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The word is now a virus. The flu virus may once have been a healthy lung cell. It is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the lungs. The word may once have been a healthy neural cell. It is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the central nervous system. Modern man has lost the option of silence. Try halting your sub-vocal speech. Try to achieve even ten seconds of inner silence. You will encounter a resisting organism that forces you to talk.¹

William S. Burroughs, *The Ticket that Exploded*

It is now simply a fact—we have learned it all too well—that “viral” memes and biological viruses are coagents. The progress of the novel coronavirus in the United States, and elsewhere, has been enabled by misinformation gone viral. This is the deadly consequence of what is called “fake news.” It is not entirely Donald Trump’s doing that information *infects* rather than *informs* us, but he has achieved something remarkable in *legitimizing* a relation to knowledge that is viral rather than evidence-based. He has done so by using his power as president of the United States to thoroughly assault the institutional actors who authorize information as knowledge, including journalists, climate scientists, judges, and epidemiologists, as well as denigrating the testimony of anyone whose speech he regards as illegitimate, including people of color, asylum seekers, and refugees of all kinds. Fake news, in other words, introduces a crisis of authorization. But is the “cure” worse than the disease, as some politicians (including Trump himself) have suggested with regard to the economic devastation caused by social distancing? If the cure for information gone viral is to authorize some forms of knowledge as legitimate and others as illegitimate, doesn’t this contravene the long-held convictions among critics and historians

1. William S. Burroughs, *The Ticket that Exploded* (1962; reprint, New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 49.

of modern and contemporary art that progressive cultural expression should *question* authority rather than establish it?

To *authorize* is distinct from authoring. The *New York Times*, for instance, authorizes the writing of all who contribute to its pages. But while authorization can occur through elite institutions like the *Times*, it also has great democratic potential—in fact, as a form of power it is necessarily communal. Black Lives Matter, for instance, has reauthorized video recordings of police brutality, previously suppressed, or dismissed as isolated cases, as evidence of *systemic* white supremacy. Nonetheless, such communal forms of authorization are by no means limited to progressive political positions. Stephen Moore, an adviser to Trump’s Covid-19 economic task force, who assisted a group organizing protests against stay-at-home orders in Wisconsin, was reported as declaring, “We need to be the Rosa Parks here . . . and protest these government injustices.”² In doing so, he attempted to reauthorize the activism of an African-American civil-rights hero for his own libertarian cause. If biological viruses hijack the cells of human organisms, human agencies (whether governmental, community-based, or individual) seek to control viral forms of information. This is possible because, like an organic virus that moves freely from host to host, the informational kind is no longer impeded by any stable discursive authority. To be sure, it seems that social distancing may be easier to accomplish than informational distancing.

In some ways, of course, the loosening of powers of authorization sounds like a very good thing. After all, the avant-garde has been devoted to de-authorizing aesthetic form and content throughout its history: The readymade is only the most obvious example. It might even be possible to define modernism as an agonism of de-authorization whose agonizing endgame is unfolding before us in our world of fake news. Whether or not this is the case, I believe the struggle over the authorization of images is the most significant aesthetic challenge of this moment—one that is often incorrectly understood as identity politics. Consider, on the one hand, a contested discursive field that includes both the theorization among many African-American thinkers, including Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman, and Tina Campt, of strategies of fugitivity, whose aim is to escape balkanized stereotypes (or infection by toxic information viruses), and, on the other hand, the seemingly contradictory claims to the rights to represent the heritage one identifies with (or perhaps, more expansively, that one *cares for*) that erupted in controversy over the inclusion of Dana Schutz’s painting of Emmett Till, the black boy brutally murdered in 1955 for allegedly flirting with a white woman, in the 2017 Whitney Biennial. This juxtaposition indicates a profound double bind—the impulse to evade oppressive identity projections coexists with claims over the rights to represent a deeply painful

2. Michael D. Shear and Sarah Mervosh, “Trump Encourages Protest Against Governors Who Have Imposed Virus Restrictions,” *New York Times*, April 17, 2020; updated April 20, 2020; accessed online, April 24, 2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/17/us/politics/trump-coronavirus-governors.html?searchResultPosition=2>. I am grateful to Keisha Knight for initially pointing out this analogy to me.

