# SNAPSHOTS
# Images, crowds, thoughts.
# A conversation with Susan Buck-Morss

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**Abstract**
This conversation was prompted by the interest of our research project in all the people (in the theoretical field as well as in artistic or curatorial practices) who carry out what we have called a thought through images. In this sense, more than unquestionable, Susan Buck-Morss's figure was foundational. We were especially interested in picking up some Benjaminian derivations that have accompanied her since the issue of her book *The Dialectics of Seeing,* a critical visuality with which it is possible to politically rethink hegemonic narratives, as is the case of *Dreamworld and Catastrophe. The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* or *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left.* The conversation will be interwoven with this factory of thought that regards the image as a fundamental tool of political theory, with all that is implied –for the emergence of a new culture– in the possibility of sharing it (*Visual Studies and Global Imagination, 2004*). The events that went off like simultaneous powder kegs –Arab spring, 15-M, *occupy* movements, etc.– true devices of bodies, words, images and gestures, proved that this new culture would also favor the emergence of a new policy, the potency (not the power) of what she has called the translocal commons (*On Translocal Commons and the Global Crowd*, 2013). The conversation took place in New York, in March 2014.

**Keywords**: interview, Susan Buck-Morss

Botany classroom. (School of Agricultural Engineers). Date unspecified.
Theoretical classroom where the careful design of the desks can be clearly noticed.

**Aurora Fernández Polanco.-** *As I explained to you before, our group is indebted to your way of organizing the task of thought. We believe the idea of a visual essay is essential (for example, within the text itself, by means of multimedia montage, in a concept of curatorial montage, or in video essay. What strategic differences do you find between Benjamin and yourself, regarding the use of images and their relation to the 'factory of thought'?*

**Susan Buck-Morss.-** I think with images and I do philosophy with images. A long time ago I learned to do that from working on Walter Benjamin. Most of Benjamin's images are verbal, they are in language. For example, he describes in language something he would find on the street (I've just given a lecture on Benjamin and databases, he was a collector of data, but within specific constellations of concern). For Benjamin images are keys to thought. He doesn't collect images but, rather, data that produces mental images, but for me the real work is often to collect pictures themselves. I think with these pictures more than Benjamin does. I often collect pictures before I write the text. I find the images; they go together. I don't stroll around the city looking for things – that's Benjamin, that's not me. But, how did I write about Benjamin? I had to see what he saw! And I went around the city in order to follow his footsteps, going down the *art nouveau* entry to his *métro* and seeing the *passages*, and Haussmann boulevards and architecture that existed in his Paris, seeing what he saw. I photographed those places. I had an archive of pictures.

There are so many ways to read Benjamin, so many approaches to Benjamin that don't necessitate my visual way of thinking, but it is the only way I have access to him. It works really well for me. I'm not interested in the approaches that are colored by nostalgia for the 19th century, a kind of melancholy. To me there's something so urgent, present, alive!, in the thinking that he provides. Even his philosophy of history is full of references to his immediate experiences, you know, what just happened to him; he's always thinking about what he has experienced. For example, there's a place in "On the Concept of History," where he talks about sunflowers turning towards the sun[1]. And you realize he's referring to the countryside in France when the sunflowers are blooming. You can see them from the train –hills of these big flowers! All through the day the move, turning towards the sun. And you know he saw that! He's seen that! So he's always looking at the world for the thoughts that it produces, and we have the capacity to know what he is thinking through some sort of visualization of it. This means that he's not searching for a metaphor, but he's actually compelled to the thought by the experience, the visual experience; they are one and the same –there's no difference between them. Otherwise, using any other method, I can't make sense of him, but if I proceed in that way… For instance, even his filing systems are visual. The archive of his *Nachlass* contains Benjamin's *fiches*, ordering fragments all with

[1] "As flowers turn toward the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism the past strives to turn toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history. A historical materialist must be aware of this most inconspicuous of all transformations".

little colored signs… have you seen these? There are some recent books that contain images of the fiches, but now you can download them from the web as well.

