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A Universe of Fragile Mirrors

Pérez
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I am going
to describe
a ritual

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Retirer anba dlo means "retire beneath the waters." It is a Vodou ceremony that some friends told me about while I was staying in Haiti for a couple of weeks a year ago. The ceremony is held a year and a day after a person's death. For the first few days after the death—from a week to ten days—the *ti bon ange*, or spirit of the dead person, which quickly leaves the body, remains close by. The waters are the ancestral residence of the *loas*, the spirits. During the *anba dlo* ceremony, the *gros bon ange*, the life force shared by all humans, moves from the ancestral waters to a *govi*, a vessel, which is placed on the altar in the peristyle. The *loa Met Tet* is also freed. This is the *loa* closest to the person: literally, the "master of the head." In order to move the *gros bon ange*, the *loas*, the Invisible Ones, the mysteries, are invoked through rituals involving music, dance, and *langaj*, and through an act of possession the *loas* communicate directly with the ceremony's participants.

The objects and materials used in the ritual are everyday things—bottles, flour, fire, sequins, satiny fabrics, rum, water. The are all poor materials. But the way they are treated, the attention to the form of the ritual, the rhythms, and the movements lead to a transformation of consciousness and perception. The *loas* occupy the same time and space as the living by inhabiting the body of a *chwal* (*cheval*, or horse). It is said at that point that the *loa* "mounts" the person possessed.

The state of possession has been described in many ways. It is a difficult, exhausting process for the person possessed. During the possession, the *loa* completely takes over the body of the *chwal*. The ceremony leads the *serviteurs* into different kinds of trance; not all lead to the state of possession. The trance may be pleasurable or inspirational, or it may be a *trance-errant*, a voyage to another place, or it may be a door opening to the *ginen* mysteries, mystical aspects of Vodou, what are called *nan domi*, waking dreams that enable

states of consciousness and deep thought related to the metaphysics of Vodou. Possession, the particular state of trance in which a *loa* takes over a human body, is not the only possibility.

The ceremony is a grand *travay* (from travail, meaning "a work") which opens the door between the worlds of the visible and the invisible.

The ritual creates and occurs in a sacred time and space, an exceptional time and space in which attention and perception are transformed. There is not just one position, but many, from which a person may take part in a ritual: there are *serviteurs*, who alternate between states of lucidity and possession, abandon and support; there are novices, children, and visitors; there are those who carry out concrete actions while in a lucid state—killing a goat or drawing a *vevé* on the peristyle; there are the sick and there are visionaries, who occupy yet other positions and may themselves be powerful figures. These positions are fluid and interchangeable. When the ritual is practiced communally and as part of everyday life, it is not a static repetition of forms; it is in constant transformation. The *loas* multiply, new aspects are born each day, the form and practice are transformed and their metaphysical aspects expand.

The spectator is present, too, but as a marginal figure. The spectator may come to know the meaning of the forms, times, and greetings, and even become something of an expert, but there will always be other aspects, perhaps the most important ones, that will forever be inaccessible to him: knowledge of the states of trance and possession, the sense of commonality in the group's action, the alteration of the perception of time, the sensory intensification that emerges out of the repetition of rhythms, the attention to the sacred space and sacred objects, the group's energy. Rituals bring us closer to other states of consciousness, so that we can perceive what we are unable to perceive in everyday space and time, so that we can identify with the "other," and so that many other things can happen.

We take part in many rituals every day: the act of sitting down at a table to eat has ritual aspects that transform a physical necessity into a communal, shared, sometimes emotionally fraught event. But I use the specific example of Vodou because it has something in common with the practice of art: the transformation of states of consciousness and perception through our bodies' physical senses and the forms and materials of daily life. Art is a practice that aspires to transform states of consciousness through the sensorium in its entirety.

Ritual also shares with art the possibility of multiple positions from which to perceive the experience. In ritual, this multiplicity is evident. But the experience of art has been turned so violently toward the experience of the spectator that we seldom talk about the aspects of artistic practice that are perceived from other positions. Seen from the position from which art is made, its processes intensify states of perception and the relationship between the form and new states of consciousness. Both ritual and art are constructed on the materiality and metaphysicality of every kind of object, whether everyday or exceptional.

