

To say the world is an enigma is commonplace. But to say that the world is an enigma composed of its various solutions requires the intellectual subtlety of a nature. Following nature, we might say that the question of how to live together is also an enigma composed of its various solutions. If this is the case, then instead of trying to come up with quick solutions, which would only make living together even more enigmatic, we might begin by trying to understand the various dimensions of the enigma. And the enigma, of course, is how to live together in spaces that are increasingly volatile?

Volatility is arguably the biggest characteristic of our times; the one aspect that politics, economics, and art have in common. What then is volatility? What makes spaces volatile?

A space that can be conceived of in terms of a single frame of reference is never volatile. Action and movement in such a space may be perplexingly complex, but complexity is not volatility. There is volatility only when you find multiple frameworks that overlap, and each framework pulls in a different direction. Hence, in a volatile space, movement loses clear directionality and takes on the randomness of Brownian movement, while time loses its chronological sequentially, and various kinds of anachronisms take over. To clarify with an example of a volatile space, namely China today, and its so-called socialist market economy; what is the socialist market economy? Are we dealing with another face of socialism? Or is it, as it is often said in the West, that China today is capitalist in anything else than by name alone. More paradoxically, and that is the argument that I want to develop, are we dealing with neither the life nor death of socialism, but its *afterlife*, with what I might call a 'postimist' socialism more than a post-socialism.

Socialism in 'postimist' form can have a vitality stronger than ever before, in the same way a preserved building would be more significant once its time is over. Spatially and temporally then, postimist-socialism is more complex and volatile than post-socialism. In post-socialism, one set of conditions is seen to succeed and replace another, whereas in postimist socialism we are forced to inhabit overlapping timeframes; where a socialist past is not just succeeded and replaced by a capitalist present, but co-exists with it. Where, for example, a single party system, with the state as the final arbitral in all important matters, can co-exist with the rise of a consumer society, where individual choice and preferences are given priority.

In postimist socialism with its overlapping timeframes, anachronisms of a new and peculiar kind are everywhere. Anachronism does not mean being behind the times. Rather, it is a sign of the times; a product of the speed of historical change. For example, in a China that seems to the outsider to be obsessed by famous brand names and consumerism, we still find as a common occurrence the anachronistic singing of revolutionary songs. What we will see then, it seems to me, in the coming period, is not just a change from socialism to consumerism. In

fact, it is not a change in any familiar sense that we need to understand. Rather, what we must grasp is how change itself has changed.

Now, it is perhaps not coincidental that volatility as a consequence of overlapping frameworks resonates so strongly with the theme that this Moscow Biennial has been formulated; Acting in a center, in a city, in the heart of the island of Eurasia.

The notion of Eurasia itself points to overlapping frameworks; the overlap of Europe and Asia. So structurally speaking, the notion has something in common, at least, with the socialist market economy and other volatile spaces.

Furthermore, to describe the largest land mass on earth as an island suggests that under volatile conditions, what Paul Virilio called speed, space loses its measure and even our perception of dimensions, of large and small, can come unfixed. Finally the Chinese box effect of a center, in a city, in a heart, and so on, suggests that center, city, and heart are not single focused entities, but each a multiplicity made up of overlapping frames, and each a site of volatility. We cannot think of volatility then as simply speed of movement, or quickness of change or the absence of rules. Volatility can no longer be captured by futurist images of bullet trains devouring space, or even by the influential image of globalization as time-space compression, which is more uni-directional it seems to me. A more acceptable image might be time-space distortion, which follows a less predictable trajectory than compression.

Some paradoxical features of volatility can be discerned, if we take even a brief look at contemporary theories of finance, of cinema, and of reading and interpretation. Take finance, in options trading volatility refers not to the actual price movement of a stock and its expected returns, but to a statistical history of how the stock tends to deviate from its own means. In other words, to what is called the "spread". The spread then is a measure of deviation from a norm, and not a measure of actual movement. Another way of putting this is to say that what the spread measures is the movement of movement. The greater the spread, the higher the volatility. However, a small difference in a spread can have a large difference with regard to volatility. Note too that that the spread as a measure of volatility has a *slow* temporality. It operates not in actual chronological time, where frantic price movements take place, but in the time of meta-movements and statistical deviations that cover longer time periods, and move more slowly, more like a time of duration than a chronological time. From this point of view, there are clear parallels to finance theory in contemporary cinema.

