

# White

VII

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OFFAL

# Zinfandel

A.K.  
In part it was the moment in time. Filmed police violence had increased. Social media disseminating film-captured violence in ways that weren't possible just a decade ago. My self-understanding also began to change. Reflecting on my past had given me a moment to look at the more troublesome occasions in my history and how it linked to a larger narrative. Depression sank in and I needed to find a way to gather myself.

Having the chance to do a show in Baltimore, my hometown, gave me a repository for all these thoughts, feelings, conflicts, and atmospheric shifts. The show ended up being the beginning of an ongoing series of exhibitions that in some ways had moments of figuration.

It began rather intuitively. I had an image in my head of one boy pissing into the mouth of another boy, both boys enjoying every minute of it. It felt like this perfect feedback loop of white masculinity I had been steeped in growing up. The third figure, a brown boy with a digital camera as the "eye," eventually became the crux of the piece. I installed a speaker cone into the belly of the urinator, when switched on, vibrated the stream at around 23Hz. Because this camera "sees" at around 24 frames per second, it becomes "confused" when information vibrates at nearly the same rate (23Hz), which in turn causes the urine to look like it actually travels *back up* into the pissing vessel from the perspective of the viewfinder. The idea that one could attempt to rationally understand an event, and have that comprehension be so completely backwards was really appealing to me. The story was being told in such a way that it allowed a variety of embodied perspectival shifts. This is what got me interested in figuration—how it could fracture a unified understanding of the body as sculpture.

A friend of mine from school came to the show—another student of color—and when he went upstairs and saw the three figures, he turned to me and said, "dude, you just took me back 15 years." It's not that the scene depicted a literal moment in time for him, but the feelings it evoked somehow fit his anxiety: the madness, the strange euphoria, the senselessness, and the violence. My figurative moment came about because it was a way to address a particular feeling and atmosphere that I couldn't realize without it.

How someone stands in front of a racialized body was what led me to continue thinking about inherent subject positions and the discomfort in the literal moments of this subjectifying and subjugating process. I prefer my work to have a kind of "stupidity" sometimes. A disarming sense of the cute, the absurd, the obvious, the immediate (however historically bound), so that it allows for other complexities to rise more slowly. In the end, much of it was intuitive to how I wanted the figures to feel: how fully formed or unformed I wanted them to become; how much was too much; was it too sculpturally thin or heavy.

How do you regard a brown or black body that feels almost like a caricature? What happens when a marginal body becomes the cartoon it thinks others believe it to be? This is where my head has gone recently.

**I'm interested in how you talk about *manananggal* as a "victim of dispersion" and what it could mean to think about recovery. It seems like there is space for the reactionary to exist here, but that doesn't seem to be what *Manananggal* feels like. And in speaking of this dispersed space, I'm also interested in the language that *Manananggal* might speak. You describe it in relation to ESL and I think this is interesting, though I wonder if our thoughts might differ here.**







**A.L.**  
The Trump bomb dropped in the middle of a hyperactive Chinese art week where a very new sense of community was becoming clarified for us. One which felt extraordinarily displaced from everything happening in the US and what our friends and families were feeling there. We were thinking a lot about the global aspect of the election results (especially as Trump follows in the wake of Duterte, Brexit, and right wing factions all over Europe) and what it means to globally traverse the formations of these locally rooted demands for a shutting down of connectivity, trade, exchange, and diversity.

Monster mythologies traditionally assert themselves during times of social conflict. We were in the Philippines in the winter of 2016 when we started talking about this Filipino folkloric figure, manananggal. The suspicious woman neighbor of the village, manananggal sneaks away to a hiding place in the middle of the night. Her body splits in half, the torso grows wings, and her organs dangling, flies back to the village to attack the sleeping villagers. Viscera is sucked out from their bodies. Fetuses sucked out of pregnant women.

So there are a lot of metaphors at play. Also the fear of otherness; and misogyny. I think we really latched onto the weird paradox of a predator who is so much in pain but with the amazing ability to fly—but only at the cost of leaving half her body hidden and grounded.

There is some social context for manananggal arriving in Berlin. We were landing in this very strange moment. We could feel the city had shifted under this immense confluence of migration—from pan-euro-American startup culture, to the *DIS* Biennale, to migrant creatives like us, to refugees from Syria and elsewhere. And we were also feeling a backlash to the influx of information and peoples. Manananggal was inserted into this situation with a kind of overextended sense of relating. Manananggal wants to synchronize with all of these things—in materiality, and in imagination—so she also becomes a victim of dispersion. It was the first time we made such figurative work and the results were kind of surprising—even to ourselves.

