

Bruce Nauman's
Green Light Corridor (1970),
in *Move: Choreographing You*,
the Hayward Gallery, London,
2010. Photo: Alastair Muir

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IDENTIFYING THE ENDGAME

WHAT'S AN AUDIENCE OR A PUBLIC?

To think carefully about the possibilities of curatorial practice in relation to the emergence of audiences and publics, we surely come back to questions of demographics, social relations, and cultural assumptions. In the context of the United States, the proliferation of new performance forms in the 1960s and the establishment of national institutions to administer them in the 1980s led us to discuss these sorts of markers as identity politics and to speak of multicultural programming. We tended to assume the presence of a white masculine audience, artist, and object that would be circulated in the name of art; our progressive politics told us that those majority stakeholders could possibly be augmented by small numbers of audiences of color in relation to a black artist or a white woman artist. These incursions would somehow demonstrate a brief diversity of creative exercise. This sort of programming lasted all the way to the new millennium—did it ever stop?—in performance seasons with one black artist or with visual artist lineups that included a white women's moment among the men. At times, queer white men might be identified as gay, allowing them presence as alternative artists/publics, and also allowing the overexposure that men always have in the world.

Obviously, this approach to curating as though the audience or public were mostly white, peppered with a little bit of color at times, failed. But we went along with the logic for a very long time. If the art, artist, and its venue were conceived to be “straight white masculinist,” all the rest of us responded to that core as we imagined ourselves to be potential artists and publics. We tried to see ourselves among the white work, and at times we created counterpublics and dissenting performances. We demanded a Studio Museum in Harlem as a venue to show experimental black work and performance; we supported a Museum of the African Diaspora to demonstrate affinities of black creativity across geography and time. Artists tried to make black work, concerned with black lives, but it was inevitably positioned in “alternative” venues and subject to critiques of

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The Studio Museum
of Harlem with
David Hammons's
*African-American
Flag* (1990),
New York, 2016.
Photo: Jen Davis



diminished sophistication. Identifying work in terms of a social politics meant that the work could be disparaged or disregarded when its markers of identity became unfashionable. Fantasies of art that might exist outside of race were countered by a reality of being always already in relation to the long-established white norm for art.

In these decades, social relations and cultural assumptions diverted attention away from communities of color as capable of their own ontological production of creative thought and practice. This varied from the black arts movement and its insistence on creativity for audiences of color as something of a right of citizenry. Theater companies, dance companies, and venues for spoken word and visual arts emerged in this era, galvanizing possibilities for communities of color in provocative, sensual, and spiritual performance creativity. These institutions emerged with limited government funding, mostly created by political structures that assumed “colored” versions of white practices of art making, gathering around art, and the becoming-an-artist of those committed to social justice as it was conceived at that time.

After the civil rights era, if there were to be black venues that demonstrated black participation in American cultural life, they would be led by African American administrators who participated in the (larger, white) art scene as best they could. This sort of logic led to some identity-laden venues and circulations of creative expression. Black-led theaters and dance companies, which had always been around in the United States, established themselves as best they could, some with brick and mortar, such as the New Jersey-based Crossroads Theatre Company or the Joan Weill Center for Dance of the New York-based Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, but mostly on the assumption of a growing middle class that had been promised by civil rights legislation and increased opportunities for Americans of color. The ultimate us state-sponsored affir-

mation of official culture, the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, which opened in 2016, arrives in the wake of the neoliberal economic policies of the 1980s that tilted toward a “solve it yourself” ethos.

But the burgeoning black middle class did not produce a commensurate audience and development base for performance and live art that might be created in response to black life. Neoliberal policies allowed the consolidation of power and resources among a small few that grew smaller between the 1980s and 2000s. The Occupy movement responded to this crisis of a tiny superrich whose influence overwhelms possibilities for others. In the performing arts, consolidation and capitulation to the vagaries of public funding—now privatized—meant the creation of many nostalgia-based, conservative arts companies: the revived Negro Ensemble Company of 2014; the scaled-back Crossroads Theatre Company of New Jersey; the four-production Penumbra Theatre of Saint Paul, Minnesota; and the struggling but still producing Black Rep of St. Louis. Meanwhile, white-led venues, including Berkeley Repertory Theatre, the Alliance Theatre of Atlanta, and Yale Repertory Theatre, continued their practice of including one or two elements of black programming in their annual number. Black venues for performance and black companies shrank and shuttered, falling into configurations that spoke to easily advertised, conservative impulses: theater as achievement-laden history lesson, once-a-year Kwanzaa and black nativity productions, celebrity evenings featuring anecdotal recitations of experiences among the creative class.