When we look at the practice of art through a lens of ritual, we can open art to positions beyond that of the spectator. What about the transformation of the subject, the *poiesis*, the hyper-sensory states that allow leaps of thought? In ritual, one can be a lucid expert, a visionary madman, a child, a master of objects and form, or a person possessed. From what position can we describe all of this, analyze it, and theorize about it? How are we to open it, how are we to think about the possible transformation of the subject, or the communal transformation?

If, for example, we talk about film as ritual, about the camera as a ritual object, about the time and space of making film as the time and space of ritual, and about the processes of art as processes that transform perception and consciousness, just as ritual does, where do we direct our attention? Not just to the presentation and the spectator's perception anymore. What happens when we think about possession, about the state of acute perception, individual or

common, about the implicit learning in the event (children are not given Vodou classes; they witness the ritual), about the expert, the novice, the madman, and the sick person?

Jean Rouch had the following to say about film as ritual:

> When I filmed the second ritual, I myself was in a sort of trance that I call the "cine-trance," the creative state, which allowed me to follow very closely the person who was about to be initiated. The camera played the role of ritual object. The camera becomes a magic object that can unleash or accelerate the phenomena of possession because it leads the filmer into paths he would never have dared to take if he did not have it in front of him, guiding him to something that we scarcely understand: cinematographic creativity…It seemed to me in particular that the individual observer who confronted the phenomena of possession, of magic and sorcery, merited critical examination himself…
>
> In this universe of fragile mirrors, next to men or women who can with one clumsy motion unleash or stop the trance, the presence of the observer cannot be neutral. Whether he wants to or not, he himself is integrated into the general movement, and his slightest actions are interpreted with reference to this particular system of thought. All the people I film today are familiar with the camera and know what it is capable of seeing and hearing. They have also seen successive screenings of the films in the course of their editing. In fact, they react to this art of visual and sound reflection in the same way they react during the public art of possession or the private art of magic and sorcery.[1]

We might choose other analogies: a hallucinogenic trip, the mechanism of the psychoanalytic cure, a political demonstration, or musical improvisation. The states of attention and perception, of thought, during musical improvisation are very well known in the Caribbean. This is the part of artistic practice that I am interested in thinking about. All of these practices allow us to see the form of

the processes and recognize experiences from a variety of positions. They have some aspects of ritual, and ritual contains these aspects.

1. Time collapsed; the ritual object

Paso del Indio—Indian pass, or passage—is the name of an alluvial plain in Vega Alta, in northern Puerto Rico. In 1992, the Puerto Rico Department of Transportation and Public Works (the DTOP, its initials in Spanish) decided to build a highway extension to the town of Arecibo. All the archaeologists that knew Puerto Rico knew that if the highway was going through a place called Paso del Indio, there were going to be archaeological finds. One day, a backhoe excavating the roadway picked up an entire skeleton, as though it were the Taíno deity Atabey holding a body up in the palm of her hand. At that point, the law required the government to halt the project while an archaeological investigation of the site was carried out. The DTOP put out a call for bids, a contract was set, and an archaeological team took over the project for several years. Two hundred residents of Río Abajo, a community located on limestone cliffs rising out of the plain, were employed on the archaeological dig. Twenty years later, I spoke with the archaeologist in charge. That day in his office, several stories were mixed together, or maybe they were all a single story.

This is what he told me:
Hundreds of complete skeletons were removed. Some 200 people from the neighboring area, paid minimum wage, worked in groups of eight or ten, spread out in a grid across the site. Each group had its designated leader, who was given a helmet of a different color, making him more powerful than the others. These hierarchies create discipline and order on the worksite. We taught them to photograph and draw the objects and bones in order to show size and condition. One of the skeletons was that of a woman giving birth—the skeleton of the fetus was still trying to come out of her body. One day, two or three men arrived dressed, symbolically, as Taínos, and they went into the project office. They objected to the exhumation of

their ancestors and said the project was a transgression against a sacred place. But we offered them jobs and in a couple of days they'd changed their uniforms. All those skeletons are now in the University of Puerto Rico's laboratory of forensic anthropology. With respect to the objects and fragments found, the initial archaeological proposal included identification, cataloging, and storage, but the government didn't want to comply with the contract. They canceled it as we were entering the third phase, which was preservation. The excavation had paralyzed the highway project too long. There were allegations, totally unfounded, of corruption, and rumors were spread about the employees from Río Abajo stealing money. It destroyed my career. A technical-studies firm took over the project and completed it forthwith—that was why they'd been hired.

