

PAN TO THE SKY IF ANYTHING UNEXPECTED OCCURS.

CALL MISSED.

In Iraq and elsewhere, insurgent fighters have used mobile phones as triggers on roadside bombs and other so-called Improvised Explosive Devices. When the phone receives the call, it does not ring but rather transfers the electrical impulse to the bomb's detonator, causing it to explode. Sometimes the transmission fails.¹



LETTERS.

Many years ago, the philosopher Jacques Derrida noted rather caustically to the psychoanalyst and theorist Jacques Lacan that 'a letter can always not arrive at its destination'.² He insisted that this possibility of misdirection, of going astray, of divisibility and fragmentation, does not mark the failure of the communicative structure but rather constitutes its condition of possibility. A communication that could take the possibility of its success for granted would not really be a communication. 'Not that the letter never arrives at its destination', Derrida continued, 'but it belongs to the structure of the letter to be capable, always, of not arriving. And without this threat ..., the circuit of the letter would not even have begun.' Without the possibility of non-arrival, there would be no letter in the first place. The letter, and in general the communicative event for which it serves here as a metonymy, depends on the chance of it not reaching its addressee.

Typically, letters of all sorts – from whispers to spoken words to emails and television images – come and go unproblematically, often even in real-time. The ease and speed with which they flow, and sometimes circulate, tend to make the process by which they do so become less and less obvious. The possibility of disturbance, of interruption, remains – prior to any transmission – but it is increasingly difficult to grasp.

Derrida reminds us of all that is at stake, for a theory of the subject and of truth among other things, in forgetting or denying this structural possibility of straying. That is important, regardless of what happens to any particular communication.

But sometimes letters do actually go astray and then other possibilities can open up. The more readily we can communicate, the harder it is to recognise and read the rules that govern those communications, structure what counts as speaking, and regulate what sorts of communications can happen and how they travel. When letters get lost, or remarks fail to reach their intended audience, the spaces and subjects defined by those communicative rules can be exposed – and exposed to change.

In that sense, interruptions can be helpful. Heidegger famously noted in section 16 of *Being and Time*, apropos of broken tools: 'When its unusability is thus discovered, equipment becomes conspicuous.'³

TRANSMISIUNE DIRECTĂ.

Sometimes this happens in real-life and on television. On 21 December 1989, most of Romania watched as President Nicolae Ceausescu spoke to a vast crowd in the Piata Republicii from the balcony of the Central Committee building in Bucharest. He had hurriedly returned from a visit to Iran in an attempt to reassert his authority and control the damage from a revolt that had begun days earlier in Timisoara.

A minute and a half after he began to speak he was interrupted, first by noise and movement within the crowd assembled before him, and shortly thereafter



by the controllers of the live broadcast. Making themselves heard, rumbling from the background and gathering volume and vigour, other voices emerged, taking advantage of the official medium to assert their challenge.

The interruption itself became visible and audible within the space of the speech. First it was registered, acknowledged, verified by Ceausescu, who slowed down his words, then paused in mid-sentence, with a look of uncomprehending disorientation on his face. A low roar had emerged from the crowd and turned into something like sustained screaming, and the camera shook, then suffered from a burst of static, and turned away. Within half a minute, the director of the live broadcast marked the disruption as well, taking the live feed from the Plaza offline altogether and replacing it with a red card reading TRANSMISIUNE DIRECTĂ ('live broadcast').

Filmmakers Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujica show the tapes of these few moments, as they were broadcast and also as they were recorded by the state television TVR, and analyse them in their 1992 *Videograms of a Revolution*. As the screen goes to the red card, the narrator says:

At this point the [live] television [image from the plaza] went off the air. Electromagnetic recording continued in the broadcasting van and documented this. [Images of a building, crowd noise, and the sound of Ceausescu's voice.] Command communication from the ruler to the people had broken down, and as if there were a disturbance in the line, Ceausescu shouted ['alo, alo, alo ...'].