The “doing community” gesture of the late twentieth century, which continues in the present, largely failed. Black venues that tried to emulate white venues seldom gathered the local social capital necessary to sustain themselves. Organic communities seldom grew around these venues. As Jean-Luc Nancy has theorized,¹ the “community” cannot be made or coerced; it emerges of its own volition in order to be true to itself and useful in its provocations and achievements. Doing “community outreach” by white institutions for black communities failed because there was no organic need or development of those relationships. Black venues, such as they were, struggled in large part because they had no history to draw on in terms of stable black patronage of the arts; depending on white institutions meant being corralled toward the corner of ethnic work, to be minimized and exoticized as alternative. By the new millennium, a double bind of dysfunctional or nonexistent high-profile black venues or art publics was inevitably tethered to the “one or two artists of color at a time” logic of curation and presenting. By the twenty-first century we wonder, how are we allowing for the emergence of an audience or public of color?

The questions that come to the fore in this awkward detente: Demographics—who participates in art? Social relations—what can art demonstrate to us about one another? Cultural assumptions—how is your art different from mine?

One problem feeding this divide is the pull of the past. Black artistry might produce black publics or assist white audiences in the expansion of their understanding of black lives. But if performance assumed a naturally white art object and a white museum/venue, then black art was often imagined to be a black version of something

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that could have been white but wasn't in some creative detail, as in a well-made play (about life in an all-black context), an experimental performance (that critiqued stereotypes by leaning into them), a musical with gospel music. We all might have seen or participated in these productions: *A Raisin in the Sun* or *Jar the Floor*, the Broadway production of *The Scottsboro Boys*, *The Gospel at Colonius*. These works engage information about black life and Africanist aesthetics without offering tactics or strategies for enhancing our lives; they offer satisfying diversions. Revolutionary black art, like that of the black arts movement, emerged in black resistance to mainstream scrutiny. Black life has been continually disavowed in the context of the United States; black artistry responds to that disavowal even as demands are made for it to conform to "recognizable" standards of creative exercise.

CURATING FOR COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

In 2015 and 2016, Dasha Chapman, Jane Gabriels, and I cohosted a working group, *Configurations in Motion: Performance Curation and Communities of Color*, at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. We wondered, what could happen if we begin our structural wondering about curation from within an assumption of a black, or Latinx, or Native, or Asian American public and the particularities of its assembly and concerns? What if we placed the people who might gather around artistic creativity at the center of the conversation and its conceptualization? What could that shift of focus inspire around the suddenly unavoidable discourses of curatorial practice?

Our call for conference participation wondered, how do we imagine twenty-first-century configurations of performance curation and presenting that acknowledge the particular concerns of audiences and artists of color? How does performance that relates to people of color fit into trends of contemporary curatorial practice? This gathering of presenters, performers, scholars, curators, and managers sought to examine how their work could focus on the involvement, investment, and creative growth of people of color. In a two-day symposium, participants shared their work and insights and produced a gathering of focused thinking about the future of live arts, performance, and the performing arts in the United States, with special attention to black, Caribbean, and Latinx communities.

In 2015 we counted fifteen participants, and in 2016, twenty-one. We asked that the participants arrive ready to engage an "assessment and imagining" workshop. All invitees offered a seven- to ten-minute position paper or brief synopsis of their current work and future goals with regard to the questions posed above. The short symposium convened with all good energy and little agenda, beyond mobilizing our shared interests and achievements, while being attentive to differences in location to the field (however conceived), career, primary areas of expertise and experience, sexuality, geographic location, disability. The convenings held with them an ambition to imagine what a larger structure or future initiatives might be and how they might be nurtured and sustained through time.

