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Richard Meyer, author of What was Contemporary Art?

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CONTEMPORARY ART

1989 TO THE PRESENT
# CONTENTS

**Contributors**  
ix

## INTRODUCTION  
1

*Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson*

## 1 THE CONTEMPORARY AND GLOBALIZATION  
5

*Worlds Apart: Contemporary Art, Globalization, and the Rise of Biennials*  
7

*Tim Griffin*

*“Our” Contemporaneity?*  
17

*Terry Smith*

*The Historicity of the Contemporary is Now!*  
28

*Jean-Philippe Antoine*

## 2 ART AFTER MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM  
37

*Elite Art in an Age of Populism*  
39

*Julian Stallabrass*

*“Of Adversity we Live!”*  
50

*Monica Amor*

*Making it Work: Artists and Contemporary Art in China*  
60

*Pauline J. Yao*
Contents

3 FORMALISM 70
Form Struggles 72
Jan Verwoert
Formalism Redefined 84
Anne Ellegood
The World in Plain View: Form in the Service of the Global 95
Joan Kee

4 MEDIUM SPECIFICITY 105
The (Re)Animation of Medium Specificity in Contemporary Art 107
Sabeth Buchmann
Medium Aspecificity/Autopoietic Form 117
Irene V. Small
Specificity 126
Richard Shiff

5 ART AND TECHNOLOGY 137
Test Sites: Fabrication 139
Michelle Kuo
Inhabiting the Technosphere: Art and Technology Beyond 149
Technical Invention
Ina Blom
Conceptual Art 2.0 159
David Joselit

6 BIENNIALS 169
In Defense of Biennials 171
Massimiliano Gioni
Curating in Heterogeneous Worlds 178
Geeta Kapur
Biennial Culture and the Aesthetics of Experience 192
Caroline A. Jones

7 PARTICIPATION 202
Participation 204
Liam Gillick and Maria Lind
# Contents

The Ripple Effect: “Participation” as an Expanded Field 214  
*Johanna Burton*

Publicity and Complicity in Contemporary Art 224  
*Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy*

## Activism 232

Activism 234  
*Andrea Giunta*

Knit Dissent 245  
*Julia Bryan-Wilson*

Light from a Distant Star: A Meditation on Art, Agency, and Politics 254  
*Raqs Media Collective*

## Agency 265

Participation in Art: 10 Theses 267  
*Juliane Rebentisch*

Fusions of Powers: Four Models of Agency in the Field of Contemporary Art, Ranked Unapologetically in Order of Preference 277  
*Tirdad Zolghadr*

Life Full of Holes: Contemporary Art and Bare Life 287  
*T. J. Demos*

## The Rise of Fundamentalism 298

Monotheism à la Mode 300  
*Sven Lütticken*

Freedom's Just Another Word 311  
*Terri Weissman*

On the Frontline: The Politics of Terrorism in Contemporary Pakistani Art 322  
*Atteqa Ali*

## Judgment 331

Judgment's Troubled Objects 333  
*João Ribas*
### Contents

A Producer’s Journal, or Judgment A Go-Go 346  
*Frank Smigiel*  
After Criticism 357  
*Lane Relyea*

#### 12 Markets 367

Globalization and Commercialization of the Art Market 369  
*Olav Velthuis*  
Three Perspectives on the Market 379  
*Mihai Pop, Sylvia Kouvali, and Andrea Rosen*  
Untitled 388  
*Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri*

#### 13 Art Schools and the Academy 406

Lifelong Learning 408  
*Katy Siegel*  
Art without Institutions 420  
*Anton Vidokle*  
Will the Academy Become a Monster? 429  
*Pi Li*

#### 14 Scholarship 436

Our Literal Speed 438  
*Our Literal Speed*  
Globalization, Art History, and the Specter of Difference 447  
*Chika Okeke-Agulu*  
The Academic Condition of Contemporary Art 457  
*Carrie Lambert-Beatty*

*Index* 467
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This volume comprises newly commissioned essays on contemporary art since 1989. The contemporary art world has expanded exponentially—in size and complexity—over the last two decades, precipitating a general uncertainty as to what matters and why, much less how we should look at, write about, and historicize these recent practices. Admitting from the outset the implications of this profound and often antagonistic situation, we have eschewed producing a descriptive text of our own and have instead brought together nearly fifty leading international creative, critical, and curatorial voices to examine what contemporary art is today. This book follows the principle given poetic shape in the Indian parable of the blind men and the elephant, in which a company of individuals feels a single region of the elephant’s body. One mightgrope a leg, while another the tusk, or an ear. Each touch yields a different tactile experience, as well as a distinct vantage from which to extrapolate the contours of the whole. Precisely because of the variability of the animal’s features—much less the horizon of one’s perception—the resultant points of view are at once catholic and incommensurate.

The history presented in this book is necessarily partial, and the better for its aggregation of conflicting opinions, interpretations, and approaches. It goes without saying that Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present is neither meant to be absolute nor prescriptive, but investigative, even speculative. It aims to generate a picture of a heterogeneous whole through the specificity
of positions moored in disparate practices, locations, and philosophies. It is with this goal in mind that the essays in *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present* emphasize the virtues of partisanship in the task of understanding the recent past, and the book’s success depends upon the vigor of debate it generates—debates we hope will provide the groundwork for successive histories of contemporary art.

While the essays themselves establish a discussion of the contemporary quite apart from our brief introduction of them, one basic point of structural and historiographical organization is our periodization of the contemporary from 1989. We do this for a number of reasons. The unprecedented growth of the contemporary art world coincided with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the tumultuous events surrounding the Tiananmen Square protests. The Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, the Solidarity Movement in Poland, and the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and the rest of the Eastern Bloc irrevocably modified the landscape of contemporary European Art; it also provided the economic means for local collectors to become highly influential players in the international art world. Meanwhile, the contemporary art scene in China, post-Tiananmen, evolved into an economic and cultural phenomenon independent from Western critical and economic systems of distribution, and as such represents a willful excision from, or the complete indifference to, the New York–Western Europe “hegemony” of contemporary art.

No matter the importance of such cities as New York, Berlin, or Beijing, the contemporary art world has experienced not just a multiplication of centers, but a deep constitutional adjustment regarding the nature of borders, travel, and the global economy. The increased number of biennials and triennials spread across the globe—something virtually unheard of before 1989, with the exception of stalwarts like São Paulo and Venice—made artists “peripatetic travelers” who created site-specific installations in response to the phenomena of globalization. Oft criticized for engendering a touristic, entertainment-oriented experience, these shows likewise gave rise to a kind of participatory art, taking advantage of the absence of traditional institutional structures for new, contingent presentational styles.

Such differences in exhibition practice notwithstanding, it may seem contentious to link aesthetic change to the geopolitical shifts of 1989—an argument that applies to other momentous dates, such as 1945 and 1968, which routinely arrange the writing of art history, the teaching of its classes, as well as the chronological installations of museum collections. To be sure, the events of 1989 and the years surrounding it were prepared for
by longer-term cultural, economic, and political histories, the implications of which are decisive for the comprehension of the recent past. But much art produced in the last twenty years arises, on the one hand, from artists who have grown up, been educated, and work in a context removed or critically distant from normative, Western art historical and social historical concerns. On the other hand, for those who have been educated in the Western/North Atlantic tradition—an obviously diverse body of individuals—many have at best an ambivalent relationship to the history of Western art and see themselves participating in an integrated international art system.

Despite these many transformations, the problems of power, distribution networks, conflicting senses of history, and the various contingencies surrounding both ideas of subjectivity and political agency remind us of how fraught this moment of art production and reception really is. When taken together, these complex conditions have gradually serrated the art made after 1989 from the art preceding it. Related to this, the authors assembled in these pages are, by and large, members of generations formed by the events of 1989, rather than the Vietnam War. (This latter fact has the advantage of setting aside the animating tensions between social art history and formalism that have driven much of “high” art critical writing since the 1970s, while making apparent the ways in which both approaches have been retooled, whether by means of new philosophical reference points or emergent aspects of practice.)

But to reiterate: There are numerous connections—many of which go back decades, if not longer—that caution against taking a stance of historical exceptionalism. Nevertheless the social and political alterations of the last twenty or so years have impacted how artists and commentators look at both their practice and the world, often regarding art as a source of critique as well as a tool for comprehending contemporary life under coeval conditions of holistically integrated cultures and temporalities. It is here that *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present* begins and leaves us, *in medias res*, which does not obviate the gesture toward understanding but renders it urgent.

**A User’s Guide to *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present***

The ubiquity and variance of contemporary art since 1989 challenges art historians, curators, and critics attempting to account for works of art created and circulated in a truly, if imperfectly, global context. At the root
of this problem is how to order thematically art defined by a multiplicity of contents—art that is far from determined or accommodating to extant, particularly Western, critical categories. Indeed, the openness of post-1989 art abets both its possibility and potential vacuity, and in response, we have grouped the essays into fluid rubrics that range from theoretically oriented problems to medium-based investigations: The Contemporary and Globalization; Art After Modernism and Postmodernism; Formalism; Medium Specificity; Art and Technology; Biennials; Participation; Activism; Agency; The Rise of Fundamentalism; Judgment; Markets; Art Schools; and Scholarship.

Each section is prefaced by a brief editorial statement, which introduces the material in broad strokes. We have included three essays per section to highlight the respective range of standpoints, and while the approaches and writing techniques vary from the straightforwardly scholarly to the self-consciously casual, each text is relatively brief in length. The essays are meant for a wide audience—as befits the topic at hand. Their concision provides a forum for deft, polemical interventions. We have made the editorial decision to avoid the imposition of a house style in order to show how the essays reflect recent developments in the contemporary art world and current methodological approaches to its interpretation, whether through a case study, survey-of-literature, journalistic brief, or experimental script.

The essays also manifest critical pedagogical concerns: Authors implicitly or otherwise evaluate the distinction between primary and secondary material; balance social, historical, material, theoretical, and aesthetic issues; and come to terms with the distinctions between contemporary art history and criticism. While Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present originated in the academy—one of the main impetuses for this book arose from our experiences in the classroom—it is, most importantly, also intended for artists, curators, critics, and anyone interested in a strongly argued, sustained, and disputatious inquiry into the structures and belief systems of the international contemporary art world.
In the middle of the twentieth century there was much art-world excitement regarding “internationalism”—the notion that art might reflect or impact the complex relations between distinct, politically sovereign nations. Greatly accelerated by the geopolitical events of 1989, critical attention has shifted to globalization, a difficult, even slippery term that downplays political powers, emphasizing how the deregulation of trade has largely eroded traditional nation-state boundaries. The forces of globalization—often abstracted away from the specific people, corporations, or governments that occasion its usage—its proponents believe, have promoted an effortless, even naturalized, flow of materials, goods, and services. For globalization’s detractors that “unification” levels local distinctions through processes of acculturation.

Tim Griffin argues in his essay “Worlds Apart: Contemporary Art, Globalization, and the Rise of Biennials” that globalization is fundamental for understanding how institutional frameworks now shape contemporary art. Certainly, globalization was celebrated in the early to mid-1990s in conjunction with the rise of international biennials. Many curators, critics, and artists believed in the potential of working in interstitial spaces and traveling to and among them. These optimistic attitudes changed with the turn of the millennium, when globalization became something actively to counter both in art and in writing, for reasons ranging from its flattening of difference to multinational corporations’ disregard for human sovereignty and environmental responsibility.
Of late, commentators have focused on the rise of the contemporary, a concept that sits alongside globalization. Like modernism, the contemporary suggests an aesthetic phenomenon that is necessarily global in scope, and for Terry Smith, as he outlines in his “‘Our’ Contemporaneity?”, this also represents a historical shift toward a cultural condition that continually reveals new worlds, new senses of being, and ultimately new ways to exist in our collective, yet particularized, time. Modernism arose in fits and starts around the world, and meant different things in different places. The contemporary assumes globalization as its foundational criteria and in a narrow sense describes what it literally means to be with the times. The contemporary speaks less about stylistic concerns (although they are implied) or ideological beliefs (they are still coming to the fore). In the conjunction of globalization and the contemporary we find two central concepts for comprehending on a macro level art production and distribution of the last twenty or so years. The question becomes just how this will be historicized. As Jean-Philippe Antoine suggests in his “The Historicity of the Contemporary is Now!” a new type of art historical practice is already under way, one which need be reciprocally informed by the work done by artists who assume the role of historian.
If art is necessarily bound up with its institutions—in other words, made legible as “art” only through and within its various apparatuses of production, display, and circulation, in addition to its discourses—then nothing is so crucial to our conception of contemporary art as globalization. Yet this is only to suggest that nothing else is so implicated in art’s dense weaving (or even dissolution) into the broader cultural field today.

To explain, globalization, utilized as a term in recent economic and political theory, often pertains to, in the words of Fredric Jameson, “the sense of an immense enlargement of world communication, as well as of a horizon of a world market.”1 Within artistic circles, the word has been used more specifically to describe an exponentially increased audience for (and financing of) contemporary art, attended by a radical proliferation of public and private museums and exhibitions throughout the world and, further, an expanded and ever-more rapid travel network and exchange of information among constituents of art on all points of the compass. (To illustrate this point simply with a hypothetical example: A work produced and debuted in São Paolo, Brazil, can be purchased in the artist’s studio by a committee of visiting trustees from a major institution in New York, where the piece is placed on view within the next month for tens of thousands of both local audiences and tourists from dozens of countries.) Precisely such circumstances, however, demand that art be seen in correspondence with the larger context of a world shaped principally by the forces and flows of global capital.2 For amid a postindustrial landscape it becomes clear, as put succinctly by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their benchmark volume on globalism, Empire (2000), that “the economic, the political, and the cultural increasingly overlap and invest one another.”3 Rather than imagining that art can be placed at an idealistic remove from these societal shifts, we arrive at a better grasp of art’s real contours—or better, of art’s institutions—by examining just to what degree it is steeped in those shifts. And nowhere in art is such an examination so possible or sustained—or so telling of both contemporary art’s predicament and potential, or of its waning and waxing singularity within the greater field of culture—as among biennials of the past twenty
years. In fact, in order to grasp the conditions for art-making today fully, one begins most productively with a consideration of their historical development and implications.

Arguing as much is partly to posit a crossing of two postwar trajectories: First, of art and its various models of critique; and, second, of socio-economic currents destabilizing nation-states and their ideological bases world-round. If in the 1960s, minimalist sculptors implicated the viewer’s body in their work, capitalizing on a phenomenological experience of the object in space, the following decade—in the wake of such artists as Daniel Buren calling for a sustained exploration of art’s “formal and cultural limits”—would see the rise of institutional critique and its efforts to disavow any sense of art’s autonomy: The notion of any display space or viewer that was objective or, more precisely, independent of social matrices of class, race, gender, and sexuality (Dan Asher, Sherrie Levine, Martha Rosler, Mierle Laderman Ukeles). By the 1980s, such engagements were extended by artists (Group Material, Hans Haacke, Christian Philipp Müller) to those social and economic terms and conditions that made any institution itself possible, with these artists’ critical intention still being, to cite art historian Miwon Kwon’s signal text “One Place After Another” regarding early iterations of specificity in art, to “decode and/or recode the institutional conventions so as to expose their hidden yet motivated operations—to reveal the ways in which institutions mold art’s meaning to modulate its cultural and economic value, and to … [make] apparent [art’s] imbricated relationship to the broader socioeconomic and political processes of the day.”

Such a longstanding mission, often undertaken in the immediate context of the museum, would only have been amplified in the face of such political developments in 1989 as the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of apartheid in South Africa, and the execution of pro-democracy demonstrators in China’s Tiananmen Square. While artists in previous decades might have wanted audiences to interrogate conditions of viewership and of art’s relationship with culture more generally, here were world-historical events forcing a mass reconsideration of ideology, of subjectivity and subjecthood, and of national and postcolonial identity (and even of the terms East and West, North and South)—all of which were already being eroded or challenged by widening forces of commerce and technology. In fact, if artists were, as Kwon has also noted in her essay, already being prompted by the trajectory of institutional critique to move outside the conventional realm of art—relocating their practices in the discursive framework of any site they chose, and steeping their art-making in research and, moreover,
in other disciplines, from anthropology to archaeology and so on—such endeavors would naturally gravitate toward the suddenly recalibrated coordinates of contemporary society. As curator Okwui Enwezor aptly put it in a brief text written in 2007, the world-historical events of 1989 “spurred a critical appraisal of the conditions of artistic production and of the systems by which such production was legitimated and admitted into the broader field of cultural production,” resulting in a “shift in curatorial language from one whose reference systems belonged to an early twentieth-century modernity to one more attuned to the tendencies of the twenty-first century.”6 The very ground under the institution of art had shifted; and if the museum was, as an initial object of postwar artistic critique, nevertheless linked to the idea of the modern nation-state, artists and curators alike would now seek alternative discourses and frameworks for their projects.

Numerous biennials provide ample, concrete evidence of such efforts being prompted by such a changing postwar landscape. For instance, the inaugural Johannesburg Biennial, curated by Lorna Ferguson, opened in 1995, just a year after South Africa’s first multiracial elections, in an effort to establish the country as part of a larger global community (a second iteration, curated by Enwezor, was titled “Trade Routes” and explicitly revolved around the theme of globalization). The Gwangju Biennale was created the same year, against the backdrop of South Korea’s first freely-elected government after a decades-long military dictatorship; titled “Beyond the Borders,” its first exhibition aimed to present work reflecting the dissolution of longstanding arbiters of identity, from political ideology to nationality. Further to the West, Manifesta—a self-described roving “European Biennial of Contemporary Art”—began in 1996, taking the fall of the Berlin Wall as a cue for reconsidering a new Europe (in terms of political ideology, economic structures, and novel communication technology) both in its own right and in relationship to the world at large. And, looking back to more than a decade before Manifesta’s creation, we find a precedent for such a multinational scope in the Havana Biennial: Created specifically to highlight artists of the Third World on the global stage (though later iterations of this exhibition would include Asian artists, effectively expanding its purview more generally to non-Western artists) this large-scale exhibition took region, as opposed to country, as its organizing principle.

If all these exhibitions were intended at their respective inceptions to create a stage for art within which audiences could discern a kind of destabilizing of cultural perspective—a redrawing of the societal map, as it were,
that was Copernican in its altering of the terms for center and periphery, and subsequently for object and context—it is still more provocative that most historians and curators contemplating the biennial phenomenon of the past twenty years cite the 1989 Centre Georges Pompidou exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* as a singular precedent for such investigations. Curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, this exhibition included work from the global “margins” not only to counter museums’—and, more specifically, the Paris Biennial’s—privileging of work produced in Europe and the United States, but also to put into question the very Western ideation of art. (Notably, the Paris Biennial was created in 1959 by André Malraux.) As Martin would say at the time in an interview with art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “[T]he questions of center and periphery are also related to issues of authorship and oeuvre…. especially since the artist’s role and the object’s function are defined [elsewhere] in an entirely different manner from our European way of thinking.”

In turn, the exhibition would feature not only Western artworks by such artists as Nancy Spero and Cildo Meireles but also objects playing unique traditional roles within their specific societies, including a Tibetan Mandela and a Navajo sand painting, among other pieces. While such displays would necessarily ask audiences to view art in the West through the prism of ethnography—effectively denaturalizing art’s place in Western society, prompting an awareness of its stakes in specific societal structures and belief systems, as well as of what Martin would call “the relativity of culture”—they also courted a very great risk. For in presenting installations specially made on the occasion by these various artists—one should note that to say “artists” is not quite accurate here, given the curator’s desire to problematize conventional ideas of art by deploying the anthropological terms of cult and ritual, as evidenced even by the use of “magicians” in his title—the exhibition re-inscribed Western tropes of authorship despite itself and, as a result, of authenticity and originality. The latter aspect, with its troubling historical associations with primitivism and, more specifically, constructions of an “other,” would undermine the exhibition’s supposed mission to subvert any privileged Eurocentric vantage on cultural production throughout the world.

Far from being a closed chapter of curatorial history, *Magiciens de la Terre* therefore has a continuing legacy in exhibition practices today, partly since so many curators have in its wake sought corrective approaches to the problematic of center and periphery, and partly since the core dilemma of that exhibition—of bringing together different cultures only at the peril of re-inscribing neocolonial perspectives—persist even now. Regarding
the former, it is worthwhile to consider the increasing prominence of Martinique-born, postcolonial poet and theoretician Édouard Glissant, particularly in terms of his emphases placed on the recognition of sustaining difference among cultures that are nevertheless being drawn into ever-closer relations. As he would write in 1990:

What we call globalization, which is uniformity from below, the reign of the multinationals, standardization, the unchecked ultra-liberalism of world markets, in my view, is the downside of a prodigious reality, that I call globality. Globality is the unprecedented adventure we are all given to live in a world which, for the first time, in a real and immediate, shattering way, conceives of itself as both multiple and single, and inextricable.9

Such a notion of being both “multiple and single” would, in Glissant’s own writing, be developed into a “poetics of relatedness,” whereby “each one must face the density (opacity) of the other. The more the other resists in his thickness or fluidity (without being confined to this), the more expressive his reality, and the more fruitful the interrelating.”10

In curatorial practice, then, many large-scale international exhibitions have been conceived in formats designed to create and maintain the quality of opacity, while moving beyond traditional display formats. For instance, Molly Nesbit, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, and Rirkrit Tiravanija’s Utopia Station, which debuted as part of the 2003 Venice Biennale, was organized around Glissant’s idea of the “archipelago”—consisting of so many interlinked yet isolated presentations of the project at different points on the globe, unfolding not only in space but also in time.11 With numerous iterations of the collaborative exhibition happening over the course of many years, few, if any, individuals would ever encounter the project in its entirety. Similarly, Enwezor’s Documenta 11 of 2002 would embrace Glissant’s understanding of creolité—a term first used to describe the heterogeneity of the Antilles, given historical interfaces there of European colonialists, indigenous Caribbeans, African ex-slaves, as well as indentured servants from China and East India—while composing a project featuring numerous seminars and conferences at various locations throughout the world in addition to an exhibition in Kassel, Germany, where Documenta takes place every five years.12 Audiences would be bound not to have seen every aspect of the exhibition and, more important, every conference city—whether Lagos or Mumbai—would be taken as a location with unique, specific concerns and cultures even while they were necessarily imbricated in global discourse
and the forces of globalization more generally. Any artwork placed on view was put forward in the context of this broader discursive landscape and larger thematic.

Such impulses, of course, are bound to create a fair amount of frustration among audiences—particularly as questions of access and accessibility arise. In fact, if, in a 2003 roundtable devoted to considerations of large-scale international exhibitions, artist Yinka Shonibare would note that globalization had created “a fantastic opportunity for visibility” for non-Western artists seeking international recognition, many others have levied criticisms that the conditions of visibility in exhibitions taking up globalization as a theme are subpar at best. Put another way, the impulse toward kinds of opacity in these exhibitions is taken to bespeak privilege—since the formulation of these ideas require a kind of overview only available to the curators themselves—or, perhaps more problematic, obfuscation. In this regard it is worthwhile to consider a reflection from the same roundtable by Francesco Bonami, who, following his 2003 Venice Biennale—for which he invited a number of other curators to organize shows with visions diverging from his own—would note New York Times critic Michael Kimmelman’s expressed desire for a smaller show consisting of a “dozen or even a few dozen” artists. Taking exception to this wish, which had been put forward in a review of his Biennale, Bonami argues:

[H]e is dreaming about a museum show—which isn’t what Biennales and Documentas are about. People insist on looking at Documentas and Venice as unified territories, which they are not. Similarly, the concept of globalization is often used to define the world as a unified territory, which it is not. We experience fragmentation in the world, and that’s what these big-scale events should reflect.14

Hence, the curator says, his exhibition was inspired in part by architect Rem Koolhaas’s notion of bigness, in which a “building is not a building but something else, with a plurality of functions. Similarly, an exhibition, when taken to a certain scale, is no longer an exhibition but a plurality of visions.”15 A certain cacophony (or even incoherence) is, in other words, necessary if art is to be reflective of its larger cultural context. To seek any streamlined presentation whose organizing principles would be overarching and all-encompassing would be not only to commit an act of bad faith—since objects would be subject to a singular vision, instead of being allowed to
operate according to their own individual logics—but also to adopt a false premise given the conditions of contemporary living. Yet Bonami’s choice of words—plurality—should nonetheless draw attention again to the perils of globalization-minded exhibitions re-inscribing the very single, coherent perspective it seeks to elide. Indeed, earlier debates around pluralism in art come to mind, since they often revolved around the risks and implications of a sameness arising in difference. Consider Hal Foster’s assertion in the early 1980s that “pluralism is precisely this state of others among others, and it leads not to a sharpened awareness of difference (social, sexual, artistic, etc.) but to a stagnant condition of indiscrimination—not to resistance but to retrenchment.” At the time, such an argument was steeped in the idea of numerous styles actually adhering to a single ideological structure—that of the free market—even while appearing to provide for heterogeneity of belief and form in art. And, in fact, today we might do well to consider whether the perspectival dilemmas of Magiciens de la Terre have arrived at new permutations given the increasing reach of capital in our era of globalization. In other words, we should ask not only to what extent difference might be subsumed by ideology within exhibitions, but also to what extent the biennial phenomenon—however much devoted to reconsiderations of ideology, geopolitics, and the very terms for self-reflexive art with the context of globalization—might be just another figure of contemporary commerce.

Perhaps on no occasion has such a question seemed so pertinent as the 2007 Grand Tour, a sequence of art-related events including Documenta, Skulptur Projekte Münster, the Venice Biennale, and Art Basel. Taking place at the very apex of the international market for contemporary art, these individual exhibitions were not only co-branded in a manner bound to eclipse distinctions between global exhibitions and art fairs—the latter of which had been, in recent years, commissioning work and asking curators to organize thematic shows of material from the gallery system, wanting to approximate the look and stature of biennials—but they were effectively arranged under the sign of tourism. Put another way, audiences would move from place to place as subjects in motion, or as figures in free circulation, passing through various staged scenes—and often to meet audiences’ preconceptions of what a global exhibition should be. (In this regard, the Grand Tour title seems particularly apt, since the first such tours were undertaken by young men in Europe who, sketchbooks in hand, would seek out landscapes and antiquities that—in another instance of sameness in difference—would match the tropes for the picturesque taught at home.) Yet such a formation of a view made in passing seems not exclusive to this
instance, particularly if one also takes into account the many biennials that have used their locations in nearly cinematic manners—rendering site as scene, summoning historical events without, per Kwon, aiming to “decode and/or recode the institutional conventions.” To mention just two such exhibitions by name, consider the 2006 Berlin Biennale, which utilized deteriorating architecture along a single street (including a former Jewish girls’ school) to house an exhibition whose work offered, given their sequenced themes, a loose narrative of a life’s passage running from birth to death; or the 2008 Prospect, in New Orleans, a newly created biennial whose first instantiation featured numerous artists making work in the ruined architecture of that city in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. In each instance, a city becomes something akin to an image, within which art has been placed.

One artist in particular has, in fact, made work that seems to address—or convey—precisely this situation, and on the stage of a global exhibition. For 2007’s Skulptur Projekte Münster, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster would populate a grassy hillside with miniature works from all the previous incarnations of the exhibition—from Dan Graham’s 1987 octagonal pavilion to Andrea Zittel’s iceberg-like islands made ten years later. Here, in other words, was the entirety of the exhibition’s history arrayed—in a new work by a contemporary artist—as so many copies of itself. And yet as consequential was the corporeal sense of the piece. As Gonzalez-Foerster would write at the time, her work, titled Roman de Münster, was intended as a “novel” where visitors would “be able to go from one sculpture to another without having to wait ten years or walk for kilometers.” Time and space collapsed in an experience whose components were recognizable at a glimpse. Such is the paradoxical situation of biennials today, which engage globalization yet seem also just symptomatic of it—which asks in turn for a tactical engagement in art that might re-instill and invigorate a sense of difference among regions and cultures that are in ever-tighter, if ambivalent, relation. In fact, it is difference-in-relation that, if established, would set contemporary biennials apart from pluralism of the past and, moreover, from passive reflections of globalization in the present.

Notes

By using the word correspondence, I mean to suggest simply that the operations of art are continually impacted by these larger economic forces at the same time that they might impact them in turn—much as actual agents, specific individuals, and/or corporations and governmental organizations might mobilize individuated systems of law, policy, production, exchange, and even belief that, taken collectively and cumulatively over time, generate a new set of objective (if also abstract) terms to which those various individuals and entities must react anew.

Indeed, the pair goes so far as to contend that “the cultural critic needs a basic knowledge of economic processes to understand culture.” Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Empire (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. xiii, xvi.


Ibid., p. 153.


Obrist in conversation with the author, April 13, 2011.


Ibid.

In part, here I merely reaffirm Hardt and Negri’s point regarding cultural critics needing some footing in the field of economics, and in the passages that follow certain correlations with mass commerce, particularly in terms of tourism and branding in art, should be clear. My hope, however, is that the present discussion implies—even if only by underlining extant conditions for the institutions of art—how such proximity also offers a unique opportunity to engage.

For a more nuanced consideration of this subject, see my “Framing the Question: The Grand Tour,” Artforum 46 (September 2007), pp. 424–427. One might consider the touristic aspect of this presentation of contemporary art as being enmeshed in larger developments, whereby art institutions are considered “destinations”—from the Guggenheim Bilbao to Dia: Beacon. Historical matters of scale assume geographic proportions.

What does it mean to be contemporary? This is a pressing question about how one might live now as well as a continuing inquiry into what kind of modernity is most suitable to present circumstances. Indeed, in many parts of the world—notably much of Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East—posing it hastens responses to the challenges of contemporary life. It is, therefore, a question for the world. How does this kind of questioning manifest itself in contemporary art?

A useful starting point is to acknowledge that the concept of contemporaneity has much greater potential than the mindless up-to-dateness that attends the word “contemporary” in much ordinary language and art-world usage. The etymology of the word itself is helpful in this regard. The *Oxford English Dictionary*’s four definitions, for example, bespeak a multiplicity of ways of being in time, and of so existing with others—who may share something of our own temporality but may also live, contemporaneously, in distinct temporalities of their own (and thus share a sense of the strangeness of being in time, now). This is to understand particular contemporaneity to mean the immediacy of difference. “Difference” is understood in three strong senses: difference in and of itself; difference to proximate others; and difference within oneself. To be contemporary, then, is to live in the thickened present in ways that acknowledge its transient aspects, its deepening density, and its implacable presence.¹

What might be said of contemporaneity in a more general or historical sense? In the Oxford dictionary, the word “contemporaneity” is defined, simply, as “a contemporaneous state or condition,” one that could, of course, occur at any place or time, and be experienced by individuals, groups, and entire social formations. Yet if we read this word through the richness we now see in “contemporary,” we recognize its potential to name a broad, worldwide situation, the most definitive characteristic of which is the experience—at once subjective and objective, individual yet shared, entirely particular while being inescapable for all—of being immersed, to an unprecedented degree, in a world marked by an unprecedented diversity and depth of difference.²

Modernity is now our past. Consider how the current world picture has changed in the aftermath of the Cold War stalemate. As the system built on
First, Second, Third, and Fourth world divisions imploded, what new arrangements of power have come into being? The reconstruction of an idea of Europe promises to contain its warring nationalities, or, at least, disperse disruption to its borders, yet it faces fundamental transformation from within as previously colonized peoples move to its centers and diversify its national cultures. Decolonization has opened up Africa, spawning hybrid nation-states that in most cases have failed to reconcile the interests of elites, international economic agents, and the variety of tribal peoples artificially contained within outdated borders. In Asia, a number of “tiger economies” revived the dream of modernity-for-all by intense, high-speed modernizations. China has emerged to superpower economic and political status, driven by arrangements between a centralized state and free-market economic players that would have been inconceivable in modernity. In South America the era of revolution versus dictatorship led first to the imposition of neoliberal economic regimes and then to a continent-wide swing toward populist socialism. Meanwhile, the United States’ attempts to rule as the world’s only hyperpower have spectacularly and destructively imploded, while its patterns of internal governance fall into divisive paralysis. The Middle East is afame with protest against autocracy, corruption, and servile dependence. The post-1989 globalizing juggernaut—unchecked neoliberalism, historical self-realization, and the worldwide distribution of ever-expanding production and consumption—is disintegrating.

What all of these changes have in common, both within each sphere and as a whole, is the contemporaneousness of lived difference, the coexistence of incommensurable viewpoints, and the absence of an encompassing narrative that will enlist the participation of all. In this sense, contemporaneity itself is the most evident attribute of the current world picture, encompassing its most distinctive qualities, from the interactions between humans and the geosphere, through the multitude of cultures and the ideoscape of global politics to the interiority of individual being. This picture can no longer be adequately characterized by terms such as “modernity” and “postmodernity,” not least because it is shaped by friction between antinomies so intense that it resists universal generalization; indeed, it resists even generalization about that resistance. It is, nonetheless, far from shapeless. Within contemporaneity, it seems to me, three sets of forces contend, arrayed like a three-dimensional chess game, with moves on each board incessantly shifting pieces on the others.3

Dominating the first, geopolitical and economic level is globalization itself, above all its thirsts for hegemony in the face of increasing cultural
differentiation (released by decolonization); for control of time relative to the proliferation of asynchronous temporalities; and for continuing exploitation of natural and (to a degree not yet imagined) virtual resources against the increasing evidence of the inability of those resources to sustain this exploitation. On the second level, that of societal formations (citizenship, governmentality, local politics), the inequity between peoples, classes, and individuals is now so blatant that it threatens both the desires for domination entertained by states, ideologies, and religions and persistent dreams of liberation. Thirdly, on the level of culture, where selves are formed vis-à-vis others, we are all increasingly subject to what be called immediation—that is, we are immersed in an infoscape (a spectacularized society, an image economy, a regime of representation)—capable of instant communication of all information and any image anywhere. This iconomy, or the entire global communication system, is constantly fissured by the activities of highly specialist, closed knowledge communities, open, volatile subjects, rampant popular fundamentalisms and anxious state apparatuses, even as it remains heavily mediated from above.

Globalization, free market economies, centralized states, international arrangements, nongovernmental agencies, legal or shadow economies, cooperation between dissident movements—none of these “global players” seem capable, singly or in concert, of keeping these antinomies in productive tension. This is especially disabling at a time when climate change signals that the implicit ecological contract between human development and the earth’s natural evolution might have been broken. Planetary consciousness, and planetary action, has become the most pressing necessity of our contemporary situation. How are contemporary artists responding to this overall situation?

Ab-original: Contemporaneity and the Origins of Art

In 2006, Jean-Luc Nancy began a lecture by explaining why he chose “Art Today” as his title instead of the subject on which he had been invited to speak: “Contemporary Art.”¹ He offered the usual reasons, each of them acknowledging one of the meanings of the concept: contemporary art is an art historical category still in formation; in ordinary usage “contemporary” means the past twenty or thirty years; because it excludes art being made today but in pre-contemporary modes, it cannot encompass all current art; and, finally, when it is used to name kinds of art it “violates” not only the
traditional categories of the practice-based (plastic) arts but also more recent ones, such as “performance art.” In the face of such confusion, “how is it possible that in the history of art we have come to adopt a category that does not designate any particular aesthetic modality the way we would, once, describe hyperrealism, cubism, or even ‘body art’ or ‘land art,’ but a category that simply bears the name ‘contemporary’?”

He was not tempted to treat this confusion as an indicator of the vacuity of contemporary “thought.” Nor did he see it as evidence of the triumph of witless presentism on the part of those who live only to consume the latest offering, in art as in the general culture. Rather, he went straight to origins. At the moment of making, every work of art is ipso facto contemporary with other art being made at the same time. It is also contemporary with its own times in the general sense. Every work of art, therefore, enables us (the artist, the viewer) to feel a “certain formation of the contemporary world, a certain perception of self in the world.” It does so, not in the form of an ideological statement (“the meaning of the world is this”), but more as a kind of suggestive shaping of possibilities, one that “allows for a circulation of recognitions, identifications, feelings, but without fixing them in a final signification.” Thus the contribution of Giotto, Michelangelo, Caravaggio and others, who give us more than the Christian program that occasioned their masterworks, and the secular artists—Picasso, Cézanne, Brancusi, Proust are among his examples—whose art exceeds the factuality of the everyday from which they begin. The worlds that they (as artists) are, the worlds that they create, are “there every time to open the world to itself, to its possibility of world.” This stands in contrast to works of art that “offer a surcharge of significations,” where the message seems too obvious.

World-making in and by works of art is, Heidegger has shown us, as fundamental to the art as is its contemporaneity. What, then, is so special about the kind of art that is designated “contemporary”? Or, better, what qualities with regard to worlding might a work of contemporary art be said to possess? Nancy’s first stab at this is as follows: “Contemporary art could be defined as the opening of a form that is above all a question, the form of a question.” He is not alone in highlighting the interrogatory gesturing of contemporary artists (in contrast to the projective impulses of modernist artists, and the propositional character of late modern transitional art). Yet the interrogatory is not enough: “Perhaps a question does not entirely make a world, or a world in which the circulation of meaning is solely an interrogative and anxious circulation, sometimes anguished; it’s a difficult world, a fragile world, an unsettling world.”
We might expect that these terms would invite him to attach art practice to the broader condition of being-in-the-world today. He does not take this path, trying out first the (opposite) route of proposing that, “Art today is an art that, above all else, asks: 'what is art?'” This is the central conceptualist question initiated by Duchamp, in contrast to the formal and figural elaborations continued by Picasso and Matisse. Duchamp’s lead was taken up by conceptualist artists during the 1970s and act out in the public provocations of the Young British Artists during the 1990s. Nancy does not pursue this development to its current most obvious instantiation, where every person adept at any form of social media undertakes art-like practices as a matter of everyday course, and artists everywhere seek to make art virtually indistinguishable from such practices. The question is, in effect, reversed: “What, nowadays, is not art?”

Nancy does, however, offer an unusual inflection on Duchamp’s ready-made, reading it as staging a rendezvous with that which, until that moment of the artist’s designation, was not regarded as art: “The question of art is obviously posed as the question of the formation of forms for which no preliminary form is given.” By “preliminary form” he means “schema” in Kant’s sense, the non-sensible that precedes and makes possible the sensible. He does the same with his suggestion that Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937) was the last history painting in the grand manner that had prevailed since the later eighteenth century. From this observation Nancy draws the implication that, subsequently, signification itself went into crisis (one famously identified by Foucault as the posthuman and by Lyotard as postmodernism). This sudden absence of “great schemas, great regulating ideas, whether they be religious, political and hence also aesthetic” removes the “supports” of art, the bases on which artistic form arises. Contemporary art, therefore, begins from “this shapeless state of self.”

If I have dwelled here on Nancy, it is because he identifies some of the key elements—and their implications for art-making—of what I see as a world historical shift from modernity through postmodernity to contemporaneity. But, having seen a clear set of connections between epochal changes in world-picturing and the interrogatory nature of contemporary art, he retreats toward a set of his core beliefs, above all those concerning art as a fundamental *gesture*, one that “puts us in direct communication with the creation of the world.” In favor neither of art for art’s sake, nor of art dedicated to religious, political, or ethical purpose, Nancy celebrates art as an act that manifests being, which brings worlds into being. The closest he gets toward identifying what might be contemporary about such art today
is his remark: “I would say that a contemporary signal is a signal towards this: there is always, again, as before, there is always the possibility of making a world, it opens up a world to us.” He links this with the French preference for the term “mondialisation”—the worldwide creation and circulation of sense by all concerned—over the EuroAmerica-centric economic and geopolitical schematism underlying the term “globalization.”

If, in the limited framework of a single lecture, we cannot expect more than brief allusions to how contemporary art might connect with larger contemporary conditions, we must value Nancy’s forthrightness in bringing his core insights about artistic creativity and metaphysical presence to bear on this question. In particular, we find useful his recognition that in Duchamp’s gesture, and that of countless artists after him, “The question of art is obviously posed as the question of the formation of forms for which no preliminary form is given.” While on a superficial level this was a mantra of postmodernism, when we recognize its applicability at the deeper levels where artistic form originates we can see that it points to a distinctive, perhaps definitive, fact about what it is to make art today: That artists search for the supports that will generate form within a worldscape across which great schematisms—globalization, decolonization, fundamentalism—continue to contend for universal dominance, yet are destined to fail because they presume modern, or anti-modern, world pictures. In contemporaneity, committed as it is to “opening up worlds to us,” there is no spatial or temporal territory that leaves these forces as they were.

The Art-World Considers “the contemporary”

Do philosophical reflections such as these resonate within art-world discourse? Regrettably, the rise of contemporary art during recent decades has been accompanied by a deep reluctance to engage with such core issues. The “Questionnaire on ‘the contemporary’” circulated by October magazine in 2010 points to the strange conjunction of a radically under-theorized, almost empty yet core value (“the contemporary”) and the proliferation of contemporary art into almost every corner of the world of art today. Most of the responses lamented the disabling impact of this impasse on current art practice and theory, yet stayed within its terms. In this sense the authors reflected the larger impotence that pervades much thinking in the field. When generalization is attempted, it often takes celebrated, successful, and expensive art as representative of all art being made today, and then adds to
the adulation, pillories it as evidence of profound cultural vacuity and artistic corruption, or wavers somewhere in between. Art that is different in kind, intention, form, and effect is regarded as somehow falling short of this maligned, yet all-too-prominent fakery. This approach falls into the trap of reductive simplification. It is of course true that Hirst, Koons, Murakami and others do serve up to their masters a kind of palatable capitalist realism. At the same time, Hirst at least offers a trenchant exposé of the health industries as a machinery of death and decimation, and Murakami has more successfully than any other figure popularized a critique of the arrested adolescence pervasive in postwar Japanese culture.

Some respondents to the questionnaire attempted more constructive approaches. Yates McKee detailed his efforts to tackle issues of actual effectiveness of political art in his teaching. Contra the generalized inclusiveness of Nicolas Bourriaud’s notion of “Altermodernism,” curator Okwui Enwezor highlighted the need to display the interplays between modernity and contemporaneity in “off-centered” art-producing regions. In a rare attempt at seeing the larger picture, and seeing it art historically, Alexander Alberro argued that the end of the Cold War in 1989, the globalization of cultural values, the spread of integrated electronic communications, and the dominance of economic neoliberalism signal the emergence of a new historical period that, in the fine arts, has become known as “the contemporary.”

When the editors of e-flux journal, an online and book publishing coalition that also runs a nonprofit space in New York, whose activity is itself taken to be artwork (that of its founder, Anton Vidokle), decided to establish a simple menu structure to allow users to navigate a wiki archive of contemporary art they ran head first into the same problem. They published two issues seeking ideas about how they might develop their “own criteria for browsing and historicizing recent activity in a way that affirms the possibilities of contemporary art’s still-incompleteness, of its complex ability to play host to many narratives and trajectories without necessarily having to absorb them into a central logic or determined discourse—at least before it forms a historical narrative and logic of exclusion that we would much rather disavow?” They realized that “we are looking at two distinct approaches to contemporaneity: one that has already been fully institutionalized, and another that still evades definition.”

The temporal mismatch at the core of contemporary art’s situation is brilliantly nuanced in Cuauhtémoc Medina’s opening essay, “Contemp(t)ory: Eleven Theses,” most of which are studded with succinct formulations
such as “it is no coincidence that the institutions, media, and cultural structures of the contemporary artworld have become the last refuge of political and social radicalism. …[They] also function as the critical self-consciousness of capitalist hypermodernity.”24 This dangerous double leads him to dissent from “those theorists who lament the apparent co-opting of radicalism and critique by the official sphere of art,” opting instead to suggest that “our task may consist, in large part, of protecting utopia—seen as the necessary collusion of the past with what lies ahead—from its demise at the hands of the ideology of the present time.”25 This is a sentiment close to the heart of Boris Groys who, in the title of his essay, “Comrades of Time,”26 puns on the German term for “contemporary,” zeitgenössisch, bemusedly draws out the sense that we are being asked to nurture a time that, after the abandonment of the Communist Project in Europe, seems condemned to “repeat its pasts” and “reproduce itself without leading to any future.”27 The art-like activity of the millions throughout the world who are immersed in social media instantiates this state of spectacular pointlessness. In contrast, time-based contemporary art “turns a scarcity of time into an excess of time—and demonstrates itself to be a collaborator, a comrade of time, its true con-temporary.”28 His example was a work by Francis Alÿs, but he could have cited another contributor to e-flux, the Raqs Media Collective, whose work and thought is exemplary of the issues in play. My favorite from their essay: “A contemporaneity that is not curious about how it might be surprised is not worth our time.”29

Can insights such as these help us develop a more general hypothesis about the roles, the positioning, and the potentialities of art in contemporary conditions? The sense of being “in” this time, these times, and “out of” them at the same time is of the essence of contemporaneity. This kind of “time/space”—a space that exists in time, from which one is aware of being embedded in measurable temporalities and historical consequence while somehow also being at a shadowy distance from them—has always been of enormous interests to artists. It was a major theme within modern art, pitching it against the past and many specific pasts, and doing so in the name of imaginable and inevitable futures. It is even more of a core subject for contemporary artists, working within and between the currents just outlined. These include Tacita Dean, Christian Marclay, Bill Viola, John Mawurndjul, William Kentridge, Isaac Julian, Steve McQueen, Emily Jacir, and countless others. I would argue, however, that the past–present–future triad no longer dominates temporality, because contemporaneity includes
within its diversity many revived pasts and wished-for futures, all of which are being lived out as vivid, or at least possible, presents.30

I suggested above that the concept of contemporaneity allows us to see that friction between three sets of antinomic forces shapes, in a fractured way, the current world (dis)order. I have proposed that these forces subsist in art practice in homologous ways, such that three broad currents may be discerned in art today, each quite different in character, scale, and scope.31 They have taken distinctive forms since the 1950s. The first current prevails in the metropolitan centers of modernity in Europe and the United States (as well as in societies and subcultures closely related to them) and is a continuation of styles in the history of art, particularly modernist ones. The second has arisen from movements toward political and economic independence that occurred in former colonies and on the edges of Europe and then spread everywhere. It is characterized above all by clashing ideologies and experiences. The result is that artists prioritize both local and global issues as the urgent content of their work. Meanwhile, artists working within the third current explore concerns that they feel personally yet share with others, particularly of their generation, throughout an increasingly networked world. Taken together, these currents constituted the contemporary art of the late twentieth century, and their unpredictable unfolding and volatile interaction continue to shape art in the early twenty-first.

**Notes**

1 Giorgio Agamben’s answer to “What does it mean to be contemporary?” is to articulate “contemporariness” as experienced by those philosophers, poets, scientists, and artists who, he presumes, are most capable of understanding its true nature. Presented online as “Giorgio Agamben on contemporaneity,” its title when published in Italy was *Che cosè il contemporaneo?* It has settled in English as “What is the Contemporary?” Respectively, www.youtube.com/watch?v=GsS9VPS_gms&feature=related; Giorgio Agamben, *Che cosè il contemporaneo?* (Rome: Nottotempo, 2008); and Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 39–54.

Joseph Nye Jr., inventor of the term “soft power,” has recently used this metaphor to invoke the distribution of military, economic, and cultural power in the world today. See his The Future of Power (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011).


See, for example, Boris Groys, Going Public (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), especially “Comrades of Time,” pp. 84–101. See also note 28.


25 Ibid., p. 21.


27 Ibid., p. 28.

28 Ibid., p. 29.


30 As a corrective against presentism, it is worth remembering that this idea emerges vividly in books 10 and 11 of St Augustine’s *Confessions*, written in Hippo in 397 ce. And to read Garry Wills’s brilliant introduction to these books in his *Augustine’s Confessions, A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), chapters 7 and 8.

31 I have elaborated these ideas in a number of recent publications, among them Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); my own response to the questionnaire, see *October* 130 (Fall 2009), pp. 46–54; and *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2011).
The Historicity of the Contemporary is Now!
Jean-Philippe Antoine

The project of a history of the contemporary may easily look oxymoronic, caught as it is between the habitual distance required from historians toward their subject matter, and the critical urgency, as well as the tentativeness, associated with any attempt to analyze the present. The case of art offers an additional twist. Here the word contemporary doesn’t designate any artwork presently being done. Rather, it singles out a number of artistic practices, objects, and events, deemed by their makers and audiences to be “the art of our times,” against other works that do not count as contemporary art, while, from a timeline point of view, being strictly coetaneous with us. This discrepancy between a chronological catch-all “now” and a restricted concept of the contemporary, circumscribed by values and perpetually threatened with becoming a particular genre of art, is symptomatic of a larger situation, in which contemporariness and historicity have become but two sides of the same artistic coin.

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The first inklings of this connection between art, the contemporary, the present, and the past emerged in the late eighteenth century, when Friedrich Schiller defined the relationship between the artist and his time as uncannily untimely. Schiller insisted that he was writing as “a citizen of the century,” and his essay is unabashedly grounded in the urgency of the French Revolution. Yet he asserted that, while “a child of his time,” the artist resists his assimilation to the current moment. He remains “a foreign construct” (“eine fremde Gestalt”), so that the strangeness of his work appears to the public to hark back to past, ancient, even unknown times. Acknowledging this situation, though, gives rise to a new question: If the artist and his/her artwork are not wholly absorbed by the urges and tastes of the present, then to what other part of time do they also belong?

Prompted by archaeological findings, in other words by resurrected traces of the past, Schiller and his contemporaries answered the question by reinventing antiquity as a ghost among the living. The attempt to reach out to the Greeks and Romans, by emulating their aesthetics and politics, resonates time and again throughout the period. But what resonates just as well
is the recognition of the impossibility to wholly coincide with them, and to cancel an irreparable time difference. Winckelmann’s moving meditation on the downfall of classical antiquity in the final page of his *History of Ancient Art* stands as a case in point.

As implied in the term “neoclassicism” later forged by art historians, one may view these developments as yet another iteration in a series of revivals of classical antiquity already begun in the Middle Ages and culminating with the Renaissance. But to do so misses what really started with neoclassicism: The attempt to define the contemporary through specific connections to historical periods, picked out of a generic, a-historical past. Late antiquity and the Middle Ages were thus rediscovered and “revived” by romanticism, not because of their sequential order, but because they provided valued vehicles for resisting absorption into the pure present of nascent industrial societies. And despite obvious differences, the cubist romance with African masks or Barnett Newman’s interest in the Indian mounds of Ohio Valley are but two examples of this same appropriative gesture, geared toward retrieving specific moments in a large and indefinite past. Indeed one may very reasonably argue that modernism plays for many artists today a quite similar role to that of classicism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, whether as rightful inspiration and vocabulary, or as a foil. One may think here of Mark Lewis’s or Tacita Dean’s recent filmic reinvestments of modern architecture, or else of the way Gerhard Richter’s “abstract paintings” parody modernist abstraction. But this situation was probably best acknowledged in the question posed only a few years ago by the editors of the *Documenta 12 Magazine*: “Is Modernity our Antiquity?”

If the later eighteenth century provides an early condensation point for this emerging pattern, it took much longer for a theoretical awareness of it to develop. We may credit Alois Riegl, the late nineteenth-century Austrian art historian and theoretician, with being the first to fully recognize this development and evaluate its consequences. In the increasingly prophetic *The Modern Cult of Monuments* (1903), Riegl identified a shift in attitude toward the past peculiar to modern Western societies. Its background is a concept of history that has slowly developed from the Renaissance on, away from its medieval status as the exemplary chronicles of worthy men and deeds, from which princes and rulers were taught. History now stands as the recording of events deemed worthy of being remembered because they are irreparably lost and will never come back. History will *not* repeat itself.

In the entropic realm that Riegl describes, any trace of a past event, as small as it may be, becomes a potential object of historical inquiry, while the
actualization of this potential is trusted to its rarefied character, its beauty, horror, or singularity—as assessed from the present. Objects, events, people and social groups, periods and styles, compete for historical status as part of a global ancientness (as recent as they actually may be), whose apprehension relies on the perceptual recognition of certain things as unheimlich, as different from the ordinariness of the present. This eminently democratic relationship to the past doesn't require any historical culture. It is available to anyone, and it bestows upon things an age-value entirely distinct from their historical or artistic value. A good example of this new “sentimental” attitude is the love of ruins that developed at the end of the eighteenth century, coinciding with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Ruins “look” ancient, they display age whether we know what they are, or not. But nowhere is age-value more succinctly described than in the first chapter of Flaubert's unfinished last novel, Bouvard and Pécuchet: “When they admired an old piece of furniture they regretted that they had not lived at the period when it was used, though they were absolutely ignorant of what period it was.”

Age-value has become, in the last few decades, a prevalent feature in processing our relationships to things in general. For today things immediately appear to us either as new, modern—i.e., functional and void of any trace of the inscription of time—or as ancient—i.e., bearing entropic markings which make them into signs of unknown past events and places; in other words, into monuments.

Indeed, another strong symptom of the situation here described is the newly acquired importance, and shift in meaning, of the concept of monument. While for a long time the use of the word had been restricted to intentional monuments, expressly built to last and provide posterity with definite coined messages, modernity has seen unintentional monuments proliferate: things which, through the inscription on their surface of the markings of passing time, have become mute records of differences they weren't meant to carry. It is here we come back to art. For, just as traditional monumentality provided a stage for the restricted concepts of the fine arts, the modern category of unintentional monument, which embraces any trace of human activity (as long as it is the bearer of some irreplaceable difference), opens up into a much larger, expanded concept of art. When any trace, provided the right circumstances, is liable as such to become an unintentional monument, then the field of monumentality not only expands, it also becomes one with the field of art. In this instance, Marcel Duchamp's shockingly general definition of art, from some forty years ago,
becomes quite handy: “The word Art, etymologically, means to do, not even to make, but to do.” To which one may add: and to take care of what was done, or made.

The responsibility of art today is to make or do something singular and valuable, something “interesting.” Or it is to conserve, maintain, and publicly exhibit something that has crystallized value and singularity through its trials in time. But this widely expanded definition means that art no longer operates as it used to, through the underwriting of the contemporary by supposedly eternal, time-free ideals. It now inhabits a vast, a-historical and boundless warehouse of ancientness, continually revisited and augmented by the present. There all past objects and events have become indifferently available for historical and artistic pick-up. Furthermore, the evaluation of art is now entirely ruled by judgments that not only are circumstanced, but know themselves to be date-stamped. It is ruled by fashion. This fact, while itself possibly value-free, nonetheless ushers in a new situation, which bears on art’s practice, appraisal, and enjoyment. For fashion explicitly exerts its judgment from the present, even as it forages from the past.

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While trying to define the present-day value (Gegenwartswert) of monuments—shall we say their contemporaneity?—Riegl stumbled upon a major difficulty. He found himself with two irreconcilable working definitions of the new. The first one, which we have already encountered, is linked to functionality: Things are new, they feel contemporary, if they fully identify with the capacity to accomplish what they were meant for. The actually new communes here with objects from the past, as long as the latter are still functional, or have been returned, through conservation and restoration, to their pristine state. This newness-value (Neuheitswert) thus primarily connects with both the concept of intentional monument and the artistic/historical values embedded in the fine arts tradition.

Yet another, more novel, concept of the new has emerged in contemporary Western societies, which is tied to the problem of evaluating works of art and, generally speaking, creativity. “In our modern view,” writes Riegl, “the new artifact requires flawless integrity of form and color as well as of style; that is to say, the truly modern work must, in its concept and detail, recall earlier works as little as possible.” Far from being linked to use-value and functionality, this alternate newness-value thrives on the shock-value of the perceived object (or event), on its uncanny otherness—and this clearly
contradicts the functional new. The reliance on shock-value ties this emerging form of the new to many twentieth-century avant-garde strategies. But it connects it simultaneously to the most recently developed form of relationship to the past: age-value. For pace Riegl, who couldn't quite reconcile these findings, maybe for fear of endangering the evolutionary art history he still advocated, a strong family resemblance actually unites the “absolute” newness of contemporary art and the ancientness of things past. In both cases, the viewer experiences a thing or event through feeling the signal shock of the uncanny.