I remember the first time I went to read Benjamin's *Nachlass* in the manuscript room of the old Bibliothèque Nationale. When I saw them, I realized that I had to buy colored pencils in order properly to take notes, so I bought, you know, a children's set of yellow and red and brown and green and blue pencils. I came into the archive, and sat down among a very esoteric group of researchers with my colored pencils, and took notes with marks like a brown circle with a yellow cross in the middle, or a red square with an x. I had to work in this very mimetic way in order to understand what he was thinking –there was no other access for me. I found that it worked well –and that I was pretty good at it. I could do that. And so I began to rely more and more on that way of presenting thought, as a way of thinking itself, so that philosophy isn't illustrated by images but, rather, the image itself produces the philosophy. Sometimes it's extremely striking. So striking! And then, you know, I started to work like this with everything, and now because of the Internet and because you can download images from anyplace you are in the world, you have immediate access to the raw materials for a different way of thinking. So when I'm writing, I just sit at my desk and get images from the web - like these, you know? [Showing them to Aurora.] I liked these because they could *be* the thought. So it changes the way you work. The method connects with collage, or montage, or cinema – forms first developed in the early 20th century – that make connections through the material of reality and the immediacy of its presentation… there is something so… concrete about that way of thinking. And it seemed to me fair to talk about it as a Marxist mode of philosophizing.

There is an image that I'm working with now – well, it's a thought, not an image… Actually, I learned about it in a conference on the Armenian genocide. Someone spoke of a report by a woman about how her husband was killed, they ran over his body with a cart. The next day she was scraping pieces of the body off the wheels of the cart so she could bury them. This is an extraordinary image! But I'm thinking now, from this image, that what happens with philosophy when it becomes divorced from such traces of concrete reality, is that it loses… it loses everything! It becomes this purified thing that rolls on with no traces of the objective world, no traces of matter… In other words, what's the wheel if it doesn't have this historical concreteness stuck to it, if it

doesn't have material history attached to it? You have nothing if you just have the wheel. And much of philosophy is just that, it's purified, it's... They fumigate it, so nothing material remains attached. Benjamin showed us you could write in a different way, you could think in a different way. It's a line of philosophy in which I'm happy to be located. Even people in political positions I feel close to don't often share that devotion to historical material. And I also find that you can work philosophically with almost any aspect of historical concreteness, you can work on 19th century Paris or 20th century Soviet Union or the Haitian Revolution… Wherever your focus, the method works… as a method. It's a method! And I find also that it's the most unique thing that I do. On the other hand, even if people appreciate some aspects of what I'm doing, they don't understand it as philosophy. They don't get it. They think I am just writing history, or cultural studies.

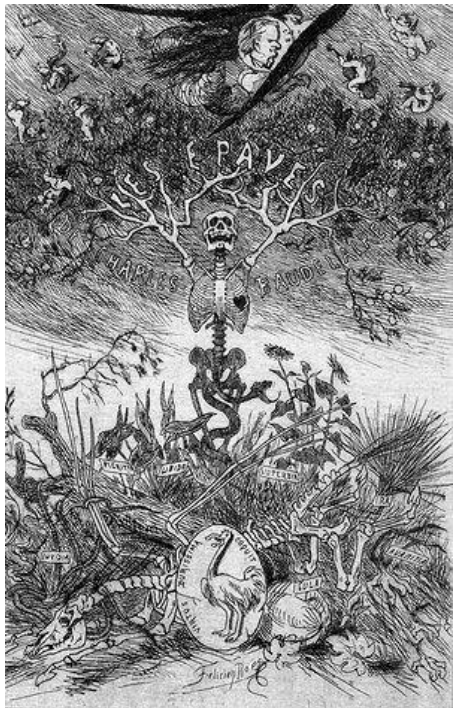
**AFP.-** *Montage is also, as in Benjamin, an epistemic method… But in your case it has always needed concrete images, in the sense of pictures –that's why you have sometimes said that you feel close to Heartfield. Dreamworld and Catastrophe shows it clearly but it all began with your 'reconstruction', in The Dialectics of Seeing, of Benjamin's interest in a prehistory of modernity that would revolve around commodity, in which company Baudelaire holds a privileged position.*

**SBM.-** Yes, it happens when you put these things next to each other… such juxtapositions are very important for Benjamin…

[Susan rises to pick her book *The Dialectics of Seeing*.]

Sixteenth-century woodcut, chosen by Baudelaire as model for the frontispiece of *Les Fleurs du mal,* 2nd edition.