The National
Museum of African
American History
and Culture,
Washington, DC.
Photo:
Alan Karchmer,
courtesy of National
Museum of African
American History
and Culture

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Configurations
in Motion:
Performance
Curation and
Communities of
Color Working
Group, Duke
University, Durham,
NC, 2015. Photo:
Michael Anthony

The composition of the group mattered to us three conveners. The meetings included artists, curators, funders, presenters, scholars, and community organizers. We counted a majority of stakeholders of color in our grouping and sought to maintain a majority of female-identified voices. Participants offered a mix of scholarly reflection, anecdotal revelations, ambitions, and methodologies for claiming space for communities of color at the center of our curatorial practices. Ultimately, the group confirmed a diversity of approaches to concepts surrounding curation, community, and communities of color.

Moving forward, these sorts of meetings must be commonplace if curating is to become an accepted twenty-first-century art-presenting practice. After all, curators are working in the world and in relation to the varied ways we experience race, culture, gender, sexuality, and class, as well as privilege and comfort; it is crucial for us to consider a variety of approaches toward understanding what live art can do in the world. Curating performance emerges in a world rife with black death and unchecked white patriarchy, the sedimented prison-industrial complex, and generational divergences, including curious baby-boomer senior citizens who know and care about different sorts of things than millennials do. The current international migratory processes demand the address of art-presenting professionals—curators—as they also demand the attention of artists in every mode of performance making. We are commonly compelled to consider art in the world, not just in relationship to itself, and to consider myriad ways to allow live art to emerge in relationship to the lives and loves of people who will experience it. The world and its many concerns must be allowed into the conversations of curatorial practice.

What, then, could our endgame be in these conversations about ethical and engaged curatorial practice? When we talk about *minoritarian art*, we can too easily

forget the basic assumptions of *by*, *about*, and *for* that could surround its designation. This might be work that is simultaneously created *by* artists of a particular identity politics but also *about* the imaginative possibilities shared among that group and explicitly made *for* the intellectual expansion of like-identified people who are its primary and particular audience. But so much of the work curated and created by artists of color these days seems mostly to be made not for people but for venues, curators, and critics and an unmarked yet unmistakably white public. Of course, artists need to feel “free” to make whatever we like in response to the world we perceive, or our own imaginations, but we are also quick to bemoan that there are few apparent audiences of color out and about at MOMA, or PSI, or the North Carolina Museum of Art. We create work possibly *about* experiences shared within communities of color but not necessarily *for* them.

The shifting demographics of the United States tell us that white people will no longer be the racial majority in less than thirty years. Alongside that statistic, consider the number of people of color who work as arts administrators. This is a tiny, tiny number. If we have learned anything collectively in our shared work in the arts, it might be that representation matters and that an expanded, diverse field of participants can generate provocative, transformative performance experiences. For now, the shared economy of arts presenting, administration, and funding remains overwhelming and unabashedly white.

We all participate in this “white economy” that elides or overlooks potential minoritarian publics for our creative practices and our curating. When we take a commission from a white venue, or some mainstream black ones, we agree to the longstanding traditions of marginalizing black creativity in relation to its originary communities in order to create work that has the potential to cross over or tour. We need August Wilson to tell stories about us and play on Broadway; we want Bill T. Jones to make work about racism that allows museums and wealthy white audiences to learn about black abjection through dance. But does this work in these venues amplify possibilities for black publics among ourselves?

I’m thinking of the Ralph Lemon series *Some Sweet Day* at MOMA from 2012, in which he famously asked that the commissioned artists address the question, what is black music? Now, this series was in no way conceived as minoritarian art that might be *by*, *about*, or *for* black publics. But it surely seemed to stand in for that sort of gesture by MOMA, and possibly for Lemon. Artists who are commissioned to work outside of their areas of interest, but not necessarily for audiences who are any different from what they might expect, considering the venue at hand, can make work that arrives odd, overwrought, and undercooked. We might remember Deborah Hay’s awkward invention for the Lemon series that sparked conversations about curating and communities of color that continued with our gathering at Duke three years later. None of us want to be implicated in using black people as “props” to make art for white people. And yet, crassly, this is what seems to happen far too often when curators commission or present artists of color as part of their series.

