Another image of existence

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First having met each other in 2011, Valentina Desideri and Denise Ferreira Da Silva have since been collaborating on a practice of sensing and/as sense-making that they have come to term Poethical Readings, a *mot-valise* and an artistic endeavour that blends the notions of the poetic and the ethical in order to work toward an “ethics with/out the subject” (2015). Desideri and Ferreira da Silva employ tools for a poetics as well as a non-Kantian aesthetics of radical imagination that figures as an ethics unbound from the illusion of the transcendental subject and its violent ont-epistemological operations while at the same time acknowledging the lasting power of this modern illusion (hence the with/out). At the centre of this approach is the attempt to create, via tarot, hand-reading, reiki and other devices, a situation in which the imaginary as well as the somatic may be triggered so as to unleash the creative and possibly re-restorative or healing potential of paying attention and attending to deep implication. The aesthetic experience, here, engenders not so much a state of Kantian self-affection, but a state of alter-affection. Likewise, on a practical level, Desideri and Ferreira da Silva emphasise the importance of establishing relations by regularly inviting to “The Sensing Salon,” a gathering for collective experimentation with Poethical Readings.
Poethical Readings speak of both the philosophical project of Ferreira da Silva and the artistic project of Desideri, although their collaboration on Poethical Readings is very much designed to overcome if not the differences, then the hierarchy of philosophy and art. In her philosophical efforts from the past 15 years (outlined in the monograph Toward a Global Idea of Race from 2007, as well as in crucial articles such as “No-bodies: law, raciality and violence” and “Toward a Black Feminist Poethics,” both from 2014), Ferreira da Silva has been ruthlessly dissecting modern, post-Enlightenment thought and its construction of history, science, critique, aesthetics, as well as modern law, politics, and economy, as the paradigms that determine the value of life. Most importantly, she considers the functional opposition of self-determined, transcendental subject or “transparent I” vis-à-vis “affectable I” (2007, xv–xvi) as the device that modernity employs in its racial division of white and non-white/non-European persons, collectives, territories, and global regions for the purpose of the creation of capital. At the same time, Ferreira da Silva counter-acts the disavowal of non-white lives as mere affect bundles and things by invoking and perverting Kant's Thing as a limit phenomenon of knowledge that points toward the potential of a body or rather flesh establishing a different matter and ways of mattering differently from the value operations of the subject. Poethical Readings, if understood against the backdrop of Ferreira da Silva's philosophy, figure as a practice of sensing and knowing that, instead of perpetuating critique's and aesthetics' complicity in modern racial violence, generates sense and sensations that appreciate the Thingliness of existence while understanding that it cannot ultimately speak of and for it.

Desideri, in her artistic practice as well as in her dialogues with authors such as Stefano Harney, has likewise been working toward a loosening of the grip of the subject. Since 2006, she has been conceiving deliberately ambivalent healing practices such as Fake Therapy and Political Therapy, whose settings most crucially refer to the genealogical reference of Lygia Clark’s artistic-therapeutic and psychoanalytical body work from “The Structuring of the Self” (1970s/80s). The somatic work of Desideri’s practices can be said to perform a curative dimension that manifests in what she and Harney once called a form of “self-sabotage” (2013, 170): a process in which the self is encouraged to overcome or undermine its own mechanisms of self-control by accepting the sensuous stimuli it receives as those relating instances that first constitute it as a self. “Love” is another word that Desideri (as well as Harney) chooses to circumscribe this experience (2013, 164, 168). It can easily be understood how this artistic approach resonates with Ferreira da Silva’s philosophical considerations, as both investigate an episteme and an ontology or deontology of the self and the other in their irreducible and ethically charged entanglement.

