

“To live in exile in one’s own body”:

Strategies of Critical Displacement in the Third Guangzhou Triennial

Soyoung Yoon

“But how can a wall protect if it is not a continuous structure?” In Franz Kafka’s short story “The Great Wall of China,” our fictional storyteller, an anonymous perspective from “we, the builders,” begins by speculating on the reason behind the wall’s system of piecemeal building: five years on a thousand yards of wall, then a gap where the workers were transferred to a faraway site, another five years on another thousand yards, the gap, the wall, over and over again. The gap is also a hiatus. The workers were momentarily released from their interminable work to travel through the land; on this journey, they “heard the rejoicings of the new armies of labor streaming past from the depths of the land, saw forests being cut down to become supports for the wall, saw mountains being hewn into stones for the wall, heard at the holy shrines hymns rising in which the pious prayed for the completion of the wall...”¹ The workers had never seen such an image of unity, the nation, and thereby “the desire to labor on the wall of the nation became irresistible.” We could argue that the wall was built *for* those gaps – gaps to produce the desire to belong, plus the desire to labor, again and again, in the name of that belonging, gaps to produce and reproduce a ‘people.’ However, the storyteller continues to ask, if one can rationalize the purpose of the gaps, the spatial and temporal gaps in the construction of the wall, what is the purpose of the wall itself? What of the actual, concrete wall, the magisterial materiality of this porous wall? The answer is that there is *no* purpose, or rather the purpose of the wall cannot be accounted for; it cannot be rationalized, it is irrational, beyond reason. Rather than confront this inconsistency at the foundation of the nation, the storyteller assumes an agency behind the wall, the belief in an authority that is by definition beyond the measure of man. Thus, the decision to build the wall carries the weight of destiny, “it existed from all eternity.”² And

¹ Franz Kafka, “The Great Wall of China” in *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 235 ~ 249.

² “Why? A question for the high command [...] I believe that the high command has existed from all eternity, and the decision to the build the wall likewise. Unwitting peoples of the north, who imagined they were the cause of it!

that burden is borne on the backs of the workers, unknowingly and yet *willingly*, brick by brick – a relation between the subject and the various apparatuses of the nation-state, which Kafka famously and all-too prophetically portrays in another short story as a literal inscription upon the body, the violence of the injunction to identify (see “In a Penal Colony”).

Nationalism offers a specific mode of belonging in the image of unity, a unity that is imposed upon the individual with the full force of fate. A thread that runs through the various works from the Americas for the Third Guangzhou Triennial is an implicit inquiry into the constitution of national identities, the rhetoric that supports the identification of the individual into a national subject, and in particular, the affect of such rhetoric. Why does one *desire* to be a national subject? How does one *internalize* the injunction to identify with the nation? What is the *affect* of such identification? The brilliance of Kafka’s story about the Great Wall of China (and the ‘myth’ of the Chinese people) is its emphasis on the wall’s affect; furthermore, the story is itself staged as a series of questions and answers, the repetition of a scene of address in which the storyteller struggles to make sense of the wall’s silence, the brute materiality of its muteness. I would argue that the artists here reiterate this scene of address, its dynamics, as one’s relation to the nation and, perhaps more importantly, as one’s relation to oneself. How does one inhabit one’s own body? Or rather, for the artists here, the question ought to be how we live in exile in our own bodies.

“To live in exile in one’s own body”: Walter Benjamin described Kafka’s own bodies as such, tired figures, burdened by an identity presumably-inexplicable as fate, living in their own bodies as if in a foreign land, “a stranger, an outcast who is ignorant of the laws that connect this body to higher and vaster orders.”³ Moreover, Kafka shows that this “land” can turn hostile toward us, so much so that we can wake up one day and suddenly find ourselves transformed into something less than human (see “Metamorphosis”) – an analysis all the more prescient today when national sovereignty increasingly shifts its focus from territories to bodies, “a dispersal of

Honest, unwitting Emperor, who imagined he decreed it! We builders of the wall know that it was not so and hold our tongues,” Kafka, 242.

