



## CATEGORY VIOLATION

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Dia/Projects. Ho Chi Minh City, 2011

“I, too, have ropes around my neck. I have them to this day, pulling me this way and that, East and West, the nooses tightening, commanding, choose, choose. I buck, I snort, I whinny, I rear, I kick. Ropes, I do not choose between you. Lassoos, lariats, I choose neither of you, and both. Do you hear? I refuse to choose.” - Salman Rushdie <sup>1</sup>

RST: East, West can be seen as binaries and not necessarily linked to geography. As such, we might expand this into new territories of difference and similitude. Or, as Rushdie himself remarked, that he felt he was neither of the two, but the comma between.

LTV: Comma is derived from the Greek word *Komma* meaning "something cut off". However in contemporary English usage, the comma is a concatenation notation separating entities that share common traits and belong to one distinct inventory. To be a comma is to be a fissure on the totality of the East<comma>West body, a cleavage sculpted into the geodesic bosom. However, to indicate the relation as binary or dyadic is to restrict the dyad within the subset of the Cartesian product, for cultural hybridity has given emergence to triads, midpoints and counterpoints.

RST: I think this is right, to speak of multiplicities. All of these points form patterns that can be seen as trajectories. I was thinking today about that word, trajectory, and the root, “-ject” which I haven’t looked up. But it’s obvious from this root we derive the everyday words: eject, reject, subject, object and of course, for the artist, the project.

Intuitively, I would say that it has something to do with motion, focus or directionality. The project is related to the projectile. The firing of an idea into the world. Sometimes so violent leaving a wake of turbulence behind. The artist and the project, at least to me, requires that it disturbs or disrupts. This disruption (also going back to what you’ve just said about fissures, which are connected to ruptures) does not need to be seen negatively. It creates movement on the surface of still water. It opens up spaces to be seen in relief. It provides difference and becomes a direct challenge to complacency. And it is this particular challenge that I consider the defining characteristic of the contemporary arts practice - and to its counterpoint, that machine of complacency - mass production.

LTV: The projectile or firing of an idea into the world reminds me of Leonard Susskind’s, our “God Plumber”, theory of *Holographic Principle*. The theory tells us that what we perceive as the third dimension is merely an illusion created by a hologram at the event horizon that is being projected onto our world. Let’s not go into the fiendish mathematical proof for this theory. What would be interesting for us is the idea that what we perceive is not the information but the projection of that information. Our perceptions are not of the hologram but of its projection through the space between the earth and the event horizon. We do not know what is the definite, the defined. The only thing we know is the in-

between-ness. The space between the earth and the event horizon is not void but full of other entities that can distort and reconstruct what we consider as “reality”. The in-between-ness of reality gives us both monsters and wonders.

RST: Right. I like your point about the in-between. I would like to use it as a repositioning of identity. Rather than identity being a static and fixed location we see it through the process of identification. That is, something that is in a state of change and transition. Identification as something that one identifies with at a particular moment but always in the state of causation. I’m glad you brought this up, because we’ve nailed another word on the conference title. By restricting identity to the usual suspects (nationality, gender, sexuality, race, religion) we negate the most fundamental law of nature - the tendency for change. If the arts are to remain relevant, they must be agile and equipped to respond to this change and ultimately providing the space for new identities to emerge, however temporary and fleeting they may be.

LTV: This can problematize our tendency to categorize Fiction/Non-Fiction, Real/Unreal or Real/Nominal. What we consider as Real is merely another Unreal. What we consider as contradiction is merely difference. Category violation is always already in existence with categories. I can go so far as saying by initiating the process of categorizing, we simultaneously violate the categories.

RST: The title of this collaborative investigation, we agreed, is Category Violation. We wanted this conversation to somehow speak about issues we were interested now and not feel constrained by what I actually spoke about at the conference. To be honest, what I had spoken about at the conference wasn’t even what I had hoped to speak about - an argument against the noose-like strangulation of national representation as the starting point for art discourse. But category violation is defined quite specifically in scientific discourses...

LTV: I have no idea how “category violation” is defined in scientific discourses. But here is my own definition: Categories are lines of arbitrary inventions and conventions that tear through the continuity of juxt-a-position. To violate categories is to recreate this continuity through transforming the Tear into the Fold. Category violation is the area which corresponds to the presumably blank spaces between categories, the area where similitude becomes both contiguous and contagious, the fold which is weaved right into the very fabric it is unweaving.

RST: Fabric is also interesting. To fabricate, like you say, is to invent. Fabricating fictions, fabricating objects.

