

## Introduction

### *Aesthetics of Perplexity*

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What does it mean to be “confronted” with a work of art today, when modernist tactics of transgression are increasingly the province of right-wing provocateurs, when the autonomy of the work of art has been subsumed through the seeming commodification of everything, when digital culture desires a “frictionless” experience that manipulates attachments to global systems of technological capital? This special issue is interested in examining *perplexity* as a minor aesthetic category, in which the experience of confusion or bewilderment can be harnessed as an artistic tactic that, on one hand, provides an alternative to a range of past assumptions about aesthetic politics that presume an antagonistic or confrontational relation between work and audience designed to assault and ultimately correct the perception and sensation of the viewer, but, on the other, refuses the “smooth,” “comfortable,” or “frictionless” presumptions about the ambient framing of sensation and the modulation of affection under financial capital and digital media. Perplexity, we might suggest, is about a lack of correspondence between self and other, between the experience of an object and the object itself. (And in this spirit of self and other, in hopes of honoring the state of perplexity by not synthesizing states of being, this introduction will flow from “we” to “I” to “you” as it pleases, while maintaining that it is collaboratively co-authored by Nina Peterson and Katherine Guinness.) It is in this space we find a different way of understanding an aesthetic politics of confrontation, one that is inevitably brief and partial—the moment one discovers an “answer,” or makes an “interpretation,” this confrontation has concluded.

The perplexed outcry of “I don’t get it” is often used to describe not just contemporary and new media art, but today’s world writ large. It rings ambivalently, depending on the speaker, at times with both antagonism and longing; it is an accusation of teacherly failure, a challenge to power, and a desire to understand. It is also decidedly possessive, as if the knowledge is owed, something to be had, handed, or held. Our definition of perplexity, then, is one that defies or rejects conceptions of knowledge in proprietary terms. For the perplexed, knowledge is something to be involved with, and perplexity a distinct relationship to be produced and cultivated. To assert something as perplexing is to recognize in that thing a separation of its constitutive parts and to acknowledge contradiction and states of unknowing as binding. It is the aesthetic judgment that

names the meeting, joining, twisting of the cruel indifferent world and human appetite for clarity; it is the entanglement of these apparent oppositions.

These entanglements are more than fitting. With Greek, Latin, Slavonic, and Russian roots referencing plaiting, braiding, twisting, and folding, the etymology of “perplexity” traces to the mid-fourteenth century Old French *perplexité* (confusion) and Latin *perplexus* (involved, interwoven). Perplexity, it seems, signifies the merging of distinct things, their component pieces left intact but thoroughly entwined. Perplexity deals with unruly components, bringing together separate or incompatible objects. In this sense, perplexity appears to have a special relationship to the absurd: perplexity arises from the perception of things utterly incommensurable. In a kind of Camusian sense, the absurd occurs at the moment one apprehends the cruelty of cosmic indifference while in the pursuit of meaningful existence; the absurd is the incommensurability between these things.<sup>1</sup> To assert something as perplexing is to recognize in that thing a separation of its constitutive parts and to acknowledge contradiction as binding these things together. As Camus puts it, “the absurd does not liberate; it binds.”<sup>2</sup> Perplexity is the aesthetic judgement, the relational process, through which this binding happens.

Yet, the binding of contradiction enacted by perplexity is not merely a reiteration of postmodern obscurantism, ironic contrarianism, or cool detachment. It arises from a context in which public debate becomes unilaterally unmanageable and productive agonism is impossible. The term *common sense* has lost all meaning due to a lack of the commons for all. And here, that word that is so central to Enlightenment aesthetic theory—common sense, the agreement that emerges from Kantian judgment and its collective, dispassionate debate—is weaponized against marginalized and minoritized groups. The senses have never been commonly held, and communality has been systematically denied to women, queer, trans, and non-white people, for example. Perplexity causes stickiness but makes no claims to universality.

The aesthetics of perplexity do not rely on the autonomy of the art object, its existence beyond capital, beyond spectatorship, beyond experience and exchange. Neither does it presume that art exists to correct the perception of the viewer, to educate, to intervene. Perplexity argues for an affective politics in which a state of potentiality remains uncaptured, in which “knowing” remains elsewhere, but it also refuses any affective injunction for transmissibility. Perplexity indexes the intertwining of object and observer, work and experience, while simultaneously affirming the separation between the two. This special issue is interested in developing the aesthetics of perplexity as a particular condition in which spectator and work are intertwined but never synthesized, in which knowledge always remains just out of reach.<sup>3</sup>

There are several themes that run throughout the essays in this collection, but a primary concern among this issue’s contributors is the possession of knowledge in an

1. Katherine Guinness and Charlotte Kent, eds., *Contemporary Absurdities, Existential Crises, and Visual Art* (Intellect Press, 2024).

2. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien (Vintage, 2018), 67.

3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Northwestern University Press, 1968).

increasingly disorienting world. Jane Blocker, in her essay “Beacon: Epistemologies of the Art Object,” writes, “Indeed, we might say that disorientation *is* the current climate—political, technological, historical, visual, and environmental—even as we acknowledge that its damaging effects are unevenly and often unfairly distributed across bodies and subjectivities.” Blocker, Erica Levin, and Dalia Barghouty all examine the limits to imagining knowledge as something one can possess. Levin interlinks the ownership of knowledge with colonial violence and wonders if perplexity, and representations that may be perplexity, are an alternative to this colonial knowing. Barghouty writes about a collective desire for knowledge (and thus, the ability to control or be controlled) through online videos termed *subliminals* and how even seemingly irrational behaviors can “effectively become another word for ‘optimization.’” As for other forms of tech-world optimization, Grant Bollmer draws on how *perplexity* is the name for a particular statistical model of uncertainty used in the evaluation of AI models. Bollmer explains how common attempts to reduce statistical perplexity endeavor to ensure the experience of perplexity never takes place, leaving knowledge in the possession of tech behemoths. This reveals “that the world may not be for me or you or us,” even though “the confusion or bafflement that appears as perplexity points to this absence of alignment.”

