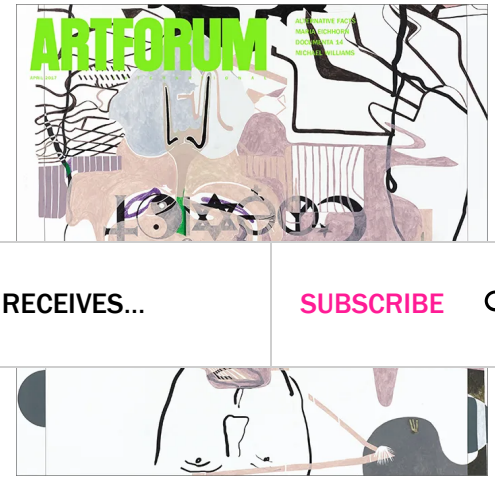
REAL FICTIONS: ALTERNATIVES TO ALTERNATIVE FACTS



Cover: **Michael Williams, *Vertical Composition* (detail), 2017**, oil, acrylic, and ink-jet print on canvas, 10' 2" × 7' 4".

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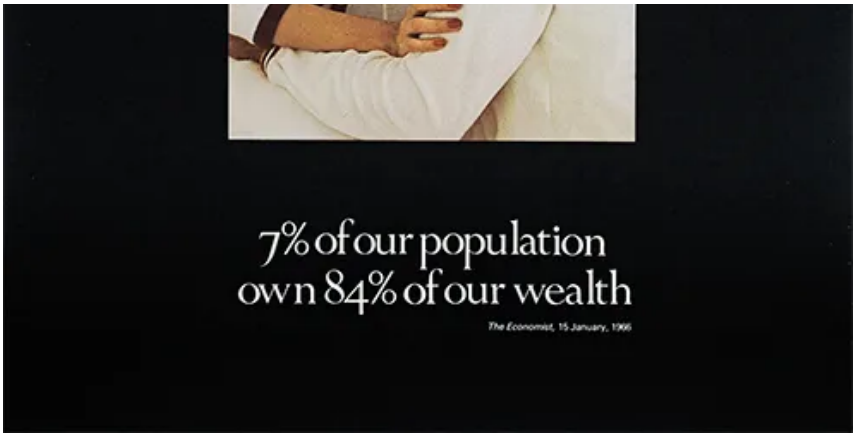

Victor Burgin, *Possession*, 1976, duotone lithograph, 46 3/4 × 33 1/8″.

1. DESPITE RUMORS OF ITS DISAPPEARANCE, the real remains with us. The labor of its production is "obstinate," Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt argue; it persists in the overlooked furniture of our everyday lives. The real is as intractable as history, Fredric Jameson adds; neither can be transcended. If these formulations seem right, then the question of the real is not a matter of its presence but of its position—where it is located, how, by whom, and for what reasons. One way to come to terms with some criticism, art, and literature is through these framings.[1]

2. We say that modern critique took its bearings from Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, but what did these thinkers have in common? Little more than a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (as Paul Ricoeur termed it), the operative assumption that the real is hidden or buried and the critic

must hunt it out or dig it up.[2] Of course, for Marx the unacknowledged truth of history is class struggle; that is the occluded narrative that must be extracted from all other accounts. For Freud, the unconscious reality of subjective life is psychic conflict; such is the latent content that must be teased from the manifest confusions of our dreams, symptoms, and slip-ups. And for Nietzsche, the unspoken force behind any system of thought is a will to power, which is to be challenged or celebrated as one sees fit. The Frankfurt School drew on all three approaches, and a key instance of its caustic critique remains the assessment of *Neue Sachlichkeit* photography delivered by Brecht by way of Benjamin: "A photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG tells us next to nothing about these institutions," Brecht remarked, with the steel manufacturer and the electric utility in mind. "The reification of human relations—the factory, say—means that they are no longer explicit. So something must in fact be *built up*, something artificial, posed."[3] This statement captures the characteristic move of ideology critique: to expose the real behind the representations that conceal it or otherwise shore it up. As Brecht indicated, one way to attempt this exposé in art is via an image or text (or, from John Heartfield to Barbara Kruger, a combination of the two) that is "built up," montaged.

