

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PRINT NOVEMBER 2018

THE PRICE OF INTIMACY

Diedrich Diederichsen on Hubert Fichte

The German writer and ethnographer Hubert Fichte (1935–1986) refused the constraints of custom and genre: His books combine autobiography, journalism, critique, and poetic avant-gardism with an ethnological practice that rejected the idea that research could be “pure.” Besides focusing on hunger, torture, human rights, and bisexuality, he made travel central to his work, turning his back on post-fascist Germany and increasingly spending time in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean in pursuit of encounters with and the study of non-European cultures. His dream, meanwhile, was of a global gay utopia. The political implications of this combination are complicated; Fichte tried to address them through a third-person alter ego who makes possible both incisive self-critique and reflections on its lack. His work is thus a precursor and an irritant to current debates in postcolonial and queer studies, as well as theories of identity politics and artistic research. Since 2017, Diedrich Diederichsen and curator Anselm Franke (with many partners and collaborators) have been organizing a multiyear project titled “Love and Ethnology,” which involves translations of Fichte’s books as well as exhibitions and events in locations where they are set. So far, the venues include Lisbon; Rio de Janeiro; Salvador de Bahia, Brazil; Santiago, Chile; and Dakar, Senegal, which will be followed by New York this December and a major exhibition and conference at Berlin’s Haus der Kulturen der Welt next fall. Diederichsen and Franke seek both to reverse the relationship between Fichte and his subjects across the distances of time and place and to situate his work within the context of post-1968 experimentalism. Here, Diederichsen reflects on the contradictions generated in Fichte’s writing and how they can be made productive today. If the question is, What can we learn from Fichte? the right place to start is with that thorny word *we*.



Hubert Fichte and Peter Michel Ladiges, 1974. Photo: Leonore Mau. © bpk/S. Fischer Stiftung/Leonore Mau.

Writing the way you speak
A kind of diary—ten years after the events
An interview with myself
Skillfully spontaneous
Whatever else, no art
Superficiality
No psychological coherence
No equivalents
—Hubert Fichte, *Hotel Garni* (1987)

WE WHO WISHED to prepare the ground for decolonization remained colonial ourselves. This variation on Bertolt Brecht's famous line "We / Who wished to lay the foundation for gentleness / Could not ourselves be gentle" applies to episode after episode in the history of

European ethnology—not least among them the experimental and poetic attempts by Hubert Fichte to go beyond ethnological practices and overcome his Western, German background in an all-encompassing search for powerful and tender, sexual and sensitive encounters with people all over the world, writing about them mainly in novels but also in essays and radio plays. His preferred methods were intense interviews, research of all kinds, and sexual intercourse or love, “embracing the entire world.”

Fichte was the only writer in postwar Germany to study not only his own queer sexuality and its social dimension but also non-European and especially African diasporic history, art, and culture. In a complex, dynamic, and experimental body of work, he frequently combined the two, writing about where sexuality and ethnology met. He nevertheless remained primarily a nontheoretical and often conceptually incoherent writer of novels: The opinions and acts of his third-person alter ego “Jäcki” do not add up to a proposal for an improved ethnographic methodology. They do, however, call into question every encounter that does not reflect the desire behind it. For Fichte, every kind of knowledge is generated by desire, by intimacy, by love—and not in general (as in Freud, for example), but in relation to certain, specific people. His writing challenges the foundational assumptions of Western literary prose (as opposed to any kind of poetry or ritual, but also the seemingly pure facticity of journalism), not to mention the Western humanities more broadly, by taking on its most problematic and precarious subject: the non-European other. And as much as Fichte exposes the dilemmas and aporias of the ethnological researcher’s life, from which he knows no way out, his incredibly direct and audacious writing style finds ways to transgress even that. His writing can be described as the opposite of othering: Transgression more often than not leads back to the well known. Rituals at the other end of the world are conducted by people who look just like old relatives, friends, and neighbors.