In cinema too, Gilles Deleuze, the French Philosopher, argues that contemporary cinema begins with the crisis of movement and chronological time (this is the argument that is central to cinema too). Deleuze says, "Movement can tend to zero in contemporary cinema, or, it may also be exaggerated, be incessant, become a world movement, a Brownian movement, a multiplicity of movement on different scales." Such devious movement then, from zero to exaggerated, is Deleuzes' cinematic version of the spread. Deleuze continues, "We no longer have a chronological time, which can be overturned by movement which are

contingent, contingently abnormal. We have a chronic, non-chronological time which produces movement necessarily abnormal, essentially false." False or abnormal movement, as in financial markets, is deviation from a mean, the movement of movement, and implies a conception of cinema, where volatility becomes the main cinematic principle.

As for reading and interpretation, it can be shown that the challenge of what is still perhaps the most influential model of reading – the deconstructive or allegorical readings of Paul de Man, comes from its relation to volatility. His seminal text entitled *Allegories of Reading* can be understood also as 'Volatilities of Reading'. Such readings do more than break down binary oppositions, or explicate a text. As de Man describes it, a literary text has a structure very much like the structure of overlapping frameworks found in volatile spaces. de Man writes, "Things do not happen as if a literary text moves from a certain period of time away from its center, then turns around, folding back upon itself at one specific moment, to travel back to its genuine point of origin. These imaginary motions between fictional points cannot be located, dated and represented as if they were places in a geography, or events in a genetic history. The three moments," which de Man says are flights, return, and turning point, at which flight changes into return or visa versa, "exist simultaneously on levels of meaning that are so intimately intertwined that they cannot be separated. Our entire argument lies compressed in such formulations."

One conclusion that de Man does not shy away from, is that the volatility of the literary text makes it impossible to read. Hence, reading is never correct; it is always accompanied by error. The more rigorous the reading, the more carefully you read, and the more aware the reader is of the volatility of the text, the more unreliable it is; this is the real challenge of de Mannian poetics. He says, "Reading is not an emotive reaction to what language does, but an emotive reaction to the impossibility of knowing what it might be up to. Literature as well as criticism, the difference between them being delusive, is the most rigorous and consequently the most unreliable language in terms of which man names and transforms himself." So in de Man, as I think these quotations show, reading is not a method of interpreting or domesticating volatility, whether with the hermeneutics of belief or hermeneutics of suspicion. Rather, reading itself is a volatile act, where rigor and unreliability go together. Reading about the rigorous as something reliable, in de Man it's the exact opposite: rigor goes together with unreliability.

Now, with some of these paradoxical features of volatility in mind, let me now turn to one specific case of art as acting in volatile spaces. The case of Ai Weiwei is as good as any [shows images]. Among Chinese artists, as I think all of us know, he is the one most outspokenly critical of the state and its abuse on the neglect of human rights. He's also been called an entrepreneur and self-promoter, and is certainly one of the richest artists in China. The official reason for his recent house arrest is Tax evasion. His position is a curious and contradictory one: he's by turns beaten up or arrested by the authorities, and tolerated or even deferred to - when the police arrest him, they apologise. At

times his work is banned in China, at other times he's the country's unofficial artistic missionary on the international stage.

The state plays a game with Ai Weiwei, and he plays a game with the state. The ambiguous position of Ai Weiwei is itself produced by China's volatile space. The present regime in fact encourages creativity in the arts, just as it encourages private enterprise. We see the proliferation of art districts, state sponsored art biennials and so on. But on the other hand we also see the palpable presence of censorship, which can be both cruel and irrational. What is disturbing and confusing in China today is not so much lack of freedom, there is in fact ostensibly much more freedom now than during the pre-Tinian era, what is disturbing is Chinese volatility expressed in this constant oscillation, this constant going back and forth between permissiveness and prohibition, free agency and control, at all levels of social and cultural life.

[So I'm just showing some of these well-known installations and images from Ai Weiwei, so if we want to talk about them later we can]. There's a point I want to make also, which is that no formal art historical analysis of Ai Weiwei's artworks' would take us very far. It is only when we situate aesthetic form within the volatile space of the socialist market economy that we catch a glimpse of what is at stake. Now the obvious way of reading Ai Wewei's artworks' and performances, which the artist himself might endorse, is to read them as emancipatory gestures, designed to subvert state repression: The artist as a fighter for human rights. However, a more volatile alternative is to read him as someone who has learned how to live under extreme conditions, like those organisms that microbiologists have recently discovered that can thrive on toxic waste. What defines his art is the game that Ai Weiwei plays with the state, sometimes with serious consequences. The game is to turn censorship itself, toxic for art production, into something enabling. To thrive on and not simply survive these conditions. To swim and not just float in the destructive element. This means nothing less than enlisting the repressive state as a collaborator, and to make repression itself a source and resource of emancipatory art.

