

a kind of forever present



..... JAMES VOORHIES)
..... FREDERIC JAMESON
..... ROBERT GREENBERG
..... JÜRGEN HABERMAS
..... JENNIFER ALLEN
..... JEAN BAUDRILLARD

AL NUMBERS

..... DAVID and DANNY TUSS of umbrella men
..... "Faded" and "The Dream"

..... George Orwell's *1984* by James Voorhies



SALON FÜR KUNSTBUCH 21ER HAUS

Vienna, Austria

Wednesday, October 10, 2012 at 7 p.m.

BUREAU FOR OPEN CULTURE

presents

a kind of forever present

written by JAMES VOORHIES

and

produced by NICHOLAS HOFFMAN and NATE PADAVICK

SYNOPSIS of PLOT

a kind of forever present is a public talk in the form of a theatrical performance that explores what ever happened to postmodernism. It culls and combines citations from texts by theorists Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, Jürgen Habermas, Clement Greenberg and others to hold a fictitious conversation about the postmodern impulse.

The performance-conversation considers the decline and transformation of postmodernism into a hybrid, constant stream of social media, information capital and cultural production in the current moment.

In this era of rapid circulation of images and ideas, where everything is always accessible, our relationship to material culture, real-time experiences and the built, spatial environment has changed.

Do we remember what it means to yearn for something?

CAST

(in order of appearance)

NICHOLAS HOFFMAN NARRATOR (JAMES VOORHIES)
ALICE BAYANDIN FREDRIC JAMESON
CASSANDRA TROYAN CLEMENT GREENBERG
MARIO STRK JÜRGEN HABERMAS
LENA ROSA HÄNDLE JENNIFER ALLEN
MICHÈLE PAGEL JEAN BAUDRILLARD

MUSICAL NUMBERS

Written and performed by DAVID and DANNY TUSS of umbrella men
“Everything Faded” and “The Dream”

Lyrics drawn from George Orwell’s *1984* by James Voorhies

Everything Faded

Shoegaze

words: G. Orwell
music: D. Tuss, D. Tuss

Voice

F Freely G In tempo

mf The stor...y - be - gan _____ in the mid...dle six...ties _____

C

— the per...iod of the great put...ges in which the lead...ers of the rev...ol...ution

G F G

were wiped out. _____ 2. In Nine...teen Se...venty none were left _____

F C

— ex...cept Big Bro...ther him...self. _____ All the rest were ex...posed as trai tors _____

G

— and coun...ter rev...olution...ations _____

3. He had the feeling
though already at that time
facts and dates
were growing blurry.

4. Everything faded into mist.
The past was erased,
the erasure forgotten,
the lie became truth.



a kind of forever present

(Curtain rises; lights up; center stage.)

NARRATOR

What ever happened to postmodernism? We never really got a handle on it. It hung around from the early 1960s until the late 1990s in an elusive, nebulous, shape-shifting form. It teased and taunted us, appearing occasionally to take a position that would help us comprehend the architecture, art, music, television, video or film of any given moment during those years. That mystery, even mystique, was part of its appeal. Its combination of intellectual cachet, intrigue and down-and-dirty dealings with popular culture made it a catchall phrase for everything. Whereas we know when the word "postmodernism" first entered use in print, no one can say exactly when it entered parlance, what gave it that initial rise, nor can they agree on when its popular use ended. Postmodernism had none of the tidy habits of its eminent forebear Modernism. No slotting of ideas and disciplines into easy categories. Some naively believe postmodernism still exists, but they can't clearly articulate why or what it is. They are wrong. It's not with us any longer, as we will see here. Its precarious condition contributed to its uncertain and unceremonious dissolution, which feels fitting for a thing so abstract, so difficult to know yet so pervasive.

We can at least begin to talk about its obvious relationship with Modernism due to the prefix post in postmodernism...

(The preeminent American literary critic and political theorist FREDRIC JAMESON rushes from stage left and pushes NARRATOR to stage right. JAMESON starts to speak loudly. Lights go low. Bright spot on JAMESON at stage center.)

JAMESON

Indeed, the concept of postmodernism is not widely accepted or even understood today. Most postmodernisms emerged as specific reactions against the established forms of high Modernism. Those formerly subversive and embattled styles--Abstract Expressionism; the great modernist poetry of Pound, Eliot or Wallace Stevens; the International Style of Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies; plus Stravinsky, Joyce, Proust and Mann--felt once to be scandalous or shocking were, for the generation that arrived at the gate in the 1960s, felt to be the establishment and the enemy--dead, stifling, canonical, the reified monuments one has to destroy to do anything new. This means that there were as many different forms of postmodernisms as there were high modernisms in place. That obviously does not make the job of describing postmodernism as a coherent thing any easier, since the unity of this impulse was given not in itself but in the very Modernism it sought to displace...