Fichte’s Jewish father fled Nazi Germany in 1935, and during the war Fichte himself was sent to the countryside, where he spent one year in an orphanage. After his return to Hamburg and a spell as a child actor, he made several attempts to escape the post-fascist Federal Republic (first to France, where he lived with a painter; then to Sweden, Finland, and France again). In the early ’60s, he started publishing autobiographical novels, and by the end of that decade he was a relatively successful author, known as a chronicler of the

Hamburg demimonde, with an experimental style characterized by long passages of dialogue (in which who says what is often left unexplained, and it is an open question whether one is in fact reading inner monologues constructed as dialectical montages of multiple voices) and expressive lists of, say, all the fish on sale at the Portuguese market of Sesimbra, or all the songs played in one night at the Sahara Bar in Hamburg's St. Pauli red-light district. Fichte claimed to have been influenced by no writer of the German-speaking world—except Baroque playwrights such as Daniel Casper von Lohenstein, who was, according to Fichte, rejected by a homophobic historiography.

As Fichte emphasized again and again, mutual understanding is possible.

Fichte considered Jean Genet one of the three greatest then-living writers (the others were Burroughs and Borges), and like him he has been accused of illegitimately sexualizing the political. Just as Genet—from his infatuation with certain Nazi collaborators to his seemingly political engagement on behalf of the Black Panthers and the PLO—conflated sexual fascination with political solidarity and betrayal, Fichte has recently (partly in reaction to the “Love and Ethnology” project launched last year) been suspected of orienting his sprawling narrative of the world around his individual affections. This, he might have claimed, is true of every artist—only, in his case, he was open about it and thematized it in his work, ultimately proposing that the energy of desire be transformed into a utopian machine.



Hubert Fichte, Berlin, October 1962. Photo: Leonore Mau. © bpk/S. Fischer Stiftung/Leonore Mau.

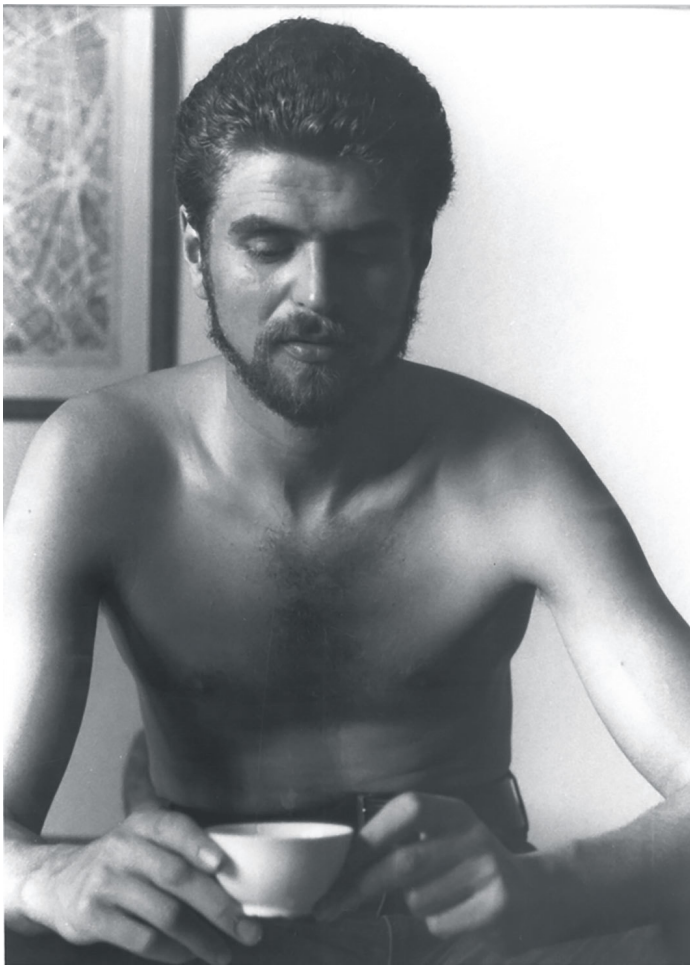
SOMETIME IN 1972, Fichte—this controversial gay Jewish German poet and reporter—began to wonder if he wanted to go on being the kind of writer who thinks “about Hölderlin and railroad stations.” The stations, in this remark, stood for the diffuse sentimentality and pretentiousness of German literature that Fichte always sought to oppose with facts, statistics, and especially interviews. That year, Fichte was living in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, where he finished his fourth autobiographical novel, *Versuch über die Pubertät* (Essay on Puberty, 1974), which opens with a brilliant scene at the Salvador city morgue. The restlessly researching and traveling Jäcki has gone there to investigate the death of a guerrillero, and specifically to find out whether he was tortured by the military dictatorship before he was killed. But then we witness other corpses being taken out and washed, including the fleshy body of one Herr Pozzi. The novel cuts to a classroom in postwar Hamburg, where Pozzi—as Fichte has pseudonymously named the German writer, organ builder, hormone researcher, and commune founder Hans Henny