He told me (I quote again from memory):
The hallucinations produced by cohoba are geometric and mosaiclike.[2] Look at this reproduction of a *cemí* upside-down, right-side up, and from the side. Imagine it superimposed on the hills around (the sacred Taíno ceremonial site of) Caguana. I'll tell you a story about the hallucinations. It was in the early seventies. Some friends of mine had cleared a piece of land in the country for planting and for several years they'd been working diligently, planting fruit trees and coffee trees in the shade. One day, they all drank some tea made from angel trumpet flowers, which in Puerto Rico is known as *té de campana*, "bell tea," because of the shape of the flowers. At first they didn't think they were particularly affected, but later on, the trees started talking to them. The trees said they were at war. That they'd been at war for hundreds of years. "They attacked us," my friend said. "So we fought them. When we came down from the trip, we'd destroyed every tree on the farm."

In his office with its fluorescent lighting and air conditioning, the archaeologist talked to me about the transmutation and migration of indigenous mythology from the Southern Cone to the Arctic. When I went back to Paso del Indio, I sought out other stories in the current geography and physical panorama. Which cave, I wondered,

was Cacibajagua, the black cave from which all life emerges? Which one was the cave of death, the mythological anus of the world; which one does the god of disorder and chaos live in, and which one belongs to the god that gathers and shares ancestral knowledge? I visited once a week, and I would stand with my camera under the bridge; I would watch out for twin figures, as in the story of the divine—syphilitic twins. I would seek out dark places, nocturnal creatures like the Quequerequé. I would wonder which back the first sea turtle had crawled out of, what kind of supernatural power the androgynous person has. I would also walk through the houses of Río Abajo, interviewing people for a purpose I was uncertain of. I found several men who had worked at the archaeological site, digging up some of those skeletons and objects 20 years ago. One of them had worn the leader's helmet. After working with the archaeologist, he had been an assistant on several other similar projects. He was 45 years old, his name was Julio, and I asked him to walk down with me to the area under the bridge so he could show me where he himself had excavated. He stuck a pistol in the waistband of his pants and walked down to talk to me for a while. His mother watched from the window of their house. The house had no porch or balcony, and hardly any windows. It had been built by Julio. Down under the bridge there were televisions, conch shells, cans of pink paint. Julio had learned to draw at that project, and he'd worked at other archaeological projects as an assistant. Thousands of years ago, human bodies had been buried, and now cars and dogs were being buried. No one knows where the objects from the Paso del Indio wound up. For a while they were in plastic bags in a basement room of the Tren Urbano offices on Piñero Avenue. Now, nobody can find them.

One afternoon, out of the weeds and underbrush there appeared two teenagers, 13 and 14 years old. They asked me what I was doing there and they told me they were looking for a horse of theirs that had run off. I explained the history of the place. They already knew it, though they hadn't been born in 1992. They'd heard the history as horror stories people tell to children. For Heniel and Keniel, they

were stories about skeletons, Indians with rotten teeth, the burial of a woman with a fetus between her legs. Their fathers, uncles, brothers, or teachers had worked at the excavation. From that day on, every Saturday I would go to Paso del Indio and stand under the highway across from the house that Heniel and Keniel lived in. They would come down. They weren't ordinary boys. They both had an unusual masculine tenderness and the solidarity of children raised with freedom. I told what I knew; they, what they knew. They would act; I would film. We would watch the filmed sequences and start again.

The future and past is superstition, and all these things have equal weight: bureaucratic hassles, the hallucinogenic tea made from *Brugmansia versicolor*, the pistol in the pants, the indigenous people's cosmology, air conditioning turned up full blast, reproductions, the bureaucratic straitjacket, the beautiful drugged visions of the humanist archaeologists who were young in 1969, and the beautiful visions of drugged first people who are young in our reconstructed memory. All these things live together, we drink them all down in a single swallow, they exist not in one past or another, but all in the same present and memory.

I carry all this with me along with a camera to walk with a man who learned to draw by exhuming skeletons and who now carries a pistol to walk under the bridge. I walk behind him, a woman with a camera, standing every Saturday for two months under a bridge. The lookouts on the corner say they protect me, and from a distance the boss man oversees the car theft around the corner. When Heniel and Keniel arrive, we take everything apart and put it back together again. Sometimes Heniel gives the orders, sometimes I do. The three of us improvise. We don't talk to each other as teacher-student or mother-son. The relationship is strange, undefined.

