure of middle and high school education in Chicago. The syllabus, formulated by members of Chicago Torture Justice Memorials, is one part of a reparations package passed by the city of Chicago as redress for the two-decade-long wave of torture enacted by Police

⁴ All quotes related to *The Knotted Line* come from the curriculum, which can be found at <http://knottedline.com>. The project adheres to a nonproprietary logic and open-source ethos—all the data is available online to anyone who wishes to tinker with it.



CASE STUDY

BRIDGES

Commander Jon Burge (discussed in more depth by Rebecca Zorach and Mary Patten within this publication). Delineating a unit for eighth- and tenth-grade United States history classes, it provides a comprehensive picture of the Burge episode, exploring its interrelated causes and consequences and revoking knowledge of the incident's once-discredited status. If *The Knotted Line* excavates and presents acts of resistance and self-determination, "Reparations Won," as part of a larger weave of material manifestations of redress, is one such act. It is document and deed, pedagogical tool and battering ram against deliberate and inertial continuances of cruelty.

Underscoring the *embodiment* of resistance and reparation seems crucial to grasping not only the character of "Reparations Won" but also its guiding desire. Inserting episodes from the annals of the trampled into the circuits of official history, cinching to the splendid documents of civilization traces of the barbarity that, as Walter Benjamin avers, secretly constitute them, sabotages the smooth circulation of the old narratives. In this demand that the world tarry with the bones and body parts embedded in the mortar mix of its foundation, a poignant desire registers: to make the social order that allowed the Burge episode to perniciously stretch unchecked for decades—an order that thrives on such episodes, and others like them—to begin facing its own monstrousness. This desire, moreover, wills such an order to dissolve, and to forbid any lament over the fact that it will soon be irrecoverable as a vital thing as it does. Brought to fulfillment, the project would render these pernicious edifices available only to a nostalgia that makes its bearer even more grotesque and piddling in his yearning than he is in his inhabiting and sustaining of such an indigent world.

"Reparations Won" is an exercise in putting the curriculum (and all the other outlets it constellates with, such as exhibitions, archives, and a future public memorial) in the service of blueprinting another world. Is the demand for reparations not, after all, an intransigent demand for the end of this world? As Robin D. G. Kelley reminds us, the call for reparations has always been about more than remuneration. At a minimum, it demands "redistributing wealth, creating a democratic and caring public culture, exposing the ways that capitalism and slavery produced massive inequality," as well as supporting universal free education, transversally abolishing the interlocking systems of domination that structure social reality, and in a necessarily feminist framework, rethinking what constitutes family, and demanding specific responses to gender-based oppression and violence.⁵ All these ideas of reparation serve as the ligaments that hold the common project together and refuse to give in to the forces that pull at them from every direction toward dissolution. To hold on to them is to equip the imagination with rich material that it can employ in its essential task of scripting a future that is incompliant with the things that we are stuck with for the moment.

⁵ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 129–132.