

Place

Renée Green

These writings on the theme of turbulence grew out of reflections on recent daily encounters, as well as out of encounters with texts I've been engaging. This text includes journal-style entries and a listing of reflections on textual references.

1. April 2006

Unité d'Habitation? is the title of the exhibition I'm developing to present in Paris in June 2006. Literally, in English, it can be thought of as *Unity of Habitation?* or, obliquely, as *United (in)Habitation?* It refers to the name of Le Corbusier's building project Unités d'Habitation, his proposal for collective living. These structures were built in and imagined for different locations, including Marseilles (1946-1952), Rezé-lès-Nantes (1953), Berlin (1956), Briey-en-Forêt (1957), Strasbourg (projected 1951), Marseilles-Sud (projected 1951) and Meaux (projected 1956). I inhabited one of these structures, Firminy-Vert (1968) in 1993, but the title (Le Corbusier's term) more broadly refers to the possibility to inhabit, as a material condition, in addition to inhabiting as a state of being. The title is also meant to raise questions concerning the profundity of how to inhabit places with others, living and dead, and what form of social and historical circumstance is related to who can inhabit, where and how.

This morning I've been reading Czeslaw Milosz's *The Land of Ulro*, published in 1985. I find it describes different states I feel, especially while here in this region of the US, the Bay Area of Northern California, as well as in relation to being an artist and working as an academic, somehow.

2. April 2006

Questions about the privileging of pain. Why should histories of suffering from any region be viewed as exemplary, when all suffering in its many dimensions is horrible? Even the dominance of media diffusion and saturation that the US and Western Europe have achieved can still be acknowledged as presenting only very partial views of any form of claimed or described suffering. Beyond that, why can't it be understood that no form of suffering is exemplary, as the human condition itself is predicated upon suffering? Why perpetuate suffering?

These questions grew out of a dinner conversation. A disturbing incident was described by friends. The location of this incident was a dinner they'd attended in the Bay Area. They were requested to verbally prove their ownership of, or allegiance to, identity-based culturally designated territories within the international art terrain. Who's the exemplary suffering representative of suffering peoples? Rights for legitimacy were claimed by others present. Who most authentically could represent the projected disenfranchised sector from an artist's perspective? It seemed like an absurd premise. As if that were a goal anyone would want to achieve, rather than one of freedom from even those classificatory restraints. During this occasion, these friends were put on the spot to represent their legitimacy: they were being perceived to be responsible for representing oppression since they hailed from New Delhi; the terms for evaluation, however, were inadequate and inappropriate. Yet another gap amongst those espousing progressive stances, willfully ignorant of more complex phenomena and history, undermining the possibility of coming to terms with a more profound understanding of the contemporary world, because of a narrow territorialism. Why perpetuate suffering?

3. April 2006

Back in New York ...

Now I'm thinking about the theme of turbulence. I may write about the turbulence involved in the struggle to represent history, all that is 'partially buried', the intentional deletions, 'some chance operations', my Sisyphean attempts at creating an 'index of oblivion', the confrontations while one still lives to write dismissed histories back into what will be recognised as History. Many people's annotations. Many people's sense of ownership. The

difficulty in accepting complexity. The emphasis on superficial responses, especially popular in the US, but not only here.

4. April 2006

Strangely, 'identity' is the space sometimes allotted to 'her', here in the US. The inadequacy of this category propelled 'her' to leave the US, her country of designated origin, many years before. Even with the passage of years and so many works of 'hers' made about 'import/export' and translation and transnational existence, writings about 'negotiations in contact zones', the prevalence in the US for this category as a means for labelling, then mistaking that labelling as knowledge, and then dismissing any further obligation for more profound investigation, is not uncommon. Identity. It is an odd designation. An empty signifier.

In the US 'she' feels compelled to read more of the late science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler, who in her *Xenogenesis Trilogy* (xenogenesis defined as 'the birth of something new - and foreign') far exceeds anything known as 'identity', or even human categories.

'She' left the country to find a space to create beyond rigid identity definitions.