(Spot on NARRATOR standing at stage right.)

NARRATOR

And it became even more complex. Time has certainly proven that since you delivered those words in 1982 in your lecture "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" at the Whitney Museum of American Art, postmodernism continued to evolve into something much more pervasive than a one-to-one reaction against each high Modernism...

POSTMODERNISM

OR,

THE CULTURAL LOGIC

OF

LATE CAPITALISM



FREDRIC JAMESON



JAMESON

Yes...but as I was saying...another feature of postmodernism is the effacement in it of some key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture, those rigid distinctions that Modernism tried hard to maintain. This is perhaps the most distressing development of all from an academic standpoint, which has traditionally had a vested interest in preserving a realm of high or elite culture against the surrounding environment of philistinism, of schlock and kitsch.

NARRATOR

Kitsch is no longer a relevant term. It is 2012. There is little difference between what was called kitsch and anything else in our culture today. Kitsch has been eroded by a culture that is simultaneously high and low. Whereas folks like the American art critic Clement Greenberg tried vehemently to elucidate some sort of understanding about kitsch and the avant-garde, both have without a doubt become extinct, fossilized, absorbed in the abyss of a contemporary culture à la "Artstar," YouTube and Facebook. Postmodernism took care of eradicating the avant-garde, and our super-hybrid condition of cultural accretion has now finished up the job and excised kitsch.

(Lights go low; a dim, greenish glow illuminates the barren stage. JAMESON and NARRATOR stand quietly as the slow drawl of CLEMENT GREENBERG permeates the space.)

GREENBERG

As I said in 1939 in "Avant-garde and Kitsch," where there is an avant-garde, generally we

also find a rear-guard. And that rear-guard takes the form of kitsch. To fill the demand of the new market, a new commodity was devised: ersatz culture, kitsch, destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide.

In walked kitsch, using for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture, welcoming and cultivating this insensibility. It is the source of its profits. Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money.

NARRATOR

Mr. Jameson, this sounds not so different from some of your ideas about pastiche and postmodernism?

JAMESON

Pastiche is yet another key feature that I outlined at the Whitney in my analysis of postmodernism. Pastiche involves imitation or, better still, the mimicry of other styles and particularly the mannerisms and stylistic twitches of other styles. It gives us a chance to sense the specificity of the postmodernist experience of time. Postmodernism expresses the inner truth of that newly emergent social order of late capitalism, a new type of social life and economic order--what is often euphemistically called modernization, postindustrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, or multinational capitalism. It can be dated from the postwar

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ART
AND
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CRITICAL ESSAYS
CLEMENT
GREENBERG



Falling from the Grip of Grace The Exhibition as a Critical Form since 1968

James Voorhies

boom in the United States from the late 1940s or early '50s or, in France, from the establishment of the Fifth Republic in 1958.

NARRATOR

The new social order has turned into an all-encompassing, completely integrated human relationship with communication and technology, leveling high and low culture into one and the same. This condition has emerged partially because of the dissolution of an avant-garde vis-à-vis the end of Modernism, precipitating a new kind of relationship with time that privileges constant accessibility to everything, a kind of forever present. Today, who is interested in "making it new," pushing it forward? Who and what are the avant-garde? And, if they exist, which culture are they pushing forward or reacting against? Building upon Mr. Greenberg's connection of the avant-garde to kitsch, we can say that kitsch no longer exists because the avant-garde no longer exists. Because how does an avant-garde get ahead of a continual present that has no desire to differentiate between high and low culture?

(There's a rustling in the audience, and an elderly gentleman stands in the third row. It is the distinguished German sociologist and philosopher JÜRGEN HABERMAS. He moves slowly to the aisle and walks down it, then up the steps to center stage. He sits on the top step and slowly faces the audience.)

HABERMAS

Let us not forget that aesthetic modernity is characterized by attitudes, which find a common focus in a changed consciousness of time. This time consciousness expresses itself through metaphors of the vanguard and the avant-garde about which Mr. Greenberg speaks. The avant-

garde understood itself as invading unknown territory, exposing itself to the dangers of sudden, shocking encounters, conquering an as yet unoccupied future. The avant-garde must find a direction in a landscape into which no one seems to have yet ventured.

