Blackout

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Blackouts are very literal events of disconnection. A blackout – in the most common sense of the word – is a total loss of electric power for a longer period, experienced as complete darkness when lights go out. Blackouts are landmark events of what Roland Wenzlhuemer has described as a common characteristic of global crises, namely 'disruptive phenomena that corrode networks' (2022, 11). As such, blackouts are indicative of a multitude of global crises relating to war, colonialism, extractivism, climate change, environmental harm, and the unequal distribution of resources.

Power outages can be caused by failures in power stations and transmission networks due to technical faults, short circuits, or physical damage, for example through climate impacts, natural disasters, or acts of war. They can also occur as an intentional measure, for example to prevent fire in case of gas leaks or floods, to protect an area from being visually identifiable during night-time air raids, or to safeguard migratory birds in urban environments. When the capacity for electricity generation is insufficient due to energy crises or poorly managed infrastructures, rolling blackouts can be scheduled to disconnect the parts of a supply area alternately.

Recently, Russia's war against Ukraine and the destruction of its critical infrastructure has enforced large-scale blackouts on the country's people, limiting the electricity supply to a few hours each day. Following an ongoing electricity crisis with rolling blackouts, Palestinians have been exposed to darkness and cold since Israel cut off the supply of electricity to Gaza in the first days of the war. Lebanon has suffered a nationwide power outage due to the exhaustion of the state's fuel reserves required to run the power plants and increased military airstrikes between Hezbollah and Israel. Hurricanes, wind and ice storms have caused power outages in the United States and Canada. Frequent and severe blackouts have occurred due to technical failures and grid breakdowns in several countries in South and Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa, including the 2023 Pakistan blackout that ranks among the largest blackouts in history by the number of people affected.

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Referring to a failure of electricity supply, the term 'black-out' became common in the first half of the twentieth century. As the earliest evidence of the term's use to describe a power outage, the *Oxford English Dictionary* mentions an article in the March 1934 issue of *The Atlantic*, dedicated to the completion of the *O.E.D.*'s Supplement, which traces all new words since the publication of the dictionary's volumes.

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Among the words 'too recent even for the Supplement' is 'black-out' that was then newly 'used of a [. . .] failure of the electric light' (Weekley 1934, 350). Around the same time, in the early 1930s, 'black-out' also came to mean a temporary loss of memory or consciousness, used to describe the inability to remember events that happened during drunkenness, intoxication, faints, or amnesia, but also more broadly in a figurative sense of memory failure.

Yet, the word 'black-out' originates from theatre in the early twentieth century, referring to the darkening of the stage between the scenes, while scenery changes, or during the performance (Oxford English Dictionary 2024; Merriam-Webster n.d.). The theatrical notion of 'black-out', somewhat obscured by the term's more recent association with a disruption of electricity supply, is reactivated when turning off the lights becomes a spectacle in public space. This has been the case to raise awareness of energy waste and the need to take measures against global warming. Launched as a symbolic lights-out event in 2007, WWF's Earth Hour invites people around the globe to switch off electric lights for one hour each year, on the last or penultimate Saturday in March, as a sign of a collective commitment to the planet. These globally orchestrated blackouts have been publicly showcased at iconic landmarks, including the Empire State Building in New York, the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Pyramids of Giza, and the Sydney Opera House.

In an essay that traces a series of staged blackouts in cities, Tom Holert describes the Earth Hour as 'a highly practical, media-savvy way of displaying political initiative, ecologically as well as economically' (2015, 3). To the reading of the blackout as a publicity performance, I would like to add that this performance is less one of scarcity than of abundance, a gesture towards energy saving by those who can afford to switch off the lights for one hour of contemplation. A strange conflation of omittance and awareness, concealment and exposure is at play here. Switching off the lights as a spectacle not only makes visible the depletion of global resources, but also obscures the infrastructural inequalities of the distribution of electrical power (Hughes 1983; Hirsh 1989; Schewe 2007). Even today, 600 million people living in sub-Saharan Africa remain without electricity, and progress on global energy access remains far behind the goals of sustainable development (IEA 2024). The staging of a blackout in highly electrified cities is, thus, inseparable from infrastructural violence and its colonial legacies operating through the electrical grid (Rogers and O'Neill 2012, 404).

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What becomes visible when the lights go out? Infrastructures, as Susan Leigh Star and Geoffrey Bowker put it, are hidden from sight by definition and become

visible only upon breakdown. Within the terms of infrastructure theory, they have described such a breakdown as an instance of 'infrastructural inversion' that brings to the fore the 'depths of interdependence of technical networks and standards, on the one hand, and the real work of politics and knowledge production on the other' (Bowker and Star 2000, 34). In this context, blackouts can gain the importance of political disruption or upheaval, lending them 'causal prominence in many areas usually attributed to heroic actors, social movements, or cultural mores' (ibid.).

