


Tension/Spannung, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey, *Cultural Inquiry*, 1 (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2010), pp. 7–12

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Preface

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ABSTRACT: *Tension/Spannung* explores the critical potential of tension by bringing together contributions from several academic and artistic fields, including history of science, philosophy, literature and media studies, political and social theory, visual and performing arts. Both individually and in their combination, they produce a rapprochement and confrontation between different meanings and models of tension that unsettle the apparent self-evidence that any particular model has when considered in an isolated context.

PREFACE

Political and aesthetic tension, mechanical and electrical tension, muscular and psychological tension: these are but some examples for the many uses and contexts of the deceptively simple term ‘tension’. Tension often involves an unstable equilibrium on the verge of transformation, providing the condition, energy, and direction for processes that can be productive as well as destructive. Undecided in multiple ways, states of tension do not leave us indifferent. Their indecision promises us the possibility – and often therefore also the duty – to intervene. At the same time, tension commonly demands attention on account of its aesthetic qualities. Tension thus unfolds or elicits a pragmatic, even ethical, as well as aesthetic response that can easily appear self-evident in any particular context: it is usually viewed as something to be avoided and reduced in politics, to be worked through and resolved in therapy or science, to be sought after and enjoyed in popular culture, or to be endured and sustained in art.

Tension/Spannung explores the critical potential of tension by bringing together contributions from several academic and artistic fields, including history of science, philosophy, literature and media studies, political and social theory, visual and performing arts. Both individually and in their combination, they produce a rapprochement and confrontation between different meanings and models of tension that unsettle the apparent self-evidence that any particular model has when considered in an isolated context. Emerging from a sustained collective dialogue and foregoing the temptation of a stabilizing synthesis, the articles form a paradoxical unity and span a dense web of tension that provides a new critical paradigm for further inquiry.

While the volume can be read in no specific order as a densely interlinked hypertext, its structure reflects a particular concern and tension that spans its web of tension and provides a guiding thread among the individual contributions, namely the relation between socio-political and aesthetic tensions, which in many ways would seem to be one of diametric opposition.

The first essay motivates and conceptualizes the critical potential of a double understanding of tension as object and method of inquiry. In particular, it proposes as working hypothesis that tensions between different cultural or disciplinary fields can be made productive by inducing tensions within each field so that different fields can be related to each other on the basis of tension rather than some substantial commonality. Successively focussing on aesthetic, socio-political, and physical tensions, the essay describes and exemplifies a larger critical paradigm focused on tension while drawing upon the contributions in the present volume.

The section 'Aesthetics' begins by invoking the physical model imputing a natural tendency of bodies under tension towards relaxation as well as the association of bodily tension with discomfort and pain. It opens with a paper by Sabine Arnaud on eighteenth-century medical autobiographies, where physiological tensions figure as painful symptoms of illnesses to be dissolved through appropriate cures. But already in this paper the focus lies on how these autobiographies narrate the course of tension and use tension in their narratives as strategy of socio-political self-legitimization. Arnaud's exploration of the (pre-)history of hysteria is picked up by Fabio Camilletti's paper, which concludes with Charcot's late nineteenth-century pictures of hysterical patients. The focus here is on the experience of the uncanny and the *je ne sais quoi* as an experience of tension in an undecidable space between pleasure and pain. The hypothesis that such an experience is central in post-Enlightenment aesthetics, but also interpretable as an after-image of non-aesthetical experiences extending the subject towards a transcendent alterity, can also be found in the following contribution by Rupert Gaderer. Public demonstrations placing feminized bodies under electric tension form the context of Gaderer's analysis of a late eighteenth-century image of electrified lovers. The paper highlights how the image creates and suspends rather than resolves tensions on the level both of electrical discharge and of the coexistence of mythical, supernatural, and enlightened modes of interpretation. The section concludes with contributions that adopt artistic and performative approaches to explore the physical experience and aesthetic mobilization of suspense and tension. The filmmaker and choreographer Laura Taler, who worked on a video-installation involving footage from dance improvisations, models tension upon the structure of leader and follower in Argentine tango. In an edited transcript of a performance lecture, Taler provides a playful,