Curating, or presenting, is surely a remain of corporatization processes that began to surround the performing arts at the same time that limited but direct government funding for artists became available following the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965. The NEA's funding policies essentially ensured that a managerial class of arts presenters would have to be formed in order for the arts to become standardized, as other federally funded projects might be. We can look to the genealogies of several other social programs created in the 1960s, including Community Action against Poverty; these programs required healthy numbers of administrators who could translate ideas from the service providers to the government and those being served. In some ways, curators and presenters might fill a similar function: building connections from artists to audiences and funders.

Today, with that public funding curtailed following Washington's 1980s and 1990s "culture wars," I wonder about a different model of curating and presenting—one that could center its efforts on creating relationships among audiences and sometimes artists. What if the gesture to create community through art were consistently narrated in front of the gesture to secure art and offer it up to an interested (but assumedly ignorant) audience? This is something that dance competitions do, especially the B-girl, house dancing, krumping, and J-Setting battles: communities form around the practice and interest in the arts, and microecologies of celebrity emerge in these contexts. These sorts of arts are not curated as much as administered, and the huge number of people involved in the production of these dance competitions attests to the abiding interest in performance artistry, even if that artistry is couched in the mode of sport. Still, I wonder what would happen if curators focused on creating context for living in the arts by nurturing participation by communities in motion over time. This might be how many artist collectives imagine themselves to work, and how some possibly do function: creating supportive communities of people invested in process together. How could we imagine the action of curating as being directed toward the experience of the so-called audience, participating in the thing that we gather to celebrate/consecrate? Imagining forward, what if entry to the museum could require a drawing, and entry to a performance could require a dance?

Let's take a moment to spin here in directions that have already been tried in high-profile "white" contexts, such as in the *Move: Choreographing You* exhibit in London² and in several of Tino Sehgal's "constructed situation" works, including *This Progress*. Of course, even as they encourage participation, these works assume an intractable separation of artist and audience or viewer/witness/participant. The direct address of the work is simulated; the works do not change, given varied responses by communities of audience, and the audience is designated to be responsible for its own experience within the work, whether good, bad, or indifferent. I wonder, what if we were to put our faith in the allowance for relationship in community and direct our energy toward what people in that community actually value as engaged art practice; we might come up with models that service and inspire communities of color in unexpected ways. For

example, the Philadelphia project that the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage and the Painted Bride Art Center have launched casts around the places that Philadelphians hold dear to their sense of its history; those unusual, neglected places become the site of performance but also an occasion to remember place differently. Because it is the Bride, the artists and consultants to the project are mostly black people, and the fantasy of the project as an in-reach rather than an out-reach sort of site-specific exercise is to engage black communities around sustained experiences of art making—making art inside the geographic communities rather than making art and out-reaching it to the presumed communities. This could be something similar the Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue that Anna Deavere Smith founded and ran at Harvard University, with its engaged core audience group that participated the entire three years of its existence there in the late 1990s.

Participatory work such as Sehgal's tends to lead to discussions of deskilling and concerns about the usurping of performance expertise—technique and virtuosity—as hallmarks of art making. The question might become, are we just talking about process-based materials that involve the audience as art makers? I am not sure about this, but I do wonder about recentring communities in formation, not as recipients of “great art” that is found and offered up by an expert broker/impresario but as the focus of the live art experience as it might be conceived by that middle-management position. Encouraging the community to engage its dormant creativities might be what curators explore. Some curators certainly take on these tasks, even as they work in sideward, small venues or circumstances that will seldom land them in the pages of the *New Yorker*, if that were their goal. These curators might define themselves as social architects or social sculptors; they might be activists affiliated with Black Lives Matter who do indeed attend experimental performance events and ask pointed questions about working with artists who present imaginative, provocative work. As an example, at the *afroFUTUREqu#r* platform staged at JACK in Brooklyn, New York, on October 15–18, 2015, co-curated by myself with Niv Acosta; two members of Black Lives Matter Philadelphia attended the Sunday brunch panel “*afroFUTUREqu#r*: Black Art, White Venues, and the New Black Presence in Elite Performance.” These artist-curator-activists brought a clarity of intention that surrounded their mission to encourage live art for the urgent social justice movement into the space of New York experimental performance. Like others working to create performance experiences with spiritual, sensual, gender nonnormative, or living folkways traditions, curators can begin with a need to create particular space for people who are not finding that live art regularly or reliably attends to their imaginative concerns.