LTV: Yes, the fabric/fabricate connection is brilliant! Both words imply the act of construction, or as you just said, invention.

RST: We might also look to fabric’s close cousin, the textile. Their relationship is interesting. Of course, the significance of textile is rooted to the notion of the text, from which we also get texture and thus the tactile. And tactility is again that crucial difference. The ability to detect the contrast, in those valleys and ridges, folds. Those surfaces with sometimes double upon them selves. Of course, the imagery is absolutely sensational.

LTV: Like Taste?

RST: Yes, recalling our research last year about taste and how at one point in time the two sensations of taste and touch were not distinguished, both having the linguistic DNA of the Latin *taxtare*. I’m glad you brought this up. I would love to talk about this and distance right now, but I wonder, if we should migrate

back toward the issue of categories and taxonomies? In our discussions you've brought up a lot of interesting observations about categories from Foucault's *Order of Things* and if I remember anything about Kant, it was the *categorical imperative*. I feel we need to discuss the idea of category further to flesh out our decision to title this submission in the way we did.

"There is a continuity produced by fusion in which all generality is nominal."  
(Foucault, *The Order Of Things*, p. 160) <sup>2</sup>

RST: The Nominal is the named. It's rather difficult to name the unknown, the *unsensible*. Throughout human history, we've had this difficulty of defining the absence even when we've been confronted with it face-to-face, look at how long the notion of "zero" took to gain currency in mathematics. The Romans simply had no way of incorporating it into their numeric symbology. Giving name to the void. But it's precisely this giving form/label/name to the formless that brings it out of the void and allows us to speculate. The exposition (read: the exposing, or if you will, the exhibition) is also like the showing, which is precisely the monster, from which we get the word demonstration.

LTV: In economics, the Nominal is actually more real than the Real, since the Real value is inflation-adjusted based on the Nominal value. Real values therefore need to be evaluated based on a specific timescale. The Real value is actually not real, but a representation of the Nominal value in terms of purchasing power.

RST: Perhaps the discrepancy between the nominal (named) and the Real is the monster. I don't know so much about economics, but I'm confident that anyone that suffered from the recent derivatives implosion would agree that the classification system for rating bonds based on fabrications of compounded voids were monstrous. I wonder, if we see bonds as relationships (however real or unreal), we discover they exist everywhere both intangible and physical, we might transition to the notion of bonds in chemistry? It's not so far-fetched, people often say they have a "chemical attraction".

LTV: If we think about atoms that are attracted/connected to each other through chemical bonds, these bonds are electromagnetic force between opposite charges. In Chemistry, the number of bonds formed by an atom of a given element is called *valence*. In *Logics*, we have the semantic principle called *Bivalence* which states that every proposition is either true or false. Similarly, the principle of *Contravalance* states that no proposition is both true and false. We can see the connections being drawn here where validity is determined through the bond. For a proposition to be considered valid, Uni-valence is required.

What is remarkable is that bonds do not simply connect, they can also generate. For example, hydrogen and oxygen, each one of them is a combustible gas. However when bonded together, we can get water  $H_2O$  which is an electronically neutral compound that has an emergent property totally different from the properties of its constituent elements: it can extinguish the fire induced by its "ingredients". Continue on this path, now that we have water  $H_2O$  H-O-H, if we add in one more oxygen atom, we have hydrogen peroxide  $H_2O_2$  H-O-O-H which is an oxidizer that is often used as antiseptic. But here comes an interesting issue: if molecular hydrogen and oxygen can combine and react together to produce either  $H_2O$  or  $H_2O_2$ , either water or antiseptic, why is there a stronger tendency for water to be produced instead of hydrogen peroxide? I believe this tendency is determined by stability.

Now speaking of stability, it also reminds me of our earlier discussion on tranquility and boredom. What are the factors that differentiate one from another, that contribute to our different perceptions of the same objective conditions. According to your observation, it was stability. Tranquility is stable since we have the

desire to remain in that state, while boredom is a state from which we try to break away and is thus unstable. What I said earlier about “tendency” can be explained in what you referred to here as “desire”: the desire/tendency to attach vs. the desire/tendency to detach.

