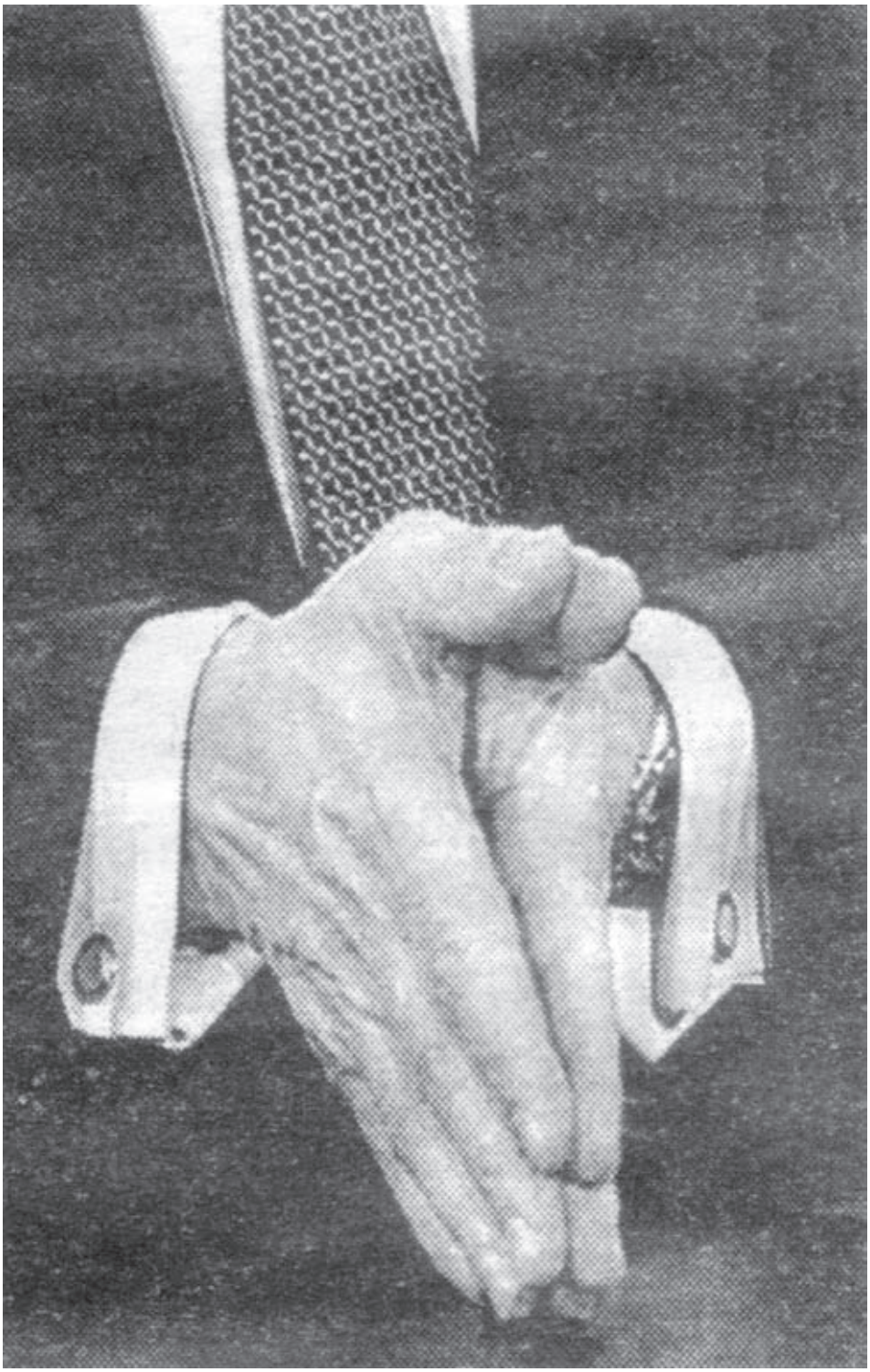

THE SUSPENDED SUBSTANTIVE
ON ANIMALS AND MEN IN GIORGIO AGAMBEN'S *THE OPEN*

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Giorgio Agamben. THE OPEN: MAN AND ANIMAL. *Trans. Kevin Attell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004.* [*O*] *Trans. of* L'aperto: L'uomo e l'animale. *Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002.* [*A*]

With a title as enigmatic as *The Open,* the reader might well wonder, "the open *what*?" Is the title's adjective to stand alone? Does it need no substantive to support it? This unfamiliar title is not what one might first guess—it is not an awkward translation from the work's original title. No substantive follows in the original, and none is meant to. The idea that gives Agamben's book its title is that of an openness which is unconditioned—and perhaps unconditional, an openness which is unspecified—and perhaps unspecifiable.