as well as critical, analysis of Heinrich von Kleist's early nineteenth-century essay on the puppet theatre. Taler questions both Kleist's reduction of dance to a mechanical activity, and his characterization of gravity as an obstructive force rather than an important partner in dance. Shifting genres, 'ici unigloria' reflects the way Taler worked with the filmed dance footage in her video installation by editing, fragmenting, and reassembling responses to her installation. The result is a poetic intermingling of voices that rub up against each other, creating subtle tensions that allow for shifts and movements within the piece, while also acting as a binding agent holding all the fragments together. The section concludes with extracts from two recent fiction works by filmmaker Siouxi Mernagh, who dialogued with all contributors while producing an 18-minute 'subconscious narrative' film experimenting with the means of creating and sustaining suspense, particularly in view of the notion of the uncanny. Both works draw on the structure and methodology of her previous films as they explore tensions spiralling between intensity and excess, desire and *jouissance*.

If the first section shows how tension is mobilized and sustained in the aesthetic field in order to produce suspense and aesthetic pleasure as well as effects of legitimization, meaning and transcendence, one might expect the section 'Politics' to be more concerned with different ways of reducing (social) tension. Yet, the shared interest lies rather on how politics contains tension in the sense not of reducing or confining it, but of having it as a constitutive ingredient. As a state of indecision or undecidability, tension may be understood as the condition for the possibility of politics and of contingency as the field of the political. From this perspective, the precise way of conceptualizing socio-political tensions as constitutive of the social and the political is a crucial political matter as it informs the concrete ways of dealing with them.

'Politics' opens with an article by Bruno Besana providing a link between the two sections as it couples contemporary philosophical sources with aesthetic and political examples in order to establish tension as a specific approach rather than object of analysis. As it concludes by picking up the figure of the spiral, we seem to come back to a narrative of tension, but this time it is a narrative aiming not at a resolution, but at a proliferation of tension. Besana highlights how the method of relating two tensions keeps engendering new tensions, both in aesthetics and in politics, and suggests the possibility of an open classification of manifold modes of tension, which indicates how the

essential definition of a thing is bound to the contingent analysis of its transformations. Jean Terrier's article, by contrast, proposes to locate tension in potentially conflictual encounters where subjects resist the action of others, and explores how a concept of tension in terms of social forces can be applied to different models of society. Focussing on Hume, Hobbes and Durkheim, his analysis sheds light on the different ways in which the presence of contradictory forces can be taken to be inherent in the social itself. His reference to utopian visions of a society without tension provides a connection with Martin Doll's contribution, which develops a topology of utopias and explores the different temporalities implied in the spatial terminology. Doll argues that utopias can retain an emancipatory potential insofar as they create a tension by highlighting deficiencies in the *status quo* of a given society or its possible futures. This means, in particular, that they must be understood as utopian fragments radically disconnected from a fixed ideal society to be realized. If Doll concludes with the suggestion that the best utopia would be one in which utopianism itself has a place, Antke Engel further highlights the political potential of paradox. Her thesis is that a de-centring of the political's hegemonic dynamic becomes possible if one invites paradox as a specific, anti-identitarian and agonistic mode of tension to function as a constitutive moment of desire and the political. Unfolding her argument in favour of a 'queer politics of paradox' through a close reading of a short music video, Engel privileges a notion of tension conceptualized in terms of paradox rather than opposition or contradiction. In Ozren Pupovac's article, by contrast, the question of politics revolves around the transition from asymmetrical contradiction to reversible dissymmetry. Pupovac offers a philosophical reading of a sound piece by Mazen Kerbaj and draws parallels between the imposition of form and order in Kerbaj's music and in a Marxist theory of the State. He highlights in particular the contingency of the appearance of order, its spatializing function, and its inseparability from an excess of violence.