Tendency is also DeLanda’s interpretation of Deleuze’s “singularity”. DeLanda has the tendency to use “tendency” and “singularity” interchangeably.<sup>3</sup>

RST: Yes, but we should be mindful about DeLanda’s use of the word tendency, and note in particular that tendencies are an argument against essences. And this, at least to me, overlaps with how we’ve just defined identity - that identity cannot be distilled by essential qualities but as shifting relationships. Now to bring this connection back to DeLanda’s notion of singularities (which are not essences, but rather conditions) and tendencies. To start off with, DeLanda is using an entirely different model of looking at reality here, moving away from the familiar geometries of Descartes and Fermat of three dimensionality (length, width, depth) and looking at what is known as differential geometry (aligned with Friedrich Gauss and Bernhard Riemann) based on the idea of manifolds (a term in the mathematics of topology). DeLanda gives of the example of the soap bubble and why it is shaped so. The soap bubble has a spherical shape because its tendency is to seek a point of minimal free energy and minimal surface tension, as opposed to the salt crystal, which is a cube because of the tendency of minimizing bond energy. Identities here are based on topological form, which are driven by relationships, or tendencies.

LTV: I love soap bubbles. Unless there are adhering liquid drops, they are always spherical. The sphere has the minimum curvature among all convex solids with the same surface area. They are like *spherical bastards* to borrow the term from CalTech astrophysicist Fritz Zwicky, who said “They are bastards no matter which way you look at them.”

Regarding degrees of freedom, I remember DeLanda explained that the pendulum has two degrees of freedom (position and momentum). However momentum is actually mass multiplied by velocity. So I wonder why DeLanda chose to stay at molecular level did not break it down further. Velocity also encapsulates position and direction.

RST: Because perhaps beneath the molecular level, certain particles have speed but no mass, thus no velocity?

LTV: No, I was speaking of “molecular” in a metaphorical way. I meant to say that momentum can be broken further into mass and velocity. By that reasoning, does it mean that at a microscopic level, things can have more degrees of freedom? And then when you talk about “position”, you also need to mention the frames of reference, ie. the position of an object in relative to which origin and which axes.

RST: No, because that is putting the object in a Cartesian space. In differential geometry we exchange the precision of space for the complexity of multi-dimensionality. *“As with any model, there is a trade-off here: we exchange the complexity of the object’s changes of state for the complexity of the modelling space.”* We can read about this later.. you will understand it better than I, but I recall this part in the book....

LTV: Degrees of freedom, as I remember, is the number of levels in which an object can change.

RST: Yes, but here is the trick. EACH of those changes requires it’s OWN dimension in the topological model...

LTV: A pendulum can change its position which consequently change its kinetic and potential energy.

RST: We're not talking about energy here though, but defining it topologically. Degrees of freedom is based on the manifold and how many pivots so to speak. A human-sized bike has ten, a microscopic bike would also have ten, though the masses are different.

LTV: I know energy isn't a matter of concern here. I just brought it in since it's one of the hypothetical consequences when a pendulum changes its position. Now back to my argument about momentum vs. velocity, momentum and velocity are both vector quantities which means they both have direction. Because the mass of the pendulum remains unchanged and momentum = mass x velocity, wouldn't it be more precise to speak of velocity instead of momentum?

RST: Perhaps, but the position of "what", which requires mass. Isn't this a Foucault's pendulum trick question or something.

LTV: Oh it's the other Foucault! Foucault the physicist, not the philosopher. Leon Foucault's pendulum was used to demonstrate the earth's rotation.

RST: Well, that was a detour. But it's relevant. Moving from spheres/spherical bastards to form and motion. Speaking of bastards, a term I personally don't find offence to, it is usually used in reference to relationships that fall outside of the norm. A bastard is the offspring of an unmarried couple, and that offspring is perceived as "abnormal". This brings us to the issue of monsters.

Very often we speak of monsters we think of the combination of the familiar (familial) and strange. Something truly alien is not as disturbing as the mixture. We find this phobia in all sorts of fields, from sociology (racism) to biology. In fact, the mixture or remix seems to be one of those defining beacons of the postmodern. I don't really want to go into a discussion about the remix but would like to look more closely at the idea of the mutation, which is one of the keywords in the title of this conference, along with movement. Would you agree that movement and mutation are not so different?

LTV: Mutation and movement reminds me of a debate which I read a while ago about whether natural selection is a force. Since a force in physics is represented by a vector which indicates movement and directionality, I think the notion of movement is self-inherent to mutation, as suggested by the title of this conference: *Moved, Mutated, and Disturbed Identities*.

Speaking of Mutation and *mutare* (to change), I would also like to bring in permutation which etymologically means "thorough change" (*per* : thoroughly). One form of permutation is anagrams - a favorite sport of ours. Palindromes are in fact also a type of anagram in which only identical elements are allowed to swap positions.