³ Walter Benjamin, “Franz Kafka: Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer (1931)” in *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927 ~ 1945*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, et al. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ., 1999), 497; see also, Benjamin, “Franz Kafka (1934),” *ibid.*, 794 ~818. Note how in the recent translation, ‘exile’ is translated as ‘estrangement’; so, it is “strangeness – his own strangeness – has gained control over him,” 806. For Benjamin, Kafka literalizes the alienation of modern man, an alienation experienced as if enforced by an external agent, in the form of a physical distortion, particularly as a hunched back.

body politics to bodies politics” for which the border is between citizen and non-citizen.⁴ The figure of the displaced body is prominent in the works here - for example, the squatting bodies of China and its diaspora (Simon Leung); the spatial and temporal dislocation of the colonized subject in Shanghai, Taipei, and Hanoi (Lin + Lam); the teeming heterogeneity of a plot of earth, literalizing the groundlessness of the national subject’s originary fantasy (Maria Theresa Alvez); the impropriety of a lover’s discourse in public and especially in political discourse (Sharon Hayes). And, last but not least, there is an overall insistence on the displacement of the spectator. Note that ‘to displace’ does not merely mean to ‘to dislocate,’ but also ‘to depose’ and ‘to substitute’ – a *qualitative* move and, in psychoanalytic terms, a transfer of affect. To displace the spectator is to refuse a totalizing point of view or any other such claims to situate an ‘I’ in an unrestricted position of power and knowledge. Rather, it is an embrace of a *critical* displacement of oneself, a certain vulnerability and the desire to be overwhelmed by, indeed to be undone by another, as the very condition of ethics and politics.⁵

In *Squatting Project/ Guangzhou* (2008), a two-channel video projection-installation, Simon Leung appropriates a scene from Hong Kong filmmaker Stanley Kwan’s film, *Center Stage* (1992), a scene in which two figures elaborate on the significance of the gesture of squatting. For the filmmaker Tsai Chu-sheng (played by Tony Leung Ka-Fai), the gesture represents the relationship between the Chinese people and History: “two-thirds of the people in China” are compelled to squat, to squat and wait, wait for abuse or assistance. The scene itself begins with a shot of Tsai, squatting, pensively smoking in front of a Shanghai film studio of the early 1930’s

⁴ Michael Sorkin, “Introduction: Up Against the Wall” in *Against the Wall*, ed. Michael Sorkin (New York: The New Press, 2005), viii. “The law of nations becomes the law of the sea, a de facto shared space plied by new vessels of national sovereignty. *By switching figure and ground [my emphasis]*, national authority can be exercised anywhere on the globe. This wall not only protectively encloses citizens wherever they are but also draws the ‘line’ of national territory around suspect non-citizens wherever they may be found...a perverse twist on the settler subject whose body confers nationality on any territory through which it passes.”

⁵ Rather than the term ‘critical displacement,’ I prefer ‘politics of extimacy’ (a la Jacques Lacan) or ‘critical de-subjectivation’ (a la Judith Butler). “Extimacy” is the word that Lacan coined for the strange intimacy of living in exile in one’s own body, a collage of ‘exteriority’ and ‘intimacy’ through which the very distinction between the two terms are challenged. It also critiques the self-possession of the subject and defines our relation to the other: how we are doubled by a strange yet intimate other, how at the very core of our being is something we cannot name, the sense of something always already so much more than the selves we *own*. I would argue that, within art, a politics of extimacy emphasizes the *estranging* affect of an image, the image’s ability to de-stabilize us, to reveal our vulnerability, our radical dependency on the other and therefore our responsibility to the other. However, in this essay, as we inquire into the constitution of national subjects, I use ‘critical displacement’ to retain its connotations of spatial dislocation, not only because national sovereignty has traditionally been defined by territorial claims, but also to account for those who have been forcefully mobilized - the refugee, the immigrant - as figures who particularly put pressure on the ‘fiction’ that one is born into a nation (see Hannah Arendt).

(the Lianhua Film Company, or rather its recreation, which we will see at the end of Kwan's film juxtaposed with black-and-white footage of the actual studio's state of destitution since the Second World War.) For the actress Ruan Ling-yu (played by Maggie Cheung), squatting is also a moment when one succumbs to the fatigue of one's body, a pause, plus a potential moment of self-reflexivity. The social significances of the gesture, especially its connotations of class and gender, are all the more accentuated when Ruan reveals she has not squatted since she became a famous actress (in fact, one of the most famous figures of silent cinema). The scene ends with Tsai's invitation to squat together (or precisely, "to see her squat too"): the shot changes from a high angle, Ruan looking down at the squatting Tsai, to a shot from behind, a closer shot to them sitting together, back to back, at our eye-level, that is, if we, the spectators were squatting with them. In Leung's installation, this scene is to be reiterated nine times in multiple variations of image, dialogue and subtitle "as a means to a multi-dimensional meditation on China's self-regard."⁶