Another theme that occurs throughout this special issue is the perplexity that emerges from encounters with otherness—and how attempts to reduce or move beyond perplexity, simultaneously, seem to move beyond otherness. While Bollmer addresses an otherness at the heart of technology, A. Joseph Dial and Margaret Baker emphasize how this is amplified when technology is used to appropriate race. Drawing on a critical making project designed to intervene in the use of Blackness for digitized, corporate entertainment, Dial and Baker note how attempts to reduce or overlook the problem of otherness in digital media flatten and undermine embodied histories of trauma that cannot be made transmissible. Critiquing the illogics of a cybernetic posthumanism that denies the relationship between embodiment and information in digital extractivism, Dial and Baker write, “Blackness is hollow. Thus, when aligned within the grooves of humanity, it occurs at the scale of skin, but also, ones and zeroes.” But the smooth surfaces of digital capital cannot acknowledge the difficulty that comes from embodied histories. They continue, “Since the Black was formed outside of ‘the human’ then made to be its addendum, the sample’s technologized ubiquity cannot be understood without positioning the Black body as its material antecedent.” Dial and Baker, Levin, and Peterson all discuss the problem of knowing otherness, and how this knowing can be used to do violence. Peterson’s essay thinks about how inducing a state of perplexed bafflement—drawing on a video by Yoko Ono that she intended as a protest against war—can serve as a political action, although also one that concatenates numerous intertwining threads about imperialism and racial otherness.

Finally, uniting all these essays are problems related to *sensation*, and especially to the relation of sensation to visual art—problems of aesthetics. To quote Blocker’s contribution again: “From this perspective, it is as though, in a moment of great upheaval, we find that the face of the compass was only painted on, the dial pointing always to a non-existent horizon, and art is the only thing that can reveal the illusion.” Throughout, this

issue is invested in questions of how perplexity is itself experienced, and how sensory experience can be defined as perplexing—or, in other words, how “perplexing” can itself become a judgment to describe and communicate an experience that otherwise resists description and communication.

## MULTIPLICITY, CAPITAL, AND FRICTION

The multiplicity we locate within the judgment of perplexity mirrors how the term *aesthetic* is deployed in contemporary culture. The internet and social media are filled with an ever-expanding set of “aesthetics” with an ever-expanding list of names such as “goblincore,” “cottagecore,” “dark academia,” “ballerina-core,” “vapourwave.” These in turn expand to be both more vast and specific: “pastel goblin,” “Southwest cottagecore,” “light academia,” “ballerina sleaze,” and on and on.<sup>4</sup> These so-called “microtrend” aesthetics, usually organized around a particular clothing style, sound, or vibe, are regularly integrated with a range of cheap and disposable commodities distributed through dropshipping platforms such as Shopify and global clothing conglomerates like Shein or Temu, and displayed and hawked over social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. At the same time, cultural theory has seen a return to the “aesthetic” in the past several decades. This includes influential arguments about the political and epistemological dimensions of sensation and experience, from French philosophers such as Jacques Rancière and American literary critics such as Sianne Ngai.<sup>5</sup> There’s something about the aesthetic sensibility of our time that warrants a multiplicity of debates, theorizing the political “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière) or the generation of new “aesthetic categories” (Ngai) beyond the traditional judgments of “beautiful” or “sublime.” Further, the term *aesthetics* in contemporary cultural theory is a common way for writers to link emotion, affect, and art, with examples including work by Mark B. N. Hansen, Erin Manning, and Jennifer Doyle. The “aesthetic” has become a key concept in linking the multiplication of forms today with the affective dimensions of culture that exist beyond language.<sup>6</sup>

There is, however, a central contradiction in how aesthetic theory is practiced today. On one hand there exists a range of seemingly insignificant, temporary trends linked with

4. These microtrend aesthetics themselves can become perplexing—unintegrated into or unperceivable by any sort of common sense when their proliferation is produced/controlled by the technologies and models of dissemination in social media. So, I’m thinking about the algorithmic determination of platforms like TikTok, which shuttles users toward content or away. Conceivably, a microtrend is illegible, whether unseen or unelaborated or simply bewildering to certain users based on algorithmic assessments that filter that content out or make it so ubiquitous as to be inescapable.

5. See Jacques Rancière, “The Distribution of the Sensible,” in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (Continuum, 2004) and Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories, Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Harvard University Press, 2012).

6. See Mark B.N. Hansen, *New Philosophy for a New Media* (MIT Press, 2004); Erin Manning, *Relation-scapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (MIT Press, 2009); Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Duke University Press, 2013); Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (University of Chicago Press, 2019); Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton University Press, 2015); Eugenie Brinkema, *The Form of the Affects* (Duke University Press, 2014).

the political economy of identity and visibility on the internet: “aesthetics” online are a way of distinguishing oneself, linked with the desire to commodify oneself as an object of attention and, therefore, value.<sup>7</sup> Then there are a range of academic discussions that often defer to “art” in an institutionally legitimate sense, using the traditional object of aesthetic contemplation as a route to theorize technology, the body, emotion, and beyond. *Art* has become a way for cultural theorists to signify the legitimacy of their arguments, even though today *aesthetics* more broadly points to a range of phenomena that are seemingly illegitimate because of their imbrication with, and thus “corruption” by, capital.

The problem of capital, its scale, and the ability to escape its subsumptions, seems, to us, to be implicit in any discussion of contemporary perplexity. “The coils of a serpent are even more complex than the burrows of a molehill,” as philosopher Gilles Deleuze concludes his 1992 essay “Postscript on the Society of Control.”<sup>8</sup> The sheer intertwining of technology and capital leads to a level of complexity that seems absolutely baffling, impossible to perceive or even make coherent at the level of human experience.<sup>9</sup> When this complexity even appears it often does so in a form that seems banal, nostalgic. For instance, in his video essay *Syzygy*, artist Jacob Hurwitz-Goodman tries to make sense of the 2022 Superbowl ad for Meta Quest, titled “Old Friends. New Fun.” Horowitz uses the ad to work through a myriad of contemporary issues including the collapse of pizza chain Chuck E. Cheese, the history of Atari, the rise of virtual reality and the “Metaverse,” and, most significantly, the use of private equity to purchase and destroy formerly profitable corporations. Hurwitz-Goodman follows, in many ways, Jean-Luc Nancy’s theories of interconnected disaster and the “equivalence” of catastrophes. Nancy argues that

