Beyond the Line, or a Political Geometry of Contemporary Art

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IN MEMORY OF P.L. DE BRUYN

Two incongruous points of departure gave rise to the following speculations on the notion of a political geometry and its relevance to contemporary art. The first is a remarkable painting by Florian Pumhösl of 2005: a single, black line that coils across a white ground. The second is a crucial passage in Carl Schmitt’s *The Nomos of the Earth*, where the legal scholar coins the resonant phrase, “global linear thinking.” The image and the text have no immediate kinship, yet they both raise questions concerning the kinds of pathways or lines, both lawful and clandestine, that have been inscribed and can be drawn upon the globe. Quite literally, the problem is one of geo-metricity; that is, not geometry as the universal science defined as a “branch of mathematics concerned with the properties and relations of points, lines, surfaces, and solids,” but geometry as a social technology that maps political and juridical boundaries upon the surface of the earth. This historicity of geometry is not only to be understood as immanent to an actual practice of political cartography; it also allows us, in turn, to plot the conceptual diagram of power within contemporary society. In short, political geometry will refer in this essay to actual lines and figures, whether drawn upon the earth or a pictorial surface, as well as to the spatial formations of sociopolitical forces as they emerge and transform themselves within history.

What Is a Line?

To begin, I present a deceptively simple image by the Austrian artist Florian Pumhösl: a single curving line etched in stark relief against a white background. What would an animated version of this image look like? Entering the picture plane from behind the left frame, the line curves across the surface and then begins to coil upon itself. As the loop tightens, the contours of two elliptical figures are outlined, one superimposed upon the other. However, before the line becomes fully ensnared in its own rotating motion, fastening itself into a knot from which it cannot
escape, it sweeps around one more time in order to course back to its initial point of entry. Yet, before the line reaches its final destination it comes to a sudden end, expiring in full flight upon the white surface.

Our first question must be, “What kind of line is this?” To the extent that Pumhösl’s line appears to propel itself forward as an autonomous agent, it resembles what Paul Klee calls an active line. In the Pedagogical Sketchbook (1925), based on his course at the Bauhaus, the Swiss artist defines an active line as moving freely in space, taking “a walk for a walk’s sake.” An active line is “free” to the extent that its inflections are not curbed by any exterior force or impeded by any obstacle placed in its path. Nothing exists to obstruct the progress of such a meandering line, since the very movement of the active line gives birth to space. The active line is abstract in the truest sense of the word, because as a pure vector of movement it remains beyond the geometric coordinates of any stable system of representation. Yet to what extent does Pumhösl’s graphic trace achieve such an autonomous status? His line alters its character once it commences to retrace its own path, twisting around itself. At this moment, its identity changes. The line creates a planar effect through the tracing of a geometric figure. Klee has another name for such a graphic trace: a medial line. If the active line exists beyond representational space, the medial line inheres within a geometric space. Active and medial lines may convert into each other, and Pumhösl’s line alters its properties three times: at the end, it spins off again, dropping its medial function and resuming its autonomous path.

What has remained in the shadows in this account of lineal transformation, however, is a more essential mode of spatial transformation. From active to medial line, the relationship between figure and ground is fundamentally altered: figure and ground enter into a determinate, geometric set of spatial connections. The medial line adheres to a coherent, planar surface, whereas the active line provides no sense of dimensionality or measurement. A dual set of spatial terms has therefore been tacitly introduced in our analysis, which can be elaborated through Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s distinction between “striated and “smooth” space. Deleuze and Guattari took Klee as a point of departure to propose not two but three kinds of line. In turn, I take the different spatial properties of these three lines as a starting point for investigating the notion of political geometry in art, since Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of territorialization offers an initial bridge between formal and political understandings of the line.

In the typology offered by Deleuze and Guattari, Klee’s medial line is the easiest to define; it corresponds to what they call a “segmentary” line, which marks bound-
aries, delineates contours, links locations, and establishes distances. By means of a segmentary line the properties of a territorial area become measurable in more than one sense; space assumes a metric dimension, whether we consider this in terms of cartographic scale or monetary value (i.e., land rent or wage distribution). Only within a homogenous system governed by fixed coordinates can one draw a segmentary line. Its counterpart, to a certain degree, is the “supple” line that is not strictly opposed to the segmentary line but is entangled with it. The supple line coexists with the segmentary line and crosses over into it. As such, the supple line constitutes another kind of segmentarity, one that is less rigid, one where a fluctuating, micropolitical realm of “fine segmentations” exists that operate at an angle or within the interstices of a totalized space of rigid segmentation. If linear segmentarity (re)territorializes space, feeding into “a machine of overcoding that constitutes more geometrico homogenous space and extracts segments that are determinate as to their substance, form, and relation,” then a supple linearity deterritorializes and decodes space. Or, rather, it constitutes a micrological, unstable space of force relations, a threshold that resides between the state apparatus of sovereign power and an ungovernable, turbulent outside of mutation, multitudes, and flows that escape quantification. Think, for instance, of the segmentary character of payment-money versus the creative-destructive flows of credit-money. The contemporary, speculative practice of high-frequency trading is a good example of how capitalism attempts to exploit the supple segmentarity of financial space, but it also clarifies how even the most fine-grained, mathematical mechanisms of computation can never bring the incalculable “quanta” of economic flux under control.