In terms of creative work, though, and lining up my own interests in the archive and technology that is always already surrounding us, and in performance as a singularity that might be available to communities in motion, I want to share a SLIPPAGE project in development: the video “The Weight of Ideas.”³ This interface allows the movement of the performer to manipulate identity labels that are projected onto a screen behind



Faustin Linyekula's
Philly Files, the
 Painted Bride,
 Philadelphia, 2016.
 Photo:
 Kristel Baldoz

the performer. This interface also can be used for performance, as it is in this video, but we also strive to create a version that allows audiences to decide the words they want to “tether” to their body and the music that they want to hear as they work, physically, inside the interface. Like many *SLIPPAGE* creations, the interface requires the input of the participant to activate it; these creations intend to be immediate-gratification sorts of devices that value our own movement among an archive of ideas to create their effect. An ambition for *SLIPPAGE* is to create these sorts of devices that will allow for group communion, rather than only for solo performance structures that rely on a silent and still audience.

But talking about curating is not the same as talking about making art. Somehow, I do want to get away from the focus on the artist or the artwork/performance as the measure of artistic experience and the thing that needs to be protected or enhanced by curators. I believe there are other possibilities for live art and performance, and I want to imagine giving that power to the people.

Curating, as it is widely understood now, seems to me middle-management work and as such might be greatly enhanced by placing emphasis on its stakeholders. Granted, the possibilities for live art surely need to be protected, and maybe curators are people who do that. But I have not really noticed that live art might be endangered, especially in contexts like MOMA or PSI, while I have wondered at the curation or creation of varied publics to experience performance. It seems a shame to me that we might create new structures that value the act of curating as art practice over the need to develop strategies to allow for direct participation in the arts by, about, and for the people (whomever they might be). White publics that are hipsterish, or art-school-ish,

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ivy-league-ish, middle-aged executive, straightish, or retired-curious still tend to go unidentified and assumed as the foundational audiences for our curatorial exercises, even when we work in places where that is not the majority population that might participate in the events we create. What if we actually sought to create counterpublics or particular publics that could make manifest possibilities for performance that are not simply slotted into season-driven planning?

Artists will continue to make unexpected work, and there will always be space for the unexpected, unanticipated performance that requires everyone to witness in stillness and reflection for a bit of time while something that has been rehearsed unfolds. But maybe curatorial process could be less concerned about protecting that possibility and more concerned with the social engineering necessary for a community to recognize itself as stakeholders in the process, or venue, where art emerges.

For me, this is more like the endgame of curating: to create possibilities for artists and publics to emerge where they were not visible to each other before. The usual suspects of publics for live art and dance performance we know; where are the queer black communities invigorated by curators intent on commissioning and presenting work by queer black artists? Are we working simultaneously to allow the emergence of public discourse that is actually for a particular public? It seems so easy to get to the *by* and *about* portions of minoritarian art and its presenting, but the *for* portion of the equation calls for the development of trust and communication that arrive rarely among professional curators.

Ultimately, I do think of curating as something like social engineering, rather than its own art practice, in no small part because of its emergence as a managerial practice, in the middle (somewhat elevated), that intends to create context for the urgent encounters with unexpected expertise—or art—that we all desperately need.