From now on there is an interconnection, an intertwining, even a symbiosis of technologies, exchanges, movements, which makes it so that a flood—for instance—wherever it may occur, must necessarily involve relationships with any number of technical, social, economic, political intricacies that keep us from regarding it as simply a misadventure or a misfortune whose consequences can be more or less easily circumscribed. . . . The complexity here is singularly characterized by the fact that natural catastrophes are no longer separable from their technological, economic, and political implications or repercussions.<sup>10</sup>

Hurwitz-Goodman makes a similar claim, but notes how the technological solutions presented by Meta and other Silicon Valley corporations are designed to obscure the confusion produced by the networked, interlinked culture we navigate today. Perplexity and complexity are replaced with the desire for a “frictionless” space of circulation:

7. Grant Bollmer and Katherine Guinness, *The Influencer Factory: A Marxist Theory of Corporate Personhood on YouTube* (Stanford University Press, 2024).

8. Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Society of Control,” *October* 59 (1992), 7.

9. See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991).

10. Jean-Luc Nancy, *After Fukushima: The Equivalence of Catastrophes*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Fordham University Press, 2015).

The tragedy of modernity is resolved inside the metaverse. It diagnoses the real problem of current day widespread malaise of alienation, loneliness, atomization, obsolescence, underemployment, and appears to prescribe a treatment—a magical circuit that leads us back to youth and belonging in a frictionless virtual world. The old world is dead. Long live the old world. . . . However, nested inside this ad in its comforting imagery, in a place deeper than subtext . . . perhaps we should call it the corporate subconscious, a commercial dream realm from which meaning bursts forth against the will or intention of any board member, PR expert, or marketing firm . . .<sup>11</sup>

Of course, this goal of a “frictionless virtual world” derives directly from Bill Gates’s oft-cited dream of “friction-free capitalism,” outlined in his 1995 book *The Road Ahead*. Gates writes:

The Internet will extend the electronic marketplace and become the ultimate go-between, the universal middleman. . . . All the goods for sale in the world will be available for you to examine, compare, and, often, customize. When you want to buy something, you’ll be able to tell your computer to find it for you at the best price offered by any acceptable source or ask your computer to “haggle” with the computers of various sellers. . . . We’ll find ourselves in a new world of low-friction, low-overhead capitalism, in which market information will be plentiful and transaction costs low. It will be a shopper’s heaven.<sup>12</sup>

As if. We can think back, again, to the multiplicity of aesthetics that can be seen online, in which Gates’s dream of total personalization leads to a complete fragmentation of common sense and a proliferation of minor aesthetics. To be sure, digital capital seems to desire a “friction-free” exchange, in which capital circulates free of material attachment. But in practice, this has led to the undermining of countless businesses and corporations through private equity, environmental destruction, and, directly following Gates’s predictions, a shopper’s hell in which automated bots are buying all the products and ratcheting up prices on resale platforms. The demand to eliminate “friction” at the level of finance has increased the “friction” for human beings, increasingly locked out of a system not built for them but instead built entirely for the movement of capital. What does “frictionless” anything do? Does it provide the freedom Gates promises and assumes? There is, indeed, freedom. As Dial and Baker write, “At stake, here, is undoubtedly freedom—the freedoms of corporations to extract without consequence and conscience, to innovate beyond the human, to create an always ready and docile surrogate for labor, and to push aside, maybe forever, the annoying prospect of talent acquisition and retention.”

This is, perhaps, another form of perplexity—a separation of one from the world or worlds we were promised. This is further evidenced by reading Gates’s book today. Let’s take his 1995 position on the environment and climate disaster: “Environmental problems and resource shortages must be taken seriously too, but I think many doomsayers

11. Jacob Hurwitz-Goodman, *Syzygy*, 2022, <https://dis.art/syzygy>.

12. Bill Gates, *The Road Ahead* (Viking, 1995), 181.

vastly underestimate the potential of technology to help us overcome these problems.”<sup>13</sup> Gary Chapman, in a review of *The Road Ahead* in the *Los Angeles Times* says the book suggests, “The environmental benefits of this digital economy could also be significant. If computer users download their software from a network, instead of getting it on the nearly 1 billion floppy diskettes we use every year, the software industry could approach the ‘zero impact’ standard of environmental quality.”<sup>14</sup> Today, nearly thirty years later, Gates has written another book, *How to Avoid A Climate Disaster: The Solutions We Have and the Breakthroughs We Need* (2022), and is currently (as of the writing of this introduction) breaking ground on a nuclear power plant in Wyoming in order to fuel the accelerating demand for power to operate generative AI.<sup>15</sup>

Friction, we claim, might slow one down and keep us curious. As we will detail, neither friction nor perplexity seem highly valued today. Ludwig Wittgenstein outlines perplexity as a condition of friction, which itself must be negotiated: “We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground!”<sup>16</sup>

#### THE PHILOSOPHICAL HISTORY OF PERPLEXITY AND APORIA

Perplexity, its rough, frictional ground, has a long philosophical history, appearing in Plato’s dialogue *Meno* as the condition brought about by Socratic questioning. *Meno*, named after the political figure from the city of Pharsalus, is initially a Socratic dialogue about the nature of virtue (*aretê*) and the ability to learn or teach virtue. The titular Meno confronts Socrates about how virtue is taught and acquired, to which Socrates responds by asking Meno to define virtue. One way of reading *Meno* is as an argument meant to show Meno what he doesn’t know—Meno can only define virtue in a contradictory way, and Socrates shows how Meno’s presumptions about virtue rest on a more foundational paradox: “A man cannot enquire either about that which he knows, or about that which he does not know; for if he knows, he has no need to enquire; and if not, he cannot; for he does not know the very subject about which he is to enquire.”<sup>17</sup> It is this paradox that drives Meno into a state of perplexity.

13. Gates, *The Road Ahead*, 291.

14. Gary Chapman, “‘Friction-Free’ Economy Rhetoric Holds a Time Bomb,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 11, 1996, [www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-01-11-fi-23355-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-01-11-fi-23355-story.html).