Our motivation to talk to Desideri and Ferreira da Silva for this journal issue was derived from the interest in how Poethical Readings can be understood as a resistant practice that is capable of both addressing socio-political issues of violence and domination as well as creating a situation in which the micro-physics of power and the subtle relations at work in a reading are carefully attended to. The interview was conducted in the autumn of 2020, roughly six months into the COVID-19 pandemic, which strongly influenced the questions and reflections from the exchange. It is a document from a specific moment in time that speaks of the use of Poethical Readings during a societal crisis.
Georg Döcker: Valentina, in a talk about your and Denise’s Sensing Salon from December 2019 at Centre Pompidou in Paris you explained: “At a moment of crisis, you open up a reading.” A few months later, we saw the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic unfurl, which keeps affecting the health situation, sociality, and economy of communities all over the world as we speak. Denise and you consequentially reacted with a public reading: on July 5, 2020, the two of you set up a Poethical Reading about the possibilities of the present moment using tarot cards; the event was live streamed via the platform EhChO. Could you both tell us how this reading came about and what your connection is to EhChO, an online platform that presents and archives materials of different media to act as tools in relation to the pandemic specifically in the so-called Global South.

Denise Ferreira da Silva: In a way, we started reading for the COVID-19 pandemic before it was announced. Early in January 2020, at the Sensing Salon event at Hangar, in Lisbon, we gathered a group of people on a four-day study group on the human (the event was commissioned by Natasa Petresin Bachelez for the Not Fully Human, Not Human At All program, cf. https://kadist.org/program/lisbon-valentina-desideri-and-denise-ferreira-da-silva-sensing-salon/). During our conversations, we realised that the approaching three-planet conjunction (Saturn, Pluto, and Jupiter), which was to happen in March 2020, would bring about substantive changes. Even though the announcement of the new virus from China had already happened, we did not connect the two. We did however dedicate quite a bit of time to talking about the conjunction. That was January.

As we prepared for the Hamburg exhibition (which opens in October 2020 at Kunstverein, and as a part of Natasa’s program Not Fully Human, Not Human At All), we decided to read directly for how the global pandemic is affecting the human. In short, the reading streamed via EhChO was not the first reading on the COVID-19 pandemic. What is more interesting, I think, is that EhChO in itself is a response to a moment of crisis; not so much an answer, but a refusal to be paralysed when nothing seems possible.

Valentina Desideri: Yes, and in this moment of crisis, we began gathering and supporting the kind of artistic creation that can provide an image of the crisis—of its complexity, of the relations that
compose it, of the multiple perspectives of those inhabiting it while creating a means for solidarity. In this sense, we could also think of EhChO as working as a kind of reading in itself.

Ferreira da Silva: EhChO.org came out of a proposal Amilcar Packer made to me and Valentina. He is an artist based in Sao Paulo who was witnessing how the COVID-19 pandemic was affecting black, Indigenous, and LGBTQI+ artists, all of whom had already had so many doors closed to them since Jair Bolsonaro's election. With the pandemic everything came to a halt. Now, both Amilcar and Valentina are PhD students in my institute at the University of British Columbia (UBC), and are members of the Critical + Creative Social Justice Studies Research Excellence Cluster. What we did with the help of Diego Crux (an artist and web-designer based in Sao Paulo) and Giovanna Andreotti (an undergraduate student at UBC) was to set up EhChO as a cluster initiative. In response to a crisis, an academic group reconstituted as also an artist-activist collective, but it is really none of them.

EhChO definitely gathers many of the aspects we highlight when describing how a Poethical Reading session unfolds: it is a proposition that registers a crisis; it was proposed by one person to a group; it expanded the group (to include the artists) and in doing so it reconstituted the original (academic) group into a collective, which does not fit into any given descriptor: it is no longer only academic, it is not artistic, and it is not activist.

Desideri: From Amilcar's suggestion, we constructed EhChO as an online platform which functions simultaneously as an archive, a forum, and a site of production that enables material and immaterial exchanges. As a contribution to the platform, me and Denise decided to do a reading, which was the reading from July 5, 2020.

