How does the exhibition as a medium partake in the ontological partitions of modernity? This question seems particularly relevant in a time when it has become urgent to put curatorial practice on new conceptual ground—a fundament that is not limited to art history, but instead is capable of re-contextualizing art history itself against materialist social histories and a multiplicity of modern media-technologies and boundary-making practices. It is a question that is also important in a moment where thingness and object-oriented ontologies have considerable influence on artistic and exhibition practice. For my part, I consider the medium of the exhibition a possible ontographic device—a medium that is particularly well-equipped to deal with the ontological separations of the modern age (and perhaps only the modern age); the production of both subjects and objects, without ever taking their existence for granted, but engaging with their emergence from a “middle ground” where we find media and images situated at a tilting point, where object and subject become Kippfiguren (multistable images), and the forces of poeisis and pathos enter into relations of reciprocity and create a meridian of mediality, giving access to a possible vertical history. To disappoint the speculative realists of the first hour, the exhibition, I think, is not a place where one could ever hope to leave the correlational circle, the reciprocal conditioning of consciousness and world, subject and object. Instead, it allows us to interrogate the conditions of mediation and separation within correlational circles: an exhibition can take us to the foundations and the limits of those circle(s) because it can explore the thresholds of the correlation between consciousness and form.
My argument for the medium of the exhibition as a place that is particularly suited to a complex analysis of borders and frontiers across different epistemological registers, and as a place where both cognition and aesthetics partake and enact frontiers, is perhaps substantiated by the following effort, in which I test whether and how the exhibition can positively figure in the “Constitution” of modernity as proposed in an influential model by Bruno Latour in 1993.¹ This model tries nothing less than to sketch up the ontological partitions of modernity—providing a diagram of the constitutional separations that made modernity modern, both within (modern institutions) and without (the difference that would become now inevitably “pre-modern”).

In Latour’s graph, there is no place for the institution of “art.” I therefore begin by looking at a related diagram: in 1988, James Clifford sketched what he called the Western “Art-Culture System” as that which has been operative in Western institutions, within a fourfold semiotic graph unfolding between “art” and “culture” at the top, and “not-culture” and “not-art” at the bottom. “Art” is qualified as original and singular, the product of an identifiable author, validated by connoisseurship, museums and the market; whereas “culture” is collective, traditional, and validated by history, ethnography, material culture and crafts. The two poles share a common value-orientation towards the “authentic,” while they are separated by the “masterpiece” on the side of “art,” and the “artifact” in the case of “culture.” On the lower part of the graph reads “not-art” and “not-culture”; not-art being the commercial, the reproduced, tourist art, or commodities, and not-culture being the “new and uncommon,” which includes radical artistic gestures in the moment when they are not yet accepted as “art,” but above all, includes the entire realm of technological invention, insofar as it somehow constitutes a surplus with regards to the mere “commercial”—and, we might add, functional—sphere.² Between the poles in the graph there is of course movement, as when things of cultural value such as so-called “tribal objects” are suddenly granted the status of art, or when previously “low,” inauthentic art is uplifted in a similar fashion. Movement in the inverse direction occurs whenever works of art are culturally and historically contextualized. Indeed, movement in the graph constitutes a great deal of canonical history in the field. It is as if “history” itself consists of exploring the possibilities of movement and transformation within the matrix.
But such a description of the “economy” of internal divisions and hierarchies in art can gain further contours by being placed and described within the schematic systems of knowledge disciplines and the division of labor of modernity itself. It then becomes possible to define more specifically the boundary-making practices in which art is immersed. What Clifford attempted for the “Art-Culture System,” Bruno Latour attempted to do for modernity, particularly with respect to the pertinent division between the natural and the social sciences. In his book *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour does not simply expound another Greimasian semiotic square from a structuralist bird’s-eye view. We may suggest that he aspires to account for the onto-genesis of the modern categories from a point of view of an anti-reductionism—a terrain where received categories are already undermined. And, indeed he does not have to look for a subterranean realm where these categorical crossings and transgressions happen, as it were, by night; he looks instead at the newspapers, and turns to the sky, using the ozone hole as an example of an “object” that cannot be defined as being either purely social,
natural or discursive but instead constitutes a paradigmatic “hybrid” made of politics, nature and society alike. And what a hybrid that is and has since become, if we only think of the way “nature” has entered into “human” history once again through climate change. Latour searches for the zero-point of the division that has held modern thought in an iron-grip: the division between the natural world and society; which translates, by extension, into the division between primary and secondary qualities, res extensa and res cogitans; and the standard dualist metaphysics of everyday instrumentality based on the mind/body split. He distances himself from the narrative of the division of labor and the differentiation of functions in modern society, into the separate realms of politics, economy, the law, science, art, and mass media, and above all, from the assumption of a fundamental division between nature and culture, of a separate physical environment and society. He instead describes the coming-into-being of the relative categories nature and culture, or subject and object as poles, as if from the middle, along a continuum from relative stability to mobility and a horizon of “the event”—a primordial event (or never-ending series of events) where, with Michel Serres, “the object as such constituted the human subject.”