This finding seems at first of little help. Neither the shockingly new artwork nor the shockingly ancient object initially appears as historical. We know nothing about the contemporary work—inasmuch as it is not a mere repetition of existing artifacts. We also don’t know anything about the ancient thing. It belongs to forgotten or never known circumstances, and strikes us aslant from afar. Both behave as unknown quantities, and their relationship is grounded in a common denial of history, whether explicitly, when modernist avant-gardes insist on building from a tabula rasa, or as the product of a widespread commonplace ignorance of the historical past. But precisely because the contemporary work of art and the ancient thing don’t already belong to established historical categories, they require—indeed they demand—to become the focus of historical inquiry.

A first reason for this is that, as once stated by the late nineteenth-century French sociologist, Gabriel Tarde, history is above all a record of inventions. Aside from fiction, history is the one discourse that has the potency not to dissolve invention into repetitious sameness. Its broken, unpredictable linearity works as a graphic record of the happenings of the new, and that is why it doesn’t repeat itself, but only changes shape. As a consequence, a special responsibility emerges for artists and scholars to take care of the new, of the now, in terms of building for it a history. Otherwise they will just reiterate previous constructs and petrified events.

Such a history will be discontinuous. It will be fragmentary and anachronic, as indeed are the relationships between present and past. As suggested earlier, one of the signal ways in which a present grows to differentiate itself from what it was, is by appointing, within the boundless storehouse of a generic past, newly targeted moments. This means that the contemporary, far from identifying with a “present” reduced to a narrow and fugitive slice of chronological time, actually consists in the knitting together of a specific variety of times.
These knit-together times are highly different from the generic past of age-value, whose undefiniteness resembles nothing more than the global, a-historical present of consumption, with its insistence on a perpetually renewed *tabula rasa*. For each specific variety of times will be made up of an undefined but limited number of current connections to peculiar moments in the past, whose combination defines a specific present. And while these moments do stem from the generic age-value that gives modern democratic culture its distinct atmosphere, they don't actually inhabit it. They live with and among us, quite often as the Ghost of Christmas Past, since they first appear to us not as readymade historical or stylistic periods, but as wild, shocking artifacts questioning our awareness of the now, and ultimately the shaping of our present.

Indeed, while the first symptom of this process is an unpredictable feeling of difference experienced before various past objects, only through the becoming historical of this relationship will the present actually produce *for itself* these elected moments of the past, and build them into recognizable periods, styles, or *epistemes* to emulate, or desecrate. Only then will it find itself different from the urges of even the most recent past—that of fashion—and from what by now will have become mere tastes.

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As intimated from what precedes, this form of historical inquiry doesn't identify with the existing field of art history, which has a grievous record of stifling the new (as well as, just for symmetry, heterogeneous ancientness), while privileging long chains of the same repetitious "influences." Adding "contemporary art" to a long list of centuries in order to bring to a close a universal history of art would be but a short-lived parody of previous historicist endeavors, and a spectacular misunderstanding of the unique methodological and, yes, ethical value of the contemporary for *all* historians.

For in studying the contemporary, one of the most frequent obstacles to the practice of history is made much less onerous: The prejudice that "things past" were always part of history, even before historians grabbed them and made them so. Such false naturalizing of the work of previous historians becomes very difficult, if not downright impossible, with contemporary artworks, which do not possess the kind of historiography and genealogy attached to their forebears. While these works ask not to be left to die in a coma of pure presentness, and ultimately petrified into a-historical clichés, the very fact that documentation and archival work need to be performed to achieve their historicization gives the strongest
indication that they weren’t born historical in the first place. They claim to become historical.

A first reason for studying the contemporary is thus that it offers a cleaner plate to the crucial task of performing history. But should we accept the family resemblance between vanguard new-value and age-value, we must of necessity accept an additional consequence. Studying the contemporary means investigating its ties with the “specific objects” which NOW—not at any other time—unpredictably come alive and strike us as shocking monuments, as opposed to the abstract, “past-in-general” that inhabits the boundless storehouse of collective memory.

Why has Mallarmé’s poem *Un Coup de Dés* (1897) suddenly become the cornerstone for a number of recent visual artworks, as was made clear in *Un Coup de Dés: Writing turned Image*, a 2008 exhibition at the Generali Foundation in Vienna? Is it because modernism looms so large in today’s artistic practices and critical thought? Because it has become a monument, as opposed to the very air we breathe (a possibility that the spreading of the term *postmodernism* lamely acknowledges)? But what modernism? How does the recent shifting back of its origins from the first decades of the twentieth century to the nineteenth impinge on its very idea? Why have the works of artists as different as Paul Thek and Marcel Broodthaers lately been given new purchase, after years of benign (or not so benign) neglect? Those questions, with many others, do not amount to a series of disconnected and ultimately subsidiary toils. They become part and parcel of the very act of shaping our contemporariness. And such an investigation qualifies as a work of art—an act of “social sculpture” performed by artists as well as by art historians and other varied members of the public. For acquiring an awareness of who and what haunts us is a huge part of, if not the main affair in, shaping the present, as unremarkable a task as it may appear in our present-obsessed times.

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This art historical practice runs contrary to run-of-the-mill eclectic art history, with its predictable continuities and lines of influence, as well as to the sort of art criticism that, addicted to a flimsy, paper-thin concept of the now, remains unaware of its multiple temporalities. As much professionalism as it requires, such an ethos is not confined within the limits of professional art history. As a matter of fact, in recent years some of the strongest manifestations of this kind of history-making have been wrought directly by artists, challenging art historians to duties they too often shirk.
One such example of this performing the history of contemporary art is Mike Kelley’s exhibition *The Uncanny*, here described in its enlarged version of 2004 at the Museum of Modern Art in Vienna, Austria. Along with a host of very recent artworks, this show included, among other things, Egyptian mummies, sex dolls, nineteenth-century waxworks, medical supplies, store mannequins, death masks, and photographs. This undifferentiated plateau of artifacts was united, beyond the variegated circumstances, shapes, and visual styles of the displayed items, both by the quite generic concept of “figurative sculpture” and by the more specific Freudian one of the *uncanny*, transported from the realm of the psychological unconscious to the workings of culture. By using these unorthodox categories, Kelley applied considerable pressure to recent models of art history and practice. His task was made clear in the lengthy essay which anchored the accompanying catalogue, but was rendered even more vivid through the co-presence and space arrangements of the “specific objects” (Marcel Broodthaers, via Donald Judd) chosen to be included in the show. Their generic groupings engineered a strikingly immediate sensual apprehension of the a-historical storehouse space in which things come up for our attention, and of its potential association with the addictive present of consumerism. With time, though, the variegated local combinations allowed by the display, partially trusted to the visitors’ creativity, allowed each object to shine through on its own and engaged with empowered viewers a conversation that extended beyond its sheer uncanny character.

In *The Uncanny*, the artist not only took over the mantle of “Sunday curator.” Using the same rigorous historical and theoretical tools available to and developed by career historians, he engaged with the contemporariness of art, which is to say, with the traces of the past we choose to live with, consciously or not, when making new artifacts or even just looking at them. In fact, he transmogrified himself into a historian, because no one else had engaged in historicizing a good number of the recent artists and works which he had chosen to include in the show. As Kelley reminds us in an essay dedicated to the writings of fellow artist/critic John Miller, “Most of the artists that influenced me are absent from [academic] accounts. Historical writing becomes a duty for the artist at this point.”

Here is a lesson addressed to professional art historians and scholars. If they don’t inquire into which “things past” contemporary artists engage
with, and how, or if they don’t engage in analyzing the artifacts produced by these many acts of selection, whether minor or major (and here the general public is just as much of an artist as the career or even amateur artist), then artists and other punk types will. And they will make history—real history. Beware!

**Notes**


ART AFTER MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM

For much of the twentieth century, the narrative of Western art relied on the temporal and stylistic succession of modernism, which described the history of modern art in positivistic, teleological terms. Whether through plots regarding the development of abstraction or the incorporation of elements from everyday life, one finds evidence of the great shibboleth of progress. Yet by the 1980s, abetted by the writings of thinkers from Michel Foucault to Fredric Jameson, Johannes Fabian to Gayatri Spivak, many critics and artists began to question the applicability of such conceptions of history, much less the ideological biases that subtend them. This generation of commentators critiqued the notion of the canon, the master narrative, and the status of the artist as a unique actor whose art is original in some fundamental manner.

As Julian Stallabrass recounts in his “Elite Art in an Age of Populism,” a strand of populism emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. This was coincident with and exemplary of postmodernism, which helped to engender debates regarding an aesthetic pluralism marked by a disorienting relativism of positions. This shift had a profound effect on opening the art world, which largely had been confined to Western Europe and North America, to a number of other sites of production. Of course, as Monica Amor reminds us in “Of Adversity we Live!,” alternate conceptions of modernism and postmodernism developed alongside those emanating from the United States. Nevertheless, the change in critical outlook also evacuated the interpretive apparatuses once used to make sense of one’s surrounding context, while further pointing to the regions of the world where ideas of modernism
and postmodernism were received quite differently and not necessarily sequentially, or with an understanding of modernism—or postmodernism as it shades into the contemporary—as a fait accompli.

This is the case with China, for example, as Pauline J. Yao deftly demonstrates in her essay “Making it Work: Artists and Contemporary Art in China.” Indeed, one of the telling characteristics of art and its discourses after 1989 is the waning purchase of modernist and postmodernist accounts alike. New theories about post-postmodernism or the contemporary have emerged. At the same time, a younger generation of artists might actively recover specific aspects of modernism, as their art historical peers reconsider ideas of postmodernism. To a certain extent the historical specificity of modernism and postmodernism has been collapsed in our present situation in which large areas of the past have been flattened into a field of information ready to be retrieved and put to use on a case-by-case basis.
Elite Art in an Age of Populism

Julian Stallabrass

The art world is going through truly bizarre times. Many art historians, critics, and theorists assure us that it is virtually impossible to see beyond the horizons of the neoliberal present and its trivial, celebrity-obsessed culture of pure surface, yet much art strikingly deals with the global reach of exploitation, deep histories and memories of oppression, the prevalence of gender inequality, geopolitics, and the “war on terror.” Of the two major strands of current art—crudely drawn: art that deals with the intersection of documentary and political issues, as opposed to spectacular, expensive art objects, destined for the museum wall and the billionaire’s mansion—one has had its legs kicked from under it by the financial crisis. The most fashionable artists of the contemporary art boom—among them, Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, and Banksy—were the worst hit; Hirst’s auction income fell fourteen times from its (admittedly stellar) 2008 height.1 Broadly coincident with these boom years was the remarkable rise in social networking and the online publication of many kinds of cultural creation which became known as Web 2.0. Amateurs had, of course, long made art but until the price of server space and fast data transmission dropped to the level at which it no longer made sense to meter, they had little access to global audiences.2 When uploading material became almost free, and millions of people aired their creations online, there was a strange technological answer to Walter Benjamin’s difficult demand of radical art: that art should be judged by the extent to which it promoted the “socialization of the intellectual means of production.”3 Equally, the commercialized spaces of the most successful Web 2.0 sites—Facebook, for example, and Flickr—may be seen as mass-marketed, controlled, and shut-down versions of the thoroughgoing user empowerment promised by the pioneers of tactical media in the 1990s.4

For all of this, the term “postmodern” no longer seems adequate. Yet the difficulty of seeing forwards to cultural, social, or political transformation, despite the striking novelties of the present, is certainly a postmodern matter; indeed Jameson opened his foundational essay on the subject with remarks about the “inverted millenarianism” of the era, in which there were plenty of endings but no beginnings.5 The difficulty can be glimpsed in the failed attempts to positively characterize the new: Hal Foster’s The Return of
the Real, while identifying elements of contemporary art that sat in tension with postmodern theory, remained pessimistic about the horizons of possibility for its firmly neoliberal times; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s great overarching analysis, *Empire*, ran into events of September 11 and the reassertion of imperial power of the old kind; Nicolas Bourriaud’s attempt to synthesize elements of modernism and postmodernism to build the “altermodern” generally failed to convince.6

While this essay will be focused far more on the art world than Jameson’s essay on postmodernism, it is worth returning to, so as to analyze the present in terms of this successful characterization of the past, and vice versa. As is well known, Jameson’s concern is to try to periodize postmodernism, aligning it with postindustrial capitalism, and to describe its main elements in sharp contrast to modernism. He alights upon the depthlessness of the new, contrasting Andy Warhol’s silkscreen, *Diamond Dust Shoes* (1980), with boots painted by Van Gogh. The worn surfaces of the latter are products of manual toil, while the former stand for a deathly but affectless superficiality.7 Shallowness is accompanied by a waning of history’s power, and a schizophrenic relation to signification, which leaves a “rubble” of unrelated elements, and with it the ruin of any coherent sense of self.8 The vast flow of culture is taken in by viewers with an aesthetic of overload and rapid switching from one source to another, which is evoked by the alien in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976) watching fifty-seven television screens at once.9 Spectacle is passively consumed, and the eternal present admits of no action or agency.

Jameson also notes that postmodernism was an “aesthetic populism,” referring to the manifesto-like book *Learning from Las Vegas*.10 In the fall of 1968, shortly after the summer of revolutionary dissent in many countries, teachers at the Yale School of Art and Architecture, including Robert Venturi, took a group of students on a field trip, not to see the wonders of Rome or the modernist towers of Chicago, but to Las Vegas to examine the architecture of the Strip. The students dubbed the course “The Great Proletarian Cultural Locomotive,” and this gives a clue to one of its most important aspects, which was a defense of popular culture against the taste of the cultural elite.

The casino architecture of the Strip was designed to entertain popular tastes: in this way, argued the authors, it was more democratic than modernist buildings whose makers insisted that an absence of decoration and a concentration upon unadorned form imbued them with moral rectitude. They celebrated the extraordinary mix of styles and pastiched histories to be found on the Strip:
They also recommended an architecture and an urban scene that was “almost all right.” That is: far from perfect in utopian modernist terms which would want everything to be forever fixed, but which was, for all its messiness and contingency, imbued with an emergent order that was full of incident and entertainment. What was defended here, on the grounds of its popularity, was the taste of the white middle class, and just as the Strip was “almost all right,” so were the then much-denigrated suburbs.

Jameson’s own architectural exemplar for postmodernism was the mirrored and disorienting spaces of John Portman’s atrium hotel, the Bonaventure, in downtown Los Angeles. This was taken as an architectural analogue of the decentered global communication networks that formed the basis of the postindustrial economy. This, too, was a populist work that did not attempt to insert an alien, utopian presence into the urban scene but to be a striking addition to it, and the building was indeed popular with locals and tourists.

In looking back on Jameson’s essay, there seem to be features of postmodernism that have been amply borne out, and even to have intensified. The “depthlessness” of culture has been furthered by the sheer extent and speed of digital culture, with its brief wildfires of popularity, endless novelties, and the ease with which it encourages clicking between diverse forms of information and entertainment (news, games, gossip, video novelties, pornography, and social networking, to name but a few). The depth and extent of information about many topics provided online may be vast, and may rival all but the greatest libraries (though it is also fissured by the agendas that determine what gets digitized and under what legal arrangements) but this undoubted richness is often countered by the flux of novelty and distraction. Confronted with the extraordinary proliferation of information and social dialogue, the effects of the data sublime are felt everywhere, in both the mathematical sublime of the digital expanse and the dynamic sublime of its rapid transformation. The cascades of data that confronted Roeg’s alien appear to wash over all of those who dwell in mediatized environments, and the art world regularly responds with its own versions: From the most direct, such as Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin’s Listening Post (2004), which turns the flow of online texts into an immersive digital waterfall; to Candida Höfer’s carefully recorded library and archive rooms (technologically
advanced renditions of the ancient data sublime); or the numerous large-scale museum photographs that overwhelm the viewer with the richness of their detail, while providing few means with which to interpret it; or the many ways of visualizing the complexity of internet structure, of which one of the pioneers was Matthew Fuller’s web browser, *I/O/D 4* (1997), which gave the user direct access to a dynamic map of the linking grid.

The populism that Jameson identified in postmodernism also seems to have grown stronger. Art-world suspicion of populism is well summed up in the introduction to a catalogue on the subject, where it is described as a refusal of complexity which pretends to appeal to the common individual, often about the consequences of globalization (whether it is growing insecurity of employment or clashes over religion). While some sections of the art world revel in and exemplify complexity, a forced simplicity is the populist response to the speed and ambit of change.

Yet at the same time, the speculative contemporary art boom saw the rise of a great deal of populist art—that is, an art of simple character, wide popular appeal, and an enthusiastic engagement with commercial mass culture delivered through branded artistic persona. The heights of the market, at any rate, were peppered by such work, with the figures of Jeff Koons, Richard Prince, Takashi Murakami, and Damien Hirst standing at the head. Warhol, who it should be remembered was for long a despised and isolated figure for his commercialism and celebrity-chasing, has arguably replaced Marcel Duchamp as the founding father of contemporary art. Banksy is the most interesting of these figures, since his art-world career is purely a result of the fever of the boom (the others all had reputations that predate it), his work was at first made in contention with the art world, and above all because it was not approbation within the art world that drove his market success but the weight of media hype and popularity. Most extraordinary of all is the extreme populism of Banksy’s art: Its messages are very simple, clichéd, and instantaneously grasped, relying on highly familiar advertising techniques; his signature style is likewise little troubled by complexity; and as with most street art, popularity, speed of production, and ubiquity are prized above much else.

The fact that such crass work has been drawn into so many important contemporary art collections, hanging alongside pieces by significant modernist and contemporary artists, indicates a deep shift in the art world. First, it points to the changing profile of collecting itself, as new buyers swept into the remarkable investment opportunity held out by contemporary art up to 2008; many knew little about art history and bought on the
power of famous names, readily identifiable trends, and fashionable national schools. It also shows that the art world, which has outgrown its once small and enclosed Euro-American domain, is less insulated than it was from the wider culture, having become a global social club for the mega-rich—among whom are numbered, of course, the entrepreneurs of the great media conglomerates. Where there was once a deep divide between popular taste and museum art (think for instance of the condescension with which L. S. Lowry was treated by the British art world), now the track between popular approbation and high cultural “excellence” seems, if not smooth, then less impassable.17

While Banksy is the most extreme example of this shift, the general rise of street art is no less remarkable a populist phenomenon. There have been previous art-world dalliances with this art, particularly in the 1980s with the concerted attempt to commercialize the work in the transfer from wall to canvas, and the rise of a few stars who leveraged their street reputations in adapting to the gallery scene (above all, Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat). Yet what has changed profoundly in street art, apparently a creature of old(ish) media such as the spraycan and the photocopier, is the power of the Web: where once it was short-lived and documented by a few highly dedicated photographers who would spend hours waiting for decorated trains to pass, knowing that the works that they recorded would be destroyed by cleaning crews that very night, now with the ubiquity of easy-to-use digital cameras and of publishing on the Web, vulnerable street works gain long lives, and their artists considerable reputations.18 Graffiti, an often arcane practice of tagging that spoke to a competitive in-crowd who could read the codes of writing, numbering, overwriting, and one-upmanship, has been overlaid with an accessible, illustrative street art that courts popular attention, competing with advertisements in a self-conscious struggle for the right to the city.19

The museum is pulled in two incompatible directions. In its elite and educative role it is supposed to demonstrate that capitalism can sustain cultural and creative autonomy by displaying work that cannot be found in standard mass culture. At the same time, the demands of branding, marketing, and “partnerships” with big business dictate that the museums open themselves to popular taste. The great global brand that is “Tate” has responded by devoting a large section of its flagship bookshop to street art and graffiti publications, and publishing its own; selling graffiti-style stencils, stickers, and badges; and offering a Flash game that allows users to decorate a wall of Tate Modern.20 It also commissioned well-known street
artists, including Blu and JR, to make large works on the Tate Modern facade in 2008. In 2011, the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art held the first major retrospective exhibition of street art.\textsuperscript{21}

The heights of elite culture are infected by the popular. Koons, Murakami, and Hirst all deal with mass culture but filter it through highly individual sensibilities, and re-present it safely under the assured forms of neo-conceptualism, most obviously through appropriation. Banksy does not appear to put anything in inverted commas, and his style, whilst distinct, is also anodyne, and his concerns—political, social, and satirical—are commonly shared. What Web 2.0 provides is rapid and constant feedback; street art is continually tested against it, and contemporary art as a whole becomes more and more open to it, especially as its increasingly digital products find their way onto media-sharing and social networking sites.

Looking back from the present to postmodernism, its populism may now appear to be its most radical feature, since it laid the ground for the erosion of elite culture. Yet the “populism” of \textit{Learning from Las Vegas}, as with so much in postmodernism, conflated the operations of big business with popular taste, in a familiar move to which populist sentiment is often subject.\textsuperscript{22} What Venturi and his collaborators asked us to accept as “almost all right” was not popular taste, but popular taste as imagined by casino owners. It was tested only against the democracy of the dollar, which yields only the crude contrast of on/off, of buy/not buy. This is also the “democracy” of Warhol, in which the President and the “bum” drink the same Coca-Cola, and which is understood to be not about power and dialogue but about buying stuff.\textsuperscript{23} Such a view has little purchase on the experience of the entire Strip—the polluted, environmentally catastrophic, surveilled and controlled urban fabric—which is not subject to consumer choice. Web 2.0 opens up the possibility for detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis and manipulation of popular feedback—and what commercial organization (museums, for example) can resist that? So populism intensified in the art world, produced by the exposure of its flagship institutions to market forces, and by the gradual modernization of the art market to the regular calculations that underlie investment. In its intensification, it also changed its nature. The threat to elite art comes from the lack of pretence in populist art: it does not pretend not to be a commodity, or to be uninterested in publicity; it does not refuse to bear the marks of its reception; it is relatively open about its methods, and encourages participation; it is generally uninterested in expert opinion. It is a product, in short, of participatory, rather than broadcast culture.
There are other features that this cultural-technological scene opens up that are unrecognizable in Jameson's account of postmodernism. For example, there is the ability of a much larger and wider section of the populace to make and publish their own work (whether street art, music, or photography). In offering a more positive description of the current phase of capitalism than the reactive “post-industrial,” Hardt and Negri point to the development of informationalized capitalism, in which cooperation is more important than capital. In grasping this, Perry Anderson’s discussion of the contrast between modernism and postmodernism is useful. The former was immersed in the romance of technological innovation in production (the cars, planes, and ocean liners that Le Corbusier lauded, for example); while in the latter, it was the technologies of reproduction that took the lead (thus video art may be seen as an archetypal postmodern form). In data capitalism, we see a classic dialectical synthesis of the two, as the new technologies bind production and reproduction together. If the archetypal location of modernism was the business towers of New York and Chicago, and of postmodernism the playground of the Vegas Strip, or the mirrored and decentered atrium hotel, the locale of the new age (only a decade old) must be in the exchange of products along with melded business and private persona on Facebook, and in city streets transformed by the augmentation of data overlays.

The point of the synthesis of production and reproduction is that data can be worked upon, not merely viewed; it can be worked upon by others, providing tailored perspectives on datasets, guided by the user's own input. More radically, computational power is increasingly available for users over the Web, who are able to interrogate data with specific queries, and use it to perform calculations. This hands powerful analytical tools to anyone with an internet connection. Analyses of datasets, most commonly carried out on numerical data, may also be applied to culture, as Franco Moretti has been showing in a remarkable series of works on global literature.

As pointed out in the *Populism* catalogue, art also holds out (as an elite game) allusions to forms of popular activism and direct democracy—a form demonstrated regularly in reality television shows. Vast numbers of people are now making things that look a bit like art, and are finding that it is not hard to do. At the same time, the number of contemporary art museums, essential tools in gentrification and regional development, grows rapidly across the globe, making the museum experience a more common part of everyday life. Here Jameson’s demand that we dialectically see the positive as negative may be put into place: the overpopulation of arty products and places to show them serving the salutary demands of
demystification. This remarkable set of developments puts pressure on an elite culture that has long served as a mask for neoliberalism, while the economic system itself falls into crisis.

This cultural scene is accompanied by a political one in which the corruption, incompetence, and powerlessness of the political class is illuminated: in the banking crisis and its consequences which deny a conventional, consumerist future to entire generations; and in the lack of any vision of the future beyond slowly increasing enrichment, in which the inability to see beyond the present becomes, with global warming, a threat to our very existence.

The problem of seeing beyond the horizon of the present was always one of agency and powerlessness. Jacques Rancière's book, *Hatred of Democracy*, argues that the elite want democracy to run in such a way that they can exercise complete technocratic control over decision-making without interference from the public, but equally that they despise the decadence that they themselves make by blocking people off from political life and power.30 “Populism” is the elite term used to condemn any move to break the sealing off of the majority from decision-making.31 Such passivity was always a First World view, a product of those nations that had the most successful technocratic governments, and that sat at the top of the pyramid of global economic oppression. Elsewhere, the years since Jameson's book was published have been an era of revolutions. Following those that deposed the communist dictatorships in Europe, there followed the crumbling of other authoritarian regimes that had been propped up under the Cold War—in South Africa, in many former Soviet states, in South America, and most recently in the revolts of the Arab Spring.

To invoke revolution is to point to the extraordinary dangers and opportunities tied up in the popularization of culture and politics together. The elite condemnation of cultural populism has traditionally been founded on believing that it lacks and even threatens to destroy the qualities that should be most valued in art—ambiguity, complexity and freedom from overt use. Likewise, the political elite condemn populist movements for their lack of expertise, and their belief that complex problems will yield to simple solutions. It is certainly true that populist art has a parallel with populist politics: as Laclau points out, populist politics commonly presents itself, in underdog fashion, as representing the whole of the community.32 We can find similar statements in Hirst or Banksy, who purport to represent the common people against the elite art world. This comes down to a class divide between the culturally active multitude and the elite who control the
heights of the contemporary art world and the biennial scene. Anderson again makes a salient point here: that in postmodernism there was a divide between what he calls the “citra” and “ultra” wings, the former sunk in the spectacular and the latter seeking to elude it, a divide which corresponds to the class of consumers and those who command the market. Anderson links this to a remarkable analysis that compares the change from modern to postmodern to that of Renaissance to Reformation. While the intellectual achievements of the Renaissance were superior, it was an elite affair, whereas the Reformation was in part a popularization of Renaissance ideas that took in “half the common people of Europe.” Anderson continues, writing of postmodernism:

“Plebianization” in this sense does mean a vast broadening of the social basis of modern culture; but by the same token a great thinning of its critical substance, to yield the flat postmodern potion. Quality has once again been exchanged for quantity, in a process that can be looked at alternatively as a welcome emancipation from class confinement or as a dire contraction of inventive energies.

While it is true that the representatives of populist art in the art world have suffered in the economic crisis, this is a matter of uncertainty about investment in certain art stars, rather than a fundamental undercutting of the populist urge. If postmodernism is popularized modernism, then populist art is popularized postmodernism, a result of the technological stripping of command from the manufacturers of culture, whose role is now to frame the popular.

Yet the present also opens the possibility of a more self-conscious and self-critical populism, one driven not only by continuous and instantaneous feedback, but also by the wide availability of tools to analyze its own cultural products and the responses to them. In this development, we may glimpse the synthesis of elite critique and common populism.

Notes


8 Ibid., pp. 26–27.

9 Ibid., p. 31; his artistic model here is Nam June Paik. The Man Who Fell to Earth was directed by Nicolas Roeg.


11 Venturi et al., op. cit., p. 80.

12 Ibid., p. 6.

13 Jameson, op. cit., p. 39.


15 For an analysis of the change in Warhol’s reputation, linked to the character of the current art scene, see Isabelle Graw, High Price: Art Between the Market and Celebrity Culture (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009).

16 For Banksy’s views on the art world, see Wall and Piece (London: Century, 2005), p. 128.


18 For the work of the graffiti photographers, see Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, Subway Art (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984).


20 Tate was the most popular brand followed on Twitter in 2010, a position only achieved by responding to users’ views. See www.freshnetworks.com/blog/2010/06/tate-museum-uk-top-brand-twitter/. Accessed June 2, 2011.
The Lewisohn and Chalfont book referred to earlier is published by Tate. For the game, see http://kids.tate.org.uk/games/street-art/. Accessed June 2, 2011.


22 This point is made by Ernesto Laclau, “Populism: What’s in a Name,” in Larsen et al., op. cit., p. 107.


24 Hardt and Negri, op. cit., p. xx.


26 This is the model offered by Wolfram Alpha which takes Mathematica procedures and applies them to selected datasets. See www.wolframalpha.com. Accessed June 2, 2011.


31 Ibid., p. 80.

32 Ernesto Laclau, “Populism: What’s in a Name,” in Larsen et al., op. cit., p. 110.


34 Ibid., p. 113.
In the late 1950s, critic Mario Pedrosa often said that Brazilians were condemned to be modern—a maxim employed in his writings on Brazilian architecture and Brasilia, the country’s new capital, to allude to what seemed an endless capacity to embrace the new. But Pedrosa, one of Latin America’s towering art critics, also made current the term postmodern in reference to the art and conditions of the mid-1960s, arguing that the radical technological transformations and the rise of mass media thrust the subject into a reality of information and consumption to which the perceptual apparatus had to urgently respond. So, too, art, which had to produce new images and forms of mediation. I want to use the elasticity of Pedrosa’s localized thinking to reflect on our own attempts to chart recent artistic and intellectual constellations: a “now-ness” fraught with contradictions and frictions germane to Pedrosa’s “modern.” Indeed, in his writings, the modern did not define a period but a constant search for what suited the progressive aspirations of the country. This operational use of the modern depletes past and recent historical attempts at concisely defining and classifying the intellectual, material, and political trajectories of an epoch and a place; it remains a localized tool. To be sure, modern was not for Pedrosa a period defined in contradistinction to a past; instead, it delineated a condition which renders these definitional projects fallacious (something amply demonstrated by the mutational processes and dynamics of cultural exchange unleashed by colonization and globalization).

Pedrosa’s notes on modernism and postmodernism undermine the common assumption that these are totalizing accounts emanating from one source: be that Western Europe or the United States. In contradistinction, my micro-narrative incorporates “peripheral” geographic loci undoubtedly constitutive of the modern, as these were the product, above all else, of a process of modern colonization, which echoes that of the United States. Following this logic, “normative” Western art identified with an Anglo-European tradition was not perceived by the Brazilian artists and critics that concern me here as some inviolable, immutable, hegemonic paradigm that was foreign to them; instead, they considered various modernist legacies as rich material to navigate within the context of Brazil’s cultural
makeup, which in tandem with the more materially powerful places of the West, engaged ideas of progress, development, and experimentation while resisting the categorical proclivities of canonical modernism.

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The acclaimed international recognition of Brazilian architecture in the 1950s triggered much of Pedrosa’s thought on the still current issues of the national and the international, the original and the copy, erratic industrialization, democracy, and modernity. For Pedrosa, the colonial history of Brazil, a narrative defined by transplantation, facilitated the revolutionary desire to create something new in a territory, which, without any traces of ancient civilization, provided modernism’s ideal tabula rasa—a place of endless new beginnings. It was thus in the history of colonial domination that Pedrosa paradoxically founds Brazil’s a-historicity and delivered a modernus without a classicus against which to stand. It is this fundamental paradox that informs the unique insertion of Brazil in the cultural history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and that undermines the definitional aspect of the modern (and the postmodern) in favor of an operational quality, a tool-like deployment that informed Pedrosa’s understanding of the country’s position vis-à-vis the epochal dynamics.

Other paradoxes plague Pedrosa’s modernism; for example, a tradition of novelty smoothes contradictions and fuels experimentation. Likewise, the Brazilian tabula rasa facilitated the rise of modern architecture in the midst of dictatorship, a situation accelerated by the self-aggrandizing nature of the government and the favorable economic situation that followed. It also delivered the artificiality of Brasilia, more than 600 miles away from the metropolitan hubs of Rio and São Paulo, along with the utopian plan of its architect, Lúcio Costa, who believed in the self-sufficiency of the region while remaining keenly aware of the incongruence of the program. The result: urbanism, architecture, and art as a societal model, an intertwined vision of modernism and modernity predicated on political vagaries, geographic dispersion, spatial contradictions, and discontinuous temporalities. This utopian élan called for the public reinstatement of the aesthetic dimension, which perhaps explains why, for example, the neo-concrete project, a constructivist program turned against itself and, preoccupied with the participation of the spectator, is intimately related to the urban chimera of Pedrosa—for whom Brasilia was the ultimate collective work of art.

Indeed, it was only a few months after the publication of the “Neo-concrete Manifesto” in March of 1959, and only three before that of the
“Theory of the Non-Object” (both texts authored by poet Ferreira Gullar, the spokesperson of the movement) that Pedrosa articulated the young artists' position when he wrote about the ideal modern city as wanting to "restore the lost social cohesion." It is obvious that the closely knitted group of intellectuals and artists were invested in a notion of collective agency that optimistically looked away from the merciless dynamics of capitalism (a key concern of Pedrosa’s) and toward the possibilities of radicalizing international avant-garde culture. The latter was done in ignorance of "Greenbergian" modernism, toward which American postmodernism, as it developed in the 1970s, was profoundly hostile. Indeed, neo-concretism’s theoretical foundations, as influenced by Pedrosa and voiced by Gullar, were predicated on the underbelly of a certain canonical modernism: a synthesis of the arts that, for Pedrosa, had to go beyond the integration of mediums and which in the Brazilian context led to the dissolution of the conventions of painting and sculpture. These aesthetic investigations were performed from within a unique modern preoccupation with space whose antecedents were Vladimir Tatlin’s Counter-reliefs, Kazimir Malevich’s Arkitektoms, and Kurt Schwitters’ Merzbau. Thus the non-objects, as Gullar called the works produced and conceptualized during the brief lifespan of neo-concretism (1959–61 approximately) unleashed a phase of intense experimentation that advanced issues later explored by manifestations that bracket much of our discussions on contemporary art: Donald Judd’s essay “Specific Objects” (1965) and the concept of relational aesthetics coined by the curator Nicolas Bourriaud in 1998. Notwithstanding the chronological primacy of Gullar’s reformulation of the art object or Pedrosa’s usage of the term postmodern art to refer to the art of the mid-1960s I want to underline how the unique structure and lineage of modernity that summoned these artists, delivered, as a consequence of their localized thinking, an environmental and participatory art threaded by the contradictions and antinomies of modernity on the “periphery”—in this case, fraught with productive material inconsistencies and symbolic misreadings that eventually led to the dissolution of the art object and toward experimental practices with which we are just now coming to terms.

But what of postmodernism? In the mid-1960s Pedrosa’s steadfast belief in a correspondence between contemporary art and society forced him to assess the radical break of modern art with the self-sufficient space of pictorial representation and subsequent engagement with the immediate reality in terms of postmodernism. Underlining contemporary art’s focus on the “immediate objectivity of the everyday,” Pedrosa, roughly ten years
before the term gained currency in the United States, saw postmodernism as an art of the real. Information assumed a primacy via its effective transmission through mass communication, and it affected our experience of the world, the real, which we now apprehended through “mechanical technological processes.” The literalism of American art seemed to confirm the above. In a review of the 33rd Venice Biennale Pedrosa wrote: “As the great vanguard American artists say: One does not idealize reality, does not interpret reality, reality does not transcend, reality is what it is, in front of our nose.” Although Frank Stella’s infamous “what you see is what you see” might resonate, Pedrosa had pop art—the crude objectivity of its images and the society of consumption that it invoked—in mind. Reality in Pedrosa’s usage encompassed the epochal changes that the 1960s imposed on modes of perception and communication: from new technologies to rampant capitalism, from full-fledged mass consumption to Marshall McLuhan’s global village.

Something else was happening by the mid-1960s: the Brasilia that had triggered so much reflection on the modern in Pedrosa’s writings had proven to be the result of a capricious bureaucracy whose urban agenda of civil collectivization had been blatantly disrespected. As a result, it lay in the most aberrant isolation, apart from the “cultural drama,” eminently urban in character, that boiled in the main cities of the country as an immediate, irreverent response to the dictatorial regime installed in power in April of 1964. This was a defiant art, or anti-art, as Pedrosa was calling the disruptive manifestations that he was trying to diagnose, was intimately linked to the disintegration of the pictorial plane performed by the neo-concrete artists Helio Oiticica and Lygia Clark. And this categorical attack on the conventions of art had changed its physiognomy forever, thrusting artist and art into the unprotected space of the real, the environment, and action. Pedrosa’s optimistic tendencies (usually undermined by his acute analysis of the market) led to a position in which he called for an art that might restore a lost multi-sensorial synthesis of communal dimensions. A unique theorization of the postmodern to be sure, it was conditioned by (and was responding primarily to) recent developments in Brazilian art, the latter transformed by political developments that had culminated with the military coup of 1964, which cut short talk of agrarian reform, as well as the proliferation of trade unions, national liberties, anti-imperialism, and national initiatives that favored the working class. The paradoxical result of the coup was not an immediate silencing of the left intelligentsia (that would come later), but instead the manifestation of
what has been called the “festive left” to define an artistic effervescence of clear social and political overtones where collective participation was a paramount precept.

Three years later and on the eve of a fierce restriction of civil liberties that unleashed the brutality of the dictatorship, both Pedrosa and Oiticica, still clinging to the idea of collective participation, assessed the status of the Brazilian avant-garde under the sign of the postmodern. For Pedrosa, the São Paulo biennial of 1967 distinguished itself by appealing to a broader non-specialized public—the people (“o povo”)—which was actually invited to manipulate some of the works (many kinetic in nature, others related to the post-neo-concrete work of Oiticica, Clark, and Lygia Pape). “The ‘participation of the spectator,’” wrote Pedrosa in this review of the biennial, “increasingly revealed itself as a revolutionary concept to oppose—almost as the specific trait of our epoch’s sensitivity—the, without a doubt, decisive aesthetic concept of previous periods, or of ‘psychic distance.’” This deployment of festive interaction with the works was not without contradictions as works suffered and were totally dismantled; as manual methods of construction made the works highly vulnerable; as the exhibition space and its rules of conduct were not conceived to host the large number of works devoted to such experiential investigations. Most importantly, after reminding his readers once again how different were these manifestations from the modern conception of autonomous art, Pedrosa introduced the ultimate contradiction, a contradiction that he wanted to undo but couldn’t: the fact that as a consequence of mass consumption works of art had become objects of transitory consumption like cars.

A subsequent article from that year, appropriately entitled “World in Crisis, Man in Crisis, Art in Crisis,” attempted once again an optimistic path for these unsettled questions: In the fields of science, technology, and aesthetics, there was no other option but to project environmentally. By this Pedrosa meant the channeling of the creative activities of the time toward regional planning, urbanism, architecture, industrial design, and in the realm of art “sculpture and the diverse constructions and arrangements of objects in space.” (A description that arguably corresponds to what we have come to call installation art.) This verdict was followed by an important question: “The decisive problem is to define the environments; for whom, where, and for what or why?” Dismissing the intentionality and skills of the artist, even the celebrated publicness of art’s setting which is not valid in itself, what matters, Pedrosa insisted, was the correlation of arts and activities in the context of the environment, their integration and realization
in the social complex. No doubt Pedrosa was looking back to his earlier interest in a synthesis of the arts but also looking forward to what we might call today interdisciplinary. Overwhelmed by an all-over present exchange of communications and information, the arts of space were destined to an obsessive interest in research that signaled the most audacious artists of the time who were not object makers but were engaged in expanding our perceptive structures.

The year 1967 proved to be crucial in the theorization of the postmodern: An exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro entitled New Brazilian Objectivity marked the publication of Oiticica’s essay “General Scheme of the New Objectivity,” in which he delineated the main traits of the Brazilian artistic situation. It diagnosed the dismissal of the conventions of painting and sculpture that unleashed material experimentations toward the real (the concordance with Pedrosa was here obvious). This owed much to Gullar’s “non-object,” an attempt to define a beyond painting and sculpture that broke with a “transcendental order” to propose a participatory art that was intimately related to the politicization of culture that had followed the coup. An ethical and social engagement with the real, “a return to the world,” manifested in artists such as Antonio Dias, Pedro Escosteguy, Rubens Gerchman, Clark, and Oiticica himself. These explorations, argued the artist, ranged from structural (a favorite term of Oiticica) reinventions of the art object to a conceptual concern with the semantics of the works many of which incorporated text. For Oiticica, these tendencies coalesced toward objective structures that solicited modes of participation in accord with the open character of the works. The notion of a collective art was subsequently mobilized as a key aspect of the Brazilian avant-garde, and here too we hear echoes of Pedrosa’s unrelenting hope in aesthetic agency and Gullar’s (post-neo-concrete) engagement with popular culture. Indeed, in the wealth and richness of popular manifestations such as Samba, carnival, fairs, and “holidays of all kind,” Oiticica saw a model of collectivization and participation for aesthetic practice.

The last item of the essay—“the resurgence of the problem of anti-art”—collapsed anti-art with Pedrosa’s postmodern and posited, too, the ontological question of how to, in an underdeveloped country, “explain the advent of an avant-garde and justify it, not as symptomatic alienation but as a decisive factor of its collective process?” The tentative answer was given in terms of a paradigmatic shift regarding art’s quest: anti-art here and now not as a reaction to the past or a concern with new art but as the facilitation of experimental conditions. One could argue that Oiticica thus broke the spell, the curse of the modern to which Pedrosa had condemned his country.
in the 1950s. But how not to recognize in the artist’s call for rupture and search for “a typical Brazilian condition,” that should not be confused with a banal nationalism, echoes of Pedrosa’s localized thinking? At the same time, how not to see in the younger artist’s insightful synthesis of the critical and aesthetic conditions of his context the foundations of so much international contemporary art? For both, as stated at the outset, modernism was neither hegemonic nor inviolate, but the deltaic source from which their culture sprang. In other words, their response to the modernist legacy was not conceived as a supplement to it, but as a contribution so that Pedrosa’s new and Oiticica’s experimental were part and parcel of the same project, Brazil’s interjection in the wider cultural horizon of their time. This, of course, did not preclude the fact of a subaltern condition of which they were clearly aware and that informed too their cultural practices, an adversity that, to Oiticica, was foundational to their distinctive artistic formulations and unfinished cultural negotiations.

I’ve attempted here to delineate an argument in the name of a productive dialogue on the widespread assumption that Western art, the modern, modernity, postmodern, postmodernity, and contemporaneity (the list can go on) is a delimited concept or paradigm whose locus is a center of political and economic power whose institutions coalesce around certain narratives of canon formation. I’ve spoken specifically of a situation that is generally contemporary with what American critics liked to called in the 1960s “advanced” art. But what interests me here, more than the chronology, is the complexity of an operation that is construed in relation to a universal horizon, say the modern, the experimental, the avant-garde, but closely tied to specific necessities and local concerns and thus, largely because of a very different institutional and political makeup, much less compartmentalized or prone to congealed narratives: Instead we find a fluidity and pliancy of discourses and practices that had to cope with a sense of urgency derived from all-over present contradictory and hybrid conditions. As Oiticica firmly concluded in his New Objectivity essay: “Of adversity we live,” and the result of his and Pedrosa’s acting upon this adversity was not a borrowed modernism or postmodernism tweaked here and there to update the cultural production of the country but a profound reflection on the means and sites of artistic production, the circulation and reception of aesthetic practices, the institutions of art, and the relation of all of this to the social, political, and economic situation of the country.

Of course, contradictory conditions are not unique to the decentered locales of the world (just pervasive), and thus one of Brazil’s cultural lessons
has been to derive pleasure and knowledge from those conditions. An artist such as Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, who grew up in la Villeneuve, a neighborhood in Grenoble designed in the early 1970s by L’AUA under the aegis of progressive urban ideals and with ambiguous results, has found in Brazilian culture and history plenty of material to engage critically the ideological and material conflicts of modernity. A series of works developed under the exploratory concept of “Tropical Modernity” deploys props and objects, images and sounds, which attempt to evoke unique environmental situations and ponder on the identity of a place. No doubt Oiticica’s Tropicalia, presented in 1967 at the aforementioned exhibition, is for Gonzalez-Foerster a key influence. Another European artist, Marine Huggonier, explores, in her parsimonious film Traveling Amazonia (2006), the unfinished modernity of Brazil. Here, a crew of local workers constructs a dolly to make the camera roll in a last and unrevealing shot of the road that was to become in the 1970s the unrealized trans-Amazonian highway, the vastness of the landscape challenging any possibility of its representation. Francis Alÿs’s recurrent and metaphorical returns to the question of modernity, as so vividly manifest in his absurdist films and videos in which the old and the new, craft and technology, reality and dream juxtapose, also deal with a desire to think the relationship of an imaginary “periphery” to an imaginary “center,” to unpack and repack the objects and discourses of a landscape that is perceived as failure but that he finds pregnant with poetic and affective matter.

But the relationship between the specific modern/postmodern Brazilian configuration that I’ve delineated above and contemporary art, as increasingly acknowledged, can also be diagnosed in a tendency toward collective and participatory practices for which agency, subjectivity, and affect have become areas of paramount concern. The public projects of Marjetica Potrc dedicated to exploring and recreating low-tech, informal, and self-sustainable urban solutions and the bartering exchanges that open up the possibility of alternative aesthetic and economic intersections in the work of Carolina Caycedo owe much to the predictions and conceptualizations of Pedrosa and Oiticica in the 1960s. The same can be said about the careful usage of site, the productive reflections on the legacies of constructivism, and the historical archive of distinct artists such as the duo Dolores Zinny and Juan Maidagan and the younger Alessandro Balteo. These artists are committed to investigating the entangled trajectories of aesthetic form and institutional history to tease the past, our memories of the past, and its currency in the present. No doubt the rich Brazilian artistic landscape, including veterans such as Ernesto Neto and Fernanda Gomes, but also less known
artists such as Cabelo and Renata Lucas, is unthinkable without the layered and complex legacies that I’ve sketched above.

This is just to state the obvious but it bears reminding that in our desire to define the present we risk forgetting the reticular and unfinished trails of history. As Pamela Lee observed in a parallel query about the contemporary: “It is precisely due to the seeming ‘presentness’ of our archive—and the mythic transparency of its materials as well—that the historian of contemporary art must be that much more vigilant about questions of historiography and periodization, that much more attuned to the formative influence of the models we enlist and the tone we take in our confrontation with and analysis of recent practices.” Most importantly, as she wrote in the same text: “how we pursue our study of recent art—the methodological side of things—coincides with the larger issue of what gets left behind in the process.” Most importantly, as she wrote in the same text: “how we pursue our study of recent art—the methodological side of things—coincides with the larger issue of what gets left behind in the process.”

I am suggesting then that we think the contemporary in relationship to a pliant and contingent usage of concepts, terms, models, and projects while evidently paying close attention to the micro-histories and contexts, “peripheral” as they might be, that have always belonged to the architectonics of the modern, that think the modern and the post-modern in their own terms, and whose erratic but groundbreaking cultural contributions diffuse canonical Euro-American narratives and the fallacy of a correspondence between modernism and total modernity. More than calling attention to the firstness of certain Brazilian artistic propositions and concepts, what is important is that in this felicitous moment in Brazilian art’s commitment to a localized thinking that saw as its goal creativity and experimentation, we can recognize not the finality of meaning but the unfinished task of critical questioning that characterizes the best of contemporary art.

Notes


3 See Pedrosa, “Reflexões em Torno da Nova Capital,” op. cit.
6 Pondering with acuity on the loss of the base in sculpture and the relevance of the location for his *Penetrables*, Oiticica argued for an integration of work and site that would avoid gratuitousness: “What would the work gain in possessing a ‘unity’ if that unity was jettisoned in a locality where it did not only not fit as an idea, but also where there would be no possibility of its full experience and comprehension?” See *Aspiro ao Grande Labirinto* (June 3, 1962), p. 43.
9 Ibid.
12 Ibid., p. 191.
14 Helio Oiticica, op. cit., p. 97.
15 Pamela M. Lee, “Questionnaire on the Contemporary,” *October* 130 (Fall 2009), p. 25.
Making it Work: Artists and Contemporary Art in China

Pauline J. Yao

There is little question that contemporary art in China has developed in response to the cultural, political, intellectual, economic, and social conditions of its particular environment. Yet the extent to which one should view art practices in China as merely contextual or reactionary, rather than endowed with the capacity to transcend difference and enact change, has been a topic of discussion among artists and art historians since the advent of Western art forms in China in the early twentieth century. It is this contradiction—between art’s capacity to reveal certain social determinants and its ability to effect them—that underlies much of contemporary art production today both inside and outside China. The modernist tendency to dissolve the gap between art and everyday life by challenging prescribed systems and art institutions, cross the boundaries of art, or the question of how we define art in the first place comes up against significant hurdles in the Chinese context. In fact, we must question the very application of such modernist tendencies, since Euro-American transferral theories, which view modernity in art in non-Euro-American contexts as imported discourse, suggest an ignorant appropriation of concepts and, consequently, periodizations. Favoring a progressive development model that begins with the pre-modern, followed by the modern, and the postmodern, not only negates the possibility of synchronous occurrence, but also necessarily overlooks the plurality of phenomena that results in modernities existing outside the grasp of Euro-America.

In China, the relatively short history of contemporary art forms and the messy overlap of disparate art trends and philosophies within a severely compressed timeframe obscure any clear periodization of the “modern” and “postmodern.” If anything, the dominant strain of postmodernism in China breeds a willfully unstable application of the term itself, and of its implications for discourse on art. Yet most scholars would agree that the triumph of the ideology of consumerism following the break with a revolutionary past has yielded a dizzying acceleration of change and fragmentation—a central theme within postmodern theory. The embrace of new patterns of production and consumption accompanying the integration of China into a global capitalist system has also led to radical instabilities in everyday life and
artists and Contemporary art in China 61
culture. As global contemporary art increasingly moves beyond the walls of the studio or gallery into public spaces, questions arise over how such practices can develop in China, a context in which art remains subject to inscriptions by an authoritarian system.

The Chinese contemporary art world is in a peculiar position vis-à-vis the global art world. It has experienced great commercial success but few have meaningfully questioned its internal logic, and more importantly, what lies beyond the Chinese art world’s tendencies toward professionalization and systemization. While the global art world struggles to define the role of art institutions, and countless artists and curators appear eager to jettison modernist frameworks and container aesthetics, in China these conditions are given preference through the establishment of countless private museums, oversized galleries, and dedicated art zones. The legacy of anti-institutional practices that we readily associate with modern and postmodern contemporary art in the West barely exists in the Chinese context. The most visible institutions are State-run and subject to the nation-state occupying a dominating position vis-à-vis interpretations of the past as well as social representations of the present. Under such conditions, art is not an autonomous realm from which one critiques reality. Therefore understanding and identifying with critical art traditions from the West represents a conundrum for artists in China who may wish to adopt a critical stance but find themselves unable to escape the inevitable limitations of authoritative structures of “officialdom.”

The bifurcation of the Chinese art world along “official” and “unofficial” lines that began in the 1980s and grew more polarized in the 1990s might be viewed in far less radical terms than is often portrayed. It is true that over the years artists struggled with the ideologies and prescribed stylistic conventions of the dominant government-sanctioned art forms, and at times fought hard for acknowledgment by the “official” system. But even though they felt begrudged by being denied certain opportunities, their dissatisfaction did little to openly challenge the inequalities of the officialdom itself. Rather than carving out spaces for free and open critique or advocating abolishment of certain key practices that sanctified artists—approved national fine art exhibitions or the academic system—artists of this era trained outside the official ranks or working in “avant-garde” styles sought to find ways to harmoniously coexist with other accepted art forms and be welcomed into the fold.

The formation of the self-organized Stars Group during the late 1970s is an example of a frustrating moment in which only academically trained
artists were afforded recognition by the “official” art system. Indeed, their decision to stage a group exhibition in an outdoor park adjacent to the National Art Gallery in Beijing in 1979 might be seen as a symbolic gesture aimed at making this frustration public. Needless to say, their gesture of waging an unsanctioned art display in a public space helped them gain exposure, and shortly after they were granted an exhibition inside the National Gallery. Another example might be the Xiamen Dada group, which in 1986 decided to rent the Fujian Art Museum for an exhibition of paintings and sculptures. When the time came to mount the show, the artists decided to move various construction materials from an adjacent courtyard into the museum and proclaim these as works of art. These two approaches express critical attitudes toward the space of the all-important state institution, yet the former revolves around the status of the artists (most of them were self-trained or working outside the approved art system) rather than the style or content of the work itself, whereas the latter sought to question the definition of art.

Today, the current process of reconciling these two goals—of gaining entry into hitherto closed institutions locally while at the same time maintaining an “anti-establishment” position for the global art community—produces a tension that underlies artistic production throughout China. This tension manifests itself in a variety of ways—politically and stylistically—and ultimately influence the ability of these artists to adopt a true position of criticality toward the political and social context from which it emerges. The most recognizable forms of “contemporary Chinese art”—oil paintings or sculptures by well-known artists who command record prices at auction—are often viewed as being deconstructive. However, these artists rely upon modes of appropriation that are largely consistent with aspects of Western modernism, and while superficially appearing to overturn given symbols or styles, they in fact uphold them.

As the world faces a shrinking global economy and the collapse of the financial markets, questions surrounding art’s autonomy have become more pressing. And as ties to commerce and markets in the field of art grow, one wonders where the boundary between art and the market lies. But rather than look to the market as the culprit for the ineffectiveness of art criticism in its wake or for the lavish spending and self-aggrandizement it has abetted, we might turn instead to factors that sustain rather than misappropriate artistic production. If we recognize the art market as a subset of concerns contained within a larger entity (the art world), then what can be said of the concerns of the art world itself? More importantly,
in the context of China, where can the concerns of the art world be said to begin and end? Assessing art’s relationship to autonomy in the midst of China’s pronounced lack of freedom in other spheres of life—namely constraints imposed upon political and social rights we associate with civil society—is an ongoing task endlessly complicated by inabilities to enunciate certain sentiments openly critical of the ruling regime in the face of progressive modernization.

In his essay “Politics of Installation,” Boris Groys reminds us that although artworks cannot escape their commodity status, they are also not expressly made for buyers and collectors; in other words, the multitude of art biennials, art fairs, and major blockbuster exhibitions has generated an “art public” in which the typical viewer is someone who rarely views the work as a commodity. For Groys, this is evidence that the art system is “on its way to becoming part of the very mass culture that it has for so long sought to observe and analyze from a distance.” Such an assessment may hold true for the bulk of the Western art world, but carries less weight in China or in many non-Western regions where contemporary art is still far from being a constitutive element of mass culture. Despite growing numbers of visitors to museums and arts districts in China, contemporary art remains mostly unrecognized by mainstream culture, haltingly accepted in government-run institutions, and absent from the average university art department. These truths are often forgotten, especially when one’s time is spent sealed within the gallery-filled espresso culture of the urban contemporary art world. One need only venture outside the gates of Beijing’s 798 Arts District or past the threshold of certain doorways in Cao Chang Di to witness the vast gulf that separates the well-heeled art enthusiasts and average citizens. Lumped together into the amorphous designation of “creative industries” and isolated within “creative industry zones,” contemporary art in China has found itself walled off in art zones that instill a sense of hermeticism among artists or Disneyland-like curiosity for visiting tourists. This radicalization of space serves as a constant reminder of the contested nature of public space in China, and of a lurking authoritarian presence that seeks to control artistic as well as personal participation in the creation of everyday culture.

While the Western appetite for “resistance” has a tendency to cast all art production in China as oppositional or “anti-regime,” this is rarely the case. It may be true that in the absence of a meaningful civil society, political society encompasses everything. By the same token, this situation stimulates an utter indifference with regard to politics itself. Since reaching
significant economic achievement, contemporary art in China is plagued by both the absence of politics and the banalization of politics. What is needed are models that do more than critique the commercial atmosphere surrounding art: that is, models that engage meaningfully with the social determinants of production that shape and form art in the first place, asking not what is made, but who makes it, how it is made, for whom it is made, and under what conditions. It is also perhaps more significant to continue asking, in the Chinese context, what it means to be an artist today. Because the state plays a preeminent role of power in Chinese society and actively determines representations of “the national,” artists and artistic practices are increasingly defined by their own personal histories and their relationship to “the national” as they go about their daily lives. Aesthetics aside, are there ways that artists are envisioning or imagining their role as artists today? To what degree can we view these practices as being mindful of their own conflicted position or ability to effect change on their current relationships or surroundings?

