

**“BIOPOLITICS ON SCREEN”:
AERNOUT MIK’S MOVING-IMAGE INSTALLATIONS**

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Is there not something catastrophic in the very nature of thought? Thought is driven by an excessive compulsion and is itself an excess over and beyond perception. [...] Thought is seeing what exceeds the possibility of seeing, what is intolerable to see, what exceeds the possibility of thinking.

— Alphonso Lingis, “Catastrophic Times”

According to art critic and philosopher Boris Groys, the transformation that the art world is undergoing today is shifting the focus of attention from the actual artwork toward art documentation. Groys interprets such a shift as the artistic response to today’s “biopolitical age.”¹ And while technologies reduce life as “a pure activity that occurs in time,” that is to say, “as time artificially produced and fashioned;” for Groys “art [itself] becomes biopolitical” exactly when it attempts “to produce and document life as a pure activity.”² Groys here rightly implies that what we find at the core of *(bio)political art* is *life* caught in an indistinct zone of friction between *politics* and *art*. A life that, by residing in a space of indistinction, can then be turned into an event that can be started and ended; an activity that can be easily timed at one’s own will. “The real achievement of biopolitical technologies,” Groys alerts us, “lies more in the shaping of the lifespan” so as:

From begetting and lifelong medical care by way of the regulation of the relationship between work time and free time up to death as supervised, or

even brought about by, medical care, the lifetime of a person today is constantly being shaped and artificially improved.³

Groys' concerns are echoed, and further articulated by Giorgio Agamben, for whom the lives of the overcomatose person lying in a hospital room, along with the ones of the neomorts waiting for their organs to be transplanted, inhabit that "threshold of indistinction between biology and politics." Such a threshold, Agamben claims, is the same one that is crossed by Western "military interventions" when, acting on humanitarian grounds, they carry out military interventions "for the sake of biological ends such as nutrition or care of epidemics."⁴

The same threshold of indistinction between biology and politics has been increasingly problematised and addressed by artists. Let us think of the work produced, from the second half of the nineties onwards, in the recently established field of *bio art* by artists such as Eduardo Kac, Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr (also known as Tissue Culture and Art Project), George Gessert, and so on.⁵ A critical engagement with bio art and an investigation of its correlations to biopolitics is beyond the scope of this article; however it is necessary, for the foundation of my argument, to at least gesture towards it. Bio art, considered as a macro example, is able to show that the means through which biopolitics manifests itself in art and the means through which art manifests itself in biopolitics are always under the cipher of indistinction. Indistinction, thus, is on the one hand what biopolitics employs to perform power, and on the other the powerful result of the implicit performances that happen within and through *biopolitical art*.

Let us now reconsider what I mentioned at the beginning of the paper, namely that in biopolitical times life is just an activity that happens in time. Let us now relate this claim to Groys' assertion that it is because of such an event that our ability "to distinguish between the natural and the artificial" is in crisis:

How does one distinguish between a technologically facilitated beginning of life, such as artificial insemination, for example, and a “natural” continuation of that life, or distinguish that natural continuation, in turn, from an equally technology-dependent means of extending life beyond a “natural” death?⁶

Once confronted with these questions it becomes clear why Groys advances that the one and only difference that we can aspire to detect between what is *real* and what is *artificial* is “exclusively a narrative difference.” Groys’ proposition brings the discussion back to the topic of documentation, since the difference between the real and the artificial “cannot be observed but only told, only documented.”⁷

A great example of this kind of undetectable difference is described in Christopher Nolan’s movie *Inception* (2010). In this film the real⁸ and the artificial (which in the movie is the dream world) happen to be blurred to the extent that at the end of the feature not only the fictional characters in the movie, but also the actual audience, are left wondering whether the spinning top (which in the movie is the only element able to *document* with certainty the difference between the real and the artificial) is going to fall (= real) or is going to keep spinning (= artificial).

I would like to push this idea a step further, by suggesting that what we experience in Aernout Mik’s moving-image installations is *biopolitical art*, for it creates “something living and original from something artificial and reproduced.”⁹ The production of something *real* from its *artificial* copy is, in fact, another mechanism of contemporary biopolitics. Think of biometric systems of identification in which it is paradoxically the copy (i.e., my iris scan or my digital finger prints) that identifies (me as) the original, and not vice versa. Think of the fact that nowadays the dynamics of power have substituted human life for the human subject. All of the above is but a drop in the mare magnum of biopolitics, an area that has been investigated by an increasing number of contemporary Italian

philosophers such as Antonio Negri, Maurizio Lazzarato, Pietro Montani, Giorgio Agamben, and Roberto Esposito, to name just a few.