15. To be fair, Gates claims he is resorting to nuclear power to decrease carbon emissions. But claims for this echo his older techno-futurist determinism: “This is a big step toward safe, abundant, zero-carbon energy,” Gates said. “And it’s important for the future of this country that projects like this succeed.” Jennifer McDermott, “In Wyoming, Bill Gates moves ahead with nuclear project aimed at revolutionizing power generation,” *AP News*, June 10, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/bill-gates-nuclear-terrapower-wyoming-climate-change-electricity-23176f33200b22b9ede7f4ccf4f2ec3b#:~:text=Gates%20told%20the%20audience%20at,that%20projects%20like%20this%20succeed>.

16. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), Sec. 107, 51.

17. Plato, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 3, *Lysis. Symposium. Gorgias*, trans. W.R.M. Lamb (Harvard University Press and William Heinemann Ltd., 1981), 80.

Perplexity, as the outcome of this philosophical method, unseats beliefs and garners additional puzzlement. But puzzlement is often solution-oriented, focused on intellectual reconciliation—Plato’s solution to the state of perplexity in *Meno* is to define learning as a remembering, or *anamnesis*, of eternal, transcendent forms, making perplexity into a process uncovering that which is always-already present before birth. Perplexity becomes a problem to solve, a state to be avoided or resolved.

These solutions themselves have a counterpart today in contemporary definitions of perplexity. In information theory and artificial intelligence, perplexity refers to a statistical measure of probability in a large language model. The higher the perplexity, the more confused or surprised a model is when given new text. The lower the perplexity, the better the model is at predicting. Perplexity becomes an instrumental measurement rather than a route to eternal truths. And this doesn’t even refer to the confusion an observer may have when encountering the uncanny output of an artificial intelligence. The attempt to reduce perplexity only generates more, and different, perplexities.

Perplexity then, instead of leading toward answers to oft-unasked questions, is most productive when seen as a time before the puzzling happens—a condition that remains deep in the mire and all that mire entails. It’s about process, the conditions that lead to an epiphany without the “Eureka!” moment, just the feeling of something there, about to be discovered and unveiled. Perplexity is like being in a state of sensory deprivation, and not knowing whether your eyes are adjusting to the dark so that you can see *something* out there, eventually, or if it’s just the Ganzfeld effect forming hallucinations as your brain compensates for the lack of sensory stimulation.<sup>18</sup>

The lack of ends, here, is essential. In his *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin juxtaposes a myriad of texts, histories, lived experiences, objects, and images—not to “remember” the past, not to recall eternal truth out of confusion, but to awaken *from* the past in the present to produce something new. He writes: “It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation.”<sup>19</sup> For Benjamin, this practice was not designed to form cohesive wholes, but to revel in *non-synthesis*. Samuel Weber writes that “all of Benjamin’s writing and thinking can be productively studied in light of the task of elaborating the ‘non-synthesis’ of . . . concepts in one another.”<sup>20</sup> Through these non-synthetic images, or “dialectical images,”<sup>21</sup>

18. The Ganzfeld effect is a perceptual phenomenon in which the brain amplifies neural noise to look for missing signals when a lack of stimulation, or an unstructured and uniform stimulation field, is presented. This can cause visual hallucinations.

19. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Belknap Press, 2002) [N3, 1], 463.

20. Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s -abilities* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 119–20.

21. A dialectical image, which can produce an awakening, often works by bringing two or more objects, images, ideas, etc., together; making us look and thus understand more about each, casting them and an entire history of creative production in a new light. “In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural [*bildlich*]. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical—that is, not archaic—images. The image that is read—which is to say the image in the now of its recognizability—bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded.” Benjamin, *Arcades Project* [N3, 1], 463.



Benjamin feels the past can be brought into the present (the “then” to the “now”), producing “awakenings,” resisting simplistic, incorrect, and teleological narratives of progress—or, we might suggest, harnessing the perplexity that comes from juxtaposition not to reveal eternal forms, but to free ourselves from their determination by producing a state of suspension without resolution. We embrace these connotations of perplexity: of mire with embarrassment, of bogginess with deep-woods bewilderment. How might it be possible to enter into this state? To live in it?

The classical strategy for evoking perplexity, or of wading through the mire, or perhaps, at the very least, bringing us closer to our definition of perplexity and its relationship to aesthetics, is *aporia*. This is the position that Socrates imposes on Meno. An aporetic argument, generally, is one that “generates a state of puzzlement . . . by way of the equality of opposite reasonings, that is, by way of a problem or difficulty . . . put forward in the course of philosophical investigation.”<sup>22</sup> Defined in a variety of ways by a variety of scholars, any definition of *aporia* is slippery as well. Jacques Derrida, for instance, saw them as “knots” within institutions—including philosophy and the legal system.<sup>23</sup> According to philosopher Jeffrey Leonard Welaish, “The intellect is brought to impasse by its own flawed way of conceiving things. *Aporia* emerges as the motivating factor in the mind’s transcendence of the lower levels of the divided line. Hence, it is the necessary concomitant of properly dialectical thought.”<sup>24</sup> Yet, again, we have a problem: truth is too often found in the resolution of *aporia*. The state induced here is, we think, unlivable. It presents a barrier that must be lifted, and experience that cannot persist.

Although perplexity and *aporia* are comingled, we do not want to conflate them. For our purposes, we’ll define it thusly: perplexity names the experience; *aporia* names the object. One might point and say “yes, this is an *aporia*” (even though one could imagine a state in which defining an *aporia* is itself undecidable), but one does not experience the aporetic. Perplexity is the experience, the sensation, while *aporia* is that which causes the experience. Theorist Peter Schwankl, in a 1967 essay titled “On the Phenomenon of Perplexity,” writes that, “There are no actions *of* perplexity, only actions *through* perplexity.”<sup>25</sup> And, beware! As Wittgenstein—another aporetic philosopher known for arguing through his perplexity—warns, the sensation is not in the object itself, and so the *aporia* does not hold perplexity, does not cause it innately. In fact, the experience of perplexity is the fact that one cannot say the object caused the experience at all.

But what does this process feel like in practice? What *is* the experience? And what can we glean about aesthetics as experience versus aesthetics as collective judgement? Perplexity does not seem to be something one would seek out actively or enjoy greatly. (Unless

22. Máté Veres, Review of George Karamanolis and Vasilis Politis, *The Aporetic Tradition in Ancient Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 319, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, <https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2018/2018.11.08>.

23. Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford University Press, 1993).

24. Jeffrey Leonard Welaish, “The Significance of Plato’s Use of ‘*Aporia*” (PhD diss., Bryn Mawr College, 1980).

25. Peter Schwankl, “On the Phenomenon of Perplexity,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 27, no. 4 (1967), 554.

one is, perhaps, a theorist or philosopher.) Perplexity and frustration are, at first, similar emotions. Schwankl describes a state of perplexity as an unpleasant “river . . .”<sup>26</sup> One is met with an object (be it an event, person, anything) they do not comprehend. Frustration, however, stops here. One becomes angry at their lack of understanding, sees no way out or through, and that is the end. Derrida places perplexity and irritation at about the same height, when writing of first meeting his friend Jean-Marie Benoist: “During our first encounters at the École Normale in 1964, I remember having felt some perplexity, along with a sort of irritated concern.”<sup>27</sup> He says this perplexity transformed to “complicity,” to “warm fidelity,” and doesn’t bother to detail the transition, the working through of the person whose memorial he writes in that essay.

The process of puzzling is the space of perplexity. As soon as one understands, they are through, done with this experience, this process. The perplexity disappears. If a problem has no answer, then one remains perplexed. (Additionally, if a problem is of such little consequence or exists only to perplex, or the answer would be unsatisfying, then even if an answer is found, one can remain perplexed. We’ll return to this later.) The epiphany after the perplexing incident, the other side of having worked through a great confusion or problem, that is where the satisfaction and after-exercise endorphins lie. And when one achieves this level of satisfaction, the state of perplexity is, more often than not, forgotten.

#### LIVING IN PERPLEXITY

Is perplexity always unpleasant? What might it look like for a perplexing experience to remain unresolved? Here is an example of an aporia, perhaps, that I sought out and willingly paid for: a work of art by James Turrell entitled *Unseen Seen + Weight of Darkness* (2017). The work, the largest of Turrell’s perceptual cells,<sup>28</sup> delighted me, amazed me, changed me—I wanted to talk to everyone about it, and yet I couldn’t. When trying to explain why this piece was so significant, I found myself at a loss. I forced discussion of it into emails that had nothing to do with art, or work, or artwork—yet I never had the words to explain it to others, or the understanding within myself of why it mattered so much. And I probably, here, still don’t. The work is housed at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Tasmania, whose website simply explains “Take your neural battering lying down,”<sup>29</sup> and lets you know the work lasts about 45 minutes, and cost 25 dollars to experience, and has a “hard” and a “soft” setting.

Critics who have reviewed the work are also at a loss: “There’s no way of accurately describing the experience . . . and capturing its full richness and magic,” writes Ben

26. Schwankl, “On the Phenomenon of Perplexity,” 555.

27. Jacques Derrida, “The Taste of Tears,” in *The Work of Mourning*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (University of Chicago Press, 2001), 108.

28. James Turrell’s perceptual cells are (usually) freestanding enclosures in which a viewer can sit or lie down while experiencing a program of lights designed by the artist.

29. MONA, *Unseen Seen + Weight of Darkness*, <https://mona.net.au/stuff-to-do/art/unseen-seen>.

Neutze. Brigid Delaney wrote that it, “seemed to rearrange my neurons, and completely still my mind.”<sup>30</sup> She went on to explain that the work was so overwhelming that she bonded with the stranger she experienced it with (*Unseen Seen* can hold two people, both lying down) for the rest of her museum visit, and they remain friends to this day. Curator Jarrod Rawlins says the work is, “life-changing,”<sup>31</sup> and Seph Rodney called the perceptual cell work, “difficult to reconstruct in language, because I essentially entered a fugue state.”<sup>32</sup> Most reviews, and even the museum workers, dressed in lab coats, who guided me through signing exhaustive waivers, tend to use the language of David Walsh, the owner of MONA who commissioned the work. “David said that when he first experienced this work, he could see the inside of his eyeballs, and also the color of his thoughts,” explained Dan, the docent helping me, who also recommended the “hard” setting and let me know that, while I couldn’t shut the work out by shutting my eyes to it—“you’ll still see it, even with your eyes closed”—I could put my hands over my eyes or push the panic button he then handed me.

The first stage of the work, the optical cell titled *Unseen Seen*, lasts about twenty minutes. From the moment it began I could, indeed, see the inside of my eyes, and began to giggle uncontrollably. Within the first fifteen seconds I was sure I would need to press the panic button and end the experience, but I did what I do when overwhelmed (I happen to love an overwhelming experience—hot yoga, cold plunges): I breathed through it, told myself I wasn’t dying, and eventually lost all sense of time. When the work ended, I was left with the realization that I had no idea what color was, and that it had only felt like two or three minutes, not twenty. The second half of the work, *Weight of Darkness*, consists of being led into a completely dark room, and then staring into darkness for another twenty minutes in an attempt to hallucinate.<sup>33</sup> When the entire work was over, I rushed to a seating area to decompress and discuss with my partner, who I had experienced the work with, and yet we had nothing to say. “I feel like I’ve taken two Klonopin,” was all I could muster. But that wasn’t true. I felt *good* and I felt *happy*. But it was also less those emotions and more in my body. Why did I resort to drug metaphors? It’s common, with Neutze writing that, “the technician told me this would be the closest . . . I would ever come to a 1960s acid trip . . .”<sup>34</sup> Margaret Gordon writes that, “Viewing this work is as close as possible to a hallucinogenic experience without

30. Ben Neutze, “We spent 15 minutes inside MONA’s new ‘perceptual cell,’” *TimeOut*, January 23, 2018, [www.timeout.com/melbourne/news/we-spent-15-minutes-inside-monas-new-perceptual-cell-012418](http://www.timeout.com/melbourne/news/we-spent-15-minutes-inside-monas-new-perceptual-cell-012418). Brigid Delaney, “Blinded by the light: James Turrell obliterates the senses in stunning new MONA wing,” *The Guardian*, January 25, 2018, [www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/jan/26/blinded-by-the-light-james-turrell-obliterates-the-senses-in-stunning-new-mona-wing](http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/jan/26/blinded-by-the-light-james-turrell-obliterates-the-senses-in-stunning-new-mona-wing).