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3. A late epitome of ideology critique is *Mythologies* (1957), in which, with a mix of old Brechtian estrangement and new structuralist decoding, Roland Barthes read various manifestations of middlebrow culture (e.g., the "Family of Man" exhibition staged by Edward Steichen in 1955, the Blue Guide travel books) as so many class-bound myths that present specific beliefs as general truths. *Mythologies* was a first manual of critical suspicion for many artists and critics; its influence was especially strong in Conceptual and feminist practices that employed image appropriation (e.g., those of Victor Burgin and Sherrie Levine). However, in the wake of 1968, Barthes had second thoughts: "Any student can and does denounce the bourgeois or petit-bourgeois character of such and such a form," he wrote in 1971. "It is no longer the myths which need to be unmasked (the doxa now takes care of that), it is the sign itself which must be shaken."[4] What could be more radical than this quasi-Maoist call for a "semioclasm" that passed beyond demystification to attack representation as such? The signs that stitch the real together were to be not merely exposed but utterly torn asunder.

4. In the end, however, the real was only repositioned: No

longer hidden or buried, it was now thought to lie, overlooked but in plain sight, on the surface of things. One signal of this shift, soon to be associated with poststructuralist theory, was another Barthes essay, "*L'effet de réel*" (The Reality Effect, 1968), which considered the function of the detail in nineteenth-century narrative, both fictional and historical (his test cases were Flaubert and Michelet, respectively).[5] In such narratives, Barthes argued, everything is expected to mean; even incidental details that seem not to signify do so nonetheless, for what they thus signify is *in*significance, and the apparent meaninglessness of the mere facts of the contingent world helps to clinch the realist evocation of the real. In this account, nothing escapes the "empire of signs," and so it was but a short step to see realism in toto as a system of conventions, as Barthes did in *S/Z* (1970), his painstaking analysis of the 1830 short story "Sarrasine." There he demonstrated, line by line, how Balzac referred "not from a language to a referent but from one code to another"—that is, how the narrative consisted "not in copying the real but in copying a (depicted) copy of the real." "This is why realism cannot be designated a 'copier,'" Barthes concluded, "but rather a 'pasticheur' (through secondary mimesis, it copies what is already a copy)."[6] A decade later this figure of the pasticheur became the dominant avatar of the postmodernist artist, in the guise of both the neo-expressionist painter who mixed historical and pop motifs and the critical appropriationist who held up media stereotypes for our scrutiny. Semiotically speaking, these ideological opponents played on the same team.

Trevor Paglen, *Reaper Drone (Indian Springs, NV, Distance ~ 2 miles)*, 2010, C-print, 30 × 36″.

5. If Barthes contributed to the first two framings of the real, he exemplified yet a third. Here the real was still attached to the detail that resists meaning, but it was now located in the subject as much as in the object. This detail is the famous *punctum* Barthes proposed in *Camera Lucida* (1980), the inadvertent point in a particular photograph that pricks the unconscious of the viewer: "It is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me."[7] Inflected by Lacan, this third positioning of the real, which we might call traumatophilic, differs from the first two in key ways. In the ideology-critical framing, the critic exposes the real, whereas here the real exposes the subject; and in the poststructuralist framing, the subject is displaced, and the real subsumed, by conventions and codes, whereas here the subject is called back as witness to a real now understood as traumatic.[8] What could be more real than a real that resists all symbolization? Gradually, however, it became clear that this real could be codified, too; in fact, it could count as a realism of its own. This was the case with abject art and fiction in the 1990s, exemplified in the work

of Mike Kelley and Dennis Cooper, once their tropes of bodily disfiguration and psychic damage were established.