In his study of the history of blackouts in America, David E. Nye points to the heterogeneity of causes, while shifting focus from a technical account of events and a rhetoric of blame to the blackout as a 'historically new collective experience' (2010, 6; see also Nye 1990). Regarding the diverging public responses to the blackouts of 1965 and 1977 in New York, he describes this experience in terms of dis:connection by stating that blackouts 'expose a community's degree of cohesion' at a certain historical moment since they have 'the potential to unite people in a stronger sense of community, with neighbors and strangers working together to solve problems and forging bonds that long outlive the crisis' but they can also 'tear a community apart' (ibid., 209).

From the perspective of vital materialism offered by Jane Bennett (2010), however, blackouts and power outages allow us to consider their causes and effects in more complex ways beyond human (inter)action. Understanding the electrical power grid 'as a volatile mix of coal, sweat, electro-magnetic fields, computer programs, electron streams, profit motives, heat, lifestyles, nuclear fuel, plastic, fantasies of mastery, static, legislation, water, economic theory, wire, and wood' (2005, 448), Bennett proposes to consider the electrical power grid as an assemblage (after Deleuze) with an agency that is distributed across the human and nonhuman divide. Giving an account of the events that led to the North American Blackout in August 2003, she speaks of a 'vortex of disconnects' (ibid., 499), which challenges 'established notions of moral responsibility and political accountability' (ibid., 446).

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Following the invitation of the editors of this volume to consider artistic practice as a means of providing an aesthetic epistemology of 'rupture, fracture and absences' (→ **Introduction**), I will focus on a selection of three different artworks in which blackouts figure as such moments of dis:connectivity. While they all refer to historical blackouts, the actual instances of power outage are transformed into explorations of potentiality, using the blackout as an epistemic tool to dismantle and disrupt the mechanisms of power operating through the electric grid and the production of racial knowledge, both of which were foundational to globality.

Katharina Sieverding's monumental photograph *The Great White Way Goes Black* (1977, Fig. 1) was taken spontaneously on the roof of the Fine Arts Building near Broadway during the blackout that hit New York City in the hot summer night of 13 July 1977. The photograph shows a portrait of the artist looking straight into the camera, with a white top and milky drink in her hand, red nails matching her visor cap, lit by the flash against the dark. Across the photograph, the work's title is printed in white capital letters. 'The Great White Way' is what Broadway was called prior to its electric illumination, alluding to the white bark of the birch trees that lined it. It was the Wickquasgeck trail of the Algonquin people, before it became a main trade route of the Dutch West India Company in the early seventeenth century, and was later renamed Broadway under English occupation. In Sieverding's photograph, which recalls Broadway's colonial history, it is white supremacy that is disrupted by the blackout, inviting viewers to read the scene's 'going black' in a double sense. The New York blackout of 1977, caused by lightning during a heat wave, occurred in a moment of financial crisis with high unemployment and crime rates; it caused a breakdown of the civic order, and is less remembered for the spontaneous street gatherings from which the photograph emerged than for the looting and arson that were related to conditions of social inequality (Mamet 1977; Curvin and Porter 1979; Goodman 2003).

Fig. 1: Katharina Sieverding, *The Great White Way Goes Black*, 1977/1997, colour photograph, acrylic, steel, 300 x 502 x 2 cm (Courtesy of the artist and Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich, photo: Klaus Mettig, © 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich).

The New York blackout of 1977 is reimagined in Stan Douglas' photographic series *Scenes from the Blackout* (2017), alongside the Northeast blackout that affected New York again in 2003 (Yuill 2004), but was experienced differently, inviting neighbourly encounters and civic support. As historical models of different forms of sociality, of social unity and division, these blackouts provided the inspiration for a series of ten scenes, which stage a power outage in present-day New York. In many respects, the scenes resemble what Nye has referred to as 'snapshots', regarding each blackout as an 'arrested moment' (2010, 3) in history, in which political, economic, and environmental concerns intersect with social life. Meticulously lit and staged like film stills on a set, the photographs show scenes of both social division and solidarity, people gathering on the stairs of a public building in a convivial atmosphere (*Stranded*, 2017) or queuing with piled loot from a local shop (*Queue*, 2017, Fig. 2), a women playing solitaire in a stuck elevator while eating the groceries from her shopping bag (*Solitaire*, 2017) or a vandalized school street with a burning trash can amidst fragmented mannequins and other litter (*Loot*, 2017). Throughout his work, Douglas has been interested in moments of breakdown and the possibil-