In her extraordinary text *Biopolitica: Una mappa concettuale*, published at the end of 2010, Laura Bazzicalupo reminds us that the term biopolitics was for the first time explicitly used in a text dated 1938 and written by Morley Roberts: *Biopolitics: An Essay on the Physiology, Pathology and Politics of Social and Somatic Organism*. In this text biopolitics is considered as the attempt to detect a normality through pathological aspects of society that otherwise would be ungraspable.¹⁰ Since 1938 the term biopolitics has undergone innumerable semantic migrations. In contemporary philosophical discourse the term biopolitics has been employed to address mostly the conceptual coupling of life and politics, and the ways in which governments have performed their (il)legal interventions over life, with norms and legislation such as the ones concerning abortion and euthanasia, organ transplants and biometric systems of security and identification. By displaying a terminological fusion and (con)fusion of the concepts of *bios* and *politics*, biopolitics attempts to eliminate — in a theoretical sense at least — the gap that is always-already present between *bios* and politics. *Bios*,¹¹ which is first of all a term that refers to life, is a generic, indeterminable, and indeed vague concept. But as soon as *bios* appears to be framed by power, a decisive semantic shift from concept to content happens. As if to say that *bios* becomes life only, and only when, power frames it and so defines it. It is only within the frame of power, then, that life metamorphoses, and from a neutral, cold and somehow impalpable concept becomes something else, namely, a warm and palpable content; something much more specific, much more present, much more subjective, and so much more subjectable. This something *so much more* is what we call body.

In Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer Trilogy*, which consists of *Homo Sacer* (1995), *Quel che Resta di Auschwitz* (1998) and *Stato di Eccezione* (2004),¹² biopolitics, from a

mere legal and political concept, became a critical tool employable in different fields of analysis in the attempt to understand contemporaneity. Springing from Michel Foucault's critical elaboration of biopower and biopolitics, and Carl Schmitt's theory of the state of exception, Agamben's philosophy depicts biopolitics as the *modus operandi* of contemporary democratic regimes. Recognizing not just an eerie interconnection but also a reciprocal necessity between the constitution of sovereign power and the production of the borderline figure of the *homo sacer*, Agamben, in his writing, attempts to peer through the opaque folds of contemporary politics. It is there that he finds the human body, or rather life in its bare nudity. *Nuda vita* — bare life — is a life that, stripped of its ethical values and meaning, is the prime object of governmental power's performances.

Agamben, in his work, reminds us that the "original political relation" that lies at the foundation of Western democracies is no longer "the Schmittian opposition between friend and enemy, fellow citizen and foreigner." The contemporary political relation is "marked by [a] zone of indistinction in which the life of the exile or the *aqua et igni interdictus*, borders on the life of *homo sacer*, who may be killed but not sacrificed."¹³ The Latin expression *homo sacer* comes from an archaic Roman law and refers to the life of any individual who has been doubly marked by a cursed holiness and a holy curse through the action of *sacratio*. Already within the same idiom *homo sacer* there appears an obscure and ungraspable paradox, some sort of semantic indistinction. By being defined and identified as *sacer* by both human and divine law; and by being excluded by both — because of that very same definition, *homo sacer* is holy and cursed, inside and outside: *homo sacer* is included via its exclusion. Such a semantic indistinction, which in turn opens itself up to a conceptual malleability, has made *homo sacer* become the apt philosophical paradigm to define the indefinable, to name what is in itself always-already

nameless: our contemporary human condition. After all, has not the main task of philosophy been the attempt to explain that which is unexplainable?

The following passage from *Homo Sacer* is crucial to grasp the interconnections between *homo sacer*, bare life, sacrifice, and our modern condition. I shall quote it at length:

Homo sacer is unsacrificeable, yet he may nevertheless be killed by anyone. The dimension of bare life that constitutes the immediate referent of sovereign violence is more original than the opposition of the sacrificeable and the unsacrificeable, and gestures toward an idea of sacredness that is no longer absolutely definable through the conceptual pair (which is perfectly clear in societies familiar with sacrifice) of fitness for sacrifice and immolation according to ritual forms. In modernity, the principle of the sacredness of life is thus completely emancipated from sacrificial ideology, and in our culture the meaning of the term sacred continues the semantic history of *homo sacer* and not that of sacrifice (and this is why the demystifications of sacrificial ideology so common today remain insufficient, even though they are correct). What confronts us today is a life that as such is exposed to a violence without precedent precisely in the most profane and banal ways. [...] If today there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually *homines sacri*.¹⁴

Employing this quote as a critical lens, I would like to propose that the moving-image installations *Vacuum Room* (2005), *Scapegoats* (2006), *Training Ground* (2006), and the most recent *Shifting Sitting* (2011), produced by Dutch artist Aernout Mik,¹⁵ are performative instances of current biopolitical concerns and can be considered “as-philosophy,” or “philosophy-in-motion,” so to speak. These video installations

represent what is supposed, and, more crucially, is always expected to be unrepresentable, namely what Zygmunt Bauman calls “constant uncertainty,” which can be considered one of the by-products of biopolitics. It is because of this uncertainty that we feel hopeless in relation to the political status quo and we are made believe “that everything can happen but nothing can be done.”¹⁶ In order to offer a more comprehensive picture of Mik’s imagery and to build a more coherent and linear argument I will now take some time to sketch out the structure of the pieces mentioned above. These are video installations that all share the following elements: they represent staged situations; they are in colour, silent, and looped. Before engaging with the individual description of the pieces I need to say that Mik’s installations, in this paper, will function as a series of conceptual paradigms aimed to help me to illustrate the thesis of this paper, namely, that the very same installations are *biopolitics on screen*.