In particular, for Leung, the squatting body is "a depiction of the subject in a metaphysics of waiting." In the case of *Center Stage*, the squatter awaits the answer to the open question of China: What is China? The bodies stress an inability to answer, a state of suspension, and a sense of foreboding, of the impending force of history experienced by Shanghai of 1930's as well as Hong Kong of the 1990's. Speaking about the historical significance of this scene in 1994, Leung says, "this squatting, this anxiety in waiting, is the sentence history has passed on China's diaspora: We wait...we wait to see what will happen in China, in Beijing; we wait for a change; we wait to return...And, for some of us, we wait for the inevitability of return – of 1997."⁷ The colonized subject is *compelled* to squat in one's own country – a material and affective condition of what Gayatri Spivak calls the epistemological violence of colonialism, "to consolidate the Self [...] by obliging the native to cathect the space of the Other on his own home ground."⁸ Or, to paraphrase Leung, the subject born into a colony is forced to desire in the field of the Other's violence. The critique of ideology at the level of desire is crucial. The significance of Spivak's argument that the subaltern cannot speak - the difficulty of the colonized subject to speak in his/her name - is to underscore a specific *structure* of silence as well as the violence of this

⁶ Simon Leung, from Leung's final proposal for the Third Guangzhou Triennial (Los Angeles: June 2008)

⁷ Simon Leung, "Marine Lovers...another sit(t)ing," from a paper initially presented at the College Art Association Annual Conference (New York: February 1994)

⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward A History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), 211.

displacement of power, knowledge, interests, and desires. Furthermore, it allows us to critique a position that would automatically assume agency simply by “letting them speak for themselves”; as in the case of “we, the builders” of “The Great Wall of China,” desire and self-interest do not necessarily coincide.⁹

In English, the verb “to squat” harbors the violence of beating, crushing, flattening out of shape, or suppressing out of sight; thus, to squat connotes a certain formless-ness, a loss or lack of identity, plus a potential de-forming and dis-identification. There is an ambiguity in the agency of the squatter as the one who squats *and* the one who is squatted; an ambiguity amplified in the definition of the squatter as an illegal settler, as one who is out of place, but also, if not more so, the symptom of an aggressive process of social displacement. In Leung’s *Squatting Project/Berlin* (1994), posters picturing the back of an Asian squatting body is accompanied by the proposal for the spectator to squat, to reconfigure the spatial-temporal coordinates of the city from the position of the squatter – at one level, an implicit critique of the forceful repatriation of Vietnamese “guest-workers” by the German government in the early nineties. In a project for the Generali Foundation, *Squatting Project/Wien* (1998), Leung inscribes his own squatting body in front of an otherwise ‘immaculate’ image of all the real estate of the Generali Corporation – a ‘stain’ in the picture, which not only speaks to the ties between art and capital, but also exposes an excess, a remainder of the processes of gentrification, that is both constituted by *and* constitutive of the circulation of capital. Squatting here becomes a deliberate performance of displacement, an act of almost literally reversing figure and ground. And it is the strength of Leung’s work to show that the ground is always already a figuration, that these displaced bodies are part and parcel of a specific structure of internal exclusion.

What is at stake in the ambiguity of the spectator’s relationship to Leung’s work, I would argue, is this dynamic of critical displacement - a dynamic that is also brought to the fore in Lin

⁹ In *Squatting Project/ Guangzhou*, I would argue that the problem of self-representation is embodied by the figure of Ruan Ling-yu. As one of the most prominent actresses of silent cinema, her presence marks the transition of silent films to talkies. Noteworthy is the fact that the transition to the talkie itself was not so much an issue of technology, but of the demand of the film industry for standardization; in addition, Ruan, born and brought up in Shanghai, was forced to learn Mandarin to be able to talk in the new talkies. As a “modern woman,” Ruan committed suicide on account of the loss of control over her self-representation in the media, publicly denouncing, from her deathbed, *renyan kewe* (‘talk’ or often translated as ‘gossip’). That said, *Squatting Project/ Guangzhou* is *not* a project of recovery or restoration; I emphasize again that the significance of Leung’s work lies in how it underscores the specific structure of silence and its violence.

