

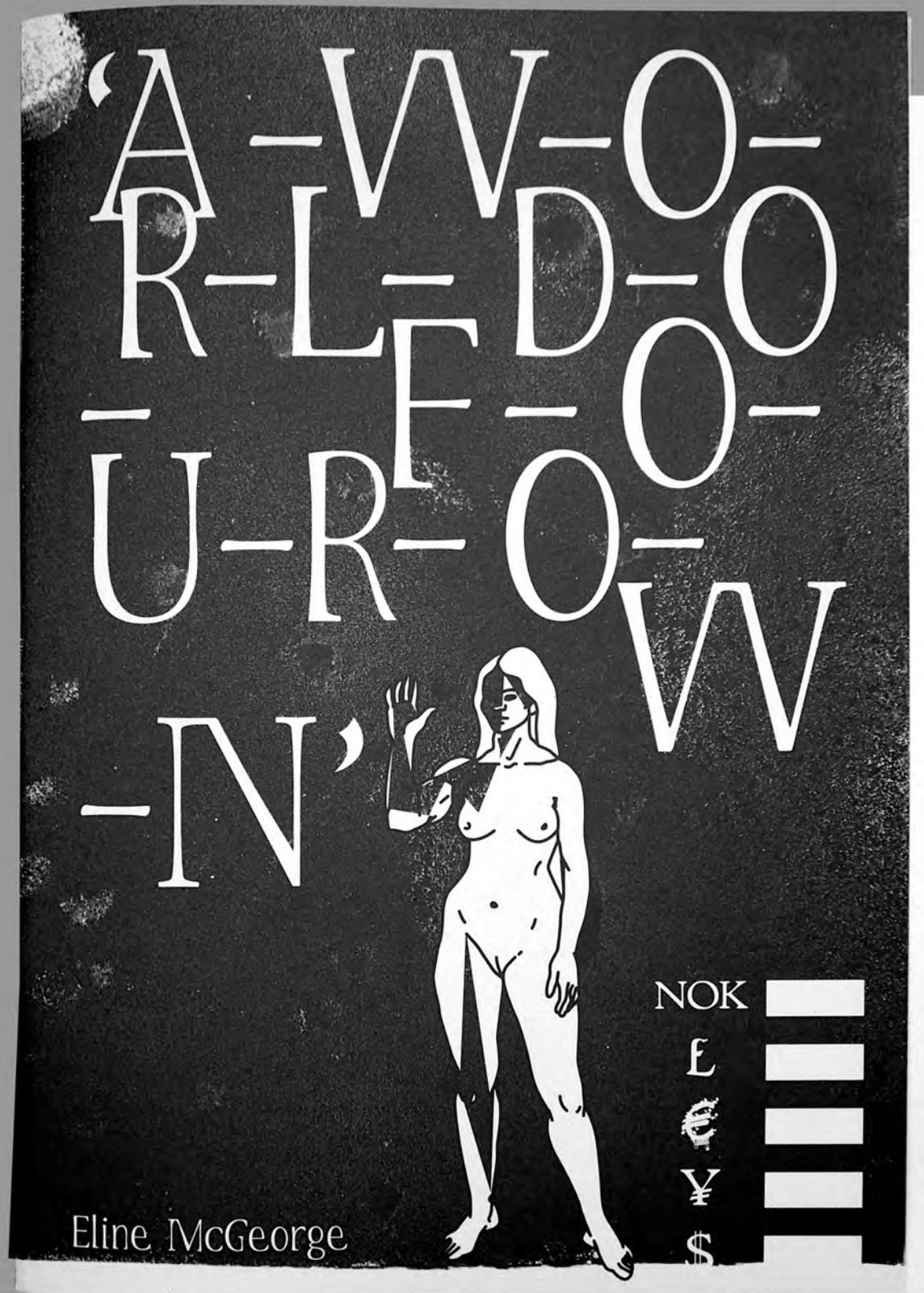
A World of Our Own  
Marcus Verhagen, 2012