6. In one way or another, all the aforementioned framings of the real rejected the naive notion that the realist work is a mirror of the world. Yet a reflectionist assumption sneaks back in when we link cultural outlooks too directly to economic processes. Nonetheless, we might hazard a few connections between the two registers here, if only to underscore that they do in fact exist. Jameson saw the transition to postmodernism in terms of a crack-up of the sign under advanced capitalism. In the modernist epoch, he argued, "reification 'liberated' the Sign from its referent," as evidenced in the abstraction that pervaded its arts. Yet this "dissolution" only deepened in the postmodernist era: Now internal to the sign, reification worked to liberate "the Signifier from the Signified, or from meaning proper."[9] Here our second framing of the real, the real as a textual effect, was suddenly repositioned, for such semioclasm was now taken to do the cultural work of a capitalist order that thrives on "floating signifiers." In part, the third framing of the real—the real as traumatic affect—stemmed from a recognition that the postmodernist crack-up of the sign was not as resistant to advanced capitalism as it purported to be, that it might even be structurally consonant with that order. Of course, other forces were also at work in this shift from the textual to the traumatic—the AIDS crisis, systemic poverty, racism, sexism, a broken welfare state, a wounded body politic.[10] Nevertheless, to some degree,"the body in pain" emerged as a protest against the empire of signs.

7. The past decade has seen yet another turn in the framing of the real, one that bespeaks a frustration with the three positionings that preceded it. First, ideology critique was already under attack on account of the authority that it appeared to arrogate. Like most poststructuralist theory, much postmodernist art had questioned such authority, but this challenge was soon understood to erode the very ability to claim a truth or to posit a reality at all, and so it came to be questioned as a species of nihilism. (The critique of representation, central to both poststructuralism and postmodernism, was also tainted when the Right later appropriated it for its own ends, as in the assertion that global warming is a "mere construction.") Last, the traumatophilic framing of the real brought authority back into play, in the strong guise of the subject as witness (even as survivor), yet this development came with a problem of its own—for how is such authority to be questioned in turn? Bruno Latour emerged as a prominent skeptic of all three framings of the real, especially with regard to the negativity that each appeared to advance in its own way. Against this destructive critic, he offered his own benevolent figure:

The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naive believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather. The critic is not the one who alternates haphazardly between antifetishism and positivism like the drunk iconoclast drawn by Goya, but the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in need of great care and caution.[11]

8. This shift, with the real now viewed as a fragile construction to tend with care and caution, is evident in recent documentary practice, a category that was often a bad object for both ideology critique and postmodernist art (not to mention poststructuralist theory). Brecht can

represent the former position—again, “a photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG tells us next to nothing about these institutions”—while Martha Rosler can stand in for the latter with her framing of documentary photography as an “inadequate descriptive system.” Today, however, this critique of the document is largely assimilated, and many artists have passed from a posture of deconstruction to one of reconstruction—that is, to the use of artifice to rehabilitate the documentary mode as an effective critical system, if not an adequate descriptive one. (Roughly speaking, this is the epistemological posture of Harun Farocki, Hito Steyerl, and Trevor Paglen, among others.) In large part, this shift was a response to the increased control by corporations and governments, through satellite imaging and information mining, of what is given to us as the real in the first place—what can be represented, known, disputed, proved—at all scales, from the individual pixel to the vast agglomerations of big data. With such control, events that are criminal or catastrophic (secret wars, genocidal campaigns, territorial occupations, environmental disasters, refugee abuses, detention centers, drone strikes, and so on) can be partially or totally blocked from view.[12] It becomes imperative, then, to reconstruct these events as cogently as possible by means of media both new and old (some of which were questioned in the initial critique of the documentary). Eyal Weizman has termed this modeling of the real “forensic architecture,” and he points to a turn from a politics of the witness, based on “individual testimony” and aimed at “empathy with victims” (which corresponds to our traumatophilic framing of the real), to a politics of human rights advocacy undertaken as “a process of materialization and mediatization.”[13] Such forensic practice salvages, assembles, and sequences fragmentary representations in order both to image and to narrate disputed events; these scripts can then be offered as evidence in courts of law as well as in courts of opinion. (As Latour speaks of “arenas,” so Weizman speaks of

"forums," which can include art institutions, too, and he reminds us that *forensis* is Latin for "pertaining to the forum.") At first glance, this turn might be interpreted as neo-Brechtian ("something must in fact be *built up*, something artificial, posed"), but the relevant work here (again, Farocki, Steyerl, Paglen, et al.) is concerned less with exposing a given reality behind representation than with reconstructing an occluded reality, or with pointing to an absented one, by means of representation.[14]

Tacita Dean, *Event for a Stage*, 2015, 16 mm, color, sound, 50 minutes.