If the supple line belongs to the microtextural realm of the social fabric, a knotty dimension within the overall, geometric pattern, then the third line, the “line of flight,” unravels the weave altogether. This Deleuzian line of flight is what resembles the active line of Klee most closely: it “does not go from one point to another, but runs between points in a different direction that renders them indiscernible.” This line is without coordinates—“it always begins off the painting”—confusing all relationships of inside and outside, foreground and background, surface and depth, merging with a “plane of consistency upon which it floats and that it creates.” A line without a stable background, it is without localizable connection and lacks not only any representative aspect “but any function of outlining a form of any kind.” The line of flight rushes headlong, that is, into the molecular
space of pure flow, an undifferentiated, formless “plane of consistency” in which the very phenomenon, if not concept, of the line as such must dissolve.¹¹

Pumhösl’s drawing goes quite far in presenting a visual model of the disappearing line of flight, yet also illustrates the two basic modes of a striated and supple spatiality. We are still at a loss, however, to determine the possible cause of this line. Pumhösl’s line appears to have a will of its own, pushing itself beyond the frame to which it may be attached but which does not determine its shape. This line is not a particularly elegant line—no artfulness is involved—but it is no random or spontaneous mark either. Indeed the line has been executed with painstaking precision in a rather unusual technique, reverse glass painting (Hinterglasmalerie). Furthermore, this line has been literally mapped onto the smooth surface of the glass. Its historical referent can be deduced from the German title of the painting: Schlacht von Manila Bay (Wendemanöver).¹²

Manila Bay

And so it stands revealed: Pumhösl’s abstract line refers to a specific historical event; namely, the maneuver of the U.S. Asiatic fleet as it engaged and destroyed the Spanish Pacific fleet at the beginning of the Spanish-American War on May 1, 1898. The triple loop retraces the course of the American squadron as it repeatedly doubled back on itself in order to shell the Spanish warships within the enclosed Bay of Manila. Yet if we compare this painting to, for instance, the map of the same battle in the Historical Atlas of the U.S. Navy, we see that Pumhösl has eliminated all topographical features: the coastal outline, the coordinates of longitude and latitude, the geographical scale, and, significantly, the successive points along the fleet’s path which log its exact time of passage.¹³ And, therefore, what appeared at first sight to be a pure, abstract line inhabiting a topological space of its own is, in fact, nothing of the kind. Pumhösl draws our attention to the ambivalent status of this line by deliberately obliterating certain historical and geographic details from the painting. The line is both supple and segmentary, active and medial. This overlapping of different geometric regimes in the same image is the object of my fascination. More specifically, it is the vexing manner in which this singular line is entangled with the political geometries of both modernist painting and maritime space that interests me in the present context.

The reference to the Battle of Manila Bay is significant for two reasons: first, because it reveals that the space within Pumhösl’s painting cannot, strictly speaking, be described in aesthetic terms, since its abstract ground is no ground at all—
it is a sea from which all coastal landmarks have been eradicated; second, because it suggests how the possible relationship between abstract and social diagrams can be historicized while avoiding the pitfalls of a reflectionist theory of artistic representation. That is, what is important here is not the referential content of the line as such. The line is not just the literal trace of a particular historical event. Rather, it functions as the historical index of a specific political geometry. What the line demonstrates is a singular mode of entanglement between smooth and striated spaces of social organization at the end of the nineteenth century.

The linear trajectory Pumhösl transposed onto glass shows how the American ships looped around in order to discharge their cannons on both port and starboard sides. We may presume that this naval tactic was already practiced during the age of sailing ships, yet in the case of the Manila Bay attack the maneuver was executed with a geometric precision only made possible by steam power and its associate technologies. Linking the naval diagram to a new, industrial era of mechanized warfare gets us closer to the historical specificity of political geometry. Hence we can turn to my second prompt, in the work of Carl Schmitt, who saw in the Spanish-American War the mark of a world-historical shift, or Wende, in the evolution of global linear thinking.

Schmitt coined the phrase “global linear thinking” to denote that the act of drawing lines over the globe has been fundamental to the history of political power since the early sixteenth century, when “the contours of the earth emerged as a real globe—not just sensed as myth, but apprehensible as fact and measurable as space.” In reference to the discovery of the American continent and the first circumnavigations of the world, Schmitt writes, “there arose a wholly new and hitherto unimaginable problem: the spatial ordering of the earth in terms of international law.” The European powers had to decide upon the nomos of the “New World”; that is, how the new spaces would be demarcated and divided in a spatial and a juridical sense. Geographical lines had to be drawn across the whole earth. If, at first, these lines were drawn superficially, more geometric, that changed once the “historical and scientific consciousness had assimilated (in every sense of the word) the planet
down to the last cartographical and statistical details.” As a result, the development of a more substantive concept of the geopolitical order arose in the course of the
seventeenth century. Schmitt thus feels justified to speak of a political cartography of modernity during which the globe was inscribed with rigid lines not only in order to fix the boundaries of geographical territories but to distinguish among different juridical dimensions of space. The new planetary consciousness of European culture, which Schmitt heralds as a “world-historical event,” transformed geometry into a state apparatus.\(^{15}\)

To support his history of a politicized geometry, Schmitt invokes the “pessimistic maxim” of Thomas Hobbes, which states that the rational certainties of geometry become problematic once they enter the sphere of the political.\(^{16}\) The constitutive act of the sovereign is to draw a line between an anarchic state of nature, where \textit{homo homini lupus} (man is a wolf to man), and the lawful order of the sovereign state. If the Hobbesian state of nature constitutes a “no-man’s-land,” it is not therefore a “nowhere” (or, literally, \textit{u-topia}), Schmitt claims, but can be located in the dual “open spaces” of the New World—“the land of freedom, i.e., land free for appropriation by Europeans”—and the newly discovered oceans, which the English, French, and Dutch conceived as a mare liberum or “free sea”; that is, a maritime medium of free enterprise and primitive accumulation.\(^{17}\) Schmitt is concerned with the various historical acts of drawing geopolitical lines that established a division between the European order of sovereign nation-states and the unlawful space that existed “beyond the line” and created the necessary conditions for mercantile capitalism to thrive.

Within this history, the Battle of Manila Bay coincides with the rise of the United States as a sea power and the end of U.S. isolationism. Schmitt states, “The Spanish-American War (1898) was a sign to the rest of the world that US foreign policy was turning to open imperialism. The war did not abide by the old continental concepts of the Western Hemisphere, but reached deep into the Pacific Ocean and into the Old East.”\(^{18}\) The United States began to project its sea power across the globe, usurping the former British domination of the seas. Announcing this new imperialist ambition to the world, President Theodore Roosevelt sent his “Great White Fleet” on a two-year circumnavigation of the globe in 1907.