This is a dangerous and paradoxical game, which is why some of Ai Weiwei's admirers, especially those in the West who know nothing about what is at stake, think he should leave the country. The irony is, of course, that if you are so unhappy in China, and so suppressed, why don't you come to Germany where you are so welcome? I'd suppose he would just say no. In fact, this might be the worst thing for him as an artist; Take away the destructive element and Ai Weiwei will be like a fish out of the water. Adulation can sometimes be less productive than repression itself.

One question that Ai Weiwei's example indirectly raises is, is the point of living together the achievement of happiness? For an artist living under conditions of censorship that have become unpredictable is of course not a happy situation. Yet, as we see in Ai Weiwei's example, creative work can be done within this context. In fact, it could be argued that, as in Ai Weiwei's case, toxic conditions can function as necessary stimuli.

What does it mean to be happy together? Hong Kong director Wang Hwei has a film with that phrase as its title, "Happy together". The film, as some of you may know, is about a gay couple running away from a sexually conservative Hong Kong, to Buenos Aires in search of happiness. But after a very graphic homosexual scene at the beginning of the film (for Hong Kong cinema), the couple start bickering for the rest of the film. It is as if they could be happy and not together, or together and not happy, but never again happy and together at the same time.

Nevertheless, what both Ai Weiwei and Wang Hwei are suggesting in their different ways is that while living together may not result in immediate happiness, what it offers is even more important. Namely, the promise of happiness. Immediate happiness is possible in the form of success, or recognition is possible if we are willing to conform to the values of our times. This is why the existentialists, long ago, used to say that happiness is nothing but a bourgeois fantasy. For Chinese today, happiness means living in their consumers' paradise. In contrast, the promise of happiness is a much more volatile notion. It forces us to imagine a much more subtle and complex form of happiness that does not just passively reflect a society's predispositions but works to transform it.

Let me trace the genealogy of this phrase, 'la promesse du bonheur.' The first to introduce it was Stendhal, and then is Theodor Adorno, who understood it in a completely different way in order to apply it in art and politics. What Stendhal originally wrote was, "love is never more than a promise of happiness." The model in Stendhal is that of flotation. The float who promises everything and delivers nothing, that is what a promise of happiness might mean. Otherwise put, an erotics of deferral and duplicity. In Adorno however, the phrase takes on a new direction, "art is the promise of happiness," a notion that figures prominently in two of his most important works, *Minima Moralia* and *Aesthetic Theory*. The question Adorno asked in these and other works was the following, "Can Art transform society and not just collude with it or withdraw from it?" In other words, the question of *how* to live together which is just as interesting now.

The negative part in Adorno's answer is that "the conditions of capitalism has irreparably damaged our ability to live together and has reduced art's transformative potential."

*Minima Moralia* is subtitled, as we know, *Reflections on damaged life*, because for Adorno, a life under capitalism is already damaged. A key aphorism from *Minima Moralia* reads, "Wrong life cannot be lived rightly." In such a desperate situation, the only ethical option open to art, and this is the important part of the argument: that its *minima moralia* is to fail. The crucial twist is what he describes, "It is the principal and creative way in which art fails, that we find the promise of happiness." Failure here is not the opposite of success. It calls success into question, through a complex relationship to happiness, as we see in another aphorism from *Aesthetic Theory*, where Adorno writes, "For the sake of happiness, happiness is renounced because it is only this renunciation that the promise can be kept. So failure as *minima moralia* also announces the emergence

of a new kind of artist. For Adorno it was someone like Samuel Beckett, whose comments on art as failure, written a long time ago, are arguments that we are only just beginning to understand.

Let me quote a few lines from Beckett, where he says, “to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and to shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living.” Beckett goes on to outline what he calls “an art of failure”. He says, “I know that all that is required now is to make of this fidelity to failure a new occasion, a new term of relation and of the act which, unable to act, obliged to act, he makes an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation.” Now, it should be clear that the failure is not the same as failed art. In Adorno and Beckett, failure is both an ethics – “Wrong life cannot be lived rightly,” right? It is the person who fails who is ethical– and an aesthetics that makes a failure an expressive art that makes up the impossibility of art the starting point of a different kind of art. Just as de Man’s insistence on the impossibility of reading results in an exemplary kind of reading.

So, understood in these ways, failure is related to a main concern of this Moscow Biennial; how to act particularly in spaces that we do not accept or do not feel that we can live with. This issue of how to act also lies behind an event that challenges us to think through the problem of living together in volatile spaces. I am thinking of the Hong Kong occupy movement that took place over several months at the end of 2014. I want to conclude with a brief discussion of how in this event, the ethics, aesthetics, and politics of living together overlap in important ways.