I have a camera in my hands; I am carrying the ritual object. What do we call everything that happens before an image appears? What discipline is this? Who is the person possessed?

2. The landholder's domain; the marroon forest

The forest of the maroon [from *cimarrón*: runaway slave] *was thus the first obstacle the slave opposed to the transparency of the planter. There is no clear path, no way forward in this density.*

—Édouard Glissant, "The Known, The Uncertain"

This is a brief story about seeing and not-seeing. Before being able to create an image, we have to be able to see. We have not always been able to see. The landholder sees the land as a space of dominion, as his *domain*; the maroon, or runaway slave, sees a thick forest that offers freedom or danger. Darkness, opacity, noise as opposed to clarity, brightness, control.

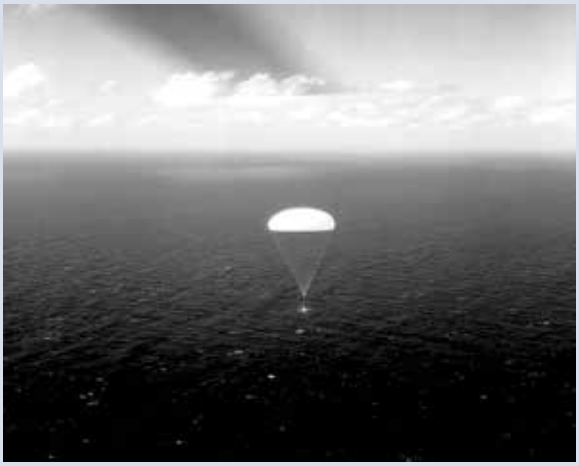
The aerial view is the preferred representational mode of the US Navy, which for 60 years bombed the island of Vieques, just off Puerto Rico and belonging to it. Over those 60 years, the Navy produced hundreds of aerial images, and blocked the public's view from other places on the island.

If language is not to be believed but rather to impose an order, then the visible, like language, establishes an order, determines what it is possible to think and feel about the present and future. The United States Navy's photography department produced images of daily life on the Roosevelt Roads Naval Base and Vieques, aerial images of the entire eastern coast of Vieques, and other images that, rather than portraying a group of persons or a geography, portrayed the ideology of rational domination of the Caribbean and demonstrated a series of technologies of the visible, the "seeable." Training us to see our geography through that lens is also part of our preparation for war. This visual order organizes what it is possible to think about our territory; it puts us in the category of military ruin, when it might otherwise be coast, secret society, cave, or a thousand other forms and ideas. The camera, the lens, the position of the subject, the darkness or brightness of an image, its depth of field—all these things are part of the grammar, the order. When we confront that order, whose most representative construction today might be the

camera-drone, we need something more than analysis, description, or interpretation. The task requires us to generate a postmilitary practice that breaks with this visual order, that structures not just what can or cannot be seen, but the positions from which the practice is carried out, who and what undergoes it, how observations are made, and with what.

The name the Navy gave this archive is 1975 Drone. Roosevelt Roads had an R&D program for drones as early as the 1940s, when the base was inaugurated. Not long ago I learned to develop film manually. It took me a couple of hours to shoot, rewind three times, and develop my three-minute film. The military photographers would climb into small planes, film with infrared film, develop it, and project it, all within an almost incredibly short time. This allowed them to calculate their bombing targets. I won't say the activity was wholesome, but those guys were good at what they did. Military photography developed its methods from the air. Journalism remained at ground level until after the Vietnam War. The Navy enjoyed its aerial viewpoint so much that it used it for everything, even for commemorating the troops. On the base at Ceiba, the best place for observing footage of the bombardments was at the bar in the general's house, with a whiskey in your hand; it was the most private entertainment space.

