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Accademia di Belle Arti di Brescia SantaGiulia

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Via Tommaseo, 49, 25128 Brescia (Italy)

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CALL FOR PAPERS

Anne Imhof: The Platform as a Symbolic Form

By Giacomo Mercuriali (Università Statale di Milano)

Abstract: The Palais de Tokyo in Paris hosted Anne Imhof's *Natures Mortes* exhibition from 22nd May to 24th October 2021. Even without presenting a single interactive screen, the exhibition seems to say something fundamental about the present and future of the West, in particular concerning the experience of human life under the constant and pervasive control of machines. A corollary of the contemporary situation is the destruction of the difference between public and private space – therefore of politics. In order to deepen the artist's own statements («[The work is about] the idea of the single individual, who can make all these connections through digitalization, but is being controlled by being tracked, and who will always be seen wherever they are»), the introduction of the aesthetic category of the “platform” as a mode of contemporary visual thought is suggested.

Digital Platforms

Scrolling through Twitter's feed a couple of nights ago, I came across a rather funny meme: the image showed five girls drawn in the style of Japanese comics; above their heads, someone had superimposed the logos of some of the wealthiest and most powerful multinational companies in the world. Given Facebook's recent rebranding to Meta, the giants known by the ominous acronym FAANG (Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix, Google) were transformed—through an emotional shift that generates laughter—into the more innocent and cute MANGA.

Economic news daily churns out a series of acronyms identifying companies at the head

of the NASDAQ: the acronyms FANG, GAFAM, FAAMG, BAT serve as indicators of current market trends, with the most popular one highlighting the current dominant forces. In the era of financial capitalism, the actions of the FAANGs (the decisions they make, the services they offer, the research projects they support) better represent the dominant culture of our time than anything else.

The FAANGs and other companies like Adobe, Alibaba, Baidu, Microsoft, Nvidia, Tencent, and Tesla stand out because they operate in the tech sector and enjoy fame and public recognition: they are “digital platforms,” environments of hardware and software with variable configurations, virtual biomes—often referred to as “ecosystems”—that support different applications. According to an emblematic paradox of our time, as natural biodiversity decreases, cybernetic biodiversity increases.

Is it plausible to think that digital platforms owe their name solely to the conventions of computer engineering? Does the description of these entities end within the boundaries of a handful of technical disciplines? Rather, aren't they very complex objects that escape easy categorization? For instance, doesn't it happen that digital platforms have replaced oil platforms as the primary space for extraction activities in capitalism?

In the absence of secure definitions, one thing is certain: today, the representation of reality is worth more than reality itself. In 2017, *The Economist* titled: “The world's most valuable resource is no longer oil, but data” [1]. Data (but it would be better to call them

capta, as Johanna Drucker has suggested) [2] is the raw material extracted, managed, and sold by digital platforms, the invisible engine of all their operations. Data is produced, appropriated, and exploited according to a cycle of semiosis that now possesses the character and necessity of a meteorological fact. It involves creating informational asymmetries, accelerated feedback loops, and stratigraphic shifts in databases.

The rise of platforms is not a recent phenomenon. In 2001, after the dot-com bubble had already burst, the protagonist of Michel Houellebecq's *Platform* expressed himself like this: "In a slightly unreal state of excitement, we defined a programmatic platform for dividing the world" [3]. In the case of the novel, a morally unscrupulous travel agency was planning a system that would permanently merge sexual desires and material needs of the entire global population. The imbalanced and unjust relationship between the Global North and South was counterbalanced by elevating the abandonment of any moral principle to a business plan, with each person's body literally transformed into "human capital": the realized utopia of globalization.

Today, platforms are recognized actors in the struggle for global dominance, their coffers and production cycles worth more than many nation-states combined. The means of conquering the world are no longer military. As explained by Shoshana Zuboff [4], each platform aims to acquire as many users as possible in order to transform their behavior, making it socially unfeasible to renounce the services they offer. Each of us would be perfectly capable of living outside the grasp of the FAANGs, but as the number of users increases, it becomes harder to engage with

others without the relationship being mediated and supported by a platform.

In their universalistic aspiration, platforms are not merely infrastructures; they are, at least, an explicit concretion of the "Kapitalismus als Religion" theorized by Walter Benjamin [5]. Platforms "convert." Instead of sects and movements: corporate cultures; instead of sacrificial rites: keynotes. Mark Zuckerberg has a soteriological mandate, claiming that Facebook's mission is to "connect" all people in the separate space of the network. But if the infinite growth of capital becomes a religion, what are its effects on the attire of its followers? How does the platform's influence manifest in the contemporary dialectic between salvation and the debt/guilt nexus?