31. Tim Stone, “In pictures: the hallucinatory new Pharos wing at Tasmania’s Museum of Old and New Art,” *The Art Newspaper*, July 11, 2018, [https://varenne.art/usr/documents/press/download\\_url/358/in-pictures-the-hallucinatory-new-pharos-wing-at-tasmania-s-museum-of-old-and-new-art-the-art-newspaper.pdf](https://varenne.art/usr/documents/press/download_url/358/in-pictures-the-hallucinatory-new-pharos-wing-at-tasmania-s-museum-of-old-and-new-art-the-art-newspaper.pdf).

32. Seph Rodney, “Disappearing in One of James Turrell’s Perceptual Cells,” *Hyperallergic*, October 17, 2016, <https://hyperallergic.com/309971/disappearing-one-james-turrells-perceptual-cells>.

33. Another reference to the Ganzfeld Effect. Perhaps there is something innately perplexing about this occurrence.

34. Neutze, “We spent 15 minutes.”

substances.”<sup>35</sup> Why do we supplant bodily sensation with substances? Are they a way of universalizing phenomenological experience?

This isn't a case of what you can imagine being greater than reality. It's not the *Pulp Fiction* briefcase loot or Cthulhu, the aesthetics of the “weird” or the “eerie,” which, to use the words of Mark Fisher, has “to do with a fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience.”<sup>36</sup> It's a matter of translation, the utter inability to translate one's phenomenological experience to another medium that can communicate this experience from one to another. The explanations for the Turrell artwork are more perplexing than helpful—they can't get to the object; the experience cannot be transmitted. And thus, a sense of frustration. Beyond attempting translation of experience, frustration also arises when we assume experiences do not need translation.

Like knowing what you don't know, seeing one's own eyeballs, the primary vehicle of sight, seems impossible. It's like tasting one's own tongue. Attempt to do either and you may fall into an aporetic exhaustion. In fact, the question of “can you taste your own tongue?” has become my favorite way to induce instant perplexity. (Whomever I ask it of immediately furrows their brow and frowns: perplexity-face.) And even if an answer *can* be found it is so absurd, or of so little consequence, that one could remain perplexed. The answer is not the point, it's the puzzling. (I don't want to solve this problem; I don't want to taste my own tongue.)

While perplexity isn't necessarily pleasant, it is necessary. Universalizing phenomenological experiences, especially through language, generally doesn't end well or effectively and should be avoided. Luce Irigaray warns that, “If we continue to speak the same language to each other, we will reproduce the same story.” And, “If we continue to speak this sameness, if we speak to each other as men have spoken for centuries, as they taught us to speak, we will fail each other.”<sup>37</sup> And Schwankl writes, “A man cannot become perplexed, if he is confronted only with himself.”<sup>38</sup> Frustration, which is perplexity without a search for understanding, leads to anger and violence. But a lack of aporia (the object which brings about the frustration or perplexity in the first place) creates a failing, flattening sameness. If we're not challenged, if we smooth everything over, how can we ever grow? How can we ever begin to know what we don't know—which includes everyone else and their experiences?

## PERPLEXITY AND OTHERNESS

Perplexity as an aesthetic experience saturates the context of an encounter between self and other. As Sara Ahmed articulates it, an encounter is a meeting characterized by

35. Margaret Gordon, “MONA's new wing Pharos highlights things to come,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 6, 2018, [www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/beam-for-change-flux-and-light-take-wing-at-mona-20180306-hox2fs.html](http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/beam-for-change-flux-and-light-take-wing-at-mona-20180306-hox2fs.html).

36. Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (Repeater Press, 2017), 8.

37. Luce Irigaray, “When Our Lips Speak Together,” *Signs* 6, no. 1 (1980), 69.

38. Schwankl, “On the Phenomenon of Perplexity,” 553.

“surprise and conflict” that involves “processes of inclusion and exclusion, or incorporation and expulsion, that constitute the boundaries of bodies and communities.”<sup>39</sup> Perplexity troubles the operation of social histories and political processes that determine and depend upon the ontological formation of a figure who is always already outside the bounds of subjectivity and sovereignty—a stranger, as Ahmed theorizes.

However, a rhetoric of confusion is often wielded politically to reinscribe these boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexuality and to construct strangers. In the context of proliferating attacks on LGBTQ+ rights, conservative and reactionary institutions and politicians have decried non-normative gender identities as confusing.<sup>40</sup> As part of fascistic policies to control LGBTQ+ folks and children especially, politicians advancing anti-LGBTQ legislation accuse teachers of “[delighting] in causing confusion” for their students; in these instances, Republican lawmakers describe these bills as “common sense” and position their self-proclaimed rationality against the purportedly chaotic confusion created and perpetuated by the so-called liberal gender ideologues.<sup>41</sup> Here, that expression that is so central to Enlightenment (especially Kantian) aesthetic theory—common sense, *sensus communis*—is weaponized against marginalized groups.

But the senses have never been commonly held, and communality has been systematically denied to women, queer, trans, and non-white people. Following cultural theorists including Ahmed and Ngai, we understand that perplexity, as an aesthetic category, prompts feelings toward objects, people, and phenomena, but perplexity also creates specific modes of relationality that navigate the conflictual and exclusionary social structures that produce others. For Ngai, minor aesthetic categories “are compelling reminders of the general fact of social difference and conflict underlying the entire system of aesthetic judgment or taste, making that underlying condition transparent in ways in which many other aesthetic categories do not.”<sup>42</sup> Certitude, if taken as perplexity’s opposite, was or is the province of those in positions of power, and nostalgia or anxiety about its supposed disappearance exposes the differential access to certainty as an epistemological option or guarantee and the fallacy of truth’s universality.

While perplexity is always at risk of cooptation or manipulation by power, contributions in this issue demonstrate that perplexity’s staging of a confrontation between self and other may destabilize the very ontological categories that define “us” against “them” and “self” against “other.” Dial and Baker’s articulation of the aural aesthetics of the

39. Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (Routledge, 2000), 6.