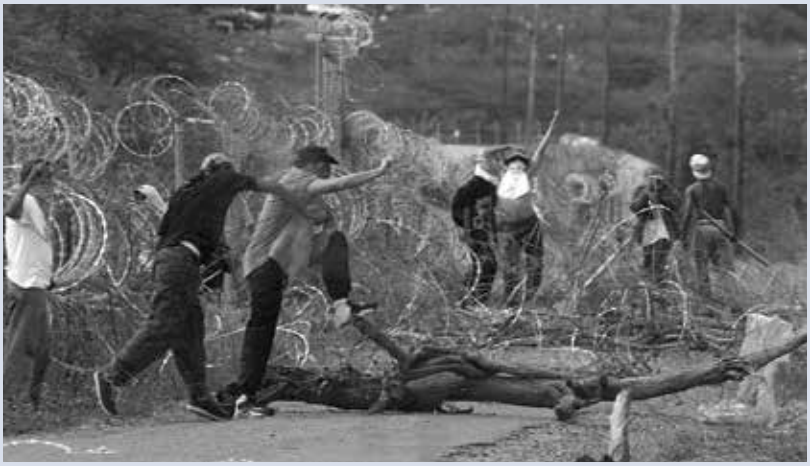
In 2000, during the civil disobedience and occupation of the Vieques bombing ranges, Governor Rosselló created a special commission to assess the environmental damage and violations of human rights on Vieques. The admiral in charge of Roosevelt Roads offered to take the Commission on a helicopter ride to inspect the firing range. Riding in this helicopter were Archbishop González Nieves, then-Secretary of State Norma Burgos, a couple of other people, and a news cameraman. As they were flying over the firing range and the admiral's self-assured voice was explaining what they were seeing, the cameraman was filming Norma and the archbishop looking out the window at the range.



Drone, archival image from the US Roosevelt Roads Naval Base in Ceiba, Puerto Rico, 1975

The admiral looks at the firing range from the position he has always looked at it. *Nothing new, here I am above the bombing range; you see, it's the same as always*. The archbishop and secretary of state are visibly affected by a landscape and a point of view that had until now been kept hidden from them. For the first time, they can look out the window of the helicopter and see what the Navy has seen for 60 years. The camera watches them; it's there to document that first moment of seeing. The archbishop and secretary of state are aware that they're being looked at while looking. The admiral is busy narrating the scene. The camera catches the moment when, despite the admiral's steady voice, the archbishop and Norma begin to weep.

The military view, and the reproduction of this view in its transparency, from the air, is a view of domination. Against this view we have the forest, those new forests of gumbo-limbo trees, African tulip trees, vines, ornamental ferns, and coconut palms that grow on top of toxic spills and are inhabited by iguanas, frogs, packs of abandoned dogs, and screeching crickets and cicadas. The transparency is the master's. The forest is the maroon's. To see the future of the place, rather than the ruin of the military past, one must look from ground level, let the forest grow back, block the



Vieques Riot, archival image, Camp García, US Naval Base in Vieques, Puerto Rico, 2001

transparency, collapse, misunderstand, constantly change position, listen to the noise without trying to hear the signal.

This is a photograph taken by the Navy in Vieques. The name the Navy gave this archive is "Vieques Riot." It's an image taken from the ground with an automatic camera. Taking pictures from the ground forces the photographer to stand before, look straight at, the demonstrators. From down here, they dominate neither the terrain nor the bodies that pass jubilantly before their cameras, posing, their very presence a threat. When the military view is forced to come down to ground level, its response is always to cut all the trees' heads off. The image is horizontal, the scale is human. One thing is clear from this image: here, there is no domination.

3. Almost-film

One of the best-known stories of almost-films is about the one Maya Deren began filming in Haiti on the movement and ritual dance of Vodou. It's a fable about failure as the only ethical possibility. Although she eventually filmed hundreds of rolls of 16 mm film, she never edited the result. Deren's proposal to the Guggenheim

Foundation involved, among other things, a film about the formal relationship between ritual dance in Vodou and the structure of children's games. She had learned something about Haitian culture from an affair she'd had with Gregory Bateson. Bateson, a well-known anthropologist who had done ethnographic work on ritual dance in Bali, was married. The fellowship granted, the two of them planned to go to Haiti together, but the day before their flight, Bateson backed out and broke off the relationship with Deren.

She went alone. She perceived the Vodou rituals as a total mythological and aesthetic system—it was impossible, she believed, to separate dance from belief, trance and possession from objects and/or rhythm without doing violence to them when represented. All this led to her abandoning the idea of making the film. Several years later, in New York, she wrote a book, *Divine Horsemen*, explaining her reasons, and she narrated in detail her experience as an initiate in Vodou.

She explains the transformation of her idea about the project in this way:

> It was this order of awareness which made it impossible for me to execute the artwork I had intended. It became clear to me that Haitian dancing was not, in itself, a dance form, but part of a larger form, the mythological ritual. And the respect for formal integrity that makes it impossible for me to consider Cezanne's apple as an apple rather than as a Cezanne made it equally impossible, in Haiti, to ignore the total integrity of cultural form… [3]

Deren identifies with the practitioners of the dance, with their level of attention to the objects, the movements, the possibilities for transformation, the therapeutic value, the metaphysical thought in the form of the ritual, the *loas*, and the trance. It is the narrative of a new initiate and, I think, it's also the narrative of a lover.