Human "behavior" is spied upon, studied, judged, and directed according to the principles of experimental "behaviorism" [6], a "science" applied by the analysis and marketing departments of platforms that shape the new space in which the deterritorializing force of capital unfolds. According to all evidence, the unprecedented alliance between psychometrics, engineering, and finance, leveraging the tools of avatars, terms of service, and instantaneous remote interactions, will one day allow digital platforms to replace the world order of nation-states, which is still based on outdated categories such as identity, constitutions, and borders.

Platform Bodies

It is well known that tracking, profiling, and the analysis of big data allow a new form of exploiting human bodies, meaning the entity that expresses "behavior." The technique bypasses the spatiotemporal boundaries of salaried labor, within which they were

traditionally employed directly by capital. Today, at every moment, on some server of unknown location, we are scanned, modeled, evaluated, zipped, aggregated, and resold in the form of statistics. The spatiotemporal scales are microscopic: the extractive exercise even occurs at the level of the unconscious, thanks to the analysis of micromuscular movements, the automated study of posts and likes, “friends” and “followers,” and biometric tracking. You could participate as little as possible in platform activities, but your degree of involvement already identifies you within a particular segment of the population.

The radical novelty announced by the smartphone is this: once public and private spaces are filled and traversed by sensors—devices for capturing and recording connected to platforms—to contribute to the overall development and movement of alienation forces, it is enough to interact, even involuntarily, with an interface: simply to be a body. Biopolitics exits disciplinary institutions to settle permanently in everyday space. The increasing universalization and automation of surveillance and control techniques demonstrate that, far from having exhausted their ability to capture, the Foucauldian categories of biopolitics [7] and governmentality [8] remain an indispensable premise for interpreting contemporary life.

Now, despite the subsumption of more and more aspects of human life by platforms having been underway for at least a couple of decades, it is rare to find thinkers or artists capable of addressing this situation comprehensively. It seems that today, it is very difficult to say or do anything significant on this topic without falling into one of the two well-trodden and opposing paths: proposing inquiries into the present and its media

archaeology or offering futuristic celebrations of techno-utopianism.

The year 2021 marked the birth of Web3, the financialized network governed by smart contracts. NFTs and cryptocurrencies are racing ahead, announcing yet another acceleration of platform automatisms and disparities in wealth distribution. Yet, we are still in a situation where it is very hard to think of platforms not as they are [9] but as the origin of the movement of contemporary bodies—perhaps already more powerful, in terms of desire, than traditional vectors of subjectivation like families, states, and markets.

Critics and apologists of technological devices and the second nature that unfolds beyond the black mirrors mostly gloss over a set of questions that are becoming increasingly important precisely because they are a repressed issue that is difficult to think through: What has become of our bodies today? What has happened to this remainder of transcendence? What is the embodied effect of a world where relationships with others take place and unfold within the cybernetic niche of platforms? What remains on this side of the metaverse? Is it possible to think of the body in its materiality “before” it is intercepted by a platform?

Whether one feels closer to lichens or servers rather than to fellow humans, as contemporary fashion and mythology suggest, the fact remains that everything we experience is made possible by our flesh, the medium of experience par excellence. Whether we like it or not, we can only be on this side of the screen, to the dismay of transhumanists and their strange eschatology, the “singularity” [10].

Since a general reconfiguration of gestures

and actions unprecedented in history is underway through digital platforms, it is certainly worth asking what happens to the matter that underlies them and, more broadly, what the real effects are of the pervasive integration of each person's movements and passions into the development of capital, especially in light of the novelty that this is happening outside the time and space of labor, or according to a mixed regime where praxis and contemplation, activity and inactivity become indistinguishable temporal forms.

Notes on the Platform

My hypothesis: the recently concluded *Natures Mortes* exhibition by Anne Imhof at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris constitutes a possible response to this unfathomable abyss of contemporary thought. The event is on everyone's lips and earned the cover of *Artforum* in December 2021. Why? *Natures Mortes* is a careful study of the fate of bodies in the 21st century. It is an archaeological work that reflects on the real condition of their existence by exposing them as they are, here and now, just a moment before any process of subjectivation.

From Imhof's work, one can deduce an entirely innovative formal paradigm. Using the formula of Ernst Cassirer, as applied by Erwin Panofsky, I believe that through Imhof's art, the platform rises to the level of a "symbolic form" [11]; indeed, in general, the artist's work imposes the platform as the symbolic form of the 21st century, as the overarching style of contemporary visuality, replacing the guiding project of the 20th century, the installation [12].

In the following paragraphs, I intend to sketch an attempt to characterize the platform independently of the conclusions that could

be drawn by comparing it with the installation. However, this should remain clear: unlike the installation, the platform explicitly takes responsibility for both objects and a certain population of living beings. The observer gives way to groups of classified users, who are always conceived as being inserted into an infrastructure that precedes them.