Eve Katsouraki: As every reading starts with a question, you decided, on that day of July 5, to ask: “What is the present moment offering to life?” How did you settle on this question and how do questions more generally arise when you do readings?
Desideri: We settled on this question, because we wanted to see what kind of orientation the reading could give us. Sometimes we ask “what” a situation is, an image of what is really happening; but in this case we felt that we knew what is happening: yet another and more vicious and global expression of racial capitalist extraction. Critique already helps us to explain how that operates, but in the midst of it perhaps we felt the need to ask “what else becomes possible?” through it. We wanted to ask that question because the reading is collective, and we knew we would do it with many Brazilian friends and colleagues tuning in, which is also why we did it in Portuguese.

Ferreira da Silva: As I mentioned before, we had already done a few readings using the different tools for the current moment, the pandemic, and how it is impacting everything. Folks, friends, and acquaintances had approached us, asking for a Poethical Reading. That had not happened since before we started the practice itself. That is, early on, when Valentina and I were studying the tools and assembling Poethical Readings, we did readings for folks who were staying at PAF (the residency Performing Arts Forum in St. Erme, France), on a few occasions. After we started the practice, with the exception of usually a couple of participants in the Sensing Salon July gatherings at PAF—we have had three week-long of such meetings, so far—we were not doing individual readings outside events.

In any event, that July 5 reading was, in a way, in response to what had come out of these recent individual readings, which indicated to us a shift in the practice. Not a change of it or in it, but it seems—now at least—a change in how it plays out in this particular context of the COVID-19 pandemic, one in which our usual critical tools seem to be more insufficient than ever. The question reflects that in the sense that it became evident to us that the readings done after the onset of the pandemic have been indicating a move to something else, instead of just a question about how to fix things.

Desideri: We have been doing Poethical Readings since 2015/2016, and at first they allowed us to generate more complex images of the questions at hand. As we went on, we realised that the sociality they generate, the conversation, the holding space for not knowing and vulnerability that happens both in the readings and the Sensing Salons was very important. Now, as Denise said, there had been one more shift in which our practice began to also serve as orientation.

Döcker: Let’s reconstruct the dispositif of the July 5 reading which you used in order to investigate the question: there is the table which serves as some sort of a stage, and there are the cards laid out on the table; there are your hands, your fingers, holding up cards and pointing out symbols or image fragments on the cards, or connections between them; and then there are your gazes scanning the cards, and of course there is your parole—overall, an entire web of material as well as imaginary and discursive relations, a spatial and gestural as well as language choreography. Take us through some of this: as you improvise meanings in relation to the question, what is the experience of the hands, for example, what does the haptic and gestural dimension produce?

Desideri: For me, the gestures of the hands while reading are a kind of weaving. They help plot both attention and narratives, lines of thought; they take back narrative lines that got loose, point at details which are potentially meaningful. It is as if they would be constantly summoning
participation from all those present, which helps collectivising the reading, even if, in the case of the July 5 reading, the others were only remotely present.

Ferreira da Silva: This is a very interesting question because it calls attention to something we say about how we read, but have never, because we can’t, described. The reason we can’t describe—in the way you’ve just done—is because, as we say, every reading is singular. However, if one attends solely to the elements—not the particular moves (from one card or position in the Celtic Cross to another) but to the elements (hands, fingers, gestures)—as you just did, then, yes, of course, there is something that can be called from the audience’s or guests’ point of view an “experience of the hands” but for us, I think, it is more like a “practice”—which is a rehearsal, which each time involves different movements and contents. The hands and fingers and the touching and raising of the cards add an extra image to the image before us, the spread of the cards. Unlike the spread, however, the gestures are not fixed. With the gestures we rearrange the spread without having to move cards. Attention is crucial. There is an interrelation between attention and sense-making through the gesture. As our hands move and our attention jumps from the card in position one to the one in position nine, and we connect them, we are opening up other layers of signification. One of the things we say to folks when doing private readings is that we always read together, with them (whomever comes to a reading) and with others who have read before and other previous readings as well.