Jahnn—is studying the urine of teenage boys. Shortly after the examination, we learn, Jahnn revealed to the eleven-year-old Fichte that his hormones showed him to be bisexual. Against Fichte’s mother’s wishes, the two became friends. The book retraces how Fichte soon joined a group of young queer men who, in a web of friendships and affairs, formed an artistic circle with Jahnn and other older men—and how the young Fichte eventually fled the city and the country where he felt persecuted as an “illegitimate” gay “half Jew.” The dreamlike and associative juxtaposition of the death of a guerrillero in Brazil; a corpulent, sexually visionary German writer; and Jäcki’s own birth out of persecution and escape are exemplary of both Fichte’s mastery of montage techniques and the way he connected scientific and journalistic research with goals and needs rooted in his own biography.

In 1986, just a few weeks before his death, Fichte completed *Explosion: Roman der Ethnologie* (Explosion: A Novel of Ethnology, 1993), which takes as its subject those years in Brazil, and hence the genesis of *Essay on Puberty*, as well as his love-hate relationship with another older gay role model: the French ethnologist, photographer, and Candomblé priest Pierre Verger (or “Fatumbi,” as he later called himself). One of the novel’s climaxes is the writer’s realization that a subjective perspective was no longer sufficient, which is why Jäcki/Fichte decided, around 1971 or ’72, to become a scientist himself: an ethnologist. The book also documents three other decisions from those days in Salvador that shaped the artistic life of this flamboyant, polarizing author with long fur coats and wild curly hair. First, he decided to stop publishing (though not writing) “literary” works and to restrict his public output to ethnological texts, lectures, and essayistic radio plays. Second, he would spend almost no more time in Germany, dedicating his remaining years to traveling in Brazil and Haiti, as well as in Argentina, Bahrain, Belize, Burkina Faso, Chile, the Dominican Republic, Egypt, Florida, Grenada, Mexico, Morocco, New York, Portugal, Senegal, Tanzania, Togo, Trinidad, Venezuela, and elsewhere. He was accompanied on his travels by his life partner, the photographer Leonore Mau (“Irma” in the novels). Together, they produced journalistic photo-essays and large-format ethnological coffee-table books that helped finance their journeys.

Third, he embarked on a poetic cycle of novels conceived as a single Proustian roman-fleuve, which he intended to publish only when it was complete. Fichte envisioned nineteen

volumes plus numerous supplements, but he did not finish the project before his death in March 1986 from AIDS-related complications. It became a laborious and controversial posthumous undertaking, with sixteen volumes gradually published by the mid-'90s, and one final volume appearing in 2006. Many of them are indeed novels (although six or seven are missing), but the cycle also includes commentaries and essays on a range of subjects including Genet, the Marquis de Sade, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Sappho, James Van Der Zee, graffiti in the African diaspora, psychiatry in Senegal, German Baroque theater, Rimbaud, Haitian art, and Herodotus, as well as a volume of radio plays.



Hubert Fichte, Dürerstraße, Hamburg, 1963. Photo: Leonore Mau. © bpk/S. Fischer Stiftung/Leonore Mau.