If the answer to the question "the open *what*?" can be answered with no substantive, might we ask in what this opening occurs? *Between* what more substantive things has an indefinable space been opened? The first answer to the question can be found in the work's subtitle—*Man and Animal*. The open space in question is that which separates and distinguishes man from animal. Philosophers, anthropologists, social scientists, zoologists, chemists, taxonomists—and many others—have had no small difficulty in agreeing upon the matter.

Philosophers have traditionally had a low opinion of animals [cf. de Fontenay]. Descartes had especially little respect for the minds of animals and influentially classified them as automata mechanica. As Agamben notes, the great naturalist and taxonomist Linnaeus responded to this assertion with the laconic rejoinder: "Descartes obviously never saw an ape" [cf. *O* 23/*A* 30; translation modified]. Philosophers have been more eager than taxonomists to put distance between themselves and the animals—and for this reason have been particularly interested in studying what separates man from animal. The last great philosophical attempt in this regard is that of Martin Heidegger. Despite his preference for the primordial, his openness to the woods and the wilderness, his opinion of animals' faculties was not much higher than that of Descartes. In his view, animals live in an environment in which they are receptive to various stimuli, but where they have nothing approximating what we call a "world"—animals are, as he claims, "poor in world" (*weltarm*)—or even "without world" (*weltlos*). They live in such intense and incessant proximity to their environment and its stimuli that they do not see the existential forest for the environmental trees. They can never take a step away from the immediacy of their perception and for this reason cannot be said to possess a "world" in the sense that man, in Heidegger's view, does.

As mentioned above, the title *The Open* is, for all its strangeness, not the result of

an awkward translation from Agamben's Italian. Its strangeness stems, nevertheless, in large part from a translation. Or, to be more precise, from two translations. The first of these is from the German. The German in question is a special one—that of the profoundly idiosyncratic technical vocabulary that Heidegger fashioned for his philosophical purposes. For Heidegger, "the open" is something literally fundamental which lay at the heart of his thought. "The open" is the space revealed to us in the moment when the world we live in, which because of our many tasks and travails we tend to take no distance from (like animals with their stimuli), opens out onto something larger. This moment of distancing ourselves from our everyday concern with means and ends, with stimuli and response, is what gives us not just an environment, but a "world." "The open" is what we find ourselves in when the bustle and haste of our environment recedes and we see that environment in all its strangeness and immensity—as a "world," greater and less graspable than our restricted and finite representations. This experience of "the open" is, for Heidegger, what makes us human, and what separates us from the animals. And this open moment lies at the origin of philosophy: the humbling—and potentially frightening—moment of wonder that spurred speculation into the finer and deeper reason for things. As was his wont, Heidegger introduces a special phrase to describe this experience of acceding to the open, "the world worlds," "die Welt weltet" and in the very next sentence states that "the rock has no world. Plants and animals also have no world" [*Holzwege* 31].[1] When the world, strangely enough, worlds, we find that world open before us; we are standing, to adopt Heidegger's terms, in a "clearing," a step away from both trees and forest. The world is no longer too much with us, and we suddenly see trees, forest, and ourselves in an uneasy and changing relation to one another.

"The open" is a term amongst many in Heidegger's technical vocabulary—ultimately one that found little place in his later philosophy. It nevertheless played a crucial role in the development of that philosophy. This is most clearly visible, as Agamben points out, in Heidegger's lectures in Freiburg in the fall semester 1942–43. In the midst of the most bitter and brutal combat, Heidegger was lecturing on Parmenides. The course was dedicated in large part to the translation of a single word—but a crucial one—*aletheia,* "truth." Heidegger suggested a number of ways of translating the term, but the fourth and final way was as "das Offene und das Freie der Lichtung des Seins"—literally, "The open and the free in the clearing of being"—or, more simply, as "the open" [*Parmenides* 195]. In his woodland terminology, *Lichtung,* a clearing (as in a forest), is etymologically a "light-ing," an opening and an illumination. The "open" then corresponds to originary truth: it is the open space in which truth in its original (Greek) meaning took place. It stands thus, for Heidegger, at the heart of philosophy: at the heart of its history and its essence.