The women in Eline McGeorge's 2012 cycle of works, titled *A World of Our Own*, are explorers in time and space. McGeorge uses appropriated materials, including film footage, musical clips and images culled from books, newspapers and the internet; even her title, which plainly takes its cue from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), is appropriated. She combines these materials with video and animation footage of her own to tell stories about astronauts, demonstrators, freedom fighters and writers. Or rather, she weaves the stories together, splicing, interleaving or superimposing them, using one to extend or interrupt another. Some works are quite literally woven together, like the collage in which prints of Virginia Woolf and Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman in space, are meshed together in a neat grid (*Cosmonaut-Woolf Portrait Weave*, 2012) [see p. 3].

The central exhibit in *A World of Our Own* is a video of the same title and that too is woven together. In it we see Tereshkova again and, after her, a passage from Vivienne Dick's short film *Staten Island* (1978), in which an androgynous figure wearing what looks like a space suit appears in the New York Bay, wading in shallow water between mooring poles. We hear Nina Hagen, circa 1979, singing about astronauts and speaking about the singers and revolutionaries who inspired her. We catch a brief glimpse of a 1983 "die-in" staged by the Greenham

Common Women in front of the London Stock Exchange in protest at the financial backing received by the arms industry and at the deployment of US nuclear missiles in Britain. At various points in the video we see clips from *Born in Flames*, Lizzie Borden's cult sci-fi film of 1983, and hear Borden's feminist insurgents speak in incantatory tones about the need for change, for collaboration among revolutionary factions and for caution in the face of danger. Other passages are more recent; these include McGeorge's footage of skyscrapers in the City of London today and of a woman dancing slowly on a beach at dusk. They also include her short animations, abstract sequences in which rectangular surfaces fold and unfold, intermittently reflecting a powerful light. The various passages in the video are bound together not just by the recurrent themes of protest and space travel but also by certain visual textures, by the artist's taste for grainy shots and laminated surfaces, for thinness and slightness. (McGeorge's various source materials are outlined in a book, made out of recycled £5 notes and titled *A-W-O-R-L-D-O-F-O-U-R-O-W-N* (2012), that was designed to accompany the video, acting as a storyboard and an extended political fantasy in its own right; and the same liking for uneven textures is apparent in the book.)

The video also weaves together two distinct narrative modes. Just as Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, conjures a fictional character, Shakespeare's sister Judith, to call attention to the constraints under which women writers have laboured, so McGeorge conflates documentary and fictional modes, suggesting analogies between the Greenham Common Women and Lizzie Borden's feminist guerrillas, Tereshkova and Vivienne Dick's otherworldly



*A World of Our Own*, 2012, soft cover, 32 pages, 21.6x29.7 cm, ISBN 978-1-907908-05-7

