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On Burnout

Pamela M. Lee
Josie Roland Hodson
The Friends of Attention
Jonathan Crary
Jean Ma
Pamela M. Lee

Jane Weinstock
Emily Apter
Natalia Brizuela and Julia Bryan-Wilson

$17.00 / Spring 2021

Published by the MIT Press
OCTOBER

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An electronic full text version of OCTOBER is available from the MIT Press.

OCTOBER (ISSN 0162-2870, E-ISSN 1536-013X) is published quarterly (winter, spring, summer, and fall) by the MIT Press, One Rogers St., Cambridge, MA 02142-1209. Subscription and address changes should be addressed to MIT Press, Journals Customer Service, One Rogers St., Cambridge, MA 02142-1209; (617) 253-2889; U.S./Canada (800) 207-8354; fax: (617) 577-1545. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to OCTOBER, One Rogers St., Cambridge, MA 02142-1209. Periodicals postage paid at Boston, MA, and at additional mailing offices. Subscription rates: Electronic only—Individuals $65.00, Students/retired $31.00, Institutions $314.00. Canadians add 5% GST. Print and Electronic—Individuals $72.00, Students/retired $37.00, Institutions $367.00. Canadians add 5% GST. Outside the U.S. and Canada, add $21.00 for postage and handling. Single issues: Individuals $17.00, Institutions $72.00. Canadians add 5% GST. Outside the U.S. and Canada, add $6.00 per issue for postage and handling. Claims for missing issues will be honored free of charge if made within three months after the publication date of the issue. Claims may be submitted through https://mitpress.ailastanet.net/servicedesk/. Prices subject to change without notice. Manuscripts should be emailed to octobermagazine@gmail.com. Rights & Permissions: To request permission to photocopy or otherwise reproduce content from October, please complete the online request form found at www.mitpressjournals.org/rights_permission, or contact the Subsidiary Rights Manager directly at MIT Press Journals, One Rogers St., Cambridge, MA 02142-1209; fax: (617) 253-1709; email: journals-rights@mit.edu. Corporations and Academic Institutions with valid photocopying and/or digital licenses with the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) may reproduce content from October under the terms of their license. Please go to www.copyright.com. CCC, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923; Phone: (978) 750-8400.

Abstracting and indexing: Alternative Press Index, American Humanities Index, AFTbibliographies Modern, Art Index, Arts & Humanities Citation Index, Avery Index to Architectural Periodicals, Bibliography of the History of Art, Current Contents/Arts & Humanities, Film Literature Index, MLA International Bibliography, Periodicals Contents Index, RILM Abstracts of Music Literature, Scopus. Send advertising and mailing list inquiries to the Marketing Dept., MIT Press Journals (address above); (617) 253-2866; fax: (617) 253-1709; e-mail: journals-info@mit.edu.

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OCTOBER 176, Spring 2021
The editors would like to acknowledge the generous support of the following individuals and foundations:

*Benefactors:*
  - Fundación Almine y Bernard Ruiz-Picasso para el Arte
  - Marian Goodman

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  - Richard Serra and Clara Weyergraf Serra

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  - Strypemonde Foundation
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NATALIA BRIZUELA, Professor of Film & Media and Spanish & Portuguese at UC Berkeley, is the author of *Photography and Empire* (Cia das Letras, 2012) and *After Photography* (Rocco, 2014) and the co-author of *The Matter of Photography in the Americas* (Stanford, 2018). She is co-editor of the series *Critical South* and has curated exhibitions in the US and Argentina.

JULIA BRYAN-WILSON is the Doris and Clarence Malo Professor of History of Art at UC Berkeley. Her most recent book, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago, 2017), received the ASAP Book Prize, the Frank Jewett Mather Award, and the Robert Motherwell Book Award.

THE FRIENDS OF ATTENTION is a collection of artists, scholars, and activists concerned with attentional forms/practices resistant to financialization. Recent work includes “The Politics of Attention” workshops at Mildred’s Lane (2019 and 2020); “Manifesto for the Freedom of Attention,” a performance at Cloud City (2020); and a screening of “Twelve Theses on Attention” at the Glasgow International (2021).

JOSIE ROLAND HODSON is a PhD student at Yale University in the departments of History of Art and African American Studies.

JEAN MA is an associate professor in the Department of Art and Art History at Stanford University. She has published books on the temporal poetics of Chinese cinema, singing women on film, and the relationship of cinema and photography. Her current book explores the connections between sleep and moving images.

ALIZA SHVARTS received a BA from Yale and a PhD in Performance Studies from NYU and was a Helena Rubinstein Fellow at the Whitney ISP. Her work has been shown at the Athens Biennale, SculptureCenter, and Art in General, and she has published in *Whitechapel Documents, Contemporary Art: Practice, TDR*, and *The Brooklyn Rail*.