In the role of the anthropologist who brings anthropology “home from the tropics,” he focused on networks in which agencies are entangled and distributed among human and nonhuman actors and organized by narrative structures. Its self-description in terms of a gradual disentanglement of the natural and the social, the subjective and the objective, by means of which humankind breaks free from the chains of nature to the degree that it produces objective knowledge of nature’s (fundamentally indifferent) laws, Latour claims, has been taken in by self-deception. This momentous self-deception has been the result of a gigantic effort of “purification” of the social and the natural into increasingly separate domains—an effort whose official languages have systematically obscured the “work of translation,” that is, the terrain of mediation, which Latour calls a “middle kingdom,” “as vast as China and as little known.” What differentiates modernity from the non-modern is thus neither the work of translation nor its scientific-technological configuration, but a strange renouncement of the “collectives” that are formed from material, social and discursive entities. This renouncement is the price that is being paid for the “purification” of nature and culture into the separate categories of the human and the nonhuman, scientific objects, and political subjects. Latour describes the “modern constitution” as being based on two interrelated “great divides”: the first between subject and object, or social and natural, which are each to be purified in their respective domains; and the second divide that separates this realm of
“official representation” from the work of mediation and translation in which “hybrids” are produced (these encompass the religious just as the technological, and their corresponding forms of subjectivity). But this realm, this so-called “middle kingdom,” is foreclosed from “official” representation. “Everything happens in the middle, everything passes between the two, everything happens by way of mediation, translation and networks, but this space does not exist, it has no place. It is the unthinkable, the unconscious of the moderns.”

Latour may be at his most controversial, contradictory and amusing where his heuristics of networks turns into a psychogram of “the moderns,” where he seeks to describe the leap, the sleight of hand, the propaganda through which this disavowal of “hybrids” occurs. For that seems to require that “the moderns” not only “see double” and talk in “forked tongues”; it evolves in a matrix of mutually exclusive and internally contradictory “options” provided by the “constitution” as if on a playing field:

A threefold transcendence and a threefold immanence in a crisscrossed schema that locks in all the possibilities: this is where I locate the power of the moderns. They have not made Nature; they make Society; they make Nature; they have not made Society; they have not made either; God has made everything; God has made nothing, they have made everything.

The result is that mediality and the social nature of relations between people and their environments is permanently being eclipsed, made to disappear as if by a slight of hand, “and they can never be caught red-handed.”

Latour speaks of two official systems of representation that are erected on the grounds of the unrepresented and disavowed hybrids: political representation for subjects and society, and representation “in the laboratory” by science alone for the true, purified “speech” of objects and nature, now speaking the language of facts.
Are not the two lines of division in this diagram, one horizontal and one vertical, corresponding to different kind of imagery, as if they could also be conceptualized as screens? Are images not what emerges exactly at the sites of these divides, crossing and organizing them at the same time like mediating boundaries?