Vacuum Room is a six-channel video installation, whose screens are held by a freestanding semicircular architectural structure designed to physically surround the viewers. The action represented on the screens develops within what appears to be an official legislative chamber. Shot from the vantage point of six security cameras positioned at different angles, and lacking a linear narrative, the footage of *Vacuum Room* shows a group of rebels entering the chamber and taking over what looks like an animated political debate. Unlike his other films, in *Vacuum Room* Mik uses fixed cameras to record the happenings, perhaps to give the impression that the images are actually coming from real surveillance cameras. That said, nothing is actually certain or clear in the piece, as we read in the catalogue of the 2009 exhibition entitled *Aernout Mik*, which took place at MoMA in New York:

During a boisterous debate (complete with shoe-banging) a protest group bursts into the already contentious assembly, exacerbating tensions and creating

a power vacuum in which order is threatened and authority compromised. [...] In spite of the work's specificity [...] much remains unclear. There is no chronology. The piece does not open with pictures of the ministers in session. In fact it does not open at all.

The way Mik positions his telling precludes any beginning, and without a beginning there can be no middle and no end. The work starts whenever the viewer first encounters it, and then continues and loops, and continues some more.¹⁷

Instead of occurring within a secluded and confined space, the action depicted in the two-screen installation *Training Ground*¹⁸ happens in an outdoor environment where "guards with weapons oversee/harass/abuse/corral/search detainees against a background of parked police vehicles and transport trucks."¹⁹ We might have the impression that if we pay close attention we could eventually discern a coherent plot. However, "by shifting sequences shot in different parts of the field from screen to screen" Mik deprives us "of contiguity and presents [us] with a puzzle that, like the violent action described in the work, cannot be solved."²⁰ While in *Training Ground* we are not completely sure who is a guard and who is a detainee, especially considering that at a certain moment the two factions seems to swap roles; in the sports arena of the single-screen work *Scapegoats*, the demarcation between the group hostages/prisoners and the group of guards becomes even more unstable, to the extent that differences turn into similarities.

Mik's most recent production, *Shifting Sitting*, is an open reference to the legal court cases in which the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has been involved since the 1990s. In a sophisticated fashion, *Shifting Sitting* exposes the implosion and the resulting erasure of the boundaries between governmental power, legal power and media-related power; boundaries that should be of crucial importance for the

maintenance of democratic systems. Filmed in the EUR district of Rome (where EUR stands for Esposizione Universale di Roma), which was built in the late 1930s by order of Benito Mussolini to host the 1941 World Exhibition, *Shifting Sitting* seems to suggest some sort of similarity between the current state of Italian democracy and the Fascist regime. Mounted on three separate screens, the video installation shows scenes that take place in an Italian law court, where, symbolically overseen by the motto *La Legge e' Uguale per Tutti* [*The Law is Equal for Everyone*], five men — who, by the way they are dressed, might be either businessmen or politicians, some of whom bear an obvious resemblance to Berlusconi — are being questioned.

As appears clear from these four examples, what Mik develops in his work is a reflection on European democracy, which depicts democracy not as a unified concept but as a plural one that manifests itself in many different specific ways.²¹ Mik, in his work, tries to tackle some of these ways. In all his videos we see groups of people gathering together, some of them sit, some of them walk, some of them interact. Although, overall, it seems that nothing noticeable is happening, the scenes are always disquieting. We see groups of people that sometimes come together in a political chamber, sometimes in a field, sometimes in a stadium, sometimes in a law court. The people of Mik's videos often appear divided into conflicting groups. It is through the employment of slightly different objects or clothes, or by positioning the people in particular spatial arrangements, that Mik leaves us to imagine who belongs to which group and why. And while we are attempting to make sense out of what we are seeing, and maybe we think we have understood, the two groups suddenly "mingle and intermingle, or they may disperse into an amorphous gathering, a crowd, sometimes to regather, reform, regroup."²² In the attempt to offer what I would tentatively call a "democratic plurality of performances," in filming the movements of these groups of people Mik "keeps the whole field in sharp focus so that no group is visually privileged and all activity is equal."²³ Such

equality extends outside of the space of the video into the physical space of the exhibition venue. Because of the cues that Mik uses in his films, which act as reminders of recent social or political events, the viewers are captured by the images and yet puzzled by the absence of a coherent narrative. Steve Klee rightly points out that the scale of the screens generates a sort of *trompe l'oeil* environment, which lures the viewer into the space of the video:

The projected characters are often life, or near life, sized and the space within the training ground, conference room and sports arena seem somehow continuous with the gallery. This continuity depends upon the positioning of the screens flush to the floor, so that as we pass by the images there is often the curious feeling of walking on the same ground as Mik's performers.²⁴

What Mik is interested in is to deconstruct the behavioural dynamics of groups, and to question how people act and what happens when they come together in a specific space. Preferring to refer to himself as a sculptor rather than a video artist, Mik admits that his fascination for the presence of bodies in space is "a sculptural starting point," which over the years has developed in "the idea of installations." Mik, however, describes his video-installations as 'situations' more than videos. They are "spatial arrangements" where a physical encounter between the viewer and the work is necessary to allow what he refers to as "a constellation of people or different living creatures and objects" to meet in a space. Mik, in other words, seeks to produce a "kinaesthetic and kinetic relationship with the viewer's body."²⁵ But how can he control in advance the ways in which the viewer will experience the piece? The answer is that "where the viewer will stand and how his eyes will engage with both the images on-screen and the other observers"²⁶ can be somehow choreographed through the shape of the architectural constructions and the size of

the screens that combined together turn the video-installation into something *living* to experience as opposed to a *dead* film to watch.