historical legacy that still remains unknown or misunderstood by many white Americans. The complexity of this double bind calls for strategies that are very different from a straightforward or affirmative identity politics. This is where seizing upon authorization as a practice—an agonistic democratic struggle over the meaning of any particular image or quantum of information—becomes urgent. Artists as different as Kara Walker and Cameron Rowland, for instance, powerfully explore how images and objects move in and out of different proprietary regimes. The former, through heightening affective encounters with debased stereotypes that contemporary African-Americans “should” deplore, and the latter by exploring how persons can be moved into the category of property when they are no longer considered human. Each artist re-authorizes a discourse that neither one invented. In this sense, their work may be associated with practices dedicated to the appropriation and recalibration of existing images that were introduced in Pop art and greatly expanded after the Pictures generation. All of these practices are premised on strategies of re-authorization that engage with the viral images of a particular time and place.

My point is this: We are faced with a critical and ethical challenge right now as well as a health and economic crisis of existential proportions. If we want to believe in the de-authorizing effects of contemporary art as a romantic and revolutionary capacity, must we not recognize that the regime of fake news has taken such strategies to their most terrifying extreme? I propose that it is the citizen’s responsibility not only to *de-authorize* but to *reauthorize* information (including images) in the face of our world gone viral. What does this mean for the history and criticism of modern and contemporary art (and, more broadly, visual culture), which is the project of this journal and its readers? In response to these conditions, I will offer two reflections, or recommendations, on method.

1. The social history of art should not consist exclusively of encircling artworks within an account of contemporaneous historical events like a gilded frame, or performing a literary analysis of the criticism that was coeval with a work of art. These approaches are illuminating, but in themselves they articulate only a single moment in the artwork’s life, which is no more significant than any other. Fastening an artwork to a context suggests that that work has an essential, transhistorical meaning, which no work of art possesses or can possess (a basic historiographical study of any “masterpiece” will prove that, or just the fact that your last visit to the *Demoiselles d’Avignon* wasn’t quite like the previous one). The work of art hosts an endless chain of events of apperception, and as art historians or critics we enact a certain violence when we assign it a single meaning in the way that the art market assigns a price (though even prices fluctuate). The event of an artwork’s making really has very little to do with the event of its appearance fifty years later (or five minutes later, for that matter). What if, instead of attaching works of art to a privileged time or place, we

choose to focus on one or more historically specific moments of the work's "life" that attest to its engagement in struggles of the authorization and de-authorization of images? A controversial recent example of this would be the Museum of Modern Art's juxtaposition of Picasso's *Demaiselles* with Faith Ringgold's *American People Series #20: Die* (1967). The choice to hang these two paintings together was certainly anachronistic, and perhaps it was condescending, but it led to a lot of salutary debate because it straightforwardly and explicitly sought to authorize Faith Ringgold's work, as that of an African-American woman, as an icon equal to Picasso's.

2. In the wake of postmodernism's and post-structuralism's interventions in the 1980s, the reality and concept of a canon became radioactive. This was an important moment of de-authorization, but after nearly forty years, it has led to a condition where the *history* in modern and contemporary art history has been in decline. The prevalence of the case study as a preferred scholarly approach is an index of this. Case studies suggest an atmosphere of history while simultaneously occluding it—the gaps between the cases evacuate whatever historical events may have linked them (or demonstrated their arbitrariness). The case study is the strategy of the historian who has abdicated their responsibility to history. These remarks may seem to contradict what I said above, but not at all. What I am arguing is that, first, artworks are reiterable events that may continually reenter history, and, second, the work of an historian should be to *authorize* an historical account of these events. It is highly significant that the postmodern intervention demonstrated that no one historical narrative can ever again be taken as *the* canon. But that doesn't mean that crafting historical narratives and evaluating their relative power and utility should be abandoned. Moreover, it is my belief that artworks themselves tell history, that through their form they give the story of how a particular configuration of images has been authorized by the artist through a distinctive grammar of combination and execution. Some people might dismiss this as formalism, but I call it history.

In the face of the thoroughgoing de-authorization of information we are experiencing, I believe we should embrace the capacity of the intellectual to authorize knowledge in a manner that is open, ethical, and desirous of provoking vigorous debate. As a discipline, we need to authorize politically engaged historical narratives and work with activist allies to de-authorize toxic institutional structures and re-authorize or authorize those we admire. We are not outside the virus as metaphor; it is up to each of us to decide how to fight it.