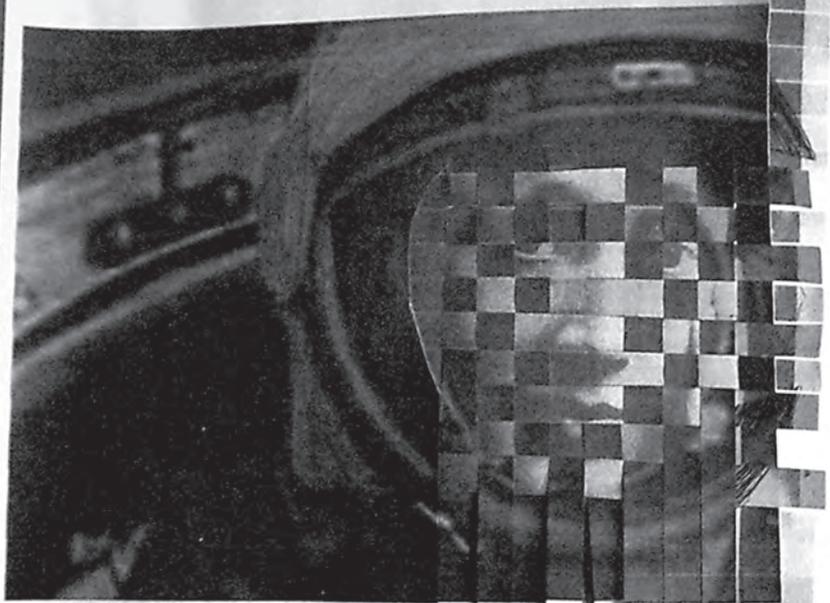
explorer, Norman Foster's Swiss Re building and a spacecraft. Borden's film is, in this respect, another crucial precedent: although *Born in Flames* is a fictional projection, it uses the protocols of documentary filmmaking. Like Woolf and later Borden, McGeorge gains political traction by combining rhetorical styles that are proper to fact and fiction. Towards the end of the video we see office blocks from the upper deck of a London bus and hear a woman call for "[the] people who are responsible for this mess to face... an inquiry". Who is this woman? A character from *Born in Flames*, an activist from Occupy London, one of the Greenham Common Women? It is precisely because we don't and can't know that her words stay with us. In weaving fact and fiction together as she does, McGeorge is pushing the viewer to weigh the full implications, for political thought and action in the present, of the various situations that are sketched in the video. She is also, of course, implicitly recognising that political thought is in any case conditioned by imaginary scenarios, above all by competing visions of a better society.

As McGeorge edits and combines her various materials, the video plots multiple trajectories in time. *A World of Our Own* is part memorial, consistently looking back to the late 1970s and early 80s. It warmly remembers Hagen's theatrical drive and presence, Dick's witty, dislocated vision and the unearthly allure of Kate Bush, who can be seen, dressed in a space suit, in a clip that was taken from the video for her 1982 single 'The Dreaming'. But the past here is clearly facing the present. The artist pays tribute, for instance, to the Greenham Common Women for their impact on public opinion in the early 80s, but in the video they also act as forerunners of the Occupy movement,

