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1.

[PROVAN SPEAKING]

Welcome, and thank you for attending this presentation of Triple Canopy’s briefing on the activities of the International Necronautical Society. Please turn off all data-transmission devices, audio recorders, and cameras. And note that what follows is a draft copy of an internal report, and has not been approved for circulation, reception, or publication.

In summary: I will argue that we find ourselves in a perilous situation: Each of us has been turned into a medium of transmission, doomed to convey no other message than that quality of our being—a condition that is not only generally accepted but, having in certain circles achieved an aesthetic aspect, relished. For certain prevalent and profitable systems of exchange, such as art and finance, this situation is ideal. And yet it has also made us—especially those of us who consider ourselves to be producers and consumers of culture, and for whom ideas and trends are a common currency—vulnerable to the International Necronautical Society.

We will provide an explanation as best we can, through the presentation of intercepted INS documents and other intelligence. But be warned: Our knowledge of the INS’s activities is fragmentary at best, and our understanding of its intentions, and even its tactics, is limited. What follows is a sketch, which I hope will be filled in as more intelligence is gathered in Berlin and elsewhere. If you have information to share, please approach us (discreetly) following the presentation.

2.

In the winter of 2008, Triple Canopy invited the International Necronautical Society to present the aerial reconnaissance work that Anthony Auerbach, Chief of Propaganda (Archiving and Epistemological Critique), had been conducting in Berlin. Several of us had for some time been interested in the group, which poses as a semi-fictitious avant-garde network, and were acquainted with its research into the ontological status of death as well as its public presentations, which take the form of interrogations of fashionable artists and intellectuals, briefings on the history of transmission and encryption, etc. General Secretary Tom McCarthy had recently published a critically acclaimed novel, *Remainder*, and, to be honest, while we didn’t quite understand the INS’s work, there was an aura around the group that we found appealing.

And so, on the evening of February 24, Auerbach and INS Head Philosopher Simon Critchley sat together behind a table in the back room of a Brooklyn bar called Freddy’s. An audience of fifty people—members of what you in Berlin refer to as “the creative industries”—were gathered. Auerbach and Critchley proceeded to introduce the INS. From there the details become hazy. None of the Triple Canopy editors in

attendance can recall the specifics of the INS presentation. We have scant evidence that the briefing even took place. And yet, while no full record of the event exists, the recollections of those who claim to have been in attendance suggest that Auerbach and Critchley said something like this:

Necronautical materialism insists that the dead do not come back (there are neither spirits nor revenants). Death is a type of space, which we intend to map, enter, colonise and, eventually, inhabit. The INS works to chart the space of death, to trace it in the fault lines that cross art, literature, philosophy; to tune in to its frequencies in the air; to pinpoint its irruptions in the urban fabric; and ultimately to construct a “craft.” The INS’s central concerns are marking and erasure, transit and transmission, cryptography and death. The INS spreads itself as both fiction and actuality, often blurring the two. Working between the lines and in open view, the INS inhabits and appropriates a variety of art forms and cultural “moments,” from the defunct avant-gardes of the last century to the political, corporate and conspiratorial organisations they mimicked.

The audience listened intently, or confusedly, or absent-mindedly, or didn’t listen at all, as Auerbach went on to describe his aerial reconnaissance work. We know this because, some months later, an anonymous source sent us a file with excerpts of a low-quality recording of portions the event. This is Auerbach speaking:

[AUDIO RECORDING]

An aerial photograph is not a map—or is not yet a map. Aerial photography merely piles material at the threshold of knowledge.... Aerial surveying proper covers operations in unexplored and partly explored regions where maps do not already exist or where they are not to be relied on. It provides an almost inexhaustible store of information. That information—the photographic material—demands from each branch of knowledge a specific modus of interpretation.