What kind of image then corresponds to the “first divide”? It is an image, or better: a condition of the image as eternally torn between the subjective and the objective, either conceived as illusionary-projection or as documentary, truthful representation. Latour’s crisscrossed scheme indeed also manifests itself on the level of the image: the image as a middle ground that is disavowed, for we can only ever think of the image as either entirely subjective or objective.

It is important to recall the core of Latour’s thesis, namely that the two “upper” halves of the divide are the product of one and the same division, and that it is indeed the division that produces both poles as an effect. They are the mutually exclusive and recursive production of a border-making practice, whose product is paradoxical, an internally divided and contradictory matrix “that locks in all possibilities.” Taking Latour’s model to its conclusion, we can say that they posit subject and object as Kippfigur. It is precisely a recursive production of a reversible figure and ground, where we can exchange between...
two perspectives, but can only ever see one as figure at any given time, while the other must recede into the supporting back-ground, the “milieu”, that makes its interpretation in the terms of a “seeing as” plausible. It is perfectly possible to trace this character of the Kippfigur with regards to the ascription of the image either to the realm of the objective or subjective in debates on iconoclasm, as Latour has done, or in debates around the status of photography and its role in legal forums. Images, too, must take sides: as neutral windows adequately representing the objective world (by way of divine or machinic inscription producing an uncontaminated mimetic accuracy that reduces the deceptive to a minimum), or as mere subjective representations, with no claim to an objective world; that is, in the last instance, as an “animated mirror” of sorts.

And what about the second divide—the one that divides the realm of purification from the “unconscious” realm of mediation and hybrids? This second divide appears as a screen of forever murky imagery, a theatre of defense and appropriation, the imaginary figuration of the constitutional outside: the barbarian, the animal, the man-machine, Donna Haraway’s “monsters.” Here, the advancing frontier of modernity produces the spectacle of its negatives and its “exports” into the outside: of the primordial and archaic past, the “irrational” colonial outside, and of a techno-utopian or dystopian future. It is a screen which acts both as a mirror and a window, operating the limits of “symbolic order,” whose “outside” appears as a variously metamorphic, projected ontological anarchy, or as a diabolic realm of partial objects, spectrality and monstrosity. It is at this divide that the small and grand border-dramas of modernity are formed. In fact, all the aesthetic genres known to us partake in its logic of liminality, and it is the basis on which they turn into the formative scripts of its frontier-mythologies. All human societies, it appears, are formed by such a limit, drafted as a circle drawn by the social contract into the not-yet divided terrain of sociability, instituted as a negative that is folded up within, creating in turn a highly organized and yet anarchic realm that acts as the imaginary outside which the very distinctions that organize this society within break down.

In 1993, Latour declared the crisscrossed schema of the constitution and the system of divisions of modernity as ultimately bankrupt. The hybrids that this system allowed to proliferate, he says, have overwhelmed the realm of purification – one symptom of which is the ecological crisis, where society, nature and technology are all hopelessly interlaced. The very fact that he could delineate, in 1993, the entire constitution including its (excluded yet proliferating) “unconscious,” finally, is proof of its collapse: for within the registers of the constitution, delineating the very relation between purification and hybridization/mediation was allegedly anathema and could hence not come into view.
The constitution, according to Latour, forbade the “official” representations of hybrids, in order to destroy and develop them. It could only represent them as objects yet-to-be-purified.

But at the very site where there two divides meet, has there not been this most marvelous stage, where all the contradictions of the scheme came to be “officially” dramatized? An institution which appropriates, hosts, and articulates the different kinds of hybrids and images I have outlined above? Is this not a space of “official mediation,” of “represented hybrids”—the space of the museum? A peculiar space that had been granted the rights and the power to represent “hybrids” officially, assigned to act as what I might refer to as an ontological quarantine. At middle of the diagram there ought to be the medium of the exhibition. It is the always-contested “space of the arts” with its many internal partitions, also the space where “others” are represented and come to be taken possession of by being delivered to visibility. It is the “official” site of the curious hybrids of the pre-moderns, and of technology—for instance, the very categories we find in Cliffords’ graph.