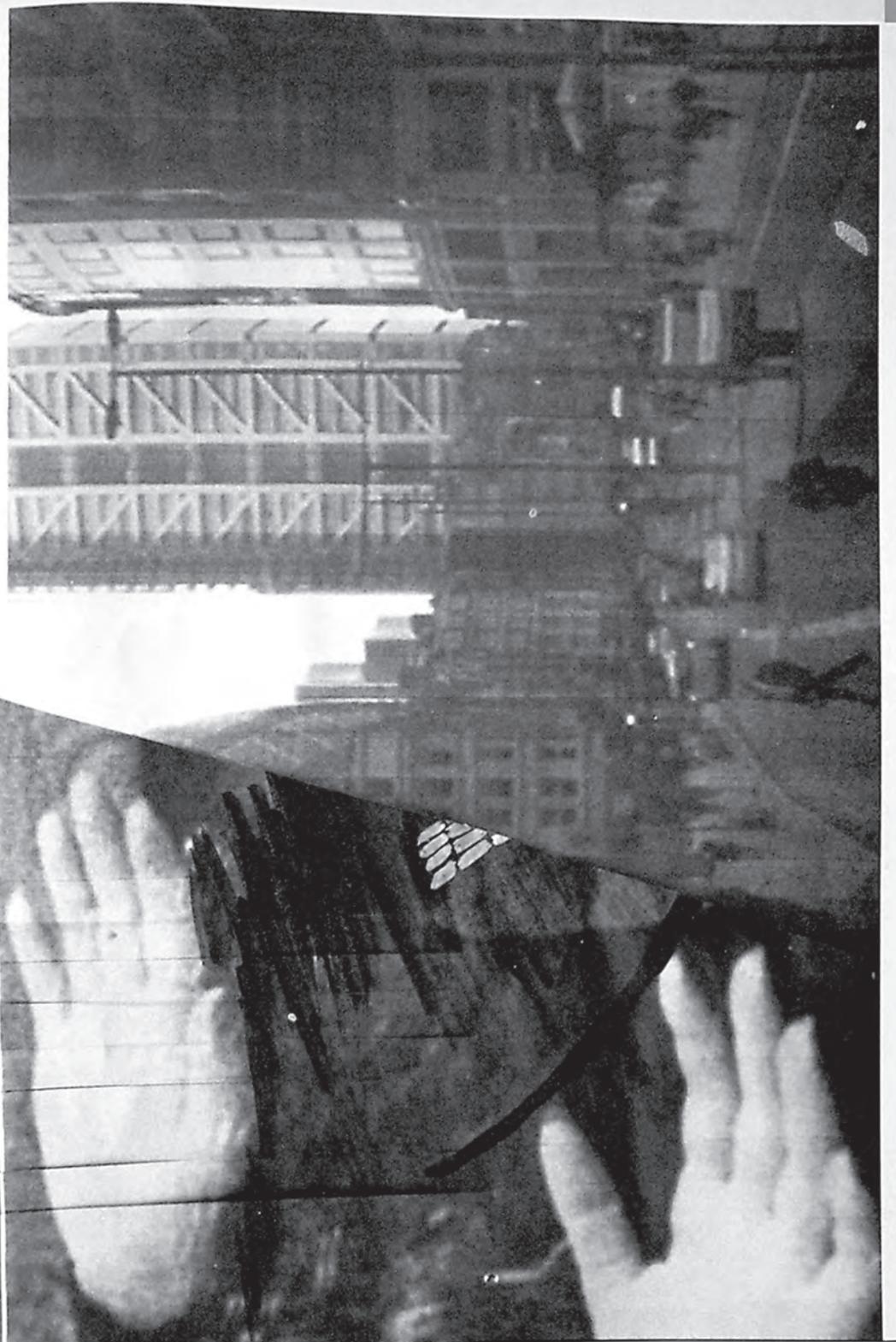
which is not directly shown or discussed but which is alluded to throughout in the many shots, most of them apparently taken from buses or trains, of the City of London, the nerve centre of the British financial sector and of Occupy London. Looking back in time allows McGeorge to look forward from the vantage point of a generation that was slightly less wary of utopian thought than we are today, and so to express in a backhanded style her sympathy with the protestors who were camping out, until their eviction, in Finsbury Square and in front of St Paul's. Her historical breadth also allows her to imagine a complicity across time between present-day protestors and such feminist icons as Woolf and Borden.

McGeorge's constant allusions to space exploration may be read as metaphors for time travel, for her own travelling back in time as she engages with an earlier generation of artists, singers and filmmakers, but also for past and present efforts to think imaginatively about the future. Her astronauts are, in other words, closely related to her revolutionaries. Indeed, the video works hard to weave those two roles together, to see the one as the necessary complement of the other. The space suit, for instance, is not just a complex protection but also, as worn by Kate Bush or Vivienne Dick's amphibious figure, an outlandish costume and a sign of refusal or apartness.

The composite figures that emerge in the video bear affinities with figures of insurrection in social and political theory. They can be likened, for instance, to the "new barbarians" that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri speak of in *Empire*.<sup>1</sup> As Hardt and Negri describe them, the new barbarians are part of the "multitude", the heterogeneous formation that has spearheaded the resistance to global corporatism and that carries within it the



*... This is part of our history, this is our defense.*



germ of a new society. They signal their rejection of the present order through bodily mutations and through sexual and gender positions that defy convention. The new barbarians creatively refashion their bodies and appearance, suggesting in the process not just that they have thrown off ordinary social repressions but that they no longer recognise the distinctions on which such repressions are predicated:

“The first condition of this corporeal transformation is the recognition that human nature is in no way separate from nature as a whole, that there are no fixed and necessary boundaries between the human and the animal, the human and the machine, the male and the female, and so forth; it is the recognition that nature itself is an artificial terrain open to ever new mutations, mixtures, and hybridizations.”<sup>2</sup>

For Hardt and Negri, the “mutations, mixtures, and hybridizations” that distinguish the new barbarians are the outward signs of a bodily insubordination that can energise the multitude. And McGeorge’s figures are similarly insubordinate as they discard conventional styles of self-presentation and fuse or reinvent gender roles. The many dancing figures in *A World of Our Own*, including the women who dance in time to the insurrectionary declarations of a feminist fighter in a clip from *Born in Flames*, indicate that McGeorge follows Hardt and Negri in viewing alternative styles of self-presentation and new bodily freedoms as ways of “being-against” and so catalysts for political liberation.