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**E.C.**  
To offer just a few more words on manananggal: besides the body being “marginal” (brown and female), it is also of course a fantasy monster body (maybe in some relation to the becoming-cartoon role-play you mention about your work). We were interested in the perverse particularities of this body; freak features that make the fantasy feel real: the rip, the penetrating and sucking tongue, the exposed innards. Manananggal’s body is so crazily incoherent. And not only that, she spreads her own incoherence. She penetrates others’ bodies to suck out their internal organs—their whole internal organizational system—totally disregarding body borders because her own has already been ripped open.

As Amy alluded to, one aspect of our decision to bring manananggal to Berlin was to face off with this image of the foreign brown monster that’s been thick in the air in Europe these past years. But I think another aspect and assumption we wanted to brashly make was that a specific and local figure coming out of the Filipino provincial imagination could or should resonate in a place like Berlin, for Berlin’s international art folk; something in the figure itself that wants to transcend or transgress its own specificity (I’m interested in self-transcending/transgressing moments of identitarian discourses.)

Maybe this relates to Amy’s description of manananggal as a “victim of dispersion.” But just to be clear, I don’t think we see manananggal as a victim in the sense that she has been violated and is in desperate need of help (maybe obvious, but manananggal is not meant as some symbolic representation of actual Filipina women today and the very real abuses that many of them are regularly subject to—it’s not this kind of figuration).

Amy mentioned to me in conversation the other day that she meant “victim” as in “fashion victim,” and I don’t think she meant this flippantly. This kind of victim is acutely sensitive, highly responsive, and when beholden to constant, hyper-erratic, uncontrollable change, spins itself into a delirious cringeworthy mess. The fashion victim might be the figure that best captures the operations and conditions of fashion itself. So maybe this is one way to understand “victim of dispersion.” And maybe also a way to understand our thoughts on ESL as a way of acknowledging the imposition of certain standards to facilitate global exchange—global English as a stand-in or example. We were thinking about non-fluency. All this effort put into engaging in the English language and the inevitable frustration, resentment, misunderstanding, and scrambling of this language you are being *forced* to speak.

Your point/question about recovery is a good one.

I think right now we cannot really afford to make more “space for the reactionary.” This doesn’t mean we should just try to annihilate that space, but that we maybe need to seriously and persistently redefine the terms, and not just the terms of that space, but of all other spaces as well, starting with our own. To me the term “recovery” implies that there is some past state of things we need to try and recover, which is something I would generally reject (How to “recover” from slavery, colonialism, global neoliberalism? Some things are just irreparable.) But for sure, I think mourning properly is important. As is figuring out the what/now/next.

**I am curious to hear your thoughts on language and how you see them differing from ours. Do you project a language onto your figures?**



**A.K.**  
I think I initially misunderstood your thoughts on ESL. After reading your responses and revisiting your piece as it relates to ESL and manananggal, I better grasp it and quite like this idea of ESL as the “becoming-communication” of language. These glitchy beginnings are precisely how one must navigate through the narrowing regulative passages of global capital.

For myself, English is my first language. My parents spoke Malayalam in the house but not in order for me to learn it. They wanted me to assimilate, so I was often in the dark in my own house, my eyes volleying back and forth between my parents, incessantly asking, “what?” That refrain became so commonplace, they often didn’t hear it, or me. Over time, I came to understand much more of the language, but even today have a lot of trouble speaking it. In any case, what I realized was that I’m not so much a speaker of ESL, as much as I have a kind of fluency in it. And since my extended family learned ESL out of necessity, I learned to translate my English into ESL—also out of necessity. Sometimes I’ll shorten or simply butcher my normal syntax to become more understandable to my cousins, aunts, or grandparents (of whom I now have only one). For instance, instead of using one exacting word, I’ll use five that act as a more easily understandable chain of referents. Instead of a direct explanation, I’ve found metaphor often works better to describe the sentiment or atmosphere of a less than global thought. This maneuvering—something like reaching around your head to touch your nose—is fascinating when I think about how I make my own work. It means precision can come in all sorts of forms. Sometimes economic, and other times precisely excessive.

I don’t think of my figural sculptures as having a kind of language, but more accurately, multiple economies of appearances. These come together rather intuitively, and it’s more about balancing and editing than anything else. There are influences, ideas, and languages that play a role, but in the end, what makes the sculptures work is how all of these things become entangled in such a way to achieve a precise atmosphere.

But going back to this way of speaking, ESL seems like the bridge from margin to center, meaning that in terms of economic power, one needs to speak English to play. I’ve been thinking about this in terms of art-making and how anything one makes is in a sense a push towards making it more central. The artist is saying, *pay attention to this*. Of course there are more or less distributed ways to do this—such as how you both orchestrated your project in Berlin—but nevertheless, the idea that this marginal figure for a Western audience could become more than that, or was hiding already within the bricolage of Western thought is interesting. What I’ve been trying to think about is when you are bound to the margins, when your very existence is held at the margin and you want to move to the center, how hard can you push before the act of pushing is no longer seen as an artistic act? The question is nearly rhetorical since I know there’s no clear answer, but I’m curious what your thoughts might be.