Plan for frontispiece of *Les fleurs du mal* by Bracquemond, 1859-60, rejected by Baudelaire.



Frontispiece of Baudelaire's *Les épaves* by Félicien Rops, 1866.

Here's something that I found –and loved discovering! There is one small fragment in Benjamin's *Passagenwerk* that refers to Baudelaire's reaction to an image intended for the cover of *Les fleurs du mal,* and another that became the cover of *Les épaves*[2]. Benjamin notes the incident, but the pictures themselves are not included. So I looked and looked, and finally found the ones to which he was referring. They clarified so much! The first image was of a 16th-century woodcut that Baudelaire found and gave

[2] Walter Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*, Konvolut J., "Baudelaire," (J26,2) [vol. V of Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, p. 352].

to the artist Bracquemond, saying "Do something like this for *Les fleurs du mal*". Well, he did, and as a rendition of the woodcut, it's perfect! But Baudelaire was furious! He said, "That's not what I mean at all!" And then another artist, Félicien Rops, did a version as the frontispiece of *Les épaves*. Baudelaire loved it. But, why? The difference is a key to Benjamin's theory of allegory in Baudelaire's poetry: for *modern* allegory, hell is not after death, but within this life here. It's the hollowed-out experience of capitalist Paris, this screaming… this living deadness in the frontispiece image was *within* modern experience. When I found these images I understood so much better Benjamin's appreciation of Baudelaire, but also his criticism of the inadequacy of aesthetic politics. I didn't understand what he was talking about until I found the images. I had to search in book after book until I found them –this was before the Internet.

But I think to myself –this is my critique of so much Benjamin scholarship– that precisely the most contemporary books on Benjamin treat his work like a fetish –rather than, as he did, criticizing the fetishism of commodities as the living dead. So you get these books filled with images that are very nostalgic, right? They are saying: "Oh! Isn't it quaint that Benjamin still takes notes in handwriting?" Well, if he *had* had a computer, he would have loved it. You see what I mean? There's this way they make him into such a quaint figure, robbing his work of its very modern friction. It's all about modernity, right? The commentaries on Benjamin have nice pictures, they are pretty books, beautiful, but they make a fetish out of Benjamin. Yes, he was a genius, but he has use value too, you can use him, and that's what we should do, use him, and not make him this great man that we have to bow down to like an idol, a fetish. This approach frustrates me very much – the work of Orhan Pamuk or others, like W. G. Sebald, who are always compared with Benjamin because they have pictures, nostalgic pictures, in their books. You know, everybody loves these authors, everybody says they are Benjaminian! But I think that's absolutely unfair to Benjamin. OK, Walter was a very old-fashioned guy, but his mind was extremely progressive. Students still appreciate that. I have taught both Adorno and Benjamin for years, and it's Benjamin! –I don't care how hip, how young, how deep in consumer culture American students are, they understand Benjamin, they can respond to his work. Adorno remains distant, his texts are very… esoteric…

**AFP.-** *And, on top of that, he loathed jazz…*

**SBM**.- Oh, yes, that was a terrible thing... But, to return to Benjamin, for instance, you can't just say about his interest in 19th-century toys: "Oh, antique China dolls! Aren't they cute?", you know? This is nostalgia, right? But by the time Benjamin was writing, these pieced-together doll-bodies had lost a limb, perhaps, or an eye. Such dismemberment, such taking bodies of women apart, this is what Baudelaire's poetry expresses about modern eroticism. Think of the mannequin. For the generation with which Benjamin grew up, that played with China dolls, this bodily fragmentation had become the reality of the experience of women's bodies –the pieces as fetishes. So this was what I was talking about. But it's a method; it's a method that he uses, and I try to use as well.