When an exhibition historicising the art milieu in Cologne during the 1990s – in which 'she' had been an active participant and to which 'she'd' steadily contributed – came to the US, her contribution, beyond being a marker of identity, was erased. To her surprise, prevalent historical data, of the kind usually used to research a past time, was ignored by the US curator. 'She'd' heard the composer-musician and computer/installation artist George Lewis make a similar claim regarding the lack of acknowledgment of his participation with IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique) in the 1970s. No space seems possible to be assigned for 'her', beyond that one, in the current rush to write histories of the past decade, the *fin de siècle*. Many of the valiant witnesses from those times are dead. 'She' is left to make her own claims. This is why 'she' continues to endorse and rely on archives and the many documents they house. And indices of oblivion.

5. April 2006

The challenges encountered when attempting to both inhabit and to shift representation... This creates forms of turbulence for the author, for example, in terms of where the words can be encountered, read or heard, and the force with which territories are protected and words censored.

Describe why it's necessary, in her case, to live in several places, even if she once thought she'd like only to continue to live in New York. That the attempt and effort to continue working and being connected to sources that provide intellectual, spiritual and emotional sustenance, as well as which relate to her deep history and genealogy, are all a part of these movements and relocations, as well as attempted inhabitations. The wish to inhabit in a way one chooses. That which can encompass the breadth of living, rather than a flattened stereotype or shallow half-life.

6. April 2006

But what is the relationship between these wishes and efforts to what can be described as turbulence?

turbulence: n. the quality or state of being turbulent.

turbulent: adj. 1. Causing violence or disturbance.

2. Marked by agitation or tumult; tempestuous.

Below the apparently calm veneer: tensions and tempests. The struggle to claim more than limited access. Why is the access limited? Based on what criteria, and decided upon by whom? The contestation for representation and rights continues to be turbulent. Again, this relates to who is narrating history and how it is being done. Who is narrating the present and how is it being described? Again and again the question arises: why is this included and that excluded?

The continual and driving question for me: what else could be possible?

Think about forms of dispossession and violence – physical, intellectual, historical.

Think about the relativity of privilege. There are serious reckonings yet to be made in what I'd describe as cultures of avoidance such as the US, in which the history and cultural forms of the country are based on suppressing the violence committed to found the nation. The avoidance to which I allude is the avoidance of coming to terms with historical acts that are repressed, rather than acknowledging these to be part of a contiguous history. What would it mean to acknowledge the violent ancestral acts that continue in altered and cruel forms today? Instead, what is attempted in cultures of avoidance is to live amidst a policed 'calm', based upon a deluded sense of entitlement and invincibility. In this consumption-laden and fear-saturated atmosphere, the fear of punishment from those who've been lied to, robbed and abused, is a prevalent element and resides just under the surface of many encounters, suppressed and avoided. How to begin to describe the gross limitations of what I've encountered in the public and private cultural spheres that are affected by these forms of avoidance? I've observed attempts to exorcise critical, political and historical perspectives, and observed what is presented in their place as 'critical', 'political' and 'historical', to a broader public.

What could it mean to seriously engage with living in the world amidst the varieties of turbulence? Or amidst the varieties of experience possible, but without threatening or killing anyone? Examine the energy that turbulence requires. How to shift to a different way of being? The desire to shift would be necessary; I'm not convinced that many share this desire, as there are so many conflicting desires.

A drop of water in an ocean. In Paris I'll present films I've made that refer to turbulence: *Elsewhere? Here* and *Climates and Paradoxes*.

The question remains: What can each of us do?

7. April 2006

I'm glad the 'art world' is not the only subculture in which I've been interested. It's odd, but gradually in New York I've found less and less that interests me. New York is a magnet for many people from around the world, yet the conditions for living seem to dominate people's lives to such a great extent that other modes of engagement, that could be more interesting than drinking and going to art openings, seem less possible. Or maybe it is because I've experienced other ways of living and being in which time wasn't primarily devoted to working, fighting bad housing conditions, struggling for funding, etc.; these other ways allow me to think of better ways to live.

Humans. I saw the movie 4, a first feature by Ilya Khrzhanovsky and directed from a script by Russian avant-garde novelist Vladimir Sorokin, last night. A view from contemporary Russia.