40. “Mapping Attacks on LGBTQ Rights in U.S. State Legislatures in 2024,” American Civil Liberties Union, [www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights-2024](http://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights-2024). And, unfortunately, this prejudice and hateful rhetoric isn’t limited to the “right wing” or Republicans. A 2022 National Public Radio/Ipsos poll showed that 63% of the organization’s presumed left-leaning listeners were either “somewhat” or “strongly” opposed to allowing transgender athletes to participate in sports teams. “Americans are deeply divided on transgender rights, a poll shows,” NPR, June 29, 2022, [www.npr.org/2022/06/29/1107484965/transgender-athletes-trans-rights-gender-transition-poll](http://www.npr.org/2022/06/29/1107484965/transgender-athletes-trans-rights-gender-transition-poll).

41. Wesley Muller, “Don’t Say Gay’ bill gains traction in Louisiana,” *Louisiana Illuminator*, April 26, 2023, <https://lailluminator.com/2023/04/26/dont-say-gay-bill-gains-traction-in-louisiana>; Arleigh Rodgers, “Indiana ‘Don’t Say Gay’ bill pivots to kids’ gender identity,” *Associated Press News*, February 20, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/sex-education-teaching-indiana-gender-711a50c7b385dae68795889d07c2bcde>.

42. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 11.

scratch and mixing suggests how perplexity affectively works toward the halting of digital, racial capitalism and the extraction of Blackness for corporate profit. The scratch, as Dial and Baker argue, is a praxis of embodied touch, suspended mechanical operation, and sonic disruption that sustains relational links between those who are systematically othered while rejecting or remaking capitalist injunctions to reproducibility and hypervisibility. Perplexing and interruptive, the scratch binds and braids existing sounds to create new rhythms and invite connection beyond normative (i.e., white, capitalist) recognition. As Dial and Baker write, “When swift, agile fingers dance along jogwheels and vinyl turntables, twisting knobs and sliding levers, we hear it as vibes—an always fly, brush-the-dirt-off-ya-shoulders transgression and revolt against empire’s demand for incarceration within the cells of ordered grids.”

Perplexity as a protective condition and a mode of refusal is also addressed in Nina Peterson’s contribution, which argues that Yoko Ono’s *Film No. 4* (1966) confounds imperialist inscriptions of race, gender, and sexuality in the discourses surrounding the involvement of the United States in the Vietnam War. Audio in the film raises questions about its own representation of race, but the visuals respond with obfuscation. As a series of close-ups of buttocks that form constantly shifting quadrants, the film parodies the visual tools—the camera and the grid—historically used to construct the Western model of the human against the colonized or exotic other.

Against imperialist knowledge systems and visual regimes, which rely on logics of possession, extraction, and capture, Levin positions the embodied camerawork of Ana Vaz’s films. Sonic and imagistic buoyancy and narrative incompleteness—the sounds of lapping water, pictures of inverted geographies, unresolved storylines and histories—characterize the aesthetics of perplexity that “entail ecstatic leaps, repetitions, reversals, evasions, animations, suspensions, and moments of profound uncertainty.” And how might rethinking long overused, co-opted, corporatized methods of protection and refusal aid in our call for perplexity?

#### PERPLEXITY AS AN AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

The problem of perplexity strikes at the heart of almost all debates about aesthetic judgment since Immanuel Kant. As Kant writes in his third critique, the judgment of taste has something “strange and anomalous” about it, which is that the feeling one gets from a work of art “is not an empirical concept but rather a feeling of pleasure (consequently not a concept at all) which, through the judgment of taste, is nevertheless to be expected of everyone and connected with its representation, just as if it were a predicate associated with the cognition of the object.”<sup>43</sup> For Kant, aesthetic judgement demands that I must somehow communicate and make universal what I like or dislike. The *sensus communis*—to return to our themes from earlier—is a transcendental a priori for judgment, and it is this common sense that guides almost all liberal interpretations of the aesthetic descending from Kant. Art is important because the ability to sense and judge

43. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, third critique (Oxford University Press, 2009), 77.

together, communicating our experiences and coming to the same conclusions, is that which guides our commonality and universality as shared members of the liberal public.<sup>44</sup>

For this Kantian liberalism, the ability to communicate sensation is essential, even though Kant recognizes that the words we use are not equivalent to the sensation of the object. As he notes:

If one judges objects merely in accordance with concepts, then all representation of beauty is lost. Thus there can also be no rule in accordance with which someone could be compelled to acknowledge something as beautiful. Whether a garment, a house, a flower is beautiful: no one allows himself to be talked into his judgment about that by means of any grounds or fundamental principles. One wants to submit the object to his own eyes, just as if his satisfaction depended on sensation; and yet, if one then calls the object beautiful, one believes oneself to have a universal voice, and lays claim to the consent of everyone, whereas any private sensation would be decisive only for him alone and his satisfaction.<sup>45</sup>

As Ngai reads this passage, what Kant is doing is setting up a relation between words and images, concluding that, “Art, Kant is suggesting, should be analyzed in the same way we approach ordinary verbal communication, which if reversed suggests that ordinary ways of communicating aesthetic feeling can be analyzed as art-like artifacts.”<sup>46</sup> Or, to quote Blocker’s contribution, “I invite you to think with me about this light, and of art more broadly, as an object of epistemological orientation in a historical moment when the horizon has been shattered.”

Here is where an aesthetics of perplexity comes into play most—through experience that cannot be truly converted into language, through experience that cannot truly be universalized. As one critic writes of James Turrell, “His work is the sort not seen, but instead experienced.”<sup>47</sup> As our discussion of Turrell above suggests, the impossibility of communicating the experience of his perceptual cell leads one to metaphors that may be more easily communicated—taking drugs, impossible bodily experiences like seeing one’s own eyeballs. “Perplexing” becomes a judgment that universalizes a particular experience, but permits the specificity of that experience to escape, groping toward the “universal voice” of Kant, but never reaching it. Sensation remains private, and the inability to reach the universal leads to frustrations. Kantian judgment is about agreement and negotiating the problem of perplexity. If we all agree that this is beautiful, then we all agree that this particular aesthetic experience can be judged as beautiful. Perplexity is not something that can be agreed on. It is, by its very nature, agonistic and without synthesis. If Kantian judgment is about universality, perplexity refuses this universality. Wittgenstein explains that perplexity is the gap between aesthetic experience and the communication of that experience. But how is this not just the space of affect? While affect is itself

44. In her writing, Sianne Ngai attributes this to Hannah Arendt. See Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Harvard University Press, 2020), 18.

45. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, third critique, 10.

46. Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 21.

47. Delaney, “Blinded by the light.”

communicative, moving impersonally and circulating, perplexity sabotages this movement. It is confronting, but not confrontational. It sabotages, prevents, and cannot be located (thus opening gaps rather than smoothing movement as is the case with affective circulation).

The refusal of normative, universal categories of judgment leads us to suggest that perplexity is best understood as a minor aesthetic category. According to Rachel Longa, “the state of puzzlement necessitates some act of judgment. And . . . the active force of that judgment is the faculty of reason.”<sup>48</sup> But this would return us to the normative sense of aesthetic judgment provided by Kant. Perplexity registers more in line with Hayden White’s assertion: “Because the aim of interpretation is to create perplexity in the face of the real—not to clear it up. People who want the truth want to be able to wrap the event and put it away in the archives.”<sup>49</sup> White implies that perplexity may be used as an antifascistic force, something to remain elusive, or a mode of refusing the compulsions and delimitations of grand narrative versions of history. Perplexity is a condition for something to happen, a ground for epistemological—and political—transformation.

#### BACK TO THE ROUGH GROUND

We’ve already introduced many of the themes from the articles collected here. But the arguments woven throughout this introduction—about having knowledge or refusing it as “property,” about the confusion induced by the contemporary scale of obfuscated technology and capital, about conceptualizations of otherness that refuse to position difference as a problem to correct or eliminate—are all given more treatment and analysis in the essays that follow. Throughout, we hope to provide numerous perspectives on our aesthetics of perplexity—without settling on a singular definition or without ending with a problem solved, a puzzle answered.

Barghouty, in “Subliminal Supplements,” examines wellness and “healing” through social media “subliminals” videos, which manipulate sound and images to link particular sonic frequencies with messages of self-affirmation and self-improvement. Barghouty argues that even though these videos may seem perplexing, they relate to the manipulation and conditioning of experience at a level prior to conscious awareness, integrating the body and perception into systems of technical control.

Blocker presents us with a beautifully evocative meditation on Abinadi Meza’s 2007 video and sound installation *Beacon*, an abstract depiction of snow encircling a streetlamp. Blocker’s “Beacon: Epistemologies of the Art Object” presents a provocation to challenge discussions of orientation and disorientation in contemporary art, a goal regularly found scattered among gallery wall text and artist’s statements, in which art is positioned as a means to help “solve” any range of contemporary crises through its power to unsettle. Blocker moves disorientation away from its function as an ideological correction to

48. Rachel Longa, “Pedagogy and Perplexity: Reimagining the Role of the Poetic in Education,” *Philosophy of Education* 71 (2015), 389.

49. Hayden White, “The Aim of Interpretation Is to Create Perplexity in the Face of the Real: Hayden White in Conversation with Erlend Rogne,” *History and Theory* 48, no. 1 (2009), 74.



instead theorize contemporary art as a “beacon” that simultaneously warns and lures the viewer, a different epistemological goal than remedying the perception of the audience. Blocker’s “Beacon” wonders what it might look like to have disorientation that never truly settles—a perplexity that never resolves into an answer.

Peterson’s “Perplexity and Anti-Vietnam War Protest in Yoko Ono’s *Film No. 4*” examines how this work—a video of closely cropped posteriors walking on a treadmill—could serve as a form of antiwar activism, as Ono intended it to be. Drawing out a range of historical and contextual lines that come together in *Film No. 4*, Peterson argues that Ono’s perplexing antiwar intervention should be situated within a range of national, racial, and gender-based narratives that interweave larger protests against imperialist violence.

Erica Levin’s “To Assemble Is to Think Through This World” draws out perplexity as an alternative to attempts to “know,” as knowledge has been a perpetual tool in the history of colonial violence. Through an analysis of the Brazilian filmmaker Ana Vaz’s *América: Bahía de las Flechas* [America: Bay of Arrows] (2016), *Há Terra!* [There is Land!] (2016), and *Apiyemiyekí?* (2019), all short films concerned with struggles over land, Levin argues that Vaz’s cinematic techniques enable a refusal of knowledge as something one can own or possess. As Levin cites Vaz, what would it look like to make “a cinema that embraces the possibilities of other forms of experience-as-narrative to awaken our subjective, libidinal, and political imaginaries outside the inscriptions of the capitalist-colonial unconscious”? Levin argues that Vaz’s films attempt a kind of perplexity without resolution, and how an aesthetics of perplexity could be harnessed as a way to resist colonial dominance over knowledge as something one can possess.

Dial and Baker’s “Algo(rhythms)” examines Blackness and its colonial appropriation through the case of FN Meka, a robot rapper, along with other holographic, digitized representations of Black musical production. They ask, what does it mean to technically simulate Blackness? And what can be done to resist this simulation? Dial and Baker attempt to answer this question through a critical making project in which DJ and audience interact in a way that does not only rely on the simulation of racial signifiers. What does it mean to transform Blackness into one of the “smooth,” exchangeable commodities we’ve described in this introduction—making racial otherness just another set of informational properties that can be applied and harnessed in the name of capitalist value? And what might it mean to create a project that, in the process of refusing the dominant articulations of digital culture, ends up also refusing norms of traditional academic scholarship and “acceptable” campus activities?

Bollmer’s “Perplexing Intelligence” examines the opposition between perplexity as this special issue has been generally defining it and perplexity as a statistical measure derived from Claude Shannon’s information theory. Emphasizing the statistical foundations of contemporary AI, Bollmer ultimately claims that the processes of today’s digital culture are about reducing and limiting the possibilities of perplexity as an aesthetic experience, attempting to ensure that humans will never have to encounter something that they find baffling, strange, or confronting.

What to do in the face of a world that demands answers, that desires smoothness and friction-free movement? “Back to the rough ground!”<sup>50</sup> This is the aim of the essays collected in this special issue. ■

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50. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 51.