These books bear the collective title *Die Geschichte der Empfindlichkeit* (The History of Sensitivity, 1987–2006). They make for gripping and unexpected reading. Fichte's poetic ideal is the clear, concise, declarative statement: the poetry of journalism. He interviewed and spoke with a vast range of people, reproducing the subjective perspective of his

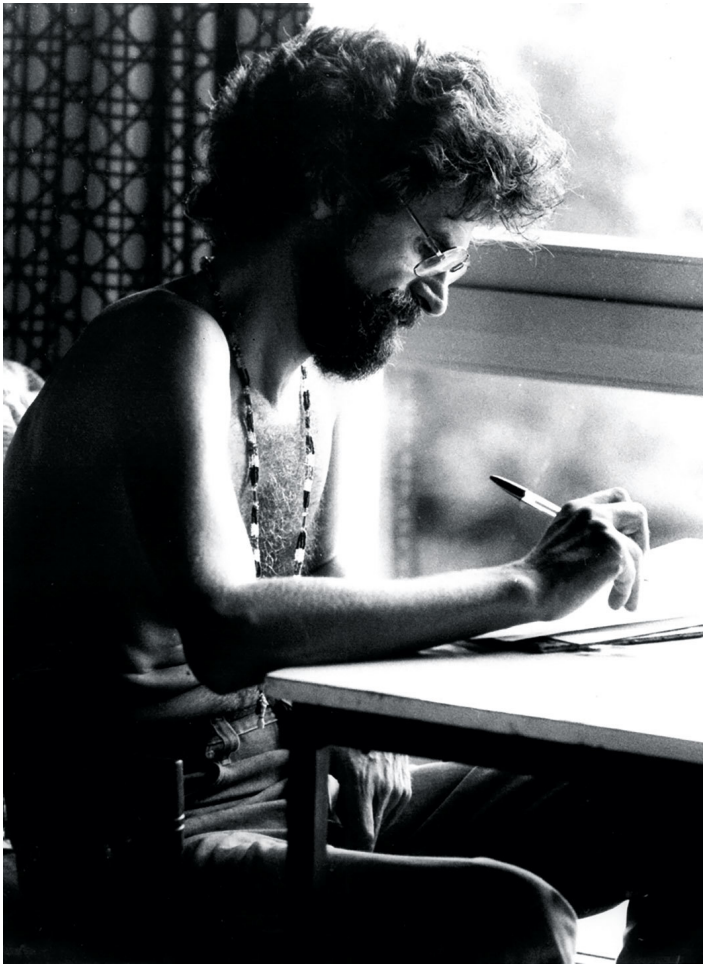
interlocutors in a way that not only strongly affects Fichte's own literary style but also creates a growing sense for the reader that he or she is interviewing Jäcki in turn. Above all, however, *The History of Sensitivity* does something that was unique in its time, especially in the German-speaking world: While sparing neither the author himself nor his characters, it offers a direct exposure of and reflection on the crises, euphorias, catastrophes, and opportunities inherent in all kinds of cross-cultural encounters on this planet. It did so at a time when global travel was becoming widely affordable, and thus being massively commodified by tourism, even as the Western desire for the other was being charged with new significance by hippies and other countercultural movements.

Among the alternative titles Fichte considered during the fourteen years he worked on the cycle were *Die Geschichte der Zärtlichkeit* (The History of Tenderness) and *Die Geschichte des Tourismus* (The History of Tourism). In a book Fichte wrote before going to Brazil, Jäcki remarks to a revolutionary friend that the emergence of mass tourism will spark a greater upheaval than the '68 uprising: a revolution of reciprocal contact, since "knowledge isn't power—traveling is knowledge!" This dictum, while sidestepping the expectations implied by its chiasmic structure, remains valid even in the context of the domesticated form of traveling. But the two alternative titles also point to how Fichte's project is often pulled between the euphoria of contact and criticism of the catastrophe of global capitalist tourism, especially sexual tourism. (Already in the *Essay on Puberty* he predicted a global sexual disease.)

If in Proust's time the entire world could be constructed from the Faubourg Saint-Germain, for Fichte the opposite applied: By 1972, the situation was such that "half the world travels with [the holiday organizer] Touropa and the other is desperate and hungry enough to break into the canteens of military barracks." He continued: "My goal is to depict the effect of the second group on a representative of the first." He believed the post-'68 Left would have to address the extremes of poverty outside Europe before everything else—but noted that wherever revolutionary movements attempted this, they oppressed homosexuals, who made up, Fichte claimed, the oldest revolutionary movement. Would there be a possible reconciliation between oppressed homosexuals and the hungry poor? That was his question to Salvador Allende's government in Chile. Fichte's books always display a natural and nervous intersectionality of this kind: He can't talk about poverty without

discussing the sexual nature of domination and power; he can't talk about religious practices without talking about homosexuality within the cult; he can't talk about hunger in Brazil without talking about the involvement of the German car industry; and he can't talk about the Chilean socialists' program of distributing a liter of milk to every poor child in the country without asking if they will also let "the Chilean gays [have] their eighth liter of cream."