For example, compare the images of Manet and Mapplethorpe. I love the juxtaposition, and wrote a text about it that I delivered at the Tate Modern years ago. I could never publish it, though, because all the Manets were with copyright, and all the Mapplethorpes were too obscene. [Laughs.] So I could never really do anything with the text… It's a matter of copyright, but also of showing someone pissing into another person's mouth… This was difficult to talk about in an academic setting. My argument is: Manet dies of syphilis; Mapplethorpe dies of AIDS; both were scandalous, and not just for their art. It leads to a different perspective on the history of art. A lot of the theoretical work of the argument happens simply by the juxtaposition of, say, Manet's woman-with-parrot [Victorine Meurent] and Maplethorpe's boy-with-parrot [Philippe and Parrot], or of this face and that face – the formal arrangement, the directness of the gaze… [Susan shows the two images.] You can immediately see –yes, you must see– these two artists together. This one from Paris, that one from Brooklyn, this one 19th century, that one 20th. You have to see them together and you're already into that space where they are part of the same thought. That's what I really love about the way this kind of thinking works. That's why the word 'constellations' that Benjamin uses is such an important idea for me. For instance, the word 'billions' applies to oligarchs from the ex-Soviet Union, who have bought all the expensive real estate in New York City. Billions are the new standard of supply. But there are also billions of stars. And the wonderful thing about astral constellations is that the light from some of the stars that we see is coming to us a billion years later. In other words, they're already gone as stars, but we see them because light has traveled. And in a constellation of thought as Benjamin understands the term, distant historical objects can break into the present (he uses a neologism, *Eingedenken*). He differs from existentialist philosophers because of this concern for time, a historical dimension. Benjamin's constellations are always comprised of both past and present. Montage is really important for him because the thought often comes… the dialectical image is one where the fetish nature of one image is broken by its juxtaposition with another.

**AFP**.- *There is often a contempt for the relation between thought and image –be it pictures, mental images or literary images. Freud, for instance, said in Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego that the mass "thinks in images that evoke one another by association, as they appear to the individual in states of free fantasizing, images that no reasonable agency gauges in terms of their congruence with reality". I also remember that Kracauer, in History. The Last Things Before the Last, talks about a letter written by the art historian Burckhardt to Nietzsche, talking about the "indolent pilgrim" who "never penetrated […] into the very temple of thought, but who "all his*

*life was content to entertain himself in the courts and halls of the Peribolos, being content to think in images"*[3].

**SBM**.- Freud said that in a disparaging way, in a very negative way. The relationship between image and concept is interesting. There is this idea that the concept is precisely what allows us to do without the image. Hegel, for example, denigrates 'picture-thinking' in comparison with the concept. But even Hegel –the best parts of his texts, the clearest– contains passages where he provides images that are never secondary in importance for explicating the meaning of concepts. You have to read Hegel in detail, you have to go to specific passages in the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. For example, there is a wonderful image that appears in the section on Religion, where Hegel doesn't talk about theology but instead describes the early practice of worshipping the sun, and then recounts the historical moment when humans build a temple facing the sun so they can catch [handclapping] the sun in the morning, so the sun will reflect [handclapping] off the temple in the morning. It's a fantastic image about a fantastic kind of transformation of thought, when you're not only worshipping the sun but you're actually interacting with it by building a temple to which it speaks. What a wonderful image that is! But the great scholars of Hegel don't talk about the temple in the morning sun, they describe some vague concepts of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, or they refer to the master/slave dialectic as an 'abstract example', and other stupidities, you know? But something like that is so…

***AFP.-*** *After the 15M, reflecting on the relation between images and bodies, I thought of Benjamin's article on surrealism "The last snapshot of the European intelligentsia". The thought of the snapshot as an instantanée, as an event, was fascinating to me. You bring this up in "Visual studies and global imagination"*[4]*. 'Images in the mind' is the Anglo-Saxon translation of Benjamin's well-known phrase in On Surrealism: "Only images in the mind vitalize the will". Thus, influenced by the Surrealists, Benjamin looks for the relationship between the images in the mind and non-mental images, which are "collectively visible in the social space". Images that, according to Benjamin, "enter the mind and leave a trace there". You recognize that, in the era of globalization, "communication rather than coinage is the medium of exchange". It has started a general transformation of thought…*

**SBM.-** Oh! I'm just writing something new[5]; Oh, there's so much to talk about! [Laughs.] I have a piece now about the global crowd[6] with images of all of these convergences of people, citizens occupying public space, beginning with the Arab

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[3] Kracauer, S. (1969), *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

[4] Another version of this article is entitled "Images in the mind: Visual studies and global imagination".

[5] "My point is that for the global crowd, what is newly emerging is the idea that politics is *not* determined by identity. Not **who you** are is crucial, but the fact that you are willing **to stand with others** in public space as an embodiment of the general will –general in the generic sense of a trans-national humanity".

