

## To Make Ready

by 3,14's text contributor **Johnny Herbert**

Themes of tolerance, reconciliation, and forgiveness are gestures of repair that attend to ruptures, tensions, or breaks of implicit, silent social contracts. Along with frequent calls for more empathy, such terms are recently frequently invoked. But what it is about the ruptures, tensions, and breaking of social contracts that necessitates repair, and is the goal of the repair to return something to a previous state, or is it a more reformative—or, even, newly formative—gesture? Further, and something to bear in mind throughout my thoughts here: who is being asked to tolerate and/or reconcile and/or forgive? Does the work in the exhibition in fact go beyond the frame of tolerance, reconciliation, and forgiveness?

In these short remarks, I will try to forward an idea of reparation, if that still remains the most fitting word, that is not merely ameliorative, but cannot function in—and cannot stand—whatever we choose to call this state of affairs: a kind of reparation that in fact instigates structural change. You see, my concern is that, otherwise, these terms are too easily assimilated into the kind of unimaginative sentimentality harnessed by, for example, Joe Biden's US presidential campaign and its Obama 2.0 politics. Such counter-populist politics (remembering that populism can be part of a wide range of political projects) doesn't try to rally people around a cause (apart from a colossally abstract notion of 'change'), but invokes a non-"right" conservatism buoyed by a nostalgia for a world few actually desire. Putting it very simply, it is almost like there is a belief that trauma will be healed by simply engaging oneself in the same things one did before one was traumatised: throw yourself back into life as it was! An all too typical reaction, of course, but one that also enables disguised effects of the trauma to permeate one's future, as the field of psychoanalysis has meticulously detailed. The US Democratic Party's trauma management—a trauma, perversely, it largely instigated—is surely just postponing more dangerous, refined versions of Trump or Bolsonaro (i.e. fascism).

"Overcoming" differences and social opposition should, then, remember that the dialectical play "overcoming" invokes is unrelenting: wouldn't new differences emerge if, say, sexism and racism were "overcome"? Such a line of thought also needs to grapple with the conflicting, incessant imperative of "being oneself" (i.e. unique, different) that is a key motor of consump-

tion. So, be different...but remember you're not. Here, then, let us transpose "overcoming" into what philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva's calls "difference without separability", in which differences are sustained but the entangled co-emergence of those differences is foregrounded: e.g. how capitalism emerged with the "science" of "race" and the transatlantic slave trade. In this sense, we have to live with how histories and knowledges (e.g. produced by institutions) are legible, audible, and intelligible *because of omissions and gaps—because of loss*. Entanglement means violence is the everyday cruelty of naming, of isolating a thing as one and not many. So, we might think of reparative gestures as attending to *the practice of foregrounding non-separability*, of bearing a wholeness too all-encompassing to be realised. Thus, reparation as the ameliorative or restorative gesture to cope with the anxiety arising from the falling away of a world that supported one's habits is transformed into coping with the anxiety of ambivalence and ethical challenge when becoming aware of losses—a latent, ubiquitous melancholy, so to speak.

When thinking about tolerance, reconciliation, and forgiveness, then, I think it's important to recognise their ambiguity as strategies enabling the continuation of the pressures of "business as usual", whilst also hinting at a practice for which they become a mode of discovering relations, something perhaps with potential structural ramifications. "Repair" might no longer be the word for this. Although "prepare" uses the same stem—"parare", "to make ready" (also where "parent" comes from)—perhaps it's fitting that there isn't one word that gets at the nascent ethics of attachment I'm sketching here.

*Living, Forgiving, Remembering* is clearly concerned with an approach to the past. Philosopher Walter Benjamin's conception and neologism of *Eingedenken* (often translated as "remembrance", but literally something like "putting of oneself into thoughts") is relevant for my remarks, here. What I earlier called the "losses" of historiography that make the past legible, audible, and intelligible, reveal, for Benjamin, the dictates of power. His work strives to shame the present's delusion of being able to access the past as if the dead's dreams can be read off like a coherent screenplay under our direction. Similarly, for Benjamin, reading something back into the context in which it was made renders history a quasi-scientific discipline, ignoring the

importance remembrance and what he famously asserted as the historian's task of "brushing history against the grain". He conceives of remembrance as "the capacity for endless interpolations into what has been", enabling a short circuit through which the past and the present are momentarily brought together in a flash, a violently isolated piece of the past suddenly electrifying the present. The incompleteness of the past, its necessary lossiness (to graft in a contemporary term), fragments the "completeness" of the present and the delusion of being at the "cutting edge" or forefront so often operative in any present. To speak again of loss: it is as if remembrance, for Benjamin, instigates a sympathetic resonance between generationally disparate losses. As Judith Butler puts it in her book *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*: "Remembrance may be nothing more than struggling against amnesia in order to find those forms of coexistence opened up by convergent and resonant histories. Perhaps for this we still do not have the precise name."

Whether or not I have somehow fabricated it (as I cannot find any supporting references), I once heard a story about Benjamin being interrogated by his good friend Berthold Brecht about the lack of explicitly revolutionary politics in his disparate textual output. Benjamin's response concisely expresses his committed belief in the past changing the future: "I prefer remembrance".