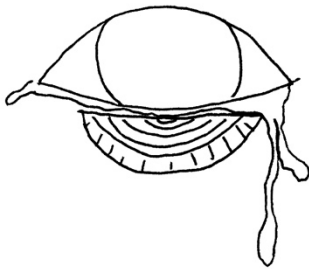




TO MOVE INTO POSITION



US ENGLISH



**Institute For  
New Connotative Action**

**#27**  
SEATTLE



i.

And this is the place you find yourself. This is the place we find ourselves.

The language we use to locate it dissipates. Every x years, it reappears. Every time you speak, even the air rushes in as a presence, an object, a response you weren't expecting. The translation of text into atmosphere, or air into language, incense into sentences - a criticism inserted into the position of your body. For example, critics with arms linked across an interstate, or lying down in an intersection, language lacking precision to explain it. Criticism, in a sense, uninnocently inserted into history.

We walk out into historical fields and ancient agoras of less than lethal language, sound and scent; looking but not seeing, saying without hearing, a cacaphony of voices and base notes. Time condensed as a single scent emphatically and empathically returns us all to a specific moment, or a non-moment, unhinged from history. A collectively written text entering in each breath.

In incense ceremonies, there are two paths to suggest: *empty burning* (soradaki) and *listening to the fragrance* (mon-koh). Both can be simultaneous, depending on what is burning and who is listening. Everything, in an expanded field, is fragrant, including language. Words are therefore incense and incense words to be listened to as if speaking - a swarm into the atmosphere, an inescapable presence.

We are unavoidably together here, attempting an engagement based in empathy, an etymology suggesting we are feeling or reading-in. Coming out of a theory of aesthetics, empathy in its Germanic roots maintains that appreciation of art depends on the viewer's ability to project her personality into the viewed object. The American Yearbook suggests that there is no doubt that the facts are new and that they justify their name: the art work is a thing of "empathy" (Titchener, Ward), of "fellow feeling" (Mitchell), of "inner sympathy" (Groos), of "sympathetic projection" (Urban).

This linguistics of fragrance also produces a parable: Blessed are your eyes; for they see. Blessed are your ears; for they hear. It smells like August, he said, deep into the winter and again now. A place and a time and a phrase, each with their scent. A place and a time and a language, each with their forms of dissent. We are unutterably together here, remembering a fragrant language reminiscent of our own time.



ii.

The seed takes approximately 108 days to germinate and bloom. A flowering plant, native to the Mediterranean, an earthen smell, warm aroma. Dating back five millenia, the seed was used in the mummification processes of the pharaohs, accompanying them into the after-life. In Biblical narratives, it was used to pay tithes to the priests, a supplication to appease the leaders, a tenth of what you own manifested in seed form.

In *The History of The Black Seed*, its earliest narratives are recounted:

The prophet Isaiah says, "For the black seed is not threshed with a threshing sledge, nor is a cart wheel rolled over the cumin, but the black seed is beaten out with a stick, the cumin with a rod."

In the sayings of the prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him): "Hold on to the use of the black seed for indeed it has a remedy for every disease except death." "Hold on," indicates a long-term use and should be well observed.

The Freeman Institute states that the seeds are acrid, bitter, aromatic. The herb goes by many different names. For example, in old Latin, it is called 'Panacea' meaning 'cure all'.

Lauded for its cosmetic properties, Pliny the Elder wrote that the seeds produced a pallid complexion, a whitening effect on the skin if smoked or its oil ingested. The smoke filling the streets, whitening not only our eyes, but draining color from the skin.

By some Greek writers, the seed is called "melanthion". That is looked upon as the best which has the most pungent odour and is the darkest in appearance. The seeds are beaten, wrapped up in a piece of linen, heated and brought continuously to the nostrils. The seed cleanses the eyes also, tears streaming out.