Desideri: The spread, as well as the single cards, are images. The gestures we do to sometimes foreground one, the story we tell about the image or a detail someone else observes in an image all conspire to the reading, to our collective sense-making. As we talk, all the meanings we mention (of the cards, of the position, of one or another way of reading it) accumulate and co-exist.

Ferreira da Silva: I think this is where intuition plays its role. It is like studying. We study the spread and, because we have done it so many times, we now can “see” connections and possibilities that are similar to previous ones we have seen, but which, of course, play out differently in another spread.

Desideri: Perhaps we can think of intuition as some kind of instantaneous GPS that flashes a pathway of meaning within the spread that you have then make sense of and articulate, and perhaps walk...
Döcker: In the reading from July 5, two cards seemed to gain particular importance: the Emperor and the Wheel of Fortune. At one point, you talked about “the practice of not being the Emperor,” and the Emperor symbolising, to some degree, the subject/Subject, or the self-determined and transparent I, to put it in Denise's terms. In this context, the Wheel of Fortune and its motif of change seemed to indicate the kind of movement necessary to practice precisely the renunciation of the subject position. Instead of asking you how to go there in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, I would first like to ask you what the idea of practicing not to be the Emperor might imply if applied to the situation of the reading itself, or the position of the reader. Would it be apt to say that the exteriority of the cards is crucial in having meaning and sense emanate not from the capacities of the subject, but somewhere else?

Ferreira da Silva: I think that, perhaps because our initial question for the practice was “How to image ethics with/out the Subject?”, one could say that the whole thing was already prefaced by the Emperor and the Wheel of Fortune. Of course, it is not the case. To your direct question: yes, the exteriority of the cards, the spread itself as a grid, and the fact that the meanings of cards and positions precede the question and our reading for it—from the very beginning we bet on all of that. And then we start doing readings and see how it takes place, that is, the displacing of the self-knowing, self-determining entity.

Desideri: The Wheel of Fortune indicates that a change is taking place and it does not depend on anyone. You may be going up or down, it’s a change that is beyond you. And yet we read to get a sense of how to deal with the change, of what this change is about. The Emperor at the centre of
the image indicates that the figure of the Subject as the Emperor is at stake. What is interesting to me is that the Covid crisis is in a way making us practice “not being an Emperor.” The Emperor is the figure of power who is able to decide with certainty and authority, and in this pandemic in particular, not being able to know if one is carrying the virus or not as just one example, means that we have to deal with uncertainty and are figuring out ways of living with it. Also the card that indicates us asking the question (position seven) in that reading is the Two of Pentacles, which is a person just juggling their coins... kind of trying to deal with opposite elements in the most gracious manner.

Ferreira da Silva: The Wheel of Fortune is the 11th Major Arcana in tarot, its number is X (10), and this 1 + 0 marks the card as both before the beginning (0) and also the beginning of counting (1). You can read it from the perspective of the 1 (as the beginning of a journey) or the perspective of the 0 (as the infinite, where there is no beginning or end), or as 10 (which is completion). However you choose to read it, when the Wheel of Fortune turns it never tells you where the change comes from or what brought it about. It is change without an efficient cause.

Desideri: It's funny, you cannot look at the images without beginning to read together. I love the kind of engagement that reading enables, it's a kind of deep sociality, not just between us but with the images themselves, their meanings, their possible interpretations. It makes visible the sociality of signification in a way.

Katsouraki: There is clearly a ritualistic element to working with a deck, picking up a card—and I'm assuming working with spirit guides according to the tarot tradition? Or is this an area you have reconfigured to something a lot less connected to spiritualism, to a more theatrical practice that rethinks the very idea of guiding?

Ferreira da Silva: We have definitely departed from the tarot tradition of working with spiritual guides. Or put differently, we depart from the tradition of working with what is called spiritual, as opposed to material. We do, however, make use of forms (rituals and symbols) associated with the spiritual to engage in collaborative sense-making exercises, under the assumption that the elements for sense-making are outside (as well as also in) our minds, that we don't have control over meanings, that the forms (the spread or the image of the card) host connections we don't think about, and that previous readers (from whom we have inherited interpretations of cards and spreads) are also part of any reading we do because we have learned from them. I would say that the approach is material.