Schmitt holds that the Spanish-American war was symptomatic of the demise of a global order of international law (or \textit{jus publicum Europaeum}) that had been established in the wake of the first voyages of discovery of the sixteenth century. Thus Schmitt identifies two epochal changes in the international order, two
Wendungen in global linear thinking. One was brought about by the rise of England as a sea power, the other by its demise (and the concomitant rise of the U.S. as a global power). With each stage, the politico-juridical relation between sea and land was to change, coincident with a structural shift between mercantile and industrial capitalism.

Mare Liberum

To what extent does Pumhösl present us with the linear diagram of such a historical Wendung? Schlacht von Manila Bay erases all but one line: the Wendemånnöver. All geographical detail is absent, including the coastline. Pumhösl reinscribes a historical trace—the trajectory of the American flotilla—upon a virtual tabula rasa, or what we may also conceive as the smooth, featureless surface of the open sea. For this reason, we were able to succumb to a kind of pseudomorphological reading of the image and mistake the medial or supple line for a fully active line. This perceptual ambivalence is a result of Pumhösl’s artistic strategy, which causes the difference between abstract and representational lines to become indiscernible. This very ambivalence sustains the critical value of his work, which merges an aesthetic and conceptual critique of the pictorial language of modernism in one gesture. Pumhösl does not treat graphic or linear systems as either a set of purely formal elements or an ensemble of notational signs that are inextricably linked to a historical referent. Rather, Pumhösl conducts a diagrammatic mode of political geometry that is located in the interstices between the two, which means we cannot take any line at face value. The basic premise here is that geometry is immanent to history; that is to say, Pumhösl would have us consider a kind of topology of modernity or, even better, modernity as a set of topological transformations that are derived from the dynamic entanglement of supple and rigid lines of segmentation.

Paradoxically, Pumhösl’s eradication of spatial detail in Schlacht von Manila Bay, which situates the image in an ambivalent space between figuration and abstraction, impresses upon us the need to question the precise historical status of this visual diagram. Neither topographical map nor atypical abstraction, Schlacht von Manila Bay detaches a historical event from its “natural” background by an act of erasure. Yet, in doing so, Pumhösl’s formal gesture can be inscribed in a history of other, technological and economic, gestures that already took the unique geography of the sea as both their condition of possibility and also as the object of spatial homogenization.

The sea provides the archetypical image of a smooth space, but it was gradually striated by technology throughout the modern period: regulated by the development
of astronomical and geographical techniques, testing site for the development of the chronometer, and theater for the substitution of wind power by steam power in the nineteenth century. This striation has more recently culminated in the containerization of commercial shipping and the full integration of maritime space within the logistics of global capitalism.

Schmitt recounts this same process of maritime territorialization in *The Nomos of the Earth*, although he describes the transition in mostly juridical terms. At first, Schmitt argues for an elementary opposition between terrestrial and maritime space within the history of human civilization. The essence of the *nomos* of the sea is to be without fixed order: “On the open sea, there were no limits, no boundaries, no consecrated sites, no sacred orientations, no law, and no property.” Departing from this primal dualism of earth and sea, however, *The Nomos of the Earth* then proceeds to draw a more precise, historical diagram of the relation between maritime and terrestrial space. Central to this analysis is the concept of the free seas—*mare liberum*—that functioned within the regulatory system of international law. One of the first jurists to expound this idea was the Dutchman Hugo Grotius. The Grotian doctrine of a free ocean, owned by no one, established an overseas domain that was open for trade and colonization. The principle of the *mare liberum* underlay a global space of accumulation, commerce, and, indeed, transgressive acts of plunder in which mercantile capitalism would find a fertile ground for expansion.

And so we arrive at the crux of global linear thinking. Crucial to Schmitt’s account are the so-called amity lines that were drawn across the surface of the globe’s oceans in order to divide a civilized area in which treaties and legal truces of European public law were respected from an overseas where only the law of the stronger prevailed and every kind of predation was permitted. In this global setting, two spatial orders coexisted, each universal in its own right and each with its own concepts of enemy, booty, and freedom. On one side of the line (land) was the lawful area of international law; on the other side (sea), a Hobbesian state of nature or anarchy, akin to the civil wars that once ravaged the European continent. This realm of ruthless, nonstate freedom found concrete historical orientation in the New World *beyond the line*: an enormous open space free for land appropriation. Schmitt identifies this lawless region beyond the line with a Hobbesian state of lawless nature where all men are wolves to other men. The free sea was the element in which the terrestrial laws of ownership did not apply, allowing the activities of the pirate and privateer to flourish, not to mention that other nonstate agency, the European merchant who was willing to risk all by sailing beyond the line—
to venture, that is, outside the international legal order of continental Europe.

The domain of the mare liberum was not without lines—itrsquos result of navigational techniques and maps—yet as a relatively open space it stood in a complicated relation to the closed nomos of the nation-state. As Giorgio Agamben specifies in his commentary on Schmitt, the mare liberum provides the sphere of reference that makes law regular; it is the state of exception conceived as a complex topological figure in which not only the exception and the rule but also the state of nature and law, outside and inside, pass through one another.rquos Thus the violent, ruthless domain of the mare liberum provides the constituent outside of the nomos of the sovereign nation-state.

Pumhöslrsquos abstract line is inscribed with a highly complex political geometry: what lies beyond the line is not a nomadic realm of freedom but a historically overdetermined, turbulent space in which linear forces of deterritorialization and reterritorialization do battle. The great commons of the mare liberum allowed free passage to privateer and merchant alike, sometimes sailing under the same flag, but this maritime space gradually came under the sway of one great sea power, Great Britain. By achieving sole hegemony on the oceans—instituting a Seenahme—the island nation thus became of Europe, but not in Europe.rqurquos The rise of the United States at the end of the nineteenth century would bring a dramatic end to this situation. The Battle of Manila Bay marks the emergence of a new revolution of the Weltraum, according to Schmitt, that would fundamentally transform the prior opposition between the nomos of the sea and the nomos of the land.