+ Lam (Lana Lin and H. Lan Thao Lam)'s installation *Departure* (2008), a three-channel video-projection installation about the interrelating histories of three post-colonial cities, Shanghai, Taipei, and Hanoi. By putting us on "center stage" as it were, both pieces displace cinema and its dominant mode of spectatorship, that is, a dominant mode of identifying with an authorial point of view from which the spectator would voyeuristically consume a flow of images unfurled in front of them in the form of a coherent, self-sufficient narrative. In Leung's as well as Lin + Lam's pieces, we are displaced from precisely such a position of mastery. In Leung's *Squatting Project/ Guangzhou*, we step on top of a platform in-between two screens, fluctuating from left to right, stooping, even squatting, to see the images projected lower than our eye-level. In Lin + Lam's *Departure*, we sense the titillation and a slight sense of nausea from the conflict of perspectives: the simultaneous screening of three films, plus our own point of view in conflict with the point of view of each film. As *Departure*'s narrators track the complexity of the transformation in each landscape, the films offer the landscapes in the form of three tracking shots: each shot from a different moving vehicle, the speed and the stability of the images shift from the progression of a train in Taipei, the smooth, steady veering of a car in Shanghai, to the shuddering and sighs of a cyclo in Hanoi – three different modalities and temporalities of movement. All the while, we stand amidst the screens, restlessly, palpably aware of our presence in the picture.

There are additional obstructions to the spectator's command, especially in the artists' deliberate deployment of linguistic differences – the difference between Chinese and English, plus the differences within Chinese itself as in Mandarin *vs.* Cantonese, written *vs.* spoken. Both Leung and Lin + Lam address the history underlying the hierarchy of these languages - for example, the struggle between 'Standard Spoken Chinese' and its 'dialects', the struggle over national sovereignty in the use of Japanese, Mandarin or Taiwanese, etc. In *Departure*, five women narrate the history of each city, alternating from English, Mandarin, Taiwanese, Shanghainese, to Vietnamese; the conflict underlying the difference of languages is brought to our attention through the history of names – for example, the perpetual naming and renaming of a single street – with names that function as national monuments or, as one narrator says, "propaganda at its most economical." As a primary aspect of the process of nationalization, a national language presupposes the existence of a language community: a community of people bound by a common language, moreover, by a common *origin*. Etienne Balibar reminds us that

the ideal of a national language is a modern invention, “remarkably recent.”¹⁰ Older societies were still based “on the juxtaposition of linguistically separate populations, on the superimposition of mutually incompatible ‘languages’ for the dominant and the dominated and for the sacred and profane spheres.” A system of translation had to be developed. With the emergence of the nation-state, Balibar brilliantly points out, this system is internalized into different ‘levels’ of one language; social differences are relativized and subordinated, *naturalized* into different articulations of the national language. Here, “the translators are writers, journalists, and politicians, social actors who speak the language of the ‘people’.”

In Lin + Lam’s *Departure*, a narrator says, “language is a currency that cannot be exchanged at a moment’s notice.” *Departure* emphasizes the significance of this ‘delay’ in translation, drawing forth the force that heaves and hoists one language upon another, the density of the spatial-temporal gap between one language and the other. The interval has a pronounced presence in Lin + Lam’s work. For example, there is a piece called “24 frames = 1 second,” a part of *Unidentified Vietnam* (2006), an installation and film about the displaced archive of the Embassy of South Vietnam Collection (a few hundred propaganda films moved to the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. following the fall of Saigon). Each photograph visualizes a wipe, a strategy of gradually transitioning from one frame to another. Unlike other techniques of editing in narrative film, the wipe draws attention to itself, a fissure in the continuity of the film; more importantly, this fissure is synthesized not on the level of images, but at the level of the narrator. What emerges is a perspective, the *act* of associating one image to another, a perspective that the spectator is dependent upon to rationalize these associations; thus, the frequent appearance of wipes in films of propaganda. However, in *Unidentified Vietnam*, Lin + Lam explicitly refuse the act of synthesis, of narrativization; opting for an image stilled, stasis rather than movement, the wipes here de-form and dis-identify the image. And the spectator oscillates in a state of suspension – apprehension and anticipation – grasping at traces of figures that bleed through the