In these lectures, first published in 1993,[2] it seems that Heidegger arrived at his translation by sounding the concealed depths not only of ancient Greek, but also of modern German. This modern German was a poetic one—that of Rilke. As he introduces his translation of Parmenides's term for *truth,* Heidegger is well aware that the unusual expression "the open" will lead his listeners to think of Rilke's celebrated *Duino Elegies* (1923) and, in particular, to Rilke's repeated use of the curious term

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*1. One might compare the curious phrase "the world worlds," with an equally curious one which Heidegger coined for the opposite movement: "the de-worlding of the world [*Entweltlichung der Welt*]" [65].*

2. These lecture notes were published as volume 54 of Heidegger's complete works. The Italian edition wrongly lists this volume as the forty-fourth ("XLIV") in the series. Attell's translation repeats this error, reproducing the bibliographical material from the Italian edition while simply translating the Roman numeral ("44").

in the eighth elegy (though neither Heidegger nor Agamben notes this, the term had a longer poetic history and had in fact been used by Hölderlin in one of his most famous poems, "Bread and Wine": "So komm! dass wir das Offene schauen . . ."). Rilke's elegy begins: "With all its eyes the creature sees / the open" ("Mit allen Augen sieht die Kreatur / das Offene") [Rilke 2.224]. In his poem, we (mankind) are excluded from this glimpse of the open granted to all other creatures. Years earlier, on a visit to Paris's Jardin des Plantes, Rilke's sensitive eye had been captured by a panther. For Rilke's panther, captivity was the central fact of his existence. "It seems to him," wrote Rilke of his great cat, that, "there are / a thousand bars; and behind the bars, no world" [Rilke 1.469]. What interested Rilke was how impenetrable, how full of incommunicable will, strength, and silence the animal was; what awakened his poetic sensibilities was how closed off that animal's world was. The worldlessness of the animal proves in the later poem to be the fruit not of his nature but of his confinement. In the eighth elegy, the unnamed animal ("die Kreatur") is accorded a different glimpse of the world: it sees that world in all its openness. It sees what fear of death and fear of life prevent humans, the smartest and saddest of creatures, from seeing: the world in all its intense and interconnected immediacy.

Heidegger is quick to distance himself from this immediacy. Though, as he notes, he and Rilke are employing the same term, the same "wording" (Heidegger repeatedly uses the term *Wortlaut* instead of the simpler *Wort*), "what is being named," says Heidegger of his use of the term "the open," "is so different that no opposition could hope to convey it," as "oppositions—even the most extreme—demand that those things which are to be opposed to one another can be placed in the same realm" [*Parmenides* 226]. "The open" that Rilke praises and sees reflected in the eyes of animals is, for Heidegger, mere blindness. This is a blindness of a particular sort: historical blindness. Rilke's problem, his misapprehension of the deep meaning of the term "the open" and his consequent inconsequent use of it, following Heidegger, stems from his unthinking adoption of a traditional view of the relation of man to animal typical of a fundamentally unreflective modernity [cf. Heidegger, *Parmenides* 231, 235]. "The open," Heidegger's translation of Greek *truth,* is a different one than that which Rilke famously invoked. It is deeper, richer—and it is that which distinguishes us from the animals. It is not the animals who see "the open"—they are open to nothing but stimuli. According to Heidegger, we alone see "the open."

This is the point at which Agamben takes his title and enters the discussion. Agamben neither laments Rilke's historico-ontological naiveté, nor accuses Heidegger of insensitivity toward poetry or animals. His interest is fixed upon another point—the open place where he feels that the two irreconcilable positions meet—the point at which the animal's unhindered openness, or receptivity, to stimuli in its environment and man's openness to the world in all its ungraspable immensity converge. One might ask whether these two types of openness, these two types of receptivity have anything in common, whether they bear the weight of comparison. For Heidegger, they clearly do not. Agamben's assumptions that they do leads him to conceive of another type of openness than either Rilke or Heidegger had conceived of, an openness of inactivity, of disengagement from one's environment and, perhaps, one's world.[3]