Fig. 2: Stan Douglas, *Queue*, 2017, from the series *Scenes from the Blackout*, digital chromogenic print mounted on Dibond aluminium, 127 x 165.1 cm (Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner, New York).

ities they offer to imagine different responses to crises, thereby turning historical situations of global unrest, riots and revolutions into scenarios for future potentiality (Liptay 2023). Within this context, the blackout sets the scene for an aesthetic imaginary, which charges disconnection from the electrical grid with the potential to unsettle or disrupt power structures including racialized associations of lawlessness with blackness. Imagining the blackout through a black aesthetics thus also entails an interrogation of its racialized conceptions, of what Fred Moten – in his critical reading of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* – has called the 'fantastical generation of the concept of blackness' (2018a, 6) that animates Enlightenment thought.

In Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla's sculptural work *Blackout* (2017, Fig. 3), blackness extends to a state of subjugation to extraction, dispossession and structural neglect within the globalized economy. The work provided the title for a whole exhibition at the MAXXI, Rome in 2018, in which the artists engaged with the colonial governance of the Caribbean Island of Puerto Rico as an unincorporated territory of the United States. The works displayed in the exhibition reimagined the island's impoverished state and its possible futures through notions of the blackout and the absence of electricity. The central sculptural work entitled *Blackout* is made from the material relics of an exploded electromagnetic transformer that caused a power outage in Puerto Rico in 2016. Assembled from electrically charged copper,

Fig. 3: Allora & Calzadilla, *Blackout*, 2017, electrical transformer core coil, ceramic insulators, steel, iron, oscillator, speaker. Vocal performance *mains hum* (2017) composed by David Lang, 139 x 262 x 129 cm (Courtesy of the artists and Lisson Gallery, photo: Dave Morgan).

ceramic insulators and transformer coils, which were acquired from the Aguirre Power Plant in Salinas, the sculpture resembles the carcass of a dead animal turned on its back, the corroded body of a depraved economy burdened by the debt that is caused, among other things, by electric power. In the exhibition, the sculpture was accompanied by the vocal performance of *mains hum*, the sound attributed to the electric current of the power grid. While the composition by David Lang, conducted by Donald Nally, was based on a quote by Benjamin Franklin, who in 1747 pondered on the practical use of electricity, these words are rendered indiscernible by the humming sound that animates the scene of the blackout (Nadal-Melsió 2018). In discussing Allora & Calzadilla's work, T. J. Demos (2018; 2020) charts the aesthetic and political spaces where blackout designates 'the dispossession of all power of self-determination, of control over and belief in one's future' (2020, 62), but is also 'made to flip into positive expression' (ibid., 66), invoking postextractive futures, which he aligns with Rebecca Solnit's (2004) notion of 'hope in the dark'.

As critical imaginary rather than historical event, the blackout holds a central position within the aesthetic epistemology of dis:connectivity. It has served not only to investigate moments of historical crisis and social ruptures (Rupp 2016), but also to imagine alternative futures that might emerge from the disruption of the given order. This includes the invention of stories that do not merely tell where people were or what they were doing when the lights went out, but what possibilities of other forms of social relating arise. From this perspective, 'thinking from within the blackout' (Salamanca and Nassar 2023) has also been used as a means of deconstructing the imperial colonial grammar in which stories of global modernity have been told.

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What is at stake when blackouts are reimagined through an epistemology of black aesthetics? Through the idea of a 'new Enlightenment' that Fred Moten (2018a, 40–44; see also Moten 2017; 2018b) envisions in apposition to the antiblackness of Enlightenment thought? Reaching beyond the dualism of light and darkness, and the legacies of Enlightenment, Denise Ferreira da Silva proposes 'blacklight' as an alternative epistemic tool. Blacklight, or ultraviolet light, does not operate within the spectrum of light visible to the human eye, but makes things glow in the dark. Using blacklight as a 'black feminist device' (2017, 245), she exposes the obscuration of the racial foundations of globality. If blackout has emerged from the 'nineteenth-century scientific projects of knowledge [that] produced the notion of the racial' (Ferreira da Silva 2007, xii–xiii), then blacklight is an intervention into this notion since it not only makes visible but also blurs its very epistemic foundations.

In doing so, it also thwarts the logics of disconnectivity at work in blackouts: 'Since it dissolves the pillars of categorial thinking, blacklight prepares the ground for a metaphysics of elements and related modalities of reading and for an imaging of the world and its existents in which reflection gives in to imagination, and thinking finally realizes the shallowness of *separability* [. . .] and attends to implicated existence, there at the deepest, darkest depths of matter that always composes and connects everything, anywhere, everywhere, immediately, and instantaneously' (Ferreira da Silva 2017, 251).

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