NARRATOR

So in the past high culture, or let's say the work of avant-garde art, served to react against and change aspects of what might be considered the everyday, ideally advancing mass culture through its critique and insistence on maintaining a certain level of seriousness and aesthetics. High Modernism's critique became less critical and even irrelevant because its audience became limited and its defining characteristics too esoteric. Postmodernism sought to reinscribe a place for low culture and rebel against the distanced and elitist place Modernism had carved out for itself. But, as Theodor Adorno warned in advance of what eventually became postmodernism, with this reconciliation of high and low art as a democratic move against the tenets of high Modernism, a culture industry emerged, establishing an opening for advertising, technology, design, lifestyle and communication to eventually co-opt art and aesthetics into one consumer totality.

Simulacra, too, are now grafted onto every aspect of daily life as restaurants, university campuses, bowling alleys and entire shopping centers are built to simulate the spatial environments of previous eras. Every detail, from the arches of masonry, the purposely cracked ceramic tiles on floors to the intentional effacement of gold letters on windows to recreate past architectural and spatial moments, contribute overall to our present behavior as we move about contemporary

life. And, whether it's Princeton University's "Gothic" style dorms or a "1950s" Williamsburg bowling alley or a "Speakeasy" Lower East Side café, the impetus behind it is Capital and the fusion, again, of lifestyle, art and design.

HABERMAS

True, in so many words. Of course, it's much more convoluted than that, and you know it. But for our purposes here the impulse of modernity as connected to a time consciousness is now completely exhausted; anyone who considers themselves avant-garde today can read their own death warrant.

NARRATOR

Why? Because they don't realize that the art they produce is complicit in the very culture they believe they are reacting against, as they continue to work and work in a modernist void long after the lights have come on and the party is over? Because they continue to spin away in some hypothetical historical continuum? But wasn't the avant-garde accompanied by an aspiration to move something forward? Isn't that what we are trying to do?

HABERMAS

Partially, yes. However, there was an increasing anarchistic intention of blowing up the continuum of history. The anticipation of an undefined future and the cult of the new meant in fact the exaltation of the present. New value was placed on the transitory, the elusive and the ephemeral; the very celebration of dynamism disclosed a longing for an undefiled, immaculate and stable present.

NARRATOR

So postmodernism obscured that master narrative put down by Modernism. That act, however, ushered along not only its ultimate demise but also its increasingly forgettable place in recent history subsumed by its very own operation. Perhaps the end of postmodernism is not a failure at all but its final triumph-- art has become fully aestheticized into mass culture via what is known as lifestyle by way of the culture industry. Today that is super-hybridized in a culture of communication networks and media constructed with Facebook. It is the fulfillment of postmodernism's wet dream rather than its disintegration.

(Editor of frieze d/e magazine JENNIFER ALLEN walks onstage.)

ALLEN

Okay. Let's bring this introductory prologue to a conclusion so we can move on with the rest of it. I want to add briefly to this discussion by saying that before the Internet, postmodernism linked different people by designating different cultural phenomena. Once dubbed "postmodern," a novel could suddenly be compared with a sculpture, a pop song or a dress because they, too, had been called "postmodern." An author could talk with an artist, musician, designer and others, although their talks took place in conferences and in print instead of online. They did not always agree, but they had a common culture in the word postmodernism. These artists didn't need a culture--let alone a neologism--to bring them together. Our postmodernism is Facebook: not a catchall phrase but a catch-everyone technology. The common comes automatically; the culture can always change. In light of social

frieze

Contemporary Art and Culture

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'Immersion, entanglement, affectivity, sudden rupture and repeated breakdown'

NETO STEVERI

'I like work which carries within itself conflicts of interest that risk being self-defeating'

SETH PRICE

Super-hybridity?

'Everything is spreading out, oxidizing, decaying; within all of this we have tricks that make us feel as though things are ordered'