Experience implies the concepts of time and space, and therefore of movement. The latter is a common element to all Mik's installations: not only are the people in the film frames always in movement, but so are the people in the exhibition space. As I have mentioned at the beginning of this paper, for Groys "art becomes biopolitical" when it attempts "to produce and document life as a pure activity,"²⁷ that is to say, when it attempts to contract life into an event that happens in a time frame that can be controlled and manipulated. Now let us briefly recall that for Groys it is exactly because "life is no longer understood as a natural event [...] but rather as time artificially produced and fashioned" that we are increasingly losing the ability to discern what is natural and what is artificial.²⁸ Let us also not forget that for the philosopher "the difference between the living and the artificial is exclusively a narrative difference" and that "the artistic documentation, whether real or fictive, is primarily narrative, and thus it evokes the unrepeatability of living time."²⁹ Now, in the light of these claims, if we think of Mik's moving-image installations, which are always presented in a loop, the question of time, space and movement, that is, the question of experience, surfaces.

Mik's work incarcerates time in a loop, so that the viewers can frame it at their own will. Such a conceptual paradox, which is nothing but a step further into the zone of biopolitics indistinction, can be explained as follows. The time of the video-installation, which has been already framed by the looped video, presents itself *as unframed* to the viewers, so that the viewers can then frame it, once again, and in so doing, they come to own it in a way. What Mik does in his films, then, is to engage with documentation in a conceptual sense, as he uses it as an art form to document what the performers enact, and as an evocative tool, since the images of his films are meant to arouse the memories of the viewers. It is the combination of these two

kinds of documentation that allows his work, I would argue, to produce *art from life*. The difference between performance and factuality, between art and life is very much indistinct in Mik's videos that, by also lacking a narrative, lack what Groys sees as the only element able to help us differentiate between artificial and real. Therefore, Mik's videos can be seen as paradigmatically "shows on screen of bare life," since the life that surfaces in his work is a life that belongs to a third category, between *zoë* and *bios*. This is a life that caught in the indistinct zone between politics and art, has yet to achieve political or artistic representation. Mik, however, shows *nuda vita* less naked because through his work it ends up being dressed, so to speak, with the projected memories and failed expectations of the viewers. Through the viewers' projections, obviously aimed at understanding, or at least at making sense out of a constructed loop of silent moving images, the viewers find themselves inside Mik's films. *Biopolitics on screen* happens there, where the screen of both Mik's and the viewers' projections, overlap and thus become a symbolic materialization of what Agamben calls "the hidden matrix and *nomos* of the political space where we are still living."³⁰

Vacuum Room, Scapegoats, Training Ground and *Shifting Sitting* engage with violent and abusive group behaviours, and depict, in a non-linear fashion, the blurring of the boundaries between social roles and identities. In none of them can the viewer gain any certainty, whether in relation to the topography of the spaces or in relation to the actual events happening on screen. In an exemplary fashion these moving-image installations perform and display, at once, biopolitics in its bareness. What appears in Mik's films is "the very bare life (or sacred life) [...], in the relation of ban, [which] constitutes the immediate referent of sovereignty,"³¹ as Agamben describes it, in the wake of Bataille's reasoning on the accursed share. What we witness in *Vacuum Room, Scapegoats, Training Ground* and *Shifting Sitting* is the confrontational and yet unspecific behaviours of two different groups of people,

those who apparently are in control and those who are controlled, and the groups' movements in space. Needless to say, that the space of these particular video installations is extremely evocative for a contemporary viewer: a parliament chamber becomes a riotous arena (*Vacuum Room*), a stadium becomes a refugee camp (*Scapegoats*), a training environment becomes a zone for torture and abuse (*Training Ground*) and a court room becomes a theatre of media display (*Shifting Sitting*).

Moreover, what confuses in these video installations is the fact that the already unclear division between the factions often develops into "a sudden reversal of roles and the captives temporarily take over" so that

The visual similarities between all of the factions — soldiers, prisoners in uniform, and those who are partially dressed in both civilian and military attire, further the confusion and make it impossible to place people in distinct categories. Nor is it clear if the "prisoners" may actually be dangerous.³²