Sarah Maldoror, whose birth name was Sarah Ducado, took the name Maldoror because of her love for the surrealistic and accursed

inventiveness of another pseudonymous author, the Comte de Lautréamont. Maldoror is a French filmmaker of African descent whose parents were born in Guadeloupe; she was married to Mario Pinto de Andrade, an Angolan, who was a central figure in Angola's anticolonialist movement as a poet and founder of political organizations. Maldoror was Gillo Pontecorvo's assistant during the filming of *The Battle of Algiers.* Her second full-length film, *Sambizanga*, takes place in the months before a prison revolt in Luanda that was one of the inspirations for the anticolonial resistance in Angola. The film shows how communal and individual radicalization takes place by documenting a long search by a woman whose husband has been jailed and will be tortured and killed. The participants are not actors. The shots are almost all close-ups. Visually, *Sambizanga* is a narrative and a record, but let's consider for a moment that *Sambizanga* came out in 1972, and the war of independence would not be over until 1974. The importance of this film is not just the meanings that it may generate for the cinephiles of the world or an audience at European film festivals. If we consider all the possible positions, including the possibilities of transforming the subject, *Sambizanga* is a rehearsal.

This is how I listen to you. This is how I accompany the observer. This is how I take note of the details. This is how I observe. This is how I can take part in a secret network.

Maldoror's second feature-length film would be called *Guns for Banta* (1970), another narrative about a war of national liberation, this time in Guinea Bissau. It was filmed among Amílcar Cabral's guerrilla fighters and, once again, from a woman's point of view. The filmmaker arrives on an island, part of Guinea Bissau but very isolated, with 16 people. The technicians, including the cameraman, were trained during the Algerian war by the national liberation front. Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, a visual artist, has recently compiled and published a series of texts on this unfinished film. I will read you an anecdote recounted by Suzanne Lipinska:

> There were seventeen of us with all our filmmaking equipment, luggage, and provisions, landed on the shore. Night was falling. The boat was departed and there was no one there to meet us. The village was very beautiful. Huge round huts with immense roofs covered in long, fine straw-like hair, screens covering their doors and windows and courtyards, surrounded by bamboo or woven fencing, little pigs wandering about, magnificent trees with extensive roots like long muscles. To open the door to Diabadian hospitality it was vital to meet "the President" but he was nowhere to be seen. We wandered from hut to hut.
>
> It was Eva—large, proud, generous—who came to our rescue, first offering water to wash and then coffee to revive us. She is a militant who has worked a lot with the rebels. Thanks to her, we finally meet "the President." The conversation was not easy. We explained our needs in French, this was translated to Portuguese and then from Portuguese into Creole and then finally to Balance, with the same process in reverse for the answer. We had two problems: firstly, where to sleep, and secondly, how to persuade the whole population to take part in the filming. The first problem was resolved without too much difficulty. We were allotted to different huts around the village. Sarah and I were invited to share—with all his wives—the President's hut. But the second problem would require a general meeting of the village. The bambolon player had to play for a long time before anyone heeded his call. It was completely dark when the first inhabitants arrived at the meeting place, under the talking tree, a large kapok. The women had got dressed up. They carried their little stools upside down on their heads and their babies, heads nodding, on their backs. The "President" of a committee of a neighboring island explained, in flowery language, twice translated, the aim of our visit. We were there to make a film. What is a film?[4]

We might begin by going backward and asking: What is a film? "There were seventeen of us with all our filmmaking equipment, luggage, and provisions." Whether or not an image exists for a

viewer, what we call "film" begins with the intention with which Sarah Maldoror and the 15 technicians disembarked. These are some of the practices, intentions, forms, emotions that create film, even before a single image has been produced: it is a mechanism that provokes ethical questionings, encounters between subjects, sensorial events, and socio-natural transformations.