Set against all this was Fichte's utopian model of the organized tenderness of global homosexuality: a network that makes possible intimate proximity among strangers all over the world. He had already become acquainted with this system of movie theaters, public restrooms, darkrooms, and other meeting places in Hamburg, and he would continue to explore it in the course of *The History of Sensitivity*—up to the pessimistic final volumes of the '80s, which focus on the aids crisis and worldwide homophobia. The author who no longer wanted to write about railroad stations would pen a novel called *Der kleine Hauptbahnhof* (The Little Central Train Station, 1988), whose subtitle, *Lob des Strichs* (In Praise of Streetwalking), is an explicit homage to gay prostitution. In his very last public talk in Vienna in January 1986, he explicitly declared male and female prostitutes and Haitian Vodou priests the principal benefactors of humankind in general and of writers like him especially.



Hubert Fichte writing his essay on the rites of the Casa das Minas, São Luís do Maranhao, Brazil, 1981. Photo: Leonore Mau. © bpk/S. Fischer Stiftung/Leonore Mau.

IF IT IS THE ENCOUNTERS enabled by traveling that make it a form of knowledge, travel itself is always also a dialectical figure. Only those who give up all certainties when traveling are capable of learning something. But those who travel are also spared. Travelers are detached; they can always move on and save themselves. Clearly if unsystematically, Fichte covers the entire force field of Romantic grand tours, colonial research, Eurocentric projection, and the simultaneous self-loss and ego-enhancement of the white-male adventurer. He aggressively works out his issues with French ethnology, tarring Lévi-Strauss as a French bourgeois with little command of Portuguese, let alone of the indigenous languages whose speakers he wrote about. For Fichte, Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris were “colonialist,” and he criticizes Verger for failing to reveal his homosexuality and his love of Afro-Brazilian men. Fichte himself, by contrast, was an autodidact who intensely studied ancient Greek, Wolof and other West African languages, and the basics of various

indigenous languages of Brazil. He wished to set a “semanticist” ethnology of understanding against a structuralist ethnology preoccupied with diagramming marriage rules. As Fichte emphasized again and again, mutual understanding is possible.

But what is there to understand? Fichte is not methodologically pure, and when he believes he’s an ethnologist, he’s often above all a storyteller and an interviewer. In his first travel books he assumes, in a classical Marxist way, that the culture of the poor—football, carnival, and Candomblé—is escapism, a tool used by the ruling class to keep the masses quiet; only later does he understand that Candomblé is much more: a gigantic cultural tradition of art, psychology, and religion, and a site of anticolonial resistance. Fichte set up ethnobotanical archives to classify all the herbs used in Candomblé and Vodou to create a taxonomy of what he called an “Afro-American computer,” a knowledge of neurology and plants capable of complex effects. At one point in *Explosion*, Irma complains that the dried plants in the little house that she and Jäcki have rented near Salvador are attracting unpleasant insects. She continues to take a great many photographs, prompting Verger to remark: “The more you know, the fewer photographs you take.” Fichte’s Jäcki is skeptical of Verger’s attempt to identify with his own research subject. But Jäcki has another method. After long-established expats in Salvador have proposed various ways he can enter the world of Candomblé, he dismisses their suggestions and brazenly explains: “I could also have sex with [the participants].”



Salvador Allende, Santiago, Chile, 1971. Photo: Leonore Mau.© bpk/S. Fischer Stiftung/Leonore Mau.