This is of no small consequence because, if we follow Latour, the representation of hybrids had to be rendered impossible in order for the modern constitution to work. Perhaps this explains why there was ever belief in the “arts” to have the potential to either transcend and reconcile, or blow up “modernity” from within? But if the “space of art” did not implode the system of modern divisions as if from within, it was because it was circumscribed by a secret contract, a magic circle still inscribed today into institutions of art—the very contract that granted art its relative autonomy, acquired at the price of its worldly consequentiality. Everything that enters into the magic circle has to be removed from the world, removed from direct effect, entering a realm of the merely symbolic, the merely fictional. All objects in the magic circle are given a special ontological status and undergo a process of neutralization through a paradoxical fictionalization. This is what the term “ontological quarantine” designates—in just the same sense that Frederic Jameson has suggested “the aesthetic” to figure as a “safety valve,” “a kind of sandbox to which one consigns all those vague things ... under the heading of the irrational ... [where] they can be monitored and, in case of need, controlled”.10 Yet on the other hand, this has allowed a unique space of cultural-semiotic reflection to emerge in which certain attitudes and subject-dispositions may be tested and produced, although the passage from the condition of a “test” to reality has ever since been a battlefield.
The very category of art and the aesthetic did not exist as such prior to the emergence of this “settlement”—the very implicit ontological partitions that underlie the status of art and the cultural object in modernity. The contract that brought relative freedom acquired at the price of inconsequentiality is constitutive of the magic circle that surrounds art and its special ontological status in modernity. And this magic circle has, of course, been a major object of contestation, such that much avant-garde history consists of attempts to break the contract, and thereby exit its spell.

Amended diagram of Bruno Latour’s diagram of “The Modern Constitution”.

Indeed the institution of art and the museum, as well as the conceptual designation “aesthetics” has to be situated right in the center of diagram, and hence at an imaginary crossroads of the modern ontological partition: a “Third House” next to “human culture” and “nonhuman nature.” A third house, burdened with the impossible, yet definitely interesting task of purifying not objectivity or subjectivity, matter or mind, society or nature; but whose most noble modern mission (as in the logic of modernism), was to purify mediation and mediality: hence “medium-specificity” as a formula of progress (i.e., purification) in the arts. And of course this paradoxical task would be impossible without
the inexhaustible resource of unpurified mediation-in-excess: hence all modern art history, in the words of Marshal McLuhan, is nothing but a never ending “crescendo of primitivism”.

What happens when this “Third House” is superimposed onto the diagram is a series of more or less predictable as well as surprising correspondences: the upper half of the circle corresponds to the left side of Clifford’s semiotic square—the side of the artistic masterpiece that stands for the subject par excellence, and the side of the extraordinary hybrid, the technological invention. On this upper half of the circle, we find museums that reflect the Western “self.” Towards the lower half of the circle, we may locate the museums of “culture,” of the artifact, and the non-modern other; and we may also locate other forms of exhibitions there, such as the commercially circulating hybrid at fairgrounds, the spectacle of the World Expositions, and so forth.

While being overtly schematic, the graph thus has its advantages. It renders comprehensible that—while being internally structured by both schisms whose interplay is, following Latour, at the heart of the modern boundary-regime—the red circle in the middle functions as a unique apparatus in which modernity is believed to be synthesized, and its cleavages can eventually be overcome. This is the reason for the otherwise rather inexplicable investment that brilliant social critics of modernity (from Max Weber and Georg Simmel to Georg Lukács and the Frankfurt theorists to name only a few) made in aesthetics and art—inexplicable, because of the stunning asymmetry of power between the arts and what they saw as their adversary, the divisive instrumental reason and objectivist rationality of the science-and-technology driven modernity whose partitioning of the sense and experience they were critiquing. In this “Third House,” so centrally located, they seemed to believe, the wholeness of experience (as first described by Friedrich Schiller) could be preserved, and one day it would emerge from there not merely as an isolated zone of a shamefully granted autonomy, but regaining sovereignty over life.