¹⁰ Etienne Balibar, “The Nation Form: History and Ideology” in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (London: Verso, 2005 [1991]), 97. The language community is one of two features of “fictive ethnicity,” what Balibar calls the form of community, a specific form of belonging, instituted by the nation-state. “No nation possesses an ethnic base naturally, but as social formations are nationalized, the populations included within them, divided up among them or dominated by them are ethnicized – that is represented in the past or in the future as if they formed a natural community, possessing of itself an identity of origins, culture, and interests which transcends individuals and social conditions.” 96.

blur.¹¹ Akin to Leung's squatting practices, the wipes here are a 'stain' upon the surface of the image; the photographs also reverse figure and ground, show how the ground is always already a figuration. Lin + Lam refuse to homogenize the temporality of film – or rather, they refuse to relativize and subordinate the different temporalities in the name of a coherent, self-sufficient narrative.¹² Indeed, in *Departure*, our access to the disparate and yet interrelated histories of the three cities is literally interrupted with screens that look like highway signage. Lin + Lam show the movement of people, of language, as anything but the capitalist myth of perfect circulation, that is, the myth of a fluid flow of labor and information without the combustible crackling of the medium. Perhaps that is why each of the three films ends on the same, stationary image: a deserted construction site, sporadically lit up by the burst of a few flames, sputtering, spitting in the dark.

Another work in the Triennial, Maria Theresa Alves' *Wake in Guangzhou: A History of Earth* (2008), underscores the materiality of such sites of construction. Alves' *Wake* series began in Germany, where she germinated dormant seeds from soil under the streets of Berlin, accompanied by extensive archival research into the specific sites. The seeds unfold a curious history: the plot of earth as the coincidental site of multiple tales told from the various and somewhat absurd perspective of a seed. Through Alves' meticulous pseudo-scientific documentation, we deduce that seeds are transferred not only 'legitimately' via trade, but also surreptitiously brought over stuck on clothing, the bottom of a shoe, on fur or feather, or carried over by wind, rain, etc.; the seeds come from all over the world, some from centuries ago. Of especial interest is the Voss Strasse site, the place of the official residence for all the chancellors of Germany till it was destroyed during the war. Alves shows how the former garden was the site of surveillance and discipline, of the injunction to identify by the apparatuses of the nation-state upon the bodies of...seeds: "Through hundreds of years, gardeners worried about which plants to nurture and which to remove. Which would be ones that might be construed as unpatriotic? Which regions or countries were to be included in any given government's idea of proper

¹¹ "The adjectival 'unidentified' is not a provocation to identify. Instead, *Unidentified Vietnam* engages in an experimentation with modes of *unidentifying*... "Unidentified" is, then, a mode of challenging a politics based on identity and working to identify its participants." Una Chung, "What.Comes.After.:An Introduction to Lin + Lam's *Unidentified Vietnam*," *Art Journal* vol.66, no.4 (Winter: 2007), 22.

¹² Spivak says "the epistemic history of imperialism is the story of a series of interruptions, a repeated tearing of time that cannot be sutured." She cautions against the temptation to narrativize this history: To assume that one can suture the gaps with the recovery or restoration of sufficient knowledge is to ignore the epistemological violence of imperialism. Spivak, 208.

Prussian/German flora? [...] A precisely watched garden.” However, as one reviewer humorously put it, “Bismarck’s attempts to create a German national state and identity, to be reflected by the ‘national’ flora of his Minister’s Garden, once in the vicinity of Alves’ Voss Strasse/ Behren Strasse site, would undoubtedly be thwarted by the lack of respect given by plants to national borders.”¹³ The teeming heterogeneity of a plot of earth literalizes the groundlessness of any originary fantasy of the national subject – as much as the anxiety that permeates through the site’s discourse, not to mention its multiple transformations and reformations, speak to the materiality and affect of such fantasies. Noteworthy is how such fantasies of belonging are enforced as a response to capitalism’s constant social displacements. Part of the seductiveness of nationalist rhetoric is its promise of a (re)turn to an ‘organic’ community in which everyone (again) has his/her own place. For Slavoj Žižek, the rampant rise of nationalism in the last decade is to be explicitly aligned with the increasingly visibility (and violence) of structural imbalances constitutive of the expansion and intensification of capitalism.¹⁴ It is important to emphasize that these nationalisms are *not* accompanied by a critique of capitalism. On the contrary, they are supported by the desire for “capitalism without capitalism”: internal social contradictions are externalized into a relationship of power, a struggle of domination between “us” and “them,” in which “they” are the alien agents who must be excluded, even annihilated, for a return to ‘natural’ order.