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3. Neither Heidegger nor Agamben seems aware that Rilke appears to have borrowed his enigmatic term from a specific source: the German writer Alfred Schuler. Schuler enjoyed a certain celebrity at the turn of the nineteenth century and belonged along with Ludwig Klages and others to the so called Munich Kosmiker. *In 1917–18, Rilke heard a lecture by Schuler and met the author afterwards. He was so fascinated by what Schuler had to say that he returned when the lecture series, entitled "The Eternal City," was repeated. The curious substantive "the open" is employed repeatedly by Schuler, alongside the term "open" in its linguistic variants. In the life*

The openness that interests Agamben is then not one of daily immersion in immediate stimuli and short-term tasks, nor an exalting in the immensity and strangeness of the world, but of a special sort of inactivity, which he uses another strange substantive to denote—the French term *désœuvrement* ("inoperativity"; *inoperosità*). Agamben dedicates significant passages of *The Open* to the exegesis of this term—both at the beginning of the book, in his discussion of the debate which grew up around it between Georges Bataille and Alexandre Kojève, and, at the book's end, where the penultimate chapter bears the title *Désœuvrement* (the title is left in French in both the Italian original and the English translation—though in both the original and the translation the word is curiously misspelled). This is far from the first time Agamben has confronted the idea. It is one that excited the intense interest of two writers Agamben feels close to, the late Maurice Blanchot and Jean-Luc Nancy, who both wrote works centered around this term in Bataille's work, and its applications and absence of applications beyond it [cf. Blanchot, Nancy]. In *The Coming Community* (1990), Agamben indirectly responded to Blanchot's and Nancy's speculations on *désœuvrement,* community, communism, and identity in novel fashion. In his next work, *Homo Sacer,* he traced the term's genealogy as well as offering his own singular interpretation of it. Therein he writes that "the only coherent way to understand inoperativeness is to think of it as a generic mode of potentiality [*potenza*] that is not exhausted (like individual action or collective action understood as the sum of individual actions) in a *transitus de potentia ad actum*" [62, 71]. For Bataille, the term meant a radical refutation of the utilitarian aims of modern society and modern philosophy (represented for him by Hegel's dialectic), a commitment to inactivity and excess, a refusal to contribute to the great work (the *œuvre* of *dés-œuvre-ment*) of history. For Agamben, it is this and more—*désœuvrement* is not about exhaustion or even excess but, curiously enough, of what he calls *potentiality.* It represents an energy that has not been exhausted, energy that *cannot* be exhausted in the passing of the potential to the actual ("*transitus de potentia ad actum*"). In the postface to a new Italian edition of *The Coming Community,* Agamben recenters his speculations in that work around the idea of inoperativeness, and suggests that the term might form a "paradigm for politics": "Inoperativeness does not signify inertia, but rather *katargesis*—that is to say an operation in which the *as if* integrally replaces the that, in which formless life and lifeless form coincide in a form of life [*Inoperosità non significa inerzia, ma katargesis—cioè un'operazione in cui il come si sostituisce integralmente al che, in cui la vita senza forma e le forme senza vita coincidono in una forma di vita*]"; ". . . not work, but inoperativeness [is] the paradigm of the coming politics [*Non il lavoro, ma inoperosità [è] il paradigma della politica che viene*]" [93]. Inoperativeness is not laziness or inactivity, but in Agamben's relating of the term to the Greek *katargesis,* it is the open space where formless life and lifeless form meet in a distinct life-form and form of living—and which life-form and form of living is rich with its own singular potentiality. This is "the open" that Agamben's title strives to name.

In Agamben's first work, a study of art and aesthetics in their progress from Plato to the present entitled *The Man without Content* (1970), the final two chapters of the work occupy themselves with two divergent thinkers: the next-to-last chapter with Heidegger, the last with Walter Benjamin. This first work sets a precedent in this regard. Virtually all of Agamben's works present novel interpretations of Heidegger's thought; and virtually all of his works follow these novel interpretations of Heidegger with novel interpretations of Benjamin.

Schuler calls for ("offenen Leben"), "there is no religion because life as such is the religious fact [Tatsache]"; "In the open life there is no possession, no property" [qtd. in Rilke 2: 267]. The political tone of Schuler's conceptions of "the open" is close to Agamben's, if not always close to Rilke's.