Desideri: Perhaps because of my experience of working with dance, movement, and somatic practices, what is called “spiritual” was always embodied and material for me, so that opposition did not hold. Take for example a dance score, or an instruction in a somatic practice, that is just a piece of language (form), an image, a description of a sensation, but once you practice it enough, or sometimes in the very moment you hear it, it becomes an actual embodied sensation, something you can feel, recall, activate, do. And with the readings I feel it is a similar process, simply practicing those forms, studying the images together, staying present with what is there allows for sense-making to happen.
Döcker: Valentina, I remember participating in readings that you did within the framework of Political Therapy, in Riga, Vienna, and other places. Watching you, I saw you being particularly immersed into the action of mapping out notions on a big piece of paper, where you would draw all kinds of connections between words and ideas. Similarly, in the reading of the tarot cards on July 5, Denise and Valentina, you were both engaged in a play or game of navigating relations. It seems to me that there is a particular pleasure, if not potentially a jouissance involved in this activity, one that may have to do with what Artaud described as the anarchic principle of poetry: “poetry is anarchic insofar as it calls into question all relationships between objects and all relationships between forms and their meanings. It is also anarchic insofar as its appearance is the consequence of a disorder that brings us closer to chaos” (1976, 235–236)—How do you experience and conceptualise this reshuffling of relations at the brink of chaos with respect your poethical practice as a poetic practice, and perhaps with respect to the workings or non-workings of power, powerlessness and desire in the process of imagining and thinking?

Ferreira da Silva: I like how you picked up movement in how we do this. Recalling how we do this, without a script, yes, there is no choreography per se. We come to the reading with the previous readings, and by now we know that it will have a sense of how it will unfold. But we don’t have any strategy for keeping things going just in case... there is no “just in case.” All there is is us responding to what comes to pass. So, yes, Artaud’s description of poetry as anarchic captures what unfolds in a session. There is another term for power, which is capacity. And I think that, as a term, it does not convey control or force. What happens in a session is just this unleashing of a collective capacity for making sense of situations, events, et cetera without anyone claiming control over it, because the session does not allow for such a position of control. Yes, I think it is something between poetry (cards and spreads and their many possible meanings) and dance (the reading itself and all the elements that play in it) that takes place.

Desideri: And I think there is a sense of pleasure in that capacity which reading unleashes, it is perhaps more of an erotics than a desire. When we read I sense this abundance of meaning, an opening of the imagination that is not only mine, this social capacity. It is not so much that the image or connections that we draw are more beautiful or accurate or true; it is the way we go about it, the fact that we study those relations with all of our senses, with the cards, and with each other that generates movement. Most of the time what is produced by a reading is indeed not a new or better sense or meaning, it is rather a sense of release from the question.

Ferreira da Silva: And regarding the ethics in the poethical, I see its ethical orientation in/as the practice itself. I think that EhChO which, as Valentina suggested earlier, is itself a reading, indicates what becomes of ethical responsibility in the kind of sociality Poethical Readings practice.

Katsouraki: I would like to come back to an issue that you raised earlier on: you mentioned that in your most recent readings during the time of the novel pandemic, you could see a shift in the reading’s social function, which you referred to as giving orientation. Could you tell us more about what you mean by orientation and how you experience this demand for orientation?

Desideri: Beyond offering a more complex and layered image of the situation we read for, the readings now seem to also give a sense of what could be done or how to deal with the situation.
As the orientation is found by reading together, it doesn't feel like it is us or it is the tool in itself, the tarot for example, that is giving orientation to people. Rather the tarot, with all its archived and encrypted information, functions as a tool that brings us together in study, something we read with and through and that is able to give us a sense of how to go on. And yet, the reading does not really give a direction, it just provides orientation. Direction gives a spatial sense, an arrow, a pointed finger, whereas orientation provides a set of coordinates, a vocabulary and a grammar to sense your own position, to make sense of what is going on.