In *Everything Else Has Failed! Don’t You Think It’s Time for Love?* (2007), Sharon Hayes questions the affect of national belonging, putting it side by side the longing for a lost love. Hayes appears in the middle of a crowded sidewalk in mid-town Manhattan with a microphone and an amplifier. Abruptly, Hayes begins a love letter, what she calls a “love address,” to an anonymous “you.” Meeting the gaze of the passersby, “I,” the lover, speaks of her longing, of the war, of the difficulties of love during a war – for her, love and war are inextricably intertwined, so much so that war becomes a measure of time itself: she marks her beloved’s absence by counting not days, but bombs, “every mark a strike against you.” She speaks of the madness of lost love, of what it feels to be forcefully separated from “you” and yet to belong to “you”, a belonging that is all the more unbearable for the beloved’s silence but nevertheless a belonging in which she is compelled to persist. The madness of a lover, Roland Barthes says, is not an

¹³ Jean Fisher, “Maria Theresa Alves: Migration’s Silent Witnesses”

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1993), 205~211.

experience of depersonalization, but rather of “becoming a subject, being unable to keep myself from doing so... *I am not someone else*: that is what I realize with horror.”¹⁵ For the “I” of Hayes’s love letter, the experience is comparable to being separated from the war (a war fought on foreign soil, a war which she is wholeheartedly against) and yet to belong to that war, to belong to a nation that has brought on this war, to be unwillingly culpable not only for the war’s horrors, but also for her beloved’s absence, a distance of time, space, *and* nationality. Initially, then, we could claim Hayes’ love letter as a fitful confession of this culpability, of a declaration of the lover’s state of subjection, as well as a confession of her struggle to make sense of the other’s silence, that is, the absence not only of her beloved’s reply, but also the nation’s reply to her protests against the war. With a different letter for each day of the week, each letter is repeated three times, and each ending with the sentence “I choose my words to you carefully and I say goodbye.”

However, if Hayes’ love letter is a confession, it is one that is deliberately displaced from private to public discourse: it is a love *address*. Note that “I” do *not* address “you” to internalize my call, to identify with me; “I” address “you” to expose my vulnerability, to externalize, and, yes, to displace myself to you. Judith Butler tells us that confession need not be circumscribed to a technique of surveillance and discipline, to an apparatus for internalizing the injunction to identify.¹⁶ Rather, confession is a specific scene of address; the practice of confession is an act of giving an account of oneself to another, “an *ec-static* movement, one that moves me outside of myself into a sphere in which I am dispossessed of myself and constituted as a subject at the same time.”¹⁷ It is crucial to note that this self-externalization for another takes place within a *social* scene of address; thus, when we account for ourselves, “we not only disclose ourselves but

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), 121.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2005), 111–136. Butler follows the later Foucault, who shifted away from his earlier criticism of confession as “a practice in the service of regulatory power that produces the subject as one who is obligated to tell the truth about his or her desire.” Foucault reconsiders his initial position on confession, “finding that confession compels a ‘manifestation’ of the self that does not have to correspond to some putative inner truth, and whose constitutive appearance is *not* to be construed as mere illusion... Confession in this context presupposes that the self must appear in order to constitute itself and that it can constitute itself only within a given scene of address, within a certain socially constituted relation,” 112.

¹⁷ Butler, 115. Here, I need to point out that the problem of forced confession: one is not allowed to tell the ‘truth’ of oneself, but forced to speak again and again till one says the other’s ‘truth’; violence not only in that one is forced to speak, but that one is forced to speak in one’s own name. Indeed, a forced confession is *not* a confession: it is an imposition, an imposition that appropriates a certain norm of interpreting confessions as an articulation of an inner truth. Within a culture of forced confessions, perhaps we must insist all the more that such ‘truths’ are radically exterior, that all confessions are ‘fictions.’

act on the schemes of intelligibility that govern who will be a speaking being, subjecting them to rupture or revision, consolidating their norms, or contesting their hegemony.”¹⁸