According to Charles Esche, attempting to untangle the knot of aesthetic autonomy has traditionally magnified art’s two radical directions: toward either autonomous irrelevance or engaged complicity. The model of “engaged autonomy” that Esche proposes is thus an intriguing one, suggesting a way to think of autonomy not as something that is invested in the object itself but rather as an action or a way of working. It advocates not only an active and participatory attitude, but replaces traditional top-down methods of assigning value and worth with more homespun measures of self-declared legitimacy and collective gain. Moreover, it makes it difficult to put aside the role of the artist in the act of making and the way criticality can be educed through this process rather than sitting on the surface in the form of an artwork that eventually gets “read” by outsiders. The artists mentioned below—the Xijing Men and Zheng Guogu—are but two examples of artistic practices that reflect taking a proactive role toward carving out critical spaces for art.

The work of the Xijing Men proposes new ways to look at modern and postmodern frameworks that privilege notions of nationhood, cultural specificity, and the separation of art and daily life. Composed of three artists from three nations with long and entangled pasts, the Xijing Men—Chinese artist Chen Shaoxiong, Japanese artist Tsuyoshi Ozawa, and Korean artist Gimhongsok—is a collaborative effort that conjures complex notions of Asian-ness while offering a discourse centered less on the homogenizing forces of globalization than on the celebration of difference. Utilizing
various media such as installation, video, and performance, their work is presented as an incomplete narrative that hinges upon the attributes of a fictional city/state known as Xijing. In reality there exists a northern capital (Beijing), a southern capital (Nanjing), and an eastern capital (Dongjing or Tokyo), but as yet there is no western capital (Xijing); therefore the artists have taken it upon themselves to create one.

Constructed as a continuous yet episodic narrative, the work of the Xijing Men engages in a process of mythmaking that consciously references the grand agenda of nation-building through humorous absurdities and references to everyday objects and activities. The creation myth of Xijing is not only indicative of a desire to carve out a “third space” somewhere between and among the three nations the artists inhabit in real life, but suggests an enunciation that embraces a multiplicity of languages and voices. In spite of the didactic tone, imagining Xijing also evokes the process of imagining through different references and vantage points, ultimately putting forward an agonistic model acknowledging pluralistic tensions and conflicts alongside utopian ones. Chapter 1: Do you know Xijing? involves each of the three artists, Chen Shaoxiong, Gimhongsok, and Ozawa Tsuyoshi, traveling to a remote island in their home country (Hainan, Youngjong, and Okinawa, respectively) and interviewing locals about whether or not they had heard of or been to a place called Xijing. Designed to establish Xijing as a place that exists within one's mind, the trio then embarked on Chapter 2: Xijing Theater: This is Xijing—Journey to the West, which involved revisiting and retelling the story of Journey to the West, an allegorical tale of a pilgrimage or spiritual journey, via traditional hand puppet theater. Developing the script on-site with local audiences, This is Xijing—Journey to the West completes the symbolic journey to a new land through performative means, and with added measures of improvisation to incorporate different perspectives dependent upon locale.

Staged in August 2008 during the official Beijing Olympic Games, Welcome to Xijing—Xijing Olympics presented a humorous yet provocative take on the unabashedly spectacular Olympics mania that gripped China during the summer of that year. It marked the pseudo act of establishing nationhood by devising a Xijing Olympics flag, singing the national anthem, and designing various t-shirts, hats and logos, not to mention competing athletes and requisite ceremonies. Concocting their own series of events and casting themselves as “athletes” and their family and friends as the “populace,” the competitions (if you can call them that) consisted of kicking watermelons instead of soccer balls, marathon napping, boxing in the form
of body massage, and other absurdities such as a three-way table tennis match using shoes as paddles. Their version mocked the seriousness and solemnity with which the Chinese government (and by association, the Chinese public) treated the glitzy theatrics of the real Beijing Games and replaced themes of winning, success, and public entertainment with modesty, simplicity, and failure. If the Olympic Games themselves constituted the supreme performance of Chinese national pride under the auspices of international diplomacy (never mind the subtext of China’s own eager aspirations to secure its position among the global superpowers), then Welcome to Xijing—Xijing Olympics represented a caricature of these attitudes in which humor, playfulness, and aimlessness are injected into the highly scripted and ceremonial tone of the official games. Their antics worked to present a kind of informal locality to offset the trope of national spectacle, and in the process identified more directly with the concerns of average citizens, whose struggles to negotiate the massive transformations enveloping their way of life go largely unnoticed. The low-tech DIY approach of Welcome to Xijing—Xijing Olympics reflected a form of practice that is refreshingly human-scaled and attuned to the proximity of individuals rather than standard groupings overly conditioned by notions of the “mass” and the “people.”

The prescribed categories of what makes an artist, what constitutes an artwork, or how we judge the practice of art-making are designations that the Xijing Men seek to disrupt and disavow. Similarly, Zheng Guogu works under collaborative auspices, through his work with the Yangjiang Group (a collaboration with other artists, Chen Zaiyan and Sun Qinglin) and his individually authored projects that are created with the assistance of family, friends, experiences, social interactions, and recreation activities. In short, nearly everything in his life and surroundings has a way of embedding itself in and leaving traces upon his work. Zheng’s art is as much a negotiation of his own life working as an artist in the contemporary art world, as it is about an artist’s life within his hometown of Yangjiang—a small coastal city in southern China. The unique relationship Zheng has with his city—which rarely appears itself in any definitive or representational way in his work—forces us to consider the production of art in relation to place and environment, and how the so-called “real” intertwines seamlessly with the fictional.

Zheng is as active as any artist on the international circuit—participating in the 2003 Venice Biennale, 2007 Documenta, and many other solo and group shows in China and Europe—yet he continues to live and work in his
hometown of Yangjiang, a third-tier city in southern China several hours’ drive from Guangzhou. If the current leitmotif of contemporary Chinese art produced over the last ten years has been guided by notions of massive social change and transformation, then Zheng’s motto might be one of sameness, in the sense that it is the lack of difference which makes a difference, and the ebb of change is prone always to local interpretation and inflection. Zheng’s art presents us with a sort of hypothesis—if real life can become art once it enters into the world of art (galleries, museums, exhibitions) then what are the ways in which art can be turned into a part of one’s everyday existence?

In his hometown of Yangjiang, Zheng acts at once as embedded local hero and distant weary-eyed observer; according to him, “I think I still live in this world of a game.” The “game” Zheng refers to is “real life” and the “game of life”—namely filled with conflicts, struggles, and underlying strategies. His ambitious Age of Empire (2001–present) is borne out of this thinking, and while it employs the logic of gaming, role-playing, virtuality, and simulation it is also emphatically real. Inspired by the computer game series Age of Empires, in which players control historical world civilizations, Zheng has been gradually transforming an agricultural area on the outskirts of Yangjiang city into a real-world replica of the game’s virtual environment. The project began in 2000, when a friend gave Zheng a tip on some cheap land in the outlying undeveloped parts of the city. He soon bought up 5,000 square meters of land and by 2005 he had acquired neighboring plots to arrive at 20,000 square meters. Today his spread has grown to 40,000 square meters (approximately 10 acres) and counting.

Zheng’s Age of Empire is a project that does not concern itself with achieving a finished artwork—rather, it functions as an exercise in turning the fictional into reality, or, more accurately, as an experiment in the social process of making itself. As Zheng recreates his made-up game on real land, he faces real-time constraints when it comes to securing money, building rights, land permits, and the location of materials and labor. Thus the sleepy coastal town of Yangjiang comes to stand as a microcosm for daily survival in Zheng’s practice. The language of waging war, launching campaigns, and formulating strategies present in the original Age of Empire game is applicable also to Zheng’s conception of his home environment of Yangjiang as a contested space filled with underground systems and that taint and seep into everyday life. As Zheng knowingly acquired his land through illegal means, Zheng’s daily activities have quickly become consumed by winning, dining, and bribing the local officials in efforts to curry favor, maintain
good relations, and negotiate with the proper channels for smooth future acquisitions. In making *Age of Empire*, he cooperates with the system in order to transcend it, becoming complicit yet independent at the same time. In a spirit attentive to regionalism and locality, Zheng’s steadfast ties to his family, friends, objects, experiences, social interactions, and recreational activities in Yangjiang embed themselves and leave traces in his art.

Projects like *Age of Empire* and the work of the Xijing Men are ongoing and continue to operate spontaneously with no fixed timeframe, set limits, or defined outcome. Zheng has calculated a means of living his art through his daily actions, calling into question our awareness of our own practices as artists, critics, curators, historians, and audience members—practices that define the boundaries of the art world in the first place. Like Zheng talking to the man eating abalone, or to the fishmonger, we are witnessing the art world’s traditional borders becoming indivisible from those of the social order it is inclined to merely portray. Zheng’s transformation of the virtual into the real with *Age of Empire* also brings the role-play of world dominance and territorial expansion into contact with the actual domain he has built in his outpost of Yangjiang. The unassuming qualities of Zheng’s practice are offset by notions of calculated strategy and hard-nosed manipulation that—despite dark moments—hint at a utopian vision that transcends regional, national, and imaginary borders.

The Xijing Men similarly tug at real and imagined conceptions of nationhood, though, carried out within an entirely fictional tone, their antics lend an absurdist light to notions of hybridity and the prospect of locating a “third space.” If we are to take these practices as reflective of new strategies of making and imagining that insert new realities into our contemporary world, then it is crucial to see how these frontiers in China are marked also by a tendency to create spheres of autonomy. Perhaps it is in these gestures of mythmaking, creating, and inventing spaces that align with contemporary social-political conditions that we can locate the utopian processes attributed to art.

**Notes**

1. This essay represents an altered version of my earlier essay “A Game Played Without Rules Has No Losers,” which appeared in the online publication *e-flux* journal, Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood and Anton Vidokle, eds. Issue 7 (June 2009), www.e-flux.com/journal/view/74.
Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang, “Introduction,” Postmodernism in China (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 9. The authors point out that in China, postmodernism as a discourse preceded postmodernism as a reality, and that the convoluted debate over China’s qualification as a postmodern society is caught up in an insistence upon the “authenticity” of an indigenous Chinese-style postmodernism, overlooking the fact that authenticity itself is a term called into question by postmodernism. See also pp. 1–16.

As John Clark points out, “Even in China where for political reasons a kind of anti-establishment ‘unofficial’ art developed in the 1990s, the artists involved were overwhelmingly trained in the art establishment or were reacting to its educational curricula, exhibitions practices and stylistic codes.” See his essay “Modernities in Art: How are they ‘Other’?” in Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried Van Damme, eds., World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008), p. 414.

For more on the state of contemporary art criticism in China, see my text “Critical Horizons: On Art Criticism in China,” Diaaalogues, Asia Art Archive Online Newsletter (December 2008), www.aaa.org.hk.


For more on issues of production, see my book, In Production Mode: Contemporary Art in China (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Books, in cooperation with CCAA, 2008).


Age of Empires is a video game series published by Microsoft Game Studios. The first edition was released in 1997.
3

FORMALISM

Formalism is an interpretive method that emphasizes the form of an artwork as opposed to its content. Formalist criticism excludes external considerations such as symbolism, history, politics, economics, or authorship, focusing instead on the forms structuring a work of art. Two main camps of literary critics greatly determined formalism's significance for visual art: the “New Critics” (e.g., I. A. Richards, C. P. Snow, and T. S. Eliot) and intellectuals in Prague and Moscow (e.g., Roman Jakobson, Boris Eichenbaum, and Viktor Shklovsky). In the spirit of “New Criticism,” the American art critic Clement Greenberg argued stringently that art should divest itself of its representational and illusionistic aspects. Beginning in the late 1970s, after the wane of Greenberg’s influence, formalism was often allied to structuralist modes of thinking that sought to understand the workings of an artwork, or group of artworks, based on properties internal to them. Reinterpreted by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, Shklovsky in particular became very important for his ideas about the technical support as well as his connection between form and social practice.

Among these strains of formalism, it was Greenberg’s—especially in the United States and Western Europe—that came to represent modernism so totally as to become synonymous with it. Thus did critics’ appropriation of Shklovsky represent an attempt to pry formalism away from its identification with Greenberg: to resist throwing away the baby with the bathwater. Still, the postmodern reaction against formalism in the 1980s largely condemned it on the basis of its hermeticism and disinterest in worldly affairs. By the 1990s, with the rise of identity politics and methodologies like postcolonial
theory, critical race theory, and queer theory, formalism was seen as part of 
an essentialist tradition that marginalized a significant amount of art.

Nevertheless, formalism has become important once again—but with 
key differences. This is the landscape that Jan Verwoert addresses in his 
text “Form Struggles.” In it, he seeks to reorient the North American, 
Western European-centric model of formalism, and to recover other, more 
local, and profoundly historical, understandings of artistic form. Likewise, 
Anne Ellegood’s essay “Formalism Redefined” takes a long view of the 
history of contemporary art in order to show that formalism—as inherited 
from “significant form”—can never be considered without content. Finally, 
Joan Kee proposes, in “The World in Plain View: Form in the Service of 
the Global,” that formalism might also be reconceived as a methodology 
by which to understand radically different contemporary practices on a 
global scale.
Form Struggles

Jan Verwoert

Polemics

In the modernist tradition, definitions of what form means to art are legion. What these definitions tend to have in common though is their polemical function: The artist or writer will formulate a contentious idea of what—by virtue of its new and specific form—a good work of art could be and do; and this idea will be expressly defined in opposition to tastes and styles that are marked out as bad but prevalent. In order to grasp what is at stake when a new notion of form is advanced, one needs to tap into the politics of the struggle out of which that notion emerged. Canonical accounts are typically premised on the belief that there are only a few select places—Paris, then New York—in which such struggles become visible and hence recognized as historically significant. The chance of a new city inheriting this status keeps people hedging their bets: Could it be Berlin? None of the postmodernist mockery of the quest for the new seems to have effected the “make-it-or-break-it” mentality that bolsters the canonical belief in the significance of key style wars in select cities. As big art market booms recur periodically, this mentality has arguably only become more endemic.

That this unholy hope for art history to obtain in one chosen place only should be entertained today is particularly ironic, now that, after 1989, the true width of the horizon of global art production is no longer obscured by Cold War isolationism. If anything, these changing circumstances should have made us think differently. True, in the last two decades, Western money moving into new countries has very rarely helped create sustainable structures for local cultural production (and local art markets). The material conditions for alternative career paths remain limited. But they exist. And it is up to contemporary art historians and critics to provide an intellectual forum for the appreciation of work produced in the continuation of historical avant-gardist struggles that haven’t yet been fully acknowledged in the more visible schools of art historical thought because they cannot conveniently be arranged along a New York to Paris axis. To this end we also need to rethink the terms we use to describe the stakes of avant-gardism: The belief in global centers and cult of competitive innovators are part and parcel of
Form Struggles

the same rhetoric. What concepts could permit us to avow the undiminished value of avant-gardist experiments with—and struggles over—artistic form, yet relocalize them in alternative, less exclusive, less high-strung, less lofty scenarios?

Łódź

Let’s start from the Polish city of Łódź, a textile industry town. In 1929, a group of artists work in abstraction, and call themselves the a.r. (amaño-garda rzeczywista: the real avant-garde). The sculptor Katarzyna Kobro, her husband, the painter Władysław Strzemiński, fellow painter Henryk Stażewski, and the poets Jan Brzękowski and Julian Przyboś put together a contemporary collection of international avant-gardist art by asking friends from different countries for donations, making the collection one of the first of its kind in Europe (if not worldwide) when it is presented to the public in the local Muzeum Sztuki in 1931.

If we look more closely at the work and writing of Kobro, we encounter a most engaging philosophy of artistic form, formulated via abstract sculptures and polemical essays alike. Disarmingly clear and simple, yet highly dynamic and versatile in construction, Kobro’s sculptures articulate alternative ideas of how space could be rhythmicized. She usually used little more than small slates of wood or metal, which she glued or welded together to compose structures that echo the look and scale of architecture models while remaining strictly nonrepresentational. Kobro aptly called the main body of her works “Spatial Compositions” (1925–33) and describes their form as based on the principle of composing “space-time rhythms.”

The beauty of this concept lies in the way Kobro expands the idea of sculpture to encompass time, and then synthesizes temporality with spati-ality, by relating it to a concrete material logic of form: rhythm. In rhythm, timing equals spacing (of notes within the metric measure). And indeed, the sequential arrangement of rectangular and curved forms in the abstract architectural space of Kobro’s sculptures reads like a movement score, or rather an algorithm for events occurring both in space and time. As well, she could be seen to draw on basic formal principles of the new medium of film-making (the splicing together of celluloid strips in the process of editing film)—a new process of sequencing that helps her discard the age-old drama of the artist “giving form to matter” together with its associated pathos of “mind triumphing over material world,”1 In her work, the medium
in which ideas evolve is material: rhythm is mind and matter, inherently. There is no need for the former to dominate the latter.

Yet, Kobro always also published writing to advance her philosophy of form. In “Rzeźba stanowi …” (A sculpture is …), for instance, she describes her work of Spatial Compositions as “a laboratory experiment that will define the architecture of future cities” and thereby aims at changing “the rhythm of human movement in space”. Yet, these visionary lines are written from a polemical perspective. Kobro instantly proceeds to name her enemy and passionately attack the ideology she sees reflected in the principles of form that find the approval of the powers that be:

Shall I talk about the Warsaw academic official-bureaucratic art, about these frontal blocks of wood, stone or bronze, heavy like a bureaucrat’s mind, carefully chiselled into busts or heads of the “responsible” or “influential” lords of bureaucracy? […]

The “national” art of all countries is surprisingly similar. Its common feature is the rejection of the achievements of modern art, a stabilization at a level from decades ago, and the elimination of all flights of creativity.

These passages render the stakes of Kobro’s struggle tangible: Dedicated to the speculative spirit of an international modernist form of art and thinking, the artist finds herself forced to fight for the acceptance of that form in a context determined by the national conditions of political power and repression. While her writing, like her work, by virtue of its clarity and imaginativeness instantly appeals to a contemporary reader and viewer, it equally testifies to its specific historical experience. The concerns Kobro voices are global; the fate of a politically marginalized artist and intellectual, however, is historically condemned to be local.

In Kobro’s case this meant that she had to fight the cultural bureaucrats of her time; even more, her background—she was born in Moscow, her father being from Riga (today the capital of Latvia) and of German descent—put her in a difficult position. When forced to declare her identity during Nazi occupation, she refused to capitalize on her German ancestry and instead claimed herself as Russian, a gesture for which, after liberation, she was tried in court (the new authorities interpreted it as an act of disloyalty towards Poland). Larger parts of her oeuvre, moreover, exist only as reconstructions based on photographs; some originals were lost when Kobro and Strzemiński fled Łódź in 1940 and the new occupants of their apartment threw out the pieces they found in the basement, and still more
were burned when, in January 1945, lacking firewood, Kobro was forced to feed them to the fire.

A reading of Kobro's work that does it justice—from a post-1989 perspective that understands modernist discourses on form to have emerged from a multiplicity of particular sited struggles—needs to meet two conflicting demands. On the one hand, it would have to account for how Kobro formulated her position in the specific struggles of her time in Poland. On the other, to view Kobro's work exclusively in light of such circumstances would effectively disrespect the spirit of internationalism to which she dedicated her work, writing, and curatorial initiatives, and to relegate her to the very confined conditions that she sought to overcome. So, while the attentiveness to the formative role of local struggles would demand a close look at Łódź as a potential epicenter of artistic modernism, to pin Kobro down to one place would be to symbolically re-enact the violence of the authorities demanding to know: “What are you now, Polish, German or Russian?” If the only apt response should be “each, all, and none of these,” what form of thinking is adequate to this?

**Multiple Ironies**

The question is pressing, and it arises not only because of the demand to rewrite the histories of modernism after the end of the Cold War, but also because the contradictions that the muddled complexities of those histories have left behind still haunt us today. I recall a symptomatic incident from my first visit to Łódź in 1999. The Polish Cultural Institute had invited a group of German curators, critics, and gallerists to visit different cities around Poland. Our guide took us to an alternative apartment gallery in Łódź, where the arrival of our motley crew of professionals felt like the entry of the Spanish inquisition (think Monty Python). The art-world status associated with our group had provoked awkward situations before. Only here this sense of power imbalance was instantly thrown into relief by the manner in which the group of young artists we met greeted us: Wordlessly they handed over their portfolios, withdrew to the adjacent space and let clouds of marijuana smoke gently drift back over. Mildly upset, I recounted the scene to Polish art critic Piotr Rypson later that night in a bar back in Warsaw. Whereupon Rypson, beer in hand, broad smile on his face, declared, with all due seriousness: “Jan, you have to understand, artists from Łódź have a long tradition in non-participatory art!”
In its poignant irony, this remark put a whole set of contradictions into perspective: First of all, it was a reminder that a purposefully enacted non-exchange can indeed be a powerful form of exchange, as it abruptly renders unspoken hierarchies tangible. And precisely this kind of enacted non-exchange has always been a medium for avant-gardists to alienate people who rely on established codes of cultural exchange. Further, the sheer flippancy of Rypson’s comment exemplifies the spirit in which we may have to imagine the inception of avant-gardes. I still regret that we didn’t take the opportunity to, there and then, draft the first Global Manifesto of Non-Participatory Art (if only to annoy anyone who still feels a need to defend or contest a concept as toothless as relational aesthetics).\(^4\) Kobro, for instance, within fifteen years, started and/or joined seven(!) different avant-gardist movements, some of which she initiated together with her partner and friends.\(^5\) In this light we could indeed look at avant-gardism as a medium for collective improvisation, that is, for initiating a multilateral, international discourse on the possibilities of artistic form, if need be, in an impromptu manner.

It is sad to see this quality overshadowed by the fact that the power struggles within artistic communities notoriously produce(d) authority figures (the likes of an André Breton or Guy Debord) who attempt to brand, pitch, and promote their own ideas of form as artistic capital; and, worse still, in retrospect, make it seem as if the history of ideas revolves around the primacy of author and ownership. Unfortunately, such (predominantly male) territorial posturing is then, often enough, rewarded by art historians who mistake the pitch for the conditions of production, and hence recount these histories as if they were relay races in which single great minds passed on the scepter of innovation to their appointed successors.

When, after 1989, local biennials for international contemporary art began proliferating worldwide, and artists, curators, and writers were invited to travel to places to talk to people, all parties involved had to try and find a lingua franca within situations of improvised exchange\(^6\)—a scenario that intimately resonates with the spirit of international avant-gardist experiments locally enacted.\(^7\) This window of potentiality seems now to gradually be closing, due to the increasing push towards the professionalization of artistic careers and repatriation of global centers. Still, one could at least hope to, through valorizing a notion of collectively improvised avant-gardisms in art historical writing, contribute to an atmosphere in which international experiments with artistic form continue to appear possible and attractive.
Generational Contracts

In terms of the sociopolitical dimension of the struggle over form, there is yet another aspect to be considered: the negotiation of generational contracts. The canonical scenario associates the dismantling of once dominant principles of form with the rise of a new generation overthrowing the old. Despite the theatricality and obvious Oedipal overtones, this scenario continues to influence how artistic practices come to be reviewed, marketed, and historicized. The momentum of the “post”-modernist polemics against “high” modernism, for example, seems inseparable from a generational shift in the New York art world of the 1970s. The art writer here resembles a legal aid who must grasp the terms of negotiation (i.e., principles of form) and draft a contract accordingly, to authorize the transition of power from one generation to the next. Like in any good farce, the plot is clear, the assignment of roles understood, and the outcome guaranteed to be a coherent narrative. Can alternative models be found in the expanded field of avant-gardist histories that has come into view after 1989?

To be sure, the generational logic of different art scenes around the world need not be mapped on the dominant model of a post-1970s New York, for the simple reason that the influence of a competitive art market has not been uniform. In environments where it does not really exist, no immediate material reward is gained from pushing a previous generation off the stage. On the contrary, when recognition is primarily awarded via communication, everyone profits from keeping as many people in the loop as possible, including the members of older or intermediary generations. In the place of money, inter-generational exchange then becomes a key currency.

Apart from economical limitations, the political conditions in a given country may bar a discourse of progressive art practices from ever reaching a wider public. Be it simply because of a lack of personage to play the part of the spectator, different generations then provide each other with an audience. In such a scenario, the avant-gardist discourse keeps itself alive because different generations come to share their mutual dedication for struggle. While surely also a potential hotbed for intrigues, art scenes that are not centered around market dynamics make it much more likely for the acknowledgment of a basic need for living together to constitute the terms of the generational contract, rather than the sheer competitive urge to, as it were, “roll” the previous generation “out of town.”
If we were continue recounting the story of Kobro’s circle of friends once more in light of these reflections, there would be another highly exemplary situation to discuss: Kobro’s associate, the abstract painter Henryk Stażewski, later moved to Warsaw where he occupied a rooftop studio flat on 64 Aleja Solidarnosci (Solidarity Boulevard). Towards the end of his long life (he was born in 1894), he shared this place for fourteen years, from 1974 to his death in 1988, with a pivotal figure in the post-1960s discourse on installation-based and conceptual art practices, Edward Krasiński (who, living a long life, from 1925–2004, in his turn continued to be a presence in the neo-conceptual discourse of the 1990s). The rooftop studio flat is preserved as a permanent installation (under the name Avant-Garde Institute). It is a time portal of sorts, a zone in which two long lives overlapped. To claim that the conceptual practices of the 1960s continued certain tendencies of modernism is then to say too little; they actually coincided with them, sharing and transposing their principles.

Instead, one needs to look very closely at how the works of Stażewski and Krasiński converse with each other. Stażewski was un-dogmatic in his painterly abstractions; Krasiński in turn evoked a sense of total formalist rigor at first glance that nonetheless betrayed a strong awareness of the context of his artistic gestures. Indeed, while he continued to intermittently produce surreal sculptural pieces, Krasiński made it his trademark gesture to apply an uninterrupted strip of blue scotch tape onto the walls of a given space as a horizon line. Often the strip was also stuck across artwork already installed on these walls. (Daniel Buren one day came to visit and left some of his signature red stripes on one of the studio windows.)

As this example of a first-generation abstract painter sharing a studio flat with a first-generation conceptualist shows, there don’t have to be (or perhaps never really were) clear cuts between different generations of avant-gardists. On the contrary, if we regard the shared studio flat as a paradigmatic situation, the challenge it poses to art historical writing would be to cease reproducing juridical scenarios of power transfer, and instead move closer towards kitchen stories of the kind that would account for generational contracts like the one Stażewski and Krasiński negotiated. After all, it’s easily verified by experience that abstract debates on the implications of artistic forms and concepts can gain a particular quality when conducted in an environment where domestic issues are equally contentious.
Form Incorporating Ironies

To insist on the need of breaking with officious scenarios of avant-gardist exchanges underscores that the work made in the course of such exchanges should not merely be considered a product of the given historical conditions. Some of the most exciting work created by artists in the process of determining their mutual relationship in fact incorporates those conditions. Criticality in such instances means more than just showing how things are. It rather furthers an awareness that we are not fateful bound by the conditions of our own discourses, but that, in making these conditions the subject matter of a work, they become material to be owned, acted upon, and played with.

In the artistic biography of Krasiński we do indeed find a particularly strong, beautiful, and funny example for such an act of seizing the conditions, contradictions, and ironies of one’s own discourse: In 1967 Tadeusz Kantor invited Krasiński to take part in the performance piece *Panoramic Sea-Happening*, to be staged on a beach by the Baltic Sea near Osieki. Involving the people on the beach in an anarchic mixture of beach activities and choreographed theatrical acts, Kantor managed to channel the collective energies into a mock-grandiose gesture that closed the event. This gesture he convinced Krasiński to perform: With the participants on the beach comfortably reclining in their deck-chairs, watching, Krasiński, suitably dressed for the occasion in a tailcoat, stood on a step ladder in the surf and, facing the horizon line, played his part as a majestic conductor; convincingly enough—the photographs of the performance at least suggest that much—to momentarily make it seem as if the ocean were an orchestra and the rhythmical sound of the waves a symphony that an artist could direct, for the pleasure of the audience.

By itself, this gesture already poignantly mocks the artistic desire to engage the sublime. If we now contextualize the gesture, however, and look more closely at what it means for these artists to work together, the gesture becomes newly legible as an exuberantly self-ironic reflection upon their antagonism. While Kantor created all-inclusive, physically excessive and emotionally provocative theatrical events in pursuit of a (Hegelian) vision of total synthesis, Krasiński espoused the exact opposite: He redrew the line between art and life in the form of a universal blue scotch tape equator. Economical in his use of means, analytical in his (Kantian) insistence on there being categorical borderlines, Krasiński presented himself as the somewhat dandified embodiment of a critical intelligence.
For an artist like Krasiński to even accept being drawn into the immersive mayhem of a Kantor-happening therefore is a gesture with equally strong symbolic implications as the final pose he was asked to take. By casting Krasiński in the role of an ocean-horizon-orchestra-conductor, Kantor made patent the following: What is the universal blue scotch tape line but a symbol for the horizon and therefore an invocation of the sublime? What motivates the analytical mind in its search for universal principles of distinction, if not a romantic yearning to touch on an ultimate horizon of truth? Does the analytical mind not finally derive its pleasures from the fantasy that it could control the forces of dynamism by means of rigidly orchestrating their principles of form?

By playing the role Kantor assigned to him, Krasiński consigned to having his distinguished analytical position portrayed (if not caricatured) as romantic. By arguably making a very good show out of it, however, Krasiński in turn used the possibility of being challenged—on someone else's terms—to publicly advance and embody his own agenda. Countering the fatal tendencies of antagonistic discursive positions to become ossified and self-serving, Kantor and Krasiński used the medium of a happening—and the form of theatrical (self-)caricature enabled by it—to seize, expose, and model the principles of form at the heart of their antagonism.

If we imagine the Panoramic Sea-Happening to have been animated by the laughter of two antagonists acknowledging their dependency on the engagement of their antipode, and if we then also imagine that laughter to have been shared by the participating audience on the beach, we do actually arrive at a blueprint for transforming the exploration of avant-gardist struggle into a truly gay science.

A characteristic of that laughter seems to be that it travels through time and space to puncture the putative of prevalent discursive dichotomies wherever it reappears and resonates. Equally poignant, Nancy Holt's video piece East Coast West Coast (1969) may be a good example to show how, around the same time, artists in the United States took on the conditions, contradictions, and ironies of their discourse in a spirit similar to that of Kantor and Krasiński. Holt shot the video with the help of a group of friends. It's set in the kitchen corner of a studio flat; Peter Campus is operating the camera, and Joan Jonas, Holt, and her partner, Robert Smithson, are reclining around a table engaged in talk. The conversation for the most part unfolds between Holt and Smithson (with Jonas intermittently supporting the former). Both speak in character, Holt
impersonating the type of an unforgiving analytical and rhetorically skilled, but somewhat over-anxious, artist from the East Coast (New York) while Smithson plays the West Coast type (Los Angeles), claiming intuition, experience, and the love for beautiful people as the principles behind the form of his work, using terminology that synthesizes the personal with the cosmic.

The conversation that unfolds on the basis of this conceptual typecasting, however, is more than just a spoof. As Holt and Smithson, improvising in character, egg each other on, they run through practically the entire inventory of contemporary American discursive positions. Comparable to an exorcism ceremony, moreover, the spirits summoned start making their appearance, as a truly awkward tension builds up between the two contenders. Sharp as a knife, Holt cuts through the West Coast metaphysical slur, cornering Smithson; while his character initially seems infinitely likeable in his unabashed embrace of the experiential, he comes to seem increasingly more self-indulgent, when, at a loss for arguments, he resorts to passive aggressive counter-attacks. In his turn, however, he perfectly frames the exclusive focus of the New York artist type on theoretical legitimation as motivated by the desire to find the perfect sales pitch. In response to the (East Coast character’s) admonition that artists should have clear concepts of what they do, he grunts back: “You talk like Madison Avenue (… man)!”

To see Holt and her friends seize the very grammar of critical discourse and expose how neither the analytical nor the experiential position is, per se, more justified than the other is profoundly effecting. At no point, however, does the exposure suggest a disavowal of the need to argue over the principles of artistic form. On the contrary, the piece delivers its point so strongly because both its key performers go at their debate with an unmitigated passion. But what adds a particular poignancy to the work is the irony that underpins the conditions of its making: It is a study in discursive antagonism, produced in a situation of relaxed conviviality, in a free form of collective improvisation. So, while framing the dual set of (false) alternatives given by the standards of legitimatory discourse, Holt, Smithson, Jonas, and Campus, by virtue of the very form of their improvised collaboration, performatively point towards an unmapped third possibility: to realize the passion and humor of avant-gardist struggle over form—and (re-)write history in the making—in a very particular setting and therefore in a very special key, somewhere in a studio kitchen, together with friends.
Notes

1 Regarding this point, I am indebted to the insightful comments by Linda Quilan and Susana Pedrosa after a seminar presentation by Ania Okrasko.


3 Ibid.

4 Arguably one of the few overarching, yet painfully vague, concepts on offer to theorize the form of certain tendencies in the mid-1990s, proposed by Nicolas Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics (Paris: les presses du réel, 2002).

   That a particular form could be given to a work by an artist for the sole purpose of annoying a contender was a notion I first heard clearly formulated by Albert Oehlen. In an interview Jörg Heiser and myself conducted with him in 2003, he argued that Dali “cobbled his ‘dream’ images together – in some cases purely to startle André Breton” and offend the latter’s ideals of authenticity. Albert Oehlen, “Ordinary Madness,” frieze 78 (2003), pp. 106–111.

5 Kobro co-founded the real avant-garde in 1929 and Unism in 1931, ran a local branch of Malevich’ Unovis movement from 1920–2, became affiliated with the groups Blok in 1924, Praesens in 1926 and Abstraction-Création in 1932 to finally undersign the manifesto of Dimensionism in 1936.

6 I develop this perspective more fully in “The Curious Case of Biennial Art.” In Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebo, eds., The Biennial Reader (Hatje Cantz, 2010), pp. 184–197.

7 In his curatorial statement to the 2nd Manifesta biennial, Robert Fleck in this sense argued that after 1989 contemporary experimental practices were in fact reviving a spirit of free internationalism that had only seemingly been quelled by the repressions and enforced separations during the Cold War. Robert Fleck, Art after Communism, in Manifesta 2 exh. cat., Luxembourg 1998, pp. 193–198.

8 The experience that first made me consciously aware of such intergenerational arrangements was a residency in Yerevan, Armenia, to which I was invited in 2005 by the curator Eva Kachatryan. The community of artists I met was to equal parts composed of performance artists of the 1970s (like Grigor Kachatryan), punk-poet-painters of the 1980s (like Arman Grigoryan), and neo-conceptualists of the 1990s (like Vahram Aghasyan or Sona Abgaryan).

9 The studio flat was saved due to the initiative of the Foksal Gallery Foundation, curatorial collective, Andrzej Przywara, Joanna Mytkowska, and Adam Szymczyk.

10 By speaking of “irony” in this section I wish to describe the distinctive quality of works of art which incorporate, articulate, and reflect the consistent logic
of contradiction governing people's lives and ways of talking in a given social environment—neither to resolve these contradictions nor to judge them from a distanced vantage point, but to objectify them and thus put them up for grabs. (Dostoevsky's style of writing being paradigmatic for this deep form of irony.)

The work was recently shown in the retrospective *Nancy Holt: Sightlines* (curated by Alena J. Williams) at the Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe. I thank Daniel Pies for drawing my attention to the piece.
Formalism in art, over the past half-century or so, has been highly contested. The primary existence of form—the shape, line, color, and materiality of the artwork—has not been debated; rather, at stake has been the value of form in relationship to other aspects of the artwork, and by extension, the role form plays in understanding and evaluating works of art. Much more than an epithet for mere description, formalism has, at times, become a kind of ideological position arguing for the primacy of a specific approach to making and interpreting art, one that looks within the object for all meaning. By looking exclusively within to focus only on the physical attributes of the artwork, the type of formalist methodology espoused in American modernism—as gestured to in the epigraph—oftentimes deliberately ignored other aspects of the work, most notably its content, or meaning. The subject matter or ideas outside the work itself—whether it be the landscape, a historical event, a personal memory, or any number of other possible inspirations—was deemed superfluous to the work’s meaning, even when it informed the artist’s decisions about the very form the work would take. Formalism thus engendered a reductive binary between form and content and opened itself to critique on the basis of its willful exclusion of the content and, moreover, the context in which the artwork came into being. This hermetic stance—promoted most famously by the American critic Clement Greenberg in his writings that championed a self-reflexive “medium specificity”—occasioned the rejection of formalism in much postmodern discussion.1

Nonetheless, form is understood to be fundamental to art. Indeed, in recent years, efforts have been made to resuscitate the term “formalism” and to consider the vital questions it raises about artistic production, display, and reception. Even a cursory review of recent exhibitions that specifically take up questions of formalism in contemporary art reveals a groundswell of interest in the subject. These include Formalismus at the Kunsthalle Hamburg (2004); Formalism: Modern Art Today at
Salzburger Kunstverein, Hamburg (2004); *Gone Formalism* at the ICA, Philadelphia (2006); *Make It Now: New Sculpture in New York* at the SculptureCenter, New York (2005); *Thing: New Sculpture from Los Angeles* at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2005); my own show, *The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas: Recent Sculpture* at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. (2006); *Unmonumental* at the New Museum, New York (2007); and *While Bodies Get Mirrored: An Exhibition About Movement, Formalism and Space* at Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich (2010); to name but a few. These exhibitions argue for the extent to which the charge that artists are ideologically committed to form or content—that they must choose to foreground one over the other—no longer carries much currency. Here and elsewhere, both form and content are recognized as equally vital, and in fact, inextricable from one another. While these exhibitions are distinct in many ways, each endeavored to evaluate how contemporary artists tackle formal decisions in their work. Rather than reside in a strictly inward looking brand of formalism, the formal strategies in the works were largely argued to be informed by the culture at large. Whether responding to artworks of the past or reacting to the vernacular, the works in these exhibitions were selected by the curators for their distinct materiality and physicality but also for what they had to say about contemporary life. After a period of time in which the very term “formalism” was generally avoided in exhibition practice for its perceived automatic association with a Greenbergian reductionism, it is notable how many of these exhibitions actually used the word in their titles, an indication that a new era has emerged in which a desire to closely evaluate formal concerns and decisions is wholly embraced.

This essay thus attempts to identify how formalism operates in artworks of the past decade or so and how it expands the consideration of medium-specificity promoted by Greenberg in the wake of the challenge to his orthodoxy. The radical redefinitions of art that punctuate its history from the 1960s forward have had an enormous impact on contemporary art. The past fifty years of avant-garde practice has taught us that form is *a priori* structural in the visual arts and that any type of formalist analysis must reach beyond morphology to grapple with form’s essential ties to content. In order to understand how artists today grapple with the question of formalism and its role in their artistic output, it is worth looking back to some of the debates around formalism that have taken place during the past few decades and how they have informed artists’ practices today.
In some cases, formalist revision was a direct reaction to Greenberg, as it was for Yve-Alain Bois, who argued that Greenberg’s formalism could, at times, devolve into descriptive morphology. He also claims the critic was, ironically, “not such a great ‘formalist’ after all” for his calculated blindness to aspects of the work. If something about an artist’s formal approach did not suit the argument Greenberg wanted to make, he would simply ignore it. For example, Greenberg’s claims for flatness and opticality as fundamental to painting relied upon the classical verticality of the picture plane. Because of this, he failed to address Pollock’s relationship to the ground: his reliance upon horizontality for his working process, but also, importantly, his incorporation of detritus—of earthly, base objects such as cigarettes, matches, and coins—on the canvas of Full Fathom Five (1947) and other paintings. Despite his criticisms of Greenberg, Bois resolutely upholds the vital importance of formal analysis within art-historical discourse. When accused of being a “formalist,” and therefore “anti- or a-historical,” Bois addressed the claim that formalism and meaning are somehow irreconcilable. He writes, “even one’s most formal descriptions are always predicated upon a judgment and that the stake of this judgment is always, knowingly or not, meaning. And it is my contention that the reverse is also true: it is impossible to lay any claim to meaning without specifically (and I would say initially) speaking of form.”

Drafted in the 1990s, Bois’ stance would be unthinkable without the art that happened in Greenberg’s stead. To take just one example, the horizontality of Pollock’s paintings—in his famous dance-like dripping of paint while hovering over a prone canvas—preoccupied the next generation of artists, who encountered Pollock through Hans Namuth’s photographs of the artist at work, Allan Kaprow’s eulogy of Pollock (in which he read his work as an expansion of art, not a contraction into painting), and through his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1967. The exploration of informe, or formlessness, begged by Pollock’s drip technique, was also paramount for artists like Robert Morris whose stacked and hung sculptures were designed to respond to gravity. Of course, an interest in formlessness was not an outright rejection of form; rather it grew out of a desire to resist certain ingrained expectations about the form a specific medium should take. While historically art was understood as the outcome of precise planning, so-called “anti-form” artists increasingly incorporated elements of chance into their working procedures. They experimented with materials—from dirt and leaves to rope and molten lead—and were at times more invested in process than outcome. Morris concluded his essay “Anti
Form” from 1969 with these words: “Disengagement with preconceived enduring forms and orders for things is a positive assertion. It is part of the work’s refusal to continue aestheticizing form by dealing with it as a prescribed end.” Exhibitions such as Marcia Tucker and James Monte’s Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials at the Whitney Museum of American Art and When Attitudes Become Form: Live in Your Head curated by Harold Szeemann at the Kunsthalle Bern, both in 1969, focused attention on these new more open and unstructured modes of practice.

The West Coast had by the 1960s experienced a proclivity for so-called “junk art”—assemblages of found materials—and “finish fetish” works inspired by the car and surf cultures in Southern California. These experimental modes of practice seemed to strike at the heart of notions of history and good taste. More broadly, conceptual art and Fluxus challenged traditional notions of form, foregrounding the generating idea and often relying on instructions and systematic structures (or directives issued from the artist) to bring the work to fruition. Sol LeWitt proposed that the idea itself was the most important thing—indeed, was the work itself—while the execution was secondary: “The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.” His wall drawings, for example, begin as a set of directions that articulate the materials, shapes, lengths, and frequency of the lines. Fundamental to the work is the fact that the artist is not required to create it, or even be present during its execution. Lawrence Weiner developed his own rules-based articulation of conceptual art:

1. The artist may construct the piece.
2. The piece may be fabricated.
3. The piece need not be built.

Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.

Weiner and others such as Joseph Kosuth gravitated to language as their primary subject of investigation. Others, like Robert Barry, for a brief period of time resisted the object altogether, engaging in activities like trying to communicate telepathically with an artwork or going out into the landscape and releasing gas into the air. Lacking an actual object, these artworks existed only through documentation, or in people’s minds. An important component of Weiner’s open-ended approach to the production of his work is the emphasis of the “receiver.” It marks a growing interest in the viewer as a participant in the work—one who is empowered to fabricate the work, interact with it, or if they choose, simply imagine it.
At the same time, artists began to articulate the inextricable connections between form and content. In 1971, Lee Lozano wrote, “I can't be interested in form for form's sake … Form is seductive; form can be perfect. But there's no justification for form … unless it's used to expose content which has meaning.” The same year, Adrian Piper proclaimed, “I can no longer see discrete forms in art as viable reflections of what seems to be going on in this society. They refer back to conditions of separateness, order, exclusivity, and the stability of easily-accepted functional identities which no longer exist … I’m interested in the elimination of the discrete form as art object … with its isolate internal relationships and self-determining esthetic standards.” Interested in immediacy, process, and catharsis, Piper’s public performances were ideas for which the final form was deliberately left open, residing in the viewer's reaction.

During this remarkably innovative period for artists, Roland Barthes articulated the burgeoning prominence of the viewer. Suggesting a new era in which meaning is not determined by the author, but rather, remains open and unmoored, Barthes put the power of interpretation in the hands of the reader (or viewer), stating, “The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author.” Barthes’s resistance to conventional notions of the heroic autonomous artists, his belief that a work of art exists as a pastiche of past works, and his advocacy for the pleasure and complexity to be found in these more multidimensional and intertextual spaces become central to practices that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, particularly those of the artists who have come to be identified as the “Pictures Generation.” Enacting what Michel Foucault called a de-centering of the author, these artists often appropriated recognizable images and forms from art history, news sources, and popular culture, creating a discursive space in which questions of authorship are intertwined with critiques of systems within the art world as well as the social and political hierarchies of the day. Much more, however, than simply a desire to break down barriers between “low” and “high” art, these artists highlighted how the visual languages that saturate our culture—whether it be items stacked on a supermarket shelf or images of conflicts that appear daily in our newspapers—carry with them particular values that influence how we understand and operate in the world. Their perspective is one of criticality, and it is this level of engagement with the meanings located within both the content of the work and its form that has been inherited by younger generations of artists.

For some in the Pictures Generation (and arguably artists from earlier generations outlined here), content, or subject matter, dictated form. Sherrie
Levine’s appropriation of a Walker Evans photograph necessarily had to be a photograph, too. Barbara Kruger’s borrowed images overlaid with bold text in familiar Futura and Helvetica type traffic in the language of graphic design. The renewed attention to the fruitful marriage of form and content reverberated into the 1990s, and while the decade witnessed a resurgence of insistence that art should take up subjects revolving around the urgent issues of the day—the persistent inequities of race, class, and gender, for example—form and content were no longer conflicting agendas. What Bois argued in the mid-1990s—that formal considerations always imply meaning and that meaning is contingent upon formal descriptions—was largely embraced.

The profound impact of the media and the abundance of visual information that infiltrates our daily lives acknowledged by the Pictures Generation have continued to influence artists’ formal decisions. We see it in the recent sculptures of Isa Genzken, who piles everything from glassware to dried flowers, statuary trinkets to baby dolls atop pedestals and then loosely wraps the bases with materials such as photographs, plastic sheeting, and mirrored appliqué until the entire thing appears to be on the verge of toppling over. And it is evident in the collaborative practice of Ryan Trecartin, whose video installations frantically blend references to everything from reality television to experimental film and employ a staccato editing that keeps the mystifying narrative moving at a frenetic pace. From different generations and working with different mediums, both artists traffic in a manic visual language, addressing the glut of visual input and preponderance of commodity culture—if for divergent reasons. We could argue that Genzken’s incorporation of toy soldiers and injured babies into her dynamic sculptures is a poignant commentary on our culture’s disconnection from the impact of the violence inflicted by war, while Trecartin is more concerned with questions of identity and revels in the expressive and transgressive possibilities of embracing a profusion of imagery. While their reasons for enacting a sort of visual overload may differ, each approaches this strategy through specific formal questions. In this sense, formalism functions in the work as a type of challenge, whereby the artists push the formal capacity of their medium nearly to the brink of viability. Genzken’s longstanding engagement with questions of sculpture’s particular attributes and Trecartin’s ability to seemingly effortlessly adopt and exploit the techniques and technologies of video reveal a level of perspicacity within their chosen mediums that lies at the heart of many contemporary artists’ practices.
today. And it is their knowledge of the history of their medium that forms the foundation for their ability to create a fresh visual language.

Rather than reduce a medium to what are alleged to be a few essential characteristics, as Greenberg had it, artists like Genzken and Trecartin are extending their mediums beyond their perceived boundaries and limitations, asking sculpture, for example, to balance precariously, barely able to stand under the weight of its copious parts. Artists today reject the endgame of earlier types of formalism in favor of a formalism that allows new possibilities for a given medium to flourish. These artists’ in-depth involvement with medium-specific questions has resulted not in “purity” but rather what we might call “contamination.” In many cases, explorations into one medium will suggest its relationship to others, resulting in a type of cross-disciplinary or multi-form process. By incorporating one medium into another or by creating a dialogue between them, similarities as well as crucial differences are drawn out.

Shannon Ebner, for one, delves into the possibilities for photography by linking it to both sculpture and language. Offering new insights into common photographic genres such as landscape and street photography, she incorporates sculpted words and phrases to interrupt the legibility of her images. Her sculptures oftentimes become the subject of her photographs, underscoring how an image of any three-dimensional object is by necessity flattened so that information is lost, thereby questioning our assumptions that representational photography is by its nature easily comprehended. Similarly, it is not unusual to find a photograph of a popular celebrity, current news item, or close-up of a meal adhered to one of Rachel Harrison’s sculptures. Sometimes awkwardly attached to a mottled surface or somewhat obstructed from view, her work points to the pronounced differences between producing and presenting two- and three-dimensional work and how each circulates in the world differently. For these artists and many others, it is the site of medium investigation where the formal innovation resides. Moreover, an association with formalism no longer suggests an unremitting commitment to one medium over another or a desire to traffic only in the languages of a given medium. Ian Kiaer’s installations comprise constellations of divergent objects put into careful juxtaposition, some decidedly sculptural and placed directly on the floor and others paintings or drawings hung on the wall or leaning against it. Likewise, Amy Sillman has acknowledged her debt to the language of sculpture and the influence of film and video on her paintings.
What becomes apparent when viewing works by these artists is a sense of freedom with formal experimentation. Artists of earlier generations—particularly those who participated in the pronounced expansions to the definitions of art that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s—clearly paved the way for artists today. But this feeling of freedom may also result from our distinctly heterogeneous and dispersed cultural moment. We have fully inherited and adopted what were once avant-garde approaches to art-making so that a desire to resist convention is widespread today. One outcome of this more open environment has been an increased comfort with precariousness and instability, which may manifest itself through material choices or structural decisions. Artists like Franz West and Charles Long have commonly turned to vulnerable materials such as papier-mâché and plaster. And these preferences indicate more than just a harvesting of the many material options available to artists: They reflect an ideological position. Sometimes described as “un-monumental,” these artists’ sculptures resist the expectation that art must be heroic, stable, complete, and autonomous. This rejection of autonomy is also apparent in a turn towards artworks that are composed of constellations of objects—individual forms that are incomplete and incomprehensible on their own and instead rely upon the connections between their numerous parts for their meaning.

Greenberg’s favored word “opticality” is also rarely heard today. Despite the infatuation with a level of instability and a quality of potential incompleteness, we have returned to looking and thinking closely about artists as object makers. One result of this renewed infatuation with the object is an intention, on the part of artists, to make their processes visible so that an aspect of viewing the work becomes imagining its making. The careful attention to materials, acute physicality, and integration of laborious techniques like sewing, knitting, and weaving in the paintings of Sergej Jensen, Mark Barrow, Sarah Crowner, and Ruth Laskey deliberately foreground process. Dianna Molzan’s propensity to dismantle and reassemble the canvas and stretcher bar before adding pigment to the surface makes viewers acutely aware of the distinct physicality of the painting’s ground. Even photographers—Eileen Quinlan, Liz Deschenes, Dirk Stewen, and Matt Saunders—are turning to explorations of the material, or physical, specificities of their medium. Rather than rely on the definition of the photograph exclusively as a two-dimensional image, these artists make visible the processes of production and create decidedly tactile objects, working through the many nuances of their medium to consider its component parts. Deschenes has embraced time-consuming
Formalism processes like long-exposure photograms and the use of reflective silver toner so that the photograph will change over time, the work transforming with each viewing. Stewen paints photographic paper with dark ink and decorates the surface with confetti and colored thread, emphasizing the capacity for the photograph to be a unique object rather than an endlessly reproducible image.

Photographs by these artists—while maintaining the integrality of their given subject matter (from early film stars to tombstones at the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris)—are also about photography. Likewise, the videos of artists like Omer Fast, Candice Breitz, and Pierre Huyghe similarly mine the technical capacities of their medium and reveal the strategies of the work’s making that would traditionally be hidden from view or made seamless. Aggressive and jarring editing is a common characteristic in contemporary video, as is the visibility of “backstage” activity and the artifice of makeup and special effects. These exacting formal accomplishments in the work are not, however, understood to usurp content. Formal languages may have, to some extent, become content, but always with an awareness that the forms themselves come from the outside—from the rich moments that make up our history and the onslaught of visual stimulation that distinguishes contemporary life—not by means of a solely hermetic interior view. The divide between form and content enacted during modernism has been successfully bridged. For these artists, it would be unthinkable to diminish the importance of one or the other, and of one to the other. Formalism today upholds its invaluable and integral role in the analysis of art declared by Greenberg and others but has cracked it open so that its marriage to content and meaning is further brought to light.

Notes

1 By prioritizing form and eschewing narrative and the pictorial, Greenberg intended to free art from the expectation that it should have a particular meaning. Having witnessed the use of art as propaganda in the first half of the twentieth century, Greenberg was intent on “saving art” from a role in political agendas. Later in the century, however, Greenberg’s position was believed to be too navel-gazing, to have pushed art into a formalist corner, one that neglected to acknowledge art’s capacity to engage with the issues of the day, a position condemned by cultural critics of the 1970s and 1980s.

in Rosalind Krauss *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993). Another concern for Bois and Krauss was how Greenberg's argument relied upon outmoded notions of painting's transcendent potentialities and his emphasis on opticality. While Bois and Krauss are both highly critical of Greenberg's formalism, both have been proponents of rigorous formal analysis, and like Greenberg, their writings have meaningfully explored the properties and operations within specific mediums. See also Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999).


4 Bois, ibid.


6 Robert Morris, “Anti Form,” *Artforum* 6 (April 1968), pp. 33–35. The essay was given its title by the magazine's editor at the time, Philip Leider.

7 At the center of this artistic upheaval was the energetic sculptor Ed Kienholz, who began organizing exhibitions of his friends in the mid-1950s, and met the visionary curator Walter Hopps in 1956. Together they opened the legendary Ferus Gallery in 1957 and by 1958 Irving Blum had joined the ranks to help run the gallery. The gallery lasted less than a decade, but it paved the way for a slew of innovative artists including Billy Al Bengston, Wallace Berman, Jay DeFeo, Llyn Foulkes, Robert Irwin, Craig Kauffman, Ed Moses, and Ken Price, among many others.


11 Adrian Piper, untitled essay, in Lippard, op. cit., p. 234; original date January 1971.

I was impatient with Yang Haegue’s *DINA4/DINA3/DINA2 Whatever Being* (2007). Six rectangular white monochromes made of fiberboard protrude from a wall into the space of the gallery. The title of the work tells you that each fiberboard panel is scaled according to standard paper measurements designated as A4, A3, and A2, respectively. Vertically oriented and modestly sized, the panels recall the shape and dimensions of a small windowpane, and their color echoes the white walls on which they are shown. The panels are angled in different ways. Some turn laterally while others tilt downwards or upwards so that you are not looking only at the panel’s front, but above it, below it, and around it. The work seemed to belabor the simple point that these were, in fact, six panels devoid of color.

*DINA4/DINA3/DINA2 Whatever Being* looked so contained, so absorbed in confirming its own material presence, so *formalist*. The shape and color of the panels immediately made me think of the monochrome, whose position in modern art history depends on its supposed role as the alpha and omega of all painting. I also thought of Ann Gibson’s observation that monochromes are “fearfully self-sufficient, refusing congress with the world.”¹ I wondered what her comment might mean now and in relation to Yang’s stubborn formalism. Would it be possible to refuse congress with the world even if you wanted to? Yang is working in a time when the art world has expanded like never before. The geographical scope of this expanded world is especially well denoted by the heightened visibility of artists whose country of national or ethnic origin would have formerly doomed them to a life on the margins. This visibility is further abetted by the physical mobility of artists like Yang Haegue. Korean by birth and nationality, educated in Germany, she seems to travel effortlessly to exhibitions in all parts of the world, from São Paulo to Moscow, Łódź to Seoul.

The mobility and professional success of artists like Yang reflect “the world” as many would like to envision it, an approach that might be described as globalism. Like veganism, hedonism, and communism, globalism refers to a belief in a particular way of doing things. In this respect it differs from globalization, a word often used pejoratively to refer to
totalizing processes requiring conformity to a certain practices or attitudes. Globalism also differs from longstanding forms of supranational circulation facilitated by a few powerful actors as proposed by commentators like Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in their wildly popular *Empire* (2000). Here globalism refers to the constellation of attempts to realize an ideal kind of world order based not only on mandates for inclusion, but also on ensuring parity among those included. It is a project that within the domain of the visual arts has gained extraordinary momentum during the past fifteen to twenty years and whose most lasting effect has been the increased visibility of artists hailing from parts of the world deemed peripheral under rubrics of empire or the avant-garde.