RST: Um, continuing on with word-play, the final word we've yet to touch directly upon is disturbed, which must have a connection to turbulence and thus relates to change. That specific *phase transition* from order to chaos. Do we consider order and chaos to be two different sides of the same coin or is it a continuum? I don't have the answer here, but it seems in that in phase transition we have a critical point (or singularity) where conditions are such that things change without gradation.

LTV: Did you know that the Greek root for cosmos (*kosmos*) means "order"?

RST: No, I didn't.

LTV: We can also have different orders for the same set of things (hence, Foucault's "The Order Of Things"). Permutations are different orders of exactly the same elements. On the other hand, order, as opposed to Chaos, implies a state of stability and predictability, a state of reasonable categorization. The word "order" itself comes from the Latin root *ordinem* which originally means "a row of threads in a loom". This brings us back to our earlier discussion on weaving and fabric. One of my favorite word is "primordial" which integrates *primus* (first) and *ordiri* (to begin to weave). Now you can see the connection between Order and Ordiri, consequently between Order and Pattern, Order and Entwinement.

I would also like to elaborate upon this point and suggest that Chaos is not necessarily the opposite of Order but a higher form of Order. Think of when Entwinement becomes Entanglement. Entanglement is not the opposite but a more complex level/form of Entwinement. It is when the threads are so tightly knit that a knot can emerge. Take a look at the text written for this conference: "*disturbed identities give way to new, sometimes knotty, relationships with the Other.*"

RST: Oh man, you are bringing up the game! As we both know, knots have been one of those areas we've developed a particular fondness for. Knots have attracted significant attention in topology communities. But the text that you cite from the conference brochure somehow says it all. Identities as evolving relationship with the other, rather than intrinsically defined by essential qualities, and in that entanglement (or entwinement) new forms of criticality can emerge. Let's leave it here, as a knot of entangled disciplines and see how it unravels.

LTV: Ravel and Unravel have the same meanings. Is it paradoxical? Perhaps it is a perfect example for the idea that un-X is not necessarily the opposite of X. In this case, it reaches the extreme where un-X is identical as X. Remember what I said earlier about the Real vs. the Unreal and what we consider as contradiction is actually difference. In this case, Ravel = unRavel, what we consider as contradiction is repetition.

RST: Not all apparent repetitions are the same either. Under certain conditions 360 degrees is not the same as 720 degrees rotation. This relates to the concept of symmetries - the required number of rotations an electron needs to make to return to its original state. A rotation 360 degrees, what we would normally believe to be a full cycle or turn isn't actually so, but requires another 360 degrees for a full reset.

LTV: We tend to intuitively believe that a rotation by 360 degrees is the same as a rotation by 0 degree and therefore always restores the thing back to its initial/original state. This is referred to, as you have already mentioned, symmetry. It is when the transformed is identical to the initial/original. When something remains the same after a 360-degree rotation, we call it rotational symmetry. Some geometrical shapes can be more symmetrical than others, which means that they can have rotational symmetry at other rotational angles less than 360 degrees.

What you just mentioned about the difference between 360-degree and 720-degree rotations is also built into the idea of symmetry. The reason why a 360-degree rotation does not restore an object to its initial/original state can be explained by breaking the 360-degree rotation into four constituent rotations, each one is 90 degrees. The process can be illustrated as follows:

Assuming the initial state is: spin up  $\{\uparrow\}$

{↑} □ {→} □ {↓} □ - {←} □ - {↑}

Therefore, what you end up with after a 360-degree rotation is not the original state but the inverse reflection of the original, the  $\neg$ {original}.

RST: Like ravel, un-ravel?

LTV: Exactly! Unravel is the  $\neg$ {ravel}. However, although ravel means the same thing as unravel, the original and the  $\neg$ {original} are totally different. The minus sign here is critical.

RST: This too is topology, no?. Think of a cube. Rotate on one axis 360 degree and if you didn't see it spin, you would say that it hasn't moved. It has a certain degree of freedom based on its symmetry.

LTV: I think a cube has rotational symmetry at 90 degrees.

RST: A sphere then would have a rotational symmetry of any degree?

LTV: That's right. A sphere is rotationally invariant: it remains the same at any direction or angle of rotation.

I also want to elaborate further and draw another connection, between symmetry and impossibility: The idea of symmetry is actually based on impossibility: the impossibility to tell the difference between the original and the transformed. In mathematics, the possibility can be validated through the impossibility. This is called proof by contradiction, *reductio ad absurdum*. All right, that has been a detour. Back to the rotation thing.