Scapegoats, in particular, seems to visualise almost *ad litteram* Agamben's controversial claim that the concentration camp has become the *nomos* of modernity.³³ Agamben, of course, does not contend that the same inhuman cruelty of the Nazi concentration camps marks the general geopolitics of our times. Unfortunately, there are instances where such cruelty is still performed, think of Guantanamo Bay or the many camps for immigrants that dot our Western urban topographies. Agamben, however, suggests that the rationale of the camp is what is pervading the topographies of Hardt and Negri's *Empire*. The exceptionality of the German camps, with their production of *nuda vita*, or "naked life," has — in Agamben's view — become the norm. "Naked life," by being metaphorically denuded of its intimate values and meanings, can also be seen as one of the tangible

results of a biopolitical annihilation of any distinction between inclusion and exclusion, inside and outside, citizen and criminal. I would advance that “naked life” is indeed what is depicted by the looped videos of Mik’s installations, works in which apparently innocuous spaces such as a stadium or a training field are transformed instead into spaces where the exception is the norm, and where violence is accepted and, for some unknown reason, even justified. As Agamben puts it:

If the essence of the camp consists in the materialization of the state of exception and in the subsequent creation of a space in which bare life and the juridical rule enter into a threshold of indistinction, then we must admit that we find ourselves virtually in the presence of a camp every time such a structure is created, independent of the kinds of crime that are committed there and whatever its denomination and specific topography.³⁴

Which means that we have a camp anytime “an apparently innocuous space” (for example, a stadium or a training field or those many spaces that belong to the government, such as legislative chambers and so on)

actually delimits a space in which the normal order is de facto suspended and in which whether or not atrocities are committed depends not on law but on the civility and ethical sense of the they who temporarily act as sovereign.³⁵

The fact that these “innocuous spaces” are becoming increasingly common in everyday life is what causes Mik’s spectators to be drawn into the videos. We saw an incredibly tragic actualization of one of those “innocuous spaces” in the New Orleans Superdome when it was used as a shelter for the people who could not be

evacuated after Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. We saw another clear example in the San Nicola stadium in Bari where in 1991, from the 7th to the 8th of August, Italian police forcefully detained 15,000 illegal Albanian immigrants, before sending them back to their country. Shortly after such an appalling event the Italian government legalized the actual creation of “exceptional spaces,” the so-called *centri di permanenza temporanea* [centres of temporary permanence],³⁶ in which immigrants were — as already suggested by the name of the spaces themselves — temporarily hosted within a state of “permanent exception” prior to the moment of their expulsion. Shifting the attention towards identification more than housing and care, these centres, from 2008 onward, were legally renamed *Centri di Identificazione e Espulsione* [Centres of Identification and Expulsion].³⁷

I would argue that uncertainty and insecurity are the feelings that we experience when confronted with Mik’s moving-image loops. Regardless of the actual events depicted in the films, the actions performed by the actors display a certain uneasy uncertainty. Interestingly, Mik does not explain the details of the actions to his cast but just gives them a general outline of the events they are going to perform. He explains his creative process in an extremely detailed fashion:

It is always important to inform them and not inform them, so I hold back information because it is better for the way I work that they don’t have a full image of what they are supposed to do. And since they are also not really very specific roles, no one knows really how different he is from the other and what exactly he represents. I don’t give them too much information because I don’t want them to become characters and to act.

[...] During the shoot, different qualities, different people emerge and become useful to what is coming to the surface. [...] In the shooting, I don’t know when or exactly why what happens happens. [...] It is collective action

that's really going on. What always happens with people, even if they are completely unskilled, if you put them together in a certain situation and with certain general instructions, for the first twenty minutes to half an hour it is kind of a directionless mass. After a short while the mass starts to behave as an organic unity and takes a certain direction on its own, even though I am partly manipulating it. Even if the people don't understand what they are doing, they physically know how to behave and there is a certain tone appearing that makes them understand what is more or less correct to do. Therefore there is some combination of control and loss of control, which is not the same as improvisation.³⁸

Therefore, besides experiencing the dilemma of "is it real — *like us* — or is it not?" any time we watch Mik's videos, as rightly pointed out by Adam Chodzo,³⁹ it is the uneasiness that emerges from within the videos that renders the "fluidity of boundaries"⁴⁰ so palpable. By creating what the artist refers to as an "encountering space," which is at the same time a physical and symbolic space, such a fluidity of boundaries is performed even further, allowing the space inside the video to reach out and touch the space of the exhibition venue. It is in its symbolic variation that Mik crafts a new space of reception in which the viewer, confronted by the absence of a linear narrative that could justify the bare and silent images of the videos, is turned into a producer, as Benjamin would say. Esther Leslie highlights that "for Benjamin, properly political art is [...] concerned with reception effects, generated by modes of production that provide conditions for consumers to become producers."⁴¹ I am not suggesting that in viewing Mik's moving-image installations we, as viewers, become literal producers. What I am proposing is that Mik's work engages with our reception so as to make us experience, in the first person, confusion, indistinction, uncertainty, and fear, which are exactly the same means

employed by biopolitics to exert power over human lives, to colonise and own them.