For all its idealism, globalism is hardly an epic of triumph. Standards of evaluation have not always been equal or equally applied to those newly admitted into the “world” as fashioned by institutions based in the rich countries of the West, including Japan. If “standards of evaluation” sounds suspiciously like “quality,” it is because I want to call attention to issues of judgment that bear ever more firmly down on a contemporary art history whose growth is nothing short of exponential. But as Max Friedländer observed more than half a century ago, the very idea of quality “arrests the flow of words of even the most garrulous.” Silence reigns now when old ideas of inclusion enjoy new life through concepts of relationality or that of the network. Even those whose job it is to pass judgment rarely divulge their criteria for choosing one work over another, particularly when the work is identified with parts of the world known as the “non-West.” Critics, historians, and curators tiptoe around the issue of quality for fear of being called a racist, sexist, xenophobe, or worse yet, a conservative. This is especially the case where the critic, historian, or curator in question is supported by public money. The main exception to this rule are collectors who freely voice their opinions about why they buy one work and not another, although the very platform that allows them such freedom of expression is also that which often prevents their opinions from being taken seriously. They are private individuals, after all, expressing their own personal tastes. In cases where the scope, quantity, or nature of a collection imbues its owner with quasi-public status, personal taste takes on the aura of serious judgment comparable to specialist assessments.

No matter the status of the decision-maker, whether she is a curator working at a government institution or a private collector buying works at auction, what remains is the problem of ambiguity when it comes to actually specifying what makes one work stronger, more effective, or simply better
than another. Many judgments revolve around the word “interesting.” Innumerable studio critiques, art history classes, and exhibition reviews use it liberally to refer to both very good and very bad work. The word is both praise and alibi, as well as a common courtesy, like asking someone how they are without really expecting or wanting an answer. It is also an expression of judgment. Donald Judd declared that “a work need only be interesting,” to which Michael Fried retorted, “all that matters is whether or not a given work is able to elicit and sustain [his] interest.” Anything can be called “interesting,” but whether it matters depends on who’s speaking.

Fried was actually speaking of authority, a subject which he, as one of the main keepers of a particular kind of formalism, was familiar. It seems ironic to quote Fried, given how those most commonly associated with the idea of formalism tend to be most dismissive of the art most frequently celebrated as examples of globalism. A particularly notable example was the glaring omission of non-Euro-American art from *Art Since 1900*, the influential history whose main contributors included some of formalism’s staunchest adherents. But Fried’s words ring true for an art world that still operates according to startlingly unequal configurations of power. Take, for example, the international biennial curated by a well-known individual typically based in a major city or at an institution in Western Europe, the United States, or Japan where non-Euro-American works tend to play the role of metaphor, conveying information about their makers’ national, ethnic, and racial origins. They are deemed “interesting” because they fulfill our desire to be tourists; they bring us temporarily to a distant, or lesser-known part of the world.

To be fair, some curators endorse a standard of native relevance, whereby “the work selected has to be defendable as being of high quality according to values held in the place where it is shown.” The standard sounds fair enough. Patrick Flores, a historian of modern and contemporary art in Southeast Asia, for example, condemns “the revival of the connoisseurial sequestration of art.” But like many others, he is uneasy with the arbitrariness of the native relevance standard. One of a handful of commentators to directly address quality as a matter of real urgency in so-called non-Euro-American art, Flores is skeptical of the native relevance standard, not only because it allows critics, curators, and historians to avoid having to explain their decisions, but also because it presumes non-Euro-American art as somehow beyond comprehension, and thus outside the domain of what is commonly accepted as modern or contemporary.

Consider, too, the legions of non-Euro-American artists whose primary strategy appears to consist of taking an object indigenous to their
Formalism

cultural background and then multiplying it, enlarging it, or reducing it. We see, for instance, the enlarged “Mao” jackets of Sui Jianguo, the miniaturized sterling silver prisons of Carlos Garaicoa, or Subodh Gupta’s endless piles of shiny tiffins. The range and number of artists who employ this strategy is vast, and it may in fact be the most common idiom among artists whose cultural origins identify them as global. Its prevalence speaks more to the nature of the global contemporary art field and its standards for judgment than to the capacities of the artists responsible for such works. Why invest real thought into the problem of form when everyone just wants to know where you’re from? Going further, if a particular kind of low-level iconography is indeed all that’s expected, why not meet these expectations with a vengeance?

That so many artists are profiting handsomely from this situation may be a kind of poetic justice. Rightful payback, perhaps, for all the times critics, historians, and curators insisted that a “non-Western” artist offer up their ethnicity, nationality, or race for consumption, or rather, delectation. The artist and critic Olu Oguibe implied as much in his imagined recreation of an interview between Ouattara, the Ivorian artist who has resided in New York since 1989, and the critic Thomas McEvilley. In Oguibe’s account, the latter appears to strong-arm the former into talking only about biography. He imagines the artist holding his breath and gritting his teeth, “vigorously crossing out the dozen F-words bombing his brain while warning himself to take it with calm.” The artist, Oguibe speculates, “stake[s] his final but ultimately futile claim: I prefer to talk about my work” (Oguibe’s emphasis).8 His dramatization vividly illustrates one of the main ironies of the globalism project. Humanist as it seems, it denies that which its presumptive beneficiaries want most—serious consideration of the artwork—in favor of reifying the artist through her biography.

Byron Kim tried to force the matter with Synecdoche (1991–present), an enormous grid composed of small, rectangular monochrome canvases. Painted in what first appears to be various shades of pink, brown, yellow, and black, the format and shape of the canvases bring back form with a vengeance, especially if you don’t know why the work was made or how. Paint is applied smoothly and consistently so that the canvases together seem as self-contained and self-sufficient as any championed under formalism’s banner. Displayed in I. M. Pei’s modernist mausoleum, the East Wing of the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., Synecdoche sits congenially near the all-white monochromes of Robert Ryman, or the black paintings of Ad Reinhardt which Kim very much had in mind during the making of Synecdoche.
Yet if Kim is looking at Reinhardt he is doing so through the prism of Reinhardt’s fixation with the idea of art having limits in the 1960s, which Max Kozloff once described as a face-off between the Day-Glo “decadence” of Andy Warhol and Reinhardt’s “reckless sobriety.” Kim’s take is to present a self-nullifying proposition that perfectly emulates Reinhardt’s suppression of touch, but also undermines it by applying colors distinctly attributable to certain extra-artistic references. Contrary to the works of Kazimir Malevich, Yves Klein, and Reinhardt which tend to be painted in primary hues, variations of such, or noncolors like black and white that seem calculated to be as nonspecific as possible, the panels of Synecdoche are painted in such a range of hues so as to direct viewer attention to the choice of color. Not only are the colors so specific as to again breach the question of intention, which Kim himself described as “an adulterated aspect” that might provoke the viewer to speculate over their meaning, Kim juxtaposes the monochromes in seemingly random order so that each panel registers more as an intense version of the color in which they were originally painted. Dark monochromes, for instance, appear even darker when paired with lighter monochromes, while high chroma colors seem clearer next to low chroma panels: “Instead of using the color field to represent something universal, spiritual, something too large for words, I use it to represent an idiosyncrasy.”

In Synecdoche, that “idiosyncrasy” is the presence of race and ethnicity. Famously shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art as part of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, an event alternately applauded and reviled for its explicit foregrounding of visual art’s relationship to race, ethnicity, gender, and to a lesser extent, class, the colors used to paint each monochrome in Synecdoche were extrapolated from the skin tones of those who sat for the artist. That Kim chose to frame this presence in the language of pollution (“an adulterated aspect”) touches directly on Warhol’s legacy of cheerfully violating the lines separating high culture from low. In addition, the understated, nearly deadpan nature of Kim’s transgressions provoked viewers to liken the monochromes to paint chips—which, in fact, is what the paint colors are actually based on.

Not everyone appreciated what Kim was trying to do. The philosopher Arthur Danto, for example, dismissed the work as trendy and without substance. “Issue-related art,” he called it, a work only able to ask large questions without answering them. Danto’s dismissal of Synecdoche invoked a distinction between art entrenched within a particular understanding of art history and art having an extra-artistic, sociopolitical agenda. Kozloff’s
formulation of the Warhol–Reinhardt axis of public infuriation where both artists “touched an exposed nerve in what might be called the art tolerances of this country” has new meaning through Synecdoche.\textsuperscript{13} Made by someone whose surname distinctly indicates certain ethnic and racial origins, Synecdoche was created to “respond directly to those who ask me, ‘Why are you making abstract paintings?’ The ‘you’ meaning Asian-American-artist, artist-of-color, artist-with-something-to-say.”\textsuperscript{14}

Still, Danto’s objection is worth considering. The 1993 Whitney Biennial thrust upon viewers a system of evaluation whose primary index was efficacy. Inherent in Danto’s objection was the question of whether a given artwork could be an effective means of enacting social and political change. Under such criteria, quality is reframed as an ethical matter so that the question to be asked of an artwork was whether it was a moral good. This kind of thinking was hardly limited to the United States or to the early 1990s; we need only look at the enormous popularity of theories like relational aesthetics which emphasized participatory, interactive works aimed at cultivating relationships between otherwise unrelated groups of people.

Problems arise, however, when ethics precludes any critical examination of the works in question, let alone discussions of artistic quality, an issue on which Claire Bishop has written extensively in relation to collaborative artistic practices.\textsuperscript{15} The very idea of basing interpretations on questions of form would strike many as deeply suspicious: Form invokes aesthetics, which in turn raise old fears of a market that regards the artwork as nothing more than another item for sale. Form is put into quarantine, isolated as an unwanted vestige of a previously elitist art world. To Monica Amor, a specialist in Latin American art, it is an “absurd dichotomy of form and content” in which artworks, particularly by non-Euro-American, or non-white artists, were studied only in relation to content.\textsuperscript{16} The turn against form must have staggered Kim, Ouattara, and many other artists for whom form was a critical means of reframing globalism. Mere recognition of racial, national, and ethnic difference was insufficient to realize a truly global art world; there must also be serious consideration of the actual work, including careful examination of its forms.

These attempts, as well as the beleaguered status of form, shed further light on Yang’s stubborn insistence in pointing out that monochrome panels are, in fact, monochrome panels. She graduated from Seoul National University’s art school in 1994, by which time globalism seemed to unfold through a system of value that pegged a given artwork according to its perceived capacity to visibly reflect the origins and location of its
maker. This was spectacularly demonstrated by the kinds of works included in what was then the revitalization of the international biennial circuit, for example, Takashi Murakami’s unabashed bastardizations of Japanese animation culture and traditional screen paintings and Cai Guo-Qiang’s epic installations of gunpowder. If artists like Murakami and Cai emerged from the 1990s as globalism’s poster children, it was partly because their works brilliantly performed as signs of cultural consciousness. Moreover, they helped make real the newly iconic figure of the cosmopolitan artistic nomad, able to move with enviable ease from one metropole to another.

But even as non-Euro-American artists began to show more frequently in places like New York, it was still painfully evident to some artists and critics how little flexibility the new breed of global nomads had. Many artists were limited to exhibitions that focused on the mobility of their bodies as opposed to the fluidity of their minds as demonstrated in their works. In several cases, the global nomad was allowed to be global within the limited framework of exhibitions organized around themes of race, ethnicity, and (tacitly) nationality, which for decades was the main vehicle through which non-Euro-American artists entered into global artistic commerce. In 1993, the artist and critic Bahc Mo caustically remarked that “it was better to show than not show,” a comment later interpreted by fellow critic Alice Yang as a symptom of a broader “failure” in the New York art world to integrate Asian artists into a discursive system able to “cut across racial boundaries.”17 The world was larger than before, but formed exclusively around a narrow set of parameters. Bahc’s dissatisfaction anticipated what by the late 1990s would be a critical mass of conscientious objectors to globalism’s present shape. One of British multiculturalism’s fiercest critics, Rasheed Araeen vented his frustrations over what he argues is a postcolonial fetishization of the figure of “the power of the mule which always carries the burden and the sign of its breeding.”18 No matter how well traveled the non-Euro-American artist, she is forever bound to her cultural origins, and most importantly to what others make of those origins.

Working in 2007, Yang Haegue enjoys a measure of physical and psychological freedom greater than that of artists working in 1993, or even in 1999. Yet her gravitation towards the monochrome can hardly be written off as personal choice for she remains bound to a discursive context that insists upon geopolitical separations even as it champions cultural difference through tropes of circulation, including transnationalism, diaspora, and more recently, the network. The ability to encounter such art in ways other
Formalism

than those framed by inferences of cultural difference is as urgent as the need to approach contemporary art made by white artists with an eye to their own possession of ethnicity. Interestingly, we are reminded of the words of Rosalind Krauss, one of the critics most associated with a brand of formalism apathetic, and even hostile, to the globalism project. Attempting to recuperate the specificity of Richard Serra’s artwork as experienced through the viewing encounter, Krauss takes aim at the “world-wide homogenization” of culture which she located under the sign of the “international.” Though made in 1978, her point still holds for an artist like Yang, only that this time, “homogenization” has everything to do with the remarkably narrow set of interpretative tools used to discuss those works whose contextual origins are most responsible for validating the idea of the global.

Yang is not so naive as to think that simple indifference or outright refusal of this situation would be enough. “To be engaged without dogma,” she says, one must carve out a space for oneself by preventing one’s position from being “fully definable or cultivated, therefore [preventing it from being] instrumentalized by anyone else.” What Yang wants is to be left alone in a space specifically of her own making, not for its sake alone, but as an escape from the trespasses of globalism. What she desires is autonomy, not aesthetic autonomy, but freedom, or at least respite from a world in which she exists only to the extent that her artwork can serve as a metaphor from which we can glean information about her origins and subjectivity.

It is this desire to escape that underwrites her insistence on showing six fiberboard panels from various angles. In many ways Whatever Being is an excessively didactic work, one that threatens to become what Fried described as “merely interesting.” But perhaps this only attests to Yang’s desperation. Only such an extreme response will get viewers to abandon otherwise standard measures of judgment. Writing on art made by African American artists, Darby English has recently urged that attention be squarely centered on form lest the artwork be permanently indentured to generalizations regarding the artist’s ethnic, national, and racial origins.

We might read these concerns as veiled calls to bring back formalism, a term that despite its long history cannot be mentioned without resuscitating the ghost of Clement Greenberg and his attendant biases against art that failed to fulfill an extraordinarily rigid set of criteria. Greenbergian formalism seems as far away from the project of globalism as one could possibly get, and incongruent too, given how few art worlds outside the Euro-American sphere actually knew of, or cared for, the ideas of Clement Greenberg. But the fear remains. It may never be possible to think of
formalism outside the writings of a very small, yet astonishingly influential, circle of art historians and critics, nor is it possible to forget that certain approaches to form are partly to blame for the exclusion of much of the world’s artistic production. The strong association between the very word formalism and a particular body of art criticism hostile to considerations that might undermine the artwork’s autonomy undermines arguments urging close formal analysis. Too often, calls for close formal reading are misinterpreted as reactionary calls to purge considerations of sociocultural context altogether. These criticisms miss the point of works like *DINA4/DINA3/DINA2 Whatever Being*, which doggedly remind us that we are looking at objects made specific by their hardness, the sharpness of their edges, and the starkness of their color. Whatever might be said of the work, it is clear that Yang has an investment in making us see.

Again, we may wonder whether this isn’t a regressive turn towards aesthetics and away from politics. To cite Flores once more, the “notion of an aesthetic” makes possible a different view of the artwork as something other than a spokesperson of a particular context, and thus something other than evidence. In asking whether the problem of aesthetic might “posit a form of difference … that resists the conditions under which form is expected to materialize and be received by an experiential community,” he proposes that the artwork be allowed to operate as something other than complicit.24 If Yang has such an investment in making us see it is because only then can we see the world more clearly. As she and many other artists ask, is it possible that form might actually be central in realizing the dream of globalism? Can the aesthetic be fodder for a transformative politics of its own? And if we believe that globalism means more than inclusion or geographical expansion, then shouldn’t we at least entertain the ideas of those trying to do just that? Indeed, to explore form’s potential to facilitate dialogues between artworks that might otherwise lie at opposite ends of the world has all the force of an ethical imperative that grows stronger by the day.

**Notes**

Formalism


6 Flores, op. cit., p. 51.


8 Ibid., p. 11.


11 Ibid., p. 122.


13 Kozloff, op. cit., p. 141.

14 Ibid., p. 34.


19 Among the few initiatives to explore this latter point is “White: Whiteness and Race in Contemporary Art,” held at the International Center for Photography, New York, October 9, 2003–January 10, 2004.


22 Fried, op. cit., p. 21.


24 Flores, op. cit., p. 51.
A medium comprises both the materials that an artist uses to make a work, and a set of conventions to which an artist refers. In either instance, a medium is neither immutable nor inherent. Though the concept dates significantly further back (to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in the eighteenth century), in the period of modernism, especially in the United States, medium assumed great importance through the writings of Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried, and Rosalind Krauss. By the mid-1960s and 1970s, those associated with minimal and conceptual art began to produce works that either blurred the boundaries between media or pushed aside the object altogether in favor of the promulgation of ideas. It was this latter gesture that gained traction internationally, disregarding to a certain degree the urgency medium specificity had in the United States.

But in an art world that has, discursively at least, become reluctant to advocate for medium specificity’s relevance, there is still a powerful, contextually based reconsideration of medium in conceptual and new media art, as Sabeth Buchmann reveals in her “The (Re)Animation of Medium Specificity in Contemporary Art.” Indeed, as technologies have changed—and with them, “media”—other genealogies of medium specificity have become significant. One such lineage proceeds from Marshall McLuhan, a media theorist concerned with the effects of technology on culture and the individual within it in the 1960s, to discussions of internet art and other developments in recent years.

Even before, and coinciding with the globalization of the contemporary art scene in the late 1980s and 1990s, artists from around the world...
continued to explore multimedia practices often driven more by subject matter than considerations of medium. Building on Krauss’s attempt to rethink medium in the wake of a proliferation of photography and installation art that bears a reciprocal relation to globalization, Irene V. Small argues in “Medium Aspecificity/Autopoietic Form” that there has been a push away from medium as such to questions of the recursivity of form.

Nonetheless, medium specificity still bears on institutional organization in art schools and museums alike (where departments are commonly organized around medium). It has also become a useful way to talk about the material conditions for practice, as well as the social structures that are maintained by them. Moreover, in a world increasingly dominated by its visual culture the question of medium is one way in which to particularize art, and to see how it functions differently from other elements of visuality. Indeed, as Richard Shiff discusses in “Specificity,” it is through medium that one is able to sense the world, to feel something that is always specific to the individual yet irremediably alien.
Media Specificity in Context

Given the wide spectrum of so-called new media characteristic of postclassical, non- or anti-formalist art, it is astonishing how little significance is accorded to them in contemporary aesthetic discourses. Ironically, however, the critical discourse on art continues to articulate the formalist credo of media specificity, which originally referred to painting and sculpture, where artistic aspirations are founded on qualities that are (allegedly) immanent to a medium; examples include abstract film as well as certain sectors of video and computer art. In conceptual forms of artworks, by contrast, the definition of the medium tends to be a matter of its employment. Media specificity, that is to say, depends on the medium’s particular function: documentation, information, communication, participation, interaction, etc. Although the emergence of historical conceptual art took place in parallel with the expansion of new media, critics as well as the artists themselves have paid fairly little attention to technological and material aspects. According to Gregor Stemmrich, conceptual art emerged out of the awareness “that all media are at bottom equal in value and capable of being put to artistic use. It is not the historic pathos and prestige of a medium that count but rather the concept of engaging with information.”

Such objectivation of the medium may motivate Rosalind Krauss’s critique of conceptual art. She argues that the latter bears partial responsibility for what she sees as a loss of medium specificity in contemporary art, especially in multimedia installations. Against this loss, in which she recognizes a reflection of art’s subjection to the logic of consumer culture, Krauss, drawing on Walter Benjamin, posits the potential for aesthetic resistance implicit in the “obsolete medium”: Only the medium that has recently become obsolete, she claims, runs counter to the capitalist ideology of progress by virtue of its unfulfilled promises and potentials.
With regard to the tendency of discussions of “aesthetic experience” in the sense of “differential specificity”3 to either underestimate or overrate the import of media, the debate Krauss initiated no doubt represents an overdue revision. Still, I believe that the tradition of conceptual art contains approaches toward a re-establishment of medium specificity—one that is now radically contextual in nature. The oeuvres of Hélio Oiticica, Martha Rosler, or Robert Smithson, for instance, offer examples of a temporally and spatially specific dynamic-topological, network-based, and flexible concept of their media4 the art of the 1980s and 1990s could build on. Smithson’s works were realized in the form of contributions to journals, filmic documentaries, and sculptural assemblages of objects. Similar strategies are apparent in the photographic-documentary practice of Rosler5 as well as Oiticica’s quasi-cinematographic environments, which rejected the formalist credo of the “pure” medium as cleaving to a myth that excluded an “impure” social experience, and excluded the “other” and “heterogeneous.”6

Craig Owens’s exemplary 1980 essay “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism” describes the allegorical—which is to say, both fragmentary-transitory and temporary-site-specific—montage-like character of (post-)minimalist or (post-)conceptual artworks.7 Owens refers to Smithson’s late 1960s critique of a “natural history of Modernism,” against which Smithson had mobilized the artificial, the discontinuous, and the differential, which he recognized in the ultramoderne of the 1930s as much as 1960s pop art.8 The integration of semantics that articulate a critique of hegemony, such as class, skin color, and gender/sexuality into post-conceptual forms of artworks became manifest not least importantly in the artistic appropriation of media such as film, television, architecture, design, literature, and (pop) music that to my mind offered far more extensive interfaces to social contexts and experiences.

The praxis of allegorical montage benefited such a localization of art within an expanding modern media culture by enabling the observer to regard art and its history as a complex nexus of contingent phenomena that reached beyond the radius of canonical media. This conception helps us to understand the widespread use, in descriptions of site-specific work from the 1990s, of the concept of “layers,” whose topological nature allowed critics to think time in the sense of “placed time”9 and nonlinear processes. If such views articulated a conception of art as a noncausal constellation of fragmentary strata of meaning, they inevitably also required a revision of distinct concepts of media. The topological-temporary conception of media would seem hard to square with linear conceptions of the distinction
between “old,” i.e., “obsolete,” and “new,” i.e., “advanced,” media. Yet we become aware of its significance for the (post-)conceptual works produced in the era’s art scenes in New York and Western Europe—we might mention Group Material, General Idea, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, Felix Gonzales-Torres, Juli Ault/Martin Beck, Gregg Bordowitz, Clegg & Guttmann, Christopher Williams, Stephen Prina, Andrea Fraser, Christian Philipp Müller, Fareed Armaly, Renée Green, Sharon Lockhart, Stan Douglas, Jeroen de Rijke/Willem de Rooij, Stephan Dillemuth, Nils Norman, Tom Burr, Josephine Pryde, Dorit Margreiter, Florian Pumhösl, Mathias Poledna, Zoe Leonard, Harun Farocki, Henrik Olesen, and others who always also examine the contextuality of artistic media by virtue of the way they employ them. So if we seek to address the question of medium specificity in post-conceptual multimedia installations, we must do so with a view to their situationally dependent conditions of presentation and reception. For to the extent that we can say that the distinguishing feature of art resides no longer in the category of the medium but rather in that of the site conceived in temporal-spatial terms, we must acknowledge the immanently referential nature of multimedia montages.

Around ’89

The political upheavals of 1989 not only redrew the political map of Europe; they also lent new force to a process comprised under the umbrella term “globalization”: the shift, described by Jean Baudrillard and others, from Fordist industrial capitalism to an economic system defined by freely roaming financial capital. This process left its mark on the era’s artistic discourses about media, as exemplified by the project The Message as Medium, conceived by the art historian and curator Helmut Draxler for Vienna’s Museum in Progress in 1990–91. Sponsored by Austrian Airlines, the project was published over the course of several months in the Austrian daily paper Der Standard and the business magazine Cash Flow. The title quoted—though in ironic inversion—Marshall McLuhan’s credo that “The Medium is the Message,” and with it the invocation of a global media revolution, an idea the postwar avant-gardes had profoundly taken to heart:

“The Message as Medium” is an exhibition which is not taking place in a gallery or a museum but exclusively in print media. [...] The word exhibition can be used because on the one hand no reproductions of “real” works
Medium Specificity

will be seen and, on the other, because the printed pages are to be understood as a totally specific “space.” And this does not mean the “white box” of enclosed and protected culture but rather a specifically world-orientated space, related to the public, to the distribution of information and to the economy. It applies to all artists that the way of handling the respective medium and the particular public before whom they are appearing is to be treated as the actual theme. […] [The artist’s work can no longer be thought of in categories such as painting or sculpture. He acts as scientist, journalist, philosopher, politician, preacher or designer. […] It is much more a question of specific differences between, on the one hand, being bound by and, on the other, released from functional and institutional straightjackets (here, the two media). In this interaction lies the chance to be more than an agreeable investment and to create new forms of knowledge and consciousness.]

The terms Draxler uses to designate the general framework that constitutes these media (as a space of the public) are striking: the economic sphere, information, and science.

The contributors to Draxler’s project—Fareed Armaly, Georg Büttner, Michael Clegg & Martin Guttmann, Andrea Fraser, Thomas Locher, Mark Dion, Stephen Prina, Michael Krebber, Christian Philipp Müller, and Heimo Zobernig—were among those artists who, in the 1990s, took up what Alexander Alberro describes with reference to the early conceptual art produced in the orbit of Seth Siegelaub’s gallery as the “politics of publicity”: a strategy that, by circulating exhibitions in the form of media of distribution, broke with the notion that art is primarily at home in galleries and museums. Although these latter sites have not really lost their institutional privilege, conceptual forms of artworks imply the intertwinement of “real” and “symbolic” places, which is to say, of material and media categories. Draxler’s updated version of Siegelaub’s model sketched a multiplication of the profiles that constitute the artist’s role, which seem to anticipate the capacity for multi-tasking today’s art world has come to expect of media-savvy artists. Given the fact that the postmodern discourse of media rose in the 1980s to the status of a social theory, and in light of the Bulletin Board System technology of the time, which anticipated the internet revolution of the 1990s, it is hardly astonishing that post-conceptual artists showed particular interest in those aspects of modern media culture that attest to the interwovenness of (retro-)avant-gardist utopias with technological optimism.
Recollecting (Media) History

One significant example of what Draxler invokes as a turn away from the author-centric production of objects and toward an integration of scientific, journalistic, and discursive tasks into the artist's media practice is Christian Philipp Müller's exhibition *Vergessene Zukunft [Forgotten Future]*, which was on display at Kunstverein München in 1992.12

As the title suggests, the exhibition examined utopias that had been repressed from contemporary consciousness: a pavilion Le Corbusier had designed, at the behest of the electronics manufacturer Philips, in collaboration with Iannis Xenakis and Edgard Varèse for the 1958 Brussels World's Fair; Nicolas Schöffer's book *La ville cybernétique* (1969); and Veit Harlan's movie *Bewildered Youth [Anders als du und ich]* (1957). Drawing on historic materials, the show documented these three projects, which would at first glance seem unrelated, in montages of texts and imagery on walls painted in various colors that recalled the exhibition displays of Group Material. It was not by accident that the deliberately aestheticized form of presentation brought the interpenetration of art, architecture, and design in the historic avant-gardes to mind, a practice late modernism, here represented by Le Corbusier, had revived in the form of the high-tech spectacle. Yet far removed from the auratic aesthetic of the White Cube usually associated with high and late modernism, Müller's wall design pointed to a historic event in whose light the clean break that ostensibly separates the era of high-modernist formalism from that of the neo-avant-gardist media revolution appears less absolute. Not only does the pavilion commissioned by Philips, whose products were sold worldwide, suggest the idea of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* that gestures back to the historic avant-gardes; it also adumbrates the shift from single-medium works toward the post-avant-gardist multimedia installation. It is precisely such multilayered genealogies that Müller's spatial montage of historic documents, minimalist object-rhetoric, and post-conceptual information display reflects—a technique that enabled the artist to both historicize and recontextualize modern media.

*Forgotten Future* manifested this sort of context-referential and topological concept of its media not least importantly in its aesthetic emphasis on materials and objects. A large model of the Philips pavilion presented on a pedestal was at once functional and autonomous in character, as the viewer could read it either as an architectural element or as an art object. The color of aluminum and set against a blue surface, it
was placed on a radiant yellow platform that conformed to Le Corbusier’s doctrine of colors. The indistinguishability of functional-illustrative and autonomous-presentationist exhibition elements returned in the reconstruction of Le Corbusier’s Paris “minuscule bureau” or “tiny office.” Set in the “White Cube” architecture at Kunstverein München, the windowless room, constructed on the basis of the Modulor system and measuring no more than 226 by 259 by 226 cm (7.4 by 8.5 by 7.4 feet), which provided space for a maximum of four people, looked like an oversized minimalist object. Müller’s reinterpretation of the “minuscule bureau” into a walk-in sculpture added a new dimension to Le Corbusier’s calculation that spatial constraint would render the communication with collaborators and visitors as efficient as possible. Though functioning, within the framework of a contemporary art exhibition, as a spatial expansion of aesthetic perception, the reconstruction also revealed itself to be an instrument of social control; for the exact duplication of Le Corbusier’s office—instead of the original’s colorful interior design, one copy was outfitted as a White Cube, the other as a Black Box—engendered a fusion of architectural and media-based semantics of space. If this structure evoked an interrelation between the modernist paradigm of rationality and the (post-)modern one of reproduction, the restrictions on the visitors’ freedom of movement lent it another meaning: In order to open the door that led to the office reconstruction designed as a “White Cube,” they had to pass through a photoelectric barrier, and only after closing this first door could they operate the glass door leading to the “Black Box,” which would reopen after pressing an alarm button. Triggered by a motion sensor, Varèse’s eight-minute composition Poème électronique would be played for visitors once they had entered the Black Box.

In other words, the visitors gained a physical experience of invisible technologies that allowed them to interact with a contemporary (re-)construction of a late modernist version of multimedia aesthetics. In this way, Forgotten Future set empirical knowledge of social control, mediated by a spatial-temporal ensemble, against the phantasm of democratic participation frequently invoked by modern architecture as well as avant-gardist exhibition designs and interactive installations.

Forgotten Future was intended as a complement to Beatriz Colomina’s instructive study Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media by offering insight into the role modern art plays in the production of architecture as a (mass) medium. This role became visible in the form in which documentation of the Philips pavilion was presented. Where the
“minuscule bureau” embodied the dialectic that links the artificial scarcity of space and time to efficiency enhancements, the pavilion’s architecture, based on hyperbolic paraboloids, housed an audiovisually overwhelming multimedia spectacle: Le Corbusier’s eight-minute projection of “representative” images from world history, ranging from monkeys to a newborn baby to the detonation of a nuclear bomb to the architect’s own works, in combination with Varèse’s abstract composition and Xenakis’s design based on mathematical formulae proved to be a synaesthetic Gesamtkunstwerk of architecture, music, film, and light. Varèse’s timbres amalgamated machine noise, piano chords, singers’ voices, etc., which unfolded into a dynamic spatial acoustic environment thanks to a special audiotape technology developed by Philips. Yet the way Le Corbusier’s picture show stylized an advanced electronic composition into a synthesis of organic life and technological developments evinced the same humanist pathos that had been the target of Smithson’s critical assessment of the “natural history of Modernism.”

By addressing the confrontation between two different practices of montage, one allegorical, the other topological, Forgotten Future at once also brought to light the differences as well as the similarities between the conceptions of media inherent in them. The spatial nexus of the office and the pavilion with the documentary graphic material illustrating Schöffer’s plans for the transformation of Paris into a “Cybernetic City” revealed the proximity between avant-gardist utopian, technocratic, and biologic visions of a systemically regulated urban structure promoting increases in efficiency and productivity by rationalizing space and time. In formal terms, the spatial segments that served the presentation of materials concerning Harlan and Schöffer were dominated by flesh tones. By evoking such references, the exhibition’s topology allowed the viewer to read the shadows cast all the way into the present by the negative outcomes of attempts to translate utopian ideas into reality. Unlike the allegorists, however, the postmodern theorists of media pursued—and more or less affirmed—the idea that technological change shaped social development—a vision that, in the case of Schöffer’s work, reached into the dimension of biopolitics as described by Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben. Manfred Hermes’s essay in the catalogue accompanying Forgotten Future draws our attention to this dimension as well; Hermes writes that Schöffer’s model was based on “fascist conceptions of national hygiene” whose hetero-sexist implications are evident in the design for a “center for sexual recreational activities”: The center was conceived as “a sort of basement orgy room” to which “only heterosexual couples” would be admitted. Schöffer “feminized”
the building that would house the center: “soft shapes, a color scheme based on pink, the whole structure in the shape of a female breast.”

If *Forgotten Future* thus opened biopolitical perspectives on a late modernism situated between corporatist interests, fantasies of technological omnipotence, and masculinist creation myths, it sharpened the argument by presenting documentary materials around the movie *Bewildered Youth* in a movie theater-style display box. Veit Harlan’s vile concoction, firmly rooted in the tradition of anti-Semitic and homophobic agitation, first came out in 1957, the year Müller was born. It tells the story of a young man who is seduced by a homosexual dealer of modern art, juxtaposing the anti-modern impulse manifest in the connection between deviant sexuality and abstract aesthetics with the tensions, but also the complicity, between modernism and anti-modernity revealed in Le Corbusier’s and Schöffer’s models. As Draxler writes in his contribution to the catalogue, the exhibition thus examined the rising popularity in the late 1950s of “ideas about the harmony between art and an aesthetic social hygiene” that had left the “classical potentials for conflict between technology and the social realm” behind.

We might add that these very same potentials for conflict came to light in the allegorical-topological montages of documentary imagery and texts, objects, architecture elements, movable walls, film projection, sound, wall displays, and print media—and also with regard to the artistic and aesthetic position Müller staked out for himself. For the post-minimalist and post-conceptual interior and communication design he had created evinced intersections with the multimedia look of the late 1950s, revealing unresolved continuities.

Against such entanglements, the spatial placement and aesthetic design of the documents and models posited a structure of disruptions and dissonances: Le Corbusier’s office, for instance, was originally furnished with a table, a chair, a sculpture, and a wall painting; patently stripped of its original function, it was now a container that served as passageway, sound studio, and projection surface. The work of montage in the space thus appeared as a time-bound process of self-reflective remedialization. This nonlinear layering of meanings, which must perhaps be described as post-modern, was also manifest in the convoluted placement of architecture elements, autonomous objects, and functional partitions that opened forever new lines of sight and fields of vision as the viewer moved through the room. If this imitation of filmic montage lent the exhibition design a cinematographic quality, the consequence was a (de-)naturalization of aesthetic perception that reflected back on the way media exercise a form of control.
over such perception (for instance, by predetermining the selection of visual detail) while also contrasting it with a displacement of perspective.

**Open End**

Around 1989, a number of exhibition models similarly opened the montage of real and symbolic, of architectural and media sites toward a perspective on modern art and media culture with a view to a historical critique of power; examples include shows by the abovementioned artists, such as Fareed Armaly’s *(re)Orient*, on display at Galerie Lorenz, Paris, in 1989, which was received as a central contribution to the debate over postcolonialism, as well as Renée Green’s *Import-Export Funk Office* (1992), created in collaboration with the music theorist Diedrich Diederichsen for Galerie Nagel, Cologne, which helped initiate the discourse on “black music for white listeners” in the German-speaking world.

In art since the late 1980s, we can observe a transformation of allegorical montage that becomes manifest in the shift from functional sites to topological spaces. This shift also reveals a process that renders a return to distinct media more difficult for the simple reason that it commingles material and immaterial media to a point where they become indistinguishable. It seems to me that today, at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, we would do well to recall efforts such as those undertaken in *Forgotten Future* to object to the media-based naturalization of aesthetic perception, which obscures the conflict between technology and the social even as that conflict no doubt continues unabated. More particularly, in light of what is by now a fully integrated network culture as well as the current renaissance of the scientific exhibition, such efforts would seem to be an indispensable contribution if this conflict is to be openly enacted in and with an art that does not imagine its place to be beyond the modern media culture.

**Notes**


3 Ibid., p. 56.
6 For instance, one of Oiticica’s famous installations, *Tropicália* (1967–68), bore the inscription “Purity is a myth.”
10 See Juliane Rebentisch, *Ästhetik der Installation* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003).
12 This was the second exhibition held under the direction of Helmut Draxler, who had recently been appointed director of Kunstverein München.
15 See Christian Philipp Müller, op. cit., p. 102.
16 Ibid.
18 In 1940, Harlan had made the film *Jud Süß* for the Nazis; he was acquitted after the war, despite his active involvement in the Third Reich.
19 As Christian Philipp Müller notes, the dealer, as a disseminator of modernist ideals, replaces the Jewish conspiracy insinuated by the Nazis.
21 To mention only one current example: the exhibition *WeltWissen: 300 Jahre Wissenschaften in Berlin* [World Knowledge: 300 Years of Science in Berlin], which was on display at Berlin’s Martin-Gropius-Bau from September 2010 to January 2011 (the exhibition poster was designed by the artist Mark Dion).
Patently, art does not have a monopoly on creation, but it takes its capacity to invent mutant coordinates to extremes: it engenders unprecedented, unforeseen and unthinkable qualities of being. The decisive threshold constituting this new aesthetic paradigm lies in the aptitude of these processes of creation to auto-affirm themselves as existential nuclei, autopoietic machines.

(Felix Guattari)

In the opening pages of her 2010 collection of essays, *Perpetual Inventory*, Rosalind Krauss states that the anthology “charts my conviction as a critic that the abandonment of the specific medium spells the death of serious art.” Such a declaration is not unexpected: Since the late 1990s in particular, Krauss has elaborated critical artistic practices resistant to the so-called “post-medium condition” triggered by postmodernism. Contra hybrid, intermedial genres such as installation art, Krauss argues that the most important contemporary art turns on the invention and reinvention of mediums, each of which carries within it a set of recursive structures that provide a logic for production and a matrix of meaning.

Yet the statement is not without a certain historical paradox. It was Krauss, after all, who in the early 1970s delivered a penetrating critique of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, the two writers most closely linked to the discourse of medium specificity in the 1960s. Greenberg’s and Fried’s modernist criticism, she argued, telescoped history into the dissembling objectivity of master narratives, and it was against this looming teleology that Krauss sought out aggregate, impure, and self-deferring mediums such as film and opted for alternate terms such as “technical apparatus” in her criticism of the 1980s and 90s.

But what if one were to reorient the discussion of medium within contemporary art away from the question of specificity and towards an articulation of form? How would the terms shift in character and relation, and what potentialities might be revealed? Consider Maria Eichhorn’s *Maria Eichhorn Public Limited Company*, a work commissioned for Documenta 11 in 2002 that involved the establishment of a public limited company with a single shareholder, Eichhorn herself. Eichhorn stipulated
that the company’s assets—the required initial investment of €50,000—should never appreciate in value. She further transferred all shares to the company itself, thereby eliminating her role as shareholder. Stripped of the possibility of profit, the company forfeits its raison d’être, but also cannot fold. The €50,000 investment, meanwhile, loses its representational and mobile character as capital and becomes mere matter, static and dead.

*Maria Eichhorn Public Limited Company* is an example of a work of art whose form, rather than medium, is recursive. As a legal entity continually divesting itself of its own financial potentiality, it is a glittering kernel of autonomy within a market system premised on the capital of art. Documentation regarding the company’s establishment can (and has been) purchased, thus participating in an external appreciation of value that its internal rules disallow. Yet the company *itself* is owned by itself. Impervious to market fluctuation, it simultaneously evacuates and gives form to capital, each operation a figure to the other’s ground.

The mediums for Eichhorn’s work of art are the legalistic discourse of financial institutions, the profit motive of capitalism, the aesthetic valuations of the art world, and the means by which such valuations translate into financial worth. Eichhorn did not reinvent these mediums; indeed, she appropriated them readymade. What Eichhorn invented, to use a phrase drawn from Felix Guattari, are the “mutant coordinates” of a form that is capable of both endless self-production and constant irritation within the very mediums from which it is plied. To speak of the “medium specificity” of *Maria Eichhorn Public Limited Company* is to redundantly describe the work of art’s constituting matter without articulating its animating form. Rather, one might term its medial condition as “aspecific”: a *de facto* situation and a processual state.

Like an increasing number of contemporary works of art, the form of *Maria Eichhorn Public Limited Company* is not a shape or object, but a behavior. Such works frequently have multiple, fluctuating, and contingent mediums; their critical capacity, meanwhile, derives from their situatedness within interactive ecologies, some of which involve other works of art, but many of which do not.

How does one recalibrate seminal terms like “medium” and “form” in response to the character of such works? This essay proposes one possible defamiliarization through the work of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, whose elaboration of systems theory in the 1980s and 1990s has widely influenced the analysis of communicative structures in sociology, science, and law. Luhmann’s systems theory is a totalizing theory of social production, and as such, not without ample pitfalls of its own. Within the
context of contemporary art, however, its decidedly nondisciplinary vocabulary provides new purchase on a set of foundational art historical terms and a dynamic description of their relations, and it is these aspects that I seek to foreground here.

For Luhmann, the term “medium” does not refer to individual media, for example, painting or sculpture, and the normative conventions or technical supports that determine them. Rather, Luhmann conceives of medium broadly as the means by which communicative acts occur. Just as oil acts as a vehicle for pigment in paint, a medium is a facilitator; it establishes a condition of possibility for the appearance of forms, but is in itself formless and fluid. Drawing from the psychologist Fritz Heider, Luhmann understands medium as coupled with form in terms of relations or proportionalities: Form is a tight configuration of elements, whereas medium is a loose configuration, potentially of those same elements. Medium and form are therefore mutually dependent, and may constitute and reconstitute each other through time.

Luhmann’s articulation of medium opens up to the exigencies of contemporary art in a number of ways. First, Luhmann’s coupling of medium and form is aspecific. The form/medium distinction may be narrowly conceived in terms of an object: matter gathered into definite shape as opposed to loosely distributed, as in the difference between a pyramid of sand fashioned on a table and the loose sand of the beach upon which such a table might sit. But a work of art’s form might also emerge out of multiple, simultaneous mediums, artistically or otherwise defined. One could conceive of the form of Gabriel Orozco’s Sand on Table (1992), a photographic image of precisely the form/medium distinction described above, for example, not simply in terms of the photograph’s composition, but the analogic transit between the table as a physical site where a form/medium distinction is performed and the photograph as a temporal platform by which this event is contained and conveyed. The flexibility of the form/medium distinction thus spans micro and macro art systems, and further, allows mediums to be continually constituted rather than a priori defined.

Luhmann conceives of medium and form as intrinsically, rather than circumstantially, co-dependent. Thus, a medium has no abstract identity or determined set of conventions that particular forms only provisionally embody. Rather, mediums only become visible by way of the forms constituted through them; in turn, forms do not emerge without the facilitation of mediums. The practice of institutional critique produces institutionality as a medium just as the medium of the institution allows for
a configuration of elements to form into institutional critique. Similarly, the interventionist forms of many activist-oriented practices (Critical Art Ensemble or The Yes Men, for example) are often intended to force a loose configuration of elements within a political-economic medium such as global capitalism to thicken into a legible structure that can be perceived, analyzed, and potentially dissolved. The shifting relationship between medium and form thus allows for works of art to act swiftly and nimbly, keeping pace with the ever-quickening speed of capitalism itself.

Luhmann’s formulation is temporal and understands forms not in terms of stable objects, but contingent events. A work of art is conceptually constituted within one medium, or condition of possibility, but it may also be dissolved and reconstituted by way of another. Much of the way art practices and discourses animate other art practices and discourses is by virtue of these reconstitutions. The inception of minimalism is one such example: If Frank Stella’s paintings of 1959 emerged out of the American discourse of medium specificity (with its priority on mining the limiting conditions of the painterly support), contemporaneous artists such as Carl Andre and Donald Judd almost immediately reconceived of these paintings as insistently material objects that dialogued with the literalness of their own sculpture. The temporal nature of the form/medium distinction thus acknowledges the way in which reception and interpretation are constitutive, rather than incidental, to the identity of works of art. It also explains why a configuration may be a work in some cases, but not in others.

Luhmann’s articulation of medium depends on the foundational role of the observer in making the distinction between medium and form. In their respective formulations of medium specificity, both Greenberg and Fried advanced the centrality of the observing subject or critic. Luhmann departs from these approaches in his emphasis on the subject’s perception over and above his or her judgment. This means that questions of evaluation shift from designations of quality to estimations of success, wherein success is measured (with no specific positive valence) by the ability of a medium/form distinction to generate further distinctions for one or several observers. Likewise, while the observer is constitutive in describing the medium/form distinction, she necessarily occupies the blind spot of her own point of observation. As such, a second observation is required to situate the first, and so on. Contradiction, contingency, multiplicity, and delay are thus woven into the very texture of observation, and consequently, the role of observation in determining medium and form.
Finally, Luhmann’s coupling of medium and form shifts attention away from identity and towards boundaries. Following the mathematician George Spencer-Brown, Luhmann argues that each form/medium distinction creates an inside and an outside of that form, and further, that “the question of what lies on the other side of the form is posed anew in each instance.”

Whereas narratives of twentieth-century modernism frequently depend on the relative stability of art as a category to either continue or supersede, Luhmann’s aspecific conception of medium and emphasis on processes of differentiation and distinction allow for an epistemological, rather than ontological investigation of how communicative acts come to mean. Observing distinctions (whether traditional “canvas/painting” couplings or the increasingly frequent “project/practice” pair) is therefore an experimental, rather than disciplinary gesture, one in which “art” is a permeable and often temporary form posited relationally by way of a broader medium.

As a descriptive schema, Luhmann’s formulation of the medium/form relationship does not offer prescriptive guidelines for art’s evaluation. But it does facilitate the charting of new genealogies of distinction responsive to the recursive forms increasingly prevalent in contemporary art. Let us take an example. In 1954, Lygia Clark made a collage framed by the mat of a passe-partout, and observed that when she abutted this passe-partout with a collage element of the same color, a line of space appeared between them. She observed that the line was an undrawn line, that it was contingent and indexical, and that it was found, not made. In a series of paintings that same year, Clark deployed this line to “break the frame” of the painting support. The line of space entered the composition, while the painting moved out to incorporate the frame. Two years later, Clark connected this “undrawn line” to the lines of space that appear between doors and lintels, windows and frames, tiles on the floor. She named it “the organic line,” and began to use it as a structuring element in her work.

Since Greenberg’s articulation of medium specificity depended on exploring the limiting conditions of a medium in order to better secure its “area of competence,” it was well equipped to make sense of the problem of edge. Fried later observed exactly this concern in the “deductive structure” of Stella’s paintings and Kenneth Noland’s “discovery of the center” in the radiating circles of his target forms. Edge, in Luhmann’s terms, corresponds to the interior limit of a form. It establishes identity by virtue of a positive value: in the case of Stella or Noland, by way of the painting’s support. Clark’s “organic line,” by contrast, concerns the exterior limit of a form: that
which is liminal, rather than integral, to a form’s identity. It is a byproduct of making, but it is not making in itself.

By using the organic line as a generator, Clark shifted attention from support to frame, from edge to gap, and from the medium of painting as a historically continuous category to the medium of space through which the distinction of painting and not-painting occurs. It is precisely this interval that Gabriel Orozco harnessed when he placed an empty shoebox on the gallery floor as his contribution to the 1993 Venice Biennale. For Orozco, it was crucial to preserve the infrathin plane of space between the box and the surface upon which it rested. By insisting on the continuity of this space and that around and within the box itself, Orozco effectively displaced the form of the sculpture from the empty container to the volume of space that filled it. If the shoebox demarcates this form’s interior edge, the infrathin plane of space beneath the box gestures to its exterior limit: that limit where form disaggregates into medium, or full space once again becomes empty. It is therefore the shoebox that functions as the organic line of this sculpture, dividing medium from form and work from frame.

From this perspective, Orozco’s innovation lies less in his recuperation of the category of sculpture than in the way he slots traditional mediums such as sculpture and photography into the liminal interval described by Clark’s organic line. Hence his notorious 1994 solo exhibition at Marian Goodman Gallery in New York, in which he affixed single clear yogurt caps to each of the gallery’s four walls at eye-level. Rather than solicit interest in themselves, the yogurt caps initiated the viewer’s rotation in space as she pivoted within the gallery’s architectural frame. In so doing, the caps coagulated the medium of space into an experienced form, one that could also be understood as social, historical, and institutional, as when, in *Home Run* (1993), the artist activated the space between the Museum of Modern Art in New York and a neighboring apartment building by asking residents to display oranges in the windows facing the museum. The physical coordinates of this work—oranges, windows, apartment building, museum—correspond to what may once have been called “sculptural” materials. In *Home Run*, however, they form an interface that allows the fugitive medium of “public space” to become visible as a contingent, relational, and potential form produced in the moment of observation.

It is precisely this interest in harnessing and manipulating “extra-artistic” mediums—mediums such as public space, ideological conflict, historical archives, communicative networks—that characterizes much contemporary art today. In such practices, the first function of a work is often to identify
form/media distinctions already being performed outside the normative parameters of art. Yael Bartana’s *Trembling Time* (2001), for example, documents the Israeli state’s orchestration of a monumental form of nationhood through the minute of stillness that begins Yom Hazikaron, the memorial day for Israel’s fallen soldiers. Shot from an overpass into the bright lights of oncoming traffic, the video captures the moment when drivers, signaled by a siren’s wail, stop their cars in remembrance of the dead. The video is first a tool of observation, one that records how the state carves an ideological form out of time and space. Extending this minute to a full seven minutes, Bartana calls attention less to the ritual’s startling lack of movement, than to the indeterminate edges of the stillness itself. As one watches the cars’ interminable grinding to a halt, their ghostly doubling, and finally their gradual return into motion, the video unhinges the specific contours of the ideological form and reveals it as a continuous thickness that permeates embodied experience within the nation-state as a whole. In producing this ideological “trembling,” Bartana has, in Luhmann’s terms, turned the state’s own distinction between form and medium into another medium, one generated by the organic line that previously acted as their boundary.

The organic line, conceived broadly as the interval that occupies a position between entities, is a boundary reconstituted by every distinction between medium and form. Yet, since the medium/form distinction can in turn function as a medium, the organic line is also the mechanism by which form becomes recursive. As Bartana’s *Trembling Time* demonstrates, such recursivity may involve one medium/form distinction generating another. But it may also involve the maintenance of a single form, as in *Maria Eichhorn Public Limited Company*, where the potentiality of capital generates an organic line that is both constantly frustrated and endlessly renewed.

Luhmann, extending the biological theories of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela to the realm of social systems, describes such behaviors as autopoietic, meaning auto- or self-producing. An autopoietic unit is one that generates and regenerates itself via internal feedback, despite external events that require adjustments to its internal functioning. Such an entity’s autonomy depends on the continual production of its own boundary. Since the positing of a boundary involves both the internal and external limits of a form, however, an autopoietic unit is not hermetically sealed, but rather “structurally coupled” with its environment in relations of dynamic interaction and response. In Greenberg’s formulation of medium specificity,
recursivity inheres in the self-critical capacities of a medium; in Krauss’s articulation of the technical apparatus, it provides a set of self-generating rules through which to justify artistic choices. An autopoietic conception of recursivity, I would argue, understands recursive operations as the means by which an artistic entity not only regulates identity, but creatively responds to its outside.

Francis Alÿs’s *The Rumor* (1997) offers a succinct demonstration. The piece began when Alÿs initiated a rumor in a small Mexican town concerning an individual who had not returned to a hotel, and ended when municipal police issued a missing person poster based on verbal descriptions, thereby giving the rumor’s immaterial fiction a material claim. Demarcated by these two events, the work of art’s form consisted solely in its ability to recursively generate the work’s identity as a set of related verbal utterances in relation to the larger medium of social communication through which it flowed. As an autopoietic unit, the rumor responded to deformations brought about by the medium: idiosyncrasies in narration, for example, missing details, or the addition or elaboration of information when the rumor was told. Indeed, such deformations actually sustained the rumor, which also demonstrates the interrelationship between medium and form. As such, Alÿs’s rumor models, not simply the recursive operations of a work of art, reconceived as an autopoietic unit, but the way in which such a work can act as a “perturberance” within other self-organized systems that share its medium, such as community infrastructure or the geopolitics of the state.

It follows that one central task of the “historian” of contemporary art is to excavate the organic line that lies between these various configurations, to give texture to how this boundary delineates inside limits from outside space, and to chart the “mutant coordinates” of experience produced in its wake. To approach works of art as autopoietic forms produced in relation to a multiplicity of *aspecific* mediums is to conceive of art’s autonomy as operative, rather than merely ideological or aesthetic. Such an autonomy does not concern the specificity of art within an art system, so much as the way works of art organize themselves into acting entities that can be observed and described from various locations, each of which contains its own blind-spot, its own aporia of situated space. Contemporaneity is one such blind-spot. But it is also the generative platform from which to construct the conditions of possibility for works of art, and the subjects that observe them, to exist.
Notes

Some arguments are hard to believe as we think them, easier to believe if we feel them. Here, to the contrary, is an idea easy to think: If we concentrate on the feel of the pencil within our grasp or the keyboard beneath our fingertips, we risk losing what we intended to write; distracted by the physical sensation of writing, we abandon its plan. Ed Ruscha recently spoke of “looking at the word [that he painted] long enough to lose the meaning.”1 His account is logical, for rational discourse opposes sense-as-feel to sense-as-meaning—a typical dualism. Focusing on the one blurs the other. Yet English offers a single word for both types of experience, and an artist might insist that the feel and the thought occur simultaneously: sense-as-sense.

Let me begin again, not in recognition of this convergence but in acknowledgment of a difference. There are at least two types of experiential specificity explored by modern artists who work through a material medium. First, you can manipulate the material—for instance, paint—as a way of assimilating your sense of what you see externally. The resultant representation lends physical substance to immediate vision. Second, the same paint medium may refer to, or even directly express, inner feelings. You realize these feelings, you feel them, in the act of working the material. Like the feelings, the paint medium itself has neither essence nor limitations. A material medium and its associated procedures are specific to the experience conveyed. The reflectivity or translucency of a paint surface may prove more significant than its color. Despite patterns in customary practice, paint need not imply “painting.” This general category of medium is a mere analytical contrivance. Each of the two experiential modes aims to eliminate such intermediary cultural coding. Each seeks specificity even as it forms a representational sign—perhaps an unattainable goal, if only because of how we think signs operate. Like designations for media, signs generalize. But for now, assume that an artist can present the specificity of experience with an appropriately specific materiality and that there are at least these two variants of the process.

Paintings by Paul Cézanne exemplify the first method or attitude. The distinctive qualities of his brushstrokes, tactile as much as optical, record moments of visual concentration. The materiality of Cézanne’s surfaces
inspired Pablo Picasso, the owner of a densely structured Cézanne landscape, to show the painting off to guests by rapping his knuckles against an area of blue near the center of the taut canvas. As he did this, he said: “Look at the sea. It’s solid as a rock.” He was responding to the physical solidity of the painted image. This was no pictorial conceit, no question of “solid” composition. By knocking against the painting, Picasso referred to the hardened surface of Cézanne’s relatively thick strokes. He recognized an irony beyond comparing water to rock: Critics and historians had for several decades—this was 1971—discussed Cézanne’s effect of solidity when they might have investigated actual solidity.

In 1966, five years previous to Picasso’s irreverent treatment of Cézanne, the East German artist A. R. Penck (Ralf Winkler) painted a single standing figure with outstretched arms, all in tones of red: a case of the second experiential attitude. Whereas Cézanne depicted an environment complete with terrain, trees, sea, and sky in full spectrum, Penck reduced his figure to the point that it resembles a monochromatic pictograph on an amorphous field—an abstract sign. Yet, at five and a half feet in height, the figure approaches human scale, although oddly proportioned and extremely linear—a human-size stick figure. Penck states that he thinks in terms of “abstract motions.” He thinks through the abstracted forms and potentialities of his body, shared with other human bodies. There may be something universal about pictures that resemble pictographic abstractions, as Penck’s do. But this universality or generalized quality of sign is sufficiently crude and coarse to appear specific to this image. Imagine a familiar sign—the letters S and O were Ruscha’s example—rendered oddly enough to shift attention from the conventional communicative value to an open sensory experience. This condition approaches Penck’s sense of representational reality.