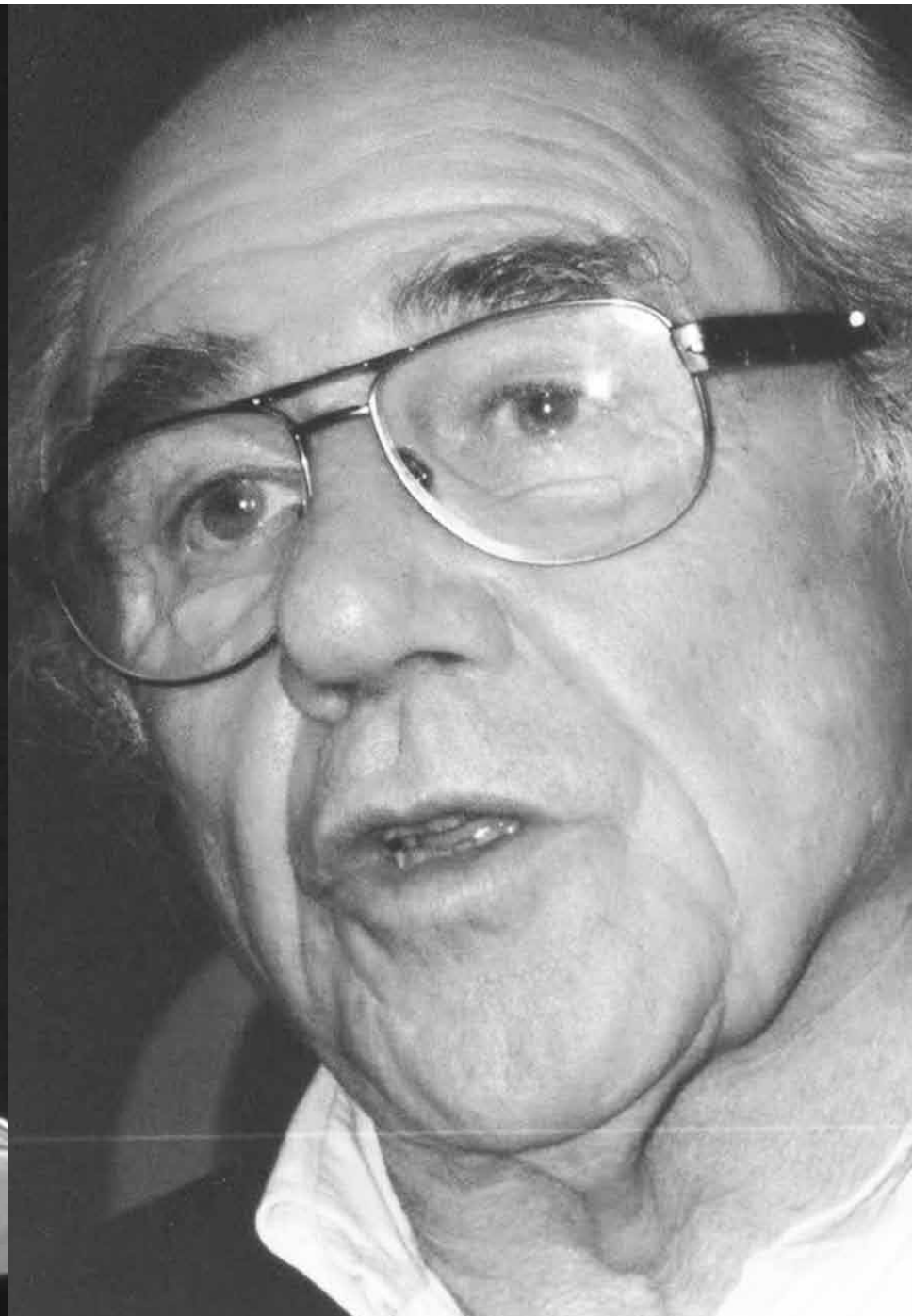
EMILY WARDILL

'I want to see how much more I can cross: animal, mineral and vegetable - everything!'

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THE ECSTASY OF COMMUNICATION

ean Baudrillard

networks, the ubiquity of postmodernism appears as its most revolutionary trait.

(From high above in the front row of the balcony, a man with a French accent begins to speak. It is sociologist and cultural theorist JEAN BAUDRILLARD. The stage remains silent and the spectators below shuffle and turn around in their seats to quickly find the source of the voice.)

.BAUDRILLARD .

Let me interrupt for just a moment. This situation with media and technology should not be that surprising to all of you. I warned about the dominant role of technology in 1987 in "The Ecstasy of Communication" when I analyzed the screen and network, the non-reflecting surface, as an immanent surface where operations unfold--the smooth operational surface of communications. Around that time something had changed, and the Faustian period of production and consumption had given way to the era of networks, to the narcissistic and protean era of connections, contact, contiguity, feedback and generalized interface that goes with the universe of communication. At first it was the television image--the television being the ultimate and perfect object for that previous era. Our own body and the whole surrounding universe became a control screen. Today people no longer project themselves into their objects, with their affects and their representations, their fantasies of possession, loss, mourning, jealousy: the psychological dimension has in a sense vanished. One feels that it is not really there that things are being played out.