8. April 2006

Thinking and producing in turbulent times. F.A.M. (Free Agent Media, my dream label and production company), artist, media practitioner, writer, filmmaker, educator, space creator and enabler, activist, citizen. How to apply these terms now? Waking words. Sunrise in San Francisco.

Thinking and producing and living amidst many dislocations and forms of violence in economically privileged places, where tenuous relations to wealth and access exist. The components of that create the semblance of 'the good life'. The surface view. The supporting structures and genealogies differ. An immigrant protest and school boycott are scheduled for 1 May. Urban mirages: California and New York provide case studies.

9. April 2006

To create a place to return to, again and again, not only as a refuge, but as a place to receive sustenance that can renew one's motivation to continue to engage with life and the world, both internal and external worlds, both inner and public life. It continues to amaze me that the work of scholar and public intellectual Cornel West is not cited more often in broader contexts of intellectual discourse, beyond topical media debates. He definitely provides an interesting model of how to cope and live amidst the complexities of life today.

In The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism (1989), as well as in *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (2004), West provides a searing analysis of intellectual histories as they've been constructed in the US and that can be traced from an Emersonian genealogy. For example, West's statement:

American pragmatism emerges with profound insights and myopic blindnesses, enabling strengths and debilitating weaknesses, all resulting from distinctive features of American civilisation: its revolutionary beginning combined with an entrenched business-dominated status quo; its hybrid culture in combination with a collective self-definition as homogeneously Anglo-American; its obsession with mobility, contingency, and pecuniary liquidity combined with a deep moralistic impulse; its impatience with theories and philosophies alongside ingenious technological innovation, political strategies of compromise, and personal devices for comfort and convenience. This 'hotel civilisation' (to use Henry James' apt phrase), with its fusion of the uncertainty of the capitalist market with the quest for security of the home, yielded an indigenous mode of thought that subordinates knowledge to power, tradition to invention, instruction to provocation, community to personality, and immediate problems to utopian possibilities...¹

The fundamental argument of this book is that the evasion of epistemology-centred philosophy – from Emerson to Rorty – results in a conception of philosophy as a form of cultural criticism in which the meaning of America is put forward by intellectuals in response to distinct social and cultural crises. In this sense, American pragmatism is less a philosophical tradition putting forward solutions to perennial problems in the Western conversation initiated by Plato, and more a continuous cultural commentary or set of interpretations that attempt to explain America to itself at a particular historical moment.

West's writings have been helping me to think about 'home' and its complexities, as well as what I've sought beyond.

10. April 2006

Mobility?

What informs my point of view? List different contexts and experiences that have had an effect. I'm thinking again of how to describe the position from which I speak about turbulence.

Having choices? This is a big question. A student at the Whitney Museum independent study programme asked me whether the movements I've made to inhabit different places came from privilege or necessity, or both. I answered that necessity loomed large, if one considers a quest for freedom of thought and for freedom to create, as important possibilities that everyone should have; as these were also linked to my livelihood, it seemed necessary to move to fulfil these quests. Everyone can ask themselves these questions in relation to their own lives: Have you remained in the place you were born? Could you have stayed? Why did you leave? How were you able to leave? Will you return? What enables you to live, wherever you are?

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Contested claims:

Land claims? Language claims? Citizenship claims?

Sociologist Saskia Sassen writes of new claims:

If place, that is, a certain type of place, is central in the global economy, we can posit a transnational economic and political opening in the formation of new claims and hence in the constitution of entitlements, notably rights to place, and more radically, in the constitution of 'citizenship'. The city has indeed emerged as a site for new claims: by global capital which uses the city as an 'organisational commodity', but also by disadvantaged sectors of the urban population, which in large cities are frequently as internationalised a presence as is capital. The denationalising of urban space and the formation of new claims by transnational actors and involving contestation, raise the question – whose city is it? ...