Susan Buck-Morss, *On Translocal Commons and the Global Crowd*. (My emphasis.)

[6] http://www.alati.com.br/pdf/2014/malaysia/parte-4_-_Susan-Buck-Morss.pdf

spring of 2011. The global crowd as a political actor is problematic, of course. I was trying very much to support it, redeem it, make it a positive thing. I used these pictures in a piece on the new 'commonist ethic'. But then you witness what has happened later in Egypt, or in Syria with the global crowd, where unarmed citizen resistances were overwhelmed by government oppression. And what has happened there since then is horrible.

**AFP.-** *The global crowd… We are in need of a new idea of 'totality'… You have proposed a 'commonist ethics' for the revolutionary wave as the greatest conjunction or constellation of the proletariat ever imagined by Marx himself...*

**SBM.-** Right, yes, exactly. I compare images of the global crowd with the frontispiece of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, where the crowd is circumscribed within the body of the sovereign. But if you think of the body without skin as a body-without-organs (Deleuze) –the biggest organ of the human body is the skin– the global crowd [pointing to the image] takes on a contrasting meaning… In Hobbes' image the sovereign contains the people within his skin, the leader is the skin, but the new crowds have no skin and so they spill out also over the boundaries of nations –and they should. It's a different kind of force; in the image, it's a totally different kind of force.

**AFP.-** *Yes, if we go back to the sky with its constellations, you can't talk about skin there…*

**SBM.-** Yes, right…

**AFP**.- *You have said that "the global crowd is not an object to be described by intellectuals, but a composite of ourselves". Is this an element of hope? Is this a critical hope, not merely an accommodating one?*

**SBM.-** I am hopeful, I'm totally hopeful… because there have been enormous transformations. I'm also working on another part of Benjamin's thinking. Many people cite Benjamin's line, "each generation has its weak messianic power[7]". Recently, Agamben has talked about the 'weak power' that we have. But no-one talks about the importance for Benjamin of the term 'generation'. This concept is really very interesting because for Benjamin –this is what makes him always for me *not* nostalgic– the past is focused on the present –he talks about the present as the vanishing point in his discussion of history. The past is condensed within present consciousness. For instance, he describes "the experience of our generation: that capitalism will not die a natural death". Within history, generations have experiences and these experiences are collective. For me, 9/11 was just extraordinary as a transformation of… I mean, intellectuals have long been critiquing the *idea* of progress, but with the shock of 9/11, with the physical destruction of that event, the notion of automatic progress through necessary stages, was destroyed as well. It vanished from collective consciousness. It's gone! And I think… it also opened a possibility to conceive of the future differently. There are so many aspects of modernity about which I *thought* I was enlightened, and it turns out I wasn't even half aware. Events like 9/11 have forced my eyes open to things I wasn't aware of. And that's why I'm hopeful. Because it's just impossible to remain some sort of self-satisfied European, or American, or Marxist or… We're really, really forced to think in a new way. We can no longer imagine progress as guaranteed... And then we have Obama who [sigh] –help! [Nonverbal expression of disappointment, followed by laughter.] We were *so* proud of that, we elected a Black president –but as it turns out, as far as US policy is concerned, it made *no* difference whatsoever. And now it's clear that electing Hillary Clinton won't make any difference, either, the fact that she's a woman won't matter. And so there's a way that we've had to give up our earlier *naïveté*, but there also is a new awareness emerging from the 21st century's shock to our consciousness that does make me optimistic.

**AFP.-** *In Spain, precariousness forces us to re-think the idea of Marxism. Many people are against an optimistic discourse, finding it all too infatuated with the possibilities of technology. They speak of taking up a political discourse again and not just staying in the event.*

**SBM**.- I'm not in love with capitalism but you know, even if you were to adopt a Marxist position right now, you would have to transform totally your theoretical presuppositions so far as political action is concerned. Important today is the possibility of a non-national identity, a non-national solidarity. But it's very hard to overcome the assumption of national difference. You know, during the Arab Spring,

[7] Benjamin, W. (1940), *On the Concept of History*, II: "For we have been expected upon this earth. For it has been given us to know, just like every generation before us, a weak messianic power, on which the past has a claim".