What are the consequences of this new global Wendung on space as a subject of contemporary art? On the one hand, Schmitt and Agamben posit (with different ends in mind) that maritime space has eradicated the former terrestrial order and that the conflict zone formerly confined to the sea has, for the most part, been displaced beyond the line.rquos To use Agambenrsquos own terms: the state of exception no longer exists overseas but has become permanent and general (as is demonstrated, for instance, by the current fear that expatriate fighters joining the civil war in Syria will bring home the violence to Europe). Allan Sekula, on the other hand, submits the reverse, venturing that a terrestrial order has come to regulate maritime space, extending its lines of transit across the ocean surface. In the essay film The Forgotten Space (2010), which Sekula codirected with Noël Burch, the artist shows how the sea has become an extension of the mainland by acting as a medium for the global circulation of goods. If largely invisible in contemporary society, shipping forms the backbone of our global economy. In this interpretation, the former mare
liberum has become fully striated with the increased control of shipping by the various processes of standardization, containerization, and satellite tracking. As I have discussed elsewhere, these two versions of our current political cartography—the sea takes over the earth or the earth takes over the sea—are not necessarily at odds. If Sekula’s version of events is more relevant here, it is because in The Forgotten Space and his photo-essay Fish Story, among other places, he has addressed how the mechanization of naval ships imposed a new, linear abstraction upon the sea:

The critical space of naval maneuver and engagement was eminently picturable, and legible to a knowledgeable viewer. Coal-fired boilers, torpedoes and long-range naval guns introduced a new abstractness to the maritime space of combat. Abstract measured distance . . . came to matter more than the immediate and local vagaries of the wind . . . steam gave precedence to space . . . tethered ships more firmly to the land, by a line that stretched back to the bowels of the earth.

While Great Britain inaugurated this mechanization of seafaring, it would not see this development through to the end. Rather, the United States was to become the main agent of the “new abstractness” in the maritime theater of warfare. This happened not only in practice during the Battle of Manila Bay but also in theory. The main propagandist of America’s rise as a naval power was Alfred Thayer Mahan, who in The Influence of Sea Power upon History (1890) established the powerful doctrine that “the prosperity of nations” depends upon domination of the seas. He described the sea as a “wide common” where certain “well-worn paths” and “lines of travel” had been laid down during centuries of colonial trade. The sea, for him, represented a “great medium of circulation established by nature, just as money has been created by man for the exchange of products.” Mahan argued that military control should follow these same pathways of trade, establishing another system of communication lines atop the network of trade routes to string together coal fuel stations and naval bases in strategic, overseas locations. Mahan’s geostrategic vision of maritime expansion was supported by technological change, especially in the regularization of maritime time. Steam would make the sea the first terrain upon which a fully mechanized warfare took place, transforming it into a smooth, abstract field of action: “modernization proceeds as a substitution of efficient, smooth surfaces for broken, interrupted surfaces.” This observation leaves little to argue with, although we might prefer to substitute the more dialectical term supple segmentarity for Sekula’s (and Deleuze’s) notion of a smooth space.
Mahan’s diagram swept into place during the naval battle at Manila Bay eight years later. According to Schmitt, Mahan was only accidentally clairvoyant: “[Mahan] did not realize that the Industrial Revolution affected the elementary relationship of man to sea. This is why he continues thinking along the old lines.”\footnote{33} Mahan, that is, had not taken note of the true meaning of the most recent, global \textit{Wendung}, which had rendered the old division between land and sea irrelevant.

Thus the eradication of the distinction between land and water in Pumhösl’s image acquires yet another significance: it not only figures the “new abstractness” of naval maneuvers (or what we first mistook to be an “active” line) but indicates what Schmitt infamously decried as the “new universalism” that undermined the old international equilibrium between land power (of European nations) and sea power (of England).

Schmitt’s pessimism is rooted in two modern tendencies that subverted the sovereign power of the nation-state: in the first place, the transition from mercantile to industrial capitalism, which further liberalized the market place on a global scale; and in the second place, the “criminalization” of warfare after World War I. Western society had, as it were, been cast “beyond the line”: the mare liberum had washed far ashore. Industrial capitalism had caused the directionless sea to transform itself into second nature; namely, “the total rootlessness of modern technology.” Schmitt blames industrial capitalism for the annihilation of England’s former maritime existence and for bringing about “an enormous destruction of all orientations based on the old \textit{nomos} of the earth.”\footnote{34}

**S.S. Bauhaus**

\textit{Schlacht von Manila Bay} was first shown together with a series of nine other reverse glass paintings.\footnote{35} Although uncommon, this technique is not exceptional within the history of modern painting; it derives from a mostly rural tradition of popular art and was generally employed in the depiction of sacral scenes. In the early twentieth century the avant-garde, particularly in the environment of the Bauhaus, would revive reverse glass painting. Admiring the ancient technique for its creation of translucent color and smooth surfaces, Wassily Kandinsky, Josef Albers, Walter Dexel, and Oskar Fischinger, among others, employed the method in the fashioning of abstract paintings, and, with the assistance of Dexel, it would also find a new field of application in the emergent advertising industry. The implementation of such minor, if not anachronistic, practices is a constant in Pumhösl’s work.\footnote{36}

The other paintings shown in the same exhibition as \textit{Schlacht von Manila Bay} are
also linear compositions on either a white or black ground. But they employ a different formal language. They exhibit a more rigid, inflexible type of line, resembling technical diagrams that are not drawn by hand but with ruler and compass: the instruments of an engineer, architect, or navigator. One of the paintings is even identified by the title Diagramm. Others are named Element or Figurine (despite being abstract in appearance) or are referred to as Ohne Titel (Untitled).