As I mentioned earlier, the screens of Mik's video installations inhabit the exhibition space so as to create what the artist calls "spatial arrangements." The screens are often positioned in a way that makes the viewers walk through the projection so as to become themselves a living part of the video installation. These "spatial arrangements" after all, are environments that the viewers can actively experience, rather than just passively look at. "When video images are placed in an exhibition space," Groys claims, the images are what will "dictate the time the visitor needs to view them," making the viewer lose control "over the duration of his or her contemplation."⁴² When it comes to moving-images installations, such as the ones by Aernout Mik, "we do not possess sovereignty, administrative power over the time of contemplation." Which is, in a sense, what we experience in our everyday life, where "we are always only accidental witnesses of certain events and certain images, whose duration we cannot control."⁴³ That feeling of being "only an accidental witness" is rendered in Mik's videos by the ways in which the camera moves amongst the elements of the scenes, always in an invisible fashion as if it were "looking for something else, equivocating, haunting a space, returning to it."⁴⁴ An element that is common to most of Mik's work, besides silence, which in my opinion calls for much closer attention, is the feeling that something is missing. As if we were standing in the wrong place or we were watching from the wrong angle. As if "the *real* action" is actually happening somewhere else, maybe "outside the frame," or "perhaps it has already happened or is going on in the distance?"⁴⁵ It is this "narrative ambiguity of Mik's staged situations" that produces coexisting opposite dispositions in the viewer: "the feeling of being both engrossed and distracted, implicated in the actions on screen and distanced by them at the same time."⁴⁶

Let us now turn to some aspects of Agamben's work on language to investigate further how in Mik's moving-image installations *biopolitics* indeed ends up being *on screen*. Conceiving politics as "the sphere of pure means" — where means identify with gesture, and gesture with language — Agamben sustains that biopolitical regimes employ a language devoid of its content. Such a vacancy of message is for Agamben the result of a crisis of communicability, for in our spectacular biopolitical times "what prevents communication is communicability itself."⁴⁷ According to the philosopher, in fact, "an alienation of the linguistic nature of human beings" has been pushed to its extreme so that right now "human beings are kept separate by what unites them," namely by language itself.⁴⁸

In *Infancy and History*, Giorgio Agamben, echoing what Benjamin had already described in *The Storyteller*, claims that what modernity brought about was first and foremost a crisis of communicability. Such a crisis manifested itself exactly in a communally shared crisis of experience whose dawn was identified by Benjamin in the catastrophic events of the First World War when "men returned from the battlefield grown silent — not richer, but poorer in communicable experience."⁴⁹ For Agamben, thus, there is a noteworthy convergence, or better to say a quasi-identity, of these two kinds of crisis: the one of communicability and the one of experience. To recuperate experience on the one hand, and its communicability on the other, or rather its "translatability,"⁵⁰ what needs to be reconsidered is, according to Agamben, the essence of experience itself. More than a question related to knowledge and consciousness, experience should be understood as a question of language, for "any rigorous formulation of the question of experience inevitably impacts on the question of language."⁵¹ After all, language along with mortality is what makes us and marks us as human. Agamben explains:

In the tradition of Western philosophy, humans appear as both mortal and

speaking. They possess the “faculty” for language (*zoon logon echon*) and the “faculty” for death (*Fähigkeit des Todes*, in the words of Hegel). This connection is equally essential within Christianity: humans, living beings, are “incessantly consigned to death through Christ” [...], that is through the Word.⁵²

And if we follow Agamben’s claim that “it is in language that the subject has its site and origin,”⁵³ and that, “it is in and through language that the individual is constituted as a subject”⁵⁴ then we would clearly see why it is only in linguistic terms that we can actually locate experience.

For if the subject is merely the enunciator [...] we shall never attain in the subject the original status of experience: “pure, and thereby still mute experience.” On the contrary, the constitution of the subject in and through language is precisely the expropriation of this “wordless” experience; from the outset, it is always “speech.” A primary experience, far from being subjective, could then only be what in human beings comes before the subject — that is, before language: a “wordless” experience in the literal sense of the term, a human infancy [in-fancy], whose boundary would be marked by language.⁵⁵

The alienation of language that Agamben denounces as being one of the main features of the contemporary biopolitical phantasmagoria is appropriated by Mik and in turn employed to produce a “biopolitical idiom” that stretches beyond both words and images. If it is true what Heraclitus says, namely that “*logos* is common to all”⁵⁶ and if it is true what Agamben claims, that is, that “the extreme form of expropriation of the common is the spectacle” which is “the politics in which we live,” what we might discover in the spectacle is “our very linguistic nature inverted.”⁵⁷ But what is the result of such inversion? It is what Agamben refers to as

infancy: that conceptual condition which is not understood temporally (as the time before childhood for example) but rather as “the transcendental experience of the difference between language and speech, which first opens the space of history.”⁵⁸ I argue that what we experience in Mik’s moving-image installations is an experience of history and *ethos*. Infancy seems to me what can actualize the potentiality that Agamben recognizes in the spectacle when he claims that

precisely because what is being expropriated is the possibility itself of a common good [that] the spectacle’s violence is so destructive; but, for the same reason, the spectacle still contains something like a positive possibility-and it is our task to use this possibility against it.⁵⁹

What we see on Mik’s screens are “singularities that are truly *whatever* singularities.”⁶⁰ The people that appear in Mik’s films are not characters but the conceptualisation of gestures: of what Agamben calls “a constellation of gestures.” What happens within this “constellation of gestures” is firstly the destruction of the role’s identity together with the actor’s identity and secondly a questioning of “the relationship between text and execution, power and act.”⁶¹