Our response to a stick figure is intuitive, as if we recognized and even felt our own stick-like extensions into surrounding space and matter. If any one of us were to create a human pictograph, we would render the arm of the figure as an extended line, perhaps with an elbow bend, the mimetic equivalent of the vectored movement of extending our drawing arm. Penck’s figure has an oversized hand; it seems to stretch the linear arm taut, as if pulled by the hand’s weighted action, an inertial force. When we take some distance from the situation of our own body—perhaps by using a mirror or by observing others—an arm looks like the same linear abstraction that it feels like. And a hand looks and feels more complex than an arm; it has a greater presence and looms larger in consciousness.
If Penck’s picture refers (like a sign), then it refers to this intuitive feeling. Here, visual understanding corresponds to kinesthetic understanding in terms of extension, a natural movement of the arm, or what Penck calls an abstract motion. Extension is the conceptual abstraction that identifies or names the indeterminate movement. We extend (same term) the abstract meaning of the movement to willful, purposeful intention—as if an arm or a line were extending itself because it wanted to go precisely where it goes. To get something accomplished, extend yourself. If Cézanne represents what we might see outside ourselves, actualized in brushstrokes, Penck provides a material version of how our bodies feel from the inside and how the externalized visual sign of a concept of the body translates back into corporal feeling and action.

Penck’s imagery lacks a personality type. His loose, brushy lines indicate merely that there is or was an actual person who drew them. Any work so obviously handmade evokes a human presence, the human touch. But nothing guarantees that a more precise interpretation of these deposits of fluid paint will accurately capture the existential conditions that brought these marks to their present state. Just as Penck’s image induces us to fantasize our own movements, we are free to fantasize what kind of person this artist could be, and what he may have thought he was doing. But when interpreted, Penck’s image mirrors its viewer’s fantasy life, his or her anticipations and suspicions, not the artist’s. Penck assumes no control. He refers to his system as “wide open … The sequence of signs has only to be accessible so that the viewer can work somehow with the information.” To experience Penck’s imagery is to invert the usual order of ideology: Nothing compels you to receive from the image what it gives; instead, what you get is whatever you choose to take. The responsibility, the judgment, is yours.

If we were to imitate and reproduce one of Penck’s figures (as he suggests), we would be capturing its indeterminate range within the sensory substance of our marks, within the material medium. This mimetic condition would apply even if we were deploying virtual, electronic imagery—the medium would still become a determining factor in establishing the character of the expression. The medium would be speaking back to us, even though we were trying to channel it for a purpose. A nominally disembodied medium becomes embodied through its human use, a condition more evident in depictions thick with substance. But certain presentations of dematerialized filmic and electronic imagery make the point just as well. In 1971, Douglas Davis faced a standard television set to the wall and tuned it to produce nothing but a reflected glow and a hiss (The Backward Television Set). More
recently, between 2006 and 2009, Jim Campbell produced a series of moving images projected by widely spaced, vertical strings of LED lights suspended between the viewer’s position and the screen. You see the image through the external raster of this coarse projection device. It interferes with the integration of the view, as if you were seeing a painted image as lumps of pigment that remain independent of the totality even as they constitute it. To some extent, this is the effect of all painting and of every medium. The specific physicality of the medium, its aggregate of material properties, introduces sensory variables that confound any standardized interpretation of the imagery. If you think you know what the image must mean, you may well be confronted by sensations inconsistent with your preconception. Any materialized image has the potential—like Ruscha’s painted lettering—to escape its customary message, resisting interpretive clichés and all ideology. In this respect, little separates Campbell’s projection device from Ruscha’s lettering from Penck’s stick figures from Cézanne’s landscape.

Franz Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony” explores an analogous tension between articulate, interpretable reason and inarticulate, fluid, yet utterly precise sensation. If any literary work succeeds in featuring the convergence of sense in its two senses (meaning and feeling), this one does. Kafka describes an act of writing that uses the skin of a criminal prisoner as the writing surface—and not just skin, for needles perform the writing, gradually cutting deep into flesh. The crucial sentences are these: “Whatever commandment the prisoner has disobeyed is written upon his body. … It’s no calligraphy for school children. … There have to be lots and lots of flourishes around the actual script. … How difficult it is to decipher the script with one’s eyes; but our man deciphers it with his wounds.” Ideally, the writing with needles becomes the prisoner’s punishment, his execution, but also his rehabilitation or redemption, though the redeeming moment of comprehending the necessity of the law coincides with the moment of death. If visual expression normally dominates tactile expression when the concern is a conceptual abstraction such as a law or regulation, here the usual hierarchy of social knowledge will be inverted. Reading is to be done by feel, not vision.

During the 1980s, Penck was one of a number of German painters—among them, Georg Baselitz and Markus Lüpertz—who received the awkward title “Neo-Expressionist.” In one respect, the name was suitable, for these artists often referred back to the German cultural context of Kafka’s generation of writers and the expressionist painters at work before the cataclysm of Nazism and the Second World War. They shared a
motivation—a resistance to ideological order and its polarized conceptual divisions. Baselitz stated the position succinctly: “I was born into a destroyed order … And I didn’t want to reestablish an order.”

In the postwar East there was socialism, with realist art promoting it—absolute truth, transparent message. In the postwar West there was capitalism, with abstract art exemplifying a liberated, creative spirit—transparent vision, absolute form. During the earlier postwar period, the typical West German critic regarded abstraction as the progressive mode for new art. Later, during the 1960s, the progressive position shifted to images of popular, consumer culture—potentially, “realist.”

The political use of abstraction and then of variations on American pop projected these forms of imagery as antithetical to traditional realism, associated with the political past of both Hitler’s National Socialism and Stalin’s Communism. The cartoonish imagery of pop became the newer fashion. In 1963, Lüpertz (born in the East, schooled in the West) painted The Death of a Donald Duck; it treated the famous Disney character as a noble subject with a life history worth memorializing, all the while rendering the cartoon character barely recognizable through a barrage of flashy, expressionistic strokes. Lüpertz’s amalgam of references to abstraction and pop mocked the very thought of progressive fashion by adopting multiple fashions. Scrambling the terms of his ideological resistance, he avoided the formulaic character that political resistance had assumed for others. He chose cultural incoherence rather than an aesthetic-cultural hierarchy.

Whether directly or indirectly, Kafka’s thinking instructed the postwar Germans who, even when in compliance, doubted the validity of their social order. “It is an extremely painful thing to be ruled by laws that one does not know,” Kafka wrote. You discover what the law is only when your behavior conflicts with it. The prisoner undergoing judgment in Kafka’s penal colony is ignorant of the ultimate workings of the ideological system presumed to govern his conduct. Submitting to the system of justice and a punishment proper to his unknown crime, the prisoner learns the nature of the violated law as the needles of an execution machine inscribe its verbal message on his skin and into his flesh. He will “learn it on his body,” Kafka wrote, even though the knowledge, the drawing itself, causes him to bleed to death. The cursive script that reveals the law—in flourishes, paraphs, and other signs of the aesthetic—is barely legible, if at all.

The condemned man experiences on his body a specific aesthetic feeling, rather than a rule corresponding to it. This application of law is profoundly anti-ideological since the individual cannot internalize it intellectually. 
It exists only at the moment of execution, as if made for one person alone, within a context so unique it can hardly acquire meaning. Like a work of art, the law assumes its meaning only at the moment of interpretation, proceeding by corporal feeling, not mental reasoning—an ideological superstructure become physical infrastructure. Given how the law surfaces, it applies only to the specific case: traced out on the body, sensed on this body, the feeling of the law is your feeling. This law is intended for you. Under the law, survival depends on allowing thought and feeling to converge, living by the moment’s rule. The rule is: Remain open to your sensations.

Readers of the more academic forms of American art criticism might nevertheless doubt that a sense-oriented rendering, such as a brushy painting, could be politically alive after the 1960s. American criticism of contemporary art written during the 1970s and 1980s and even later often dismissed painting as work in a “dead” medium, reduced to a limited range of canonical practice and ill-suited to address pressing cultural issues. Critics impugned expressionism (German, American, or otherwise) for cashing in on a preexisting mythology of impulsive genius. “To retain its ‘art’ value,” Rosalind Krauss wrote, artists give a painting “the authorial mark of emotion—expressionism, psychological depth, sincerity.”12 As opposed to arts of material gesture, critics elevated whatever seemed discursively structured—art subject to translation into a textual equivalent—precisely what the likes of Penck, Baselitz, and Lüpertz regarded as verging on ideology.

The claim that painting in the 1980s was dead amounted to an anachronistic reprise of what Walter Benjamin had argued under very different social circumstances a half century earlier. While painting continued to demand contemplative interpretation because of its stylistic and representational complexities (perhaps less the case now than in Benjamin’s 1930s), the products of photography and film, with their radically altered relation to lived time, could be absorbed under psychological conditions of distraction. To the typically unreflective viewer, the new media provided the appearance of reality in real time, requiring little or no interpretation. But more important were the implications for class division in a modern society. Because painting suited the viewing environment of an aristocrat’s private gallery or a bourgeois gentleman’s drawing room, it reinforced the patterns of life of these patriarchal social classes, whereas the reproducibility and mechanicity of photography and film suited the consciousness of new urban masses, people with little
cultural investment in private aesthetic pleasure. Simply put, the political force of film, not to mention its economics, was revolutionary.\textsuperscript{13}

Here, for the sake of providing a context for the reception of neo-expressionist art in American academic circles during the 1980s, I have eliminated the many subtleties and ironies within Benjamin's argument.\textsuperscript{14} Critics working in the United States at the time reduced Benjamin even more, claiming that photography, film, video, installation, and text-based art were the enlightened media that would lend imagistic and semiological support to a radically egalitarian society in a new technological era. In contrast, anything created through the seemingly elite, hand-oriented media of painting and sculpture appealed to sentiment and nostalgia: media of illusion, even delusion. This divisive attitude set an abstract, speculative theory (perhaps already outmoded around 1980) ahead of whatever understanding might be gained from an artist's experience of the working conditions of a studio, or on the street, or in any given moment of a life. Overly wary of signs of emotion, the critics with their hard-headed ideological theory precluded all contrary sensory and emotional indications.

Critics who focus on modes of reception are often at odds with artists concerned with production. In 1981, German-born critic Benjamin Buchloh implied that, by the very act of painting by hand, an artist would tacitly claim an unmediated integrity and presence, imposing an unjust authority.\textsuperscript{15} This paranoid response is a critical viewer's claim, not an artist's. What justifies it? It may be that connotations of authority overwhelm viewers culturally indoctrinated and sensitized to these same effects. In an authoritarian state, references to authority and even to a counter-authority become all the more pernicious, either reinforcing the prevailing ideology or encouraging panicked appeals to whichever alternative might be invoked (hence, the odd attraction of intellectuals in the West to authoritarian Maoism during the 1970s). Buchloh cited arguments of the time that were being directed against a culture of male sexual dominance and mirrored them with Benjamin's way of associating a dominant social class with its preferred art forms.\textsuperscript{16} The argument derives from theory, enforced by conceptual syllogism. But cultural forces are far less coherent and abstractly dialogic than this argument—which has its own seductive aesthetic, its feel—would make it seem. A medium can be guilty by association with those who maliciously appropriate it, but not inherently guilty, even within a particular historical context. Each use of a medium is specific but not to the medium. A medium is not an abstract law.

Artistic practice and its criticism often divide. A critic's objection to the political naiveté, or perhaps the disingenuousness, of interpreting a work of
art as an autonomous, specific object has little to do with the liberating feeling of autonomy that an artist in the studio may sometimes experience, with or without cultural references. There are times, certainly not always, when individuals can act not only in character but out of character. They follow the course of unfamiliar feelings rather than willing their emotions into the comfort of thoughts and sensations already known. They learn from the objects and signs they produce.

Rather than expressing a preferred ideological or cultural position or even a personality, many artists whose intellectual and emotional formation occurred during the middle and late decades of the twentieth century have used the specificity of material practices to separate themselves from their history of cultural indoctrination. Richard Tuttle mused recently: “If I can free a humble material from itself, perhaps I can free myself from myself. ... I think [my work] knows, is smarter than I am, better than I am.” 17 Jasper Johns expressed a similar notion, that he aimed to generate art “a little more worthwhile than oneself.”18 Concerning a set of drawings from the early 1990s, Richard Serra stated: “I wanted ... to avoid the histories of existing styles, even my own. I wanted to free myself from my own ready-made handwriting.”19 And Barnett Newman used to say that the last thing he wanted to create was “another Newman”—a work too clearly identified with the person that he, Newman, already was.20 To this end, Bridget Riley assigns the final version of her paintings to assistants, ensuring that no habitual mannerism, no Riley-ism develops on the experiential surface; and Robert Mangold uses a roller to cover his large canvases as quickly and “matter-of-factly” as he can.21 Nominally an expressionist, Penck has risked anonymity as have these others, all of whom—especially in this respect—address the hypertrophied state of twenty-first-century culture. Critics should avoid applying theoretical generalizations to generalized categories of form. Any material condition—Tuttle’s paper, Serra’s paintstick, Penck’s stick-figure—can project sensation outside personality, outside cultural identity, outside theory itself.

We have all experienced culture’s Kafkaesque writing on the body. The ideological code becomes so internalized that the personality you project cannot be “yours,” any more than you can possess the pronouns or even the proper nouns that identify you. Any aesthetic practice can be a remedial form of drawing on the body (not writing): sensations that restore particularity, enhancing the specifics of life rather than hastening an acculturated death. As long as there is feeling, Kafka concluded, “enlightenment comes to the most dull-witted”—in his case, as a redeeming
But with the convergence of feeling and thought (feeling as the thought, thought as a feeling), Kafka’s story reads as an extension of life. T. W. Adorno speculated that the liberation of self from self could indeed occur through language: “The subject’s forgetting himself, his abandoning himself to language as if devoting himself completely to an object—this and the direct intimacy and spontaneity of his expression are the same.” Immaterial language becomes a material medium that hardly mediates.

When criticism is as confining and legislative as what it opposes, it fails. Can we be certain, however, that open experience—the specific stuff of art, both input and output—actually occurs? If I were to accept without question the intellectual commonplaces of recent decades, I might argue that experience is never so devoid of a linguistic or ideological frame. Conscious awareness comes with a delay, as if all thought were reflecting its context. We have been taught that every image is merely the sign of some other image, already associated with a multitude of ideas that constitute an established culture. This all-or-nothing position exaggerates the degree to which the conceptual message of a sign prevails over the aesthetic sensation of the sign (thought over feeling). In experience, in every passing moment, conditions waver. To argue that the feeling is the sign, that feelings refer to other feelings of analogous immediacy, may be a step in the right direction, but still misses the point. A feeling is not what is—not what belongs to a single moment of interpretive fixation, as if you could photograph its structural type and compare variations. Feeling is not what is but what is happening, hardly the equivalent of a still image.

Feeling is changing. It shifts and turns in ignorance of ideological polarities. Specific at every instance, we draw the sign of our feeling on the flowing body of our sensation.

Notes


11 Kafka, “In the Penal Colony,” op. cit., p. 145.


15 Benjamin Buchloh, “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting” (1981, with later postscript), in Brian Wallis, ed., Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), p. 123. Buchloh’s 1981 essay refers only to Benjamin’s early treatise Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels, but he could fairly assume that his readers were already familiar with Benjamin’s later writings. His notion that a medium or “production mode” can be “obsolete” is vaguely Benjaminian.

16 Buchloh, in Wallis, op. cit. pp. 121–124. On gender issues Buchloh appeals to figures of authority of that moment—Laura Mulvey, Max Kozloff, and Carol Duncan—whose writings were prominently cited by academically oriented critics during the 1970s.


22 Kafka, “In the Penal Colony,” op. cit., p. 150.


Technology encompasses mechanical arts and applied sciences. In the context of recent art, technology refers not only to the tools of production but also to the digital, virtual, and otherwise computerized patterns of consumption that define contemporary life. Emergent technologies have both engendered new forms of art and occasioned meditation on older ones, whether the daguerreotype, black-and-white television, slide projector, or video Portapak. In the 1960s, many minimalist artists worked directly with industry to better control the production of their work, while the multi-pronged Experiments in Art and Technology fostered collaborations between artists and engineers, as Michelle Kuo discusses in her “Test Sites: Fabrication.” Indeed, as Kuo outlines, the interaction between contemporary art and industrial fabrication continues apace, creating a situation in which artists have repurposed scientific models and technological innovations in the service of art.

Likewise important are changes in photography from analogue to digital, in the wake of which artists have created not only works that reconsider the apparatus, but question the nature of representation it generates. Similarly, the rise of the internet has spurred a range of philosophical writings concerning production, images, sociability, and distribution, and thus bears directly on issues of globalization and access. But as Ina Blom reminds us in “Inhabiting the Technosphere: Art and Technology Beyond Technical Innovation,” it is always the body that acts as the medium and frame for the welter of digital information defining contemporary experience.
The pervasiveness of technologies of representation, of social media websites, and of video-sharing services like YouTube, has placed the nature of art and its social role into doubt. Many artists are grappling with the ways in which technological devices so often mediate experience. As David Joselit puts forward in “Conceptual Art 2.0” a shift has occurred, at least in the realm of conceptual art, in which the artist conceives of the distribution of information in a manner similar to the workings of the internet, turning artists into data-miners.
To speak of “art and technology” today still means invoking the “two cultures”—that dreaded dyad famously coined by British physicist C. P. Snow in 1956. Addressing the unprecedented innovations of postwar technology, Snow saw a dangerous separation, even incommensurability, between technology and liberal, humanistic culture. In order to redress the growing gap between these views of knowledge and their repercussions for education and wealth distribution, each culture would have to embrace the other. Snow’s diagnosis was, in fact, steeped in Cold War rhetoric: the West had to solve this split before the Soviet Union did, for its own survival as a civilization.

Although born of a specific postwar moment, an artifact of the atomic age, Snow’s binary nonetheless persists. His diagnosis was echoed in the following decade’s cultural critiques of technology: In the 1960s, postwar technology was indivisible from the logic of large-scale organization, and a deep-seated pessimism concerning the power of the command and control sciences arose. Dystopian critiques of technology and the “military-industrial complex” were partly spurred by histories and philosophies of science published in the 1960s that contested linear, teleological views of scientific experimentation and progress. Varying challenges were posed by historians of science such as Thomas Kuhn but also by cultural critics, philosophers, and historians ranging from Lewis Mumford to Herbert Marcuse, Theodore Roszak, C. Wright Mills, and Rachel Carson. These latter voices posed technology as a force of domination, repression, war, and destruction, in direct opposition to the freedom of the human subject.

But Snow’s binary was not inviolate. By the time Michel Foucault wrote his signal text *Discipline and Punish* in 1975, he could argue that cultural expression was inextricably bound to the disciplinary structures of capitalist technocracy. The spontaneous subject that Mumford and others had opposed to technological instrumentality was actually an effect of it. With cultural liberation ever more intertwined with—even a direct result of—discipline, the notion of a cleaving between (repressive) technocracy and (free) humanistic culture seemed more and more a mirage.

Technology and cultural production were actually inseparable, for better or for worse. If Foucault had located discipline’s effects in the very production of “liberation” itself, it was to point to the pervasive reach
of disciplinary power. Much of postwar art, in fact, can be seen as grappling with this condition, not least the art that adopted or embraced aspects of the new technology, whether minimalism, conceptual art, kinetic sculpture, or video. But I would argue that a number of endeavors looked at still other possible convergences of art and technology, in a manner distinct from Foucault’s unholy merger.

One of these possibilities was to repurpose models of scientific inquiry and technological invention. Could one take the existing method of technical innovation and change it, then make it produce something else? Such a test promised nothing less than circumventing the teleologies of modernist formalism and scientific progress alike. It might also, surprisingly, provide an alternative to neo-avant-garde strategies based on negation or opposition. While historians have overwhelmingly evaluated the neo-avant-gardes (however diverse) as defensive postures (however slight or oblique) against instrumental technocracy—implicitly accepting the logic of the two-culture divide, pitting art against technology once more—these antagonistic positions cannot account for the specific works and encounters I am discussing here. Indeed, it is in the arena of production that art and technology met most unexpectedly in this historical moment, a moment generative of our own. As the artist Robert Morris wrote in 1967, “Control of energy and processing of information become the central cultural task.” He would see the automation of production, even beyond the “advanced industrial forming” of the time, as presenting entirely new horizons of possibility for making and testing. And these potential avenues in fabrication and production would run as undercurrents throughout the art of the 1960s and 1970s, merging art and technology in ways that have now become ubiquitous.

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This is precisely the future that I glimpsed when, several years ago, I visited Carlson & Co., the art fabrication and engineering firm in San Fernando, California. Looking into an entryway, unmarked save for an eye protection warning, was like peering through a looking glass. Inside and to the right were jumpsuited workers hovering over an iridescent plinth worthy of Stanley Kubrick. To the left loomed a plaster model of a Play-Doh pile scaled to mammoth proportions. Straight ahead was a tentacular cluster of Tyvek-and-foam-tipped steel prongs. And this was just the foreground of an immense space, a forty-thousand-square-foot fun-house reflection of the lugubrious Pepsi-Cola bottling plant that sat across the street from it. Until it recently closed, Carlson & Co. extended—even exploded beyond recognition—the legacy of industrial fabrication in postwar art. Carlson’s
operations, and the legions of artists who employ similar services elsewhere, suggest that making becomes a field of action in which services, media, technologies, and relations are fair game for intervention.

Carlson & Co. was at once venerable and abstruse. To be sure, many would recognize the polished plinth I saw as a John McCracken (being readied for installation at Documenta 12) and the ten-foot-high Play-Doh form (slated for realization in rotationally molded polyethylene) as an entry in Jeff Koons’s “Celebration” series. Few, however, would know that the cage-like steel structure was a sophisticated crating system developed expressly for the transpacific transport of Charles Ray’s *Hinoki* (2007), a painstaking rendition of a hollow tree trunk in hand-carved Japanese cypress. If I had continued looking into the space, I would have discovered the trappings of a vertically integrated network—machines, manpower, and materials—that played a role in everything from producing Ellsworth Kelly’s pristine surfaces to developing Doug Aitken’s kinetic mirrors to fabricating, delivering, and installing Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen’s pop monuments.

But I was at the wrong entrance. No sooner had I peeked inside than someone redirected me through another door, into a suite of offices lined with Breuer chairs and flat-screen Macs. Carlson made a business out of this hybrid existence from 1971 until 2010, functioning as a conduit between artists and “industry” and putting at their service a multifarious array that included subcontractors in computer-aided manufacturing (CAM) and robotics as well as foundries. An in-house staff of eighty-five trafficked in project management and digital design no less than in painting and sanding.

It would be a mistake to conceive of the artist’s relationship with Carlson as a high-tech update on the relationship between, say, Rodin and Rudier’s foundry. Nor would it be accurate to think of Carlson’s services as completely detached outsourcing. For a firm like Carlson bent both the authorial claims of the traditional studio and the subversion of the conceptualist gesture into a kind of post-Fordist pragmatism. To get the job done, Carlson would work closely with artists and yet also dispersed activity among assorted vendors. Far from merely applying prescribed techniques (such as sand-casting), its staff would solve new engineering and organizational problems with both patentworthy and outmoded or discarded technologies. It is in this sense, too, that the impulse that drew artists to Carlson diverges from the technophilia of postwar sculptural production—what in 1966 Dan Flavin cantankerously called a “scented romance in fiberglass or anodized aluminum or neon light or the very latest advance in Canal Street pyrotechnology.” In fact, this 1960s dalliance
was never quite so straightforward, and its latent tensions continue to surface. Industrial fabrication, rife with contradictions that clearly haunted Flavin and Morris, offered no easy answer to questions of noncomposition, authorship, alienated labor, or administration. Fabrication was never simply prefabrication.

Contrary to near-mythical accounts of artists employing industrial manufacturing at arm’s length—the (largely false) story of Donald Judd blindly ordering boxes from Bernstein Brothers is only the most famous example—the disconnect between conception and realization has rarely been total. Crucial disturbances persist in the lag between thinking and making. And as that delay has only grown more elastic and complex, industrial fabrication is now hardly recognizable in its breadth. Plunged into a murky postindustrial bathwater, it is a rubric that currently encompasses both the crude and the custom, both the serial production of multiples and the highly circumscribed, often absurdly expensive one-off work of art. It is the most omnipresent overlay of art and technology in our time, demonstrating the obsolescence of the so-called two cultures.

Besides utilizing the likes of Carlson or the London-based fabrication and design firm Mike Smith Studio, artists today have armed themselves with their own formidable fabrication and research facilities (Koons, Takashi Murakami, Olafur Eliasson, Zhang Huan) and developed longstanding relationships with industry (Richard Serra with Bethlehem Steel and now the German firm Pickhan). Artists such as Urs Fischer or the duo Allora & Calzadilla may enlist specialized fabricators for a variety of purposes. They may go to the global mega-design and construction firm Arup, or to foundries outside of Shanghai, or older establishments such as Polich Tallix in upstate New York; they may take part in the explosion of low-price-point multiples or utilize globalized outsourcing facilitated by dealers and even collectors. The intricacy and proliferation of these scenes bear scrutiny if we are to understand the full implications of fabrication and its persistence today.

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Overtures to industrial fabrication during the past several decades gave and took in equal measure, for the factory setting of presses and mills was rarely one of completely de-skilled banality, functionalist transaction, or unbri-dled machismo. Industrial fabrication often required dexterous tit-for-tat negotiation. Many of the companies that agreed to work with artists were custom metal fabricators like the legendary Treitel-Gratz Co., Inc., a family
business in Manhattan (now Gratz Industries, in Long Island City since 1968) that prided itself on close collaboration. This entailed parrying on both sides. “Sometimes, it can’t be done,” Bill Gratz said in 1989, recalling the falling-out his father, Frank, had with Frank Lloyd Wright over chair designs for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum cafeteria. Wright had insisted on two cones set vertically point to point. “There was no way you could make it strong enough,” Gratz said. “But [Wright] thought he was God. You couldn’t discuss things with him.”

When the likes of Judd, Barnett Newman, or Sol LeWitt went to work with Treitel-Gratz, they found themselves not on some Taylorist assembly line but engaged in the dialogic dance of high-end industrial design. Founded by a shrewd salesman and an MIT-educated engineer in 1929, Treitel-Gratz evolved into a successful producer of modernist fixtures. In 1948, it became the first US manufacturer of Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona furniture, turning out five exquisitely curved chairs per week. Indeed, all artists working in this setting had to contend with the constraints of mass-production techniques and synthetic material properties. But they were not so much ruled by this industrial palette as they were enabled to selectively cull materials and even alter the methods by which their work was manufactured. If Newman probed the qualities of press brake and welding torch, repetition and gesture, Judd delved into the permutations of commercial chroma and metallurgy in his peculiar fusion of the artisanal and the mechanized. Even LeWitt, who would often mail or telephone instructions to Gratz, left detailed drawings and maquettes at the firm—suggesting that his earlier use of skilled carpenters and that of the “factory” situation were similarly belabored processes rather than progressively immaculate ideations. To achieve the sheen of mechanized production paradoxically meant customizing standardized procedures.

The astonishing diversity of activities that traversed the shop floors of Treitel-Gratz (or its contemporary, Milgo Industrial, in Brooklyn) showed that, far from being utterly determined by the imperatives of mass production, artistic practice in the realm of industrial fabrication offered strange latitude. Where familiar indictments of minimalism and its peers envisioned capitalist design swallowing art whole, might we not instead view artists in this period as less easily ingested? As deforming industrial conventions, as literally conscripting both the means and the morphology of industrial design (the chaise longue, the curtain wall) for alternative ends? The space of industrial fabrication becomes a crucible for experiment—its structures not just replicated, affirmed, or revealed but vigorously tested.
Co-opting also meant cooperating. Appropriating strategies normally reserved for mass production was an interdisciplinary and interpersonal affair. The adaptation of industrial techniques opened onto overtly collaborative practices, straining the already contorted limits of artistic agency. The Connecticut-based foundry Lippincott, for example, began acquiring facility with plastics, fiberglass, and ceramics in the late 1960s—and it began to specialize in designs that preemptively accounted for the vagaries of transportation and installation. By 1970, the operation had moved into a twenty-thousand-square-foot work space on the original site in North Haven, Connecticut, complete with a field to showcase the gigantic sculptures for sale. Lippincott declared that his firm offered “the whole package of services that take a piece as smoothly as possible from the stage of conception through to the final installation,” even financing and soliciting buyers for pieces that had not been commissioned.11 On the one hand, the firm stressed its agency—Lippincott emphasized that “we often make major changes during the fabrication process,” contributing a great deal of “interaction” and “thought”—while, on the other, asserting its total subservience to the artist. As foreman Robert Giza once remarked, “We’re like their hands, or like seeing-eye dogs.”12 Individual innovation and collective production became dizzyingly entangled.

Sculpture and printmaking were, of course, the primary engines of serial workshop production, and the dying embers of the antiquated atelier and foundry—even of the fast-obsolescing Warholian Factory—were stoked and blown apart in combustion with new models of industrial research and information management. Perhaps nowhere were these sparks more volatile than at Gemini G.E.L. Begun as a printmaking studio in 1966, Gemini broadened its reach to include three-dimensional multiples when Oldenburg came to the Los Angeles company in January 1968 with his proposed Profile Airflow project. This was the latest installment in the artist’s series of riffs on the 1934–37 Chrysler Airflow, the first mass-produced aerodynamic automobile. Oldenburg sought to capture the dual fluidity and stringency of the car’s contours in a translucent molded relief superimposed over a lithograph. But to achieve the right degree of malleability at the size Oldenburg desired required a year’s extensive research in vacuum forming and new applications for polyurethane. Profile Airflow brought the Finish Fetish penchant for sophisticated plastics (think of Craig Kauffman’s advanced work at Planet Plastics in Paramount, California, at the same time, or of the pioneering fabricator Jack Brogan) into the fold of an exploratory team of engineers, printmakers, artists, and outside vendors.
And this, it could be argued, is where Carlson & Co. got its start. Peter Carlson, who would go on to found the company that still bears his name, was not yet out of college when he joined Gemini and assisted with the Profile Airflow project. Trained in both electrical engineering and studio art, Carlson remembers the heady atmosphere of discovery and the dicey trials of the mold-and-vacuum process: “There was a Plexiglas dome on top of the vacuum chamber that removed trapped gasses on the resin before molding. One day the dome spontaneously imploded. Shards of Plexiglas put holes in the walls of the room and could have killed anyone had they been inside.” What’s more, the polyurethane resin used turned out to be unstable upon exposure to ultraviolet light. When the initial edition was made, the works’ brilliant aqua tone turned a dim olive—and the pieces were “recalled” in typical Detroit fashion. With this assembly-line glitch, the project’s logic starts to resemble a kind of arrested product development.

This repurposing of research and design was the wellspring for subsequent engagements with fabrication. Carlson himself cites Oldenburg’s kinetic Giant Ice Bag—Scale A (1970) (along with the entire Art & Technology exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, of which it was a part), as central to the formation of his practice. Gemini oversaw the production of the Ice Bag with Krofft Enterprises, an animation house perhaps better known for its 1969 psychedelic children’s television show, H. R. Pufnstuf. Aligning the work’s making with the system of film production, Gemini and Krofft directed the construction of complex hydraulics and cybernetic servo drives that dramatically torqued the ice bag, offering a wry simulacrum of Hollywood animatronics. This venture had no stake in improving the industrial situation or its productivity but instead detourned its leftover technologies. Perhaps the most direct heir to the pioneering work of Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), the contemporaneous group founded by Robert Rauschenberg and Billy Klüver to facilitate collaborations between artists and engineers, the Ice Bag brilliantly made use of the engineers’ “free” time.

Fabrication was no longer a utopian imagining of the collective or the autogenic but a leveling of both in the name of research and development. As Carlson splintered from Gemini, starting his own business in 1971 (several other Gemini employees were to do the same: Ron McPherson, for example, launched the fabrication firm La Paloma in 1977), production was increasingly distributed among a network of independent actors. Collaboration took its cue from the postindustrial think tank and the engineering lab. Carlson’s growth from a subcontractor of one to a staff of
eighty-five entailed forging relationships with the aerospace, automobile, defense, architectural, and entertainment industries. Developing techniques, say, to adhere transparent acrylic polyurethane to mirror-polished stainless steel for Koons’ famously perfectionist (and exorbitantly conceived) *Balloon Dog* (1994–2000), Carlson represents a growing convergence of artisanal craft, the factory model of production, and the organizational services and informatics that bind these disparate elements together.

In fact, Carlson’s closing in 2010 is a near-perfect denouement to the rise of fabrication firms and the necessity for huge amounts of capital. The exact cause of Carlson’s shuttering is unclear, but it did, of course, occur in the wake of the financial crisis, which cannot have but impacted the funding for large-scale endeavors of Koons and other artists. More broadly, it may indicate the current migration of artists to ever more expansive fabrication and construction firms such as Arup or to specialized, niche, or in-house solutions. Increasing numbers of artists are executing pieces in China, for example: Urs Fischer designed a series of large-scale aluminum sculptures from 2006–8 in Switzerland and then had them cast outside of Shanghai, in a foundry that normally specializes in Buddhist monuments, just one indication that the intersection between service networks and facture is more widespread, hybrid, and diverse than ever before.

Such an amalgamation might seem paradoxical or even obsolete. But the repurposing and rerouting of the networks of production operate most forcefully in the interval between product design and serial object, the gap between prototype—as dead end and inauguration—and mass manufacture. The prototype thus marks the intersection between specialization and standardization. Typifying this crux is Carlson’s work with Josiah McElheny on *The Last Scattering Surface* (2006), facilitating a relationship with a computer-numerically controlled (CNC) milling operator and jury-rigging custom tools for the artist. Such strategies are also in play at Mike Smith Studio, whose work with Cerith Wyn Evans, Rachel Whiteread, Mark Wallinger, Mona Hatoum, and Darren Almond cuts across the employ of reverse engineering, rapid prototyping, casting, and 3-D scanning, arbitrating between artists and myriad advanced technologies.

In each instance, the work of these firms is an approximation, a necessarily provisional version of the actual production values of industry (whether BMW or Boeing). For high precision and mass production now, ironically, go hand in hand. The firm’s principal partner, Ed Suman, further
observed that “artists often want qualities that could previously only have been attained through mass production,” but that “it can be extremely expensive to produce a prototype of something that is designed to be mass-produced, to attain the perfection of mass production. When it’s required, we try to push the prototype as far in that direction as possible.”

Such a scenario portends a moment when there is absolutely no standardization, because everything is made to order and just in time; but this is a postindustrial dream perpetually deferred.

One could easily see the Carlson phenomenon as fetishizing production itself. Yet the firm—and its abrupt end—evinces a vital truth about so-called postindustrial production: The law of industry has gone far beyond that of serial production and differential consumption; it now hyperbolically assumes the digitized fantasy of infinite customization. Fabrication becomes a projection of our late-capitalist wish for total specialization and luxury material in everyday forms and experiences—which may be precisely its allure and its undoing. In this elastic arena where artists have sought to mine the possibilities of contemporary production and design and exploit the unpredictability of such adaptations, the large-expenditure project and the casual outsource operate in simultaneity—equivalent prospects dwelling in the loopholes and diversions of both art and technology.

Indeed, to presume the total permeation of technological specialization into all aspects of life is to place a kind of faith, humanistic in its own way, in man-made systems. It is to presume yet another type of technological determinism—one that fails to understand the unexpected risks and ruptures, the accidents that may render obsolete received wisdoms about art and technology. If aesthetic endeavor and technocratic innovation have become ever more aligned, such a union also constantly produces unpredictable side effects. These are the unforeseen consequences that trigger crises, burst bubbles, systemic catastrophes—and alternate possibilities, too.

Notes


Attention to the history of these mutinous “post-studio” conditions is hardly new—including the critical studies of Caroline A. Jones, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Pamela M. Lee, James Meyer, and Helen Molesworth.


LeWitt documents, Gratz archives, New York.


Media convergence under digitality actually increases the centrality of the body as a framer of information: as media lose their material specificity, the body takes on a more prominent function as selective processor in the creation of images.\textsuperscript{1}

The body as a framer of information: This notion, presented in the introduction to Mark Hansen’s *New Philosophy of New Media* (2004), could also stand as an introduction to the general condition under which art after 1989 produces and engages with technology. It marks not just a shift in thinking that concerns our general understanding of media technologies and practices, but also one within artistic practice. Here, new media and information technologies are themselves objects of thinking, investigation, and imagination. The task for art history is then to try to understand the newly prominent mediatic body that emerges with this shift—to discover its various manifestations in artistic practice, as well as its implications for aesthetic theory. In particular, we need to conceptualize its double relation to, on the one hand, technological media and the realm of media production and, on the other hand, the notion of the artistic medium.

With this shift, several influential conceptions of the relation between art, technology, and media may be questioned. Firstly, the notion of the body as a framer of information challenges some of the most influential theorizations of the cultural shift that took place in the 1990s, as the internet became a global phenomenon and digital processing emerged as a communal platform for all previously separate media and technologies of expression. One was the marginalization of art in the realm of new media. Digital media leave aesthetics behind, Friedrich Kittler claimed, with all the apocalyptic gusto of the early computer age: In distinction to the consciousness-flow of film or audio tape, the algorithmic operations that underpin information processing happen at a level that has no immediate correlation to the human perceptual system. Humans had created a nonhuman
realm that made obsolete any idea of art based on the sense apparatus. And this turn of events was related to the way in which technologies of the information age severed any tangible connection with human existence beyond what pertains to the control practices of capitalist superpowers, notably warfare, surveillance, and superficial entertainment or visual “eyewash.” Yet, against Kittler’s bleak description of post-human technologies it could be argued that information will still necessarily have to be processed by human bodies—even if the interaction between the human perceptual system and the finely grained temporalities of digital processing open new ways of understanding the qualities and capacities of such bodies and their environments. Aesthetics is not dead or irrelevant, but in need of a new set of descriptions that will also aid our understanding of artistic practice in the age of new media.

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Secondly, the notion of the body as the framer of information challenges an influential assumption concerning the formal characteristics of contemporary artworks. In the 1999 essay *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, Rosalind Krauss outlines a situation in which a majority of artworks and art practices have lost their critical connection to specific media. In her reading, contemporary art is not simply multi- or intermedial but, more acutely, post-medial. Post-mediality in art is the effect of an uncritical aesthetic adaptation to a media industry in which the facilitation of economic exchange is the order of the day—in sharp contrast to the critical and properly materialist struggle with the frameworks of a particular artistic medium that characterized the modernist engagement with painting, sculpture, photography, or film. However, in Krauss’s text such engagement with medium specificity is no longer described in the more traditional, formalist terms of self-reference but through the concept of recursion: a principle according to which an infinite number of computations can be described by a finite program such that a crucial moment of invention or difference is produced from within the limits of the same. Where the concept of self-reference is easily misread as solipsism, the concept of recursion places emphasis on the fact that reflexive attention to the properties of an artistic medium does not reproduce this medium as self-identical, but as a different instantiation in each specific case. Resistance to the erasure of critical differences in the new information economies is, in other words, achieved through a conceptual framework that provides a sort of quasi-computational updating of the modernist preoccupation with medium specificity.
Against the description of a post-medium condition, one could argue that recent art has not lost its connection to a critical and materialist notion of "medium." It is just that the properties of this medium cannot be easily elucidated with reference to a specific apparatus or support in the way one could speak of modern artists' engagement with distinct technologies such as photography or film. Instead, a medium today must be sought out in the more elusive interaction between bodies (or various types of existential situations) and the informational realm. It is a type of interaction that is explored in a number of recent artworks that tend to foreground a distinctly aesthetic realm of perceptual and sensorial data, while placing it within larger technological frameworks that seem to encompass the idea of an information-based mode of life.

From such a point of view, the problem with the notion of the post-medium condition is that it deals with the relation between art, technologies, and media from the point of view of old media, both in aesthetic and technological terms. The intensive twentieth-century debates about the aesthetic properties of specific media should no doubt be seen as a corollary to an industrial development of new and distinct media technologies—film, photography, gramophone, audiotape, radio, television, x-ray, radar and digital sound and image, among others—that each have their own specific formats, uses, programs, and modes of spectatorship. To a great extent, modern art production could be seen as a deep engagement with this series of technical inventions. It is an engagement that turns around the radical newness of each technology and its stakes in a yet-to-be determined future, based on its distinct medial features and the ability to generate certain (hypothetical) audiovisual, temporal, social, or political effects. As Dieter Daniels has pointed out, twentieth-century media technologies tended to develop distinct artistic practices alongside their industrial or commercial uses. Television stands as the exception to this rule in the sense that an artistic use of video was developed relatively late after the establishment of television as a state-owned or corporate mass medium. As a result, video artists not only engaged with the properties of television signals: They immediately addressed the specificity of television in terms of its function as an already existing and increasingly all-enveloping social and political institution. One effect of this development was that television was explored from a larger media-ecological and existential perspective that very often took the productive interface between human bodies and televisual real-time technologies as a point of departure. The television environments of Nam June Paik or the complex feedback mechanisms set up in Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider's video installations combined macro-political critique with a
techno-utopian imagination set on reconfiguring the potential of human perception and sensation. In this opening towards wider media-ecological perspectives, certain aspects of 1970s video art may be interpreted as early signs of the transformation of the critical concept of medium that emerged more fully after 1990. In many ways, it is the consequences of this transformation that is mourned in the notion of a post-medium condition. But the emphasis on loss implicit in this notion is also what blinds one to the specific features of the relationship between art and technology that emerges in the current realm of information.

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In broad terms, this transformation can be traced in an artistic approach to technology that is no longer aligned with the invention of specific apparatuses, programs, or media formats. This is not to say that technical invention plays a limited role in art after 1989. On the contrary, a rich subfield of recent artistic practices is devoted to intensive research and development in the realm of digital technology, spurring collaborative networks between artists, scientists, engineers, and theorists. However, what is of late most compelling is the often overlooked generative framework under which a number of recent artworks are produced, works that do not even necessarily come across as “technologically oriented” in any very emphatic or explicit sense. Instead they express a sensitivity to what we might call “general mediality,” a type of focus that ultimately draws attention to the human as a biotechnical form of life.

If this framework should be foregrounded it is not just because it constitutes a historically new addition to the realm of artistic expression and production. It also adds to our understanding of what the philosopher Gilbert Simondon might have called the technicity of a great number of recent artworks; that is, an understanding of how they come into being as new technical events. The “technicity” of a work of art is in other words not a given derived from a determinate set of features associated with an already existing apparatus or technology. It indicates, rather, a set of complex feedback relations between a range of elements—technical, environmental, intellectual, sensorial—that account for the emergence of a new techno-existential situation.

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Consider, then, a different type of aesthetic scenario. Consider, for instance, the brilliant multicolored light emanating from the grand windows of a
Parisian apartment at nightfall: This is what is offered to the city public that happens to pass by Philippe Parreno’s *Mount Analogue* (2001). Invisible to these outside spectators, the colored light is generated from a TV screen connected to a digital video system that produces a series of colors whose hue and duration are determined by a Morse code translation of a text—a narrative about the cinematic production of the mystical/spiritual novel *Le Mont Analogue*, left unfinished by René Daumal in 1944 and posthumously published in 1952. Assembled here are almost every single transcription system and media platform known to modern humans: writing, publication, Morse code, cinema, television, electric light, and binary code. What is more, digital or discrete sign systems fuse seamlessly with analogue or continuous modes of imagination and projection (as in the narrated description of a cinematic production). Uniting them, however, is the fact that these familiar media forms are now all made to operate at a submerged or imperceptible level in relation to human consciousness, a level whose temporal complexities and phenomenological inaccessibility are normally associated with the mathematics of binary code only.

Writing, cinematic images, television signals, and mental imaging are here united and pushed into the background as the interconnected elements of a complex and invisible procedure of processing. Spectators only engage with the intensive dimensions of a luminosity whose precise “technical” sources can at best be guessed at but never known within the limits of the viewing situation. In a sense, they are as inaccessible to us as the neuronal wiring and firing that underpins our own thinking as it unfolds. As a consequence, what takes place in the interplay between the sensations and perception of the spectator’s body and the flow of colored light cannot be directly elucidated with reference to the mediatic apparatuses subtending the production. In relation to the bodies engaging with the raw sensory data of the work, the role of apparatuses and technologies is mainly that of an open question or a gap in our knowledge—a point of real indeterminacy as to the function and meaning of technology itself.

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Parreno’s *Mount Analogue* is a paradigm of the new techno-existential scenario explored in recent art. Generally speaking, works of this kind approach sophisticated media technologies as a new vernacular, since the interfaces and modes of operation of such technologies come across as integrated in the fabric of everyday life. They are at one with the lamps, screens, and light constructions that illuminate buildings and streets, with
architectural constructions, with trendy interior design as well as that of more ordinary modes of dwelling. They are at one with the way in which people interact, think, dream, and experience, as well as with the way in which connections are created between humans and other agents and entities in the world. This is, at least, how the presence of media technologies has been staged in numerous artworks: works attuned to the electronic networks that keep entire environments alive with the pulsations of real-time processing.

As if in response to this integration of information technology in the deeper fabric of everyday life, many of these works lack any kind of distinct formal or object-oriented unity and instead create associations between a number of seemingly disparate elements, often separate in time and space. A work by Liam Gillick may, for instance, take place in the interstice between the translation, publication, and distribution of a nineteenth-century utopian novel by the Italian sociologist Gabriel Tarde. The ideas and metaphors subtending Tarde’s vision of a new collectivity of sensations and perceptions are updated for the new media age through a newly written philosophical introduction, innovative translation details, a promotional video for the book, and finally an architectural arrangement (or presentational “setting”) that includes specially designed furniture and carpeting. Other works seem to evoke a new type of media atmospherics, as if to explore more elusive dimensions of today’s shared spaces than those foregrounded through the more traditional parameters of media critique. Take, for instance, Angela Bulloch’s practice of expanding single pixels to screen-size square boxes. Even when she constructs entire walls of such pixel boxes, as in *Macro World: One Hour3* and *Canned* (2002), we still do not get a screen image in the traditional sense of the term, only a very tiny fragment of what might have been a rapidly passing TV-screen “output.” Connected to real-time signal transmission systems that respond to the movements of the people in the room, her enormous pixel walls and their constantly changing colors above all envelop us in a new type of atmospheric architectural surround—one which alerts us to the degree to which today’s shared spaces operate alongside the flows and temporalities of signal-based technologies.

Or take the works of Sean Snyder, which explore the relation between the technologies of information processing subtending our everyday environment and the question of “information access” in the public sphere. This relation is fraught with paradoxes. For if digital technologies facilitate the need for visual documentation, such documents are also open to manipulation in ways that constantly undermine their validity. In addition,
Inhabiting the Technosphere

the enormous flow of visual data from mobile cameras, surveillance systems, satellite systems, and television stations decrease the informational value of each image-document, influencing our ability to identify, differentiate, and account for relevance based on visual evidence. In Snyder's work the tremendous flow of visual information then essentially comes across as a form of signaletic presence or atmosphere, which engages the viewer through a predominantly tactile form of appeal. For what the signaletic environment produces is above all a powerful sense of being “with it,” “in touch,” perpetually in the middle of action.

In contrast to much of the media-oriented art of the twentieth century, Bulloch and Snyder both explore a form of collective media existence that is no longer primarily based on a viewing and digestion of spectacular images or other types of media content. Instead, their works expose and explore the intimate connections that are continually being forged between today’s sophisticated time-processing technologies and the complex temporalities of a human memory that moves at several speeds at once, combining preconscious action-oriented neuronal responses with a conscious processing of the past and future within a dynamic now-time. If today’s information technologies come across as attractive, intimate, user-friendly, and “human” (in contrast to “alienating” industrial technologies such as the conveyor belt), it is because they appear to be an extension of our neural systems and in fact include our sensorial and perceptual apparatus as part of their working components. The almost visceral sense of “connectedness” or “presence” that is brought forward in so many works, relate to the fact that shared space itself is increasingly understood as intercerebral space or a collectivity of brains, a sphere of interconnected thoughts, sensations, and affects whose political and economic dimensions we have only just begun to explore.

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In general, the situationist notions of the media spectacle and of spectacular society—central for much of the recent critique of the modern media and entertainment industries and their artificial version of reality—have relatively little to contribute to this new technicity in art. For these works often seem to move away from habitual preoccupations with the ideological and institutional shaping of media content and its construction of more or less passive spectatorship. Once attention is directed to the impact of those aspects of media technologies that function as corollaries to our own sensorial and perceptual apparatuses, we are no longer primarily seen as “users” of distinct media. Instead we are approached as human elements in a larger
techno-biological process of becoming that may produce new forms of subjectivity and social identity but that also passes beyond traditional conceptions of the human self. The Manga character *Annlee*—the point of departure for a wide-ranging collective art project—could be seen as an allegory of such processes. In 1999 Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe bought the rights to a Manga drawing from the Japanese company Kworks, and invited fifteen artists—Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Liam Gillick, Philippe Joseph, Rirkrit Tiravanija, François Curlet among them—to produce works with or around this generic yet “open” cartoon figure, who was named Annlee. Annlee is then essentially a legal-informational entity, a purchased set of rights that takes on fleeting aspects of personhood as it becomes the interface of the various desires, perceptions, sensations, and fantasies that are activated in the project.

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Once the body emerges as the critical medium of such works, it becomes easier to pay attention to the specific ways in which a number of artworks explore the alignment of real-time technologies and human memory. Such alignment takes place at two levels. On the one hand, real-time technologies seem to replicate the conscious processes of recalling the contents of the past or imagining future scenarios within the parameters of a constantly unfolding “now-time.” In fact, a range of work by artists like Pierre Huyghe, Douglas Gordon, and Jeremy Deller recall collective media memories or future-oriented media fantasies through techniques of “presencing” that place emphasis on the event-like, refractive, and uncontrollable now-time of both signaletic and human recollection and projection. Cinema and television classics, historical news events, and the scenario-like presentations of real estate agents and tourist operators are given a new form of social existence by playing off the complex techniques of memory itself. Deller’s work with the folk practice of historical reenactment is a case in point: In *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001) he restages the famous 1984 battle between British police and 5,000 picketing miners at a British Steel coking plant in a way that interlaces the “real” reenactment of the battle with the past and present mediatization of the event through television and film. The effect is not just a refraction of the political meanings traditionally ascribed to this key event in Thatcherite politics. Even more pertinently, Deller enlarges and plays off the affects involved in the production of a so-called “media event” whose force and impact depend on its ability to enroll not just history but entire collectivities in a mode of perpetual presence.
On the other hand, the inaccessible algorithmic operations that underpin real-time information processing might be compared with the subconscious memory techniques of a nervous system that guides our bodies through complex and action-filled contexts, so to speak, in advance of our conscious processing of what is going on around us. The quasi-natural and quasi-technological spaces created by Olafur Eliasson seem in particular to emphasize how an intimate interaction between neurological and informational processes are constitutive elements in the creation of whatever it is that we see as our immediate bodily environments today. Through relatively simple and always technically transparent procedures that typically involve manipulations of color and light, temporal and spatial experience, Eliasson creates situations where our perceptions and sensations are at once intensified and externalized—to the extent that we get a fleeting sense of experiencing our own nervous system at work in action—like getting a sudden flash of insight into the generative work of a computer code. A nodal point in a web of technologies and constructions that operate at a number of different levels, the body is here clearly a self-reflexive or recursive medium—one that experiences its own continual production of an environment as an integral part of the discovery of its own means and capacities, forces and limitations. This is, in short, the properly aesthetic approach to a new media reality developed in contemporary art after 1989.

Notes

5 A growing number of festivals and conferences (Ars Electronica, Transmediale, the annual ISEA and SIGGRAPH conferences) testify to the urgency and significance of this activity.

8 Sean Snyder’s exhibition *Optics. Compression. Propaganda* at the Lisson Gallery, London, 2007, is an example of this approach, as is the project *Bucharest / Pyonyang 2000–2004*. Both works use a number of different visual technologies, including photographs, satellite images, video images, digital images, and LightJet prints.

9 The political and economic aspects of intercerebral collaboration is discussed in Maurizio Lazzarato, *Puissances de l’invention: La psychologie économique de Gabriel Tarde* (Paris: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond/Le Seuil, 2002).


11 Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz have analyzed the specific way in which the live media event constructs sociality through a type of journalistic procedure where the reporter is no longer an “outside” commentator cynically open to any meanings. In contrast, the media event reporter tends to be actively involved in the official meaning of the event as if unfolds. Operating in terms of televisual presence, he or she enacts this meaning. Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 89–92.

12 Titles like *Your Negotiable Panorama* (2006), *Your Space Embracer* (2004), or *Your Mobile Expectations* (2007) clearly emphasize the way in which the work opens onto a reflexive mode of perception based on the situational experience of the individual spectator-body.
During the late 1960s and early 1970s art underwent a “conceptual turn” as marked by watershed exhibitions in Europe and the United States such as Live In Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form (1969) at the Kunsthalle Bern, and Information (1970) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. This first era of conceptual art was marked by newly established analogies between art and information. Dan Graham’s work, Figurative (1965), for instance, consisted of a found cash register receipt with its total cropped out. Figurative’s play on the double meaning of figure—as both a numeral and a body—emerged wittily when it was published between ads for women’s hygiene products and underwear respectively in Harper’s Bazaar in March 1968. In this context, the numerical figure was juxtaposed, and therefore implicitly associated with not only the history of the “nude,” but also with commodities dedicated to the care and discipline of femininity as represented by tampons and brassieres. As in so many works of conceptual art made during the late 1960s and 1970s, information, in the form of numbers, language, or photomechanical reproduction, was found to be fungible, subject to easy translation (or liquidity) between two distinct states.

We are now experiencing a second era of conceptual art, which might, in a nod to the parlance of software and the World Wide Web, be called Conceptual Art 2.0. Here the translation of information from one form to another (which during the 1960s corresponded to the rise of computers and the great postwar cybernetic age) suggests the distributed network of the internet. Instead of a bilateral translation from one form into another (i.e., from the figure of a woman, to the figure of a cash receipt) the possibility for multilateral and simultaneous translations and re-mediations are now legion.² In his important book The Culture of the New Capitalism (2006) sociologist Richard Sennett demonstrates how such new capacities have affected the structure of business enterprises under global capitalism. His model is the MP3 player:

This new [business structure] performs like an MP3 player. The MP3 machine can be programmed to play only a few bands from its repertoire; similarly, the flexible organization can select and perform only a few of its many possible functions at any given time. In the old-style corporation, by
contrast, production occurs via a fixed set of acts; the links in the chain are set. Again, in an MP3 player, what you hear can be programmed in any sequence. In a flexible organization, the sequence of production can also be varied at will…. Linear development is replaced by a mind-set willing to jump around.³

Sennett identifies an informational logic characteristic of search engines like Google or Yahoo!. The MP3 player is an effective metaphor for corporations because it exhibits two important qualities: first, an overcapacity for information storage; and second, the potential to access infinitely flexible configurations of information (in the shape of songs or video in the case of the MP3 player). Electronic tools such as this one, as well as large networks like the internet, consequently enable dizzying jumps from one thing to another. Think of typing any word into a search engine like Google—the results will inevitably be diverse and disconnected, making the kind of “poetic” association that existed between Graham’s *Figurative* and the ads that framed it in *Harper’s Bazaar*, but to the nth degree. The MP3 player of Sennett’s analogy *formats* content into a particular meaningful informational “object.” Platforms, like the MP3 player including search engines like Google, generate certain kinds of formats, just as algorithms organize data in numerically precise ways. Indeed, digital platforms not only serve as models for contemporary business enterprise, they are equally relevant to contemporary art under the conditions of *Conceptual Art 2.0*. Under these conditions, what matters most is not the production of content, but its *retrieval* in intelligible patterns through acts of *reframing*, *capturing*, *reiterating*, and *revealing*. This is what I would like to call “The Epistemology of Search”—the production of knowledge through the aggregation, rather than the production of content.