Pumphösl’s series of reverse glass paintings initiates an inconclusive game of combinatorial logic. Although the paintings are comparable in technique, appearance, and size, the viewer is led to question to what degree they form a coherent set. If Schlacht von Manila Bay provides the indexical trace of a historical event, the others appear to be fully self-referential. Nevertheless, the geometric figures—identified by the diverse names of Diagramm, Element, Figurine, or Ohne Titel and consisting of various configurations and composites of straight and circular lines—do not safely inhabit a nonsymbolic zone of pure abstraction. Consider, for instance, Ohne Titel (Weiss), which consists of two sets of graphic marks: a vertical, black line and two horizontal red lines that intersect with the black line. The vertical line presents a kind of contour—a medial line—that is situated within a geometric grid that is indicated by the horizontal red lines, which pass through the inflection points of the black contour. Yet the contour neither establishes the full profile of a person or object, nor does it fully circumscribe a closed area. The contour line even reverses its orientation at the point where it crosses the lower of the two red lines. Is this image, then, to be understood as the demonstration of a geometrical proposition, an experiment in graphic design, an abstracted human figure, a segment of a mechanical drawing, or all of the above? I venture that Ohne Titel (Weiss) represents the virtual diagram of all these possibilities.

The set of paintings operates at the edges of a rigidly segmented space. The series contains multiple points of bifurcation rather than constituting a closed series that converges on one axiomatic principle. Their schematic, graphic language—a combination of straight lines, curves, and circles—appears to derive from the loopy, vectorial path of the American fleet described in Schlacht von Manila Bay; a path that itself inhabited an interstitial zone of supple segmentarity. Another painting, Diagramm, fortifies my thesis. The painting’s title seems to state that the work func-
tions as the formal template of the series as a whole. Yet one is hard put to determine a generative principle common to all the paintings on the basis of this work alone. *Diagramm* consists of a white, hook-shaped line that merges with a blue circle. This composite figure is itself mapped upon a set of diagonal lines and a faint cross, which, like a reticule, is placed in the center of the black field. But the place of this painting within the series is again not obvious. What might *Diagramm* be a diagram of, if not the series as a whole? One might again list the various options: the schematic representation of an “abstract” painting, a human figure, a mechanical drawing, a geometric statement, and so on. But rather than running through this list of possible references, a better option is to state that *Diagramm* approximates the diagrammatic operations of the “plane of consistency,” which lacks any definite figuration or dimensionality and instead constitutes the very matrix of spatial (and symbolic) differentiation. *Diagramm* is not the diagram of something in particular—not even in the sense that a modernist painting may be taken as the diagram of a utopian idea; it is, rather, an instance of that segmentary logic, which formalizes space and structures the diagrams of political geometry.

The reverse glass series thus deliberately plays off the different semantic registers of abstraction within the cultural field of modernity. Pumhösl is not indulging in an ahistorical mode of neoformalism. Rather, the obverse is true. The artist insists on the “historicity of formal and imaginary languages,” which, he reasons, makes impossible a full disengagement of abstraction from other forms of representational practice, even though modernism might have thought such a separation to be necessary. Hence his paintings stage a return to what he identifies as “repressed systems of meaning and projection” within the overlapping social and aesthetic formations of modernity. What his practice attempts to foreground in its restaging of the modernist language of abstraction is how a specific relationship between the human body and space was established during a modernity informed by the forces of “mechanization, war technology, and standardization.” Hence, the invitation card to the exhibition reproduces a photograph of an Austrian soldier and his wife during the First World War.

This found photograph lies at the origin of a film, *Animated Map*, that Pumhösl shot the same year *Schlacht von Manila Bay (Wendemanöver)* was made. A series
of patterns is traced by red and white lines against a black background. If the reductive visual grammar of this graphic animation bears a slight resemblance to the abstract films produced during the early 1920s by avant-garde artists such as Hans Richter or Viking Eggeling, its morphology derives from a different source. What Animated Map projects is not the autonomous forms of modernist abstraction but the actual cutting pattern of the Austrian soldier’s uniform. Furthermore, the title of the film is meant to invoke the genre of animated war maps, first implemented during World War I to visualize the ebb and flow of a battle front. In a film program accompanying his exhibition of Animated Map, Pumphösl showed, for instance, F. Percy Smith’s depiction of naval battles in Fight for the Dardanelles (1915). This early film uses graphic devices such as arrows and cardboard cutouts to represent the movements of battleships. Such animated diagrams, the artist contends, “represent evidence of exchanges between the military-industrial complex and abstract pictorial language at the beginning of the twentieth century.” The emphasis in this rather dense statement should be placed on the notion of exchange (Austausch) in order to avoid the impression that a rather crude model of referentiality is at work here. To state, for instance, that the pictorial system of modernist abstraction directly reflects the disciplinary formations of the military-industrial apparatus would be absurd. That would be to
disregard the *gestaltungsutopien* of the avant-garde, which in the case of Pumhösl’s exhibition was signaled through the appropriation of a modular wall system of display, originally designed by Alfred Arndt and Hannes Meyer for the Bauhaus traveling exhibition of 1929. With its freestanding walls placed at perpendicular angles within the open space, the modular system constructed an elementary, maze-like structure that detached itself from the actual architectural environment. What this exhibition design recalls, therefore, is not only the techno-utopian future that the Bauhaus desired to realize but also Schmitt’s equally arduous rejection of an “industrial-technical existence” that, as he feared, would destroy all orientations based on the old *nomos* of the earth and create a vast “u-topia” or *no-where* of equivalence in all directions of life.

This is where the notion of a political geometry may prove its worth. The pictorial language of abstraction as practiced, for instance, at the Bauhaus during the interwar period is representative of a rationalist discourse that aimed to resolve the fragmentary, confused state of everyday life under modernity. Functionalism, standardization, and modularization were all means to organize industrial capitalism, to establish an artificial order and transparency where otherwise only an unruly “nature” of violent competition existed. Yet in its utopian ambition “to reconcile the social and technical infrastructure installed by the industrial revolution with the [cultural] superstructure of forms and meanings,” the Bauhaus remained bound to the instrumental logic of industrial capitalism. According to Jean Baudrillard’s classical critique of the Bauhaus project, its collective desire was to extend the aesthetic to cover the totality of the social environment and to conceive of design as technological control. In short, the elementary diagrams or “maps” of modernism...
and industrial capitalism may be thought to operate as affiliated structures: the Bauhaus dream becomes Schmitt’s nightmare. Or, in Pumhösler’s more dialectical terms: “The absent figure of the soldier itself becomes an autonomous cartography, locating the logic of industrial production, in this case of textile goods, in close proximity to [the] cinematographic apparatus.”