during the occupation of Tahrir Square in 2011 –I live not so far from the United Nations– I heard that there was going to be a demonstration in support of Tahrir in front of the UN. I went running down, you know, and I was the only non-Egyptian who came! [Laughs.] I thought everyone on the Left would be there! [Laughs.] People looked at me with my hair like this [blond] and thought, what is she doing here? Is she a spy? But I felt it was my struggle, this was my struggle, too. Still, it's not so easy to build these trans-local links.
For that to happen, continuous, world-wide visibility is crucial for the global crowd. The Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué writes, regarding the Islamic forces fighting in the Syrian civil war, that even if they are fighting in the name of religion, theirs is a secular gesture when they take photos in the midst of the battles, because the pictures they are sending from cell-phones are so that we can see what's happening, we can see their world. They're asking not for God to judge, but for us, fellow-humans.

**AFP**.- *How can the romanticism of the event be eschewed? By matching liberation and intentionality? [Together we read a passage by Vindel from the book Pensar la imagen / pensar con imágenes (Thinking the Image / Thinking with Images)[8].] "We run the risk of falling into the somewhat estheticizing temptation of hiding, behind the micro-political exaltation of the event, the acceptance –or the libidinal administration– of the defeat of the left at the macropolitical level. […] In the coming days, months or years, it will be urgent to mix liberation and intentionality anew, in a different way".*
*Could you comment on this?*

**SBM**.- I don't like the word 'intention'. Benjamin urged us to consider '*intentionslose Wahrheit*' (intentionless truth). I don't like intention; I don't like the concept. Because, quite frankly, it doesn't matter what I think is your intention, does it? [Laughs.] Only God cares, and when you die, he'll say, if you had good intentions, you can go to heaven. But quite frankly, intention has very little to do with anything that we can experience as the meaning of an act. It's an extremely subjective word. There's something that I would call Marxist –because it's materialist– in another way of interpreting actions that has nothing to do with your intent. Meaning is something objective, it comes from the outside… this meaning that is shared you can acknowledge, you can recognize. Maybe it's a moment of recognition, but not a moment of intentionality. .

**AFP**.- *You use to draw on Benjamin's sentence "to pull the emergency brake", his urge to calm down, to take the time… and you are more interested in the endeavors of the 'protesters' to define the meaning of the idea of democracy in our inter-connected time, acting critically in each particular case, rather than offering immediate political alternatives taken from the great inherited words or the foundational principles...*

[8] Vindel Gamonal, J. (2014), "La imagen de las cosas: cuerpo y objeto ante la crisis de consumo". In A. Fernández Polanco (Ed.), *Pensar la imagen / pensar con imágenes*, Salamanca, Delirio, p. 66. The book summarizes the concerns of our R+D group (http://www.imaginarrar.net).

**SBM**.- Well, we have to take time, we need what a mentor of mine used to call revolutionary patience… but of course no one can predict what's coming. I spent two weeks in Istanbul last fall; it's another situation that I'm now looking at closely. You know, I'm writing for them right now, and the situation there, the problems there –urban gentrification, structural unemployment, police brutality, destruction of green space– are absolutely the same as in so many other places. And national politics alone will not solve these problems.

**AFP.-** *I would like to ask you about the word 'emergency' that I often find in your later writings. Benjamin detested the word 'origin'. 'Whirlpool' was a term he preferred. Can something emerge from the whirlpool of global movements?*

**SBM**.- It's beautiful! I love it! [Laughs.]

**AFP.-** *Already in your 2004 text "Visual studies and global imagination", you said that we share the images, the body and the voice. And, from that sharing, a new world emerges. (Italics mine.)*
*At a certain moment, you also use 'emergency' together with 'emerge'…*

**SBM**.- The emergency… Ah!… Well, because in the 16th century the word 'emergence' was in English, 'emergency', not Schmitt's 'state of exception' or, in German politics, *Notstand*. Emergency did not mean some frightening moment; it just meant something coming into being, something evolving, something new being born. But today it means a kind of crisis, some radical change in the situation, which is so threatening to the status quo that you call it an emergency, in the sense that you have to rush to the hospital, to the emergency places where you go if you have an accident –you rush to the emergency room. And so that meaning of emergency –which is *Notstand* – relates to the term *Notbremse* (emergency break) that you find in Benjamin's thesis on history. That's his description of revolution as an act of stopping the present dynamics of world history. He sees this halt as providing the space for transformation – emergence. It's nice in Turkish translation, like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon (*Kelebek kozadan*).