Her figures are also akin to Donna Haraway’s cyborgs. Haraway, writing in opposition to the essentialism of an earlier generation of feminists and more particularly to the view that women

have a privileged connection with nature, stresses the value of artifice and the benefits of technological mastery.<sup>3</sup> Pointing out that communications technologies and biotechnologies are commonly used today to reengineer bodies, she argues against feminist positions that rely on the notion of womanhood as a stable category and a natural bond. At a time when older mechanisms of social control have given way to the “informatics of domination”, it is imperative, she maintains, for feminists to embrace technology, to find new ways of interfacing with machines and to form new patterns of allegiance.<sup>4</sup> For Haraway, in other words, technological mastery is a defence – but it also carries utopian overtones. Rather than creating connections with other women on the basis of natural identification, her cyborg feminist bonds with other cyborgs on the basis of political sympathy. New networks must now be formed, Haraway writes, beyond the categories of sex, race and class – and in this she prefigures the notion of the multitude, as Hardt and Negri acknowledge when they refer to her cyborg as a precursor for their new barbarian.<sup>5</sup>

The women who feature in *A World of Our Own* resemble Haraway’s cyborgs inasmuch as they manage complex machines, such as space suits, or the radio equipment operated by Lizzie Borden’s feminist insurgents, some of whom run pirate stations. McGeorge plainly shares Haraway’s enthusiasm for science fiction, the anti-organic bent of her feminism and her understanding of selfhood as shifting and permeable. Indeed, McGeorge, using a camera and a computer to mediate her vision, is herself a cyborg in Haraway’s sense, and her work can be understood as creating through montage a network of unreconciled figures that works as a

phantasmal transcription of Haraway’s cyborg network. “Weaving is for oppositional cyborgs,” writes Haraway, and so it is here: the weaving together in McGeorge’s work of different figures and rhetorics is also an exercise in imaginary coalition-building and an experiment in political cross-fertilisation.<sup>6</sup>

McGeorge’s work resonates with the related models of Haraway and Hardt and Negri, but the parallels are illuminating only up to a point. The texts of both Haraway and Hardt and Negri are polemical and explicitly utopian in thrust – Haraway uses the figure of the cyborg to imagine a world without gender, while Hardt and Negri offer an analysis of the forces that will, so they hope, one day displace multinational capitalism. McGeorge’s work, on the other hand, approaches utopian thought in a more hesitant register. It is more equivocal than Haraway’s text in its embrace of technology, apparently revelling not just in the effects that can be achieved with video editing software but also in the flickering quality of Vivienne Dick’s films, which were shot on Super 8. In fact, McGeorge regularly makes images that look like visual snow, using mirror card to suggest a breakdown in the mechanical production of images and data, as she does in the animation sequences in *A World of Our Own* (and in her *Folded Space Scan* prints) [see pp. 66–71]. Her technophilia, in other words, is episodic and uncertain. And her new barbarians may be the vanguard of a new society, like Hardt and Negri’s, but then again they may not. Some of them, her astronauts for instance, are barbarians only in appearance; they are too isolated to be understood, even in fantasy, as forming networks and uniting with the multitude. Her doubts are more explicitly expressed in another piece from the same constellation

of works, *Not Yet Titled* (2012) [see p. 107], which consists of a concrete block that was found on an East London building site and an emergency blanket emblazoned with the words “Tired of Capitalism”, a slogan that was used by Occupy Wall Street activists. The work speaks to the regeneration of inner-city neighbourhoods, which tends to dislocate and (occasionally) to mobilise communities, while also pointing to the conditions under which protestors in encampments live. But the “Tired” of the slogan can also be read as drawing a parallel with an ordinary blanket and so suggesting a more passive reaction to gentrification or, more generally, to social inequity. Certainly, the piece, which underlines the hardships that protestors have to face, is not a sunny exercise in utopian imagining.