Two years after the seminar on Parmenides, Heidegger was tried for his involvement with the Nazi party. In punishment for his active membership in the Nazi party, Heidegger was banned from university teaching from 1945 until 1950, at which time he officially retired. In his native Germany, this meant his retreating ever more profoundly into his hut in the Black Forest. More than twenty years later, at the invitation of the French poet René Char, who had played an active and courageous role in the French Resistance, Heidegger gave a series of unofficial seminars at Char's home in Le Thor (Provence). The young Giorgio Agamben was amongst the select few present for these seminars, and the experience, by his own description, changed his life. Hitherto, his interests had been largely literary, philological, and juridical. When asked in an interview for the French daily *Libération* about these seminars, he stated that it was then, for him, that, "philosophy first became possible" ("la philosophie est devenue possible"). He continued: "That is the real interest of encounters—in life as in thought: they serve to make life possible (or, at times, impossible). In any event, that is what happened with my meeting Heidegger—and, at nearly the same time, with my coming into contact with Benjamin's thought. Every great work contains an element of darkness and poison—for which it does not always offer an antidote. Benjamin was for me the antidote that allowed me to survive Heidegger [*c'est bien cela l'intérêt des rencontres, dans la vie comme dans la pensée: ils servent à nous rendre la vie possible (ou impossible, parfois). En tout cas, c'est ce que m'est arrivé avec Heidegger et, presque dans les mêmes années, avec la pensée de Benjamin. Toute grande œuvre contient une part d'ombre et de poison, contre laquelle elle ne nous fournit pas toujours l'antidote. Benjamin a été pour moi cet antidote, qui m'a aidé à survivre à Heidegger*]" ["Agamben, le chercheur d'homme" ii–iii].

It is perhaps this role as antidote which explains the curious and decisive role Benjamin's reflections play in Agamben's works. From *The Man without Content* onwards, there is a recurrent pattern of a sort of Benjamin ex machina where at the end of an essay or work the contradictions uncovered are, if not resolved, placed in a new—and more hopeful—light thanks to a particular insight culled from Benjamin's thought. *The Open* is no exception in this regard. After six chapters of Heideggerian exegesis (chapters 12 through 17), Agamben turns abruptly to Benjamin. Just as the knot of Heideggerian reasoning has begun to tighten around man and animal, a new light is offered through a conception of the open taken from Benjamin's reference in a letter from 1923 to "the saved night." The chapter's title is "Between" ("Tra") and suggests a different form of the open glimpsed in this strangely redeemed night. This openness is what Benjamin elsewhere called the "dialectic at a standstill," the "between" or "interval" between two terms or two coordinates—an unresolved opposition, a désœuvrement at the heart of a dialectic which had hitherto known no standstill [*O* 83, 85].

In a number of essays, Agamben speaks of an author's having a single most personal and intimate "gesture."[4] If we were to apply this principle to Agamben's own writing, we might find such an intimate and defining gesture in the curious idea of a "division of division." This gesture is best seen in a philological emendation which Agamben makes in his remarkable work on Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans. In glossing the suspension of the divisions that separate men (such as Jew/Gentile, circumcised/uncircumcised, married/single, and so forth) which is to characterize the messianic kingdom invoked by Saint Paul, Agamben directs his reader's attention to a curious passage in Benjamin's unfinished final work. Therein, Benjamin employs a singular metaphor for the division between what came before and what came after a given historical event. He describes it as being "like a line divided by the Apollonian incision [*wie eine Strecke, die nach dem apoll(i)nishcen Schnitt geteilt wird*]" [Benjamin, 5: 588; 7a1]. Agamben