This was shocking “even for the progressive director of the Goethe-Institut,” Fichte remarks in *Explosion*. It is also exactly the point where his ethnology of love and imitation turns into the passion of a literary character who steps into one aporia after another. One of those is the notion—not entirely atypical for Germans—that Jäcki is not implicated in the colonial traditions he constantly denounces, even as Fichte sometimes talks about the “white idiot” he is. His own whiteness doesn’t show up on Jäcki’s radar—both for methodological reasons and because he (and Fichte too) sees himself as “marked,” an outcast from post-Nazi Germany. In such passages, we witness how the advanced, risky prose, the embrace of liberation, and the desire for radicality can produce blind spots. Fichte and Jäcki, the author and the character, although seemingly identical, oscillate between merging into each other and maintaining a critical distance. Fichte often very sensitively registers asymmetries that Jäcki can’t see. The recurring tension between a

skeptical writer (Fichte) and a hopelessly euphoric or passionate character (Jäcki) structures the multitude of ideas that connect them in the novels.

Fichte maintained that the nontraditional, non-family-generating organization of sexual contact among gay men presents a utopian model for all contact between strangers everywhere in the world.

This also applies to Fichte's (and Jäcki's) advocacy for the "gayification [*Verschwulung*] of the world." Fichte's former editor Fritz J. Raddatz explains how he wanted this statement to be understood in the 2005 documentary *Hubert Fichte: Der Schwarze Engel* (Hubert Fichte: The Black Angel): "He said, 'I don't mean, of course, that everyone should sleep exclusively with boys.'" Rather, Fichte maintained that the nontraditional, non-family-generating organization of sexual contact among gay men presents a utopian model for all contact between strangers everywhere in the world. Although he increasingly bemoaned the growth of exploitative sex tourism, he never abandoned this idea, even if sometimes there is little difference between his descriptions and the white-male colonial adventurer's exoticization of black and other nonwhite bodies. Indeed, an analysis of the persistence in his writing of a colonial mind-set is central to the contemporary reception of Fichte (and a pillar of the presentation of his work in the "Love and Ethnology" project). Without quite defending himself, he might have explained it as part of the "explosion" created by the contradictions engendered through contact. There is no alternative to the experiment in tenderness, and if it goes wrong, something else is needed.



Santiago, Chile, 1971. Photo: Leonore Mau. © bpk/S. Fischer Stiftung/Leonore Mau.

COULD THIS SOMETHING ELSE really be science, theory? When Fichte decided he no longer wanted to be a German author writing about train stations, he sought assistance from ethnological institutes that were still quite traditional and had no idea what to do with him. They referred him to Joachim Sterly, who was considered an outsider by his colleagues. Sterly and Fichte became friends in the early '70s, and not quite ten years later, when Fichte needed academic recommendations, Sterly provided one, asserting that Fichte wasn't a writer but a scholar and claiming that the "peoples of Africa and South America will derive great benefit from his research." Did they?

Fichte was a great admirer of the little-known fin-de-siècle missionary and ethnologist Jakob Spieth, who traveled to Togo, then a German colony, and wrote a book about the Ewe people, which he translated and gave to his informants to correct. Fichte found that exemplary. He explained more than once that he wished for an African diasporic

readership, even if he still wrote for a German-speaking audience. Along such lines, the “Love and Ethnology” project aims to expose Fichte’s writings to a more global public. It consists of translations of five books of *The History of Sensitivity* into the languages of the regions to which they refer, plus exhibitions and events on multiple continents between 2017 and 2020, enabling a response to these texts across the distance of place as well as that of time. The endeavor is premised on the idea that it will be more productive to accord Fichte a new, international reception from a non-Western, non-European, or marginal Western perspective than to limit postcolonial critique to the canonized classics of the Western gaze. Last year, Coletivo Bonobando in Rio de Janeiro performed a sarcastic version of Jäcki’s encounter with the black Brazilian policeman Aristoteles as part of “*Implosão*” (Implosion), a 2017 exhibition at the city’s Centro Cultural Helio Oiticica responding to the Brazilian edition of *Explosion*, while Brazilian activists and sex workers spoke about the desires of their (white) customers in the publication accompanying the show. As such examples make clear, any encounter with Fichte’s work can never be complete if it is not challenged. We deliberately wanted to avoid celebrating Fichte as a forgotten radical—as happens so often with other rediscoveries of his generation—or reducing the criticisms of him to the superiority of current knowledge and ethics over the implicit belief systems of forty or fifty years ago, and instead to combine the best of both: the (re-)discovery of a courageous, experimental, and political poet, and the initiation of a contemporary critique of what it meant to “be daring” in the heroic years of post-’68 experimentalism.