It is immediately apparent that many of Imhof's works are, literally, platforms: rectangular surfaces, opaque or transparent, sometimes affixed to the walls, sometimes raised from the ground by pilasters, and sometimes directly placed on the floor. The platform was also the structure made of glass and aluminum at the center of *Faust*, the work that earned the artist the Golden Lion at the 2017 Venice Biennale. How can these forms not be related to the spirit of the times? If the strength of the best art lies in its ability to operate and communicate a dazzling synthesis between the particular and the universal, then *Natures Mortes* certainly embraces what happens beyond its own boundaries in a maternal embrace.

How is the platform form characterized? Given the complexity and novelty of the object, one can, for the time being (but perhaps forever), offer a series of partial observations that reflect the essential partiality of the thing itself that one is attempting to describe. First and foremost: the platform is both a totalizing and a fragmenting entity, distributing positions within a whole. Regarding regimes of vision, it creates a partition of the gaze. The partiality of the platform's view does not consist in a physical barrier; on the contrary, transparency is essential to it, making it always possible to traverse, though impossible to exhaust. The platform is "evident," but evident in its total unknowability.

The central material in Imhof's work is glass (the same material that serves as a junction between interfaces and the world). The effect? The reflection and its very staging. The use of glass accentuates the transparency of the platform, which one might assume to have measurable boundaries. Traversed by the gaze, in the various shades of opacity it appears in, sometimes decorated by graffiti tags (@mention) that underscore its essence as a medium and surface of inscription, the glass offers the vision the ghostly remainder of the surrounding things, which the platform (the total configuration of surfaces-interfaces) appropriates, demonstrating its modes of capturing reality.

The gesture repeats itself when materials differ: unless they constitute immovable scaffolding, they always suggest the possibility of passing through. Even if they are opaque, we might still break them without damaging the platform. Where there are physical limits that block the body (portals, dividers, railings, gates, handrails, nets), it is still allowed to cast a gaze beyond or, at least, one can imagine doing so. The platform imposes "conditional freedom" without promising any liberation—indeed, it threatens the exclusion of the user as punishment [13]. Rather – we are in a competitive regime – penalties. The artist worked as a bouncer for a club in Frankfurt [14].

Imhof designs structures and orchestrates shadowy rituals that are sacred celebrations marking the calendar of an unknown religion (we said it, it's capitalism; a practice is only recognized as religious by those who distance themselves from it). In moments when the performances are deactivated, partiality is ontological; during the staged actions, partiality resides in an abundance of possible

sites to inspect. By necessity, much of what happens occurs simultaneously, for once and never again. We are aware of this, and it disorients and indignantly upsets because it underscores the perceptual limits of bodies in contrast to those of machines.

The platform "saves." The (performative) action is inevitably unrepeatable unless it is recorded and shared online by the mobile device of some viewer. The hashtag #anneimhof replaces the need for a traditional catalog and consigns everything to sharing in separation. Imhof's, her collaborators', and the audience's Instagram profiles bounce micro-events back and forth—light deflected by the inner faces of a graph/crystal n-dimensional—that suggest, without being, a totality. "This is not a Gesamtkunstwerk"; thus, the artist [15].

In the platform regime, more and more things (past, present, and future) are made available to the gaze. Desire multiplies, but the possibility of grasping and satisfying accumulated urges becomes increasingly difficult and ultimately impossible. In the explosion of representation, we retrace the asymptotic curve that once led us to the illusion of corporeality [16], which is then undone and brought back to a primordial and original stage. The performers crawl, lick, fight, move according to looped paths—accelerated or slowed down (youtube.com: select playback speed: x0.5, x0.75, x1.5...)—throw themselves to the ground, touch each other as if for the first time. Bodies in decay. What "stimmung" can we concern ourselves with today, if not melancholy?

From a theoretical standpoint, disembodied and multiple, open to temporary occupation (the method is that of supervision), the platform "elevates" above the shapeless surface of floors or the addresses of the

network that is disintegrating into subnets and networks of subnets. Between interstitial and expansive spaces, compressions and dilations of volumes, a violent dialectic is established, which is that of the platform itself, a cybernetic entity endowed with a constant autonomous movement, according to a rhythm of self-reconfiguration that no one has ever described better than Tsutomu Nihei, with his cities of 10,000 AD, continuously built and dismantled by autonomous robots [17]. Imhof is a musician and a boxer [18].

One of the sections of *Natures Mortes* is a labyrinth of glass and metal that neither begins nor ends anywhere. The reference is not Jorge Luis Borges (the solar labyrinth), but the video game (the underground labyrinth). The drawings by Imhof displayed in the exhibition could be the storyboard of a hypothetical AAA+ game set in a city designed by Fritz Lang. Like treasures hidden behind corners camouflaged with the game environment, the labyrinth houses both Imhof's works and those of other artists: they are the loot of a dungeon. One then moves through the space of the exhibition just as one scrolls through the screens of a platform game or descends the scroll of a social media platform, searching for precious content on which to press "like" or "share."