The ostensibly banal data harvested in great quantities at checkout counters or online by corporations like Wal-Mart is useless without the capacity to derive emergent profiles from them. Data can function as an asset only when it is formatted to respond to different marketing queries, such as the success of the sales of a particular product; the ebb and flow of shoppers during an average day; or seasonal variations in consumption. Google understood this logic already in 1998. When search engines arose they were a service without a business model. Now Google is one of the most financially successful corporations of the early twenty-first century, and for a simple reason: In economies of overproduction, value is derived not merely from the intrinsic qualities of a commodity (or other object),
but from its searchability—its susceptibility to being found, or recognized (or profiled). Art is equally dedicated to searching for emergent patterns from image worlds. The creative act, as Marcel Duchamp proposed long ago, stands in a relation of *delay* or belatedness to the ordinary business of (commodity) production. Contrary to the normative interpretation of Duchamp's legacy, it is not merely the artist's “choice” that characterizes an aesthetics of retrieval, but the much more complex and multi-layered procedure of *search*. This is why contemporary art marginalizes the production of content in favor of assembling new formats for existing images. Like algorithms, art reformats existing streams of images and information. They practice both an epistemology, and an aesthetics of the search engine. And art, like search engines, *connects*—indeed degrees of connectivity account for contemporary aesthetic value. In other words, the structure, density, and speed of associations—both outward into the world and within the artwork itself—that an image formats is what counts, not the “meanings” that freeze their circulation into a static artifact.

In the realm of the internet, “hits” and “cookies” are the key to searchability. The greater the scale of a network (in other words, the greater the extent of image saturation within it) the harder it is to retrieve any particular bit of information. Search engines, for example, rank web pages according to the number of hits they receive, and what matters is density since links to other sites increase hits. “Cookies” are small text files equipped with ID tags that are placed on computers by websites so that they can store information and recognize users when they return. In a global economy, cultural visibility also depends on a logic of hits and cookies. Saskia Sassen has argued that despite the common-sense assumption that globalization should lead to decentralization, world financial capitals such as New York, London, and Tokyo with their hyper-concentration of technological infrastructure and human talent have become ever more concentrated and dominant as the hubs or nodes within global networks. Such global capitals profit from *densification*: a vast net of connections ranging from the fine-grained texture of urban neighborhoods to fast electronic links to locations around the world. To put it bluntly, New York gets more hits than Cincinnati. This is why art fairs and biennials have proliferated across the globe: They are gambits for cultural densification (which is always closely linked to financial densification). They are the stock exchanges of art where the world comes to speculate on cultural currency.

As identity tags, cookies have become equally essential in the global production and distribution of artworks. Despite the onset of conceptual
art as a kind of lingua franca in the 1970s (in text, photography, video, and readymade assemblage), success as an artist—primarily but not exclusively outside the “unmarked” West—requires that a quantum of “Chineseness” or “Africanness” or “Russianness” be easily communicated in any particular work. Indeed, the globalization of readymades has made this relatively simple: If you are Subodh Gupta, you include utensils native to India in your giant skull, Mind Shut Down (2008); if you are Damien Hirst, inhabiting the world financial capital of London, you choose diamonds instead in For the Love of God (2007). Globalization, as defined by Immanuel Wallerstein, requires a division of labor which is distributed worldwide: For instance, production of components for a particular product might take place in Mexico and Indonesia, to be assembled in the Southern United States for a company whose headquarters are in Tokyo. 5 We know that in the current global economy development involves a progression from modes of production that have very low value added (such as sweatshop manufacturing) to very high value added (such as investment banking and art production). India, for instance, has effectively moved a proportion of its economy up the ladder from production to services. Cultural densification, like that recently experienced in Beijing’s 798 neighborhood, is an instance (not merely a reflection) of economic densification. And in the art world, cultural identity adds value as long as it is susceptible to easy translation into the rhetoric of Conceptual Art 2.0.

Platforms

As curator of Documenta 11 (2002) Okwui Enwezor traveled the world organizing five platforms. Taken together, these symposia in five global cities expanded art’s public, and Documenta’s reach, beyond the confines of Kassel, its mid-size German host. Each platform included representatives from the primary constituencies of contemporary art—artists, scholars, and community representatives: “In proposing the five platforms that make up our common public spheres we have above all else been attentive to how contemporary artists and intellectuals begin from the location and situation of their practice.” 6 A platform, in Enwezor’s terms, unlike totalizing models of power such as “capitalism” or “democracy,” is a public space that is finite, local, and site-specific. But like computer terminals that function as discrete portals onto open networks, Documenta’s platforms were oriented toward sending information (or content) into the wider world in a particular kind
of format. In other words, a platform translates local information into recognizable products capable of circulating globally.

It is no coincidence that Enwezor used the term *platform* commonly associated with digital architectures like Google, Twitter, or YouTube, to describe his symposia, and indeed, the term has proliferated in art discourse. As I have suggested, alongside new *virtual* spaces produced by digital platforms, objects of art, as well as the spaces for discussing and evaluating them, have undergone a significant transformation of their own. What matters now is how artworks collect and configure an array of activities—how they produce various informational objects often changing from one state to another in the course of an exhibition or action. In behaving like search engines in real space, works of art exhibit capacities like those of Sennett’s MP3 player for translating, reformatting, and transporting images electronically. This mutability in form corresponds to related changes in political agency—and political theory—where traditional nation *states* have been challenged, undermined, or remade through the recognition of vast migrations of people across borders whether as refugees, migrant works, or high-skill laborers, whose forms of collectivity have been theorized in terms of the multitude.

The best effort to come to terms with this new model of “network” objectivity is still Nicolas Bourriaud’s concept of “relational aesthetics,” which describes the artwork as a kind of physical platform for social interaction.7 Rirkrit Tiravanija’s *Secession*, presented by the Vienna Secession in 2002, was such a platform. It occurred around the gradual construction, through the course of the exhibition, of a physical platform: a pavilion in the form of a section of Viennese architect Rudolf Schindler’s 1922 home in Los Angeles that was entirely faced in reflective chrome. This pavilion-platform-in-process presided over a number of activities including Thai massage, a summer party, and a weekly DJ session and film screenings. On Thursdays the exhibition was open 24 hours, in theory making it available as an overnight hostel for drop-in visitors. Tiravanija has described his mirrored platform as a time game: “What we’ll remember from this exhibition is the construction of a space in chrome, a space which reflects everything that happens inside. It’s temporal camouflage. It’s an exhibition that’s comprised of a series of games…. Time games. Chrome is a great agent of time.”8 The irony here is that while all the activities hosted by the platform were indeed reflected in it, these reflections could never be *fixed* in the mirrored surface as photographs can be. Tiravanija’s platform is a container for activities that disappear in time. His emphasis on fugitive
temporalities is enhanced by the physical platform itself—the “return” or transit of Rudolf Schindler's house to Vienna, where he began. Indeed, this platform is itself a kind of physical or objectified memory. It reformats experience in real time—there is no “object” to be found, just changes in the state of form that I have associated with Conceptual Art 2.0.

As images (including the kind of live action enabled by Tiranvanija’s Secession) pass through successive formats, their force, speed, and clarity is moderated or regulated. Formats can store power or squander it. Mediums are subsets of formats—the difference lies solely in scale and flexibility. Mediums are limited and limiting because they call forth singular objects instead of nodal points of exchange or nets of differential charge: they are analogue in a digital world. A format channels information or content into a particularly contingent state. It can store image power like a battery (as in Hanne Darboven’s or Xu Bing’s vast inscriptions of invented languages, or On Kawara’s One Million Years (1969–) which records in notebooks an imaginary accumulation of time exceeding human comprehension). Or formats can stage extravagant expenditures, as in Thomas Hirschhorn’s eruptions of pictures drawn from everywhere, frozen into igneous flows of misery and consumption, or Isa Genzken’s sharp stalactites of clotted stuff. Formats can offer (faux–modestly) an empty platform for actions to emerge, as in Liam Gillick’s structures resembling slick playgrounds designed by Donald Judd, or formats may furnish fantastic landscapes for prosaic commodities to develop new behaviors—new social lives—as in the work of Rachel Harrison or, through different means, Pierre Huyghe.

Nodes and Nets

There are two categories of contemporary formats that I would identify as structuring Conceptual Art 2.0: nodes and nets, each of which emerges from—and transforms—a modernist genealogy. By joining diverse streams of images in overlapping and often contradictory patterns, nodes are the progeny of avant-garde collage, montage, and assemblage, all of which establish striking visual collisions. Nets, on the other hand, rework modernist (and postmodernist) seriality and the readymade, which share a foundation in mass production’s infinite reproducibility. While within networks, nodes and nets are inextricably linked they exhibit significant structural differences as aesthetic formats. Nodes are extensive because they function as points of exchange, re-routing image currencies in the manner...
of freeway interchanges, while nets are intensive, displaying a differential charge across a uniform (or nearly uniform) field of components like a system of roads.

We might describe nodes as a kind of image commons. Lewis Hyde has recently defined commons as “a kind of property (not ‘the opposite of property’ as some say) and I take ‘property’ to be, by one old dictionary definition, a right of action.”9 In other words, every form of property involves rights of action as well as limits on action. If one owns a house in the United States, for instance, one has the right to live or host a party there, but not to synthesize crystal meth or other illegal drugs in the basement. A commons does not dispense with ownership, but stages several overlapping layers of rights to action: In a traditional British context, for instance, some might have the rights to graze their cattle in a commons while others are only entitled to gather wood there.10 These limits to unbridled use are called stints. Like a commons, a nodal work of art may host several actions, both actual and virtual. Nodal commons often function as platforms hosting an array of activities ranging from actual events (involving human participation) to virtual events (implying the dislocation and relocation of objects). Rirkrit Tiravanija’s Secession is a good example of the former. In different ways, Tiravanija’s activities shifted the rights of action away from the museum as sole proprietor of its property and toward its users as shareholders: The Secession was reinvented as a contemporary version of a commons.

On the other hand, an artist like Rachel Harrison builds new platforms for ordinary things that are derived from standard museum pedestals in some works, and in others consist of complex topographical or labyrinthine environments. In describing her 2006 sculpture Tiger Woods, Harrison says:

I was at a gas station deli and I saw a can of iced green tea; at first glance, the guy whose picture was on it looked like [George W.] Bush. What was also interesting about the can was that it had some writing in Chinese characters. This seemed incongruent with the picture—it was actually Arnold Palmer, the golf pro. So I made the sculpture Tiger Woods. I wanted to have the same initial involvement with the can, but since it was no longer at the gas station, this was not possible. My art is not representational, so I had to create an entirely different experience for the can to be present in the world.11

In modernist practices of collage and montage the raw material of consumer culture is staged as a collision of values that is commonly linked to the chaotic rhythms of the early twentieth-century city. For Harrison
as for many artists of her generation the task of “assemblage” is quite different—it accomplishes the release of objects from their limiting commercial values in the spectacular early twenty-first-century city of mass consumption—of Big Box stores and gas station emporia. In a world where commodities carry dominant ideologies, creating “an entirely different experience” for them serves to free them—at least conceptually—for common use. Harrison symbolically liberates things—it hardly matters if it’s a can of tea or a vintage photograph—from capitalism’s imposition of singular meaning (and hence quantifiable value).

If nodes create a rich and potentially chaotic image commons, nets, on the other hand, distribute differential charge across a set of standardized, or minimally differentiated, units. Sol LeWitt’s wall drawings epitomize the kind of gradient field I would like to associate with nets. From a limited number of permutational rules conveyed matter-of-factly to assistants for execution LeWitt produced optically complex nets through very modest means. His drawings are certainly “conceptual” but they share with an artist as different and “expressive” as Jackson Pollock an exhilarating optical levitation (not unlike the pixilated projections of digital screens). LeWitt is the hinge figure between Conceptual Art 1.0 and Conceptual Art 2.0. Nets of lines, however, still belong to the logic of painting as a discrete object (even if that object is expanded to encompass an entire wall). Our contemporary aesthetic challenge is no longer to compose lines, but rather to manage whole populations of images. Many accounts of modernist or minimalist seriality emphasize the philosophical significance of simple repetition. But in Sherrie Levine’s practice of seriality, as in Postcard Collage #4, 1-24 (2000), for instance, which includes twenty-four of “the same” romantic postcard of a seascape each framed individually and installed in an array, she offers an invitation to the viewer to examine the same image again and again. If you slowly move from postcard to postcard and really look, something marvelous happens: Each picture is both the same as and different from the others. Within their population, the postcards function as both figure and ground, since revisiting the “same” image is never the same experience, and occurs against the “ground” of every other occasion of looking. The set of identical postcards functions almost diagnostically as a tool for tracking a viewer’s thoughts and emotions: An attentive spectator—she who patiently looks at all twenty-four postcards rather than “grasping” a meaning right away—is paradoxically pulled in two directions at once: drawn in and pushed out of the individual image, in a complex passage from the internal logic of the artwork to its framing network.
Conceptual Art 2.0

The differences between the first phase of conceptual art and Conceptual Art 2.0, like the innovations that produced Web 2.0 are best understood as a shift in emphasis rather than a thoroughgoing transformation. Conceptual art made two fundamental discoveries: that works of art may translate existing content from one format to another; and that the circulation of information, in general, is governed by an aesthetics (as well as an economics) of communication. In Conceptual Art 2.0, as in Web 2.0 there is a tendency toward interactivity—what is known as “social media” on the internet, and what we call relational aesthetics in the art world. And secondly, there is a multiplication and acceleration of translations from one format to another that reinvigorates the venerable twentieth-century traditions of montage and assemblage, but with a difference. Data-mining is now one of the most important functions of commerce, government, and entertainment (including the entertainments offered by museums: performances, educational events, travel, and consumption). Artists are data-miners, too, but unlike politicians and executives, they do not presume the documentary veracity of information. Just like Wal-Mart, artists make profiles, but the desires they impersonate, whether modest or monstrous, are not extinguished by a purchase.

Notes


Ibid., pp. 27–28.

“Rachel Harrison & Nayland Blake” [conversation], *Bomb*, no. 105 (Fall 2008), p. 49.

For a related discussion of painting and networks see my “Painting Beside Itself,” *October* 130 (Fall, 2009), pp. 125–134.
If any aspect of the contemporary art world is tied directly to the geopolitical transformations that occurred around 1989, it is the rise of the biennial exhibition. These large-scale presentations of the latest trends in contemporary art were previously limited to such venerable institutions as the Venice Biennale, the São Paulo Bienal, and Documenta (an exhibition that takes place every five years in Kassel). But in the last twenty years numerous biennials have been created around the world, and have become an entrenched part of the international art scene. Many of these exhibitions have taken place in nontraditional art centers like Gwanju, Havana, and Johannesburg; indeed, they often are the result of a particular city or region’s desire to find a place on the world stage. Critics have faulted biennials for creating a kind of cultural tourism that is available to only the wealthiest of art enthusiasts and professionals with sizable travel budgets. There have also been objections that biennials show the same roster of artists, and that the format of these exhibitions prize site-specific installation and more ephemeral, context-derived pieces in favor of practices like painting and sculpture. To these arguments Massimiliano Gioni proposes in his “In Defense of Biennials” that stultifying exhibitions are not the fault of the model, since biennials, hardly if ever tied to a traditional institution, allow the freedom for constant reinvention and are a tool for serious reflection.

Biennials exert a tremendous influence on the contemporary art world in large part because they distill into a more manageable form the heterogeneity of the global art scene. Biennials are almost always expansive in design...
and generally occur in repurposed non-art venues. It is in biennials that some of the most compelling arguments about affinities, patterns, and new developments in contemporary art emerge, especially a reconsideration of the local and the creation of transnational public spheres, as Geeta Kapur argues in “Curating in Heterogeneous Worlds.”

Despite biennials’ undeniable importance—they help establish the careers of artists and provide the foundation for discourse—it is debatable whether or not these exhibitions, generally too big to offer a coherent argument, are merely forms of cultural entertainment, or, as some critics claim, a glorified art fair. For Caroline Jones, the biennial is central to the current experience-oriented culture, a phenomenon she traces back to the Enlightenment and Grand Tours in her essay “Biennial Culture and the Aesthetics of Experience.” To question the workings, complexities, and problems of biennial exhibitions is to begin to understand a major structural underpinning of the contemporary art world.
Perhaps I should start out by saying there are few things I loathe more than panels, talks, and articles about the theory or practice of biennials. The biennial phenomenon exploded in a decade—the 1990s—that also witnessed the emergence of the curator as a professional figure, which was soon followed by the creation of academic courses for curators, and subsequently a new didactic approach associated with contemporary art. The result: The exhibition model of periodic, recurring shows is often accompanied by generic, impressionistic criticism, by interminable round tables paradoxically held during the biennials themselves, and a plethora of meta-reflections that have become a genre unto themselves.

Moreover, I fear that as a result of these at times aggressive critiques of the biennial pattern, we have witnessed at the outset of the twenty-first century a shift from the exhibition to the art fair. Whereas the mayors, politicians—and occasionally curators and artists—of the 1990s dreamed of creating new biennials, in the first decade of the 2000s the same people discovered that an art fair is a much more tempting opportunity to spruce up their city's image. And I don't think I even have to spell this out, but if forced to choose between an art fair and even the worst biennial, I'll always opt for the latter, if only because at biennials the artworks aren't chosen because of their market value.

If you think about it, the biennial boom in the 1990s had a series of very positive effects. First of all, the proliferation of biennials coincided with a movement to redefine the boundaries and redraw the map of contemporary art. It's certainly no coincidence that in 1993 the Aperto section of the Venice Biennale offered the first signs of a new, global art world—a phenomenon that had perhaps been foreshadowed, but in a much more problematic way, by Jean-Hubert Martin and his Magiciens de la Terre at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1989. Nor is it a coincidence that in 2011 dozens of countries still tried to affirm their identities in the international arena of the Venice Biennale in which nearly ninety nations from around the world now take part. Biennials—even the best-established ones like Venice—are much more permeable terrains than traditional museums; they are spheres where changes can be more easily made, categories more freely mingled. And if we think about some of the most important and innovative events,
like the Havana Biennial (established in 1984), the Gwangju Biennale (established in 1995), the Johannesburg Biennial (established in 1995), the Sharjah Biennial (established in 1993), or, much earlier, the São Paulo Bienal (established in 1951)—leaving aside many other examples like Manifesta, the Berlin Biennale, and the Tirana Biennial—it immediately becomes clear that each of these institutions has opened up new channels or new intellectual “trade routes”—to borrow the title of the 1997 Johannesburg Biennial curated by Okwui Enwezor—which very often have turned around or at least shaken up the Western canon of art history by playing an essential role in increasing the biodiversity, so to speak, of the contemporary art world.

Of course, the most obvious criticism of biennials stems precisely from the opposite observation. According to the most predictable script for biennial-bashing, the problem with these periodic shows lies in the fact that—especially in the 1990s—a certain group of artists or certain kind of artist could be found exhibiting at almost all the biennials around the world, in a sort of traveling circus of contemporary art. Biennials would thus be responsible for stifling local diversity by simply importing works and artists who—according to refrains we all know by now—swoop down on a city during the exhibition “like UFOs” without “putting down roots,” like “McDonald’s or cultural franchises.” Obviously, these are criticisms that have a certain legitimacy and importance. It’s hard to deny that for many founders and organizers of biennials, these periodic shows are just an opportunity to tap into an entirely Western fashion phenomenon. The success of a biennial is thus measured precisely on the basis of how well it manages to imitate the original model, with the foreseeable assortment of art stars, entertainment, and bloated, often interactive, meaningless work—that poisonous mash that critic Peter Schjeldahl has perspicaciously called “festivalism.” At the risk of seeming overly reductive and simplistic, I have always been tempted to respond to these criticisms by saying that there is no such thing as a “biennial model.” Actually, if there is a truly liberating aspect to the way biennials mushroomed in the 1990s, it is that today there is no single pattern. Their proliferation has done away with any illusion of unity.

Upon closer inspection, I think the biennial is neither a model nor a format: rather, it is a tool that can be used to build very different shows and obtain very different results. It is precisely when the biennial is reduced to a format, to a formula, that it reveals all its weaknesses. In essence, the problem with biennials is perhaps a problem with the way
they are used, curated, and organized. It is not at all a problem inherent to their nature, especially since by this point there are few features that one can point to as being general characteristics of these events (the one exception being the Venice Biennale, the only biennial still partly defined by the presence of international pavilions). All that the other biennials around the world have in common is the fact that they are art exhibitions held every two years. I’m sorry if this definition is vague and simplistic, but it’s the only one that really applies to the hundreds of very different shows that we call biennials. Unlike all other artistic institutions, biennials—precisely due to their temporary nature—are, at least theoretically, wide open to change and innovation. They are flexible tools that are just waiting to be reinvented and transformed with each new edition. No museum or kunsthalle in the world is geared to such complete and radical turnarounds as any biennial, and some, like the Berlin Biennale, Manifesta, or Performa, for example, are not even linked to specific venues, or even specific cities—in the case of Manifesta—and the organizers of each edition can choose not only the artists but the exhibition strategies, the locations, and methods used to present the artworks. No other institution offers curators or artistic directors the opportunity to control the entire choreography of an event, from the graphics to the choice of venues, from the selection of artists and works to the educational and cultural programming that accompany the show.

It may be because I look at biennials from the pragmatic, practical standpoint of someone who organizes them, but I tend to think it is the responsibility of curators and artistic directors to reinvent and transform the exhibition each time around, especially since biennials offer a condition of freedom (one might say even impunity and irresponsibility) that is completely different from a museum setting. Ideally, the curators can work without necessarily worrying about later biennials and the effect that the exhibition will have on the image of the entire institution. The curator of each edition knows that he or she will be leaving at the end of the show, and this awareness often puts them in the privileged position of being able to avoid the kind of compromises that are necessary if one is to continue working in the same organization for years.

In my opinion, if a biennial is a dud—and many are—it isn’t because the model is worn out, but because (though perhaps I am attributing too much responsibility to individuals) the curators were incapable of rethinking or transforming the tool, turning it to new purposes or discovering new resources within it. The problem of biennials is therefore not that some
format exists at the source and imposes predetermined choices. The problem is when biennials congeal into a genre that is always the same.

So how can one avoid this process of ossification and repetition? I have no recipes or magic charms, of course. At the most I can provide a few empirical examples stemming from my own experience. Far be it from me to present this as a list of rules or commandments. The notes that follow are just a series of observations in the field that have helped me structure my thoughts. They are very simple, but, for this very reason, they have provided me some comfort during the preparation of biennial exhibitions. I should also point out that they are reflections in hindsight. While caught up in the preparation of these shows, I have found myself working in a much more organic way, without following any formula, but I can definitely say that in every biennial I have curated I have attempted, more or less instinctively, to tackle the following questions. In writing down these notes, I have tried to be as candid and transparent as possible. Some assertions may sound generic and superficial, but I’m not aspiring to be exhaustive, nor am I trying to present a doctrine on biennial exhibitions. These are just some of the thoughts that have guided me in the preparation of some biennials, and I hope they’ll be useful to those gearing up to curate or study other biennials to come.

1. Every biennial fits into a diachronic and synchronic sequence: In other words, when you work on a biennial, you have to work both in contrast and in relation to the preceding one, but also in contrast and in relation to other biennials around the world. Personally, every time I’ve worked on a biennial, I’ve found it very useful to try to summarize in a few words the “metaphysics” of the biennial at that particular moment, i.e., the reigning model. If you manage to define this model, then you’re in a position to reshape it, or at least avoid getting bogged down in sterile repetitions of pre-established formulas. I also find it useful to identify types of previous biennials or exhibitions that have been relegated to marginal positions within the history and canon of contemporary art: Exhibitions that have been heavily criticized or forgotten can serve as interesting case studies or inspirations for transforming the format of biennials; in other words, to find new models to counter the reigning model of biennial.

2. Every biennial is site-specific. It must react to and interact with the context in which it is held. But there are different ways of relating to the place where an exhibition is organized, and I’m suspicious of that subgenre of biennial art that mixes together a politicized attitude with unimaginative ways of engaging the audience. In other words, it is the responsibility of the
biennial curator to invent new ways of interacting with the site and its public. I also find it useful to remind myself that it is important to consider not only where art comes from but also where it can take you. Most importantly, it is necessary to remember that interactive, playful art is not the only way of engaging the audience. Viewers can be drawn in through their intelligence and their eyes, not just by providing conventional participatory experiences. To a certain extent, this means that a new biennial is one that imagines and produces a new kind of viewer. It may also mean that a new, interesting biennial is one that imagines and produces a new site, either by changing the spaces where it takes place, creating new connections between the works and the exhibition spaces, or by offering a completely different experience of the sites that are traditionally used.

3 A biennial is ultimately just one big exhibition, which means it still has to operate as an exhibition, and if possible, a good one. All too often, many biennials seem to turn instead into a cacophonous free-for-all, jettisoning all aspirations to cohesion. Less successful biennials use generic titles to mask an almost interchangeable sequence of works. Perhaps for convenience or out of laziness, the works are usually presented as discrete elements—often with one room for each artist—that aren’t even intended to come together into any kind of coherent whole. On the contrary, I think that a biennial is a form of choreography, and as such must be carefully constructed and controlled. A biennial without a coherent vision, theme, or mood is simply a wasted opportunity. And at risk of sounding too conservative, I’d say that biennials require a kind of craftsmanship that every curator has the responsibility to hone and perfect (from the extended wall labels to the public programs accompanying an exhibition, from the quality of the installation to the actual conservation of the artworks). A biennial should ideally be as good as or better than any museum exhibition.

4 And while I’m making sweeping statements, I may as well add that a biennial should tackle big issues. It should look at art to try and address fundamental questions that are urgent for artists and for culture at large. That sounds ambitious, but the scale of most biennials allows for ambitious plans, and it is the responsibility of curators and organizers to use biennials to address issues that are crucial even outside the art world. What makes a biennial a big exhibition isn’t just the number of artists, but the courage to tackle big issues. The currency of a biennial doesn’t lie just in its skill at selecting the artists of the moment—if such a thing exists—but rather in its capacity to address problems that are topical and in some way fundamental. Of course, one ought to add that many recent biennials have been unsuccessful
Biennials

precisely because they tackled ambitious but generic themes that weren’t rooted in the practice and works of the artists.

5 Historically, biennials have defined a canon of the art of the moment. But you can’t construct one canon without dismantling others. Hence a trait found in the best biennials is that they both impose a vision of the contemporary world as well as redefine a lineage or history. In a word, the best biennials are revisionist: They must produce their own past, trying to redefine the categories of a historiography that also tends to stiffen into genres and stereotypes. Biennials are temporary museums into which new historical narratives must be introduced.

6 A biennial must provide artists with the resources, spaces, and energy to bring their work to a new level of complexity, although not in equal measure. I don’t think biennials are settings in which all artists and all works must be treated alike. It is almost a universally accepted fact that biennials are particularly well suited to producing new work. On the other hand, when biennials end up being just a showcase for new projects, they risk overlapping with fairs and galleries. As hackneyed as it may sound, we must keep in mind that new is not synonymous with good. An ecological thought: New things should be produced only when strictly necessary.

7 There should be at least one element of madness in every biennial; at least one project, piece, or choice of venue that must be incredibly hard to pull off. There must be at least one financial, logistic, diplomatic or even organizational challenge that literally gives the curator nightmares and bouts of insomnia while preparing the exhibition. Without that element of madness, even the best biennial will always seem flat.

8 Biennials require money. And very often, it is part of the curator’s job to find additional funding that will help expand the scope of the show. For me it has always been quite instructive to think of the biennials I have curated as exhibitions I would never have had the resources to carry out on any other occasion. In other words, it is the biennial that must justify the budget, not vice versa.

9 Biennials contain multiple works, multiple worlds, and multiple audiences. They must be able to shift smoothly from a micro level to a macro level and vice versa. A biennial is a show that must allow for an intimate, face-to-face encounter between one little work and one individual. They must also be able to operate on a mass, urban scale. The best biennials manage to function in both of these dimensions, just as they manage to speak with the same clarity and complexity to both a well-informed audience and one that knows almost nothing about art.
Contrary to what their name might suggest, biennials in fact only happen once: Usually, curators are invited to organize only one edition of a biennial; not many artists tend to show more than once in the same event; and the public returns to each edition of a biennial to see how different it is from its previous incarnations. It is this sense of finality, this sense of uniqueness that can become a tremendous motivation for each biennial to try and acquire that state of radical renewal that is at the foundation of each great biennial exhibition.
Curating in Heterogeneous Worlds*

Geeta Kapur

Let me begin with Jean-Hubert Martin’s controversial exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, at the Centre Georges Pompidou (1989), which situates Europe’s perennial interest in the exotic within the new transculturist permissiveness of the postmodern. *Magiciens* claimed the democratic value of attributing both spiritual and conceptual parity to a myriad of cultural-creative acts. With *Magiciens,* Martin gave a ritual status to contemporary avant-garde art of the West, relating this to the allegedly magic-driven artworks from “other” cultures while, correspondingly, he contemporanized the “sacred” works from the margins in conjunction with secular works from the West. This relativizing exercise, meant to revise the debate about the “primitive” and the modern, was also intended to produce conviviality between races and genres. The exhibition carried above all a desire to recall, and even restore, the lost aura in Western art.

The curatorial premise of *Magiciens* was both anticipated and followed by intense debate. The *Magiciens’* agenda admitted the modernizing process in the rest of the world, but within an anthropological paradigm of tradition-and-change that ultimately disavowed the plurality of modernism. It obfuscated the actual anticolonial/postcolonial discourse of democracy, civil and political rights, that gives cultural transformations an edge. Nor was the terrain anywhere mapped by people’s living struggles, as Jean Fisher and Guy Brett pointed out, even a conceptual recognition of which would have led to other choices than what the trope of *Magiciens* provided.

*Magiciens* was based on an (ethnographic) anachronism, where the diachronic tension between primitive and modern, folk and urban, traditional and avant-garde, center and periphery—an important tension—would be fudged by the generous aesthetic and supposed equation in synchronous viewing, only to resurface as other (questionable) criteria. My own criticism is focused on the way this curatorial paradigm for contemporary art set up a binary of the indigenous and the avant-garde; mapped it over swathes of the globe in geographical terms; then weighed the balance of potentialities between individual agency (of northern artists) and timeless consanguinity (of artists from the south). The crossovers were designated as hybrids, in which the preferred hybrid was barely seen as a
Curating in Heterogeneous Worlds

Curating in Heterogeneous Worlds

site of dense cultural collision, more like an end product of some natural mutation, replete in its full-hearted exhalation. Predictably, examples of demonstrably metropolitan art practices in non-Western societies were barely included. Few protagonists were located within these highly differentiated societies outside the West that could be shown to have agency that is properly historical—where a self-conscious breakthrough in language and politics is seen to make a conceptual contribution to the Western claim on the avant-garde.

And yet, *Magiciens* was a productive provocation. With time we can see that it tested the models of Western art history, including theories of the avant-garde; and it offered an anarchic spill in taste and ideology that knocked the notion of the curatorially well-made exhibition. Certainly, credit must go to the *Magiciens*’ bold topography for the way these ideas have been thrashed out in discourse ever since. But is the binary of the primitive and modern, so hotly debated until the 1980s, now properly deconstructed? Is a modernist, universal aesthetic based on either a humanist premise or the formal self-sufficiency of art forms finally terminated? Has the hybrid trope valorized in early postmodernism collapsed? These questions come from sites where the conjunctural urgency defining the political is fully visible. I speak of sites where the pressure of alien temporalities from the colonial past are so heavily historicized that curators are forced to convey the exhibitory aesthetic of synchronicity into a diachronic dimension, and thence into the future.

In 1996, the Asia Society in New York invited the young Thai art historian, Apinan Poshyananda, to mount a major exhibition, titled *Contemporary Art of Asia: Tradition/Tensions*, the first rigorous manifestation of the manifold languages (“tongues”) at work in Asian art through the 1990s. Poshyananda presented the exhibition as both contrastive and complementary to Western models. While the linguistic component was brought to the fore, the standard categories of art history were problematized. The virtues of “tradition” were put to work in favor of the new, whereby the monopoly of the West was subtly undermined. Indeed, he presented a wide range of artworks, prominent among which were installations with an explicit materiality, interventions both site-specific and performative, and documentary inputs with political annotations. The exhibition was premised on works that were explicitly located, where signs and meanings were embedded in the material conditions of their production. It presented artists with a rich understanding of a situational phenomenology, which in turn demanded spectatorial comprehension of how these artworks
navigated between ritual protocol and political transgression. *Tradition/Tensions* had a built-in pedagogy with regard to types of viewing protocol. It proposed that the sacred, even when placed in parenthesis, sets up a customary etiquette whereby the phenomenology of the exhibition is restructured: Notions of invocation/circumambulation, of intimacy/distance, replace the “detached” encounter of Western aesthetics.

This culturally replete aesthetic, this experiential rendering of the esoteric and the political privileged by the first phase of Asian art exhibitions, was upturned by a widely toured exhibition, *Cities on the Move* (1997–9). Curated by Hou Hanru and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, it took as a starting point the capitalist globalization furiously under way in Asian countries. Imitating in style the accelerated market economies of East and Southeast Asia, the exhibition was excessive, noisy, unruly; it abandoned the viewer to an array of volatile signs that put entire cultures on display and encouraged a surfeit of visual consumption. These two exhibitions, *Magiciens de la Terre* and *Cities on the Move*, staged a rupture where the spectator entered a swirling sea of signifiers that the curator had configured and spectacularized. Such extravagance can be said to have a “deconstructionist” methodology that takes its cue not from high art but from the survival tactics of popular art. The tactic is that of continual hybridization, and this aesthetic, with delirious exhibition effects, has become a favored curatorial approach.

Extending the discussion on new forums for exhibition outside the Western academy and museums, I refer to the exponential growth of the biennials/triennials located in the South and East. If the São Paulo Bienal, begun in 1951, posed the first alternative to the Venice Biennale, subsequent biennials have revealed even more heterodox curatorial ideas, as for example, the Havana Biennial, begun in 1984; the Asia-Pacific Triennial, begun in 1993; and the Johannesburg Biennial, inaugurated in 1995 and discontinued after the second edition in 1997. These initiatives frequently meet with high-handed critique from Western curators, who flaunt institutional fastidiousness, quality control, cultural snobbery, and even open mockery, while nevertheless conducting curatorial activities at these new sites, claiming with impunity that an international high-profile curator—read Western hegemony—is essential to put the city and region on the international art map.

The Havana Biennial, for example, forthrightly dedicated itself to radical third-world art (including, especially, South and Central America, the Caribbean, Africa, and, to a lesser extent, Asia); it has always appointed Cuban curators; and worked from within a modest cultural infrastructure
and very meager resources. The international context was unsympathetic: In the mid-1980s, third-world unity and socialism were already headed toward final dissolution. Cuba was no longer secure in its revolutionary optimism; it was systematically impoverished by US sanctions; its aesthetics lay outside the citadels of academic art history and beyond the hub of the Euro-American art market. Yet, the intransigent faith of Cuban curators was honored by countries and artists who participated in the Havana Biennial, and the lost agenda of radicalism gained new provocations in the decade ahead. More specifically, the Havana Biennial took on a vanguard role on behalf of contemporary (third-world) art. To this day, all Southern biennials owe a debt to Havana for advancing the potential of a decentralized art world; for proposing that alternative avant-gardes do not need to affix a “neo” to gain acceptance in the canon; and for demonstrating that contemporary art activity placed off-center in respect to the West becomes acutely tendentious. Curatorially, the configuration of artworks in, for example, the third edition of the Havana Biennial in 1989, bristled with works annotating actual politics in the complex terrain of South American societies, with pointed reference to national dictatorships and subaltern movements of dissent and insurgency. Cuba was (and is) a country under siege, and its stake in cultural manifestations can be nothing less than contestatory. Artworks installed in Havana refract art's mainstream dialogue from the prism of the Cuban crisis.

In Australia the Queensland Art Gallery inaugurated the Asia-Pacific Triennial in 1993. The calibrated range of works coming out of this region was revelatory, and required strategies of signification and display where not only ethnic but even religious vulnerabilities had to be accounted for. The exhibition followed a principle already in place with Australian museums and curators, who consider it mandatory to conscientiously annotate objects of a mixed white and aboriginal society. Consequently, in the intellectual and curatorial exercise of the Triennial, categories of the secular and the sacred had to be rethought in terms of the way the societies in question face these issues within a democratically organized polity; or how the secularization of tradition impinges on the question of citizenship in the politics of a nation. While the general public is enabled to read the social problematic underlying distinct cultural iconographies, the artwork also asks to be placed in coeval terms with other, more familiar, international art forms in the contemporary.

In the light of these brief examples, my first strategic point is that the new biennials can be seen to radicalize the discourse on contemporary art towards a more investigative, more critical position by constantly revising
our understanding of the very “institution of art.” Thus, while these multiplying biennials sometimes seem like reckless initiatives, they should be seriously scrutinized for their ironies, their follies, and their worth. Glossing over the more facile skepticism that the new biennials invoke, I would like to ask that we examine not just this or that biennial for its immediate certificate of excellence, but the entire relay of site, production, and discourse in contemporary art from various vantage points on the globe. I suggest, further, that the edifice of Euro-American art is now faced with what amounts to other forms of knowledge, other forms of agency, other ideological configurations, as well as other imperatives for art-making. It is in relation to the fraught nature of art and culture in the contemporary that the unprecedented multiplication of (Southern/Eastern) biennials and of theme-and-issue-based exhibitions ought to be seen. These are no arbitrary outcrop; they are a sign and consequence of historical circumstances.

My second point is more pragmatic: The benefit from a biennial is especially evident in countries that have no museum practice worth the name when it comes to modern and contemporary art, where the opportunities to engage with international art are scarce, and where the only “institutions” developing at breakneck pace are the art market and the auction house. Such biennials have sometimes been called the poor man’s museum, and there is some truth here. The biennial phenomenon, never beyond serving vested interests (biennials being a mixture of state spectacle, cultural hegemony, market interests, and tourist commerce), is at the same time a means of creating professional conduits of communication in the cities and countries where biennials occur. These structures erect bridges between the state and private finance, between public spaces and elite enclaves, between artists and other practitioners.

The rise of the curator as a key category in the exposition of art happens, coincidentally, in tandem with the third-world assertions of alterity, including a revolutionary passage in the 1960s and a more conciliatory multiculturalism in the 1980s and 1990s. Standard discourse on contemporary art was destabilized by the redoubled exposition of postcolonial postmodernity, and relativized for good by the very scale of twenty-first-century globalization. Consequently, the curatorial project entails today an almost mandatory inclusiveness based on difference and indeed on decentralization of cultural power in discourse as in practice. The first, second, and third worlds that defined the historical battles of the mid-twentieth century are now, since 1989, condensed into what has been called the new Empire. Alternatively, the interdependence of regions, nations, cities; the imbrication
of “local” cultures within global capitalism; the deterritorialization of peoples/cultures through mass migrations; the miracles of electronic communication, bring into full play the (ironically transcendent) nomenclature: *transnational transculturalism*.

Transculturalism is not, however, a matter of free choice; it is a condition of global exchange that is materially and politically coercive, if also potentially liberating. It is necessary, therefore, to embed the debate in transnational *public spheres*—the product of contrary developments such as the emergence of postcolonial civil societies on the one hand, and of capitalist globalization on the other. In this contested space, critical dialogue centers around issues of violence, power, governance, and citizenship. Where a large part of the world populace now exists outside communities and nations, citizenship includes the experience of exile, raising the question: How is the ethical and the aesthetic implicated in the exilic condition? At the simplest level, there is a statistical response: There is an exponential increase in numbers of third-world (and now also second-/socialist-world) artists in international exhibitions. Appointing *translation* as a key term for transcultural aesthetic, cultural criticism appoints the diasporic artist as a trope and a norm—the one who constructs both the grammar and the discourse of global contemporaneity, and conducts the process of negotiation/confrontation to this purpose.

Closely mapped and variously configured, international art relies no more on now-meaningless binaries such as center–periphery, global–local. These changes in ideological orientation have been addressed in some thoughtful exhibitions like *Unpacking Europe*. On a more dramatic scale, it was Documenta 11, curated by Okwui Enzewor, that established, through the prism of the postcolonial global, a new pedagogy for mapping the world. Indeed Enwezor’s postcolonial politics introduced a documentary turn and a political/discursive (rather than aesthetic/avant-garde) criticality. Building on a premise he had already established in his previous exhibitions (the Second Johannesburg Biennial, 1997, *Trade Routes: History and Geography*; and a widely toured exhibition in 2001–2, titled *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994*), he proposed that no discussion of radical art can take place without reference to the political parameters of antagonism and redemption that come out of the decolonization process.

Thus Enwezor draws on postcolonial cultural theory (in turn drawing on elements from anthropology, psychoanalysis, and a much-transformed Marxism) to set up new paradigms for examining representational ethics,
in particular its documentary component. If the aesthetic engages the aspect of the representational that abuts the imaginary, the writer–curator expands the representational further into the symbolic: This double movement allows the emergence of new subjectivities with audacious claims to a new “sovereignty.” It is, then, Enwezor’s project to determine a vantage point from which to project the subject-position of the formerly colonized who is now the postcolonial citizen empowered through struggle. It is also his wager that the discourse now exists outside the national—the “original” ground where the struggle is in actual fact waged. Indeed his engagement rests on the formation of a global citizenry with a voice in the matter of governance precisely through transnational public spheres that nurture a human and civil-rights discourse against state power. This, in Enwezor’s belief, forms the utopian potential that emerges from and confronts the new Empire. It is with Documenta 11 that he set up a new curatorial proposition: A worldwide itinerary and a cross-disciplinary argument through a series of four ideologically conceived “platforms” that were translocated to the fifth platform, the exhibition at Kassel.

My inclination is to continue to loop this argument back to the geography and politics of region and nation. For even as diasporic dilemmas widen the political base of global issues tackled in art, they tend to produce within the transnational space a straitened convergence. If the form of address of an artwork is coextensive with the site of production, even confrontational work addressed to the first world marginalizes region and nation, societies and living communities, into the category of geopolitical context no more. These imponderables of identity and address require the interlocutors to assume a multiplicity of agential roles so as to move back and forth between a speculative transculturalism and a declared partisanship. It is still necessary to ask how art situates itself in the highly differentiated national economies/political societies that bear the name of countries; and how, from those sites, it reckons with divergent forces at work within globalization. More pointedly, what are the countercultural tendencies generated in the contested sites of the nation-state itself? With what strategies are a neoliberal, anti-poor developmental agenda and/or a (covertly) authoritarian state opposed? What political positions are upheld by the recognizable protagonists of radical change? Further, how, in the broad attempt to build and sustain democratic structures of governance, institutions for a functioning civil society and a post-bourgeois public sphere, does the cultural vanguard in its more anarchist gestures come to be positioned? And, indeed, what strategies are available to these societies to oppose the
treacherous rule of capital and its US-driven agenda executed through monstrous wars and consumerist dystopias?

In India, the definition of a polyvocal contemporaneity has been debated for several decades with reference to the dense ethnic stratifications replete with still-living traditions, multiple religious communities each with their own “modernizing” cultures, and a rapidly growing metropolitan society competing its way into global capitalism. Thus contemporaneity is discussed in terms of the reach and consequence of modernity going back to the colonial period; it is now debated in terms of a globalized postmodernity that is becoming transnational in its very infrastructure. Correspondingly, numerous exhibitions with “India” in the title have attempted to address these questions.

Billed under a country banner, the aura of national affiliation still survives. A critic–curator from India will have to justify the claim that a selection of artists from a particular country/context can, in the consequent exposition, address “universal” issues of global contemporaneity. A substantial partisanship from the Southern hemisphere should add both to art-historical knowledge and to political agendas that go beyond a mere counterbalancing polemic against the transnational/global.

But, meanwhile, contemporary art, including much of the new work of Indian artists, offers perhaps a more playful “indirection.” Skimming history and geography, younger artists everywhere draw circles around questions of location and use shifting signifiers that are programmed to be mutational. Are they the worldwide nomads or magicians, after all, indulgent towards the fetish and inclined towards masquerade? Diversifying art production, they ask that we use differentiated frames but work, nonetheless, towards imaginary universes where a shared possibility of unsolicited pleasures can still be encountered. So the work in today’s accelerated international exhibition circuits is hectic, but it is also leisurely with its rules of conduct. In a continual process of recoding itself as object, sign and conceptual equation, it privileges only the contemporary and requires that theory annotate it, as it will into the historical paradigm. We are then asked to devise a relay of translation modes for the (sub)liminal politics of youthful artworks adrift in the world like never before.

India-based exhibitions mounted in the last few years (and by overseas curators of considerable fame and skill) grow ever more competent and, succumbing to the dubious glamour of the India banner, they gain ground in lieu of the globalizing euphoria of fast-developing/threateningly
competitive countries like China and India. This euphoria has also produced its own travesties such as the Saatchi Collection’s *The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today* from 2010. The easy route to spectacle puts in place a new imagist aesthetic complemented by a range of fetishist “toys” that further commodify already reified objects, replacing whatever conceptual and critical terms of reference Indian artists are struggling to develop. These seductions are encouraged by the fact that on home ground there is no institutional infrastructure, too few independent forums of dissenting practice, and curatorially astute exhibitions whereby contemporary artists may confront, confound, dodge, and rebut the art market/art fair bonanza sweeping the global art world.

How, then, from within the full sphere of manifold art practices, do we elicit a critical calling interpellated into art in the form of curatorship? How shall we work our way from within a specific historical trajectory towards a cultural/aesthetic vantage point—and all the way across to the raw edges of the political? One understands that location cannot be isolated and valorized within what is an irreversibly globalized world; one must understand how other postcolonial (now putatively transnational) public spheres are structured. Any answers we seek will rest on evolving assumptions: First, that contemporaneity is continually co-produced across cultures; second, that place, region, nation, state, and the politics of all these substantive categories of history (proper), are in a condition of flux everywhere in the world; and, third, that past universals have been superseded, exposing major, often lethal, tensions between peoples and regions.

My argument weaves through a series of instances to suggest how the contemporary curator’s approach varies from being a collaborator, co-producing the artwork via the medium of the exhibition; to being a cultural critic providing textual/visual annotation; to laying a semiotic base for transcultural translation in the practice of art that must be nothing less than critical at the site of its production as well as within the global contemporary. These alternatives will develop agonistic sets of relationships, where the curator stages the contradictions of the present historical moment and, acting in the manner of a friendly “enemy,” makes the symbolic space that artworks inhabit more adversarial.

It used to be said that knowledge is produced in the West, and that cultural artifacts abound in the non-West. I am inclined to invert this with a degree of caprice necessary for bold prognostications. The site for fresh discourse on the problematic of contemporaneity may be elsewhere/now, here, from where I claim to speak. But lest this sound like a familiar polemic
of “us and them”—the artist and the curator, the Western and Eastern critic/curator—I want to restore the picture of art’s sovereignty within and without the institution of art. Along with the strong argument for critical curating there abides a subtle caveat spoken in the artist’s voice. While critics and curators present contemporary art so as to redeem both internal and contextual meanings of the artwork, they also learn to recognize a paradox: The artist is always situated, but also always liminal to the established order of things and, thus, peculiarly placed to question the hegemonic tendencies of national and global, ethnic and imperialist ideologies. That is to say, artist and artwork can be intuitively positioned as much as they accept conscious curatorial positioning to gain navigational abilities between and beyond simple binaries—and thereby also the degree of entropy that makes the creative process and the sites of its occurrence unpredictable.

Notes

* This essay is an abbreviated version; the full text to be found at “Curating across agonistic worlds,” InFlux: Contemporary Art in Asia, eds. Parul Dave Mukherji, Kavita Singh, and Naman Ahuja. Delhi: Sage, forthcoming 2013.

1 All the articles referred to here were originally published in Le Cahiers du Musée d’Art Moderne, No. 28, 1989, on the occasion of the exhibition Magiciens de la Terre. They were published in English in Third Text, No. 6 (Spring, 1989). See Benjamin Buchloh and Jean-Hubert Martin, “Interview”; Rasheed Araeen, “Our Bauhaus Others’ Mudhouse”; Jean Fisher, “Other Cartographies”; Guy Brett, “Earth & Museum: Local or Global?”

2 Ibid.


4 Parallels between the Magiciens’ agenda and the humanist mission of Andre Malraux’s aesthetic were perceptively brought up by Yves Michaud, along with a canny suggestion that the Magiciens’ premise included something of the formalist extension of this aesthetic as propagated by Clement Greenberg. See “Doctor Explorer Chief Curator,” Third Text, No. 6 (Spring 1989).

5 The exhibition, curated by Apinan Poshyananda for the Asia Society in New York, was shown in several cities. See exhibition catalogue, Contemporary Art of Asia: Tradition/Tensions (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1996).

6 The exhibition traveled extensively through the world. See exhibition catalogue, Cities on the Move (Ostfildern-Ruit: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1997).

The biennial can be an occasion to engage in a cognitive mapping of complex cultures and distinct regions: Curators like Gerardo Mosquera (Cuba) and Paulo Herkenhoff (Brazil) have shaped vision and discourse for the highly heterogeneous Southern region; much later, Jack Persekian (Palestine) does this for the Arab art world from Sharjah, UAE. And while Brisbane's Queensland Art Gallery keeps the curatorial course of the Asia-Pacific Triennial a museum affair, it draws on wide-ranging expertise from the region. The focus on the host city has been among the most important features of the biennial phenomenon; a key example is the 2005 Istanbul Biennial with co-curators Vasif Kortun and Charles Esche exploring with artists the interstices of the city to “hide” as much as to reveal artworks to an inadvertent public. Contrariwise, the straitened city/state of Singapore becomes a veritable garden of delights under the curatorship of Fumio Nanjo (2006–8). These exhibitions also turn to more project-oriented, more discursive, more activist forms. The Yokohama Triennale of Contemporary Art, 2005, was almost entirely collectivist and project-based. The curators (Gao Shiming, Sarat Maharaj, and Johnson Tsong-zung) of the Third Guangzhou Triennale in China, 2007, provoked a discourse on an entire era with the title *Farewell to Post-colonialism*. In 2007, the Second Riwaq Biennale (stemming from the Centre for Architectural Conservation, Ramallah, and curated by Khalil Rabah) brought together local and international architects, artists, conservationists, planners, curators, and theorists, with the aim of protecting and promoting cultural heritage in Palestine; while for the Third Riwaq Biennale, curators Charles Esche and Reem Fadda chose venues for intervention whereby possible scenarios can be imagined for the future of a fatally fractured region, polity, and culture.


The multiple presentations of Chinese avant-garde art (at home and abroad) made it necessary to read the avant-garde intent as an extrapolation worked out in alternative artistic domains, and inscribed not simply in art history but in highly differentiated political-cultural contexts. After the first phase of bemused euphoria, there have been trenchant interpretations of the 1990s Chinese avant-garde, referencing radical aspects of Chinese philosophy, history, and, not least, the political “aesthetic” of Mao’s Cultural Revolution.

Two important international exhibitions, already listed above, have brought the issues curatorially up to date: See Gulammohammed Sheikh, “New Indian Art: Home–Street–Shrine–Bazaar–Museum,” in *ArtSouthAsia*, exh. cat., Shisha, Manchester, 2002; Chaitanya Sambrani, “On the Double Edge of Desire,” in *Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India*, exh. cat., Asia Society, New York, and Art Gallery of New South Wales, Perth, 2004. These have not only proposed the phenomenological experience in simultaneous viewing of different linguistic regimes, but also argued for a structural relationship between image-cultures. The textual apparatus of the exhibition raises larger questions of community and nation, of the disenfranchisement of populations in the modernizing process, and, very simply, the uneasy exchange between art, living cultures, and market economics.

In an interview with Jan Winkelmann, Szeeman admitted: “And of course you had the eternal discussion again about whether to abolish the national pavilions or not. I find these national presentations of utmost importance. The outstanding chance for Biennales like those of Venice and São Paulo is that they have these two foundations, the national and the international. Precisely through this combination you can then build bridges, and that’s where the challenge of the Biennale model lies.” “Failure as a Poetic Dimension. A Conversation with Harald Szeemann,” *Metropolis M. Tijdschrift over hedendaagse kunst*, no. 3 (June 2001). As it happens, the national sections have been abolished from the São Paulo Bienal since 2006.

I take the liberty of self-referencing to highlight my argument. At the turn of the twenty-first century, I was asked by the Tate Modern, London, to conceptualize and curate an exposition referring to the visual culture of an Indian city, for what was to become its inaugural, multipart exhibition, *Century City: Art and Culture in Modern Metropolis* (2001). The dynamic of art and visual culture at specific points in the twentieth century was sought to be brought into focus by nine city-sections—Paris, Vienna, Moscow, Rio de Janeiro, Lagos, Tokyo, New York, Bombay, and London. This involved not simply a choice of a decade or of a political moment, but of a historical conjuncture in the twentieth century.
Working with the film theorist Ashish Rajadhyaksha as co-curator, I selected Bombay in the 1990s as a signature twentieth-century metropolis. We focused on its peculiar dynamic, pitching it not simply as a local cultural variation on the theme of the modern, but a demonstration of the co-production of modernities at different sites. We looked for the consequences of these processes as they force their way into contemporary history: from policy-driven economic choices to forms (and distortions) in the democratic functioning of urban space; to the peculiar characteristics of its multiregional, multireligious citizenry and the public sphere it evolves (and too often fails to sustain before neofascist vandals). Indeed, far from being merely a case study of difference, we proposed that historicization of this kind constitutes the very definition of the twentieth century, from which neither the cultural nor the political imaginary of the white-Western, first-world citizen can escape. What guided the curatorial approach and the exhibition itinerary was elicited from the spatialization of the project in the famous Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern where London and Bombay of the 1990s were mounted face to face, becoming, as it were, the most recent, thus precipitate “claimants” to the status of Century City.

16 Artists from India are everywhere. In addition to numerous “India” shows, there is an ever-wider circuit of paths traversed by individual artists, in museums and galleries, artist residencies and networks, as well as international biennials and major exhibitions. Punning on their nomadism, a recent, imaginatively curated exhibition in New Delhi, titled Where in the World, used this exuberant “indirection” as both theme and display strategy of the show. See the catalogue, Where in the World, Devi Art Foundation, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, 2009.

17 Up until the 1980s there were very few high-profile exhibitions of Indian art in the West; of them George M. Butcher’s Art Now from India, shown at the Commonwealth Centre, London, 1965, was a cutting-edge statement for the time. During the 1980s, the Festivals of India enterprise of the Government of India undertook an elaborate manifestation of Indian culture in many countries in the world; modern and contemporary art (in conjunction with the classical arts and living crafts) was programmed into these elaborate exhibitions. These exhibitions were held at venues like the Hirshhorn Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC; the Royal Academy of Arts, London; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. During the 1990s, the number of Indian exhibitions abroad began to accelerate with international curators taking the initiative to mount what were often museum-level shows: India Songs: Multiple Streams in Contemporary Indian Art, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1993; Private Mythology: Contemporary Art from India, Japan Foundation, Tokyo, 1998; Out of India: Contemporary Art of the South Asian Diaspora, Queens Museum, New York, 1998.

This value-free listing, masks many important questions; not only are more and more of these exhibitions curated by important international curators, they project global curators’ new compulsions including curiosity, fetishism, and the staging of new spectacles. This requires separate investigation.
Biennial Culture and the Aesthetics of Experience

Caroline A. Jones

What is this thing called contemporary art? I want to argue that the trope of experience (and its affines in relational, situational, or other socially inflected modes of art) has been constitutive of contemporaneity, further predicated on the burgeoning of what I call “biennial culture.” And although contemporaneity moves, it is the aesthetics of experience that links art in exhibition from the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, regardless of the very different kinds of historical subjects that are produced and the different economies that subend these relations. Art, in this argument, is never a mere reflection or superstructural phenomenon. What contemporary art reveals in particular is that art works to produce new kinds of subjects; and exhibitions aggregate this activity to become subject-making assemblages. So if the contemporary art-world subject is increasingly produced by experience, particularly the experience of contemporaneity on offer in the contemporary biennial exhibition, then this contemporary effect is part of a vast historical arc, traced from the search for aesthetic and worldly experience in the Grand Tour, through the great expositions that attempted to industrialize those experiences for all, to the art-specific biennial form in each of its present incarnations.