JANE WEINSTOCK is a writer/director. Her films include *Sigmund Freud’s Dora, The Clean Up, Easy,* and *The Moment.* She was the film and video curator of *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* at the New Museum. She has written for such publications as *Camera Obscura, Art in America,* and *m/f.*

*October* is located at 778 Bergen Street, Ste. 202, Brooklyn NY, 11238. All editorial correspondence should be sent to Octobermagazine@gmail.com. We reserve the right to edit letters selected for publication. We review manuscripts of no more than 8,500 words.
The Fuse; Its Refusal: Notes on the Politics of Burnout

THE FRIENDS OF ATTENTION

‘Writing, in its method and style, writing in its liberty, can coincide with real liberty only when the latter enters into crisis and opens a void into history.’

—Maurice Blanchot

Large, complex, high-voltage systems are generally equipped with a “primary burnout fuse.” Its function, like that of every fuse, is to burn out at exactly the right moment. What moment? The moment when the load on the system exceeds its capacities; the moment when a surge in power (or a spike in demand) threatens the integrity of the apparatus. Delicate circuitry will be fried. There is a risk of fire.

If the fuse “works,” the system stops. If the fuse does not “work” (if the finely calibrated ribbon of current-bearing fusible material at the heart of the fuse does not melt, does not burn up, and in the process sever the circuit itself), the system will be destroyed.

In this sense, the fuse is the canary in the coal mine of every circuit.

But this is not quite right. The canary’s death is a sign. The canary thus represents the pure conversion of “being” into semiosis—without remainder. In the fuse, by contrast, burnout is a direct intervention, by means of disruptive nonexistence. Two revolutionary images converge: the martyr and the arsonist.

Additional terminology: “Fuse” (as in “he has a short fuse”) and “fuse” (as in “go check the fuse box”) must be distinguished. They are nevertheless closely related. Both burn. But the first (sense A) burns to blow things up. Whereas the other (sense B) burns to stop things from blowing up. They are kissing cousins, this burning rage and this sacrificial combustion.

“Refuse” (sense A’) is waste. And the burnout fuse is indeed the waste component of a circuit: Its purpose is to be replaced, cheaply, when it burns out. Additional terminology: “Refuse” (sense B’) also means to replace the fuse; literally, to “re-fuse,” to put a fuse back in the system. Hence, to start it again.
Additional terminology: “Refuse” (sense C) also means to *decline to continue*. To say “no,” in word or action.

The fuse (sense B?) is the incandescent technology of refusal (sense C?).

Incandescence: At their historical origin, the fuse (sense B) and the incandescent lamp are indistinguishable. The quest for a filament that, under load, would glow brightly—that would *provide light*—resulted in countless burnouts. Subjected to sufficient current, anything will burn. The creation of controlled electric light involved the gradual separation between circuit filaments designed to glow bright hot and burn out fast (i.e., fuses), and circuit filaments designed to glow bright hot and burn out slowly (what we call “light bulbs”). In this sense, the distinction between “that by which we see” and “that by which we are protected” is merely a matter of *duration*.

What is the difference between a fuse (sense A) and a wick? This fuse is a kind of clock—a rudimentary timed detonator. It looks like a wick, but its relationship to what it lights is, generally speaking, the inverse: The wick, by means of capillary action, draws up its fuel continuously, feeding it to the flame until there is no more; the fuse, by contrast, consumes itself, steadily, until it reaches its end, which is the “charge.” The end of the wick is thus darkness (i.e., *rest*), whereas the end of the fuse is an *explosion* (fuel performing its potlach). Duration is everything.

Those who bear the brunt of a surge—the first in line to receive the full charge of a crisis—are simultaneously *essential* and *replaceable*: They do their crucial work in being “used up” by the catastrophe. Refuse in sense A? Sense B? Sense C? *Homo nihil? Homo sacer? Homo heroicus?*

Yet in a fuse (sense B) “breaking” is an *opening up*. This is the outstretched handshake of blithe accord *in reverse*. In this sense, real care may be a retraction. Like the lizard’s tail that twitches after being severed, the fuse, in its burning, *turns and bends itself away*. We recognize in this a gesture of farewell. The fuse: a *détournement* of rupture, the affirmative gift of no.

Those deeply endowed with the capacity to refuse (sense B’, sense C) are often highly *fusible* beings. They are able to refuse not because they are “strong” but because they are fragile. This act of refusal is simultaneous affirmation and negation—a crossing nexus reflected in the verb “fuse,” whereby something is created or healed (by melding), destroyed (by melting), or both at once. *Fusible beings* act as tiny yet powerful negations of the nonexistence of a better world. They are themselves both nugatory (refuse, sense A’) and *transcendent*.

Additional terminology: “*con-fuse,*” to be *with the fuses*.

Additional terminology: “*refuse*” (sense D), the act of conjoining; to cease to be a/part.