[Image shifts to the top of buildings and the sky.] The cameraman had received instructions to pan to the sky if anything unexpected occurred. [Ceausescu continues to shout.] At this point the television came back on the air, at first without audio. [View from a different camera of crowd and sky. Ceausescu continues to shout, then resumes speech.] At this point, the sound came back on. ⁴



With order somewhat restored (Farocki and Ujica show the police presence that was required for this to happen), Ceausescu managed to finish a short speech, but the damage was done. The next day he fled Bucharest and within days he had been executed. ⁵

Farocki and Ujica's narration underlines that the revolution took place within the space of the image as well as within the public square, and that the damage was the fact of the interruption itself, the disruption or the breakdown in communicative authority. The transmission, both speech and broadcast, structured the political space of Ceausescu's dictatorship, and the unexpected occurrence itself was the marker of the coming apart of that space. The pan to the sky, and the red card, however much they concealed, nonetheless left something to be seen and heard.

Sociologist Jeffrey Goldfarb describes what happened that day as evidence of 'the dynamic of the definition of the situation'. It was not merely a matter of the people in the back of the crowd finally getting their say. The situation was defined, structured, as one that



excluded them. They did not exist in it as political agents, but only as props. That situation itself had to change, and it did change, as did the one on the television screen. We could call it a transformation in the conditions of communication, and with that, in the definition of a political or speaking subject. 'It became apparent', Goldfarb writes, 'through a televised definition of the situation, that things had changed. ... [A] demonstration that was meant to bestow legitimacy on the regime rapidly withdrew it. The authority of the dictator could visibly be observed melting away.' ⁶

thinking, is this a bad thing? There is a hint of violence in the act of interruption and the possibility that what is interrupted may never be resumed and, even if it is resumed – the conversation re-started, the broadcast carried on, the machinery of everyday life re-commenced – the temporary cessation and its memory will always be there. The act of interruption breaks the continuity of time and space, separating what happened in the past from what will happen in the future.

An interruption creates an interval that frequently elicits the desire for the narrative to be maintained and at the same time provokes the possibility that things may not carry on in the same way as they have done before. The artists in *Transmission Interrupted* intervene in different ways in the constant stream around us – the unyielding rhetoric of politicians, the changing, short-lived preoccupations of the news media, the fast-moving rhythm of modern life – opening up spaces that disturb the course of everyday life and reframe the way in which we see and understand the world. The artworks in *Transmission Interrupted* are like interjections, breaking the flow of a discussion and, in doing so, changing the direction of the conversation, re-routing it into different territory. But while there is a politic embedded in these works – in the archaic sense of the term, that is, a concern with how we conduct our lives – they resist the political in a literal or didactic sense, preferring instead to open up a space of interruption which is by turns, poetic, lyrical and unexpected.

I INTERJECTION.

Jimmie Durham describes his favourite political act as Jean Genet's report of the 1968 Chicago Convention where he fantasises about being arrested and longs for the hairy legs of the attendant policemen. Overturning the usual demarcation line between police and protesters, Genet transgresses the traditional battle-line between 'them' and 'us' by rendering the policemen as objects of desire, subject to the same human impulses as the demonstrators that they have been instructed to control. The image that Genet conjures in our mind interjects into our usual way of picturing relations of power; it breaks into the traditional trajectory of 'oppressor' and 'oppressed', sowing the seed for a different way of seeing our relationship with those we have assumed have power over us. Jimmie Durham's artworks can also be seen as interjections of a kind, disturbing the unbroken narrative of modernism and modernity.

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EMERGENCE.

How do new agents enter the political field? How do unheard voices come to be heard, or, even more basically, be understood as voices in the first place? How do new subjects come to be seen, not recognised but first of all registered as faces? How do ideas and their bearers first become readable, plausible, writable and speakable? What are the conditions under which political emergence or irruption can occur, or rather, what has to happen to the existing conditions for this to happen?

Many discussions about contemporary art practices over the last decade or so have addressed this question, or versions of it, by worrying about the divide between expressions of identity and claims to universality. The split seems intractable, and the worrying interminable, in large part because the arguments on both sides appear quite compelling.

The metaphysics of universality were one of the primary targets of the deconstructive critique of western thought, but the most careful of those critics always emphasised that theirs was precisely a deconstruction and not a simple rejection of the universal, and certainly not a rejection of it in the name of some particular identity.