The platform as the common denominator of the contemporary. The platform "supports" and "distributes" bodies, objects, gestures, actions. The platform "opens" a specific field of motor and relational possibilities, partly regulated by a project (algorithm in one case, screenplay and scenography in the other), partly left to the discretion of the users [19]. The platform is "habitable" intermittently (one enters, one exits): it becomes habitat and environment. The platform "elevates" and "cuts out" parts of

the world of varying importance.

The only entity that does not swing along the infinite curves of digital axiology is our body, to which all media functions ultimately refer. Imhof directs her attention to this fact and the current state of the threshold of mediatization that projects the pure movement (life) of bodies into metaphysics. The result (but it is a point of arrival of the work that is also a point of departure) is a statement: a human body today is something essentially exposed on, through, and by means of a platform. Exposed and not simply "visible": the exposability of the thing as a way of presenting itself implies the awareness (embodied or attributed) of its own visibility.

Exposed to whom? After the death of the omniscient God, the general secularization of His faculties of vision through the platform implies that we can now be certain that the controller at the center of the Panopticon is there and directs his gaze toward each one of us (a revolution that has yet to be fully focused by those who speak today of surveillance, conflating the technical, economic, and political situation of today with the Benthamian device that was in fact something quite different, namely the image of a control center for ethics in a world still awaiting Judgment). The vision device that still requires archaeological study is the crystal ball, the mirror of desire, or the magical Palantír of *The Lord of the Rings*.

"[The work is about] the idea of the single individual, who can make all these connections through digitalization, but is being controlled by being tracked, and who will always be seen wherever they are" [20]. Unlike the Panopticon, today there is no single police observer, but a host of automatic sensors distributed in networks and subnets

that serve an empty center. The sensors feed a generalized mechanism of rewards/punishments (behavioral governmentality) that is increasingly integrated and aimed at directing life to its detriment, microparceling the movement of bodies for the purpose of increasing and reproducing capital, with the ecological and psychological consequences that are well known.

Animal Palace

It is difficult to imagine a better encounter than the one between Imhof and the Palais de Tokyo. The consonance between the Dürerian aesthetic of the German artist and the semi-abandoned state of the building (a contemporary caprice) makes the exhibition certainly an unrepeatable event. The first move is to dismantle as many walls as possible, making the structure of the space transparent, increasing points of visibility and access or controlled interruption of vision. The Palais is designed according to the modalities of the platform; consequently, the entire exhibition device becomes a platform.

There is an entrance threshold (which is that and not another solely because with our bodies we can move in this space and not directly in the platform one), and we enter Nature Mortes. According to the catalog texts, the title is a copy of the *Tableau Dada* that appeared in 1920 on the pages of the magazine *Cannibale* and was signed by Francis Picabia [21]. The “tableau” (forever lost, in fact a photograph) consisted of a stuffed monkey surrounded by four irreverent (and deferential) inscriptions: “Portrait de Rembrandt, Portrait de Renoir, Portrait de Cézanne, Natures Mortes.” A portrait of the artist as a monkey, *singerie*.

The animality/humanity pair is the primary

one among the dialectical forces that drive Imhof’s curatorial endeavors. In the figure of the primate, we encounter the first of several thresholds of interspecies permutation offered by Nature Mortes. These appear even before the visit itself, as the exhibition was advertised with a photograph of Eliza Douglas, the artist’s life and work partner, as she attempts to take flight from a platform, “playing” the vulture [22]. The directions opened by these thresholds develop in the opposite direction of the inhuman escape routes imagined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari [23]: rather than becoming-animal, Imhof examines the opposite movement, becoming-human, anthropogenesis, without certainty that this, at the “end of history,” is still possible [24].

The *singerie* has been mentioned: governed by the platform, the artist is a small puppet, the miniature representation of an animal, on the brink of impotence. The user is prey wandering among the contemporary ruins of nature in decay. The ground floor of the Palais is mostly occupied by a high corridor composed of two levels (the two and the double recur throughout the exhibition) of barriers made of glass, wood, and aluminum, curving sharply to the right following the geometry of the building (Passage, 2021). It’s like being on foot on a highway stripped of the “machine” we usually wear, out of place; even we, birds, risk smashing against the transparent sound barriers unless they are decorated with recognizable forms (the tags, overprinted signifiers—the panels were salvaged from an abandoned building in Turin, so among the artists in the show, NO TAV is also listed).