McGeorge’s work creates connections, between astronauts and revolutionaries, cyborgs and new barbarians, past and present struggles and imageries, but those connections are never entirely secure and their utopian implications, though explicit, are never locked down. That is to say, those meanings are never givens, they are always in play, always quizzing the same views and meanings as they exist beyond the limits of the work or show, in the mind of the viewer for instance. And they are always shot through with a longing for cyborg love.

1 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2000, pp. 214–218.

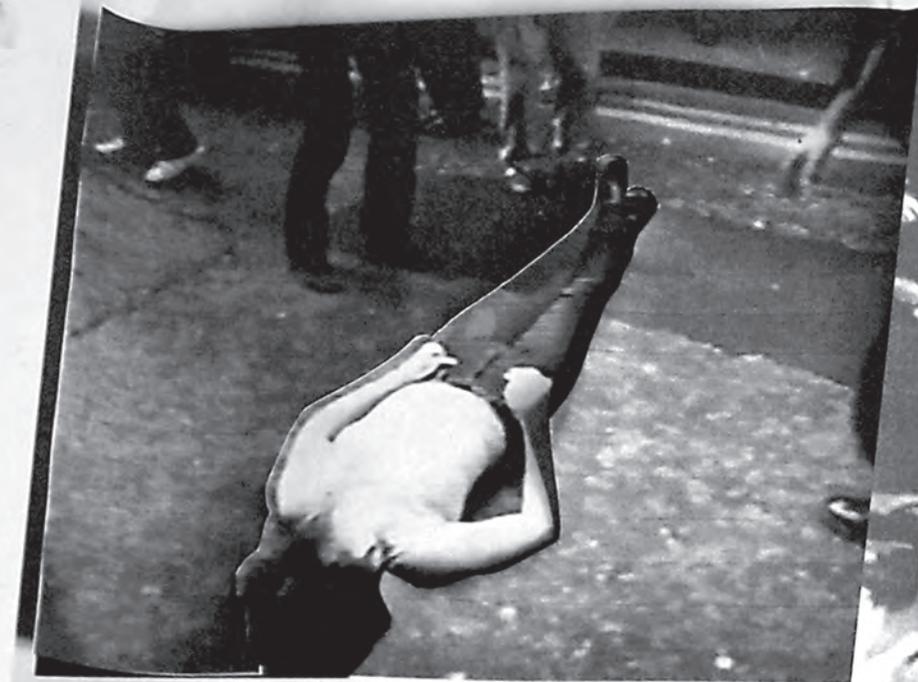
2 Hardt and Negri, *op cit.*, p. 215.

3 Donna Haraway, ‘A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century’, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge, 1991, pp. 149–181.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 161 et passim.

5 Hardt and Negri, *op cit.*, p. 218.

6 Haraway, *op cit.*, p. 170.



The camera moves to the right and up into the sun. Overexposure turns the film frames white. As the camera continues to the right we see the 'Die-in at the Stock Exchange'<sup>15</sup>. Groups of women lie Valie Export-like on the streets blocking the employees on their way to their offices. For a moment we are back to the political feminism and the City of London of the early 1980s.

<sup>15</sup> Action by 'The Greenham Women' on the occasion of President Reagan's visit to the UK, the City of London, 1983.

A cross dissolve transition returns us to the view from the bus, the City of 2012's near future, and Cosmo-Freedom fighter: *We want, we want people who are responsible for this mess to face ... a ... an inquiry ... this is a story of deceit ... I'm sorry, this is really ... should go away to Hollywood.*

The video loops.  
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