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**A.L.**  
I get what you mean in the Jordan Wolfson essay about how a white male body in pain is again threatening to eclipse all other types of bodies in pain. On the other hand, I feel like my own awareness and consciousness of diversity-visibility has increased and grown more nuanced in relation to so many conversations revolving around this subject recently—inside and outside of places such as New York and Berlin.

It seems like the discipline of art history has evolved and expanded a lot since I graduated from college. Or maybe it’s just that my own exposure to the sources have changed. Every former colony we have spent time in has a history of art, where to some extent, the visual language of the Western academy has been twisted, hybridized, innovated, and recoded to service national sovereignty or local discourses. The excitement we experience in Southeast Asia and East Asia right now has a lot to do with the increase in inter-regional exchanges between cultural practitioners. It begins to feel like the formation of a bigger-picture cultural apparatus that could be thought of as counter-hegemonic, reflecting the region’s rising economic strength.

In response to your marginality and center question, it has become confusing for us how these distinctions even work. Being in China now, between Shanghai and Beijing, we’ve experienced a sort of immersion in an art system that feels both globally connected and intensely autonomous. It has a stable center which is becoming legible to us in a certain way (and in other ways not). As a side note, it’s very funny sometimes trying to explain the problems of growing up as a Chinese-American immigrant to a Chinese person. This form of marginality can provoke some interest, maybe because of the projective opportunities it gets bundled with. It is not uninteresting to have ones personal issues relativized in this way.

I find that description of artist striving from the margin to center mostly problematic. It reaffirms a structure of power, competition, and marker—of achievements. The art market, especially and always, desires to integrate a fringe or heterogenous player according to its own standard—consensus and demand forming around these figures cyclically. Within this schema, the marginality of being an immigrant can easily be substituted with the marginality of being a loner or an eccentric. It’s not that I want to dismiss the importance of diversity for the circulation of artists within a sphere of mutual recognition, but I think that kind of personal narrative-framing of moving from margin to center can be a trap. But maybe I missed your point about this struggle?

**It has been interesting for us to think of marginality more in the sense of who or what is written out of a thought-system by the very act of speaking. I think as artists we have a certain responsibility to provoke the unspoken-for back into the conversation, but it enters in a kind of broken and non-linguistic way with a sense of threat. Ideally, I think any artist could achieve this in their work regardless of their background?**



A.K.

I confess I can't say I've thought about this on a global scale. However, I think broadening the scope of the power fluctuations (of margin and center) doesn't undo the problems in America currently and historically. I am relatively unconvinced that art history has changed so dramatically if it has at all, especially within Western art institutions. I can't speak for other contexts, but if it's changing elsewhere, it's refreshing to hear.

That being said, your take on the structure of margin versus center seems off to me. One cannot easily substitute immigrant with loner or eccentric without misunderstanding a whole set of power relations. To flatten the two is a relatively violent abstraction. I don't think it's about diversity, really, but about addressing historically embedded conditions that have permitted power to be centralized—largely by overlapping relations of race, gender, and class. Diversity seems like a code word for acceptable forms of disenfranchisement.