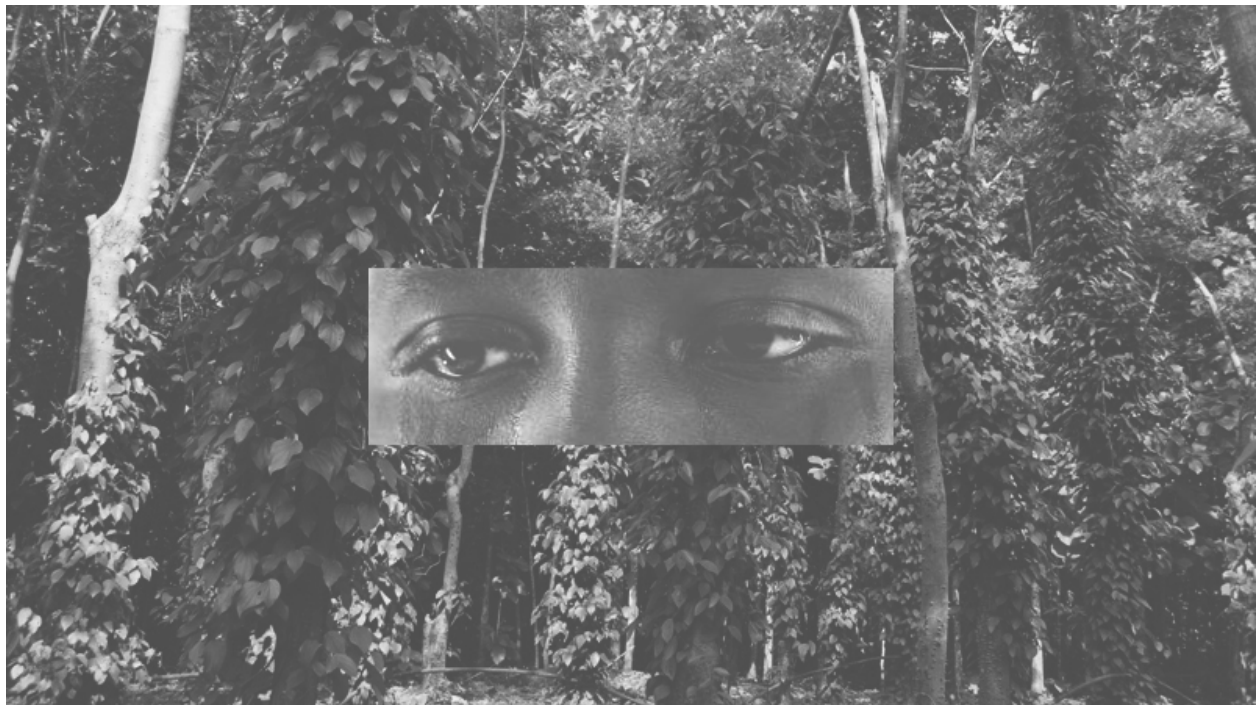
It is ground up and sold in an Agora, a gathering place, an assembly. Early in Greek history, free-born citizens would gather in the agora for military duty or to hear statements of the ruling king or council.

Later, the agora also served as a marketplace where merchants kept stalls or shops to sell their goods. From this twin function of the agora as a political and commercial space came the two Greek verbs ἀγοράζω, *agorázō*, "I shop", and ἀγορεύω, *agoreúō*, "I speak in public".

The term agoraphobia denotes a phobic condition in which the sufferer becomes anxious in environments that are unfamiliar—for instance, places where he or she perceives that they have little control. Such anxiety may be triggered by wide open spaces, by crowds, or by some public situations, and the psychological term derives from the agora as a large and open gathering place. Perhaps where cumin, mixed with chemicals drifts in, where the stele of authority lines up and encircles the square to speak. The sufferer becomes anxious; he or she perceives that they have little control. This happens in some public situations, in some large and open gathering places.

*Woe unto you, scribes and hypocrites! for thou pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought you to have done, and not to leave the other undone.*

*Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: some of them shall you scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city. Verily I say unto you, all these things shall come upon this generation.*



iii.

A flowering vine, cultivated for its fruit, the world's most traded spice, has been adopted since antiquity for its flavor and healing properties. It is ubiquitous in the modern world, mortared and pestered, bowled and billy clubbed, beaten, ground. It is considered a base note in any fragrance, its mix of appetizing and unpleasant scents carrying others along with it, outlasting the more ephemeral effects.

In *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon wrote that pepper was so valuable that it was often used as collateral or as currency. An appreciation of pepper was also passed on to those who would see Rome fall. Alaric the Visigoth included 3,000 pounds of pepper as part of the ransom he demanded from Rome when he besieged the city. Beseiged with pepper, for pepper, a developed taste, a certain pungency to the tongue, in the nostrils of the rulers. The rise (and fall) of certain city-states can be traced to its trade, its circulation.



*A riddle then:*

*I am black on the outside, clad in a wrinkled cover,  
Yet within I bear a burning marrow.*

Like cumin, peppercorns were found stuffed in the nostrils of the ruler; here, for Ramesses II to breathe in, to alter the air for eternity.