To the right of the corridor, a black dog (the platform?) runs toward us, but just before it can bite us or celebrate us, it returns to the

starting point: it's *Finite, Infinite* (2010), a very short loop video by Sturtevant. The dog is a sort of Cerberus announcing the presence of a host of infernal artists summoned (or posted) by Imhof to her black mass: Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Théodore Géricault, Eugène Delacroix, Gordon Matta-Clark, Paul Thek. *Finite, Infinite* anticipates today's TikTok stories, summarizing in a few seconds that strand of the history of moving images that identifies one of its sources in the anatomical and physiological investigations conducted on animal bodies, studied as assemblages of limbs. The platform body, and this is truly one of the standout features of the contemporary, is, often unknowingly, "constantly the object of some experiment." On the lower floor appear the *Animal Locomotions* by Eadweard Muybridge and another piece by Sturtevant (*Dreams that Money Can Buy*, 1967), which ties Duchamp's *Nuto* to the same genealogy. Commenting on *Faust*, Benjamin Buchloh spoke of a "terrarium" [25].

Transparent underground chambers, dissections: if we think of cave art and accept the hypotheses of anthropologists about shamanism, we'll find that the use of images to treat and operate on the animal body is as old as the history of humanity; the mystery of the phylogenesis of culture, but also that of the ontogenesis of each individual, anthropogenesis, bedroom, blog. Mike Kelley's series *Ahh... Youth!* (1991-2008) thus enters the constellation of the exhibition. The self-portrait of the American artist in late adolescence (profile picture) appears seamlessly within a series of photographs made up of close-ups of the faces of stuffed animals and plush toys (there's also the monkey, of course!).

Everywhere the linguistic seesaw between the Nordic phrase *still leben* (still life) and the

Mediterranean *natura mortis* in action. In between, all the tension of metaphysics: the relationship between frozen representation and reality murdered by symbols. The pendulum is caught from varying angles, but the privilege is given to those that illustrate the animal body becoming a human body: the performers collaborating with Imhof are mannequins devoid of expression, puppets, sometimes without gender, Platonic androgynes, cybernetic angels moving through the celestial hierarchies of contemporary power [26].

As angels, the agile bodies of the mannequins certainly serve as stand-ins for the artist, but they also serve as stand-ins for the user: during my visit, I encountered a couple of good-looking, well-dressed young people, "more alike than the others," moving in measured steps through the Palais, taking photos of each other with their phones, paying no attention to any of the exhibited works except as formal elements more or less suitable to serve as backgrounds for their compositions, which they would post in real-time on some social profile. It took me a while to notice the difference between myself, the other visitors, and the performers. Who among them is an NPC? Who, on the other hand, is playing?

Inhabiting, Locating

The mannequins I encountered were silent; those involved in the performances can sing, shout, or play music ("Art art art / La la la / Dive dive dive / As deep down as possible / Until your lungs fill with water like air") [27]. In any case, they lack everyday language because, in evoking an unimaginable prehistoric era in which we were more primate than human, domesticity as separation did not exist, and

it is precisely the dimension of private space that platforms are dismantling. For now, no one can say what sociospatial configuration will succeed the era of the bourgeois intérieur, the architectural matrix of an entire civilization that is dematerializing in the meta. In the meantime, in the meatspace, architecture serves to limit and constrain, to organize and direct, to exploit and invest (a bubble in global real estate was one of the causes of the 2007-2009 recession) [28], certainly not to inhabit.

While waiting to find a place, the performers deal “publicly” with domestic materials and objects. And then they drink, do drugs, wear t-shirts of ‘90s metal bands and tracksuits. The platforms of the labyrinth, halfway between the backdrop of music videos and the setup for a fashion photoshoot, are called Room. The modes of the staged actions collapse the rooms of a squat occupied by university students drunk on melancholy (on the stairs of the Palais, Polaroids of Jägermeister from the melancholic Dionysus Cyprien Gaillard were hung: Green Vessel Study, 2020) and an unknown sacred space, lost forever, where the immemorial wonder of the contact between the post-adolescent body and pure material – milk, water, fire, wax, light, smoke – speaks of a pagan baptism following yet another excess.

The question, however, is: who among us truly crosses the boundaries of what is permitted? The 2019 performance *Sexis* presented again as a video in *Natures Mortes*: we see a young man (a doppelgänger of an entire generation) burning a bunch of roses; he wears a t-shirt with a Stephen King-esque clown who, like the new Arpocrates, gestures with his finger to keep quiet. Is there a better image of the ecological disaster? In the meantime, from Imhof’s leather jacket hanging on the wall, a pile of “sugar” (*Trabende Trabanten / Wie*

werden wie ihr sein / Vergraben in eure Mähnen aus Kupfer und Gold, 2020) spills or collapses.