...The space constituted by the global grid of cities, a space with new economic and political potentialities, is perhaps one of the most strategic spaces for the formation of transnational identities and communities. This is a space that is both place-centred in that it is embedded in particular and strategic locations; and it is trans-territorial because it connects sites that are not geographically proximate yet are intensely connected to each other... [I]t is not only the transmigration of capital that takes place in this global grid, but also that of people, both rich (i.e., the new transnational professional workforce) and poor (i.e., most migrant workers) and it is a space for the transmigration of cultural forms, for the reterritorialisation of 'local' subcultures. An important question is whether it is also a space for a new politics, one going beyond the politics of culture and identity, though at least partly likely to be embedded in it.²

Place and Turbulence: Notes for Further Investigation and Ruminations from A to T

A. Place: What Places Can We Inhabit and Act In?

B. Tenuous Residency, Stranger Status Worldwide

C. Place, Claims, Contentions, Networks

D. Where Do You Belong?

E. "I Am Here".

F. Revisiting Globalisation and Its Discontents

G. Encountering Cities without Citizens

H. Musing over *The Manifesta Decade*

I. Since Negotiations in the Contact Zone

J. 'Between and Including' as a Description of Ongoing Conditions

K. Le Corbusier's Stake, or The Dream of Unity in Modern Urbanism and the Blindness to Complicity in the Obliteration of Specific Histories or Other Desires via a Totalising View

L. Learning via Buildings (When They're Proposed, When They're Built, after They've Been Built, as They've Been Abandoned, as They Decay, as They're Refurbished)
Case Study: *Unité l'Habitacion*
Case Study: Einstein's summer house in Caputh

M. Practiced Places and Buried Histories

N. Temporal Dimensions
Inhabitation

Removal and Loss
Selected Life Indexes: Time Streams and Layered Remnants
(How are the Indices Composed?)

O. Respecting Ghosts: Memorial as a Portable and Intangible State of Recognition:
Memorial As a Consciousness Carried within Us That Reminds Us of an Ethical
Dimension of Our Existence.

P. Strategic and Involuntary Absences

Q. The Continual Returns of What's Repressed, or Acknowledging Contiguity

R. In the Rough-and-Tumble World of Global Cultural Production...

S. From the Frontlines (a Survivor of the 'Culture Wars')

T. To Linger and to Tell.3

NOTES

1. Cornel West. *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989, Madison), p. 5.
2. Saskia Sassen. *Globalisation and Its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money* (The New Press, 1998, New York), xx, xxxii.
3. After having written these 'Notes', I read "The Guano of History", an essay that resonated with much of what I'd been thinking. It appears in *Cities Without Citizens*, (eds.) Eduardo Cadava and Aaron Levy (Slought Foundation, 2003, Philadelphia), pp. 137-65. The different strands of Cadava's documentation and analysis are woven into a powerful reminder that "...in order to speak in the name of freedom, in the name of justice, we must speak of the past we inherit and for which we remain answerable, we must speak ghosts, of generations of ghosts; of those who are not presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born". He opens his essay with a quote that I wish to borrow as an ending, as it has many reverberations for our ongoing turbulent times. The quote, from a letter by the Black Panther Party's charismatic incarcerated leader George Jackson, begins Cadava's explications (which later become intertwined with an analysis of Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Fate" (1860), and also the circuitous history of Peruvian guano (a commodity used to fertilise soil, that the US was as desperate for in the 19th century as it is now desperate for oil). "My recall is nearly perfect, time has faded nothing", Jackson wrote on 4 April 1970. "I recall the very first kidnap. I've lived through the passage, died on the passage, lain in the unmarked, shallow graves of the millions who fertilised the Amerikan soil with their corpses; cotton and corn growing out of my chest, 'unto the third and fourth generation', the tenth, the hundredth". See *George Jackson, Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (Lawrence Hill Books, 1994, Chicago), pp. 233-34.

Renée Green is Dean of Graduate programs at SFAI. She is an artist, filmmaker and writer. Via films, essays and writings, installations, digital media, architecture, sound-related works, film series and events her work engages with investigations into circuits of relation and exchange over time, the gaps and shifts in what survives in public and private memories, as well as what has been imagined and invented

In Turbulence

At some point during the closing half in the ‘extra time’ of the Italy vs. France match in this year’s FIFA World Cup final game on 8 July, the world changed. Again. The synapses in the brain of a man named Zinedine Zidane went into a state of momentary turbulence. A wave of rage surged into a headbutt that we mourned and saluted, seconds later, glued to television screens halfway across the world. The world seemed to change that instant, as it always does when the angel of the unexpected flaps his wings in the middle of a great game. Many prayers went unanswered that night.

