WITHIN THE CULTURAL HISTORY of selfhood, the Soviet "chronocard" constitutes a very curious artifact. Distributed to the thousands of members of the League of Time, a division within the legendary movement for the Scientific Organization of Labor (NOT), this tool for autosurveillance enjoined its user to register in its columns such everyday activities as sleeping, working, eating, commuting, attending lectures, relaxing, hygiene, and reading. (The chart also featured a write-in category at the bottom.) Part of a pervasive mania for efficiency and social management in the early Soviet period, the chronocard arrayed the biorhythms of the individual like the timetable of a train. However, unlike practices such as the confessional, diary writing, and other reflexive techniques of the self that were dominant in the West, the end product of the chronocard's quantitative life-logging was never meant to be a stable subject. Indeed, one of the most striking features of the card's method for self-auditing is the utter discontinuity of the events that it records. Once the prescribed block of sleep breaks off punctually at 8 AM, life activities begin to flicker all over the chart. A montage of unconnected episodes and encounters, the chronocard presents a manifestly nonidentitarian portrait of the human psyche.

Before founding the League of Time in 1923, Platon Kerzhentsev began his political career working in the grassroots studios of the Proletkul't, where he and colleagues like Stepan Krivtsov and Valerian Pletnev investigated the properties of different group configurations. For the Proletkul'tists researching in these social laboratories, collectivism was not an abstract ideal but a concrete science that had its own laws and analytic instruments. The group engineered communal studios for making graphic art, literature, and theater, and even assembled information collectives to form a kind of distributive organic computer based on a principle they called vzaimoinformatsiia (reciprocal information). One important discovery made during these experiments was that the products of collective labor qualitatively changed depending on the size of the ensemble. Based on this research, Kerzhentsev and his colleagues stipulated that for the purposes of, say, collective artistic creation, studios must consist of twenty to twenty-two people—no fewer, but also no more. Against an ascending current of Soviet gigantomania that equated bigger with better, Proletkul't work demonstrated that a group that was too large was just as disadvantageous as one that was too small, and might even prove to be counterproductive.1

The Proletkul't organizational scientists experimented not just with the size of these collectives, but also with different structural topologies. Kerzhentsev designed flexible organizational schemes for a variety of operations, including
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self is always a multitude, the individual dividual. The Proletkul'tists were similarly skeptical of the conceit of the internally “harmonious” (i.e., monotonous) self that had underwritten bourgeois ego psychology, and they campaigned instead for the individual to acquire a rich inventory of selves that were maximally discontinuous and conflicted. From the trade union, the guild (artel), and the seminar to the artistic circle (kruzhok), the workers’ club, and the amateur theater group, revolutionary society dramatically multiplied the opportunities for organizational interface, and while each of these systems interpellated an additional aspect of individual identity, there was no expectation that these diverse facets would ever achieve a grand characterological synthesis. To the contrary, for the psychoanalyst turned schizoanalyst Aron Zalkind, NOT’s ideal for the “psychology of the future human” was perforce radically discontinuous and dynamic, a self based not on “stagnation” but on “condensation.” Anything but harmonious, this subject was a “cold bomb” who, Zalkind explained, could be “either peaceful or explosive” depending on the social field in which she was situated. This highly reactive and fundamentally unstable human compound might be reading quietly one moment and agitating fervently the next. The ideal of discontinuous selfhood that is illustrated in the League of Time’s chronocard recalls Marx’s famous account of communism as a social organization in which it is possible “to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner ... without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic.” Each station of the day is a practice, not a personal identity.

In this way, the organizational scientists of Proletkul’t proposed a unique solution to political philosophy’s seemingly insoluble conflict between necessity and freedom, between social constraint and individual liberty. For them, revolutionary society was to be realized not by subordinating the individual to a monolithic collective, nor by espousing a version of radical autonomy that, to Marx at least, was tantamount to sociopathy (the pseudoliberty of “man as an isolated monad who is withdrawn into himself”). Rather, they advocated multiplying and diversifying what Viktor Shklovsky later called “unfreedoms” (nesvobody). Forms of objective unfreedom are indispensable for creation, novelty, and personal development; the ossatures of human relationships and labor habits are the “gymnastic equipment” on which the self exercises, Shklovsky wrote in 1926. Increasing the number of unfreedoms thus further individuates the subject, transforming an anthropologically underdetermined being into a sheer singularity. While the individual withers under conditions of radical autonomy, she thrives through the intensification and continuous variation (i.e., reorganization) of the connections binding self to world. As Lenin observed in a philosophical fragment on dialectics, it is through a kind of robust and positive intersectionality, not through dedifferentiation and generality, that the individual is able to partake of the universal: “Every individual enters incompletely into the universal, etc., etc. Every individual is connected by thousands of transitions with other kinds of individuals (things, phenomena, processes), etc.” Here Lenin anticipates the process that Gilbert Simondon would later dub “transindividuation,” the mechanism whereby a singularity emerges through an encounter between forces exerted by both organic and inorganic beings within a given sociotechnical milieu. Each additional vector, or what Lenin calls a “transition,” diversifies the repertoire of entanglement in the world, further individuating and nuancing the subject in the process. “The more strings the marionettes are allowed to have, the more articulated they become,” writes Bruno Latour. And so “the question to be addressed is not whether we should be free or bound but whether we are well or poorly bound.” The revolution instructs that self-realization comes about not by freeing oneself from bonds, but by multiplying good bondage.

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next door, were also dominated by mostly depopulated subjects almost too on the nose. (In one suite of photographs, printed at a slightly larger size than their cousins Spanish vacation homes climbing up an escarpment below an aspirational sign reading BEVERLY HILLS—or, in a few cases, the enigmatic “civilization” into the realm of the “natural,” as in the show’s most memorable photograph, Paris 0802, 2017, in which a craggy-looking chair supermarket clings to the side of a bucolic cliff face like a consumerist bubo. Soilier’s soundtrack for this space featured nothing but shiny umbrellas of the sort that would probably return to an ordinary room, but rather faint sounds of play and celebration. Yet the aesthetics to which the room gestured remained distant and disembodied—even as a vague sense of merriment, perhaps, but one conspicuously lacking any sign of fresh-and-blood merrymakers—and the enjoyment it figured felt rare and entailed.

On the day I visited, one small, unauthorized sign of embodiment had insinuated itself into the gallery (which, fittingly enough, also appeared to be distinctly unfurled): a single latex glove sitting crumpled on the floor, left perhaps by a hypochondriac visitor or a distracted art handler. Whatever the case, the gallery’s pervasive vibe of fatigued disdain that the work registers is at least as much personal as political, that the gaze it delegates, perhaps, but one conspicuously lacking any sign of fresh-and-blood merrymakers—and the enjoyment it figured felt rare and entailed.