The jacket (animal leather, human attire) recalls motorcycling, another passion of Imhof. Following the post-apocalyptic reading of the present offered by the exhibition, the iconic garment also evokes the iconography of the wandering and reckless behavior of gangs, human groups that have become mute, hunting who knows what [29]. Bands that traverse the senseless space of sprawl, glimpsed already by Walter Benjamin in the dreamlike confusion of the Parisian Passages – one will remember the corridor with the same title mentioned above – where the local and global, the interior and exterior, merged seamlessly [30].

In a corner of the exhibition, on the floor, lies a synthetic golden helmet in the manner of Constantin Brâncuși, a cyborg version of the Romanian sculptor’s delicate *Heads*, or the cryogenically preserved remains of a severed head from a traffic accident on some suburban Autobahn [31]. Unroof the houses of the West: you will find an entire generation of sons and daughters sacrificing themselves or being sacrificed (this is unclear) to a god Saturn or to the host of eschatological mecha of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*.

Two series of paintings punctuate *Natures Mortes*. The first is by Imhof and has a calendrical-atmospheric theme: it includes two gray monochromes (*Untitled*, 2017) that seem to have recorded, like mirrors placed on the ground, one of those compact, uniform Berlin skies, the daytime. True, it could also be the background of image-editing software, the absolute neutral of the screen, emblematic of the virtual potential of the digital that corresponds to the non-expression of the

mannequins. Other paintings – oil on canvas or acrylic on aluminum – illustrate the fall of darkness through delicate tonal gradations, bursts of orange, yellow, and white, which slowly transform into black (Untitled (Natures mortes), 2021). There is also a dark monochrome at the entrance of the exhibition: the night.

The aluminum paintings are scratched with the furious claw marks (formless slashes) of an aggressive animal attempting to escape from a cage[32]. The marks obscure the semi-reflective surface of the wounded paintings, offering a dialectical reading: are we observing a landscape from an Albertian window closed due to the cold, or has someone tried to sabotage the surface, still unbreakable, of the interface? In any case, once the entirety of the globe has been mapped and subjected to satellite monitoring, it is hard to imagine an “outside” to the platform, a “beyond.”

From this series stands out a significant portrait from behind (Untitled, 2017) that plays with the central theme of the exhibition: the face of the protagonist is hidden, forever invisible [33]. At the same time, the painting evokes the iconic imagery of attentive immersion par excellence, the Rückenfigur [34]. One cannot help but think of the tradition of German Romanticism, with the unforgettable Betty (1988) by Gerhard Richter and the Wanderer (1818) by Caspar David Friedrich. At the same time, the bare arm, which transforms into a sharp blade of light, is an elegant tribute to Francis Bacon (Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion, 1944), as well as to the English artist's approach to the same theme that concerns Imhof: the threshold of indistinction between animal and human[35]. Since the background of the untitled painting is black, it

must be inferred that the eyes of the depicted character cannot see anything other than a silent Nietzschean abyss – a formidable counterpoint to our gazes fixed on the prosthetic backlit screens.

The second series of paintings is by Eliza Douglas: a group of large canvases made from photographs of T-shirts that are part of the American artist's collection. Given the powerful influence of the fashion world on everything that is part of Natures Mortes, these enlargements seem to monumentalize the economic sector that made their creation possible and that increasingly dominates as the exclusive client and patron in the world of contemporary art and culture.

On the other hand, Douglas's paintings seem to celebrate the last possible egalitarian communities. The T-shirts depicted are not designer pieces, but rather garments that anyone can buy cheaply online [36]. Every time I slip on a tee chosen from those crumpled and carelessly stored in the bedroom closet – whether it's from a football team or an underground band – I become part of a society of equals that I may never meet in person. There is no hierarchy in a community of fans or followers (at least as long as paywall and fan token practices don't become ubiquitous).

Being a passenger

It can certainly be said that a living body, regardless of species, stands, occupies a portion of space, but when can it be said that it “inhabits”? Is a garment laid on the body needed? A sky – and not a roof – above the head? A support beneath the feet? Imhof asserts that a platform is necessary. A platform is something elevated in relation to something else. Platforms, from which one must always

rise to reach human stature (the titles: *Bed*, *Dive Board*, *Stage*) establish a dialectic between animality/humanity and high/low that is non-prescriptive.

Thus, the works of Wolfgang Tillmans and Alvin Baltrop also find space in the exhibition, dedicated to horizontal or waiting zero bodies (deactivated), perhaps reduced to bare life through a violence (state or sexual) imposed today by capital. What matters here is this: certainly, the zero bodies are not those we are living while we observe them, wandering through the exhibition or attending the performance; yet, they represent a potential stage of our daily experience.