[END AUDIO RECORDING]

In the weeks and months that followed that first encounter with the INS, we became suspicious that we had somehow been manipulated, and that some other force, one alien to ourselves, had been at work that night. I tried to remember the presentation and explain it to others, but found myself incapable of parsing Auerbach and Critchley’s statements—incapable, even, of explaining what the International Necronautical Society is, or does, or even what “necronautical” means, or how the INS might navigate death, much less construct “a craft that will convey us into death in such a way that we may, if not live, then at least persist,” as stated in its first manifesto, or whether this “craft” is an abstract concept or a real-life strategy. (That manifesto also mentions “the perfection, patenting, and eventual widespread distribution” of a drug called Thanadrine, which induces an experience of death.)

Despite these suspicions, the next month Triple Canopy went ahead with its plan to publish an article titled “The State of Authenticity,” by a Canadian academic named Peter Schwenger, a friend of Auerbach’s whom we had never met. The article purported to examine the INS’s “Declaration on Inauthenticity,” which had been delivered in New York that winter. Schwenger alleged that the presentation was in fact a reenactment of an event that itself had never occurred. “Let us listen to the evidence,” he wrote. “We hear two voices alternately reading a series of numbered theses. It is difficult to distinguish the voices. Indeed, as they explain, they are not individual but ‘dividual.’ They insist ‘the self has no core but is an experience of division, of splitting.’”

This resonated with me at the time. Since the event at Freddy’s, I had felt that I was being surveilled, and that each step I took thrust me further down a path that had been determined for me in advance, but that I would not be able to recognize until I had reached its terminus. Auerbach refused to send us documentation of the event, and in cryptic messages suggested that “unauthorized releases” of unspecified material were forthcoming. I would run into Critchley at art openings and literary parties, where he would would inevitably fail, or refuse, to recognize me; it was as if he were staring through me, or through the material

of my body, into the void that had opened up as my self divided. Or so I thought at the time, confused as I was.

For a while we had no contact with the INS. Then, toward the end of the year, Tom McCarthy emailed another editor of Triple Canopy, Sam Frank, about another presentation of the “Declaration on Inauthenticity,” which was to take place in January at the Tate Britain. The sequence events that followed has proved impossible to reconstruct; our memories fail us, or betray us. What we know is that, on February 17, 2009, we found ourselves publishing a lengthy account of the Tate declaration—a self-congratulatory dramatic spectacle in which actors playing the roles of McCarthy and Critchley lectured on the history of authenticity, doubling, and performance in and out of art, and reflected on “the experience of failed transcendence.”

Soon after, we began to monitor the INS, even as it monitored us—or so suggested the static, scratching and popping heard on our phone lines, the strange interferences on our radios, the unusual frequency with which utility companies made repairs to our buildings.

3.

[YAMAMOTO-MASSON SPEAKING]

Much of the information we have about the INS—the information we believe to be a veritable representation of the group’s activities—has come from a few informers who are, or were once, INS associates or agents. Some months ago one such informer passed along an internal INS memo reporting on the group’s surveillance of Berlin. It reads: “INS observers have been installed in high buildings. Local informants and collaborators continue to be recruited. Foreign agents are being mobilised to obtain information and spread INS propaganda under cover of literary, journalistic and artistic enterprises. Technical preparations have been initiated for future interventions in the city.” At Triple Canopy’s urging, in order to obtain more information directly, I began posing as a potential INS recruit. I contacted Auerbach, expressed an interest in the INS—as an art project, of course—and began meeting with him to discuss the group’s activities in Berlin.

During this time Auerbach continued his aerial reconnaissance of Berlin, cataloguing its many monuments and memorials to exterminated populations and murdered political subversives, with the ostensible purpose of critiquing the construction and iconography of cultural memory. Then, in May, I intercepted a document titled, “INS Inspectorate Berlin: HAU Installation 2011.” The draft report was produced by Auerbach for internal circulation, and takes the form of a proposal to occupy the Hebbel am Ufer theater for “the culmination of the investigative phase of the INS Inspectorate.” The putative purpose of the “installation and temporary work site” is to “examine and publicise earlier findings as well as provide the occasion for gathering further intelligence.”