At the beginning of *Camera Lucida* (1980), Roland Barthes explains his interest in photography and talks about the place from which he is interested in thinking about it. In the text, Barthes identifies three practices, or three emotions, or three intentions in photography: "to do, to undergo, to look." Barthes is writing at the moment when spectators were becoming, once and forever, consumers of images in the mass media. For personal and practical reasons, Barthes proposes to speak from the position of a person observing photography, and specifically as a viewer-consumer of images. That is what he is most interested in. Barthes's first question as he begins his reflection on photography in *Camera Lucida* is "What does my body know of photography?[5] If we return to that moment when he recognizes different positions and makes the decision to think and investigate from the viewpoint of the spectator, we can see that there are other positions—even more than he mentions.

I propose to think from the position of the person who *does*, the person who *undergoes*, the person who *looks*, and to mix those three intentions, emotions, and practices, and to open others, especially those positions that recognize the transformation of the subject, the transformation of perception, the importance of improvisation, the state of trance as intentions within artistic practice, constantly sought and desired by the person possessed, by the doer, by the subject, and by other figures that may well be accidental or marginal; to think about all those practices that also constitute art-making, but that have been degraded as minor, superficial, and shallow practices, like mimetic practices.

4.

The playwright Guy Regis Jr. was the person who invited me to Haiti last year. He is a translator as well as a writer. The translation project of his I find most moving, due to its resistance to art as message, as instrument, as representation, is his translation of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* into Haitian Kreyòl. Kreyòl is an oral language; the language of education and literature in Haiti is French. The translation of Proust from French is not a translation out of need; there are not thousands, or even hundreds, of readers waiting to read Proust in Kreyòl. Translation is, in this case, an exercise that creates a space of reflection between the two texts, of what is possible to think between two languages and ways of naming and seeing the world.

An interviewer asks Regis Jr. to talk about the process of translation:

> I read Proust with unspeakable happiness. I kept reading him, as does everyone, both frantically and driven by need for deep meditation. This great torrent in such deeply personal language—I wanted to express it, to interpret it myself. In other terms, translating is reproducing, interpreting. That desire was enough, and I got to work—like a child, mimicking, interpreting this music in my own way, with my own instrument, my own language. Translating is entirely egotistical and at the same time sacrificial. We translate out of the desire to deeply read a text. Everything starts there; language comes after.[6]

5.

All life is public in Port au Prince; all space is common. All vehicles drive in all directions at once. All foreigners in Haiti are *blancs*, regardless of the color of their skin. The industry of poverty and want, that peculiar philanthropic presence of the NGOs and "international aid" groups in Haiti that has consumed most of the funds donated after the earthquake, has created a very clear division between the Haitians and those who live off them. The men and

women who work with the international aid organizations sign contracts that forbid them from ever walking alone through the city. When I walk alone through the city, I am immediately identified as a foreigner looking for something to photograph. I bring nothing good; everyone raises an index finger and waggles it "no" when they see me approach with my camera. Haitians in the street are very clear: I have something to gain and they have something to lose. They are all very conscious of the way photography exploits their misery, and certain that every one of the photographs will be sold to a medium that will use the image to sell something, while their lives never change. They are not interested in being used as a symbolic value in the spaces of image consumption. They are not interested in being a sign within our discourse. They physically resist the representation of their bodies, emotions, and particular movements, the introduction of those things into the symbolic field. They could give lessons to the rest of the world on the circulation of photographic images.

To be able to film in the street, I go up to each person very slowly, showing my camera but not looking through the lens. I give a long explanation. I wear them down. I show them the images after taking the picture. "You see, it's just your arms." "Nothing that indicates the place." "It's a very tight close-up."

Among friends, the camera is something else. There is an exchange of emotions. Daphné Ménard sings a folk song to me. I am sitting on a balcony with him, I move around him until I find good lighting, I focus, and I smile as I listen to his private concert. Daphné is Christian, but song trumps religion, and he is a connoisseur of all the traditional music of Vodou. He sings a song about a boy arrested by the police as he's on his way to buy coffee—the boy asks himself how his mother is going to find out what's become of him. This exchange of attention and emotions requires the ritual object, the camera, but the reproduction of the image and any potential viewers are still very marginal to the transformation of the state of consciousness brought on by the camera, the song, the attention, and the perception.

I'll tell the following story the way I heard it in Haiti a year ago:

Artist André Eugène has a studio in Port au Prince in a neighborhood called Grand Rue. Dozens of people would always be going in and out, and many people at a time would be working. Some visitors would arrive with their cameras, because who doesn't walk around with a camera in Haiti? Three of Eugène's assistants wanted to do what the tourists did, but they were Haitian, so they didn't have a camera.