The assertion of marginalised identities and knowledges, on the other hand, played a forceful role, whether we call it 'identity politics' or 'multiculturalism', in opening up canons and challenging false claims to totalisation or inclusiveness. But the aim of those challenges, at least when they were made by careful critics, was never simply to assert an identity and leave it alone, isolated and insular, trapped in a prison of wounded self-identity, but rather to make claims on a larger community for recognition and inclusion.

Faced, then, with powerful arguments in both directions, too many discussions have seemed merely to flip back and forth across the divide, sometimes because they are not conducted with much care and sometimes because they fervently wish to have it both ways.

One way of trying to have it both ways is called liberalism. Although it is not the most interesting way, it is rather important. It is a programme for the identification, absorption, assimilation and empowerment of previously unrecognised political subjects. It aspires to acknowledge or legitimise particularity within the frame of a universal project, to defend particular interests by allowing them to be expressed in universal terms.

Liberalism imagines an extremely open political space, one from which people are excluded only by accident. Sometimes those accidents are intentional, the result of discrimination or prejudice or the play of power, but from the point of view of the political system they are not essential – indeed, those exclusions are errors to be corrected. If you happen to be among the excluded, you need only present yourself, make a case that you are a political subject too, agree to follow the very minimal rules of the political sphere, and you can be recognised as a member of the community as well. Although the interests of existing members of the community may work against expanding the membership, in principle the political sphere is designed to admit all worthy applicants.

The filters for admission ought be extremely minimal: you must, in a sense, simply speak the language of politics, which is to say, commit yourself to speaking rather than to fighting, and be able to demonstrate that you share that language with other members of the community to which you seek admission. (Exclusion can only be justified on the grounds that the applicant has violated a fundamental, constitutive rule of the community.) The formula for such a claim goes something like: 'I am [name of excluded particular] and I am also [name of community].' This demand for inclusion in the community typifies the rhetoric of struggles for all kinds of civil rights.⁷

At a higher or more general level, these claims or protests are often posed in terms of humanity. 'We are human beings too', or 'are we not human?' They depend on the notion that the current non-recognition of their speakers as human is incidental, inessential, and that the utterance of the statement or question is sufficient to communicate its truth as well.

Perhaps the most eloquent example of this is the motif which Adam Hochschild calls 'the first widespread use of a logo designed for a political cause', the seal which became the icon of the movement to abolish the slave trade in England in 1788: '[Josiah] Wedgwood asked one of his craftsmen to design a seal for stamping the wax used to close envelopes. It showed a kneeling African in chains, lifting his hands beseechingly, encircled by the words "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?"'⁸

Sealing wax may have disappeared, but the rhetorical strategy of the slogan is persistent. Consider this first-person account from Gaza City in January 2009, posted at the al-Jazeera website: 'What is the international community waiting for – to see even more dismembered people and families erased before they act? Time is ticking by and the numbers of dead and injured are increasing. What are they waiting for? What is happening is against humanity, are we not human?'⁹

No matter how self-evident this statement and its expected answer seem, the fact that it needs to be made at all should give us pause.

PERFORMATIVE/ CONSTATIVE.

Liberalism treats these questions and assertions as claims of fact, 'constative utterances' in the term of speech act theory, and the political sphere it imagines is structured to facilitate the making, reception and evaluation of such statements. It strives, by definition, to reduce barriers to making and hearing them – in fact, the maintenance of open access would be its most essential project.

There are two ways of assessing the limits of this understanding of how the outer edges of the political sphere work, of how new actors or agents can enter the space and time of the political.

First, it misunderstands what kinds of statements these are. Although they look like simple claims to truth, they also have what Austin called a performative structure: they make something happen, like a promise or an oath.¹⁰ They have a hidden 'hereby' embedded in them, rhetorically speaking. The words aspire to be 'operational'.