9. This epistemological recalibration is also active in recent literature. The fiction in question does not express a "reality hunger," as proclaimed by David Shields—that is, it does not conscript real experience to reanimate novel writing in an attempt to overcome the old binary of life versus art. Rather, it too deploys great artifice, not to demystify or to disrupt the real but to make the real real again, which is to say, effective again, felt again, as such. Consider the 2005 novel *Remainder* by Tom McCarthy. The unnamed narrator is struck by an unknown object fallen from the sky, and receives a large settlement from an insurance company as a consequence. He then spends this vast sum on reenactors, whom he hires to perform, repeatedly, his fragmentary memories of scenes that seem relevant to the event. Affectively blocked by his trauma, he

stages these episodes to experience them as if for the first time, and as his desperation grows, his enactments become ever more violent. On the one hand, *Remainder* circles around the real as a traumatic remainder; in Lacanian terms, it narrates a "missed encounter" with the real that, because it is missed, can only be repeated.[15] On the other hand, the repetition of the scenes is dedicated to realize them, not to simulate them, much less to derealize them. The 2015 film adaptation of *Remainder* captures this repetition-compulsion perfectly; its director, the artist Omer Fast, explores this mixed framing of the real, which oscillates between the traumatophilic and the reconstructive, in his other work as well.[16]

10. Thomas Demand has also advanced this mixed positioning of the real. As is well known, he builds his photographs from models based on found images—news sources, postcards, and the like—in a way that complicates the discursive opposition between indexical and constructed representations. Demand treats the imagistic mediation of the world as given, and he assumes that we do as well; here, too, the aim is not to demystify or deconstruct the real but to activate it. Consider a familiar work, *Bathroom*, 1997, which shows an oblique view of a porcelain tub set in blue tile. In 1987, the premier of the German state of Schleswig-Holstein, Uwe Barschel, was found dead in a hotel bath like this one; in fact, Demand based his image on the tabloid photo taken by the journalist who discovered the body. A rising star in the Christian Democratic party, Barschel was involved in a secret investigation of a political opponent, and the cause of his death—originally ruled a suicide—remains undetermined. This information alters our response to the image: Suddenly, the open door, the rumpled curtain, the creased mat, and the undrained bathwater read as possible signs of foul play. Yet *Bathroom* is also true to the utter banality of its source. "What is decisive," Demand has remarked, "are the blurred traces left in the media by [the]

incidents [that they relay].” On the one hand, this blurring produces a distraction in us, “a very diffuse sense of dullness”; on the other, it allows these traces of incidents to “lodge in the memory,” one that Demand regards as collective as well as individual. Such are the blurred traces of the real that he is able to evoke in the blunted details of his photographs. Here, contra Barthes, the punctum is not inadvertent: It must be constructed (again, “built up”) if the real is to be made effective as such.[17]

11. Repetition takes on a new valence in this epistemological recalibration. From Pop paintings to Pictures photographs, serial images typically evinced a world of spectacle become simulacral, where representations appear to float free, through repetition, from referents and signifieds alike. This view changed with the traumatophilic framing; there repetition was rededicated to the real, now understood in a Lacanian sense. Lately, however, a further shift has occurred in fiction and art: Repetition is not on the side of simulation, but neither does it circle around a traumatic past. Rather, its purpose is to produce an interruption, a crack or a gap, that might allow a different reality to be glimpsed. Consider *10:04* (2014) by Ben Lerner, who places his novel under the epigraphic sign of Benjamin: “The Hassidim tell a story about the world to come that says everything will be just as it is. . . . Everything will be as it is now, just a little different.”[18] The narrator, who is Lerner but just a little different, replays episodes from his life in this way, too, as “a little changed, a little charged,” charged as real through repetition—or, perhaps better, through coincidence.[19] Intermittently, as the narrator does this, he also reflects on how such coincidence can be transformative. For example, of the partially transparent hand of an otherwise embodied saint in a nineteenth-century painting by Jules Bastien-Lepage, he remarks, “It’s as if the tension between the metaphysical and physical

worlds, between two orders of temporality, produces a glitch in the pictorial matrix."[20] Yet his exemplum of these folds in space-time is Christian Marclay's *The Clock*, 2010, a digital video that proceeds through twenty-four hours of film clips, each keyed to a precise moment, which is almost always registered on the face of a timepiece depicted in the found footage. Lerner takes the title of his novel from the clip that represents 10:04 PM, the moment at which lightning strikes the clock tower in *Back to the Future* (1985). The narrator draws his own lesson here:

I'd heard The Clock *described as the ultimate collapse of fictional time into real time, a word designed to obliterate the distance between art and life, fantasy and reality. But . . . that distance hadn't been collapsed for me at all; while the duration of a real minute and* The Clock*'s minute were mathematically indistinguishable, they were nevertheless minutes from different worlds. . . . I felt acutely how many different days could be built out of a day, felt more possibility than determinism, the utopian glimmer of fiction.*[21]

12. Tacita Dean also produces a glitch in the matrix in her film *Event for a Stage* (2015). A man paces a stage as people wander into an auditorium; we surmise that he is an actor and they are an audience. He speaks of a great storm; his lines, from *The Tempest*, cue us that illusion will be one subject of this event. Yet the film lays bare not only its setting but also its production: There are abrupt shifts from one camera to another (which the actor calls out), as well as from one staging to another. (Dean constructed her film from four performances, each marked by different costumes and hairstyles.) Sometimes, too, the actor interacts with an audience member who prompts him with notes (it is Dean); at other times he leaves the stage altogether. At such moments, the fourth wall (which the actor calls "a membrane") is not broken so much as stretched: Life does not intrude on art so much as art

expands to comprehend actions, thoughts, and feelings that lie beyond the usual ambit of theater. These moments include confusions that seem genuine ("I don't know what this is," the actor proclaims at one point), as well as statements that sound autobiographical (the line between the lived and the performed is blurred too). The actor tells us about the dementia of his mother (she repeats things) and the "unconventional relationship" of his father with "characters in a TV series," but then we realize that the actor shares in mental uncertainties and unconventional relationships, and that we do too (especially in our viewing of *Event*). Here, again, life does not break into art, nor does all the world become a stage; rather, the imbrication of the two is explored as a condition that is as common as it is complex. If, near its beginning, *Event for a Stage* quotes *The Tempest*, toward the end it cites "On the Marionette Theater" (1810), the great Heinrich von Kleist story that ponders the equal and opposite "grace" achieved by God and marionettes, the former through total consciousness, the latter through its utter lack. What is his relation to self-awareness? Dean asks the actor. Does he ever experience stage fright? Can he ever forget the gaze of the audience on him? He responds ambiguously that, like all actors, he becomes real only through a "great text," but that, like "good parents," good actors can provide a space-time for make-believe that is actual.

13. "The lie described my life better than the truth," the narrator says (or imagines he says) in *10:04*. "Art is what makes life more interesting than art," the actor declaims (perhaps on behalf of the artist) in *Event for a Stage*.[22] These declarations are not witticisms à la Oscar Wilde that delight in paradox and advocate style so much as they are proposals about how artifice, the utopian glimmer of fiction, can be placed in the service of the real. Two questions linger, however. First, what prepares this latest shift in the framing of the real? Might the desire to open up alternative futures be, in part, a response to the

dominance of financial futures—that is, to the reality that, in a world governed by finance capitalism, present time is always mortgaged to a time to come (a time that never actually arrives)?[23] Second, what relation do the real fictions reviewed here have to "alternative facts," and might the former be deployed to challenge the latter in a way that avoids a simple retrenchment to a positivistic framing of the real?

Hal Foster teaches at Princeton University. His most recent book, Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency, *is now out in paperback from Verso.*

NOTES

1. See Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, *History & Obstinacy*, ed. Devin Fore, trans. Richard Langston et al. (New York: Zone Books, 2014), and Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 82, 102. There are other framings of the real (such as speculative realism) that I do not take up here, and more overlap in the ones I do discuss than a chronological review such as this can address.

2. See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud & Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 34. Ricoeur uses the exact phrase only later, in a retrospect on this text. See also Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

3. Brecht, quoted in Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography" (1931), in *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al., trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., vol. 2, pt. 2, *1931–1934* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 526. Benjamin doubles down on this attack in "The Author as Producer" (1934). In both cases, the main target is Albert

Renger-Patzsch, but his work is more differentiated than either Benjamin or Brecht allows. See Michael W. Jennings, "Agriculture, Industry, and the Birth of the Photo-Essay in the Late Weimar Republic," *October*, no. 93 (Summer 2000): 23–56.