Various sources from the 5th century onward recommended pepper to treat eye problems, often by applying salves or poultices made with pepper directly to the eye. For example, third person present, he "poulticed the wound." For example, second person plural, "we did it to salve our conscience." It was used to promote healing of the skin, or as protection, perhaps. There is no contemporary evidence any of these treatments have any benefit.



iv.

This cultivar originated in the Americas, though was widely exported on discovery by empiric explorers. Aromatically, the oil helps people to examine things with clarity and honesty. It allows a person to take off their own facade or mask, share their true thoughts and emotions, and unblock the flow of growth in this way. It is thought to help those dealing with repressed memories or emotions, allowing one to dig deep into one's past or present experiences. It can help uncover hidden truths or face patterns or habits with courage.

Some psychologists consider the substance an example of a "constrained risk" like riding a roller coaster, in which extreme sensations like pain and fear can be enjoyed because individuals know that these sensations are not actually harmful. This method lets people experience extreme feelings without any risk of bodily harm. We are supposed to play out our anxieties without risk; we are allowed constrained sensations of possibility, of true tragedy. This less lethal varietal can be used to lessen dangerous physical confrontation between people.



To use it as an atmospheric solvent or solution for an extraction, the elements must first be separated out and sorted. To isolate the elements, one injects a dispersive solvent into the sample population (this also containing an extractive solvent), found in a cloudy solution. This often happens at the mobile phase under extreme pressure to ensure proper dispersal. The distillation of its properties are made airborne, inhaled.

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v.

A riddle, then. What words stumble forward out of a repressed black pepper cloud, out of the oiled agora, the unwalled garden, what flowering vine? Who is this figure when they appear? How do we name them?

And this is the place you find yourself. This is the place we find ourselves.

If the historical figure within crises is a prophet, cleric or scribe, then the contemporary figure is perhaps a critic. In a similar syllogism, what we consider activism may also be called criticism as it is inserted into systems within and beyond art. *Agoreúō*. The free-born citizen speaks in public. *Mon-koh*, we listen to the fragrance. Empathy, we read-in.



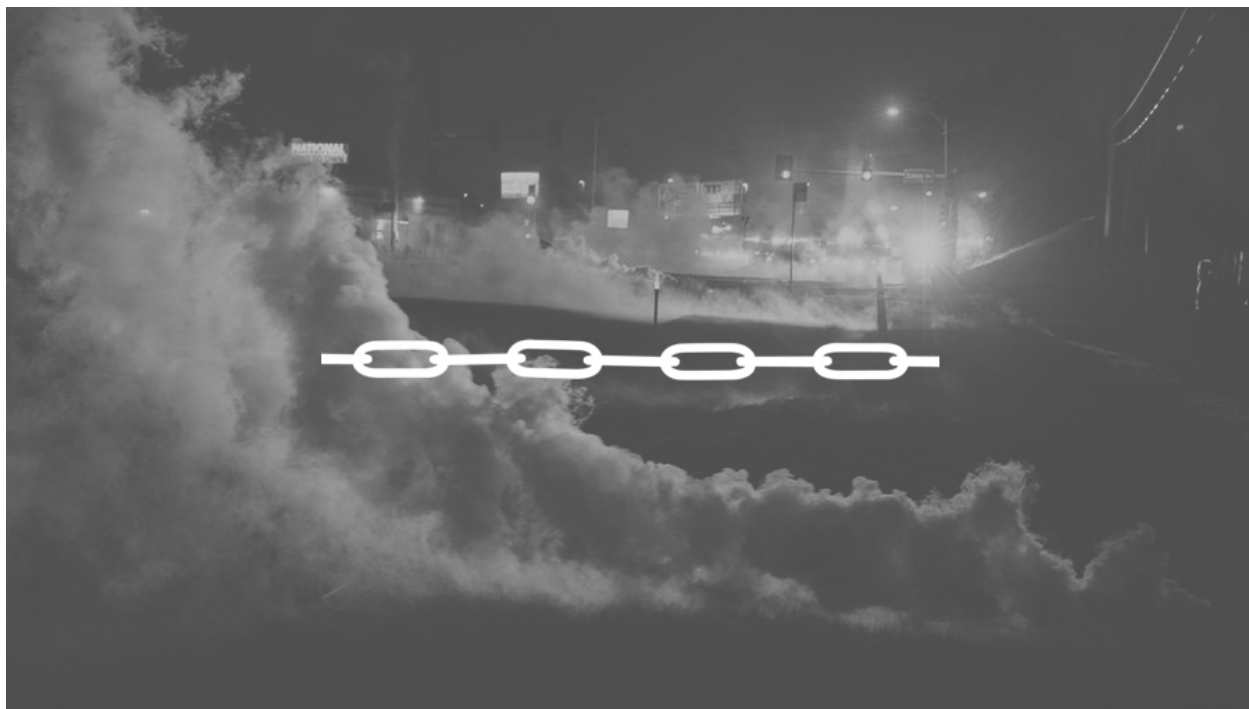


Shared space as the beginning of empathy, where for a moment we are brought close into the present. Criticism as sympathetic projection, where we return again and again to speak in public, *reading-in*, *feeling-in* then *moving in-to position*.