RST: When we speak of rotation, as a movement, and that there is extreme complexity if apparently simple movements, should we also see the inverse, perhaps the simplicity of entanglement?

LTV: No, entanglement is not equivalent to the rotational symmetry thing. I talked about entanglement earlier, but was trying to avoid touching on quantum entanglement (which is the same as non-locality). I guess we cannot avoid the quantum now.

RST: Non-locality, to borrow this term out of context, would be perfect also to speak about the need defining through fixed identities. As I understand this concept, objects can have direct influences on other instantaneously or can be in two places at once?

Some materials that have a schizophrenic complex, like glass - unable to decide whether to be a solid or a liquid (which I believe is the definition for a gel, or, a state of matter between a gas and a solid - an aerosol).

LTV: Those must be matters that are undergoing "identity crisis".

RST: Ha ha, fantastic! Which brings us to the nice quote you had about mixtures...

"Wonder was moreover associated with paradox, coincidence of opposites; one finds *mira* (marvelous) again and again in the texts alongside *mixta* (mixed or composite things), a word that

evokes the hybrids and monsters also found in the literature of entertainment" (Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, p.43)<sup>4</sup>

LTV: We can see that the *mira/mixta* can only be found in this fold of category violation. Along the interstices of the existing and prevailing norms are not void but the potentiality for new norms. These arteries of potentiality make it possible for the modular pulsation to be measured, for an active system is a system that can generate/ferment errors. Given the right proportion/combination of yeast and bacteria, the *monstre mixta* becomes the *mira mixta*, the zymurgical becomes the zymagical.

RST: WTF is zymurgical?

LTV: Fermentation. Sort of related to fermentation. And "zymagical" is the *mixta*, if you know what I mean.

On the rhetorical plane of existence, if there is a gap between two beings A and B, what causes A to be A and B to be B, or in other words, what causes A not to be B and B not to be A? The hypothetical gap therefore gives rise to the need of making leaps (*saltus*). The saltationist mechanism requires single-step speciation during which an entirely new category emerges. Stephen Jay Gould and Niles Eldredge has a gradualist theory that explains evolution as long segments of stasis that is punctuated by phenotypic deviations. However phenotypes are not distinct and independent sets of properties. They are interactions between the genotypes and the environment, in the same way as physical mass is generated, as Richard Feynman put it: "All mass is interaction."<sup>5</sup>

RST: Ah, my favorite term of the day, *Punctuated Equilibrium*, from Stephen Jay Gould. I just saw a documentary on the largest cave in the world, which is actually in Vietnam. There are areas of the cave where the ceilings have collapsed and sunlight is able to penetrate. Because the cave system was so isolated, researchers were hoping to find entirely new species in these areas isolated for thousands of years. But what they discovered were flora and fauna that were phenotypically altered but retained the exact DNA of animals outside of the cave. Trees would grow shorter to account for the lack of sunlight but were not a genotypically different species.

Surely, this was a very strange way of addressing some of issues at the center of this conference and on the surface in many ways eluded the sphere of contemporary arts completely. But dialogue, at least for me, speaks directly to the direction I believe the contemporary arts practice can go. Not necessarily toward the science, but "in other directions". To defy categories based on media, identity politics, nation. To accept duplicity, apparent contradiction, and to discover the link between violate, volatile, and volition.

I'd like to thank Biljana Ciric for having the patience to see this conversation, however odd, published and for the support of Casino Luxembourg and Ministère de la Culture/Le Gouvernement du Grand-Duché de Luxembourg, the Asia-Europe Foundation, Minsheng Art Museum and the DDM Warehouse in providing the forum for the artist residencies and symposium. I need to acknowledge a comment Sylvie Blocher made to me after my presentation encouraging me to be experimental. And foremost, for the extensive conversations, some of which are touched upon here, with Le Tuong Vi that occurred over the last several months in Ho Chi Minh City.

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<sup>1</sup> Rushdie, S. (1994) *East, West: Stories*. New York: Vintage

<sup>2</sup> Foucault, M. (2002) *The Order Of Things: An archaeology of the human sciences*. London: Routledge

<sup>3</sup> DeLanda, M. (2002) *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*. London: Continuum

<sup>4</sup> Walker Bynum, C. (2005) *Metamorphosis and Identity*. New York: Zone Books



<sup>5</sup> Feynman, R. in *Principles* (c. 1950) as quoted in Gleick, J. (1999) *Genius: The Life and Science of Richard Feynman*. New York: Vintage