What Agamben attributes to the mask in the *Commedia dell’Arte*, namely the ability “to insinuate itself between the text and the execution, creating an indistinguishable mixture of power and act” happens where the space inside the video and the space outside collide. Such a space of intersection is what can bridge the gap between life and art, act and power, general and particular, text and execution; what Agamben calls *gesture*.⁶² By being “neither use value nor exchange value, neither biographic experience nor impersonal event,” the gesture is for Agamben “a moment of life subtracted from the context of individual biography as

well as a moment of art subtracted from the neutrality of aesthetics: it is pure praxis."⁶³

When in *Potentialities*, Agamben addresses the relationship between the concept of revelation and the idea of language, he premises his argument on the claim that it is because "humans see the world through language but they do not see language," that revelation can actually reveal itself, for the "invisibility of the revealer in what is revealed is the word of God; it is revelation."⁶⁴ The philosopher at this point shows how revelation is in fact the main facet not of theology, but actually of philosophy, for:

Philosophy considers not merely what is revealed through language, but also the revelation of language itself. A philosophical presentation is thus one that, regardless of what it speaks about, must also take into account that it speaks of it, it must first of all say *language itself*.⁶⁵

This very concept, Agamben explains, can also be expressed "by saying that philosophy is not a vision of the world but a *vision of language*." However, he clarifies, language cannot be the only subject of philosophical presentations; otherwise, philosophy would just be reduced to "a metalanguage that speaks of language," to a voice that embodies a message by just being voice. On the contrary, Agamben reminds us, "the voice says nothing;" the only thing that the voice does is to show itself, to make itself present without ever becoming a content, or a message of some sort. It is worth considering that according to Agamben voice and philosophy have mutually exclusive natures: while on the one hand voice "cannot become the subject of [philosophical] discourse," on the other hand "philosophy can only lead thought to the limit of the voice," that is to say that philosophy "cannot say

the voice."⁶⁶ "Philosophy," Agamben concludes, "has hardly posed the question of the voice as an issue."⁶⁷

I see in that aphasic fracture of philosophical thinking a germane space, a space where the work of Aernout Mik is at home. I would like to propose that the silent nature of his work, regardless of the disparate visual content, is Mik's theoretical resistance against biopolitics' silencing agendas. It is via the absence of a pre-constituted narrative that an *ethos* of the viewers can resonate with the material on screen, and thus allow individuals to find sense in what is apparently nonsensical. Such a mechanism of reflection is articulated through codes that exceed the scope of language, which in itself, as we have seen, separate instead of unite. Agamben, however, foresees an "event of language" that could be a productive eventuality, instead of just being a nihilistic incident. In this paper what I have tried to show is that the video-installations produced by Aernout Mik can be read as paradigms of current philosophical concerns and can be easily considered "as philosophy."

Videos such as *Vacuum Room*, *Scapegoats*, *Training Ground* and *Shifting Sitting*, visually elucidate that, it is only by exposing "what unites human beings amongst themselves [...] [which] is the experience of language's limits, its end,"⁶⁸ that the very incommunicability articulated by Agamben may be defeated. In Mik's videos an unexpected communication is enabled via the employment of new codes, which by exposing what Agamben refers to as "gestures," become what I call "biopolitical idioms." The implicit performative power of those "gestures," of those "idioms" is actualised in Mik's films, and demands a physical and yet always displaced engagement of the spectator's body; demands that always-already challenge to the fixity of filmic documentation.

I will conclude by advancing the hypothesis, that it is through the potentiality of these "biopolitical idioms" that Mik's films "as-philosophy" perform "gestures" able to produce something *ethical* while evading, all the same, the usually

anticipated and yet ethically paralyzing dichotomy between means and end. And while the “biopolitical idioms” employed by Aernout Mik might be read as “gestures without end,” for their power to voice the always-already silence(d) *homo sacer*, they nonetheless perform a “resistance from within” against the silencing status quo of contemporary biopolitical phantasmagoria. As I have shown, Mik’s works can be considered in themselves “philosophy-in-motion” for their ability to put *biopolitics on screen*. And, if it is true that “philosophy cannot say the voice,” Mik has proved that it can certainly say silence. A silence that dwells in the zone of indistinction proper to infancy, and that makes visible what Agamben calls the “limit of the voice.” Considering that “we are not only animals whose life as living beings is at issue in their politics,” but also that we are “citizens whose very politics is at issue in their natural bodies;”⁶⁹ and that, as Agamben invites us to do, we should look for ways and forms of a new politics within “these difficult zones of indistinction,”⁷⁰ what Aernout Mik offers in his work is, if not a new politics, a new political aesthetics nonetheless.

NOTES

1. Boris Groys, “Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation,” in *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 53-65. [AP]

2. *Ibid.*, 54.

3. *Ibid.*, 55-56.

4. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 186-187. [HS]

5. *Bio Art* is a term that was first used by Australian artist Eduardo Kac in relation to his piece *Time Capsule* (1997). The first and most comprehensive text available that focuses on bio art is: Eduardo Kac, ed., *Signs of Life. Bio Art and Beyond*, ed. Eduardo Kac (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007).