This volume is the first publication to emerge from the inaugural core project that started in autumn 2007 at the ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry. Each year, the Institute announces fellowships and invites an international and interdisciplinary group of researchers to link their individual projects to the core project and discuss their approaches and perspectives over a period of several months in weekly colloquia led by

the Institute's director. The present volume contains contributions from fellows of the year 2008/09, but it also reflects the involvement of other fellows in the collective enterprise during that period: Silvia Casalino worked on a project entitled *Mercury 13: Woman in Space Program*; Lissette Olivares on *Disenchantment in the (so called) First World*; Andrea von Kameke on *Between Semblance and Play: Busby Berkeley's Moving Images*; and Michaela Wunsch on *Death Drive, Repetition Automatism and Seriality in the Intersections between Psychoanalysis, Cybernetics and Popular Culture*. Furthermore, the colloquia built upon discussions from the previous year when Kinga Araya, Annette Bitsch, Kyung-Ho Cha, Mimma Congedo, Gabriele Dietze and James Redfield were among the fellows working on the following projects: *Performing Exile* (Araya), *A Media History of Migraine* (Bitsch); *Walter Benjamin and the History of Science* (Cha); *The Concept of Imagination between India and Europe: Comparing the Yoginī-hṛdaya and Giordano Bruno's Works* (Congedo); *Critical Occidentalism* (Dietze); and *'Ich komme groß raus': Muslim Youth and Hip-Hop in the 'Global Ghetto'* (Redfield).

The present publication is informed not only by the intensive exchange among fellows, staff members and associate members both in the colloquia and in other settings at the ICI Berlin, but also by numerous events organized within the framework of the core-project *Tension/ Spannung* by individual members of the ICI, or in co-operation with other partners. Luca Di Blasi developed the format of 'Spannungsübungen' ('exercises in tension'), which seeks to facilitate the elaboration also of subtle tension between prominent scholars and led to the encounters Boris Groys/Vittorio Höslé, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht/Gianni Vattimo, and Wendy Brown/Rainer Forst. Agnese Grieco developed the format 'Wort/Spannung' ('Word/Tension'), in which tensions are explored and made tangible through staged readings. Furthermore, the ICI invited prominent writers and thinkers such as Alain Badiou, Elisabeth Bronfen, Hélène Cixous, Patrizia Cavalli, Lee Edelman, Vivian Liska, Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Pressburger, Irit Rogoff, Volker Springel, Marlene Streeruwitz, and Slavoj Žižek to give readings, lectures, and seminars enriching the core project. Finally, the ICI organized a number of workshops and conferences, from which further, related publications have emerged: *The Power of Disturbance: Around Elsa Morante's Ara-coeli*, organized and edited by Manuele Gragnotati and Sara Fortuna (Oxford: Legenda, 2009); *Reflecting on Images*, organized by Mimma

Congedo; *Dante's Plurilingualism: Authority, Knowledge, Subjectivity*, organized and edited by Manuele Gagnolati, Sara Fortuna, and Jürgen Trabant (Oxford: Legenda, 2010); *Phantasmata: Techniques of the Uncanny*, organized and edited by Fabio Camilletti, Martin Doll, Rupert Gaderer, and Jan Niklas Howe (publications forthcoming in the journal 'Image & Narrative' and in the series 'Cultural Inquiry'); *Stockende Zeit*, organized by Luca Di Blasi; *Metamorphosing Dante*, organized and edited by Manuele Gagnolati, Fabio Camilletti and Fabian Lampart (forthcoming as the second volume in the series 'Cultural Inquiry'); and *Spannung und Konflikt* organized by Jacob Guggenheimer and Luca Di Blasi. Further information about these, and many other scholarly and cultural events, can be found on the ICI website www.ici-berlin.org.

All these activities have nourished the volume *Tension/Spannung*, which is but one part of a much larger project in which the ICI Berlin has engaged in the past three years. I would therefore like to thank not only the contributors in this volume, but all the fellows, staff members, associate members, guests, friends and partners of the ICI who have contributed so much, and in so many different ways to the ICI's experimental enterprise. Above all, I would like to thank Manuele Gagnolati for all the warmth, energy and generosity with which he has given me boundless support and advice at all times and in all domains. My gratitude also goes to the other associate members Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky, Sara Fortuna, Agnese Grieco, Liora Lazarus, Fatima Naqvi, Hania Siebenpfeiffer, and Ming Tiampo, who have supported the project from the beginning with intelligence, dedication and generosity. I am grateful to be able to rely on members of the ICI staff – Luca Di Blasi, Corinna Haas, Kirstin Müller, Claudia Peppel, and Florian Rosenbauer – to keep the Institute and its projects running smoothly. Finally, Lorna Richerby is to be thanked for her help in preparing the manuscript.