The full set of interrelations that Animated Map spins between the genealogical threads of fabric design, image technology, and mechanical production are too extensive to unpack here. What has become clear, nevertheless, is that Pumhösler’s work is engaged in an archeology of modernist visuality, or what he calls “modernology.” But this modernology is concerned not only with formalism in its past history; it also asks about the present status of abstraction. André Rottmann lays out what is at stake in such a political geometry of contemporary art:

If the epistemes of modernist abstractions still promised to either relieve the subject of social contingency and hierarchy by a system of radical equivalence, or to permit it to constitute itself as an individual in the cognitive and somatic experience of maximum possible visual and tactile differentiation, then abstraction today operates within the algorithms of control.

Today the relationship that holds between “supple” and “rigid” lines differs from that in the 1920s. But the more recent Wendung to which Rottmann refers and which Deleuze calls the “control society” is a further stage in the appropriation of lines of flight by capitalism. (This is why the so-called new economy of the 1990s became so enamored with metaphors of fluidity and liquidity.)

What is at stake here is not any fixation of the political geometry of modernism. Geometric elements such as a line have no intrinsic value. To what extent a line is active or medial depends on the kind of surface it inscribes or is inscribed upon. We need, then, to develop a topological method that establishes how one (aesthetic) diagram may be transformed into another (sociopolitical) diagram. The strategy of Pumhösler’s work is to prompt this very problem by causing a deliberate indecisiveness between the abstract and representational qualities of its linear form. The diagrammatic images of the artist displace the myth of functionalist aesthetics associated with the later Bauhaus, which was said to valorize a political geometry of rationalized form. This displacement is achieved, in part, by connecting the Bauhaus—in its pretense of founding a “major science” of social design—to the “minor medium” of glass painting. Pumhösler’s work does not simply equate a certain linearism with a particular form of power but questions how the one becomes
entangled in the other. As a result we need to be highly attentive to the structural nature of the lines he draws.

Note, for instance, how the glass paintings call into question the conventional function of the line in drawing—namely, to establish the contour of solid objects. Yet, at the same time, the paintings continue to suggest the possibility of reading the lines as contours. The inflections of these lines suggest the schematic outline of a human profile, just as Richter and Dexel, among others, were to experiment with the notion of “abstract portraits” in the 1920s. Modernism, more often than not, would suppress contours, however. And thus another, more elemental principle of the line came to the fore; namely, its equation to a kind of armature or scaffolding that provides the very ground of representation, as in the linear grids of perspective. Not surprisingly, a constructivist, Aleksandr Rodchenko, would establish the essence of art on this second dispositif of the line, calling it the “foundation, carcass, system” of painting. Writing in Ship’s Log, his remarkably named journal, Rodchenko observed, “The line is the first and last, both in painting and in any construction at all. The line is the path of passing through, movement, collision, edge, attachment, joining, sectioning. Thus, the line conquered everything and destroyed the last citadels of painting—color, tone, texture, and surface.”

Rodchenko set out his course with ruler and compass, the instruments of the engineer as well as the navigator. And although his line was the “path of passing through” that broke up the archaic “citadels” of painting, it also initiated a reterritorialization of the picture plane, transcoding it as the constructive diagram of a new socialist society. The constructivist line or armature seeks to regulate the geometries of the plane, to segment, join, and section its surfaces. Even so, the constructivist line retains something of that variability or “supple segmentation” that is “marked by quanta that are like so many little segmentations-in-progress grasped at the moment of their birth.” But the diagrams of constructivism do not represent strictly logical relationships between the linear elements. The fact, for instance, that they frequently lack any sense of scale is precisely what makes them utopian. One may think, for instance, of those “transfer stations from painting to architecture,” the Prouns of El Lissitzky, which create an ambivalence between inside and outside, front and back, dislodging the viewer from a stable foothold in space.

Even though the constructivist line establishes a particular conjunction between the segmentary and the supple line, it bears no resemblance to the active line of Klee. The active line, that agent of a “primordial movement,” is not determined by any underlying armature. But how does this meandering line inhabit a plane,
according to Klee? What is sure is that it does not represent that third type of line; namely, a free or abstract line of flight. The virtual surface that Klee’s active line traverses is not simply vacant; it already contains the potential of multiple forms and objects. According to Klee, the function of the elements of linear expression is to elicit or produce these forms while maintaining their own identity. This is why, in Klee’s estimation, “the idea comes first” and not the act of drawing. Otherwise, how is one to begin a drawing? After all, he submits, “infinity,” like a circle, can begin “anywhere.” Drawing, therefore, resembles a cosmogonic act, the graphic artist a demiurge who spirits a world.

And to support his theory of the cosmogonist line, Klee provides—a nautical example. Imagine, he asks his reader, the experiences of a modern man, walking across the deck of a steamer: 1. His own movement, 2. the movement of the ship which could be in the opposite direction, 3. the direction and the speed of the current, 4. the rotation of the earth, 5. its orbit, and 6. the orbits of the stars and satellites around it.

But human beings are still the center of this universe, a window onto the world. “The result: an organization of movements within the cosmos centered on the man on the steamer.” And thus Klee’s line is returned to an ordered cosmos, one that is organized according to a foundational, original nomos of Ortung (positioning) and Ordnung (order). Once more we must conclude that the segmentary line and the supple line are always interlaced and superimposed. The active line folds back on itself, loops around and becomes a medial line, establishing forms, objects, and territories.