They took a black plastic jug that once contained engine oil, cut it, and drew a video camera on it, with its viewfinder and everything —they even made headphones—and they would walk through the neighborhood interviewing people with a brush as a microphone and looking through the "camera."

They mimicked all the movements, intonations, and emotions associated with filmmaking: they would peer at the small screen as though into a periscope, frame, focus, move around the subject looking for a better shot, listen through the headset, and give their subjects instructions as cameramen do. Even aware of what was happening, the subjects responded to all these movements with changes of attention, backs straightened, and all the corresponding ways of speaking—formality, smile for the camera and the public, attention to the questions, even nerves. Thus, everything we would call "filming" took place, with the one exception that the image was not taken, not captured, not reproduced. This was in the months after the earthquake. "There were lots of foreign journalists there and we wanted to imitate the white people with their cameras. Using an oilcan as the camcorder and a hairbrush as the microphone, we pretended to be journalists and interviewed the people who were at the event. Our camcorder and our microphone are fake, but this project is the real thing. *Jè wè bouch palé*—translated from Kreyòl, "The eyes see, the mouth speaks."

Several years later, a friend of André Eugène's came over from London to visit them and he promised to send them a camera,

which he did when he returned. Now they have a camera that reproduces images. When they go out to film, they take the first camera, too, and it always appears in all the images. Each image in this new cinema contains the memory of that first "filming."

6. What I want to tell you with all this is:
We've spent so much time thinking about the practice of art solely from the point of view of the viewer, and even more so from the point of view of the viewer/consumer, that now we hardly recognize those other positions that were once possible, and there are still others that we can't manage to perceive, to the point that we have come to think that everything is seen and everything has been turned into image, when the visible, the seen, and the made image is so little. This is the advantage of thinking from the standpoint of this territory so marginal to the history of art, photography, and film.

Because when we recognize the way an aerial view, with its view of domination, of *domain*, distorts, the shock is so immediate, so obvious, that it makes even an archbishop weep. We are close to it, it matters to us; our lives are implicated in all the things that this order is not able to perceive. Because the *"no"* of the Haitians shows us that there is a position of resistance to representation, to becoming a sign, that same resistance that Maya Deren perceived, and that behind that resistance, as in the case of André Eugène's friends, there is a practice that produces images for no one—an experience that does not undergo representation—and yet that does and undoes, like the translation of Proust into Kreyòl.

That there are ethical, political, and material obstacles to visibility, like the Guinea Bissau war was for Maldoror.

That limiting art to what it is possible to perceive from the position of the spectator, reader, or listener, and to the image as sign, representation, event in a circulation of images, is just a tiny piece of what we can think about art, its intentions, and its emotions.

We have been miseducated in aesthetics. We misunderstand the principles of this philosophical dialogue, because neither everyday practices nor economies nor institutions sustain the figure of the spectator. There are many more positions for the maker than for the spectator who strolls idly and disinterestedly through the galleries. Here the spectator, the viewer, is a ghost.

If we want to open other possibilities and positions, think profoundly about states of consciousness, leaps of thought, self-sacrifice and egoism (as Guy Regis Jr. says as he speaks about that experience of translation as a value in and of itself), profundities, resistance to becoming a sign, we will have to stop thinking about the viewer, about representation, and about the sign for a good while.

As small windows looking on to this road: we have the almost-film, material and ethical resistances, the implied and dangerous positions of the possessed person, the visionary, the madman. We have noise, the thick forest, the minor, degraded, marginal practices (mimesis, rehearsal), and failure: the image without spectator, the film with no image. Because they already exist, we can talk about them. If they are not sign or representation, what are they? What is the work they do? The work they do is subject formation, antitherapy, rehearsal, the transformation of states of consciousness via material, structure, movement, form, and much more.

This is the *travay.*

1 Jean Rouch, conclusion to *Ciné-Ethnography*, ed. and trans. Steven Feld (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 183–184.

2 Cohoba or Cojoba is a plant which seeds have hallucinogenic properties.

3 Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New Paltz, NY: McPherson, 2004).

4 Suzanne Lipinska, "Filming with the Balanta People," Africasia 19 (July 6–19, 1970).

5 Roland Barthes, *Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010)

6 Guy Regis Junior, interviewed by George Bellos, "Proust en créole?", bibliobs.nouvelobs.com, January 7, 2013, http://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/essais/20120406.OBS5667/proust-en-creole.html.

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