In 1975, Fichte asked Genet to clarify the political character of his radicalism. “To be honest, I’m not at all eager for there to be a revolution,” Genet replied.

The current situation, the current regimes allow me to revolt. But a revolution probably wouldn’t allow me the possibility of individual revolt. I can be against them. But if there were a real revolution, I couldn’t be against it. I would be a supporter of that revolution—and a man like me is not a supporter of anything; he’s a man of revolt.*

Fichte did not share this existential identification with opposition. He often preferred social democrats over revolutionaries, and, unlike all the other *poètes maudits* he admired,

he was interested in practical politics. (Even Fichte's visionary gay utopia was conceptualized as political, not just as a way of life.) In 1971, in the middle of *Explosion*, Jäcki and Irma travel to Chile—since Jäcki, who has fallen out with his radical leftist friends because they didn't recognize the homophobia of Castro's regime, is a (skeptical) supporter of Allende and his “experiment for the future,” as Fichte once called Chilean socialism. An interview with Allende that Fichte conducted for a German newspaper appears word-for-word as the one that Jäcki conducts with Allende in the novel, as does a conversation that Fichte/Jäcki holds with Allende's chief press officer, Carlos Jorquera, in Venezuelan exile after the fascist, US-supported putsch that put Pinochet in power.

Any encounter with Fichte's work can never be complete if it is not challenged.

These Chilean interviews are part of a series of frank conversations that began when Fichte talked with sex workers in Hamburg in the late '60s, which were followed by countless other interviews with healers, priests, ethnologists, patients, and doctors, and later, increasingly, with politicians, such as the Senegalese poet and head of state Léopold Sédar Senghor, the Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere, and the Grenadian revolutionary Maurice Bishop, as well as cultural figures such as Oscar Niemeyer, the Brazilian architect and builder of the artificial capital city of Brasília. Many of these interviews, including those conducted for the German media, reappear in the novels making up *The History of Sensitivity*: Niemeyer, for example, is anonymized in *Explosion* as the “architect of Utopopolis.”

Fichte sought a rational political agenda—one might skeptically call it a cover story—to undergird his extremes of sensitivity, his deliberate search for intense interpersonal situations. For a long time, he was guided by the fight against hunger. For Fichte, who had witnessed people starving to death in Salvador, it was more important than anything else, and as late as 1980 he struggled to convince himself that culture was equally important and that Brecht's “first we gorge ourselves, then comes the morality” (“*Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral*”) was more a rebuke of petit-bourgeois arrogance than it was good solid materialism. It took time for Fichte to understand the cultural practices of those

living in poverty as more than just superstructural effects of that extreme social condition. In Brazil and in West African and Latin American Yoruba culture, these practices were religious in nature and, crucially, did not fulfill a compensatory function or make room for what was suppressed elsewhere, as could be said of the left-wing understanding of them as escapism, or of the European bourgeois tradition's emphasis on edification. Practices such as Candomblé and Vodou have immediate consequences: They create a world, they shape consciousness, and they build the "Afro-American computer," whose maps are no less precise because they cannot simply be printed out.



Léopold Sédar Senghor, president of Senegal, and Hubert Fichte, Dakar, Senegal, 1974. Photo: Leonore Mau. © bpk/S. Fischer Stiftung/Leonore Mau.

IN FICHTE'S FINAL YEARS, Jäcki begins to divide his powerful experiences of African diasporic and other non-European cultures into two categories: those relating to healing and psychiatry, and those relating to art, especially visual art, which became very important to him. He wants to get rid of the idiotic Eurocentric delusion that the observer

speaks from a position of universality, while avoiding the false negation of simply understanding other perspectives as having merely particularist ends. Fichte thus came to recognize what he saw as African diasporic universalism. From the Senegalese “house painter” Papisto Boy to New York graffiti art, by the early ’80s he was seeing more and more indications that the best descriptive model of this aesthetic universalism was not so much the mural, with its implications of composition and construction, but the palimpsest, in which history is both preserved and overwritten in a constant stream of new and always-refreshed compromises between past and present, rather than simply discarded in a linear series of displacements and advances.