Ferreira da Silva: One way of describing the shift would be to say that before people would come for a reading with a question or with a sense of having run out of ways of dealing with some question in a moment of crisis. Now it seems that existing itself is a crisis. Under such conditions, in which those asking the question no longer trust on having “somewhere” else to go or in that “another time” will come and it will be all over, the readings become more about what else becomes possible, what other ways of existing can be imaged now that that other way seems impossible. Of course, this is a moment; there is another side to this pandemic. Whether there will be a treatment or a vaccine or we just live with it, there is another side to it. What I mean is that now—in the meantime—before we have a sense of how life will be, there seems to be an opening for considering existing differently. The Poethical Readings we have done so far indicate that.

Desideri: Given the fact that existing itself is a crisis, now all the questions openly and directly implicate all of us, those reading and those asking the questions, so there is a sense of looking for orientation together. I mean, every question does, but now it is really evident. This shift may also be due to the way the readings have been evolving, because readings also accumulate, they have progressively become more collective, the tools have been shared, and that creates a kind of intimacy and trust in thinking together.

Katsouraki: Overall, looking at the public reading from July and other readings that you did in the wake of corona, what did they produce for you? Did they offer perspectives as to how to insert yourself into the battle of force relations of the current moment, socially, academically or otherwise? And perhaps more generally, could there be something like a “poethics” of coping with the pandemic?

Desideri: I must say that doing readings with people in such a moment of generalized crisis had been the most nourishing thing. The activity of reading together, of sharing a space of not knowing, of being vulnerable and open, of asking questions and allowing the imagination to wander... that way of being together feels right at the moment, and also important, because when I am reading with others it feels like I am practicing a different sensibility that is really just an ability to sense together and figure out a way of continuing to exist together.

Ferreira da Silva: Regarding this political moment, the issue of racial violence that has been central to my work for over 20 years has come to the fore with the Black Lives Matter protests, which is a good thing. But with the Trump administration, there has been an authorising of racial violence, which is facilitating the return to the fore of fascism. This political context requires ways of making sense that do not fall in the usual dichotomies and also deal with the failures of linearity. I find that folks see Poethical Readings as a way of opening up for thinking about something that does not
appear to make sense if we think in terms of progress, development, et cetera. A way to make sense of questions such as: how do we find ourselves dealing with fascism again? I would say that there could be a poetics of existing otherwise, which includes getting rid of whatever makes it possible for us (humans) to exist in a way that does so much harm to humans and more-than-humans alike.

Desideri: And in the way we go about sensing the question and thinking about it, we also form relations, connections, find other paths, build solidarity and make existence possible, already and all at once.

Katsouraki: You brought up Black Lives Matter, Denise. Looking at the killings of black and brown bodies by white police and white supremacists on the streets and in favelas that many describe as the beginning of a new civil war, and looking at how black and brown communities have been disproportionately affected by the corona pandemic particularly in the US and Brazil, do you perceive the current developments as a reaffirmation of previously existing racial subjugation or do you see new forms emerge within it? Do we see the prolongation of the history of the dominance of the white transparent I that only conceives of black populations as affected and infected bodies which occupy the place of death—or do you see a discontinuity in current events?

Ferreira da Silva: Both police killings and state's neglect are to me the same operating logic of obliteration, which is the core of racial subjugation. What I think has shifted is the role racial violence is playing as part of the “normal” operations of the state. And that I think is happening not only in the Americas, but also in Europe, with this open return of fascism. More importantly, I don't see racial violence operating in terms of the transparent I versus its “racial others.” When I describe things this way it is only because raciality produces its subjects this way. What is more interesting to me is how raciality and its subjects figure in the post-Enlightenment political architecture, how it facilitates extraction and expropriation, in sum, how it is so crucial for capital accumulation.