Criticism is another way to articulate and create forms of concern and collectivity. Could we assert that at its best, it is a political act? That it is also resistance? That it is *engaged*? After all, to engage is to be "morally committed to a particular cause;" or, taking cues from its machine-informed term, to engage we must "move into position" - to prepare to act as act, to make ready.

And yes, to critique. To assess. To become critical. To "participate or become involved in;" to "occupy or involve." To "start fighting against." Are we "of crucial importance in the success, failure, or existence" of something - of art, of anything?

We make publics, this central idea of publication, this central force of public action, to together become the public we propose.



In this shared present, an embodied criticism has spontaneously started speaking.

The figure

In the streets .. in rallies

In city halls .. on billboards

In malls .. at dinner tables

Arms linked across interstates .. suggesting alternate city-states

In policies .. in political parties

In editorials .. in diatribes

In hashtags .. in comedy gags

In blogs .. in petitions for office

On flagpoles .. in school boards

In abandoned buildings .. in zoning codes

In comment feeds and wiki edits and endnotes and endgames and courtrooms and institutions and institutes and incense, this translation of text into atmosphere and action, or air into language, incense into sentences - a criticism inserted into the position of bodies. Criticism uninnocently inserted into history.

Watch the clock, has the time come?



We need forms of protest, which is to say forms of criticism, as diverse as the forms of of our incomplete history. Hashtag activism, hands-up criticism. Voiceless criticism. Out on the streets, yelling until our hoarse protests are heard. Educational activism, dropout and head start criticism. Lived-in, durational criticism. Collective and individual criticism, advancing. Private grief alongside public mourning. This, too, is protest. And what is protest but criticism in its most distilled form, dispersed? A cloud of criticism we inhale. The figure of the critic, appearing after x years. What is criticism in crisis? What is it after crisis, post-protest? What is it to be contemporary when contemporaneity is crisis? Can we carry the crisis with us and perhaps be a decisive act? Can we ourselves be the crisis?

Eruptions in other spheres expand our understanding of who and what a critic is, where it circulates, what forms criticism takes. Art itself advances in these historical contractions; May, 68 and August, 14, transliterated.

In these times, the urgency arrives to write as if something is at stake. To only write if something is at stake. When does the critic's body bend into a body politic? Why do we view criticism through an individual voice, when increasingly it has a collective, algorithmic even, pitch? When can criticism stage a walkout; when is a walkout claimed as criticism?

One must move into position. One's body on the line. One's lines must form a body. One's body must form a line.



Yes, and the text may begin chanting, its cacaphony may coalesce, anthemic, or dissipate, but it arrives fulfilled, in a perpetual wilderness and proposes a collected, collective voice.

When, really, are we critics? Only when art is an emergency, when we've helped install a crisis into our halls, our galleries, our white walls. When our institutions are occupied, reincarnated, reborn as assemblies or agoras, when even the air enters in as a presence, an object, a response you weren't expecting.

And this is the place you find yourself. This is the place we find ourselves.

We are in a gilded age of criticism, in an alchemical sense, where we're talking about transformations, moving from one state to the next.

We may write our way out of the fear of the agora, of speaking in public, transforming these environments that are unfamiliar— places where we perceive that we have little control into a shared space, reading-in, together in feeling.

We are in a critical position, where the text wakes up - not just in the minds of others - some public - but one becomes the public and the text walks out and gets organized.

The question is, if this is criticism, then what is art? What is at stake in our speaking, or not? We only install a crisis into these systems when something is worth saving or something is worth stopping,

so is our art worth saving - or worth interrupting? Or is it where art and criticism meet, in another terrain altogether, where we find ourselves spilling out?

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This text was presented at Institute for New Connotative Action (INCA), Seattle on April 12, 2016 alongside artist-designed fragrances in the form of incense based on the botanical components of tear gas and pepper spray as well as organic elements found on Canfield Drive in Ferguson, MO in the summer and fall of 2014.

text & images by US English

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