CENTERING THE PEOPLE RATHER THAN THE OBJECTS: THE COMMONS

Contemporary social theory has created a category of the “commons” to describe the assembly of people toward group relationship that aligns contingent interests and needs. The commons emerges to be different from sedimented concepts of community; the commons imagines itself to be contingent and ephemeral, momentary but stable in some ways, like the “thousand plateaus” of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.⁴ The commons recognizes itself briefly and then moves away from itself, leaving traces of its achievement in Black Lives Matter, in the Occupy movement, in student uprisings against gun access and LGBTQ hate crimes. The commons is wiser than the individuals that comprise it, because it values the sensibility of the group. It is not bound by class or strict demographics, because it emerges as an aspirational, ideological space of exchange. The commons tends to imagine and form itself as the subaltern who have not spoken, or the abject 99 percent who have little voice in public policy. The com-



Video still of Thomas F. DeFrantz and Kenneth David Steward's *The Weight of Ideas*, Duke University, Durham, NC, 2015. Photo courtesy of the artist

mons might make space for those culture workers already engaged in the labor of presenting or curating, but it certainly forms around emergent voices and ideologies of change; it imagines newly reconstituted publics and creative makers/artists.

Considering a commons at the center of curatorial discourse could possibly help us all. In the commons, how we respond to creative craft and production matters, possibly more than the fact of creative craft. *That* we respond in the commons matters more than *how*. Art does not have to make us feel good in some way, or tell us things we already know, but it might want to encourage us to recognize ourselves rather than the historical legacies of its own production.

If curation is something like social engineering, then its materials include its context and its stakeholders. Typically, that context is conceived as background: we imagine the series, and then we try to figure out how to get an audience in the room. But what if we started with the people who might want to be in the room? What if we imagined the audience as the reason to become an engineer, in the way that people design bridges to help others get from one place to another. Of course, the best engineers pay attention to questions of who, what, where, when, and why before they start asking questions of how. As curators, where do we begin? Well, we believe in art, because we know it contains healing and rejuvenating imaginative possibilities; we want people to have access to a nondenominational imaginative healing.

This calls for us to resist thinking of the context for performance or art being their own histories. In the visual arts this would be impossible; logics of visual arts are always about the relationship of the emergent to the previous—we cannot have suprematism without futurism, or pointillism without impressionism. Dance and live performance might be a little bit different from this, in that while we turn to Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, or Alvin Ailey to confirm that we have ancestors, and we celebrate Gus Solomons Jr. or Blondell Cummings for their persistence as experimental artists, we make new work because we have to, in response to the present moment. Performance

is not only about itself and its own history but also about the relationships that grow up around the possibilities of its execution—the relationships among collaborators and funders and presenters. But what if we start with the commons or audience with whom the work is shared? As social engineers, what if we stay in the place where we prioritize the needs or ambitions of the community that emerges around it? And if we want the sites of performance to feel like they value the needs and aspirations of black people, we might want to start by figuring out how to construct those spaces: what they look like, what they feel like, how they have been constructed, and what they do.

This inversion might feel far away from the action of curation that we might aspire to in our quests for power or taste making. But we have inspiration in the black arts movement, which had such great impact in large part because it emerged from the needs of the community that responded to it; those who were enlivened and enraged by it grew in its presence. When we mythologize that brief moment in creative time now, we talk about how it was created around people; it was art that responded to the moment and the population that encircled it.

So our strategies today could be based in big data, or in experiential knowledges, or in relationships and friendships that we develop along the way. We could leverage social media to examine data about where communities convene and create circumstances that speak to what is missing from those profiles. We can start social activist performance venues in places where we know that people need an opportunity to express, as many of us do already, because we experientially know when and where to enter. Or we can create alliances that allow us to listen and learn, through time, toward a possibility of embedded action and building.

This could be the endgame for us all, then: to imagine creative exchange that considers our assembly, and temporary recognition across difference, as the reason to participate in art—by, about, and for an us briefly convened but sparkling in discovery rather than abject solitude or misrecognitions. Let us make space for one another, by retreating from having to know what's next or what came before and instead encouraging a long-winded encounter of an art making public with itself.

NOTES

1. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Cooper, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
2. *Move: Choreographing You*, Southbank Centre, London, 2010, move.southbankcentre.co.uk/microsite/.
3. Thomas F. DeFrantz and Kenneth David Steward, "The Weight of Ideas," January 5, 2015, *SLIPPAGE: Performance, Culture, Technology*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqzy_Ay2fTI.
4. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).