The movement was a genuine event and not just an occurrence. I think there is an important distinction between the event and an occurrence. An event is not just something that happened, but something that happened which had never happened before. It is this that distinguishes an event from an occurrence. An event always catches us by surprise. It is beyond the reach of facts against the run of history as patent with an outcome that cannot be determined in advance. Hence it is always volatile spaces that produce events. To discuss Occupy Hong Kong, we have to distinguish between what happened, which was almost predictable, and why it was an event whose implications we are still trying to grasp.

Briefly, for those who don’t know, what happened was as follows: The immediate issue was the method of electing a new chief executive. One of the things agreed upon when Hong Kong was returned to China in 1997 was that by 2017, elections would take the form of one person-one vote, according to the principle of one country-two systems. You did not have it in China itself, but you could have it in Hong Kong, that was the promise. Beijing followed the agreement in principle, but added further stipulations. For example, limiting the number of candidates, and thereby practically pre-selecting them. “You can have your one-person-one vote, but the kinds of people you vote for is predetermined.” We find here the control mentality of the old socialism together with the neo-liberal strategy of allowing freedom while re-containing it at the same time.

In the words of Henry Ford, as you might know, when he marketed the 'Model T', he said, "you can have any color you like, as long as it is black."

Led by the charismatic eighteen-year-old Joshua Wang, the students understandably refused this deception. The tactic was simple, to disrupt the system by disrupting traffic barricades, or their own bodies, in strategic areas of the city. There was initial public support for the young students, but as days turned into months sentiment turned against them. And it turned against them from taxi drivers, from small retailers relying on street businesses and from all people who could not get to the hospitals as ambulances could not move. The government was remarkably restrained about using force. Rather it played a waiting game of attrition, believing, rightly as it turned out, that time was on its side. In a last effort, Joshua Wang went on a hunger strike but by then the movement was all but over.

Following the facts, what were the implications and what can we say about Occupy Hong Kong as event? I would like to make three sets of comments. Firstly, as the leaders are young high school students, some critics have been tempted to see the Occupy Movement in terms of a generation gap, and its participants as passionate, idealistic, but basically naïve and immature. The movement has been called many things, from an impractical form of populist democracy to a phony disobedience movement. But it could as accurately be said that what we saw really was an imagination gap. One important aspect of Occupy Hong Kong was that it provided an outlet for the city's creative energies which had so far been too narrowly channeled and directed towards instrumental goals. Those who took part in the movement saw the city in a different way. They became aware that spatial configurations other than the established ones were possible. Interestingly enough, the protest sites were also the chosen venues for weddings and even births to take place. They were also the places where we saw art works being produced. These art works were on the whole ephemeral products of the moment, sometimes crude and hardly masterpieces. However, they took their energy from what was happening on the streets, and this gave them an edginess that separated them from kitsch. Just as the Occupy Movement changed our perception of the city and the streets, so did its art change our perception of art. Now there is someone else's work that we stand back and admire when we have the time, but it is something that we ourselves can do.

Another unpredictable aspect of Occupy Hong Kong, which marked it as an event, was its longevity. When participants were asked about why they stayed even against the advice of their parents and teachers, and the personal risk to themselves, many of them said it was because the intense friendships they experienced in the movement was something that they had never experienced before. Friendship in this context, clearly now has a political meaning. A politics of friendship means not organizing a movement or a society not 'top-down' or even 'bottom-up', but naturally where we find not the paternalistic relations of parents to children but relations between brothers and sisters or better still between friends. The movement was not an abstract lesson in democracy. It was a practical lesson that we are still trying to understand how to live together.

One final question relates to the concerns on whether the movement has failed. The protest sites have been cleared and it would seem that Hong Kong is back to business as usual. These outcomes were of course entirely predictable right from the beginning, given the tremendous odds against the students ever succeeding in getting their demands met. However, one outcome was not predictable; even as it became clear that resistance was futile, it continued. Therefore, we find here not a failure of resistance, but rather failure as resistance. A politics of failure that is not the same as a failed politics, and there is a kind of heroism to it, quite different from the heroism of other times. For example, the motto of Kant and the Enlightenment was, as you know, “dare to know”.

In other words, have the moral courage to combat prejudice and superstition. Dare to know, dare to question; that was Kant and the Enlightenment. But in the volatile spaces of today, when knowledge itself is linked to power and control, our model may have to be “dare to fail”. Failure, we have to say, is the moral heroism of our times; in social life, as we as in art. This is what allows us to act and create under conditions of impossibility. To act not because we have hope, but because we refuse to give in to despair.

Thank you.