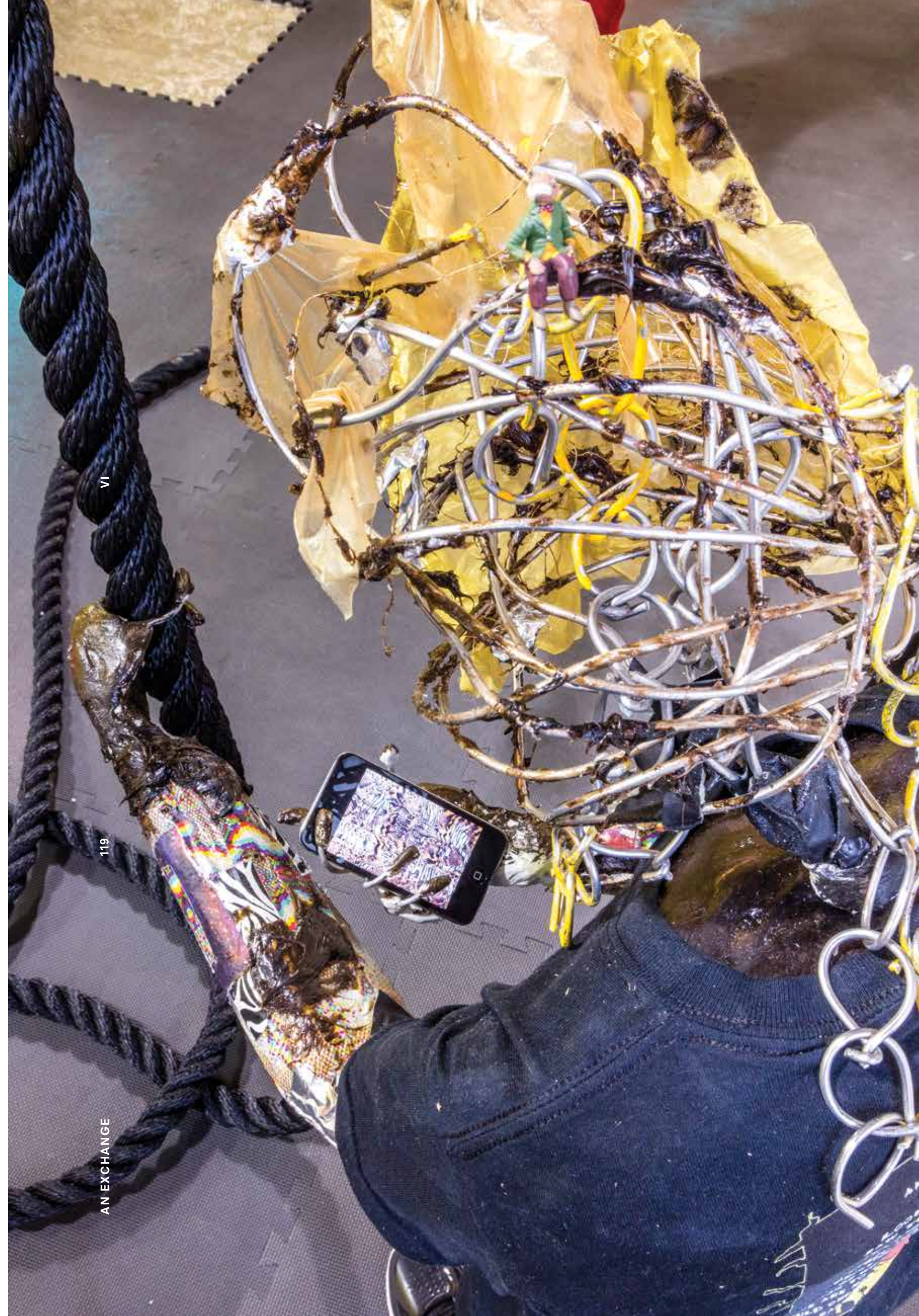
I absolutely understand your suspicions against using this kind of terminology (margin vs. center) as a reaffirmation of market principles and ways of thinking, but I suppose two things come up—one, we currently live in the contradiction of having to deal with the market while desiring an alternative, and two, in some ways I'm not sure how different your description of thought systems is. Had I replaced a subject with an idea, the movement of an idea from the periphery into the center, it doesn't sound all that distant from how you've described thought systems and provoking the unspoken.

Your description makes me think that it's an effort to escape the double-bind of subalternity, where in the moment that the subaltern can finally speak is also the moment of further erasure. But to provoke the unspoken back into conversation sounds very similar to me—to use terminology like “the center” might be a problematic spatial metaphor. The difference, to me, would be that the center is distributed to such a degree that it doesn't exist—but the system does. Nevertheless, I would say “the conversation” cannot fully escape the centralizing that economics insists on.

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**E.C.**

Definitely agree “the conversation” is more or less compatible with the market, and we are involved to some extent, in both. I think Amy was also making this assumption in her last response. Maybe the question is how to address, or fend off, the violent abstracting, collapsing, fetishizing of “other” positions as they are pulled into this endless spin-cycle of difference-for-consumption. It is a dizzying and frustrating and sometimes exploitable situation, which is maybe contributing to some of the misunderstandings between us. I imagine we have our own ways of confronting and dealing.

I think there is something productively sobering about the hard line of Spivak’s thoughts on subalternity as alterity: the woman in decolonized space, those with zero access to the lines of social mobility, a position without identity. The black hole in the center of any “conversation” on marginality. Our initial attraction to the split-body manananggal figure, and our desire to displace her into the European conversation (which yes, could be metaphorically mapped as a migration from periphery to center, or maybe better, from provincial to cosmopolitan space) had more to do with the hole than the body. We displayed 10 manananggal halves (5 tops and 5 bottoms) separately in 10 different spaces around Berlin, so it was structured around this middle-gap. You could visit one space and see a pair of legs without a top half, then visit another space and see the reverse. The physical sculptures were a means of inscribing a blankness. I don’t think anyone but us saw the entire show.

I see what you mean when you say that broadening one’s scope can’t in itself undo the local problems in America (I haven’t stepped foot in America in a long while now, but of course have been trying to follow the news there.) But at the same time I would say many of the problems in my own home country (which isn’t where I reside at the moment) are so intimately tied to America that they are difficult to entirely localize. I just wonder if insistently localizing problems is the way to address them given the state of things, which isn’t to say one should lose sight of specificities, or the concrete and situated lived experience.