When I make a claim for my civic or human status, in other words, the statement is not self-evident. It seeks to change the situation, to make itself come true. I am not currently counted as a member of this group, and yet I am one. Stating my identity, or the wound that I have suffered, or the rights to which I am entitled, is insufficient. I must first of all be recognised as a speaker

capable of making those claims and it is precisely that status which I am denied – which is why I need to make the claim. The claim is not just providing some information about me; it seeks to establish, constitute, install me as a speaker who can make claims, who is visible and audible on the field where, or in the time which, such claims are made.

If we think we already know what a speaker is, what they look like and how they sound, i.e. what kinds of marks and sounds they can make, then anything new in the realm of possible speakers is largely, and automatically, excluded. If the task of the political sphere is simply to register and translate claims made by speakers that it need only recognise, then nothing new can ever appear in that field. In this sense, no matter how powerfully and honestly the public sphere seeks to make and keep itself open, it is incapable of thinking about the conditions by which speakers are constituted in the first place.

This leads us to the second limit. When I say something like 'I am human', I am not just talking about myself. Indeed, essential to that sort of speech act is the recognition by my audience that they too are human – which means that I am saying something about them and not just about me. Their countersignature is required for my claim and they will not simply be verifying my status. They will be attesting to their own as well. My statement puts something at stake for them. If I do not look or sound



like them, if the words I say or write do not make sense or even seem like words actually spoken by another one of them, then something more complicated than merely deciding whether I am telling the truth is going on.

INFINITELY NEW CONTEXTS.

That is why transmissions need to be interrupted. Making a claim like this one is not about successful 'communication' or 'transmission' at all, but rather about disrupting the terms by which the participants in such an exchange are defined and constituted, and then rewriting them. For that, interruptions are required.

Jacques Rancière writes that 'politics exists wherever the count of parts and parties of society is disturbed by the inscription of a part of those who have no part.'¹¹ There is no formula for making this inscription come about, obviously. But what we can say is that, when it happens, the community has not simply expanded. It has changed, because the inclusion of something previously uncounted and uncountable forces the existing members of the community to change what they thought they were. When I say 'I am X, and I am American, or human, too', then whatever you once thought it meant to be American or human, which is to say, what you thought you were, has to change along with it. You are now something that is like me.

So when I say, 'I am human', I am also saying 'and you are not what you thought you were', or 'and human is not what it used to be'.

New words are not being invented here. Old ones, the things they name and define, and the circuits or chains that link them together, are being interrupted, transformed. 'Every sign', Derrida wrote in 'Signature, Event, Context', 'linguistic or non-linguistic, spoken or written (in the usual sense of the opposition), as a small or a large unity, can be cited, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion.'¹²

This is another way of saying that letters can always not reach their destinations. The drift to which they are subject, Derrida pointed out, is not simply a matter of their being open to several possible different readings or interpretations, of their falling into other hands and being made to say something somewhat different in another context. The letter (mark, sign, concept, statement, event) does not just wander from one existing context to another. Nor is this a question of the invention, somehow ex nihilo, of completely new ideas or subjects, as the revolutionary dream might have it. It announces, rather, the radical disruption of the existing horizon of meaning, the 'force de rupture' or of breaking with context and already-constituted fields ... and of engendering new ones.

In other words, pan to the sky if something unexpected occurs.

Often utilising the leftovers of modern life – broken glass, discarded snake-skins, unwanted scraps of fabric, cast-off pieces of wood – Durham pushes these remnants into the arena of contemporary art like uninvited guests at an exclusive dinner. They question the logic of inexorable progress that seduces us into thinking that democracy and development have resolved any outstanding questions. For both Genet and Durham, the possibility of violence is triggered by the suppression of difference, by the maintenance of the status quo, by the desire to sustain the continuity of liberal democracy and economic development. Their interjections de-rail us; they force us off the tracks of conventional thinking and re-route us onto an altogether different path.