4.

[PROVAN SPEAKING]

The proposal is written in the insipid prose of grant applications, but its true, encrypted meaning can be discerned in these few lines:

- “There may be no better cover, nor safer house, than a theatre for the work of the INS, but we don’t know how to act, therefore everything we do is real.”
- “The work of the Inspectorate will require numerous staff recruited from the ranks of the public. The same people will perform work for the INS and will address visitors to the installation when it is open to the public, encouraging new recruits.”

- “The prospect of inhabiting HAU reminds us of theatres under occupation: of plays coded with messages in support or in defiance of occupying authorities; of spectacles such as the occupation of the Kroll Opera by the Reichstag following the fire; of all the places that used to be theatres.”

In other words, the theater is everywhere. The spectacle of the INS performing itself is meant to both amplify and distract from the group’s real work: the transformation of Berlin into an open crypt, what they’ve termed “the World Capital of Death”; or, the abrogation of the political order that has allowed people to think of the city as anything but that; and the conversion of the city’s creative sector into a venue for the INS’s “craft” to act.

The HAU proposal also declared Triple Canopy to be among the “cultural or media channels,” that have “wittingly or unwittingly spread INS propaganda.” Upon reading this we decided to come to Berlin to investigate, and ultimately publicize, the INS’s activities. We discussed our plans with Nine and determined that there was no cover that would be less conspicuous, and offer greater access to the INS’s prime demographic, than a series of innocuous, English-language cultural programs held at a self-described “initiative for art and architecture collaborations.” This, we thought, would allow us to test the population’s susceptibility to the kind of flimsy ideas and vogue propaganda with which the INS would confront them— if they had not already.

5.

Only in recent times has it been possible for an audience like this one to gather in a place like this. The post-WWII political and economic order has engendered conditions that allow people like us to move across borders in order to enjoy ourselves among like-minded individuals, to exchange a limited set of ideas, to make our various tastes and preferences known to one another. Just as aesthetic and intellectual trends reproduce themselves as we passively receive them and then actively disseminate them, the neoliberal model of society is animated by those of us who naturally reproduce and reinforce its conditions in our daily lives. (The spectacular art you’ll witness later tonight is perhaps the epitome of this: a form of signification that signifies nothing more than its own being in relation to an audience that “gets” it, which is to say “gets” itself.)

The INS, too, exists primarily in the bodies of those “agents” who instantiate it, whether willfully or obliviously. For this reason, the global art community is at an extraordinary risk of recruitment or activation. Just as contemporary capitalism profits from the pursuit of the endlessly deferred dream of authenticity, the INS exploits its remainder, the alienation that results when society is formed as a projection of the underlying desire for the real. Today’s Berlin is the locus of that dream. As evidence, I cite a recent interview with Javier Peres, proprietor of the Berlin and L.A. Gallery Peres Projects:

Interviewer: I am really glad that people are taking Berlin seriously.

Peres: Berlin, in many ways, is more serious than just about anywhere.

Interviewer: It’s more serious than London or New York because seriousness requires levels of authenticity and reality, which haven’t existed in either city for decades.

Peres: I can’t exactly pinpoint when it started here, but suddenly now there is this place, and Kimchi Princess and all those little cute Mexican places popping up.

6.

[YAMAMOTO-MASSON SPEAKING]

There are other reasons for the INS’s interest in Berlin. “The historical recurrence in Berlin of failed revolutions and empty tombs appears to result from their entwining,” reads a recently intercepted confidential briefing, “INS Inspectorate Berlin: Surveillance Report.”