Watching Hayes’ performance, I could not help but wonder what love it is that compels the lover to wander on the streets, calling for her beloved, calling to her beloved – or ‘simply’ calling, not a demand for the beloved’s presence, but the call in and of itself, its materiality, its affect. The performance of her *I-love-you* is amplified and repeated so that we hear not only the letter, but also its resonance; the performance disturbs the propriety of the public sphere with the intrusion and the insistence of the private. With the microphone and the amplifier in the middle of a street, Hayes also disrupts a traditional mode of political dissent by superimposing the figure of the lover upon the figure of the protestor: the protestor-as-lover. The perception that the lover is out of place in the where, when, and how of protests allows us to inquire into the following: What is the current state of the culture of protest, say, in a city such as New York City? How has the privatization of the public sphere transformed the traditional modes of political dissent? Is the protestor-as-lover a symptom of such privatization? Or does the lover offer another mode of subjectivity beyond the individual as a private proprietor? There is a difference between individuality and singularity, a difference in one’s relation to oneself. The lover is a *singular* subject: the lover desires to be overwhelmed by, to be undone by the other to the point of submersion (in Hayes’s love address, the lover sees traces of her beloved in all who pass by, “you are in all these strangers”; for this “I,” “you are everything”). When Hayes puts forth the potential of her beloved as her nation (“Why can’t you be my country?”), she implicitly challenges the nationalism of common origin and common ideal. The language of the lover is *not* the language of the ‘people.’ Barthes exclaims that a lover is “a social catastrophe” and to love is to put into crisis the complacency of the everyday: the lover-as-protestor.

According to Balibar, nationalism is a specific ideological schema of individual and collective identity, a schema of constituting the individual as a national subject, “homo nationalis.” To nationalize is not to suppress all differences of race, ethnicity, gender and (especially) class, but rather to relativize and subordinate them to the difference of nationality.¹⁹ We must distinguish between ‘homogeneity’ and ‘dominance.’ This distinction is crucial for an underlying premise of

¹⁸ Butler, 132. Note: “9 Scripts from a Nation at War”(2007), a collaboration between Andrea Geyer, Sharon Hayes, Ashley Hunt, Katya Sander, David Thorne, which critically act on such a scheme of intelligibility supporting the current war in Iraq – “How does war construct specific positions for individuals to fill, enact, speak from, or resist?” – by deploying different modes of accounting for oneself.

¹⁹ Etienne Balibar, “Ambiguous Identities,” in *Politics and the Other Scene* (Verso, 2002), 56~73.

this essay is a refusal of a certain rhetoric of “tolerance.” This is not to refuse the importance of cultural identities, but rather to refuse to consider them in isolation within a seemingly benign dispersal of a plurality of positions. I would argue that the word “cultural” too often covers over how such identities are over-determined by a disparity of power, how the subject dominates the other through a systematic process of expropriation and how the other is defined to situate the subject in a position of power and knowledge. All the more so today, Balibar emphasizes, when there is an incredible contradiction of “a humanity effectively unified (economically and technologically)” *and* “a disparity in wealth within a single social formation”—a shift from external to increasingly violent internal exclusions, along with national sovereignty ever more enforced at the level of identity (from territorial borders to the “new” wall between citizen and non-citizen, actual and virtual, anywhere and everywhere.) In short, it is a shift from the Great Wall of China to the “Great Wall of Capital”²⁰; what is directly at stake is the process of identification itself.

Here, I argue is the significance of a critical displacement of oneself. If artists are social actors who, as Balibar says, speak the language of the ‘people,’ part and parcel of a system of internal translation that relativizes and subordinates social differences, I would argue that the works here redefine the task of translation. As Maurice Blanchot insists, translation is possible only because language has “the possibilities of being different from itself and foreign to itself”: “It is not the question of resemblance...It is much more a question of an identity on the basis of an alterity: the same work in foreign languages, both because of their foreignness and by making visible, in their foreignness, what makes this work such that it will always be *other*...”²¹ To critically displace oneself is to insist on this possibility of one’s own foreignness to oneself as the very condition of our ethical and political relation to the other. To critically displace oneself is not to recover or to restore knowledge, but rather to participate in a process of unknowing, to experience how I could *not* know.²²

New York
July 2008

²⁰ Mike Davis, “The Great Wall of Capital” in *Against the Wall*, 88~99.

²¹ Maurice Blanchot, “Translating” in *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1997 [1971]), 59~60.

²² “To know that one does not write for the other, to know that these things I am going to write will never cause me to be loved by the one I love (the other), to know that writing compensates for nothing, sublimates nothing, that it is precisely there where you are not – this is the beginning of writing.” Barthes, 100.