The graph also explains why the exhibition is indeed in a privileged place for what I would call a stereoscopy of divisions and recursive opposites, in a manner that can come to terms with what Latour has analyzed as the paradoxical “seeing double” of modernity. The exhibition is capable of spatializing these divisions and turning them into topographies of “figures” and “ground.” In the exhibition, the entire realm of figuration and the traffic between the relative poles of subject and object can come into view.
The Latourian graph hence gives a wider context to Clifford’s system. It is important to note that Clifford is interested in the mechanisms of representation and the way that they are implicated in the making of the essential boundaries and systems of value-creation in a culture, and the dialectics as well as asymmetries of the self/other. And here, Latour has made a suggestion with far-reaching consequences, yet one I believe is flawed in parts and marks to some extent the limits of his system. This concerns the relation between the “internal” divide of humans and nonhumans that emerges from early modern thought and its relation with what he calls the “external” divide. Latour variously credits Descartes and Galileo Galilei or Thomas Hobbes and Robert Boyle as the origin of the “internal divide,” (elsewhere he also suggests it might start with Platonism: there is no theory that can do without the colonization of origins, it seems, and Plato is always a welcome candidate). The internal divide separates humans and nonhumans, corresponding with the standard metaphysical setup of the mind/body dualism. For Latour, the “external divide” which separates European modernity from the primitive other, is the export of the first, internal divide. “In order to understand the Great Divide between Us and Them, we have to go back to that other Great Divide between humans and nonhumans.”11 The colonial frontier, Latour thus practically suggests, is the “export” of the paradoxical internal division: “they” are radically different (pre-modern) because unlike us, they do not separate between nature and culture. Indeed, “For Them, Nature and Society, signs and things, are virtually coextensive. For Us they should never be. Even though we might still recognize in our own societies some fuzzy areas in madness, children, animals, popular culture and women’s bodies (Donna Haraway), we believe our duty is to extirpate ourselves from those horrible mixtures.”12 Henceforth, the distance between Europeans and the colonial other will be measured no longer in terms of religion (the right belief), but in the supposedly secular terms of the “modern” and the “primitive”: the ability to distinguish between object and subject in certain and not other ways. Given the suggested symmetry of the two “Great Divides,” people on the non-modern side would then be subjected to comparable protocols of objectification as a nature rendered objective in the laboratory, and the form of this protocol has been colonial subjugation, and the denial of status of full subjecthood, of being a legitimate subject of rights with a proper “voice.” This is how Latour appears to “explain” colonialism, and it may sound convincingly at first. He takes no other origin of colonialism into account, whether from within or outside modern societies. Hence, decolonization, for him, is achieved once we impeach the Cartesian split. Race, gender,
class, and the boundary-making technologies of power that enthroned them, then also seem to disappear without residue. Indeed, for Latour, once the “first divide” is gone, the “second divide” must by necessity dissolve.