4. For a brief summary of Agamben's views on gesture, cf. de la Durantaye [5n8].

points out that this comparison, as it stands in the German critical edition of Benjamin's works, makes no sense. Nowhere in Greek thought is there to be found such a reference to an "Apollonian incision." Benjamin's handwriting was notoriously difficult to decipher. After examining the manuscript, Agamben suggests that while the illegible "i" is in fact an illegible "i," the half-legible "o" is a half-legible "e." Benjamin is not referring to the god Apollo, Agamben notes, but to the painter Apelles. Agamben recalls Pliny's account of Apelles's visit to fellow painter Protogenes when he, displaying the height of his painterly art, divided in two an incredibly fine line drawn by Protogenes.[5] Agamben takes Benjamin's hitherto misunderstood metaphor as a metaphor for the Paulinian division and suspension of earlier divisions (Jew/Gentile, circumcised/uncircumcised, married/single, etc.). "Wherein lies the interest of this 'division of a division'?" asks Agamben. His reply is: "Above all in that it obliges us to think the question of the relation of universal to particular in a completely new fashion, not only in the realm of logic, but in that of ontology and of politics [*Inanzi tutto perché obbliga a pensare in modo completamente nuovo la questione della l'universale et del particolare, non soltanto nella logica, ma anche nell'ontologia e nella politica*]" [*Il tempo che resta* 53–54]. Further glossing this division of a division, Agamben says that it is, "an operation that divides these nomistic divisions and renders them *inoperative,* without forasmuch leading them to an ultimate stage [*un'operazione che divide le stesse divisioni nomistiche e le rende inoperanti, senza però mai raggiungere un suolo ultimo*]" [54-55; my emphasis]. This division of division which Agamben finds in Benjamin and Paul, this characteristic gesture, does not pretend simply to efface the divisions which isolate and alienate communities, but, without effacing them, renders them no longer of great importance, renders them, as instruments of political division, "*inoperative*."[6]

This division of a division which Agamben sees through the lens of Benjamin's work, and which he traces in part to the influence of Paul, would bring about a standstill of the dialectic of ontological unity and historical progress which has led to so many of the travesties of the present. This dividing of a division, or bringing to a standstill of the dialectic, would also, for Agamben, be the freezing of the "anthropological machine" which he sees as menacing today's societies [*O* 83/*A* 85]. In the wake of Michel Foucault's analyses of the powers and dangers of "biopolitics"—the new forms of discipline, control and domination which modernity has brought with it—Agamben identifies this "anthropological machine" which threatens to close that which is productively and promisingly open in contemporary politics. The openness

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5. Apelles, the favorite painter of Alexander the Great and widely credited in antiquity as the greatest painter of all time, lived at the end of the fourth century BC. Most of what is known of him comes from Pliny's Historia Naturalis [cf. especially, for the anecdote in question, 35: 181–83]. The story Agamben summarily recounts is as follows. Apelles comes to Rhodes to visit the painter Protogenes. Finding him not at home but a panel freshly prepared to be painted upon in his studio, he takes up a brush and makes a single, extremely thin line which he then confides to a servant of Protogenes asking that this serve as his calling card. Protogenes, returning home, finely divides this fine line with one of his own, in a different (unnamed) color, and instructs his servant that, in the event that the visitor comes again, he be shown the panel. Apelles, returning some time later, finds Protogenes again not at home and when shown his line divided he divides it, in a third (unnamed) color with a third line, even finer, which divides the divided line. Protogenes, returning home, renounces doing better, recognizes the skill of Apelles, and rushes to the port to greet him. Agamben's account foreshortens the episode, leaving out the first visit, and first line, of Apelles, as well as the crossing paths of Apelles and Protogenes [cf. Il tempo che resta *52-53]. The panel in question was preserved and later displayed in the palace of the Caesars in Rome until perishing in a fire. No extant traces of Apelles's paintings exist [cf. Gombrich 14–15 and Damisch 120–23].*

6. See also Agamben's Means without End *and the discussion therein of "the essential inoperability [*inoperosità*] of mankind" [141/109].*

in question is the open vocation of man, the freedom to refuse to accept the demands of a state which Agamben sees as ever seeking to identify, to isolate, and to control. (Agamben represented his commitment to this idea in practice in his refusal to accept the new conditions for entry in the United States demanded by the revised Homeland Security Act and his consequent resignation from a post as visiting professor at New York University in January of 2004.[7]) "To render inoperative the machine that governs our conception of man," writes Agamben, "would not mean to search for new—more effective or more authentic—articulations of this conception, but rather to display the central void, the hiatus which—within the human—separates the human from the animal" [*O* 92/*A* 94; translation modified]. This would mean, following Agamben, "to take the risk upon ourselves involved in such a void, in such a suspension of suspension, a Shabbat both of animal and man" [*O* 92/*A* 94;translation modified]. It is this open-ended risk for which Agamben's work wishes to make a plea—neither strictly human nor strictly animal, but from the open space between the two.

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7. See Agamben's article explaining the reasons for his decision in the Italian daily La Repubblica, *"Se lo stato sequestra il tuo corpo" ["If the State Were to Impound Your Body?"].*