**AFP.-** *Today is the March of Dignity, with many people arriving in Madrid.*

[They look up the news on the web.] *News on the INTERNET: March of Dignity in Madrid. Tens of Thousands.*

**SBM**.- Tens of thousands is not enough; we need more.

**AFP.-** *Considering that I don't believe the word 'emergency' can coexist with 'intentionality' –there is something of a cause-effect in this word–, there is still something very remote from the situation of what you call the global crowd, within the movement of 'translocal commons'.*

**SBM**.- Yes, exactly… But also… You would think that, at least in Europe, some more united movement could come into being… But I don't see it… I know that there are people who make contacts within Greece and Italy and Spain, etc., but… well, the Germans are very disappointing in their reaction to the 'lazy' workers in south Europe. German national guilt for what happened to the Jews is actually a conservative force right now because it produces their sense of separateness, their unique guiltiness, which has always been a German thing. It's very protestant to believe that you are uniquely guilty: "You are the most sinful! God cares about you the most because you are the most sinful". There is something very protestant about that. But I recently had a fight (not a fight, just a… difference) at a conference where a strong sentiment of German national identity was expressed –even on the left, it doesn't matter: "we are Germans, we're Germans", you know? And I mean… such a stress on differences… Consider the French. They speak as if they *own* universality; the concept of universal rights is French, as far as they are concerned. It's all there in the French rights of man, the *droits de l'homme*. Or consider Rousseau, his concept of the general will. The French supposedly invented universality and they think now you just have to read Rousseau in order to understand what human universality is. But it's remarkable that national differences are still felt so strongly.


**AFP**.- *I would like to ask you now about the 'place' of thought. My work here deals with the dialectics between concentration and dispersion in the academic environment. Introspection, thought and the inner voice have always been joined, but there is another, more connective, way of knowledge. A dialectic mixture, neither white nor black. What model of university would you prefer? The MIT model or Harvard? The dispersion and the connection favored by technology in this transparent building –almost seemingly taken from a Tati film– or the convent and the withdrawal of Harvard?*[9]

**SBM**.- It depends. I am very happy here at CUNY in New York City, and it's different from Cornell. It's totally multicultural. There's freedom and a democratic spirit in CUNY as a public university, you know? In the building where I work –it's at 5th Avenue and 34th street (just across from the Empire State building)– you can leave your pocketbook on a table and come back an hour later –no-one touches it. People are trusting in the middle of New York City, it's a community… It's a democratic, academic space because only graduate students and already-tenured professors are there, so

[9] I am grateful to A. Muntadas for the materials provided and the conversations on the topic.

there's very little competition. And there's no hierarchy. The students writing their dissertations are city people, they may be 35 years old or older, with families and earlier careers; they're human beings, they have a life…

Sometimes the city of New York is hard, you're always in a situation where class difference is in your face, in your face all the time. Our apartment [where we are having the conversation] has 48 floors, and the price goes up as you go higher, so that even among the relatively wealthy people who live here, there is a hierarchy that you experience every time you enter the elevator. We bought the apartment as an investment, not just because we loved it or the neighborhood. New York City living is all so very calculated. This aspect of city life I don't like so much.

On the other hand, when I'm in my place of work, it's a very different feeling. In more elite, private universities there is too often a hollowness to intellectual life… I was in a terrible setting recently, a terrible event. I was on a panel with a bunch of white guys who were just being smug and incredibly professional. But I figure now, in the last years of my life, I can say whatever I want! So I let them know I wouldn't be polite. I mean… I was somewhat polite, I wasn't totally *im*polite, but in no way did I imply that I sympathized with their talks… These men haven't moved, they haven't changed the way they think for 30 or 40 years. They still think that… you know, they're just a bunch of older white guys and they're so used to privilege and control of their disciplinary space… That's not good for intellectual creativity.