NARRATOR

Technology has further tightened its hold since the television and altogether usurped

the previous connections we made to material culture, real-time experiences and the built, spatial environment. So now we are talking about a flattened sense of space and time, and a kind of vacancy in what marks the passage of time because our associations are no longer integrated into the materiality of things but aligned with the immateriality of communication technologies and its vast panorama of signs. Time is no longer perceived in or connected to the objects, music, environments and actions of a particular epoch. This is partially due to what you talk about, Ms. Allen, in terms of technology, of Facebook, as well as the incremental changes in mass culture related to the dissolution of both the avant-garde and kitsch that we discussed earlier. What led, then, to the ultimate disappearance of postmodernism? Why are we speaking about it in the past tense?

ALLEN

The term postmodernism likely disappeared so quickly because its force was not its multifaceted meaning but rather its capacity to link once-disparate cultural phenomena and once-distant people. Postmodernism may be the first word to become obsolete because it was replaced, not by another word (like globalization) but by a technology that did the same job more effectively. Trying to define postmodernism is like trying to sum up Facebook, if not the Internet. While Jean-François Lyotard linked postmodern life to "the degree-zero of culture," the Internet reduces all content--cultural and more--to the degree-zero of the screen. Where postmodernism commercialized culture, the Internet customizes it, often for free. If postmodernism aimed for a conciliatory hybridity--where old rivals like high culture and subculture could mix--

Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity

Critical Essays on

The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity

edited by

Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib



the Internet normalizes a super-hybridity that makes such hierarchical divisions irrelevant.

NARRATOR

So, if the ability to customize culture by grabbing it from the rapid circulation and exchange of ideas, sounds and images via digital technologies is always possible, there's really no impetus to react against contemporary culture or a particular style because by the time these things have been produced they have already been taken up and transformed into the next iteration. Awash in social media and online content, we have in our hands the tools to theatricalize our own life through references from a spectrum of visual and textual sources; everyone can be the director of their own, personalized theater, constructing virtual identities through the vacuous digital outlets of Facebook and YouTube into which real identities can accrue. Culture's hybridization has become "super" because, as the art critic Jörg Heiser says, it has turned into a "computational aggregate" of infinite sources and contexts.

Ahhh, the Internet, literally numbing our neurological abilities to remember.

(Lights go down; curtain falls.. The music "The Dream" plays and audience sits in total darkness.)

The Dream

words: G. Orwell
music: D. Tuss, D. Tuss

Understated

Voice

In the dream he had re... mem... bered his last glimpse of his mo... ther,

mp

and with... in a few — mo... ments small e... vents had all come back. It was me... mor...

y that he pushed out of his con... scious... ness. O... ver ma... ny years. He was

not cer... tain of the date. He could not have been less than ten years old,

may... be twelve when it had ha... ppened. The con... spir... cy he had dreamed of did ex...

ist and he reached the out... er edg... es of it. The end con... tained in the be...

ginn... ing. He lay back with his eyes shut, in the at... mo... sphere of the dream.

It was a vast lu... mi... nous dream in which his life seemed to stretch out

like a land... scape on a sum... mer eve... ning in — the rain. Repeat and fade

SOURCES AND QUOTATIONS

Quotations from the cited authors are respectfully included in this essay in slightly altered form to dovetail with the conversational tone of the text. It should be noted that their texts have been changed to accommodate this format; citations of the original texts and page numbers are included below for reference.

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WHO’S WHO IN THE CAST

JENNIFER ALLEN is a writer living in Berlin, Germany, and editor of *frieze d/e*. She was awarded the 2009 prize for art criticism by the ADKV (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Deutscher Kunstvereine).

JEAN BAUDRILLARD (27 July 1929–6 March 2007) was a French sociologist, philosopher, cultural theorist, political commentator, and photographer. His work is frequently associated with postmodernism and specifically post-structuralism.

CLEMENT GREENBERG (16 January 1909–7 May 1994) was an American essayist known mainly as an influential visual art critic closely associated with American Modern art of the mid-20th century. In particular, he is best remembered for his promotion of the abstract expressionist movement and was among the first published critics to praise the work of painter Jackson Pollock.

JÜRGEN HABERMAS (born 18 June 1929) is a German sociologist and a philosopher in the tradition of critical theory and pragmatism. He is perhaps best known for his theory on the concepts of communicative rationality and the public sphere.