In any case, as a people of the platform, we are never exempt from that condition of “passengerhood” ontologically [37], which is both the cradle and the curse to which we are destined under the dominance of technology. The phenomenology of this *stimmung* is everywhere in *Natures Mortes* and can be brought into focus if we think of that iconological cut that runs across Aby Warburg’s entire *Atlas*, according to the dipole of carrying/being carried, embodied in the famous *Nymph of Ghirlandaio* [38]. Translated into the present, we find many versions of the *Pathosformel* in the living tableaux of the performances, for example, when bodies become means of transport.

This strengthens the impression that the exhibition should be interpreted as a “montage of platforms (in motion),” that its object is the platforms, and that it itself is a platform. Some are arranged according to sequences of *mise en abyme*: the “beds” are rectangles of marble (perhaps elevated on pillars) on which a second surface, a cheap foam mattress, is placed—the difference emphasized by the opposite value of the

materials. Elsewhere, there is a pair of stands supporting a long pole: the object exhibited on the pedestal is another pedestal (for birds or bodybuilders), another level of the platform, another layer. The stands themselves are supported by a base that mirrors their shape and is placed on the platform of a Room.

When inhabited by performers, or when we, as visitors, imagine having fun climbing on them, Imhof’s platform-objects refer to an original architectural gesture that contrasts with the mainstream: not the roof with its function of defense and shelter, but the platform with its function of exposure, control, and supervision. Rather than the cave: the stilt house, a dwelling for a childlike humanity. Imhof picks up a watch and gently rewinds the hands of history and time: the scale of her works is large without being monumental; we stand before them, or in the middle of them, or above, or below (Track, 2021), in the same way a child inhabits space.

Perhaps one day the platform space will seem small to us, but for now, it is enormous, we do not comprehend it, it disorients us, it has power over us, and it can annihilate us. Perhaps, in a world where we are always welcomed by something greater than ourselves, the possibility of becoming “great” will no longer exist. Ultimately, *Natures Mortes* affirms this: if the platform is the aesthetic of the contemporary, it is above all in it and through it that the human being today sheds their animality (their ontogenetic and phylogenetic past) and measures their position in the cosmos.

Giacomo Mercuriali

(Università Statale di Milano)

Note:

- [1] The Economist, The World's Most Valuable Resource Is No Longer Oil, but Data, The Economist, May 6, 2017.
- [2] J. Drucker, Humanities Approaches to Graphical Display, in *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, V, 1, 2011, <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/5/1/000091/000091.html>.
- [3] M. Houellebecq, *Piattaforma. Nel centro del mondo*, Bompiani, Milan 2003 (epub).
- [4] S. Zuboff, *Il capitalismo della sorveglianza. Il futuro dell'umanità nell'era dei nuovi poteri* (2018), Luiss University Press, Rome 2019.
- [5] W. Benjamin, *Capitalismo come religione*, Il Melangolo, Genoa 2013.
- [6] B. F. Skinner, *The Behavior of Organisms. An Experimental Analysis*, Appleton-Century-Crofts, New York 1938.
- [7] M. Foucault, *Sorvegliare e punire. Nascita della prigione*, Einaudi, Turin 2014.
- [8] M. Foucault, *Sicurezza, territorio, popolazione. Corso al Collège de France*, Feltrinelli, Milan 2017.
- [9] See for example: B. Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2016; N. Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, Polity, Cambridge, UK–Malden, MA 2017.
- [10] R. Kurzweil, *Ray, La singolarità è vicina* (2005), Apogeo, Milan 2008; M. O'Connell, *Essere una macchina. Un viaggio attraverso cyborg, utopisti, hacker e futurologi per risolvere il modesto problema della morte*, Adelphi, Milan 2018.
- [11] E. Panofsky, *La prospettiva come forma simbolica e altri scritti*, Feltrinelli, Milan 1999.
- [12] C. Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, Tate Publishing, London 2008.
- [13] On the relationship between neoliberalism and the prison system, see: B. Harcourt, *L'illusione del libero mercato. Il sistema penale e il mito dell'ordine naturale*, Neri Pozza, Vicenza 2021.
- [14] T. Rogers – A. Imhof, *Anne Imhof's Stylish (and Shareable) Provocations*, The New York Times, October 13, 2021.
- [15] A. Imhof – V. Matarrese, *Anne Imhof Interviewed by Vittoria Matarrese*, in *Natures mortes: Anne Imhof*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris 2021, pp. 46–49, here p. 48.
- [16] J. Lacan, *Lo stadio dello specchio come formatore della funzione dell'io* (1949), in id. *Scritti*, Einaudi, Turin 2002, pp. 87-94.
- [17] T. Nihei, *Blame!* (1997-2003), Panini, Modena 2000-2004.
- [18] A. Imhof – V. Matarrese, *Anne Imhof Interviewed by Vittoria Matarrese*, cit., p. 47.
- [19] Anne Imhof in the Artforum interview: "All the text bits that were in the piece, all the movement parts, it's like, I give a framework or something that interests me, and then, it's in the end [the performer's] decision, what they pick out of a text, because it is important for me that – I don't tell them what to do necessarily"; <https://www.artforum.com/video/artforum-s-editor-in-chief-speaks-with-anne-imhof-87430>; December 2021.
- [20] T. Rogers – A. Imhof, *Anne Imhof's Stylish (and Shareable) Provocations*, cit.
- [21] A. Imhof – V. Matarrese, *Anne Imhof Interviewed by Vittoria Matarrese*, cit., p. 48.
- [22] In the performances, Douglas wears, so to speak, the line of separation between humanity and animality,