All this was happening as e-mails bearing notes and queries about the book you now hold in your hands, or scan with your eyes on a screen, flew across the world. This book, a book titled ‘Turbulence’, was on its way into the world. A turbulence caught, distilled, held between covers, in these many pages, in this much ink, in these images, in this much white space.

Who knows what else was happening that night? What ripples had radiated out of that momentary collision between two footballers in Berlin? Or which wave had carried that headbutt with it, to crash on which distant shore of the global unconscious?

Someone had gone to sleep after a solitary vigil over a cache of explosives in Mumbai. An Israeli soldier stood at his checkpoint, somewhere along the border with Lebanon. A Hezbollah fighter spent a restless night thinking of his girlfriend. Perhaps a party of Bengali tourists in Srinagar sang songs just because it was too cold for them, and perversely, because Italy had won. Somewhere deep within the earth, below the ocean floor, not too far off the shoreline of Pandarang in Java, magma crackled. The seeds of a million cells of turbulence, inheritors of tsunamis, descendants of riots and curfews, progeny of hurricanes, modernity’s questioning bastards, were germinating fractally, branching out into new constellations of storm. The world was at unrest. As it is, every night.

In the week and days that followed, bombs exploded in Mumbai, grenades were hurled at tourists in Srinagar, a war began in Lebanon, a tsunami hit Java, once again. There was rain. There was fire. There were signs of birth and death. There were quarrels and street fights, there were parties, the Richter scale quivered, there were demolitions. The twenty-first century rumbled on, as usual, turbulently.

If there were ever to be a ‘weather report’ for our times, an audit of the climate in which we have grown accustomed to live, it would use the word ‘turbulence’ often. We inhabit the vortex of storms, and smell sunshine. We are always prepared for rain. Our cities are sites of flood and fire. We live between tremors, power cuts and voltage surges. Agitations emerge and abate on our streets and on the airwaves, as if by accident. Books are burned, blogs are blocked, bourses dance mad tarantulas. We fly with seat belts fastened. Predictions are pronounced and dissembled in seconds. Bets are placed and lost, wagers made and found wanting. Insurance companies invoke acts of God. The more things change, the more they change.

The past decade, the first of our young turbulent new century, has opened up a series of transformations that seem to cumulatively define the contemporary, even as they themselves defy definition by virtue of the speed and immediacy with which they have made themselves manifest. Every mythic moment has begotten its Faustian other: globalisation has produced counter-globalisation, the crisis of the US empire was exposed on September 11 and via the quagmire in Iraq, the world of Islam is torn apart by internal strife and humiliation, the global West makes way for ‘India Rising’ and ‘Global China’. Sovereignty, that old pillar of the modern state, stands in ruins, lost somewhere along the road from Westphalia to Beirut, along with all stable social theories of the world – citizenship, the university and liberal doctrines of rights. Property, the legal form of capital, is under attack

not only from labour but also from modes of circulation and re-production. The kingdom of Piracy threatens the kingdom of Property. Massacres, media events, commodity fetishisms, security analysts and scam artists all clog the airwaves and the internet. In this world of exhilaration, death and survival, new practices have sought to define themselves, refusing to fall within old redemptive modes.

Turbulence is a practice for and of a time that has no name. This book, embodying that practice, is an eclectic index of an uncertain age. *Sarai Reader 06* uses 'Turbulence' as a conceptual vantage point to interrogate all that is in the throes of terminal crisis, and to invoke all that is as yet unborn. We seek to examine 'turbulence' as a global phenomenon, unbounded by the arbitrary lines that denote national and state boundaries in a 'political' map of the world. We want to see areas of low and high pressure in politics, economy and culture that transcend borders, we want to investigate the flow of information and processes between downstream and upstream sites in societies and cultures globally, we want to witness surges and waves in ideas and practices as they crash against the shorelines of many dispersed locations. We want to inhabit moments of stillness and investigate the conditions that determine stasis in the middle of a tremendous upsurge of movement.