It's another way of working. We are experiencing another way of working. And it's not that technology alone makes this possible. But it does allow a different kind of collective thinking, it does allow a certain commonness and shared-ness. The capacity to share work, images and ideas and thoughts via the Internet… It's extraordinary! But when someone appropriates this shared intellectual project as private property, you just don't bother going to the site. I mean, sometimes I go to sites of JSTOR for articles that are not open to the public, but most of the time such wonderful stuff is publically available on the web so that you can actually work in a common space of learning, you know… And then, of course, the stupidity of the new trends to privatize the production of knowledge, to provide a course for a fee under the Harvard logo (60,000 people apply to take one course online) in order to produce knowledge monopolies. I'm optimistic –but right now the situation doesn't look good politically, at least not in the United States… People worked very hard to get Obama elected. People really thought it would make a difference. And especially during the first campaign in 2008, there *was* a change in the way people related to each other because we were working together, across races, for a shared goal. But there is polarization as well as growing political apathy, and I'm concerned. Young people are not going to work with huge enthusiasm for Hillary Clinton in 2016. In 2008, many feminists wanted Hillary for president as strongly as Black people wanted Obama. But we learned during Obama's presidency that identity alone is not enough, it doesn't in itself change policies. Hillary Clinton is not a progressive, she's absolutely establishment. And she is a feminist only in a weak, liberal sense. Then there is the growing phenomenon of wealthy people coming into the political process, and they're almost buying our elections. It's just extraordinary how great a role money now plays in so-called democracies. The *New York Times* had

an article about how strategies for influencing elections have gone so far that they almost give money to every voter, you know? These forces are *really* scary. Last time I taught at Cornell, during the election year (so it was 2008), I had my students over at the end of the semester (June) and I asked "What are you going to do this summer?" –it was my question for these graduating seniors. And they said "Oh, work for Obama", "Work to get him elected", "Do volunteer work to get him elected". There was such idealism and so much energy –and it made a difference. He won… [Sigh.] But the political role of money is a common situation. I'm talking now about all countries, democratic and otherwise. We are all living in the same political time-zone, so it's the same dynamics whether you are in Egypt or in Ukraine; it's the same dynamics. We just witness, again and again, each citizen protest group being put down. But they are still reasons to be optimistic.

**AFP.-** *Finally, I would like to go back to the thought model at the university. I would like us to comment on something that I'm working on, a video by Hito Steyerl*[10]*: Adorno's Grey (2012). It has to do with the moment when Adorno demanded that the walls of his classrooms be painted in gray, so that it would contribute to enhance the students' concentration. And, all of a sudden, top-less students barged in, like the force of life bursting…*

**SBM**.- It was very hard. I don't know… I wasn't there… When you read about it, it must have been the most… he deserved it, but it was the most insulting experience… –not only insulting, it was violent. He took it as a very violent act… He had no feminist sensibility. He was worse on feminism than what he was on jazz. So I'm in favor, in a way, of what the women did, but I think they had no idea how violently he would receive their action. He took it as a terrible wound! But you see, I met his wife, I met Gretel –never Adorno, because he had died, but she was alive when I was in Frankfurt. She was very bitter about him. He was not a nice guy in that regard. He said some terrible things to her and she was bitter, very bitter. So it was a situation where I… [Sigh.] It was also bitter for me at that time. It was very hard to be a woman academic, very hard, particularly in Germany, and the Germans were maybe the worst –although the French… can you imagine being a French academic woman of a certain generation? Impossible, impossible! So I felt very estranged from that –I was glad I never met Adorno.

[10] I would like to thank Hito Steyerl for sending me the video.

I'll tell you another case, though. Habermas was very respectful of me –and, of course, his theory is very far from that which I have developed! But when I was a very young graduate student, he took my work on Benjamin seriously. After I went to Cornell, he wrote a letter for me for tenure, he cited me in his footnotes, he treated me like an equal in ways that I'm sure Adorno never would have. Adorno would have seen me as a young girl, you know, a young female… That was a very difficult time and, biographically, the feminist movement was extremely important in helping me get a sense of who I was and who I might become. I found it very tough. And I was very disrespectful of academia. I had no reverence… If they gave me a job, fine. And if they didn't, to hell with it, I didn't care, you know? I'd go and be an independent writer. But they were under pressure at Cornell because they had a legal case against them made by women who had been denied permanent positions. When I was interviewed, they had just resolved the case, and so they were trying to hire women. But I was extremely disrespectful of the whole situation and I valued my freedom more than any tenure-track position. Now of course, it's a different situation; the students today are just trying to get a job, to find a livelihood…

New York, March 2014