4. Roland Barthes, "Change the Object Itself" (1971), in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 166–67.

5. Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect" (1968), in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1986), 141–48.

6. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974), 55.

7. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), 26.

8. See the title essay of my *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996). For good and bad, *Camera Lucida* long dominated theoretical reflection on photography; certainly its emphasis on medium specificity and traumatic subjectivity distracted many of us from the social-historical field of photography. Barthes acknowledges this field, which he calls the *studium*, but his heart belongs to the punctum (he sees the studium as an array of conventional signs). So, too, his traumatophilic reading of photography restricts its temporality to the past, one that affects us but which we cannot affect in turn. This view limits photography as a means of historical reflection; it also reduces its potential for critique as well as for construction, both of which were foregrounded in the photo debates in interwar Europe, not to mention in the recent work of the late Allan Sekula.

9. Fredric Jameson, “Periodizing the 60s,” in *The 60s, Without Apology*, ed. Sohnya Sayres et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 200.

10. Again, it is this condition that abject art and fiction evoked with their own version of realism.

11. Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 246. See also my “Post-Critical?,” in *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency* (New York: Verso, 2015), 115–24.

12. The historians of science Robert N. Proctor and Jimena Canales have argued that agnotology—the analysis of how it is we do not know or, better, how we are prevented from knowing—is a necessary complement to epistemology.

13. See Yve-Alain Bois, Michel Feher, and Hal Foster, “On Forensic Architecture: A Conversation with Eyal Weizman,” *October*, no. 156 (Spring 2016): 120–21. See also Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (New York: Zone Books, 2017). This shift from testimony is only partial, as evidenced by a recent project by the research agency Forensic Architecture that models, with the aid of survivors, the Saydnaya Prison, a “black hole” site where, according to a new Amnesty International report, the Syrian government has murdered some thirteen thousand Syrians since 2011. See http://forensic-architecture.org/case/saydnaya.

14. Paglen calls his practice “experimental geography.” A cousin of forensic architecture, it involves the indexing of space that cannot be documented positively or that is otherwise removed from representation; often, in his photographs, it is registered in the (non)form of a blur.

15. See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of*

Psychoanalysis, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), 55. See also Tom McCarthy and Simon Critchley, "The Manifesto of the International Necronautical Society," *The Times* (London), December 14, 1999, 1.

16. For more on reenactments in contemporary art, see the coda to *Bad New Days*.

17. See "A Conversation Between Alexander Kluge and Thomas Demand," in *Thomas Demand*, exh. cat.(London: Serpentine Gallery, 2006), 51–114. Sometimes with Demand, as often with Gerhard Richter, it is the blank or the blur, not the detail, that takes on a punctal quality. In his sui generis writing, Kluge can be counted as an early practitioner of the real fictions at issue here. On this point, see Alexander Kluge and Ben Lerner, "Angels and Administration," http://theparisreview.org/blog/2017/02/02/an-interview-with-alexander-kluge.

18. Benjamin, "In the Sun" (1932), in *1931–34*,664. (The translation Lerner uses differs slightly from this standard translation.) See also the final thesis in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 2007), 264.

19. Ben Lerner, *10:04* (New York: Macmillan, 2014), 18. Lerner is a practitioner of autofiction, but like some others in this genre, such as Rachel Cusk and Jenny Offill, he puts the autobiography in autofiction under erasure; the ego is refracted, splintered, even dispersed by fictional pressure. In my view, for all the transformations they undergo, other subjects in autofiction sometimes remain more egonauts than argonauts.

20. Ibid., 9.

21. Ibid., 54. The Surrealists were interested in this "ultimate collapse" too; in fact, André Breton defined "the marvelous" in these very terms. Yet the narrator of *10:04* is concerned with detaching the "convulsive beauty" of the Surrealists from the uncanny with which it was bound up—that is, with redirecting coincidence away from a traumatic past and toward an unforeseen future.

22. This line is a quotation from Robert Filliou.

23. Joseph Vogl has called this development a "raid by the future on the rest of time"; see his *The Specter of Capital*, ed. Hent de Vries, trans. Joachim Redner and Robert Savage (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 3.

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