Döcker: Brazilian philosopher Vladimir Safatle, in an essay on the COVID crisis and Brazil (2020), ventured the argument that the Brazilian state has entered the phase of a suicidal state, of a suicidal fascism, which could be summarised, very briefly, as the fanatic excess of sovereignty indulging in the creation of the condition of possibility of its self-destruction (erasing its self-preserving drive). The ultimate power of the sovereign, in other words, is perhaps not to determine itself, but to kill itself. Does the self-determined subject, or its collective political formulation come to an end after all, by its own doing?

Ferreira da Silva: One could only hope. However, unfortunately, as far as the state is concerned, and given that capital does not seem to do without the recourse to total violence, I am afraid that the state will not go away totally anytime soon. However, it will—as the Brazilian state has already done—also allow total violence to be deployed by others as a mode of managing those who are not of interest of global capital. When Bolsonaro decides that everyone should carry guns in Brazil, this is what I see.

Desideri: We could also look at determination as a kind of death in itself, as it reduces, delimits, and fixes what exists within categories. The work of self-determination of the sovereign is in a way
always deadly, because it functions as an enclosure, it determines through exclusion and obliteration. So maybe the state is not killing itself, but rather preserving itself, preserving its capacity for (self-)determination, just the categories it is determining are shifting.

Döcker: When you say that the present political situation, both with respect to the COVID pandemic and racial violence, has become one in which mere existence is at stake, you also seem to be evoking core aspects of the foundations of modern political theory, not least that modern politics in Hobbes is the invention of the necessity of the people or the political subject on the putative ground of the threat of existence in the state or rather non-state of the multitude. Are we witnessing, in your opinion, a radicalisation of the very concept of politics, these days? A radicalisation of how the body that is not a part of the people is addressed?

Ferreira da Silva: This question requires and deserves a long answer. Let me just say that, in regards to Black Lives Matter, my thesis has been that an effect of blackness (as a category) is that it authorises the collapsing of the state’s protective function and that in the same movement it authorises the deployment of its self-preserving function. This has been my reading of racial violence, in particular police brutality but also in the analysis of whole apparatus of George W. Bush’s “war on terror.”

With COVID-19, we have this other aspect of the state, which I think is another indication of what I had noticed back in 2007/2008, in responses to the global economic crisis. Then and now, we can see how the economy seems to be replacing the people as the subject of state protection. Of course, this is a simple way of describing what is happening. But I think that it is early to have a good sense of what is happening. So I don’t know if it is a radicalisation of the concept of politics. There is a question of how we think about existence and the need to ask the question about power.

Katsouraki: How do you think the question of power would need to be formulated today?

Ferreira da Silva: I think we need a different image of existence. To go back to Hobbes, what if our account of the political did not start with the state of nature? Another way of saying it is: what if our accounts of the conditions of possibility or of emergence of the existing moments (juridic, ethic, economic, symbolic) did not start with an allegory of an original state of violence? Such question, I think, could be the point of departure for both critique as well as the kind of transformation needed if we are to put a stop in police brutality, extraction, and expropriation, these endless wars of capital, and start doing whatever we can to keep this planet livable for those (most of us) who cannot dream of a (and do not want to) escape to Mars (like the Musks of the world).

Döcker: You stress the importance of a new image of existence, and you highlighted the importance of imaging and image production in your readings. Much like the subject, the image has been the object of criticism in philosophical and artistic discourse, particularly in French theory from the second half of the 20th century onwards—the image as a totalisising representation of the world, the image as a power mechanism of the inclusion and exclusion of what is and what is not visible or what even has the capacity of being visible, et cetera. What is your understanding of the image? Perhaps, could your approach be related to a more tentative notion of the image as in, for instance, Lisa Nelson, who, in a meditation on
images in dance, pondered that “maybe 'image' [...] just means 'organization' like how something has articulatable [sic] organization, not whether it's clear or fuzzy, but just how one can kind of pause it and describe it in language”? (2018, n.p.)