Trajectories of Experience

Tropes of embodied experience abound in biennial culture, either announced explicitly or offered by astonishingly participatory installations (such as Cai Guo-Qiang’s Cultural Melting Bath, in which viewers entered a bubbling hot tub of herbal water at the 2000 Lyon Biennial). The aesthetics of experience evokes what Raymond Williams termed “residual” ideology. Theorized as such because in order to enter the global circuitry of contemporary art, the residues of the machinic—material objects, living bodies, elemental stuff—must be summoned only to be hybridized with cutting-edge technologies (or at minimum twentieth-century ones, revealed in the plug to the wall in an Olafur Eliasson set-up, driving the chugging refrigerator unit of the ice floor or the ice car). Such strategies can
become “resistant” or critical if their dialectics are revealed, openly staging encounters between the sensing body and its prosthetic extensions, or between the human and the infrastructural.

Within the aesthetics of experience, I argue, there is space for critical maneuvering, for constituting a productive public sphere, for reflecting on the circumstances of global capital itself. Although I suggest historical continuities from Enlightenment to modernity to the present, a strong distinction must be made between subject-positions and epistemes at various moments of these “experiences.” Most proximate to our notions of the contemporary were those artists of the 1960s who engaged in a newly international critique of the epistemic isolation of modernity, dismantling the white cube that was its accomplice. They inserted bodies back into the space of art history and its accompanying documentation, a conceptual onslaught that bore fruit in the emergence of Fluxus, Happenings, performance and body art. By the 1990s this legacy had mutated via identity politics and postcolonial critique to incorporate new imaging technologies that made it possible to straddle the boundaries between an emerging bodiless virtuality that disguised the source of its labor, and the stubborn reality of marked “foreign bodies” that refused to disappear from political and economic spheres.

This is explicit in Mona Hatoum’s extraordinary video/sculpture/installation, *Corps Etranger* (1994). Hatoum offers a bland white cylindrical booth to visitors; as we enter, we perpetually fall into a visceral tunnel that opens out from video projected beneath our feet. Contemporaneity, for artists such as Hatoum, lies in the way video and virtuality must be destabilized—here recording a particular local (and necessarily sedated) body, through which laparoscopic cameras have been threaded, allowing us to scopically tour the artist’s own orifices, intestines, arteries, ear canals, esophagus, and other unspeakable invaginations. Two decades later, such video bodies are more likely to pour across the walls and ceilings, exploding into full architectural spectacle as in Pipilotti Rist’s *Homo Sapiens Sapiens* installation at the Chiesa San Stae (2007 Venice Biennale), or her *Pour Your Body Out* at the New York MOMA in 2009. The viewer experiences such virtual bodies empathetically, as vertiginous, unstable, or desirably oceanic—but also as potentially reasserting their linguistic, cultural, and social specificity in a global frame.

This is the present-day dialectic I want to explore in the aesthetics of experience: the tension between a digital spectacle that conveniently forgets the body, and the bodily “remainder” that insistently re-emerges to assert
itself in the participant/observer's visceral, local response. This dialectic emerges over the long history of fairs and biennials, in which the there-and-then were brought into forceful contact, and European traditions were staged in confrontation with the foreign cultures and new technologies that then blasted their way into the art world itself. We can sometimes take for granted the ways in which contemporary art learned to expand the site of knowledge production beyond objects, and beyond what modernism fetishized as "eyesight alone," reaching out to non-Western cultures in a bid to globalism, and cultivating a brave new world of amplified or extended prosthetic supplements or dramatically collectivized forms of information and experience.¹

Most of this in biennial culture sails under the flag of Western democracies, or emerging capitalist powers in close dialogue with the West. Given that fact, the body's relationship to technology, a central feature of the aesthetic of experience in contemporary art, is at risk of being amalgamated to some new version of the modernist "universal man." We need to think of the body in specific, not generic terms; we need to locate "experience" as it is differently encountered by cultural, political, already-determined bodies. My gendered, classed particulars were unavoidable components of my vertiginous trajectory through Hatoum's similarly female, but "foreign" body. Yet another aspect of Corps Etranger is precisely how generic (and yet gendered) anatomy can be—my eardrum is probably pretty similar to Hatoum's, as is my urethra, and even more generic (and less gendered) the epiglottis or rectal cavity.

If the West invented philosophies of "aesthetic experience," I argue, global fairs and biennials have contributed to a much more loosely defined "aesthetics of experience," which also aspires to transcultural and transnational communication. Indeed, it was artists, not curators of biennials or commissioners of fairs' fine arts pavilions, who led the way in shifting from objects to experience in the art world. But the kinds of conjunctions staged in the fairs became so provocative that the fairs themselves would eventually change. By 1900, for example, the fair format would continue, but never again in the "universal" form imagined by previous commissioners. Most remarkably, the biennial form emerged at that time, offering itself as a trade-specific alternative to the grand exposition, another wave of genre purification, if you will, carved out from the intense and worldly experiences fostered by the fairs (which abandoned separate arts palaces at around the same time the biennial appeared).²

Thus "separated out" from the cacophony of the fairground, the early
Venice Biennale (and its eventual copy in São Paulo) were still attempting to locate the viewer within an autonomous, object-driven sphere of ideal knowledge—a place in which socius and spirit would reach (Hegelian) sublation in the work of art.

But at the same time, biennial gears were also entrained in apparatuses of entertainment borrowed from the world’s fairs (meshing with tourism, railway packages, national platforms, state visits, guide books, and other official productions). The events that animated the first biennial in Venice, for instance (in 1895!), are captured in early advertisements, which list serenades, concerts, refreshments, sporting events, fireworks, theatrical spectacles, and discount railway packages—promoted right alongside the serious contemplation of art. After the 1970s, with the Venice, Kassel, and São Paulo curators’ belated turn to process art, these ancillary event-structures—which we might locate within capitalism’s larger sacrificial economy—were now to be drawn into the circle inscribed around works of art.

The 1970s biennials (which now included Documenta as well as biennials in Paris, Tokyo, and even Baghdad) inevitably drew on the prior history and rituals of their earlier world-picturing forbears, a trend that has only become more marked with the turn of the millennium. To take a random present-day example, the desire of the 2010 Sydney biennial to stage Cai Guo-Qiang’s installation of arrested fireworks is not unrelated to this artist’s celebrated fireworks program for the 2008 Olympics, in turn recalling that the Olympics were born at the exact moment that the biennial carved itself out of the grand exposition as another kind of international competition, spectacle, and world-picturing event. Yet I make no claim that the content of these experiential event-structures is similar. Biennials, world fairs, and Olympic Games will contain different things. We need to contemplate the shared structures, and the confluence of experiences across these various platforms, in order to understand the recent tendency of biennials to open themselves to their own covert history of festivalism. My claim is that a significant sector of the contemporary art world draws on such energies, and that the experiences biennial culture promotes have histories.

Those histories took a strong turn after the upheavals of the late 1960s, when artists and curators strategically attempted to absorb the lessons of certain festal rituals that could distinguish their events from the static “museum-mausoleum,” nowhere more so than in the extraordinarily successful Gastarbeiter curating of Harald Szeemann. No longer mere adjuncts,
the kinds of performative rituals encouraged by Szeemann and staged as performances and artifact-relics in a succession of biennials in the 1970s would, by the late 1990s and early 2000s, be incorporated in contemporary art (literally embodied in the viewer, and made the corpus of art).

This set the terms for the aesthetics of experience and its millennial theorization under relational, situational, participatory, pedagogical, or other subject-making rubrics. What is interesting is the massive discourse necessary to convert the disparate and diverse subjects formed by this kind of contemporary art into a public—a project that connects postmodernism back to the Enlightenment, routing the aesthetics of experience back through Kant and the problem of the sensus communis, but now retooled for something rather more like Jacques Rancière’s “emancipated spectator” than universal man. ³

Philosophies

These social and political histories of what I have called the “aesthetics of experience” involve questioning whose experience we are talking about, where, and in what bodies politic. Questions would begin with the word itself—what do we mean when we say the word “experience?” If I describe entering and participating in Mariko Mori’s Wave UFO (2003) at a Venice Biennale identified as “the Experience of Art,” do you believe we have shared one? How much of a description is needed? In this essay, bereft of illustrations, can I convince you of the potential commonality of Mori’s superbly finished enameled pod, an iridescent, lushly furnished capsule into which three visitors at a time are invited, reclining with electrodes taped to their foreheads in order to experience a neo-Buddhist mind-meld? The experience of my prose will not be the experience of the piece. Yet my prose will inevitably become part of the experience of the piece, should you subsequently encounter it. This is the conundrum of contemporary art—it seeks the immediacy of experience, while depending on our experienced navigation of mediation.

As a term in English, experience can assert the possession of “lived” or “studied” knowledge, an offering of freshness or seasoned professionalism. In Western philosophy, the term is all the more complicated by a split in German between an earlier word Erfahrung (with a root of “going”) and a later Erlebnis (from the root of “living”); in French it is collapsed and doubled, since expérience is both free experience and carefully planned
experiment. But whatever its etymology, in most Western discourses “experience” is polemically asserted to interrupt the flow of thought and theory, to stage itself against “bookish” philosophy, and to question received tradition. “Experience” is presumed to have nothing to do with official discourses or external programs. At the same time, it is understood to impinge on the body from without, constructing a self and, by extension, a community, through accumulated and shared social knowledge.

In the exhibitionary complexes we have been examining, claims to experience often act as space holders, holding judgment at bay to allow something—“an experience”—to form in the bodies of visitors during their visits to the hypothetically neutral zone of art. The aesthetics of experience wants to claim that the activities occurring in this space of fluid negotiation can be called the work of art, where work is a verb rather than a noun. As Heidegger put it, “The working of the work does not consist in the taking effect of a cause. It lies in a change, happening from out of the work …” —a happening I have insisted is embodied. This ongoing-ness, this working in the body of the engaged biennial-goer, is what Olafur Eliasson means to evoke in the repetitions of his titles: *Your Foresight Endured, Your Sun Machine, Your Inverted Veto, Your Black Horizon.*

Without the viewer, as Saint Duchamp pointed out, the creative act is unconsummated. But if Duchamp would emphasize the cerebral and intellectual work of reception, Eliasson wants to foreground the work that begins in the experiencing body of a visitor. Not that the working ends here; this is merely one node in the multiplied processes involving the staging of the work, the slow dawning of situated knowledge from experiencing, and the dissemination of said experiences through mediated discourse into the community that continues the work of art. It is not enough to have installed the strip of LED lights at standard viewing height in a black box at the 2005 Venice Biennale for *Your Black Horizon*. Biennial culture ensures that wall labels, webchat, exhibition catalogue, press coverage, and word of mouth are part of the production, in addition to the expectations about Eliasson that the viewer brings along. The knowledge that needs to be produced if the working of the art is to happen, must include the fact that the LEDs embedded in the wall waxed and waned as a function of photon levels emitted by the city of Venice from dawn to dusk, the data compressed and transmitted in a repeating twelve-minute cycle. Suddenly pure phenomenology opens onto a larger discourse about energy consumption and urbanism. The embodied experience of wandering in the near dark is amplified by thinking and feeling. We wonder about the algorithm. (Is all
the data compressed temporally, so that an hour’s light becomes a minute’s? Or is it a stochastic sampling of particular minutes within the hour?) *Your Black Horizon* may even begin worming its way into a darker space of anxiety about a global future without oil, an “event horizon” of black nights and scary strangers. Experience thus blossoms out from the individual body, through mediation, potentially to inform a body politic.

Experience in the contemporary art context is contractual. When invoked, it calls to a certain good faith and openness on the part of the observer, as well as protocols of generosity from artist and curator; it invites curiosity, but also implies more elaborated systems of intention and reception. This oscillation between micro and macro scales—the subject and the social—is a way to think the claims of experience in the contemporary art world. Tied to the individuation of subjects, invocations of “experience” are also linked to narratives of group identity. We oscillate between being separate creatures bounded by our bodies, and humans collecting ourselves around shared tales of embodied experience. The everyday machinery (of self, and of socius) that asks us to attend to affect, sensation, unprocessed data, collective identity, and the nondiscursive become embodied foundations of the aesthetic. Art works to create a forum for such processes.

But let me complicate this contractual ethic by admitting that “Experience” is both a utopian aspiration and a marketing tool in the “experience economy.” As summarized in a popular book by Joseph Pine and James Gilmore in 1999, the place to be in the experience economy is the sweet spot at the intersection of educational, entertainment, and aesthetic endeavors (all of them heavily capitalized). They think this is something to strive for. But if we are embarrassed by such crass instrumentalization, we must also acknowledge that we can find revelation and politics in Cai Guo-Qiang even though the installation may advance both Chinese nationalism and metropolitan Sydney’s tourist economy. There is always a both/and (rather than an either/or) whenever “experience” is at hand. It is an authentic yearning and a discursive feint; it is a claim to innocence and an assertion of professional authority; it can be both sacral and a scam.

Thus, if experience is always at risk of commodification, it is also in some sense all we have to build our communities of action and contemplation. So it was with the collaborative curation of “Utopia Station” at the 2003 Venice Biennale—art historian Molly Nesbit, curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, and artist Rirkrit Tiravanija were simultaneously deconstructing utopia as an impossible conceit, and forwarding its potential for new imagined
communities. A utopian toilet (Scatopia, 2002 by Atelier van Lieshout) could somehow function in this art context, even when broken—since what was on offer here were new ways of coming-into-being. Experiences can function even when products do not.

“Experience,” it is now appropriate to admit, is the body archive of contemporary art. It constitutes the not yet adequately examined dataset for close readings in the future: criticism, blogs, and the first layerings of what will constitute the history of contemporaneity. Certainly it fuels my own slow ruminations on various artworks from the past decade as constituting its own experiential aesthetics. Here we are advised to recall the critical historiography of Joan Scott from the 1990s: “Experience is a subject’s history. Language is the site of history’s enactment. Historical explanation cannot, therefore, separate the two.”

Thus the long discursive durée of “experience,” its well-established pathways in Western philosophy, should not be ignored in a misguided belief in epiphany. Marx and Kant formed their political philosophies on the subject of sensations’ histories. And we know that it was all those Enlightenment empiricists they were reading who were the first to invoke “experience” as a way of holding dry scholasticism at bay. Experience was their primary weapon in the battle of the ancients vs. the moderns, the a priori of consciousness, making available “the only possible theoretical knowledge of what is,” as Heidegger would gloss Kant. For Kant, the towering theorist of the aesthetic in the Third Critique (Kritik der Urteilskraft, 1790), experience (as Erfahrung) was fundamental to the transcendental subject, building on “disinterested” reflections upon sensory experience to form the criterion for aesthetic judgment. When encountered by Hegel and Schopenhauer in the nineteenth century, this kind of rational Kantian experience was re-infused with spirit and will, in order to suture back together what Martin Jay has recently theorized as the relentlessly fragmented and modalized experience of modernity.

Most pertinent for the entry of contemporaneity into this discourse was the American pragmatist Dewey. For Dewey, experience was not simply an empirical precondition to subjective awareness, it was in and of itself the only way the subject could come into being in modernity. Dewey’s seminal 1937 book Art as Experience claimed that aesthetic and creative encounters were particularly powerful forms of democratic subject-formation, rebuilding the subject undone by modern industrial existence. An important contributor to the intellectual climate emerging in New York at the end of the 1930s, Dewey favored rhythmic gesture and the experience of
intuitive action over the ratiocination of cubism and geometric form. We know, for example, that Dewey’s *Art as Experience* was crucial to the formalist critic Clement Greenberg, who gave copies of the book to European contacts and frankly emulated Dewey’s unvarnished American prose.\(^\text{12}\)

But Greenberg turned Dewey into a positivist, denying the embodied give-and-take and the organic rhythms of Deweyan experience, putting in their place Mondrian’s geometries, which the critic saw as instantiating urban industrial order for what he called “our modernist sensibility.” Thus it was not Greenberg’s Dewey who influenced the emerging aesthetics of experience, but the Dewey fueling the younger generation represented by Allan Kaprow. It was Kaprow who would combine a close reading of Dewey with the teachings of John Cage to interpret the famous images of Jackson Pollock in the act of painting as auguring a new kind of embodied production and reception, requiring a new kind of art world. Kaprow’s “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock” was published in 1958, a doctrine of extemporaneous creation and experience that fueled Happenings and the seeds of process and installation art from the late 1950s and into the 1970s, exploding into Szeemann’s documentas and biennials to come.\(^\text{13}\)

Thus we come to the same juncture, this time via philosophy, arriving at the experiential turn that would propel the experiential aesthetic so dominant today. But as noted above in the historical trajectory that stemmed from the fairs and biennials to congeal in an experience economy, it is not enough to say that we have an aesthetics of experience. I have here urged us to grasp its politics and its ethics, understanding it as a tool in art’s workings, dependent on mediation and critical close reading of the body histories it entails.

**Notes**

1. Witness the provocation of Okwui Enwezor’s *Documenta 11*, which inverted the usual trajectory by which the world is brought to a representation in a Western “center,” instead offering various “Platforms” that physically took place in Vienna, Berlin, New Delhi, St. Lucia, and Lagos.
2. This argument is more fully developed in my contribution to *The Biennial Reader*, ed. Elena Filipovic et al. (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2010).
In this respect, recent obsessions with experience can be seen as a corrective to the exhausted archival impulses of postmodernism—enough with knowing quotations, parody, pastiche; now for direct impact on everybody!


See also Olafur Eliasson, *Your Engagement has Consequences, on the Relativity of Your Reality* (Baden: Lars Müller, 2006).

See B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work is Theater and Every Business a Stage* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 1999), theorizing that the “service economy” is being replaced by businesses that can stage their offerings as “an experience”: e.g. Disney, AOL, et al.


See Martin Jay’s summary, in *Songs of Experience*, op. cit., p. 351.

Ibid.

As Greenberg wrote in August 1940, “criticism is the only really living genre left .... I know my style is too much like Thorstein Veblen and John Dewey, but I’ll be damned if I can deliver the birth otherwise.” Greenberg to Harold Lazarus, August 28, 1940, Greenberg Papers, Getty Research Institute, Archive #950085.

Art traditionally has involved participation in some fashion, whether through liturgical procession, ceremonial use, or movement around a sculpture. The idea of participation as such has recently grown in importance, most famously through Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of “relational aesthetics,” which describes “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.” In short, this suggests that aesthetic experience is no longer sufficient. In a contemporary environment that emphasizes the here-and-now rather than deliverance at some later time, participatory art is at once critical of and complicit in a society in search of the next great experience—or perhaps simply the next great form of entertainment.

Since the early 1990s, interactive work, community and public art, and forms of social practice have become ubiquitous. The beginnings of these developments can be traced to practices in the 1960s and 1970s—whether the artists associated with nouveau réalisme in France, tropicália in Brazil, or institutional critique in the United States. According to Liam Gillick and Maria Lind in their text “Participation,” the roots of relational or participatory art lie in the culture of the social-welfare state, which helps explain this art’s ability to critique the increasingly pervasive post-Fordist service economy. Certainly, discourse is a significant part of participatory art, and it is this language, seen against the rhetoric of collectively suffusing American culture, that Johanna Burton analyzes in her essay “The Ripple Effect: ‘Participation’ as an Expanded Field.”
Since the contemporary understanding of art has evolved to include essentially any activity, participatory works are able to invite public engagement in new ways. Such works both create and solicit the public sphere, and in doing so critique the traditional image of the artist as a uniquely creative individual. Contemporary participatory practices, indebted partly to technological transformations (the internet, most profoundly) that abet user involvement and foster a sense of subjective agency, might be seen within the context of the DIY (do-it-yourself) ethos—one in which the viewer often becomes both the producer and consumer of the work of art. In whatever situation these types of works are seen, they must be understood in their cultural particularity, as Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy reminds us in “Publicity and Complicity in Contemporary Art,” since most of the categories associated with participation are inadequate for art created in non-Western circumstances.

Note

Participation

Liam Gillick and Maria Lind

That there is some level of participation in all art is a truism that obscures discussions about the potential and the failure of participatory models of art in recent years. For the purposes of this essay, we consider participation as a contemporary phenomenon that not only re-examines the relationship between the “viewer and the work” but also focuses on art that intentionally attempts to encourage or provoke varied levels of participation. In addition, we look at art that attempts to break down perceived barriers between the viewer and artwork while at the same time complicating the perception of where the productive moment of significant action—in a semiotic sense—takes place within an artwork or its structures. This text is about art that creates strong relationships to the surrounding world, while at the same time demonstrating a sense of skepticism in regard to the resolved art object.

It is necessary to look at social formations outside of the immediate art context in order to provide a set of societal precedents that lead the art context to see participation as an urgent need. These include the systems of mediation and communication that reinforce the increasing capitalization of every moment and sustained inequality within the globalized economy. At the same time it is necessary to look towards attempts at participation that have either failed or been restricted in their potential because of contingencies—work that too closely resembles the soft inclusivity of social networks and viral branding. The deployment of participatory art by critically conscious artists who have emerged since 1990 has led to the increased deployment of open structures in which a “semi-autonomous” condition in relation to established institutions of art is either the starting point or the desired result. But this establishment of extra-institutional zones of creativity can be hard to differentiate from those communications zones established by extra-art governments, corporations, and cultural bodies. As with the somewhat earlier focus on collaboration during the 1990s by a new generation of artists alongside curators who had emerged from curatorial schools in France, the UK and USA, such as Le Magasin, the Royal College of Art, and CCS Bard, participation requires differentiation and qualification if it is not to become the mere promotion of goods and services within a context of cultural instrumentalization that intends to promote specific educational aspects of art in the name of modern social democracies.
Participation as a set of desires and structures within art of the last twenty years has a particular political drive that separates it from earlier precedents within conceptual art and Fluxus, but nonetheless shares some of the intentions of such early work by Martha Rosler as *Garage Sale* (1973), which introduced a distinctly non-expressive and non-eccentric form of semi-commercial exchange. This involves moving beyond contemplation as the primary mode in which to engage art, and ever further away from the earlier assumption that rarified connoisseurship might be required in order to appreciate modernism. This sense of participation’s foundational democratic and political base is always faced by more retrogressive and literally conservative art forms. With contemporary art today each deployment of the participatory has to be understood to function as an alternative to the forms of art that are singled out as having contemporary significance within mainstream culture: the poetic, allegorical, subcultural, spectacular, and so on.

Participatory practices, as we see it, are divided into two clear camps that have moments of crossover and interaction. The first is participatory structures that engage the non-artist user such as a random passerby or a person encouraged to attend some kind of event without being told that they are part of an artwork that at some level is controlled, created, and manipulated by the users of the work. An excellent example is Superflex’s *Free Beer* project (various locations since 2005), where beer based on an open source recipe was made and consumed by the visitors in an exhibition context. The second camp proposes participation as an extension of social consciousness and established forms for political engagement where a structure is proposed that requires some active and sustained engagement by the non-artist user in the construction of a new set of relationships. Here, for example, we should consider the activities of the Oda Projesi’s collective in an apartment in the Galata neighborhood of Istanbul. Local inhabitants, primarily children, participated in various projects dealing with the use and coding of both public and private space during 2000–6.

Activism and knowledge production play considerable roles here, often avoiding both the paradigm of display and the function of traditional institutional contexts by addressing smaller rather than larger audiences. The notion of audience becomes complicated in such cases since everybody is a participant. Certain projects focus on participation without entering an exhibition space, such as Artur Zmijewski’s heated video *Them* (2007) in which radically different ideological groups in Poland met in workshops to visually express their opinions and correct those of the other group. Other
artists deploy participation throughout the process of making the piece such that it makes up the totality of the work. Annika Eriksson's *Collectors* (1998) began with interviews conducted with two dozen individuals about their personal collections ranging from Barbie dolls and film posters to penknives and piggy banks. The interviews were staged by the collectors and recorded on video. The work continued with a presentation at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, accompanied by a series of “collectors' days” in front of the main entrance of the museum, where collectors and fellow members of an association of collectors displayed their collections, and discussed and exchanged ideas and objects.

These two fundamental aspects of participatory art share common elements, including the construction of a framework or setting where the artist and the user of the work come together; a set of documents or data that are presented for use or expansion; the encouragement of a new audience that the artist believes may be underserved by the traditional art context; and the creation of semi-autonomous zones outside of traditional gallery spaces or locations. In Ricardo Basbaum’s *Would You Like to Participate in an Artistic Experience?* (1994–) a painted steel object—twenty versions are in use at the moment—is circulated internationally among people who used it in any way they deemed appropriate; they then documented their experiences on the project’s website. An example of the data-assembling aspect of participatory practice is Douglas Gordon and Rirkrit Tiravanija’s *Cinema Liberte/Bar Lounge* (Montpellier, 1995; Manifesta 1, Rotterdam, 1996; Letter & Event at Apex Art, New York, 1997), which consisted of an activated archive of censored feature films, shown in a lounge with free drinks. Marysia Lewandowska and Neil Cummings's *Enthusiasm* (Fondacio Antoni Tapiés, Center for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, Whitechapel Art Gallery, Kunst-Werke, 2005–) is also relevant here. Amateur movies from Polish workers’ film clubs during the socialist era were recovered, restored, digitized, and made available with creative commons licenses, forming a temporary traveling exhibition and an archive permanently available online.

The involvement of an underserved group was essential to Maria Pask’s video *Beat It* (2004), a short-term reenactment of Michael Jackson’s video inside an art institution by youth from Lithuania and the Netherlands. Dan Peterman has similarly engaged with the less-privileged communities with his long-term project Blackstone Bicycle Works, a youth education bike shop on the South Side of Chicago. The desire to establish separate activities and spheres with space for self-determination was palpable with
Nomads + Residents, a loose network of artists and other cultural producers “catching” people who passed through New York and other cities for one-off events in borrowed spaces such as studios and galleries. In contrast to various trans-disciplinary research projects which considered the Balkans as a future model rather than part of the archaic past of Europe, the *Lost Highway* project by architects Kyong Park and Stealth and the artist Marjetica Potrc (Ljubljana, Zagreb, Skopje, Belgrade, Novi Sad, Tirana etc. (2006–) was more focused in terms of its participatory potential. *Lost Highway* brought together around 200 “researchers” who traveled for a month and researched separately along a never-ending “highway of brotherhood and unity,” meeting regularly for public presentations and discussions in the cities along the way. The project resulted in several publications, conferences, artworks, and new collaborations.

All of this can be read in light of the effects of the service economy and its post-Fordist methods of work organization. At the core of participatory practice is an attempt to reclaim aspects of service away from the precarity of low wages or symbolic “fees.” By challenging the coding of “service,” such art is thereby turned towards protest, education, knowledge production, and the occupation of time or space. In this way a demonstrative critique of service as the dominant model in postindustrial countries has been created. This is where the politics of participatory practice has resided in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, but the ability of participation to escape the confines of the service culture, a terrain that mutates in alignment with the contemporary art context, is where its ethical and critical tensions remain. These tensions were explored in the feminist and activist research group A Small Post-Fordist Drama's homonymous project (2004), which was based on “militant inquiry” inspired by Italian operaist theorists from the late 1960s and early 1970s. Numerous interviews about changing working conditions were conducted with cultural producers in Berlin, which led to a video where actors reenacted the stories of the interviewees. The resulting video is only screened in conjunction with further discussions about the subject matter of the original interviews.

It is worth remembering that participation in art flourishes alongside the rise of so-called “third way” politics. Such middle-ground politics advocated private–public partnerships and accommodated the consolidated power of globalized capital without abandoning the rhetoric of “social responsibility.” Bill Clinton and Tony Blair were exemplary third-way politicians, deploying terms such as “transparency” and “stakeholder” to describe new models of government. The participatory art of the last twenty years has on the
one hand subconsciously adopted the codes of the political legacy of the post-1990s middle ground and on the other hand offered a vigorous critique of its banalities and rhetoric. These attempts to critique an accommodation with capital and neoliberalism have not been limited to artists alone. They have found form in new curatorial models that encompass discussion, presentations of archives, and attempts to recuperate older, more radical models of social protest and dissent. The participatory has pitched the documentary against the fictional, often slipping between these two modes in an attempt to transcend a straightforward desire in developed economies to claim that transparency is possible and achievable in the hands of government. The participatory has often attempted to create real transparency—part of the legacy of institutional critique that underscores and provides much of participatory art’s founding principles—while at the same time offering parallel zones where all rules of social coding are suspended and new models of social interaction are proposed and enacted.

Participation has developed into a major component of advanced art from places that have not been traditional economic or imperial centers in the modern period. The increasing globalization of the art world is countered and critiqued by participatory models emerging from the very places that are subject to increasing speculation and development: one reason being that participatory projects do not necessarily require big budgets and substantial infrastructures. The Middle East, Asia, Africa, and South America have produced powerful new models of participatory practice that often draw on revised histories of colonialism; the realities of new production centers; and the stresses of current political tensions as a challenge to traditional ethnocentric understandings of art from the periphery. However, whether addressing art produced in Brooklyn or Beirut there are common tensions that arise when attempting to differentiate versions of the participatory today.

A key here is the ability to distinguish the participatory from the performative. While a single person—usually the artist—may conduct the performative, it does not have to be participatory, which essentially requires more than one person. The participatory relies on an invitation intended for someone other than the artist. Some participatory works by Santiago Sierra and Tino Seghal are simultaneously performative and participatory but they might be better described as “living sculpture.” In these cases people (often poor, working class, or from other disadvantaged communities) are used as material and shaped in the way a traditional artwork might be. Sometimes they are hired and paid, at other times the participants just
happen to be around. In the case of the “living sculpture” participatory work, time-based discreet actions are presented to be looked at and contemplated in a traditional manner. The presentation of a number of people who have been marked, worked with, or otherwise instructed to do something does not necessarily require any extra engagement than that of a traditional art object. A moment of exchange, which may include occasional and brief verbal interaction, is lacking in these cases, and while effective in their own terms such works are pseudo-participatory: much closer related to the formalism of dance in the case of Seghal and the nihilism of reality shows in the case of Sierra. A good analogy here might be the confusion that sometimes exists between collaboration and collectivity, where the latter implies an equally distributed input and sharing of actual labor and the former means to simply do something together, whether determined by the artist or jointly with others.

The performative stands for something mundane, involving actions that we might perform on a daily basis. It is not based on participation, but relies on a certain sense of changeability. Yet both performative and participatory artworks require a presence. An exception to this is Regina Möller’s ongoing magazine project Regina which simultaneously borrows and twists the format of a woman’s magazine, producing context-sensitive issues based on the participation of many different interviewees, writers, and photographers. At the same time each copy is primarily read by one person at a time, far away from the artist and the other contributors. Unfortunately, presence is also an increasingly popular requirement from funding bodies, both public and private, leading to new problems when attempting to unhitch the potential of participation within a “participation culture” of sponsored events and “social” gatherings. When effective, the participatory leads to group activity involving more than the viewer, the artist, and their work. With the most productive participatory projects, like Oda Projesi, there is no distant viewer at all; everybody is in the process of becoming a participant working together towards some form of shared goal. This in turn can create forms of exclusivity that are not restricted to the traditional sites of art but are consciously employed in projects with disenfranchised communities.

Natascha Sadr Haghighian’s unternehmen:bermuda (Berlin 2000) is an example of where a privileged group—members of an art award jury made up of primarily high-profile industrialists and art-world celebrities—was “used” via a process of forced participation as the material of the work. Instead of giving them a traditional slide presentation of her work, the artist took the group on a carefully choreographed and secretly documented
excursion to a “bus stop island” in Berlin, situated in the middle of a “Berlin Bermuda triangle” of forces between art, industry, and science. The jury heard her relate how, among other things, Bill Gates discussed purchasing Leonardo da Vinci’s *Codex Leicester*; the artist as source of inspiration; Michelangelo’s difficulties with Pope Leo X’s rejection of the commission for the facade of the church of San Lorenzo; and Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* with its putative links to early voyages of discovery and the notion of the colony. In such cases the total participation quality of the work is deployed as a deliberate challenge to those who only feel at home in art institutions. There is no way to avoid the presence of the work and being drawn into contact with the other participants however reluctant or sceptical one might be. Merely standing on site is sufficient to render the audience a participant. Attempts to work out the effectiveness of varied performative strategies to achieve this “being thereness,” certainly a heritage from minimalism, is at the heart of the conflict over the potential of participation.

Therefore along the borders of the many participatory camps a battle takes place over the ethics of the varied practices. The heat of discord rises over the following aspects of participatory work and forms the core of its political potential as a set of practices that unsettle the standard forms of exchange within the art context: the use of people as material in the work; the exploitation or co-option of audiences beyond the typical contemporary art context in an effort to expand the reach and potential of contemporary art; the degree to which the work reenacts or replays earlier, lesser known participatory practices; and the accusation that certain participatory practices fail to escape the clutches of the contemporary art context and merely create new zones of exclusion while at the same time operating in the service of institutions that want to demonstrate their goodwill as well as introducing reassuring moments of faux-participation indistinguishable from the marketing strategies of capitalist corporations and neoliberal governments. This triggers important questions about criteria for evaluation and assessment of projects that want to be both art and something else, asking for feedback from both ends of the spectrum. Perhaps we can learn something about the consequences of working with real human beings from the discussions around the self-conscious deployment of neo-documentary photography in recent years (in the work of Sierra and Walid Raad for example) and problematics of resorting to the quasi-anthropological dialectic of the “doubly exposed”: people who are already exposed, or subordinated, in life being once again exposed in the photograph and at the same time representing a lack of authenticity and an excess of authority.
The rise of participatory practices moves alongside the increasing presence and function of the curator. The development of most participatory projects has necessitated an increased curatorial role in which the structure is developed and expanded in a set of collaborations between artist and curator. In many cases this has been in direct opposition to the institutional framework where the curator works, or against traditional expectations of what art is required to provide in an art space. Exceptions to rigid understandings of the function of an art institution are Redcat in Los Angeles, El Encuentro Internacional in Medellin, Project Row Houses in Houston, Konsthall C in Stockholm, and Contemporary Image Collective in Cairo. E-flux, with its self-funding structure that is both parasitical on the mainstream art system while at the same time providing a critical forum for discussion and new writing, is another model that requires further consideration as funding is withdrawn from cultural institutions all over Europe and the United States.

Participation has also become a key component of biennials that have developed in the last twenty years, for example the Periferic Biennial in Iasi, Romania and the Taipei Biennial. Between these two important supporting components of participatory practices we find a drive by curators and artists to establish semi-autonomous zones beyond the traditional sites of contemporary art. Beyond the white cube, with its carefully installed works of art, we find that the participatory broke down the institution’s established manners of display and use. At the same time the participatory expanded the geography and identity of art by seeking out new places in the world that have either been excluded or under-recognized in the standard history of late modern practices. So while biennials have been the result of direct political instrumentalization of contemporary art they have also been initiated by artists and curators who want to escape the market contexts of art that have formed in such traditional centers as London, Paris, and New York.

Participatory art embodies important contextual components that were suppressed or neutralized within the traditional exhibition architecture of modern and contemporary art. In these cases certain institutional and structural aspects of art that are normally pushed aside are brought to the fore by the participatory potential of the work itself. These contextual components include the educational potential of a structure such as Anton Vidokle’s *Night School* at the New Museum in New York (2008); Christoph Keller’s *Kiosk* (2001–), a traveling archive of independently published texts on contemporary art, which concentrates on the motivation behind art production and publishing. They also involve the exchange
of other artworks, films, texts, and plans as a material component of a structure punctuating the participatory artwork with a series of events or moments that give a programmed structure as in Bik van der Pol’s *Absolut Stockholm: Label or Life*, which was a Moderna Museet Projekt in Stockholm (2000–1). Through the lens of IKEA and Absolut Vodka the changing functions of buildings that had been built at the height of the welfare state were highlighted and debated in the buildings themselves. It is this sense of a work growing, developing, or having a programmed form that most notably separates the participatory from what came before. The participatory breaks down the traditional sense of a completed work and replaces it with a sequence of immersive moments and events that often carry a sense of communal activity or collective study. This is combined with a lack of heightened spectacles such that the participatory tends towards the endless and the accretion of ideas or components with no single aspect taking prominence.

This can lead to the participatory generating a different speed to the managed and capitalized flow of the contemporary street. Apolonija Sustersic’s *Juice Bar* for Manifesta 2 in Luxembourg (1998) comes to mind with its specially designed bar serving freshly squeezed orange juice in one part of a former vegetable storage space in a neighborhood dominated by Portuguese immigrants but lacking cafes and other places to socialize. The visitors could also watch a video on a monitor with a dancer “mapping” the interior of the building. As part of the Whitechapel Art Gallery’s *Street* project (2009) in the East End of London Bernd Krauss took up residence in the area and used the designated storefront, *The Shop*, for a series of events both for targeted groups and chance passers-by. In addition to a growing sculptural installation he organized among other things a tongue-in-cheek barbeque with “non-vegetarian food,” a Barbara Hepworth Sale, and an archive about his earlier stay in London in the late 1990s. In these cases roles may be quite straightforward, serving drinks for example, or work intensive such as the editing and production of an archive, with all taking place simultaneously in the same location as a group of others who may merely be “around” and are neither truly involved nor completely disengaged.

This quality of the participatory as a zone of improvised and self-appointed roles is connected to the rise of personal communication devices and the increased mobility of computing. The participatory structure can function with a built-in support and distribution system enabled by new media, thereby allowing the participatory framework to expand beyond the
different traditional sites of art. In a participatory artwork some are engaged in an external commentary on the work; others are distributing information about the structure as it develops; still more are providing basic services; and others are strategizing about how the work should develop over time. The traditional “viewer” can enter this set of roles and assume one or more at will. At the same time the viewer may just view. Due to the provision of a structure the viewer is not understood as a passive audience member, but as “an activated presence.” The participatory implicates the traditional viewer and turns them into an activated presence within the production of a series of micro-events without turning them into viewers of a performance or happening.

What we are left with is a highly complex set of competing actions, codes, displays, and potentials that often contradict one another within the same exhibition or public space. Participation is not based on universal assumptions, but brings particular activities to the forefront in specific situations. Its potential is high and the contingencies of its deployment often cause it to dissolve into a set of contradictions and incompletions. It is the sense of contingency and the unresolved status of the participatory artwork that is the source of its potential and power in the period after postmodernism, a moment in which cynicism about the verity of any structure has left a void filled by a neo-conservative turn towards super-subjectivity and parody of earlier certainties.
To investigate the elusive character of participatory practices in contemporary art, I would first like to consider the larger cultural backdrop of popular rhetoric around collectivity today. For if works of art revolving around notions of participation often touch on themes of politics and the public sphere, we would do well to ask how these moves relate to politics in culture writ large. In this regard, particularly apt is a recent political advertising campaign from the 2008 Presidential primaries. On February 3, 2008, as part of his efforts leading up to those elections, Barack Obama bought thirty-second spots of local television airtime in some twenty-four states during the Super Bowl.1 Unofficially titled “Join,” this music-video-like ad layers fast-paced clips of the then-candidate on various international stages—interspersed among depictions of recent natural disasters and political upheavals, in addition to several white-text-on-black-screen declarative sentences—with an upbeat soundtrack featuring Obama’s voice. Most notably, the entire composition is punctuated time and again by the word “we.” In fact, Obama says the word eight times during the spot,2 and it appears onscreen another three times: “WE CAN END A WAR”; “WE CAN SAVE THE PLANET”; “WE CAN CHANGE THE WORLD.” Such an invocation of a collective American audience, addressed as “we” (and finally, as “you,” in “CHANGE BEGINS WITH YOU”), might seem common enough in modern politics. And yet this very quality of ordinariness should be explored.

For the sake of an illuminating comparison with Obama’s ad, consider Lyndon B. Johnson’s 1965 speech “We Shall Overcome,” whose citation of movement-based rhetoric marked a pivotal turn in calling for the passage of the Voting Rights Act for African Americans. The “we” that Johnson puts forward exists relative to very deep and clear-cut societal divisions; indeed, the President’s recourse to “a people” insists that certain positions need to be amended in order to move in what might be considered progressive, ethical ways. In other words, this particular “we” does not point to inherent (or even possible) consensus but rather to a process of necessary democratic struggle.3 Obama’s television spot, on the other hand, would seem to operate very differently (and beyond its obvious use-value as self-promotion).
Whereas Johnson’s “we” has yet to constitute itself (it was to be articulated only through the Voting Rights Act, and even then was considered only the first step in a much longer course of actions), Obama’s is understood as extant—or at least as already united in its urgent recognition of grand-scale inequities or atrocities.

Further, the “we” invoked identifies with the aims Obama outlines, but abstractly so. “We” can end a war, save the planet, change the world. But a crucial aspect of this imperative goes unaddressed: How? Especially noteworthy here is that the ad sparks an audience to feel accountable for, or at very least implicated in, a host of looming global problems, without pointing to any immediate outlets for tangible action in response to them: Roughly halfway through the ad, a text banner flashes up, instructing watchers to “Text HOPE to 62262”; but this message appears without any additional information as to what happens if one fulfills the task. In texting the word “HOPE,” then, one might ask, just what has been done? What has one participated in, exactly? While appearing to offer a direct apparatus by which individuals could connect with “their” candidate, the texting seems framed, I would argue, not so much as an action than as a gesture, and performed less as a means to an end than as a means without an end. A line of communication is opened, but without any content; the act of communication itself is prized, and there is no substance to the connection beyond its very own form.

I open my text with this meditation on Obama’s “Join” neither to take that advertisement nor the current administration to task. Rather, I believe, it is by first attending to the larger cultural setting—in which notions of the “interactive” and the “participatory” are not simply evident within but have become arguably defining of “experience”—that we can find an alternative to the usual narratives assigned to notions of “participation” as they have been examined more specifically within the art-world milieu of the last decade and a half. Before delving, then, into some of that content, I wanted to point to a far-reaching instance whereby an audience—if not a public sphere—could be said to have been grouped momentarily together under the umbrella of a spectator sport (football) and interpellated, in the Althusserian sense: asked to act, to react, or at very least to consider. Given the invocation of a very particular “we,” how should we think about the very constitution of “participation” today? How might we conceive of the terms of engagement in a realm that both calls for commitment and intervention yet in some ways might be seen as rendering these as increasingly difficult to gauge in terms of consequence or trajectory?
This question—one of agency, really—is frequently levied at artistic practices that embody (sometimes against the artists’ intentions) what is called “relational aesthetics.” The term is synonymous with Nicolas Bourriaud, the French curator whose collection of writings (a gathering of essays written in the early 1990s for the magazine Documents sur l’Art, first anthologized and published in French as Esthétique relationnelle in 1998, and in English as Relational Aesthetics in 2002) was met with both enthusiasm and fervor (most notably by its Anglophone readers). For Bourriaud, who defined “relational” art as “taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space,” it was important to link various artistic practices that emerged in the 1990s to historical paradigms such as the Situationist International, while ultimately loosening this new art from those references, insisting for it less—or differently—utopian aims. Indeed, in discussing artists as diverse as Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Gabriel Orozco, Liam Gillick, and Christine Hill, Bourriaud implies that “relational aesthetics,” while pointing to the oppressive elements of our changed economic, informational, and technological context, is nonetheless bound up in their very operations.

In this regard, Bourriaud says, earlier practices that would seem viable as precursors for those he bundles together (among those invoked here are Daniel Buren, Gordon Matta-Clark, and On Kawara) reflect some shared impulses but ultimately cannot be aligned with the changed sphere for practices emerging in the 1990s. Foregrounding ideas of community and person-to-person encounters above overarching, idealistic programs of previous decades’ artists, Bourriaud’s “relational” ultimately posits a situation in which the very notion of interaction has to be seen through the lens of then-burgeoning internet culture. Indeed, in one essay dedicated to plumming the ways in which contemporary art always to some degree registers technological aspects of its moment, he points to the ubiquity of our encountering images, and one another, via various kinds of screens (from cinematic projection to computer terminal), warning that to ignore the ways in which we, as viewers, are always—unconsciously or not—“attain[ing] new ways of seeing,” is to ignore the real potential of the most radical new forms of art. Thus, he posited that the works he addressed operated within a wholly changed conception of both physical and mental space, to say nothing of modes of interpersonal exchange and sociability. Yet, acknowledging as well the pitfall of too smoothly mapping technological developments as such onto ideological manifestations, Bourriaud notes that “Technology is only of
interest to artists in so far as it puts effects into perspective.” Indeed, he says, “the main effects of the computer revolution are visible today among artists who do not use computers,” and those who more effusively foreground their use of new media often “fall into the trap of illustration.” Relational aesthetics, then, is to be seen as of its time and yet not defined fully by it—recognizing the merged terrain of social and economic “networking” as enumerated in the early 1990s, yet pressing against the notion that any such shift need be all-encompassing or without alternative potential.

Bourriaud’s conjectures, as I’ve argued, offer accounts of artistic practices that trouble their own conditions and yet remain deeply reliant upon them. Rirkrit Tiravanija’s parties and meals enacted the “socio-professional aspect of conviviality” within the gallery setting; Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster worked with a newly revived patron-system, whereby the “commission formed the social bond at the root of artistic representation;” Liam Gillick is introduced as a kind of art-worker, who brings into art various other competencies (architecture, for instance) while emphasizing the roles of “clientele, order or commission, and project,” models all borrowed from the “relational world” of commerce and exchange.

Bourriaud’s discussions around the variations of human relations and their place in then-contemporary artistic practices have been taken to task innumerable times, yet given the remarkable response to Bourriaud (an effect which points to the desire to name certain impulses of the moment), I want to point again to what I’ve already gestured to above: The “relational” in the 1990s and onward invokes the notion of participation, marking engagement between people as crucial and yet steeped in the logic of exchange and production in larger culture. If Bourriaud suggests that there are moments whereby artists and audiences can occupy space otherwise—in a manner alternative to the prescriptive conventions of an increasingly postindustrial, service-based society—by taking over a gallery situation in order to stage “convivial situations being developed as part of ‘friendship’ culture” (in a discussion of Heimo Zobernig and Franz West, for instance), one can’t help but wonder what this otherwise really is since it sounds so very much like the very situation it aims to outrun.

Critics of Bourriaud have pointed out this contradiction. Claire Bishop’s 2004 response to relational aesthetics in the journal October levies a critique that underscores the potential formalism of his notion of participation. “If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?” she asks, worrying that if interaction is in and of itself rendered...
oppositional—or even at the very least afforded a different kind of blanket consideration—it becomes nothing more than a trope. Hal Foster, in “Arty Party,” similarly points to what he calls the “rosy terms” in which “discursivity and sociability” have been cast in Bourriaud’s writings. He notes that, for all the criticality assumed to reside in practices that exceed the institutions they occupy, one must attend to the inevitable aestheticization of “the nicer procedures of our service economy.” For Foster, the very stakes of positing a “relational aesthetics” needs to be considered.

For my part, and without interest in positing another precedent for—or extension of—the artists and practices Bourriaud groups together, I will, in the remainder of this essay, turn to a slightly earlier moment in art discourse that seems to have little to do with “relational aesthetics” as it is presently conceived. While there are many alternative genealogical trajectories one could take (Robert Morris, for instance, having already coined the phrase “relational aesthetics” in his 1968 “Notes on Sculpture”), I will focus on the debates around appropriation in the 1980s, not to offer another precursor to “relational aesthetics” but instead because these discursive tangles offer a number of unexpected comparisons to our own moment and complicate certain assumptions around just what participation comprises. The gestural quality of participation today becomes starker when considered in counterpoint with considerations around the positioning of audiences—as active or passive—in this earlier art.

If appropriation is rarely thought of as embodying or inviting “participation,” one has only to return to one of its earliest theorists, Douglas Crimp, who attended quite forcefully to the role of subjectivity on the part of the viewer, making the argument that both mass media as well as more rarified artistic images, when radically de- and re-contextualized, might demand that their audiences meet them halfway. By stripping images or objects of their original context, artists asked their audiences to be active readers of art, prompting an awareness in these viewers as well of their own creative role in the generation and assigning of significance to those images and objects. Construction of meaning, in the face of, say, a film by Jack Goldstein, in which the MGM lion roars endlessly (looped to repeat rather than perform its expected function of opening a movie), was unexpectedly participatory, if by participation we mean that a shared general language (conventions of Hollywood movies, for instance, or tropes of advertising) is invoked but a singular response is required and even foregrounded. (For the work to yield any “meaning,” a viewer necessarily dips into her various reservoirs of reference: If this is arguably true for the viewing of all art,
Crimp would make a case that the artists he was discussing rendered the process both conscious and constitutive.) In this sense, I mean to point less to appropriation as inherently “relational”—people are not gathering in a room to collaborate on an artwork, after all, or joining to make meals—than to the ways appropriation's own operations within culture might inform our understanding of participation as it is sometimes inadvertently conceived of today, as gesture, as end unto itself. For as much as we take the modes of appropriation Crimp theorized, via artists like Sherrie Levine or Cindy Sherman, to have ushered in practices that critically capitalized on certain kinds of response and action on the part of the viewer, it was clear, as well, that such fine-tuned strategies could be turned to opposite ends. As with our own moment—and the evaluation of “participation” as it stands with regard to so-called relational practices—it is necessary to query the ways and means by which such methods of employing certain terms in art bear upon (and are borne upon) by the larger culture of which they are necessarily a part.

A brief consideration of critical reflections around appropriation is clarifying when it comes to grasping such inversions. In 1982, in an essay called “Appropriating Appropriation,” Crimp clarifies, in his first line, that if appropriation in and of itself had ever been understood as a critical method, it could no longer be argued as that solely but, rather, should be seen as capable of extending “to virtually every aspect of our culture, from the most cynically calculated products of the fashion and entertainment industries to the most committed critical activities of artists …”! Here, Crimp made an effort to distinguish between modes of appropriation: “modernist appropriation,” as he described it, operated by means of style, whereas “postmodernist appropriation” operated by means of material. For Crimp, this meant that one could say that Robert Mapplethorpe carried on an explicitly modernist tradition, given that the artist aligned the “look” of his photographs with recognizable formal traditions of “aesthetic mastery.” An artist like Sherrie Levine, on the other hand, says Crimp, in her re-presentations, undid such pretenses as “aesthetic mastery” by revealing them as repeatable and infinitely repeating devices—neither masterful nor original at all.

Ten years after “Appropriating Appropriation,” however, Crimp changes his mind when it comes to modes of appropriation and the ways in which affect, identification, and emotion needed to be accounted for in its sphere: a sphere that the critic now sees as fully embedded in the realm of politics, and not simply with regard to the history of art. In the introduction to his 1993 book of essays, On the Museum’s Ruins, he reflectively writes, “What I failed to
notice in 1982 was what Jesse Helms could not help but notice in 1989: that Mapplethorpe’s work interrupts tradition in a way that Levine’s does not.”

Crimp’s recognition that the larger cultural sphere into which Mapplethorpe placed his images was, in fact, better able to register its effects than any art-historical context could is crucial in its implications. So too is Crimp’s realization that the 1980s—when AIDS was first recognized (and purposely not acknowledged by Reagan for many years), and when censorship and neo-conservative politics attained a new power—rendered questions of representation precisely into questions about a certain kind of participation (or at very least identification). Participation, etymologically, after all, derives not from notions of “joining” but pertains instead to partaking and dividing. Thought of this way, “participation” ushers in more contradictory, even contestatory experiences, less “shared” than discursively produced. Along these lines, if Mapplethorpe’s images might be seen in terms of participation, it is because the artist produced instances whereby viewers, perhaps without even realizing it, grouped themselves according to just what it was they saw and, perhaps as importantly, what they did not. For some (including those that acquitted the artist in the face of censorship), Mapplethorpe’s images propelled the continuity of the classical tradition; yet, Crimp argues that Mapplethorpe’s pictures can also be taken as activating—for a gay male subculture at least—the possibility for a political, desiring subject, one that articulates itself in relationship to an image and to a social demographic (however unacknowledged or suppressed by the larger culture). While not prompting “participation” per se, one might argue that, in the schema I’ve laid out, Mapplethorpe’s images—approached this way—do act, nonetheless, as catalysts: prompts and promises of actions already done and yet to come.

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So goes an often repeated (official) story about Ronald Reagan: Early in his political career (a few years before taking over as governor of California), the former actor attended his adopted son Michael’s high school graduation at a boarding school in Arizona. The ceremony having concluded, the elder Reagan took to meeting and greeting, for while still recognizable as a (dimming) Hollywood light, he was keen to begin winning fans in his newly revised public figure role. A boy in cap and gown approached him excitedly and Reagan, so eager to play his part that he failed to notice that this was his own child, offered a friendly “Hello, I’m Ronald Reagan. What’s your name?”
I turn to this anecdote in order to close my essay because it pertains strangely to our own current cultural situation—in which Reagan has suddenly reappeared, cleansed and refurbished, as a model invoked effusively by both the right and the left—and its prevailing imperatives toward (or better, sense of) participation. Indeed, to return to President Obama and, as important, the question of participation as gesture, it seems worthwhile to note that the February 7, 2011 edition of *Time* would show a smiling Obama posed (impossibly, of course) with Reagan, the earlier figure’s left arm draped across the younger’s shoulder, the two appearing to be engaged in amiable discussion. “Why Obama ♥ Reagan, and what he’s learned from him” is printed on the magazine’s cover. Very significantly, more than any specific policy matters, the typical point of comparison here is the ability to communicate. In his own time, Reagan was hailed as a figure who fully incorporated affect, or at least provoked sentiment, as a kind of compulsory tool; his governmental “Morning in America” regime could be, at the very least, described as uniquely aware of the mass-media’s powers of persuasion. (And it seems only natural that artists would be looking at how images freight cultural narratives when a former movie star, becoming perhaps the greatest de-contextualized image ever, was occupying the White House.) Yet today, it seems as if Obama—or, truthfully, any president—is presumed to function as a Reagan-esque image if he or she is to have any effect.

What is essential to recognize about Reagan, in other words, is that while he is even now hailed as the “Great Communicator,” it is just this ability that typically becomes a subject—moreover, a virtue—unto itself. Very little, if anything, is typically said about precisely what is being communicated. And, thus, one critical implication is that one must question the quality of any mutual exchange here between politician and constituency: What does it mean to have such a sense of communication, one in which only the very act of communication is being conveyed? Perhaps it is that Reagan creates the image (and the corresponding feeling) of being together—of “participating” in Crimp’s sense—but without ever actually bringing people together in any meaningful way. Such a scenario is somewhat comedic in the context of his son’s graduation, but in the context of contemporary culture one suspects there might be greater ramifications for any Reagan-esque misrecognition in the public and artistic spheres alike. For his son’s startling sensation of being an intimate stranger is more than apt when considering our own experience of participatory art—and of experience itself—today.
Notes


2 The words delivered by Obama in their entirety are: “We want an end to this war and we want diplomacy and peace. Not only can we save the environment, we can create jobs and opportunity. We’re tired of fear; we’re tired of division. We want something new. We want to turn the page. The world as it is is not the world as it has to be.” See Zeleny, ibid.

3 Political theorists such as Chantal Mouffe would name such conflict as necessary for the political—her notion of “agonism,” for instance, insists that there is never a “we” without a “them” (never, that is, an all-encompassing political identity; never an inside without an outside). See Chantal Mouffe, On the Political (London: Routledge, 2005) and Chantal Mouffe, “Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces,” Art & Research 1:2 (Summer 2007).