FREDRIC JAMESON (born 14 April 1934) is an American literary critic and Marxist political theorist. He is best known for his analysis of contemporary cultural trends—he once described postmodernism as the spatialization of culture under the pressure of organized capitalism.

JAMES VOORHIES (born 5 January 1970) is an American curator, art historian and educator, currently based in Berlin. He holds a Ph.D. in modern and contemporary art history and is founder of Bureau for Open Culture, an itinerant curatorial and artistic initiative that utilizes exhibition, education, design, communication and publishing to position the art institution as an overall form of critical practice.

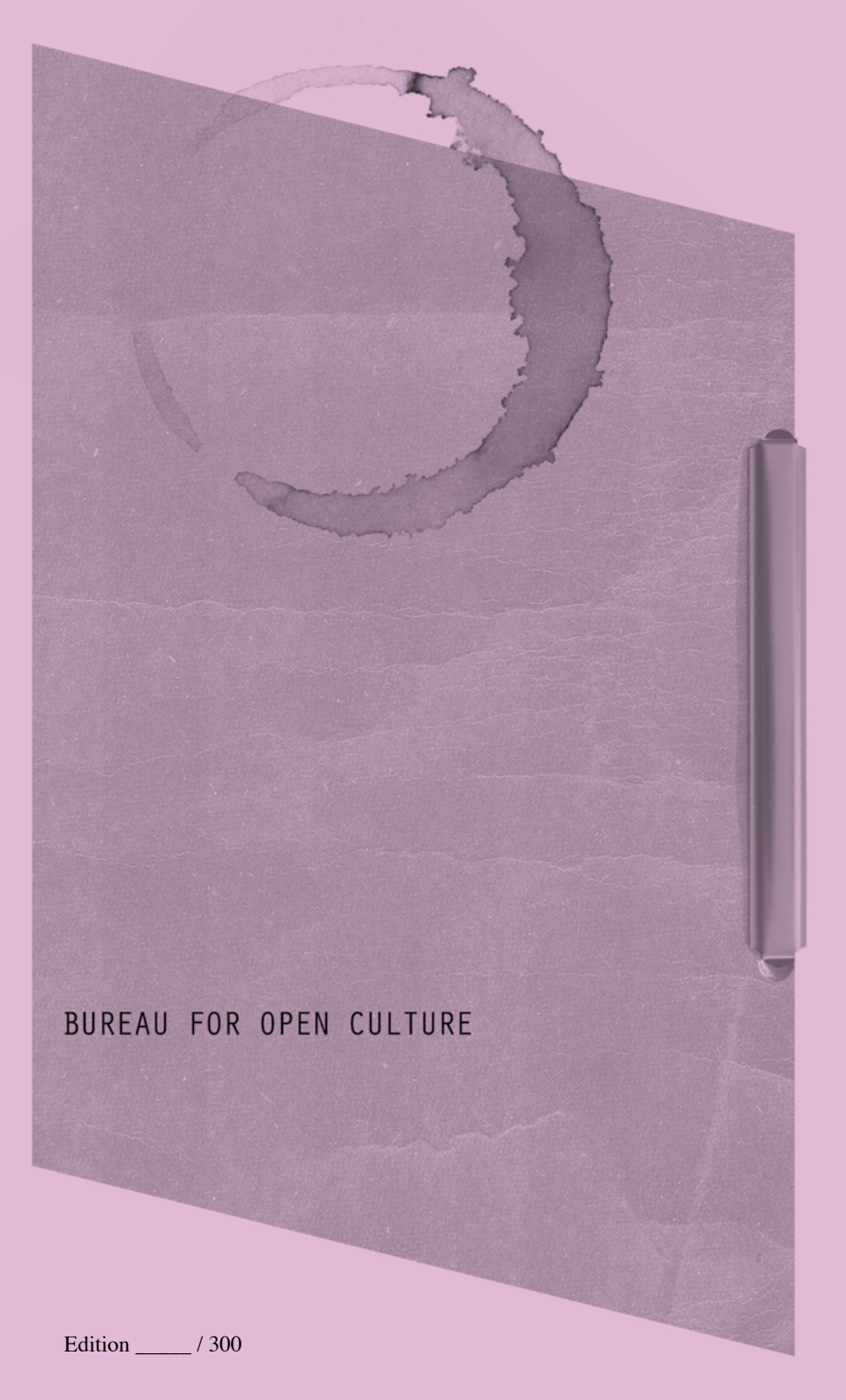
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