With the concept of the palimpsest and the decision to focus on art, Fichte once again advanced bold theses that far overshoot their mark. In three conversations held between 1978 and 1980 with the African American artist Michael Chisolm, there are a number of disagreements that Fichte seems to attribute to the fact that they are talking about “black” art, a subject that, as a “white” author, he doesn’t know enough about. In fact, their misunderstandings seem due to the divergent perspectives of a New York artist familiar with the theorization and critique of Abstract Expressionism and a comparatively literary and aesthetically provincial German author influenced by the narrative art of Surrealism. In the first of their conversations, Chisolm argues that there is no such thing as a specifically African diasporic art, there are only artists who happen to be black; whereas Fichte would like to have Chisolm’s endorsement of his theory of a global African-diasporic universality whose most recent expression was contemporary graffiti in New York (which he considered the capital of the African diaspora, the unique locale where one could travel from Santeria to Candomblé by subway). Nevertheless, their conversation reveals other paths and detours, typical of the enormous number of contradictions and connections Fichte was constantly able to expose and experience. Some of them remain unexplored: Beyond the resonances between Surrealism and African American traditions, there was a specific queer lineage of Surrealism in midcentury New York, where figures such as Pavel Tchelitchew, Charles Henri Ford, and Florine Stettheimer stood out in a field dominated by a homophobic AbEx establishment.



Leonore Mau's self-portrait with a photograph of Hubert Fichte, Dürerstraße, Hamburg, 1962. © bpk/S. Fischer Stiftung/Leonore Mau.

FROM TIME TO TIME, Jäcki and Irma lose their way, and the whole project breaks down. That becomes the central focus in the novel *Forschungsbericht* (Research Report, 1989), which takes place largely in Belize and revolves around the realization that the whole headache of ethnology hasn't generated love, only two white idiots chasing after any words or images that will help them to call their Western world into question. And yet at the moment of total collapse, when by all rights the book should be coming apart at the seams, Jäcki rediscovers his euphoria when he remembers his greatest idol, the Greek historian and traveler Herodotus (some of whose work he translates and who appears as a character in the novel). He is not only the first travel writer, for Fichte, but also the first writer to witness Greek antiquity's contact, via Egypt, with the culture of the Bight of Benin, and hence with his beloved ancient Yorubans. Midway through the book, he suddenly knows again what he's doing working on a novel about rituals in Belize:

—What do I do with a lie in a research report?
—That's it. Research Report: A novel.
—Herodotus was the first novelist. He wrote down how he imagined Egypt to be. The Egypt the Egyptians constructed for him with their lies.
—*Histemi* and *tithemi*. To put lies on display.
—The humanities are novels with protagonists such as Hegel, Freud, Lacan.
The authors are the titles.
Jäcki wrote the first lines.
Monday, February 4, 1980.

And this date is in fact the first line of the novel, whose beginning is now repeated for another five lines before it heads off in another direction. The solution has been found; the reflection on what it means to write a text about something one doesn't understand is successful, provided it's possible to leave open this question: Why do we attempt to understand what we don't understand? We travel because we want to know; traveling is knowledge. But the journey's goal—in Fichte's world—is always sex. Because it is the root, the driving force. Once we arrive there, we enter a loop and have to repeat in the novel how we arrived at the first line. Only by arriving twice at the same place, at the same sensation, at the exact same feeling—as with Proust's *mémoire involontaire*—is cognition possible, its results stabilized. But also reified, wrong. So we have to move on to the next place, the next explosion. There are no happy endings, only happy departures.

Current and forthcoming exhibitions within the “Hubert Fichte: Love and Ethnology” project are on view at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Santiago, Chile, through November 18, and at Participant Inc. and e-flux in New York, December 2, 2018–January 13, 2019. The exhibition and conference “Hubert Fichte: Love and Ethnology” will take place at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin in fall 2019.

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Translated from German by James Gussen.

NOTE

*Jean Genet, “Interview with Hubert Fichte,” in *The Declared Enemy: Texts and Interviews*, ed. Albert Dichy, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 132 (quotation modified).

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