Clandestine Maneuvers

Are our lines always destined to be captured by such a vicious circle? Are we always locked into a course of circumnavigation? What of that third line, the line of flight or absolute deterritorialization that does not return? How should we describe such a line? Deleuze and Guattari provide various formulas: the line of flight is like a “clandestine passenger on a motionless voyage,” its function “to become like everybody else,” “to paint oneself gray on gray.” However, a line that merges with its background becomes invisible. By way of contrast, Pumhösl’s line stands out against a background that has been erased. His line does not merge with the blank surface; at least not at first. Schacht von Manila Bay (Wendemanöver) is thus emblematic of two divergent political geometries. On the one hand, the image presents a diagram of the modernization process whereby the oceans have undergone a progressive
abstraction or striation that allows only round trips to take place upon their combined surface. Only in maritime theme parks or on the Internet, as Sekula ironically remarks, are we still invited to “lose ourselves.” Yet, what of the absence of scale or compass directions? What of the featureless ground of Pumhösl’s image that ultimately absorbs the meandering line?

The sea can be said to be “abstract” in more than one sense, and therefore we need to be historically specific in speaking thus. The sea is not truly a monotone surface, an equivalent of the modernist monochrome. For it is not a space without rules—which would be no space at all—but a space that is simply organized by fewer axiomatic principles than the juridical order of terra firma. Even the “free space” that existed “beyond the line” during the seventeenth century was never completely exterior to the rule of sovereign power. In Schmitt’s apocalyptic vision, the mare liberum would rise as a catastrophic flood inundating the earth during the twentieth century. We do not need to share Schmitt’s deeply conservative standpoint to find some truth in his prediction. The breakdown of the old international order of the nation-state has brought about a generalized state of exception, allowing transnational zones of commercial and financial transaction to emerge where new aggregations of state and business could operate free of former conditions of legality or legitimacy. In Agamben’s phrase, we have entered a “politics of imperceptibility” where the liminal figures of refugees and asylum-seekers live in a threshold realm of juridical nonbeing, which demands a different kind of spatial imagination, another topology.

By way of a coda, I turn, therefore, to a set of images by another artist, Bouchra Khalili, which describes another kind of line—not a line of flight but a “line of resistance” that is continuously drawn across the political cartographies of the Mediterranean region. Whereas Agamben warns of a “politics of imperceptibility,” Khalili insists, as we will see, upon the need to develop an artistic strategy of “shaping invisibility.” The lines she traces inhabit the paradoxical condition of being “beyond the line.”

A founding member of the Cinémathèque de Tanger with, among others, Yto Barrada, Khalili has shot a series of videos called Mapping Journeys (2008–2011). The conceit of these works is elegant in its simplicity: refugees are asked to narrate their clandestine attempts to travel to Europe. As they speak, they also draw their circuitous routes on a map of the Mediterranean area. The migrants themselves are not shown. We hear only their voices and see their hands as they inscribe their convoluted itineraries. Khalili compares her procedure to that of Michel Foucault in his
unfinished project, *Lives of Infamous Men*, an anthology of the prison archives of the Hôpital Général and the Bastille. The book was to collect short, biographical texts recounting the misfortunes of obscure individuals in their momentary brushes with the state police. Foucault wondered at how public discourse became a mechanism of state control, but he was equally interested in the inverse strategy of modern literature “to tell the most common secrets” by placing itself outside the law. Literature’s game, Foucault maintained, was to displace the rules and codes of official discourse. And thus he would come to describe his anthology of infamous men as a collection of “singular lives, transformed into strange poems through who knows what twists of fate.”

Khalili adopts this phrase as a motto for *Mapping Journeys*. The anonymous individuals who address the viewer in her videos speak out in public, but at the same time they inhabit a transitory, extrajudicial space of exception. Upon a normative map of lawful boundaries they trace a very different set of lines that are oriented toward a different set of coordinates. These individuals must remain invisible on the regular map, moving in a space of intervals without any clear points of orientation. They must invent their own pathways. As Khalili notes, “Many [refugees] explain that sometimes they arrive somewhere without knowing where they are. That’s what makes me work by elimination (of what could reference the place) and addition (of visual, sound, narrative constructions). As a matter of fact, rather than indications of places, I would speak about ‘shaping invisibility.’” She was thus compelled to take a further step and to imagine what it would mean to draw a map of invisibility that would exist without boundaries or landmarks.

A radical gesture of elimination or eradication seemed to be called for, which led to a series of silkscreen prints called *Constellations* (2011). For this work, Khalili transferred the trajectories of *Mapping Journeys* onto a monochrome, deep-blue surface. The clandestine paths that were once marked upon a terrestrial map are now displaced onto the featureless expanse of a sea that also reads as an astronomical map of the nocturnal sky. The astral points of the constellations are formed by cities, but the sublunary travel of the illegal migrant is what connects these dots. Thus the *Constellations* collapse the astronomical map, which sailors once used to take their
bearings at sea, onto the abstract surface of a sea that has washed away all landmarks and terrestrial boundaries. What the Constellations graph, therefore, are those invisible trajectories that take place in the spatial intervals of a generalized state of exception that is inhabited by the illegal immigrant. Within its interstices, many are lost without a trace. And this despite the fact that in our present age it has become almost impossible to think of the sea as that archetypical, Odyssean space of drift and exile. Seamlessly integrated within the trade routes of a global economy, the oceans have become fully territorialized. Even gazing at the stars has become unnecessary: with the advent of the Global Positioning System, ship captains no longer need to take bearings by consulting astronomical charts. Yet for many the sea remains a site of grave peril. In recent years the Mediterranean has become a mass grave for those seeking illegal passage to Europe. Khalili’s Constellations reminds us that star patterns have another cultural significance, one that predates their use as a navigational tool: namely, to commemorate the dead.
Notes


3. For more on this notion of the diagram as both “cartography” and “abstract machine” of the social field, see Gilles Deleuze, Foucault, trans. Seán Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 33–35.

4. The conception of a political geometry goes back to, among other places, Thomas Hobbes’s Leviathan (1651). Hobbes compared the foundational principles of his political theory to the axiomatic system of the “doctrine of Lines and Figures.”

5. An earlier version of this text was presented at the conference What Is a Path? Forms of Movement in a Global World, organized by Philip Ursprung in 2011. The present essay forms a tandem piece to my “Uneven Seas, Part 1,” which was published in Einunddreissig: Das Magazine des Instituts für Theorie 16/17 (December 2011): 84–100.


10. Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 212.


12. The English translation is less elegant: Battle of Manila Bay (Transposition Maneuver).


14. Schmitt defines nomos as “a matter of the fundamental process of apportioning space that is essential to every historical epoch—a matter of the structure-determining convergence of order and orientation in the cohabitation of peoples on this now scientifically surveyed planet.” Schmitt, The Nomos of the Earth, 78.

15. All quotes in this paragraph are from Schmitt, The Nomos of the Earth, 86.


24. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 37; emphasis added. As Agamben notes, only the sovereign can declare a state of exception and suspend the validity of the law. Yet, in doing so, he places himself outside the law. The sovereign, therefore, has a paradoxical status in relation to the law, existing both within and without its domain. This paradox can be described in spatial terms as “topological.”
25. Schmitt states, for instance, that “instead of moving forward to peace in fulfillment of this dream we seem to have been catapulted back in time into the nightmare of a perpetual and indeterminate state of war, suspending the international rule of law, with no clear distinction between the maintenance of peace and acts of war.” Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, 173.
27. For more on this topic, see my “Uneven Seas: Part 1.” See also “Allan Sekula and the Traffic in Photographs,” special issue, *Grey Room* 55 (Spring 2014).
28. Agamben proposes in *State of Exception* that “one of the elements that make the state of exception so difficult to define is certainly its close relationship to civil war, insurrection, and resistance.” Whereas Agamben emphasizes “the unstoppable progression of what has been called a ‘global civil war,’” Sekula and Burch are more concerned with the forces of “insurrection and resistance” that once thrived in maritime space. Agamben, *State of Exception*, 2. Mariners, after all, formed the first global proletariat, a cosmopolitan community signed on to an international fleet of ships where low wages and harsh discipline would often incite rebellion.
35. The exhibition took place at Krobath Wimmer, Vienna, from 10 November 2005 to 15 January 2006.
36. For more on the critical value of these anomalous techniques, see André Rottmann, who aligns

37. See Sabeth Buchman’s crucial distinction between a first-order formalism (i.e., self-referential) and a second-order formalism (i.e., referential) in Pumhösl’s work. Sabeth Buchmann, “Abstract Characters? Reference and Formalism in the Works of Florian Pumhösl,” Texte zur Kunst 18, no. 69 (March 2008): 162–170. André Rottmann has also been careful to distinguish Pumhösl’s work from the current inflation of “reenactment” strategies in contemporary art and the “restaurative [sic] project of a vehement neo-formalism.” Rottmann, “History and Abstraction,” 62.

38. All quotes in this paragraph are from Florian Pumhösl, press release (Vienna: Krobath Wimmer Gallery, 2005).


40. To date the artist has made four “abstract” films that each engage different historical and cultural grammars of abstraction: Animated Maps; OA 1979-3-5-036 (2008) and EI335721443JP (2009) are based on Kimono pattern books of the seventeenth century; and Tract (2011) refers to early forms of dance notation.

41. The exhibition Animated Map took place at Kunsthalle Sankt Gallen in 2005 and included, besides the two films Animated Map and Picture Clock ca. 1830: Charles I before His Execution, U.I. No. 2353 (2004), a photogravure series called Études abstraites (2004), three reverse glass paintings, and Untitled (Feline Faces with Raised Arms) (2004), consisting of a sample of pre-Columbian gauze.


43. See Rottmann, “History and Abstraction,” 66.

44. To the extent that such a joint project can be said to take shape at the Bauhaus during the 1920s, it was engaged in a “double movement of analysis and rational synthesis of forms” that not only operated within the artistic domain of pure form but within the very fabric of the social, constructing the latter as a functional ensemble of rational elements. Jean Baudrillard, “Design and Environment,” in For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign, trans. Charles Levin (New York: Telos Press, 1981), 186. Baudrillard’s proposition that the Bauhaus instigated a notion of the “total design” of life, which would be fully realized in postmodern society, lacks historical specificity. However, I cannot engage this debate here. For a more recent appraisal of Baudrillard’s thesis, see Hal Foster, “Design and Crime,” in Design and Crime and Other Diatribes (London: Verso, 2002), 13–26.


48. Pumhösl borrows this term from urban ethnologist Kon Wajiro, who studied material practices—both corporeal and architectural—in Tokyo after the devastating earthquake of 1923. Pumhösl’s
investigations of the political geometry of modernity are not limited to a Western trajectory, which is
an aspect of the work that, sadly, is beyond the scope of this article. *Modernology (Triangular Atelier)*
is the name of an installation by Pumhös, first exhibited in 2007 at Documenta 12 in Kassel, which
makes cross-references between the European and Japanese avant-garde.


50. For an excellent take on the maritime metaphors of the new economy, see Allan Sekula,
“Between the Net and the Deep Blue Sea (Rethinking the Traffic in Photographs),” *October* 102

51. This connection was explored by Bauhaus artists who used glass painting for advertising pur-
poses. For an alternative take on the “diagrammatic” as a countermodernist strategy, see David Joselit,
“Dada’s Diagrams,” in *The Dada Seminars*, ed. Leah Dickerman and Matthew S. Witkovsky


55. “Proun ist die Umsteigestation von Malerei nach Architektur.” El Lissitzky and Hans Arp, *Die


58. “Out of abstract elements a formal cosmos is ultimately created independent of their groupings
as concrete objects or abstract things such as numbers of letters, which we discover to be so closely
similar to the Creation that a breath is sufficient to turn an expression of religious feelings, or religion,
into reality.” Klee, “Creative Credo,” 186.


60. Klee, “Creative Credo,” 186.


62. With one exception: a Palestinian who travels from the Occupied Palestinian Territories to
Jerusalem.


64. Bouchra Khalili, “The Opposite of the Voice-Over: Conversation between Bouchra Khalili and
Omar Berrada,” in *Story Mapping: Bouchra Khalili* (Marseille: Bureau des Compétences et Désirs,
2010), 63.