This is, in my eyes, the chief defect of Latour’s system, which recently has led him to believe that he could simply pass, with his Actor-Network-Theory, from a “negative” modality to a positive ontology. The problem in Latour’s heuristics is precisely that when they shift from being a heuristic operation and become an ontology, they slip into a homogenous immanence of a seemingly seamless terrain of mediation, lacking a sense for the fault lines of political struggle. That is true philosophically as well as politically, for what has disappeared for Latour once the “bifurcation of nature” is overcome, is also any point from which one could still meaningfully address actual exclusions and asymmetries of power. We are then to enter the “parliament of things”, which Latour quickly asserts to us is not quite like the chatter of an animistic universe, or perhaps a film by Walt Disney. But what has practically disappeared is the sense that the networks are not homogenous, but internally and externally characterized by frontiers. What Latour once described as the asymmetry between “the complex” and “the complicated,” namely the increasing inscription and enrolment of entities into networks and operational chains through making them calculable,\(^\text{13}\) constitutes a useful line of argument by means of which one could recover, particularly in light of the rise of algorithmic governance, a critical sense of the frontiers of the present, and the perspective once represented by Max Weber and the like, but without their ignorance of science. The “middle kingdom,” that vast expanse of what he calls “full-blown mediators,” consists primarily for Latour of graphs and inscriptions. They seem to be at the eventful, and yet somehow obscure origin of the mutual constitution of subject and object. While in many of his works what he terms “to follow the actors” turns out to be a narrative strategy tracing shifting relations of the active and the passive, he curiously skips almost completely over the entire question of mimesis: the very terrain where historically, art (and later, the psychology of colonialism) has negotiated with the mediation and the murky vectors of the active and passive, of poeisis and pathos, but also of the dialectics of self and other, and of master and slave. But this terrain of enacted, bodily mimesis and psychological identifications disappears behind scripture in Latour’s universe. Figurations that are not written, practically, have no place in the middle kingdom of Latour’s design, and this overestimation of inscription is what makes him think he can simply move from a critique of modernity to a positive ontology of the network.
Hence, Latour’s model tends towards a premature reconciliation, a false reunification across the Great Divides, declaring that we, too, have in reality never been modern, and that we have only now come to recognize this. This is perhaps poignantly expressed through the fantasy of a “second first contact,” suggested by Latour in the immediate aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001; proposing that the former “moderns” and former “pre-moderns” start their politics anew on the grounds of a now revised, a-modern ontology. But who has ever witnessed such second first contact to take place? We can break through this impasse only by reversing the order between the “first” and the “second” divide. The “constitution” was the result of institutionalized practices that have their origin in the coming-into-being of capitalism in the early modern world. We can locate its origins in the early capitalist phase of “primitive accumulation” inside Europe, the witch hunts and the enclosures of common land. And we can trace how with European expansion, a simultaneous “cutting away” of the marginal bodies subjected to negative projections occurs. Then we realize that the “denial of recognition” of which Latour speaks with regards to the nonhuman has its origins in political reorganization and conquest at the dawn of capitalism, and that this “denial” had from the outset, at its extreme, a genocidal face; that in fact, the “Great Divide” that characterized modern European relations to the rest of the world, and the argumentation with regard to universality that informed the latest debates on human rights and the right of intervention, have their roots in early modern conflicts that reverberate to this day. An important dimension of this lineage is the medieval debate over whether non-European people had “dominion”—that is, property in their persons, goods and lands. In 1454, a papal bull declared that all non-Christian peoples had no ownership rights to the land on which they are living, and gave the King of Portugal the right to invade and conquer, convert forcibly and enslave, dispossess, expel, and ultimately, to kill those that failed to accept the truth, convert and be colonized. This provided a long-lasting resource forging a consensus around the justification for colonialism. In Two Treatises on Government, the seventeenth-century British thinker John Locke argued that the use and exploitation of land is the criteria for rights to property, and since the natives did not exploit their surroundings as Europeans would, colonization was justified. The intimate relation between the modern self and its relation to property (previously called “dominion”) certainly present a fertile line of inquiry that has not nearly been exhausted to the full, just as the inquiry into the exhibition as a “Third House” provides ground for a re-narrativization of art histories as part of the larger disciplinary and ontological partitions and their current unmaking.
Footnotes

4. Ibid. 48.
5. Ibid. 37.
6. Ibid. 34.
12. Ibid. 99-100.
13. “Complex relations force us to take into account simultaneously a large number of variables without being able to calculate their numbers exactly nor to record that count, nor, a fortiori, to define its variables. The lively and animated conversation we’re attempting, leaning on a bar counter, is complex, as is the course of a ball and the play of football teams in a match, or the fine coordination through which an orchestra listens to or filters the emanation of each instrument and voice. By contrast, we’ll call ‘complicated’ all those relations which, at any given point, consider only a very small number of varieties that can be listed and counted.” Bruno Latour and Emilie Hermant. *Paris, Ville invisible*. Paris: La Découverte, 1998. Print.

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