How do we anticipate, recover from, and remember these moments of sudden transformation? How do we look at the debris of the past and brace ourselves for the whirlwind coming our way from the future? How do we deal with the simultaneous pressures of knowing too much, or the anxiety of knowing too little about the world? How do we cope intellectually with the sudden dissolution of established ways of knowing and doing things? What does it mean to know and experience the pull of undercurrents – in society, politics, the economy? How do cities deal with the accumulation of complex infrastructural uncertainty? What happens when urban chaos strikes back at urban planning? How can we map the subterranean tectonic shifts and displacements that occur in culture and intellectual life? What are the histories of anxiety, exhilaration, dread, panic, ecstasy, disorientation and boredom like? How can we begin to narrate these histories? What does it take from us to tell stories, read poetry, make images and record experiences in the wake of turbulence?

These were the kinds of questions we wanted responses to when we invited contributions to 'Turbulence'. In many ways, this desire grew out of a desire to revisit a landscape we had last traversed in *Sarai Reader 04: Crisis Media* – not so much in terms of reporting what was going on from what could be called the ground zero of global consciousness, but to reflect on what it means to ride the storm out till its savage end. If *Reader 04* was about discovering a world in crisis, then *Reader 06* can be seen as being a book which takes the fact of a chaotic, turbulent world as a given, and then asks, "Now what?"

In the last year or so, we have trawled through a rich lode of texts and images that came our way from many parts of the world in response to this question. We heard from Tehran, from Dhaka, from Lagos, from Sao Paulo, from Beirut, from Shillong, from New York, from New Orleans, from Vijayawada, from Chennai, from Mumbai and of course, from Delhi. These contributions spoke not only of hurricanes, tsunamis and earthquakes, but also of the little storms of ordinary, commonplace life. They remembered conflicts as far away in time as the 'ghadar' of 1857 in northern India, just as much as they registered the war that had just erupted in Lebanon. They indexed 'encounters' that Kashmiris have in Delhi, and interpreted the sounds of picks and shovels laying entire neighbourhoods to waste. They spoke of storms in the mind, in the world of numbers and figures, and of the tempests that visit the body. They gave accounts of cities turning against themselves, of zones of disquiet at borders and frontiers, of the rise and demise of utopias, and of crises of meaning and value in contemporary art and current poetry. They spoke of accidents, speculations, conspiracies, leakages, flashmobs and of the strange weather that we have been having lately. They spoke in voices that spanned the entire spectrum from sobriety to exhilaration by way of doubt and despair. They laughed out loud at the madness they inhabited. They came to us in

the form of photographs and drawings, comics and reportage, essays and interviews, letters and manifestos.

At an early stage in its gestation this year, the *Reader* was invited to participate in a community of publications – a project called ‘the Documenta 12 magazines’.

This year, Documenta 12 Magazines addresses the issue of ‘Modernity?’ *Sarai Reader 06* interprets this issue with an emphasis on the question mark that follows the abstract noun of this marker of temporality. We see our time, the one that sits in on Modernity’s wake, as an opportunity for questioning, for admitting to radical uncertainties, and looking askance at the claims of truth and beauty. We are happy that this Reader marks a diffuse, dispersed engagement with discourses in contemporary art by featuring a large number of contributions by artists, curators and critics, and by paying a degree of focused attention to the perils of practice in contemporary art and literature. We hope that this enterprise succeeds in its mission of introducing a modicum of turbulence into the discursive realm of Documenta 12.

A book about ‘Turbulence’ has to be a turbulent book. It cannot have an overarching claim to structure, or a pretence to order, no matter how hard we try to quieten the clamour in its pages. This book has no desire to come to rest, no hurry to arrive at any still centre. It will headbutt and get a few yellow and red cards as it plays its game. The only design it tries to follow is one that privileges surprises and the strange serendipity that emerges from the juxtapositions of the flotsam and jetsam that remain as the residue of a storm.

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