In earlier photographic works, Yto Barrada has explored the Strait of Gibraltar as a site of rupture and violence. As the main gateway for illegal immigrants from the south, bound for the north, Tangier has become a city of transition creating a 'condition of constant departure without actually going anywhere', a space of interruption where people have been abandoned by the state and their presence obscured in 'a city full of holes'. In the *Iris Tingitana* series (2007–2009), Barrada maps out another kind of ambivalent space, suspended between present and future. Vanishing flowers like *Iris Tingitana* are to be found in abandoned or forgotten spaces in the city, in the cracks between modern urban development and the historical architecture of Tangier. They are, as Barrada describes them, 'the canaries in the coal mine', warning of the perils of urbanisation and its suppression of indigenous life, but they are also shoots of resistance, interceding in the path of modernisation and interrupting its unhampered progress and claim to control the environment. It is as if, for Barrada, the incidental blooming of these fragile flowers carries with it the defiant possibility of refusal and challenge that might slow down, overturn or even halt the prevailing forces of modernisation. In an unexpected artistic turn, Barrada instils this disappearing species of iris native to Morocco with the power to sabotage the trajectory of economic development.

Michael Rakowitz's installation *The invisible enemy should not exist (recovered, missing, stolen series)*, (2007) makes visible objects that have already (probably irretrievably) disappeared or, more accurately, been stolen from the National Museum in Baghdad in the wake of the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

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NOTES

1. This image was posted under the heading '01 Call Missed', at Little Green Footballs on 3 March 2005; see: http://littlegreenfootballs.com/weblog/?entry=14925_01_Call_Missed

The first such image I can find appeared as 'IED Trigger' on 19 October 2004 at: http://www.blackfive.net/main/2004/10/photo_of_the_we_2.html

See Michael Yon's dispatch of 10 August 2005, 'Jungle Law', for an account of another such missed communication: <http://www.michaelyon-online.com/jungle-law.htm>
2. Jacques Derrida, 'Le Facteur de la Verite', in Peggy Kamuf (ed.), *A Derrida Reader*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1991, p.469.
3. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Harper and Row, New York, 1962, pp.102–73.
4. Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujica, dir., *Videograms of a Revolution*, Germany 1992. Farocki writes about the events and the film in 'Substandard', in Susanne Gaensheimer (ed.), *Nachdruck/Imprint*, Lukas and Sternberg, New York, 2001, pp.248–63. For a superb reading of the film, see Benjamin Young, 'On Media and Democratic Politics', in Thomas Elsaesser (ed.), *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sightlines*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2004, pp.245–60.
5. The full video of the speech, along with a discussion of its circumstances, is available online at the website of a former Romanian TV employee called 'Alex': <http://www.cinemarts.net/2008/10/26/ultimul-discurs-al-lui-ceausescu/>
6. Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, '1989 and the creativity of the political', *Social Research* 68, no. 4, winter 2001, pp.993–1010.
7. For instance, the words of Detroit civil rights campaigner Herschel Richey in 1943: 'I am an American, too – despite the fact that my skin is dark, despite the fact that my forefathers were slaves who came over in chains sweltering in the stifling, musty hold of some ship' (see Elaine Latzman Moon (ed.), *Untold Tales, Unsung Heroes*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1994, p.243).
8. Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston and New York, 2005, p.128. Lynn Hunt offers a compelling account of the 'inner logic' by which the invocation of abstract categories like 'human' can lead in unexpected directions in *Inventing Human Rights*, W.W. Norton, New York and London, 2007, esp. p.150.
9. Mohammed Ali, 'Gaza diary: Are we not human?', Al-Jazeera English, 15 January 2007: http://english.aljazeera.net/focus/war_on_gaza/2009/01/200917111341829322.html

or 'Are we not human beings?... We are born to be gypsies, it is in our blood whether we live in caravans or castles, have millions of pounds or nothing at all. We are proud but we don't want to be on top of the world, we just want to be recognized as being part of it', <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/are-we-not-human-beings-1114311.html>

I have tried to examine some aspects of this in 'Where are human rights ...?', in Michel Feher (ed.), *Nongovernmental Politics*, Zone Books, New York, 2007, pp.56–71.
10. See J.L. Austin, 'Performative Utterances', in *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1961, pp. 220–239.
11. Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, p.123.
12. Jacques Derrida, 'Signature, Event, Context', in Peggy Kamuf (ed.), *A Derrida Reader*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1991, p.97. I have tried to analyse some similar structures and events in 'Drift: Politics and the Simulation of Real Life', *Grey Room* 21, fall 2005, pp.94–111.