wearing pants while remaining topless. Elsewhere, Douglas is depicted in a Warholian-style screenprint as she mimics Caravaggio's Medusa. There is also the Goethean song Medusa's Song dedicated to the mythical hybrid being. The song is part of the vinyl that collects the soundtrack of Faust (Franziska Aigner, Billy Bultheel, Eliza Douglas, and Anne Imhof, PAN, 2019) obviously available with a click on any platform.

[23] G. Deleuze – F. Guattari, *Kafka. Per una letteratura minore*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2021.

[24] G. Agamben, *L'aperto: l'uomo e l'animale*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 2002.

[25] B. Buchloh, *Rock Paper Scissors*, *Artforum*, LVI, 1, September 2017, <https://www.artforum.com/print/201707/benjamin-h-d-buchloh-on-some-means-and-ends-of-sculpture-at-venice-muenster-and-documenta-70461>.

[26] The founder of cybernetics, Norbert Wiener, in his autobiography recalls: "I first looked for a Greek word signifying 'messenger,' but the only one I knew was angelos. This had in English the specific meaning 'angel,' a messenger of God. The word was thus pre-empted and would not give me the right context. Then I looked for an appropriate word from the field of control. The only word I could think of was the Greek word for steersman, *kubernētēs*" (N. Wiener, *I Am a Mathematician*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1964, p. 322).

[27] A. Imhof – V. Matarrese, *Anne Imhof Interviewed by Vittoria Matarrese*, cit., p. 49.

[28] A. Imhof – V. Matarrese, *Anne Imhof Interviewed by Vittoria Matarrese*, cit., p. 49.

[29] E. Canetti, *Massa e potere*, Adelphi, Milan 2015, pp. 111–152.

[30] W. Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire. Un poeta lirico nell'età del capitalismo avanzato*, Neri Pozza, Vicenza 2012.

[31] In the platform, the kaleidoscopic play of references is potentially infinite: in the severed head returns the figure of Medusa but also that of Saint John the Baptist. At the Castello di Rivoli, in Turin, in the autumn of 2021, Imhof set up an exhibition called, once again, and perhaps to emphasize the impossibility of the act today, more represented than lived, *Sex*. Here the helmet was placed on a plate that could have been designed by Bernardino Luini. In one case, the murderer is a man; in the other, a woman.

[32] In relation to other guest works like a Cy Twombly: *Achilles mourning the death of Patroclus* (1968). Twombly's mark is philologically interpreted by Imhof: a mad and desperate gesture that attempts to recompose, dragging them forward and backward, the bloody, formless remains of some dismembered being.

[33] Visible instead, through a simple Google search of the words printed on the cap "NOW AND FOREVER," the garment the character wears: it is memorabilia from the musical *Cats* (<https://dldushyvintage.com/products/vintage-cats-broadway-now-and-forever-cap-1981>) which once again raises the theme of the animality/humanity threshold.

[34] A. Pinotti, *Procuratori del Sé: dall'avatar all'avatarizzazione*, in id., *Visual Studies: l'avvento di nuovi paradigmi*, Mimesis, Milan 2019, pp. 27–40.

[35] G. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon. Logica della sensazione*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2007. Bacon used Muybridge's photographs to compose some paintings.

[36] One of the *Untitled* (2021) by Douglas printed in the catalog (p. 194) perhaps represents the same *ahegao*-themed t-shirt sold on Amazon for thirteen euros and worn by a man photographed to illustrate the corresponding Wikipedia entry: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahegao#/media/File:40-year_old_guy_doing_ahegao.jpg. *Ahegao* is the stereotyped expression of female pleasure from hentai manga, recently becoming a separate category

in Western pornography. Played within the context of the exhibition, the iconography indicates a dimension of enjoyment that has disappeared from this Earth and is now possible only in the fantasy world of the meta.

[37] I. Illich, *The Right to Useful Unemployment and its Professional Enemies*, Boyars, London – Melbourne 1978, p. 33.

[38] A. Warburg, *Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne - The Original*, ed. by R. Ohrt and A. Heil, Hatje Cantz, Berlin – London 2020.

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