Ferreira da Silva: In borrowing Benjamin's dialectical image, we focus not on what a particular image or composition conveys but on the possibility of re/de/composing which is always there. Or, to say it differently, the focus is on that every image is a re/de/composition or a singular simile, which, as such is always also some other possible or never actualisable (always virtual) re/de/composition.

Desideri: On one hand we use Walter Benjamin's dialectical image, as the reading tools we use allow us to image the situation we are reading for, that is they halt time and expose the dialectics at play as a re/de/composition. And on the other hand, that image is not totalising, we are also fully immersed, or rather deeply implicated in the image ourselves. So recalling Lisa Nelson, the image remains somehow a located composition, a possible organisation, or an expression.

Döcker: As a final question, I would like to come back to the notion of practice that undergirds your work. In a conversation between the two of you which was published in Valentina's Hand Reading Studies, you touched upon the implications of readings as a practice. Denise, you said: “I would say: it is a practice. We use so many different tools when reading. Reading is a practice. It is actually a praxis: there is a view of how to live that is tied to it (which is a kind of knowing) and also it is something that you do (a kind of doing) - so reading could be a way to recall (or actualize) the connection.” (2015, 14) I would be interested in how you navigate the genealogy of praxis and particularly its beginnings in Aristotle, according to whom praxis was the action of the free citizen of the polis, the subject of speech, whereas the non-subject of the slave was excluded from the realm of praxis, as the slave was relegated to the realm of poiesis and labour that was to serve the subject of praxis and therefore was not sufficient in itself. Could you tell us how your notion of praxis, and “radical praxis,” as you call it, deviates from this heritage, if it relates to it at all? Or put differently: is “radical praxis” perhaps the radically different praxis of the one who is subjected to the category of the slave, and if so, what does, what would it look like?

Ferreira da Silva: When I think of praxis, Gramsci comes to my mind before Aristotle. I mean, I am already thinking of a political praxis and the emphasis on the ethical has to do with a concern and commitment to existing otherwise. But, in any case, the praxis is political/ethical praxis. What I am saying is that we have already violated the distinction and broken from the heritage. I guess you could call it the radically different praxis of the slave, in so far as the slave is not fully determined by the relation with the owner. That is, in so far as there is something about the slave that remains inaccessible to the owner. But this is not to be taken as the interiority of the slave.

Desideri: A radical praxis perhaps is a way of doing and knowing that is able to undo those kinds of binary categories as praxis/poiesis, which are distinctions that are instrumental to the (re)production of the world as it is. And it is radical insofar as it gets underneath those distinctions, with its resilient and tentacular roots, reaching into the (under-)world, where it grows and partakes in the making of another image of existence.


Denise Ferreira da Silva is a philosopher, writer, and filmmaker. Her academic and artistic works address the ethico-political challenges of the global present. She is the author of Toward a Global Idea of Race (2007), A Divida Impagavel (2019), Unpayable Debt (2021) and co-editor (with Paula Chakravartty) of Race, Empire, and the Crisis of the Subprime (2013). Her artistic work includes the films Serpent Rain (2016) and 4Waters-Deep Implicancy (2018), in collaboration with Arjuna Neuman; and the relational art practices Poethical Readings and Sensing Salon, in collaboration with Valentina Desideri. She lives and works on the traditional, ancestral and unceded territory of the Musqueam (xwməkwəy̓am) people.

Valentina Desideri explores art making as a form of study and study as a form of making art. She trained in contemporary dance at the Laban Centre in London (2003–2006), later on did her MA in Fine Arts at the Sandberg Institute in Amsterdam (2011–13) and is currently a PhD candidate at the Social Justice Institute at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. She doesFake Therapy and Political Therapy, and is one of the co-organizers of Performing Arts Forum in France, she speculates in writing with Stefano Harney, she engages in Poethical Readings and gathers Sensing Salons with Denise Ferreira da Silva, she is part of the Oficina de Imaginação Política, she reads and writes.

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