The multiplication of revolutionary monuments in the city where no revolution succeeded—their replicas, replacements and reminders—suggest how the revolutionary impulse is converted into a cult of death which congeals around monuments, and whose most effective expression is the empty tomb, that is to say, a hungry sarcophagus whose appetite for bodies demands the repeated immolation of victims for the sake of the tomb, not the revolution. In turn, the monument underwrites the (romantic) revolutionary’s fulfillment in martyrdom, not transformation. The revolution, as ideal, is to die for, but may not be achieved. Death sanctifies the ideal and its non-realisation. The cult of death thus secures the idealist project and unites revolutionaries and reactionaries in its rites.

As such, the document seems to suggest, politics is emptied of action, and the spectacle of reflection becomes an end in its own right. The Inspectorate cites the multitude of monuments dedicated to Karl Liebknecht as examples. Among them is the balcony of the Stadtschloss, where Liebknecht proclaimed the doomed “free German socialist republic” in 1918. The GDR government razed the building in 1952, but preserved the balcony, which was then attached to the nearby Council of State Building, then affixed to the Palace of the Republic, was destroyed in 2008, at which point the balcony was moved into storage; it is to be attached to the reconstructed Stadtschloss, which is scheduled for completion in 2014. There is also the pedestal for a monument to Karl Liebknecht, an eternal placeholder for an unbuilt memorial that was erected on Potsdamer Platz in 1951 to mark the spot where Liebknecht made a speech decrying “imperialist war.” The pedestal was marooned in the Berlin Wall’s “death strip” for thirty years, then was removed so that the square could be redeveloped; in 2003 it was reinstalled in a slightly different place, still bearing the original inscription, still promising a future memorial.

7.

[PROVAN SPEAKING]

It is a given that, in Berlin, the dead admonish us at every turn; whether embodied by maudlin statues or dignified plaques or blocks of gray concrete, they glower at us from the city’s plazas, reprimand us in its parks, everywhere calling attention to our extraordinary failings as thinking animals. They remind us of our capacity for evil, and, perhaps more poignantly, of the ease with which we succumb to the evil of others.

The Inspectorate argues that, far from bringing the tragedies of the past to bear on the present, Berlin’s many memorials “authorize forgetting and encode erasure.” It goes so far as to malign the term “Holocaust,” which, in its opinion, “lends an unwarranted dignity to the fate of those done in by the Nazis. Making them into sacrificial victims and in turn aligning the Greek with the Christian model of sacrifice promises a bounty of redemption—as if they ‘died for our sins’—which more than justifies the sacrifice of prime real estate and the investment in authenticity announced by the employment of celebrity artists and architects to design the monuments.”

But have not memorials played a significant role in allowing Germany to emerge from the morass of a century of war, atrocities, and repression, as they have in so many other countries? The question of what is being memorialized, by whom, for whom—not to mention the question of who has the right to memorialize the memory of others—is an important one, but perhaps less important than acknowledging the necessity of forgetting.

For the work of forgetting to be done systematically, it must be encoded in the very fabric of our daily lives. The scale and scope of that work, in Berlin and elsewhere, has allowed for the emergence of a global economy and culture linking free societies and their governments. By questioning the value of the

Gedenkdemos, or memory demonstrations, the INS opposes the very regime which has facilitated the lifestyles enjoyed by those gathered here today, and the aesthetic pleasures that are its complements.

What is confusing, and sinister, about the INS, is that the group masks itself as one of those pleasures—as an art project.

8.

The INS is already, to use the group’s own cryptic vocabulary, “moving in on your networks” even as it is “moving on in your networks.” But knowing this does not get us any closer to determining what the INS wants—what it wants from you. Lacking such clarity, we have provided in this report an outline of the group’s activities as well as an inducement to remain vigilant. Even if the INS has no discernible goals beyond beyond disrupting the very sort of experience you have gathered here to enjoy—if only by disingenuously simulating it—that is enough.

I leave you with a quotation recalled by the poet Reiner Kunze. After being interrogated by a Stasi officer for thirty hours, he was told: “I forbid you to write lines of poetry with double meanings. We have experts who decode everything!”