6. Groys, AP, 56.

7. *Ibid.*, 55.

8. My use of the term *real* is not related to any particular theory, therefore I am not referring to the Lacanian real but rather and more simply to something that could be called the “actual.”

9. Groys, AP, 65.

10. Laura Bazzicalupo, *Biopolitica: Una mappa concettuale* (Roma: Carrocci Editore, 2010), 26.

11. In this paper, due to lack of space and in order to keep the argument on topic, I will consider the terms *bios* and *life* interchangeable, and therefore I won’t address the essential difference between *bios* and *zoë*. I investigate the philosophical implications and complications of such a difference in the work of Aernout Mik in one of the chapters of my doctoral thesis.

12. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen

(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York, 1999). Giorgio Agamben, *States of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

13. Agamben, *HS*, 110.

14. *Ibid.*, 114-115. On Friday 23rd of July 2011, while I was revising this article, an atrocious murderous event happened on the little island of Utoya off the coast of Norway. More than 80 people, all children and teenagers, were killed at the hands of an unstable individual, while they were enjoying their holidays in one of the most popular summer camps of the region. This event sadly shows us the extent to which life is nowadays "exposed to a violence without precedent precisely in the most profane and banal way."

15. I have decided not to discuss *Raw Footage* (2006) because it is the only work that is not staged but, instead, is made by the assemblage of found footage from the war in the former Yugoslavia. The material that forms *Raw Footage*, although it comes from news agencies, has not been broadcasted because it shows how, even in a war zone, life goes on regardless of anything else, which, in other words, does not describe war as we usually see it. For its substantial difference within Mik's oeuvre I believe that *Raw Footage* deserves a chapter of investigation on its own.

16. Zygmunt Bauman, "La Incertezza Costante," *Reset Doc*, 18 May 2011, <http://www.resetdoc.org/story/00000021599> (accessed 15 June 2011).

17. Laurence Kardish, "Aernout Mik: An Introduction," in *Aernout Mik*, ed. Libby Hruska (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 17.

18. *Training Ground* is the piece that Aernout Mik presented at the Venice Biennale, Dutch Pavilion, in 2007.

19. Kardish, "Aernout Mik," 17.

20. *Ibid.*

21. For an exhaustive analysis of democracies and universalisms (in the plural) I refer to the work of contemporary sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos and his project The World Social Forum.

22. Kardish, "Aernout Mik," 15.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Steve Klee, "'Aernout Mik: Shifting Shifting' at Camden Arts Centre," *Afterall*, 5 February 2008, <http://www.afterall.org/online/aernout.mik.shifting.shifting.at.camden.arts.centre> (accessed 15 June 2011).

25. Kardish, "Aernout Mik," 13-23.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Groys, *AP*, 54.

28. *Ibid.*, 56.

29. *Ibid.*, 57.

30. Agamben, *HS*, 166.

31. *Ibid.*, 112.

32. Kelly Sidley, "Scapegoats," in *Aernout Mik*, ed. Libby Hruska (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 63.

33. Agamben, *HS*, 166.

34. *Ibid.*, 174.

35. *Ibid.*

36. See Article 12 of the 1998 *Legge Turco-Napolitano* (L. 40/1998).

37. See Article 9 of D.L. 92/2008.

38. Kardish, "Aernout Mik," 15.

39. Adam Chodzcho, "#18 Aernout Mik: Shifting Shifting," *Camden Arts Centre / February – April 2007*, <http://www.camdenartscentre.org/file-uploads/File/File-Notes-Aernout-Mik.pdf> (accessed 15 June 2011).

40. Kardish, "Aernout Mik," 13.

41. Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin. Overpowering Conformism* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 96.

42. Groys, *AP*, 87-88.

43. *Ibid.*

44. Chodzcho, "#18 Aernout Mik."

45. *Ibid.*

46. Klee, "Aernout Mik."

47. Agamben, "Marginal Notes on 'Commentaries on the Society of Spectacle'," 84, and "Notes on Politics," 115, in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). [MWE]

48. *Ibid.*, 84.

49. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. and intr. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 83-84.

50. Agamben, "An Essay on the Destruction of Experience," in *Infancy and History* trans. Liz Heron, (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 15-72. [IH]

51. Ibid., 50.
52. Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen E. Pinkus with Michael Hardt (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), xii. [LD]
53. Agamben, *IH*, 51.
54. Ibid., 52.
55. Ibid., 54.
56. Heraclitus, *The Complete Fragments*, trans. William Harris, available online at: <http://community.middlebury.edu/~harris/Philosophy/heraclitus.pdf>.
57. Agamben, *MWE*, 82.
58. Agamben, *IH*, 60
59. Agamben, *MWE*, 83.
60. Ibid., 87.
61. Ibid., 79.
62. Ibid., 79-80.
63. Ibid., 80.
64. Agamben, "The Idea of Language," in *Potentialities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), 40. [P]
65. Ibid., 43 (emphasis added).
66. Ibid.
67. Agamben, "Experimentum Linguae," in *IH*, 4.
68. Agamben, *P*, 47.
69. Agamben, *HS*, 188.
70. Ibid., 187.