5 Ibid., ibid., p. 14.

6 Ibid., in “Screen Relations,” p. 66.

7 Ibid., pp. 67–68.

8 Ibid., p. 32.

9 Ibid., p 33.

10 Ibid., p. 37.

11 Ibid., p. 32.


work in socialization: come and play, talk, learn with me.” Joe Scanlan, an artist
often associated with relational aesthetics, puts it in even more biting terms,
noting that “many people engaged in participatory art” suffer from something
akin to “low-grade Stockholm syndrome … the primary symptom being their
inability to accept that something quite underwhelming could result from so
much time and energy spent in captive social engagement.” See Joe Scanlan,
“A Letter,” in his leaflet, “Free Speech: Four Press Releases and a Letter,” accom-
panying his show, Joe Scanlan: Three Works, at Wallspace, New York City,
February 11–March 12, 2011.
14 Foster, ibid.
15 While there is not space to pursue the question here, it is important to note that
Bourriaud himself is quite interested in the notion of “form” as it pertains to the
practices he takes up and, indeed, rather than skirt the obvious perils of the term
he pursues it overtly, naming his not a “theory of art,” but, rather, “a theory of
form.” This said, Bourriaud ultimately asks readers to think more of what he
calls “formations” than “forms,” and would seem to buck against the notion that
relational aesthetics could be approached via formalism as we understand that
expression in its more properly art-historical sense. This said, relational
aesthetics, as Bishop, Foster, and others point out in various ways, does still risk
reducing participation to a thematic (to use a different but related word) in
which certain modes might signify “action” without really taking any. On “form,”
and its vicissitudes in relational aesthetics, see Bourriaud, op. cit., pp. 18–24.
16 As quoted in Rosalind Krauss, “The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist
Museum,” October (Fall 1990), p. 8. For Morris, “relational aesthetics” were
what should be avoided in a pursuit of new art: Indeed, the relations he refers
to are those that occur within the work itself, internally. An inversion of how
we now think this phrase, Morris argued that artists should “take relationships
out of the work and make them a function of space, light, and the viewer’s field
of vision.” See Robert Morris, Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of
(Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1982).
19 Where Crimp’s about-face meant that he was able suddenly to see the urgency of
Mapplethorpe’s work because of its resonance in the larger cultural sphere,
I think it’s important just as well to emphasize the way Levine’s practice, too,
exceeds its ostensible frame within art per se. While not producing the
same kind of larger anxiety around, say, sexual practices or alternative social
formations, Levine’s work, I would argue, also hailed (and hails) a kind of
self-recognizing audience: that of feminists.
“Public art” was the name used in the 1970s to describe work created outside gallery spaces, and, in the 1980s, “community project” was used for work that involved collaboration between artists and public constituents. In the 1990s, art concerned with the public—as a political condition (not a site or a social group)—was coined “new genre art” by the American artist and writer Suzanne Lacy. Later in the decade, the French curator Nicolas Bourriaud described certain artistic practices involving the public as “relational aesthetics.” Most recently, the ubiquitous denomination has been “social art practices.” Certainly, it is not the same kind of artwork or artistic practice being named differently throughout this period of time; rather, art is being created in a diversity of contexts and presented in an expanded field—to borrow a term developed by Rosalind Krauss in relation to sculptural practices in the 1960s and 1970s—of spaces, practices, communities, and discourses within which audience participation is primary.\(^1\)

Made outside of the confines of an art studio and openly engaging with a public (possibly indifferent or likely marginal to art institutions), participatory projects involve creating statements that account for the aims of a project as well as provide testimonials of the participants’ experiences. Precisely because of the discursive feature, and the inherent tensions between publicity and complicity of socially engaged artists, it is best to discuss projects on a case-by-case basis rather than slot them under artistic nomenclatures that go in and out of fashion. In fact, rubrics like “relational aesthetics” and “social art practices” are primarily used by American and European art institutions. Most often such terms are developed elsewhere, and suggest an institutional intention to describe certain activities rather than to incorporate them into the mainstream discourse of contemporary art. However, importing art historical categories into non-Western contexts flattens the local conflicts that a participatory project often highlights and emphasizes. Nonetheless, to discard the categories would be an error, since it would exclude from the dominant narrative a number of artists working simultaneously with their Western peers, who would be acknowledged only at a later date and most probably deemed derivative. It’s unclear what the middle ground is between the two different circumstances of participatory
art, but practices that incorporate a public through participation contribute to the global discourse on contemporary art only if they are analyzed particularly.

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The following participatory projects discussed come out of my curatorial practice. The writings on relational aesthetics by Nicolas Bourriaud and of socially engaged art by Nato Thompson and Claire Bishop have influenced me. But I am also very much concerned with the genealogy of the modern public museum presented by Tony Bennett. His focus on the museum’s role in “reshaping general norms of behavior” has helped me understand how participatory art projects are symptomatic of a larger cultural shift from public institutions to private initiatives. The art projects I examine here take place in the margins of museums, and with people on the edges of citizenship. That is, these works are produced outside of museums, and the participants have an unclear citizenship status, live in poverty or on the fringes of society. The art projects do not subvert their situation through representation, but set up a situation whereby exchange, whether through play or work, is a means of productivity, and as such of social inclusiveness. Their participation in art is as productive citizens.

After living in New York for nearly a decade, I moved to Mexico City in 2009. My previous curatorial work, particularly at the nonprofit Art in General, focused largely on commissioning and producing projects with emerging artists. These art projects were open-ended and took years to develop, during which time they had several iterations and involved different forms of public engagement. These projects formed my curatorial practice. I will touch upon one of them, International Airport Montello (IAM), 2005–7, a project by an artist duo called eteam (Franziska Lamprecht and Hajoe Moderegger). I will then introduce three other participatory art projects produced in the United States and Mexico, which raise similar issues.

Eteam created the project IAM after receiving a satellite image of a ten-acre plot of land in the American desert. They had just acquired this parcel on eBay for a couple hundred dollars. They noticed their plot neighbored a small town, Montello, and that a large, makeshift airstrip existed nearby. Montello is located in an economically depressed region of Nevada, and is in close proximity to Wendover Airbase in Utah. In the first of many subsequent visits to the site, eteam became acquainted with the roughly sixty townspeople, who became ongoing collaborators. Their first
work together was staging a traffic jam—an absurd event for an isolated town in the middle of nowhere. For the next couple of years, eteam and a group of Montello citizens symbolically claimed the makeshift airstrip as their own, referring to their local businesses as the terminal shops and services, assuming roles of flight passengers and airport employees. During the course of a year and a half, the artists and Montellonites created numerous “airport” situations and events. Their stories and images began circulating online, in-print, through public programs, and art exhibitions. Whether they were participant testimonials or simply rumors, these accounts progressively turned IAM into a real place. It was two years after the eteam–Montello relationship had begun that we organized a flight-layover at IAM—on our way from New York to Las Vegas—for which we chartered a plane. Those participants, the travelers (I was a flight attendant), also assumed the role of layover passengers at IAM.

Another project, created slightly before IAM, one I was not involved with, was Judi Werthein’s Brinco (2005). Brinco—which roughly translates from the Spanish as “jump” in English and alludes to jumping the border fence—is a fashionable, high-top sneaker that incorporates in its outer design imagery the Made in Mexico logo and the US eagle on the quarter coin. Among other design details are a map of the Mexican/United States border region printed on the shoe’s insole, and a portable mini-flashlight and compass hanging from its shoelaces. The Brinco shoe was produced in an edition of 2,000, and had three kinds of circulation. First, the artist personally handed the shoes to people in Tijuana, Mexico who planned to illegally cross the border. A second part of the edition sold for around $300 at a limited-editions-gym-shoe boutique shop in downtown San Diego, California. The sales revenue generated by the shoe was used to create a start-up fund for those who successfully, albeit illegally, crossed the border and phoned the number hidden in an inner-pocket of the shoe. The third and smaller part of the edition—the one expressly oriented toward the art world—was eventually presented in gallery and museum exhibitions as an art installation in the form of a didactically driven Brinco store. The project raised public controversy, and the wide coverage in the mass media increased its visibility, creating groups of fans and critics.

Whereas eteam’s IAM comprises a series of interdependent performances, video, and photographs, Werthein’s Brinco is a single object. The shoe is a succinct conversation piece, the aesthetics situated by means of the project’s ends and processes. If the intention of IAM is to create a fiction that eventually becomes real, Brinco generates a discussion of an existing
issue. The social aspects of both projects are also different. eteam engages a site and community through play, while Werthein addresses a location and subject of public concern. And while both artists deal with local politics, the relationships they develop with their primary audiences could not be more different. A relationship that unfolds through sustained conversation makes eteam’s project possible, but a single meeting is the only occasion needed for Brinco to engage a participatory audience. Ultimately, the projects’ probable success is not measured by the complexity of experiences triggered, and the kinds of mediation and mediatization generated. Amity and complicity are the strengths of IAM, as controversy and publicity are those of Brinco.

These distinctions are not presented here to say that one project or aesthetic strategy is better than the other. They are offered in order to elucidate ways in which artists involve audience participation. If these projects share something, it is a dependency on the institutional processes in their production and the public consequences of their work’s reception. This includes the kind of institution that backs and presents them: Art in General in New York commissioned eteam’s IAM, inSITE in San Diego commissioned Werthein’s Brinco. Both are nonprofit organizations, a very particular kind of institution that models itself between the vision of private patronage and the mission of a public museum. They function as a third space in the arts. Nonprofit commissions thus benefit from a significant infrastructure (logistic, discursive) and an existing art audience. This also means that the organizations commission the projects with a variety of funding sources, lessening (or balancing) the task of attending to social wellbeing that come with public funding or of interests to make a commercially viable artwork for the marketplace. It is in the conversations between artist and curator that the seeds of the political or social aspects of project are planted and cultivated. The institutional context of IAM and Brinco does not replicate widely.

In Mexico, there are also projects involving public participation, but the ones that are visible in the art field are not developed within an institutional context mentioned above. My initial suspicion for this lack is the role the state has historically played in Mexico after its independence in 1810, and more incisively and programmatically after the 1910 Revolution. Thus, the political precedent in Mexican art institutions, and their support of art and artists with socialist ideals, draws relationships for what is considered official, oppositional, autonomous, subaltern, and instrumental in contemporary art. Through policy and government institutions, ranging from granting agencies
to state-run museums, much art and a plethora of artists have openly assisted in the idea of nation-building through the creation of cultural identity.

Until recently, the Mexican state appeared to have understood the power of art to mediate between political reality and potentiality. Things have certainly changed in the last fifty years, and especially the last decade, with the rise of a neoliberal political agenda that accompanied a decline in leadership in cultural programming by the state. Not coincidently, the rise of neoliberalism goes hand in hand with the emergence of private initiatives, including the creation of art markets and the foundation of art institutions by individual collectors. Certainly emergent markets and philanthropy are forms of public participation in the arts, at least in the context of Mexico’s cultural landscape.

One of the most visible participatory works in Mexico in recent years is Pedro Reyes’s *Palas por pistolas* (2008), a project developed at three moments: The first consisted of a television media campaign in Culiacan, Mexico—a city known for its high-crime rate associated with drug trafficking—encouraging people to turn in their guns in a number of pop-up booths set up in town with the collaboration of military officials. In turn for their guns, participants would receive a coupon for home appliances and the like at Coppel chain stores. With the guns collected from that campaign, the artist recycled the metal and manufactured an edition of 1,527 shovels (equal to the total number of weapons collected), which were then used for planting trees. The project was commissioned by a botanical garden in Culiacan and by local art collectors, Isabel and Agustín Coppel, the latter the CEO of the nationwide company providing the coupons. *Palas por pistolas* is also presented as a discrete work in galleries and museums. In this version, it is an installation of a selection of shovels hung from the wall in a row. The work’s inclusion in exhibitions requires that the shovels are used for planting trees in their vicinity. The exact manner in which this is done arises from conversations between the artist and the institution.

Whether the shovels in Reyes’ *Palas por pistolas* were actually made by the weapons’ recycled metal is debatable. This detail could be a source of critique if it is connected to the artist’s relationship with the community it purports to engage. The quality of relations between the artist and participants in this case may be implicit in the direct and public one-to-one exchange of weapons for coupons. In Reyes’ work those who turned in their guns are collaborators and the primary audience; the ones who use the shovels are another participant; the viewers of the installation in exhibitions are yet another audience. *Palas por pistolas* thus allow for different levels of engagement in the various stages of the work.
Like its subtitle suggests, Claudia Fernandez’s *Proyecto Meteoro: escuela de oficios* (2003–9) involved establishing a technical school. The project took place in the artist’s neighborhood in Mexico City, which is populated with homeless youth, many of whom are drug addicts. The artist engaged with these youth, and invited artists and designers to teach them a skill with the goal of producing a series of objects and accessories by recycling found materials in the neighborhood. They created furniture, decorative objects, clothing, and jewelry. These products were sold in pop-up shops and fashion shows at the Museo Tamayo, and eventually sold in museum shops across the city. Sale revenues were invested into the workshops and their community. During its run of seven years, some of the participants dropped out of the process; others got off the streets and reincorporated into the working society. The artist made the project independently from institutions, and financially supported it and its participants through the product sales, but also through grants and donations (significant support was given by Francis Alÿs, and the Fundación Colección Jumex).

*Palas por pistolas* and *Proyecto Meteoro* respond to their social context, and involve public participation in compelling ways. In Mexico, however, the discourse on social art practices, to use a given nomenclature, which allowed for projects like *IAM* and *Brinco* to be embraced more openly by the art field, is largely an absent referent. The projects by Reyes and Fernandez were locally discussed as a form of altruism or a political scheme that would only symbolically help a community. In this respect, it’s important to uproot some nuances endemic to the local context, like the gendered distinction between the assumed benevolence of altruism and a politician’s performance. On the one hand, spouses of mayors in Mexico have historically assumed the direction or become the figurehead of DIF, a state agency devoted to family development that runs a national network of child day care centers. On the other hand, the critique surrounding the work of Pedro Reyes specifically is its unapologetic similarity if not direct appropriation of recent creative political activities made by mayors across the world. In particular Reyes’ project is reminiscent of those of Antanas Mockus, mayor in Bogota, Colombia from 1995–8 and 2001–4. Another reference here could be Edi Rama, formerly an artist and since 2000 mayor of Tirana, Albania. One of Rama’s first programs as mayor was to paint the city’s decaying buildings with bright colors with the aim of influencing citizens’ subjectivities.

While these gendered and political references matter, it is best not to rush into overdeterminism. What matters from these references is that they allow
for a productive debate underlying the existing discourses and competing institutional contexts, or lack thereof, that impacts forms of public participation and reception of contemporary artistic practices. In the analysis of these projects, for example, artistic intent and attention to the social context in which a project develops is constantly brought to light. Since the projects’ ends are what matters, their means and processes, which are institutionally leveraged, are where politics unfold. Thus, contexts are incessantly exposed, articulated to general and specialized art audiences alike.

There are significant differences between the projects by eteam and Werthein, and the projects by Reyes and Fernandez. *Palas por pistolas* and *Proyecto Meteoro* take place at sites experiencing political and economic conflict. Drug trafficking and drug addiction are part of the problem at both sites. A major cartel operates from Culiacan, and many of the so-called street kids that Fernandez worked with are addicted to narcotics. Additionally, since 2006, an official “war on drugs” has been waged by the Mexican government. Technically speaking, such a war has been going on for decades, but for the first time in the history of the country, the state has invested significant public funding in military training and equipment to combat drug trafficking. Their military strategy proves inefficient in comparison to that of drug dealers and their networks. The Calderon administration, for example, has become just a new adversary in the existing battle between the cartels. Worsening things, there has been a rise of human rights abuse cases in Mexico, including police repression and sexual crimes allegedly committed by the military, for which state impunity appears to be the norm.

According to strong opposition groups in the country, the root of these problems is the uneven distribution of wealth, which can only be countered by creating opportunities for personal and professional development. Considering this conflicted context, it is not surprising that *Palas por pistolas* and *Proyecto Meteoro’s* approach to public participation in art has the aim of being socially beneficial. Whether openly stated or not, the underlying interest of these projects is a pursuit of creating more conscientious civilians and productive citizens. These characteristics raise the issue of art’s possible function in society. The shovels are used in activities of gardening and forestation; furniture and other items are created and sold to provide an income for homeless youth. These are not art objects in themselves, but instruments that are quite literally socially generative.

Another difference between eteam and Werthein’s projects and those by Reyes and Fernandez discussed here is the institutional context in which they are created. It is impossible not to associate taking public matters into
private hands as a sign of a larger institutional crisis that comes along with neoliberalism. It is difficult to compare the impact these participatory projects can have vis-à-vis social programs of government institutions. The public reach of these art projects is limited to their infrastructural scale, as well as to the artist’s use or visibility in mass media. But the fact that artists consciously use their art for social welfare is notable. Artists’ participatory projects are not in any position to compete with government programs. However, they do attend to challenging social topics, engage with disadvantaged people (who are likely not voters), and develop a public awareness about highly overlooked places.

Finally, these participatory art projects take on models of social entrepreneurship. (Their commissioners or funders are part of the wave of philanthro-capitalism.) Ideally, if the projects work, society gets better. This brings about the idea that social progress is tied to cultured citizenship. Through these projects, it is a creative and productive citizen that is being called upon to participate—a community to be galvanized, emancipated, or vindicated. The art projects do not subvert their situation through representation, but set up a situation whereby exchange is a means of productivity and social inclusiveness. At the end of the day, the questions that remain problematic are related to productivity: Does art really have to be useful? Is the expectation of art triggering the imagination not enough? And, ultimately, why are these artists, and their patrons, taking on responsibilities generally assigned to the state? While I have no definitive answer to these questions, I wonder if the recent pressures of the commercial marketplace have given the field of art a kind of cultural defense mechanism. This mechanism allows art, and not its market, to define participation both in the field and in their society, and to give validity, if not price value, to aesthetic experience.

Notes
3 For further reading on this art project, see “The Aesthetics of Delay: eteam and International Airport Montello” by Paul Monty Paret in Art Journal (December, 2010); and eteam: International Airport Montello by the author et al. (New York: Art in General, 2008).
Activism promotes vigorous efforts to bring about social, political, legal, economic, or environmental change. Its strategies encompass the ephemeral and the violent, as well as the efforts of an individual and those of the collective. Activist art has developed alongside these various forms of dissent, especially in the wake of the social upheavals of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

As Andrea Giunta explains in “Activism,” a deep overview of contemporary activism, the story of activism is also the story of the relationship between art and politics. In the United States, protests against Vietnam, for civil rights, and for the rights of women provided groundwork for artists to address political issues in their art. During this time, artists in South America made work to protest oppressive military regimes, and in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries many artists employed poetic gestures to critique life under totalitarian governments. The AIDS crisis in the 1980s, especially in the United States, precipitated a range of activist work that invoked the legacy of feminism while shifting the terms from a politics of gender to one that also included sexuality.

In the wake of the culture wars at the end of the 1980s, artists engaged with what became known as identity politics in art that questioned power inequities in relation to race, class, and sexuality. These reflections on self-representation, which began as specific to an American context, became global in scope as politicized constructs of identity expanded to those related to cultures and nations. In 1989 alone, one witnessed the protests that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the uprising in Tiananmen.
Square. More recently wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as protests in the Middle East, have served as catalysts for activist art.

Some activist artists work in collectives and others work alone; some seek direct interaction and others representational effects; some address legislators, media outlets, or a more intimate art audience. Others focus on community—whether that sphere is something that artists might enter into or create through their own work. It is this latter model that Julia Bryan-Wilson takes on in her “Knit Dissent,” addressing the ways that some artists have used craft and the handmade to forge a kind of politics. There is also space for activism to be more abstract, philosophical meditations that, for example, ruminate on agency and its relationship to time, as with Raqs Media Collective’s eloquent “Light from a Distant Star: A Meditation on Art, Agency, and Politics.” At the core of their investigation into the conjunction of art and politics is a conception of time in which the political potential of a specific act is given the temporal space to become fully realized.
Activism

Andrea Giunta

Translated by Tamara Stuby

A row of tanks advances along the breadth of Cháng An Dà Jie Avenue, or “Grand Avenue of Eternal Peace,” some 200 meters from Tiananmen Square. The camera closes in on a man—on foot, with his back to the camera, in a white shirt and black pants—who confronts the row of tanks with his body, indicating, with a hand gesture, that they should leave. The first tank tries to swerve to the left; the man moves in order to block it from passing. The tank straightens its path, and so does the man. Three people on bicycles push the man and take him beyond the edge of the frame. Captured on June 5, 1989, one day after the violence committed against the civilians that occupied the Square began, knowledge of this action—widely circulated through this photo—quickly spread all over the world. (So great was its ubiquity and power that it was later understood to have anticipated the fall of the Berlin Wall.) The image represents the repression of the rebellion in Tiananmen Square and it came to be emblematic of the idea of resistance as a form of struggle. It is an arbitrary, “misleading” example of cultural activism in one sense, since this man did not conceive of his actions as artistic. To be more precise, then, it represents an individual form of civil disobedience in the iconic framing of one body against an army. Still, it capitalized upon many of cultural activism’s aspirations: to produce images and actions capable of accompanying social struggle and to intervene in forms of power in order to erode them. Perhaps this is why means are deployed to control its dissemination in China, even today.1

The citizen’s symbolic occupation of urban space, his performance of civil disobedience, and the power of contagion attributed to his image allow it to be read as a symptom of a different way of understanding and articulating cultural activism.

1 To transform the world through art: This was the desire that motivated artistic activism during the long twentieth century, and animates it, still. The history of artistic interventions that look to undermine cultural and political institutions could be organized as a parallel narrative to the history of modern art those same institutions enfolded. Although it
could well be linked to militancy, those who occupy the place of activists in the field of culture do not necessarily respond to a political space identifiable with a single party or organization—much less a shared strategy. Even during the period of historical avant-garde movements, as Pierre Bourdieu affirms, artistic interventions acquired visibility in public debate as a function of prestige accumulated in the field of culture, rather than in political spheres.²

Cultural activism since the mid-nineteenth century has assumed two principal strategies, one being the assertion of a united front. Here, artists or representatives of the world of culture come together in order to express their opposition to a specific situation. Their works are gathered in exhibitions or in written declarations, upheld by the force of the sum of their names. Their texts are published in newspapers or circulated throughout social networks such as Facebook, as has been the case in recent years. Demonstrations in public spaces generally form a part of a strategic whole that makes visible an agenda under dispute.

A different form of activism consists in works themselves, whose meaning is interwoven with a particular political deed. Forms visually organize and fuse agendas, poetics, and urgent content. We could consider Picasso’s Guernica (1937) as an emblematic example of image activism, whereby a work that was closely tied to its immediate situation entered a repertoire of images, subsequently appropriated for other uses. This was the case, for example, in 2003, when Guernica became a rallying point for public antiwar demonstrations in protests against the bombing of Iraq.

Whether it takes the form of a cultural front or an image, cultural activism is inscribed in history. As T. J. Clark pointed out, times have existed when “art and politics could not escape one another.”³ In the realm of art during what I above referred to as the long twentieth century—a century that could be said to begin with Courbet and last until the most recent collective actions, if observed in terms of artistic activism—this relationship between art and politics registers a story related to the history of avant-garde movements, while likewise remaining at some remove from them (and modern art’s formalist narratives, sense of teleology, and assumption of progress). To be more precise, this art constitutes groups of experiences that, above all in recent years, have begun to be investigated and historicized, establishing repertoires that can then be utilized by new forms of activism.

Most crucially, artistic activism aspires to dissolve art within life. Its agendas are exact, contextual, and historical. Can we consider that activism’s
forms have undergone transformation during the past twenty years? To what extent does the history of activism act as an accumulation of experiences appropriated by the present? I will cover several key moments after the 1960s when agendas and actions that function as emblematic examples germinated, and then introduce more contemporary forms of activism.

2 This history of activism is the history of the relationship between art and politics. During the 1960s and 1970s, censorship and repression played a constitutive role in Latin American cultural activism, provoking a specific, conspiratorial form of thought that activated creative and poetic strategies that sought to anticipate, filter, and disarm institutional power structures. In 1968, one sector of the anti-institutional experimental Argentinean avant-garde associated itself with politics. Their critique was focused on the power of communication media and organized in complex actions such as Tucumán Arde, a group experience linked in time whose purpose was to denounce official policies in the province of Tucumán in Argentina that official propaganda promoted as an economic reactivation project. It postulated violence, clandestine action, and counter-information as strategies in the articulation of a work conceived of as a machine to transform citizens’ political consciousness.

Conceptual practices allowed for the articulation of clandestine resistance based on the strength of symbolic interventions. Studies on conceptual art questioned the discourse that emanated from art centers and traced new geographies that included Eastern European, Asian, African, and Latin American countries. Lucy Lippard pointed out conceptualism’s two-fold inscription, as the expression of both art as idea and art as action. In Soviet conceptualism during the 1970s, the Collective Action Group sought alternative spaces for an alternative culture and to promote the idea that an action suffices as a creative gesture. In 1973–74 the Laboratoire Agit-Art was founded in Dakar, an interdisciplinary group of artists, writers, filmmakers, performance artists, and musicians who transformed the formalist concept of the art object based on the relationship between experimentation and agitation. Also during the 1970s, the Indonesian New Art Movement aimed to dismantle aesthetic hierarchies and questioned the aesthetic educational system. These are examples of premises held in common that redefined conceptualism beyond the European–North American circuit; they were forms of articulating institutional critique as a criticism of local articulations of power. Common strategies activated specific agendas. In recent years conceptual practices have been studied in
particular detail, fundamentally because of their capacity to articulate institutional critique and to elaborate indirect, opaque language able to evade censorship in countries such as Chile, Brazil, Argentina, or Uruguay. During Chile’s military dictatorship, isolated events in the public sphere such as Lotty Rosenfeld’s interventions in the white lines on the pavement to convert them into crosses, or urban actions by the Colectivo Acciones de Arte (or CADA) represented forms of activism that resisted state violence. Among forms articulated by activism during the 1960s and 1970s, mail-art also stood out as an expression that elaborated different forms of eroding geographic distances, a desire that is fully expressed today in the development of the internet.

During the 1970s and 1980s feminist movements wrote a significant chapter in the field of activism. Their visual and textual discourse questioned the (masculine, Western) canon and proposed new politics of the body. Their critique of the sexuality dictated by nation, class, and race created a rupture with the forms and materials of representation. Through their works and performances, artists like Judy Chicago, Carolee Schneemann, Mary Kelly, Martha Rossler, Adrian Piper, Laurie Anderson, Lourdes Groubet, Diamela Eltit, María Evelia Marmolejo, or Monica Mayer pushed patriarchal narrative into a corner; they forged ties with political activist groups working to establish a public agenda that would transform women’s place in political and cultural spheres.

During the 1990s, activism was formulated in a post-national, transversal, and transnational dimension, founded on the notion of continual revolution. Diverse circumstances contributed to the gestation of new agendas and forms of organization. On January 1, 1994, following ten years of organization, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) occupied San Cristobal de las Casas and six other districts in Chiapas, Mexico. The uprising occurred when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) took effect, as an immediate response. The armed conflict lasted twelve days, but the action was further circulated and radicalized via the internet. The activist aspect of its practices was based on multiple strategies: daily press conferences; invited guests and assessors; collective consensus decision making and openness regarding possibilities for a constant deconstruction of power relationships. Influenced by the Zapatista movement, John Holloway formulated a theory that identifies two dimensions in forms of gestating a more just society: resistance and experimental testing of constituents’ power. The Zapatista movement developed a form of continuous questioning (condensed in phrases such as
“Preguntando caminamos,” “questioning, we proceed”) and of continual critique of its own government (“governing obediently”) which translates into the statement: “It is not necessary to conquer the world. It is enough for us to make it anew.”

Activism is reformulated through a concept of power based on micropolitical practices, linking it with local agendas that are simultaneously inscribed in transversal and global relationships. In this context, agendas related to migratory conflicts, post-Fordist global capitalism's functional marginalization, human rights, a contemporary reactivation of the feminist agenda, and the appearance of a new AIDS strategy in the 1980s (organized through ACT UP, articulated by politics of civil disobedience) all emerged.

With the militarization of the frontier between the United States and Mexico in the early 1980s, the art community in border cities like San Diego–Tijuana or Ciudad Juarez–El Paso developed an agenda that focused on immigration problems, border crossings, migratory violence, cultural mixes and tensions, representations of difference, beliefs, and different activations of language. The Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF) has functioned since 1984 as a space for visual activism at the Centro Cultural de la Raza in Balboa Park, San Diego, California. The group's members have changed over time, but the purpose articulated in their actions remains the same: “We are a multi-national conduit that serves to address the issues we are confronted with while existing in a region where two countries and cultures meet.” Their actions combine video, performance, photography, and installations. They work on both sides of the border (Tijuana and San Diego) with the aim of creating a “no border” sensation, or, similarly, they carry out “border pilgrimage” practices during the Day of the Dead, when Chicano and Anglo artists gather in the cemetery of the city of Tijuana around Juan Soldado's tomb, the patron saint of Chicanos and illegal immigrants (1987). These actions were also circulated as Forms of Resistance: Corridors of Power, a community engagement project at the Poblado Maclovio Rojas, during the late 1990s.

Anti-globalization, contra-globalization, globalization critique, globalization from below, or the proposal for an alternative globalization all look for ways to represent groups marginalized from the global economy, groups that are functional to post-Fordist capitalism much more than merely accidental consequences of it. The protests that developed in Seattle in 1999 and at the G8 Meeting held in Genoa in 2001 lent visibility to a form of urban protest articulated in different types of resistance. Following 9/11, all
forms of dissidence generated politics of denunciation and repression, articulated in the “war against terror” slogan. Different spaces and agendas that were previously separate in territorial and conceptual terms (different minorities, feminism, environmentalism) now connect in a transversal manner that leads to coordinated actions in opposition to the forces of repression. With the “no border, no nation” motto, the problematization of the border theme, including figures of exile, conflicts established by offshore prisons such as Guantanamo or in Afghanistan, and legal restrictions on residency all take the form of cultural activism in response to the neoliberal agenda that multiplies internal borders. The challenge is to change the notion of border, conceiving of it not as a limit but as a space for transgression, to activate the constitutive power of that which is not finalized. The proposal is to space out the border. On July 9, 2002, 3,000 activists met in Strasbourg “for an international anti-racist border camp,” where a laboratory for creative resistance and civil disobedience was carried out over the course of ten days. Micropolitical actions were activated there that dealt as much with the organization of everyday life as they did with establishing formats for communicative exchange (a public internet cafe, Indymedia tent, radio, etc.), with film projections and counter-information caravans.

In contemporary activism in Latin America, the human rights agenda occupies a central role. In the resistance marches in the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, the Madres, and the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, along with other human rights organizations and artists’ groups, have achieved a powerful and mobile level of visibility in regard to the figure of the disappeared. In 1995, the HIJOS (Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio [Children for Identity and Justice against Forgetting and Silence]) association was founded. One of the first commissions that they organized was dedicated to the escrache: actions that publicly evidence where those responsible for the genocide during the military dictatorship live and work—these people had been granted impunity during the 1990s by a pardon and laws citing obediencia debida (due obedience) and punto final (final point) that were then overturned in 2003, allowing new court cases for crimes against humanity to be opened. Escraches involve concerts, neighborhood campaigns, tours, and marking the houses of those responsible in red. The purpose is to awaken neighbors’ consciousness. The GAC (Grupo de Arte Callejero) group, founded in 1997, participated in these actions. The signaling carried out by the group focused not only on the individuals responsible, but also on the repressive politics articulated in Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s, known as the
Plan Condor. In 2000 in Rio de Janeiro, the GAC carried out an action along with students, human rights organizations, and social organizations that consisted in putting up thirty-six traffic signs on the city’s streets denunciating said plan.22

The activation of urban protest through visual actions that followed after the widespread mobilization movement that occurred in Argentina with the 2001 crisis (explosion of counter-power)—an economic crisis expressed in banks’ retention of people’s savings, a crisis in political representation manifest in the resignation of the President of the Nation, and a social crisis demonstrated in social protests and police repression—gave rise to the formation of artists’ groups associated with neighborhood assemblies and the agendas activated in response to each particular demand.23 For example, artists’ groups supported the demands of workers at Brukman, the factory recovered by women in a cooperative structure (the 18 de diciembre cooperative) when the owners had abandoned it during the crisis, leaving hundreds of workers unemployed. Resistance to this eviction, also expressed in forms of cultural activism, allowed for its recovery. The dynamics at work in the organization of these groups is centered around tasks that erase the agendas that each collective might have, establishing a time for planning and action that operates like a laboratory of images, words and organization based on impersonal, collective production and the search for symbols able to undermine expressions of power, using the logic of contagion. Normalization is an attempt to control or deactivate this viral expansion, in the face of which the Colectivo Situaciones propose to politicize sadness, by way of different dynamics that allow them to avoid being co-opted or marginalized: They look to dismantle ways of freezing events, to exercise the power of abstention, to re-conceive public spaces of intervention by attending to the specific content of each situation without a need for exceptional conditions, and to re-elaborate the notion of collectiveness as complicity in the adventure of becoming a situational interface in the world.24

In contemporary cultural activism, articulating protest on a global level is central. Mujeres creando (Women Creating)25 is an anarchist-feminist group formed in Bolivia in 1992 that publishes the Mujer Pública magazine, has a radio program and a cafe, all spaces that allow them to articulate a radical feminist agenda that is also linked to People’s Global Action, whose third meeting was held in La Paz, Bolivia (2001). This articulation seeks to activate different specific agendas in a non-exclusive manner as part of a more general one on all fronts that it seeks to maintain constantly active. Different experiences from the past in which militant cinema,
activist theater, montage techniques and theory, and action art in urban spaces (murals, graffiti, intervention in urban signage, performance, theater, and street art) all gained potential from one another thanks to the possibility of acting as a network. *Networked activism* produces specific practices and a new vocabulary: access to programs, downloading content, distributing information (still images, moving images, and sound), opening access codes and making content available; generating participative creation online, simultaneously articulating images and sound produced in different places, capturing a chronological narrative of events; breaking up the idea of the center with those of multiplicity, heterogeneity, and simultaneousness; adding potential to the notions of liminal, frontier spaces; the ideas of contagion, virus, and infection; of nodes and nodal interconnection that provoke continual echoes and resonance; of everyday portable communications systems (like computers) that are itinerant and nomadic; the notions of node and orbit to describe mobile structures; the concept of place as site, not as a precise place but as a site of intersection, like a situation between two localities (where work comes from and to whom it pertains); the possibility and capability of being in various sites at the same time; the concept of zone as location, as an accessible space with fluid borders with no distinction between center and periphery as zones of indiscipline.26 Networks’ possibilities intersect with increased potential for collective experience, the carnivalization of protest in order to activate a global agenda that comes together in one place, based on human coexistence and interaction.27

Cultural activism today is based on interpersonal contact as much as it is on global interaction. Information and knowledge are instruments of power—as demonstrated by the relationship between hackers and activists in the case of Wikileaks—that cultural activists (actual agents) strengthen by working via the internet. However, as we can see, not everything takes place online. International meetings, periods in residency, living together, the exchange of knowledge, discussion forums that establish intervention agendas and strategies, parties and carnivalesque practices, and the dispersion of figures in terms of direction or hierarchy all bear the stamp of an interpersonal dimension that is as relevant as that which sustains online activism. Contemporary activism is based on a different concept of geography and authorship, articulated by notions that restructure the organization of knowledge and bring concepts and instruments that come from the history of more than a century of cultural activism—an activism inaugurated by Courbet—up to date.
However, there is a radical difference that stands out in contemporary artistic activism, especially in relation to that which burst forth in the 1960s and 1970s. While activism in these decades proposed the complete transformation of society by way of revolution (with art being a major part of this colossal enterprise), today the task may seem less radical, although no less relevant. On the contrary, contemporary artists no longer await the perfect historical scenario in order to activate their practices jointly with a revolutionary movement. Nor do they aspire to operate as the detonators of a revolution in the making.

Activism has diversified its fronts and articulates them on an international scale. The internet allows for a degree of simultaneousness that the technology extant during the 1960s did not permit. Reactions against current wars or the global market can be organized and articulated simultaneously in various cities around the world. At the same time, in everyday practice, the most elemental mechanisms of subsistence in terms of reconstructing social networks are situated locally. For contemporary activism, not only is it important to transform the world, but also to do so through actions on a micro scale. Transformation does not lie in substituting one model with another, since contemporary activism distrusts all models. It instead aspires to mobility and adapting agendas that allow new forms of power to be detected and deactivated. Wherever the power of the dominant system shifts and reorganizes itself to maximize its resources, activism diversifies its strategies in order to intervene and activate newly adapted forms of resistance. More than a radical transformation of the entire world, what artistic activism seeks is to continually renovate the formats that permit different types of power to be debated, along with strategies for a counter-power.

We could sustain that critical contemporary art is not willing to restrict its actions to the institutional critique to which existing power has assigned it. Biennials and exhibitions serve as the scenario for an institutional critique that is agreed upon with curators and commissioners. It is a soft institutional critique that in spite of everything, can detonate controversies and make the sensitive social areas activated by the work more visible, generating acts of censorship that range from removing works to cutting budgets. Above and beyond this artistic activism that situates itself in friction with the art field, however, a different aspect is the power that different art groups manipulate when they situate their images together with social organizations who move against the effects of globalization or that are organized around different agendas (strikes, claims
for housing and land, racial or sexual rights, or aligned with humans 
rights organizations).

In these cases, actions develop outside of art institutions (more cultural 
activism than artistic activism), diversifying its spaces and alliances, 
looking for those places from which they can articulate effective actions in 
dialogue with political agendas thought of in terms of poetic interventions. 
Here, images distance themselves from art institutions to occupy all the 
spaces in which actions can be put into motion that will put power in check 
right where it is reorganizing itself. Its interventions are not settled in a 
single confrontation. The spaces and strategies it utilizes multiply and 
diversify to convert counter-power tactics into a state of continual cultural 
organization.

Notes

1 http://en.kioskea.net/news/14619-tiananmen-tank-man-photo-available-on-
google-china.
2 Pierre Bourdieu, The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field 
3 T. J. Clark, Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution 
4 Roberto Jacoby, Eduardo Costa, and Raúl Escari, “An Art of Communication 
Media (manifesto),” [1966] in Inés Katzenstein, ed., Listen, Here, Now! 
Argentine Art on the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-Garde (New York: Museum 
5 María Teresa Gramuglio and Nicolás Rosa, “Tucuman Is Burning,” [1968], in 
6 Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver, and Rachel Weiss, eds., Global Conceptualism: 
7 Lucy Lippard, ed., Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 
8 Margarita Tupitsyn, “About Early Soviet Conceptualism,” in Camnitzer, Farver 
10 Apinan Poshyananda, “Con Art’ Seen from the Edge: The Meaning of 
Conceptual Art in South and Southeast Asia,” in Camnitzer, Farver and Weiss, 
11 Nelly Richard, “Margins and Institutions: Art in Chile since 1973.” Art & Text 
(Melbourne), no. 21 (May–July 1986).


15 EZLN, “Primera declaración de la realidad,” in *La Jornada* (January 30, 1996); also in Holloway, op. cit., p. 20.


22 [http://grupodeartecallejero.blogspot.com](http://grupodeartecallejero.blogspot.com).


Crocheted military helmet liners and sewn gas masks: Increasingly, these handworked objects embody many aspects of social art practice today. Though the return to textiles has been duly noted in contemporary criticism as stretching the bounds of what the “proper” objects of art might be, the current popularity of knit, crocheted, or woven materials is also often derided as yet another market trend. Skepticism runs rampant: What is this return to craft, really? A true grassroots campaign? Or just another hipster hobby? This uncertainty speaks to the fundamental ambivalence of claims about political art—if we agree that form and materials matter, and matter politically, then we must also interrogate how these processes are recruited across a spectrum of ideologies.

Take the following example: In 2002, British artist Freddie Robins knitted a gray yarn life-size figure that is pierced, Saint-Sebastian style, by numerous knitting needles that also scatter in a ring on the floor at its feet. Stitched onto the narrow chest of this strange bodily surrogate, which hovers just slightly in the air, are the words CRAFT KILLS. What does it mean to utilize a knitting needle as a dangerous tool, and to envision craft as a process that might harm, injure, or wound? Or does it point out, ironically, the seeming opposite—that is, the absolute harmlessness of craft? The phrase works on both fronts; made in response to a very specific historical moment (the escalation of fear after the events of September 11, 2001), it captures a certain mordant humor. Robins’ piece comments on the fact that, due to heightened anxieties about national safety in the months after 9/11, knitting and crochet needles were banned on airplanes because of their potential to be utilized as weapons. This outright prohibition has since been lifted, but the U.S. Transportation and Security Administration still recommends that travelers do not bring long metal needles in carry-on luggage.

The threat that craft might actually kill, however, is far from the historical understanding of textile techniques such as sewing, knitting, or crocheting, which are often trivialized and denigrated. Think of the ubiquitous hobby macramé home projects from the 1970s that in the popular imagination are...
loosely associated with an embarrassing mainstreaming of hippie culture, divorced from the sometimes radical environmentalism that was intrinsic to handmade, countercultural lifestyles. In fact, such “hobbyist” methods of crafting have long been castigated as domestic, quiescent, conservative, and trivial, particularly because they have traditionally been gendered female. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote in 1949, “with the needle or the crochet hook, woman sadly weaves the very nothingness of her days.” By contrast, Robins’ work reflects a competing, contemporary trend that understands craft as an ideological weapon bestowed with fresh urgency and relevance. Craft has played a significant role in the formation of national identities, especially in times of political turmoil or war, as well as in resistant actions and protest cultures. This article examines how these links are made explicit in much contemporary craft-based art, in particular by feminist artists working at the intersection of art, antiwar activism, and craft.

Craft is often defined as that which is utilitarian, that has a specific function or use value—this distinction, arguably, separates it from art. But within craft theory and contemporary art, the art versus craft divide is slowly eroding, even as there persist classed distinctions between “high craft” meant for institutional display (Rosemarie Trockel or Louise Bourgeois, for instance) and “low craft.” Recent important books by Glenn Adamson and Elissa Auther address the studio craft versus art divide, as well as the false binary between highly trained skilled professional craft workers and amateur efforts. But if the realm of amateur craft sometimes falls outside the scope of discussions on contemporary art, art history is a vital place to theorize the current rhetoric that links handmaking and activism or to understand craft as a form of politics. Indeed, looking to this longer history of protest craft art shows that Robins was not the first feminist artist to connect craft to threat, and to do so with a sly sense of humor. In the mid-1970s, the Oregon Women’s Political Caucus invented a mock organization, a “Ladies Sewing Circle and Terrorist Society,” and turned it into a well-known feminist logo, emblazoned with a deceptively innocent flower motif and a crypto-Celtic-meets-art nouveau font. For about a decade, one could send away to Springfield, Oregon for T-shirts and mugs with this design, sold through small print classified ads in the back of Ms. magazine and Mother Jones. The joke here stems from the presumed absurdity that a sewing circle might be fostering collective domestic unrest in the time of the Vietnam War. Both Robins’ high craft object and the popular T-shirt allude to female handmaking as a form of dissent in a time of global conflict.
The connection between craft and war is rooted deep within US culture—and knitting in particular has been a patriotic rallying point from the revolutionary war on. Women were exhorted to knit to support military efforts as soldiers sent letters complaining of frozen toes and asking their wives to send socks and mittens. During the Civil War, the image of women diligently knitting for soldiers on the front lines folded into a larger campaign of working to unite for the war effort in both the North and the South. The idea that knitting is a way for women to occupy their time and sublimate their feelings of loss or trauma, as well as a useful activity that directly supports the war cause, has recurred in every US wartime. In the First World War, the Red Cross distributed over a million pamphlets and held instructional sessions throughout the country to teach young girls to knit. Yarn companies unsurprisingly embraced the declared “national knitting phenomenon” as a way to sell more of their product, advertising their goods with slogans like “Uncle Sam wants you to knit.”

The Second World War witnessed a similar knitting frenzy as women organized to knit military supplies. However, as historian Anne Macdonald recounts, in a time of widespread industrial production and availability, there was far less need for homemade objects, and “many women knit because women had always knit in wartime.” In other words, it had become more a symbolic, nostalgic custom and ritual than an actual material necessity. Knitting was taken up again in the late 1960s, again to symbolically if not literally support the troops, and celebrated as a way for women to “do their part.” But during the Vietnam War, crafting was also an indelible part of a growing environmental movement that fed other alternative cultures and oppositional politics. Thus handmaking was increasingly recruited for antiwar causes, such as Bread and Puppet’s street demonstrations, which centered on handmade tapestries, large-scale crafted cloth and wood puppets, and protestors in handsewn costumes. Bread and Puppet, which was founded by Peter Schumann in 1963, was a fixture in peace marches at the Pentagon and other places, and crafting what they termed “cheap art” was a vital part of their practice. And in the 1980s, when Reagan and Thatcher were stoking Cold War fears, British women protestors for nuclear disarmament formed the Greenham Common Peace Camp and occupied land adjacent to a US airbase. With their homemade textiles, banners, and hand-knit improvised shelters, the Greenham Common women “literally wove themselves into the site of their protest.”
Contemporary War/Craft

Many contemporary artists are using craft to comment on the current wars waged in Iraq and Afghanistan; these include works like Los Angeles artist Lisa Anne Auerbach's hand-knit *Body Count Mittens*. This series, begun in 2005, uses the act of knitting as a way to mark time, as well as a method of visibly registering the growing number of US casualties in the war in Iraq. As she begins each mitten, she inscribes it with the official body count on that day. During the time it takes her to finish one hand, the number of dead inevitably increases, so she notes the new body count as she moves on to the other hand. Auerbach has posted the pattern for the gloves on her website, and she encourages knitters to make them in public, while waiting for the bus, or at a restaurant, hoping to spawn conversations and debate about these grim (and not widely publicized) statistics. Auerbach's work reaches out to the online community of hobby crafters as she encourages them to think about the legacies of women knitting during war.

In Sabrina Gschwandtner's *Wartime Knitting Circle*, an interactive installation at the Museum of Arts and Design's exhibition *Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting* (2007), the artist set up round tables and provided yarn, knitting needles, and instructions for various projects (including Auerbach's body count mittens). She invited members of the public to come in and knit with her while talking about the war. The space was demarcated by large knit banners—"photo blankets"—featuring images of previous wartime knitting activities, and she has movingly described how a museum worker (the traveling exhibitions coordinator) who had a relative deployed in Iraq learned to knit during the course of the show.

Another artist exploring the history of craft and war is Allison Smith, whose 2010 series *Needle Work* was based on her extensive research regarding European and American cloth gas masks used in the First World War to guard against chemical warfare; she photographed these masks and remakes them by hand. First seeing an early mask from 1918, Smith writes, "I was struck by the recurring thought—someone made this—and I tried to imagine what that would be like. I began to think of these fabric masks as evidence of an as yet unwritten history of needlework." Rather than protective, these gas masks seems fragile and insufficient, and Smith's haunting project points to the ways in which bodies and textiles are sewn together in symbiotic relationship that relates to protection as well as to masquerade.
These diverse practices attest to the potency and resonance of crafting during wartime for current feminist artists, but, sometimes, such work becomes predictable. For instance, both US-based Shirley Klinghoffer and Danish artist Marianne Joergensen have conceived of large-scale knit military “cozies”—Klinghoffer’s *Love Armor Project* (2008) covered a Humvee on loan from the New Mexico National Guard with a cloth made by over seventy volunteers during a series of “love ins.” Similarly, Joergensen swaddled a tank with a knit and crocheted pink patchwork “tank blanket.” These two closely related projects, which are formally and conceptually very similar—though the artists were unaware of each others’ work—veer into the territory of the precious or naive, as they express a wish that the knitted garment covering a tank renders it useless or smothers its deadly potential. It is thus an ongoing problematic within the realm of contemporary craft to think through how divergent practices utilize handmaking differently rather than to elide their distinctions. For there are actions and objects, like Smith’s, that rewrite the whole history of handmaking in relation to gender and war, and then there are others, like Klinghoffer and Joergensen, that fall into clichéd versions of pacifying female domestic work.

Indeed, some of the most potent craft critiques are coming not from US or European artists, but from Middle Eastern women who use handmaking methods to question stereotypes and the language of terror, such as Lebanon-born, Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum, who has woven a scarf out of human hair—*Keffieh* (1993–9)—in order to upend assumptions about Islamic codes of decorum and female visibility. In her 2005 installation *The Reign of Terror*, Egyptian Ghada Amer, who makes extensive use of embroidery in many of her projects, comments on the fact that while the words peace and safety exist in Arabic, the term “terror” is not indexed in Arabic dictionaries.

Just as in the historical context, though, crafting in the framework of recent wars appears at both the “high” and “low” ends of the spectrum, from more fine-arts oriented work like Hatoum and Amer’s, to amateur hobbyist; likewise it also spans a political spread, from avowedly leftist to something ideologically more ambiguous. For instance, the anonymous Afghan war rugs that have proliferated since the 1979 Soviet invasion have become a controversial embodiment of the politics of craft. In these rugs, textile makers refer to war in various ways, from incorporating simplified tanks, guns, and planes into almost abstract patterns, to creating elaborate, realistic depictions of the attacks on the World Trade Center. It is not always clear who makes these rugs, and for what purpose—an exhibition at the Textile Museum of Canada in 2008–9 focused more on questions of
dating and genre than intention. Interestingly, such rugs have found a niche for online customers around the world, not least the United States, which leads to speculation that some of them are being produced strategically and self-consciously for the US market.

The Afghan war rugs open onto many questions, including the commodification of dissent, the ever-increasing traffic in mementoes of disaster, the tangibility of memorialization, and the relation between textile design, tradition, religious ritual, and global catastrophe. They also emphasize why so much political craft is textiles-based. For while other kinds of handmaking methods (such as pottery or glassblowing) can have political registers, the bulk of war-themed craft focuses on fabric. In part, this is because sewing, quilting, weaving, and knitting are specialized forms of making and communicating. As the editors of the anthology The Object of Labor: Art, Cloth, and Cultural Production write: “The physical and intimate qualities of fabric allow it to embody memory and sensation and become a quintessential metaphor for the human condition.”

Beyond the fact that we constantly use cloth, textile making is also distinct from mediums such as metalsmithing in that it is portable—what has been called lapwork—and can be made in a range of fluid circumstances. Much of this work is small-scale and requires no extensive equipment (unlike a pottery wheel); hence it is often performed in public to create new forms of social space, from early feminist quilting bees to contemporary activist groups like the British knitting club Cast-Off, which has held major “knitting for peace” events in the London Underground. Knitting’s flexible transportability has allowed it to be pressed into service in the New York activist group Granny Peace Brigade, who take their needles to the streets with signs around their necks declaring, “I am knitting stump socks for amputees.” Conjuring the whole history of female wartime knitting, these women publicly knit garments for injured Iraq war veterans, using handicraft to express political anger as well as to transform that anger into useful objects.

Labor, Politics, Gender

Beyond art-historical investigations about handmaking and war, the groundswell of craft in the past decade has been accompanied by strident political claims as websites, blogs, and conferences extol the “radical” and “revolutionary” potential of handmaking—to name just two examples, a
2006 conference at the Pasadena Art Center was entitled “Radical Craft;” and a 2008 symposium at the Melbourne Craft Centre proclaimed “The Revolution is Handmade.” Trade books with titles like *Subversive Cross Stitch* and *Subversive Seamster* proliferate. These books could be echoing the influential feminist literature about the gendered hierarchy in the crafts, namely Rozsika Parker’s 1984 *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. Parker’s gender- and class-based analysis, together with a deep history of embroidery technique and the labor formations it engendered, provide a model for thinking through how craft methods have been deployed, re-appropriated, and politicized over time. But Parker’s precedent goes unacknowledged within these books, which are more hipster how-to guides complete with irreverent patterns and practical tips for sewing your own gauchos.

Other texts from the past few years, such as Betsy Christiansen’s *Knitting for Peace: Making the World a Better Place One Stitch at a Time*, are eager to extend the positive feminist legacy of handiwork, and assert that knitting might in itself be method of direct protest. In 2004, Betsy Greer coined the term “craftivism,” joining *craft* and *activism* to suggest that handmaking (especially the domestic “female” crafts) have become—or are even implicitly—a form of resistance in an era of global mass production. Here one convention has easily been replaced by another—if craft was formerly the territory of kitsch, the low, the regressive, and the decorative, it has recently has become an easy, all-too-uncontested shorthand for alternative politics. Some of this rhetoric ties into a longstanding desire to link craft to left politics (i.e. constructivist textiles in post-revolutionary Russia, William Morris’s socialist workshop where textile design was at the core of his utopian theories of work, or John Ruskin’s writings on the nobility of the hand). But today’s understanding of the do-it-yourself imperative is evermore fueled by the dominance of machine-made factory work within the transnational sweatshop era. Craft has been aligned with an anti-consumerist ethos, as in the online campaign buyhandmade.org that asked participants to commit to not buying at big-box or chain stores. Launched for the holiday season in 2007, it was signed by over 50,000 people; however, note that the slogan urges you to *buy* handmade gifts, not to make them yourself.

This is one of the most conflicting aspects of “craftivism,” which is that so much of the purported handmade revolution is really about shopping. For some, setting up booths at fairs or selling their work on the craft commerce website Etsy has become the way to pay rent, and it is increasingly hard to
reconcile the tension between what could be a grassroots, micro-economy of local production with the aggressive neoliberal entrepreneurialism advocated by books like *Craft, Inc.* or *The Handmade Marketplace*, which outline strategies of self-marketing and self-promotion. Yet an article in 2009 outlined how difficult it is to make a decent living wage selling work on Etsy, given the effort, time, and materials these crafts demand.

In addition, the “buy handmade” pledge overlooks one significant paradox: ostensibly machine-made consumer goods are also in large part made by hand. London journalist Eric Clark’s book *The Real Toy Story*, which reveals unjust labor conditions in the toy industry, illustrates how much significant bodily work and handiwork go into factory production in China, cranking out objects for overseas markets. In the over 8,000 factories in the Pearl River Delta region of China, where eighty percent of the toys bought in the United States are made, women work sixteen-hour days under toxic conditions for about ten cents an hour. Thousands of women workers in bright pink coats sew pants legs onto action figures: This is the reality of contemporary craft as it is persistently feminized and undervalued.

The knitting needles that half-jokingly stab Robins’ torso indicate a fundamental ambivalence about just what the political value of craft today might be. Craft is itself neither inherently conservative nor progressive—along with the contemporary “revolutionary” knitting circles, there are also right-wing knitted “yellow ribbon” drives that extend the nationalism of early knitting-during-wartime campaigns. Yet perhaps craft matters in part because it gives us purchase on a pointed, potentially messy, necessarily intricate and in-process activism, as it leaves room for the dropped stitch, the slight irregularity, the imperfection that reveals the personal investment and care in making. In other words, craft may not kill, but it is not dead, either.

**Notes**


3 Karen Beckman has discussed the ongoing elision between feminism and terrorism; “Terrorism, Feminism, Sisters, and Twins Building Relations in the Wake of the World Trade Center Attacks,” *Grey Room* 7 (Spring 2002), pp. 24–39.

Ibid., p. 295.


An artistic action is a class of action that is expressive of a will. It contains something more than just will in its unfolding. The will of each human being indicates a response to the specific conditions of that person’s existence. While that remains a constituent of every artistic action, the artistic action is supplemented by something that is more than what can be explained away by the necessities and circumstances of a single life in historic time.

Human existence presupposes points of contact between the individual human being and humanity, as well as between what it means to be human and the situation that human beings come into. We call these surroundings the world, the present, time, reality. At an ontological level, this envelope seems possessed of infinity. We appear to ourselves as relative, contingent, and fleeting in the presence of this infinity. It is in this sense that Kazuo Okakuro, the nineteenth-century curator, theorist, and interpreter of Japanese culture spoke of art and the aesthetic gesture in *The Book of Tea*: “The present is the moving infinity, the legitimate sphere of the relative. Relativity seeks Adjustment; Adjustment is Art. The art of life lies in a constant readjustment to our surroundings.”

An artistic action is the means by which humanity adjusts the infinity of being to itself. It necessitates the calling forth of that within human beings that can participate in breaking the bonds of finitude, and act reciprocally to the plenitude of infinity. Rabindranath Tagore, in *The Religion of Man*, personifies this invocation as the “the angel of surplus” within human beings, “a surplus far in excess of the biological animal in Man, an overflowing influence that leads us over the strict boundaries of living, offering us an open space where Man’s thoughts and dreams could have their own holidays.”

Although Tagore’s “angel of surplus” sings out to humanity to “rejoice,” in reality, the process of adjustment to infinity may be painful, pleasurable, abrasive, delightful, enervating, or stimulating. Howsoever its immediate
experience may be colored, there can be no denying the fact that it transforms us from being “creatures” into becoming “creators” of the world. It enables us to make infinity speak through the language of contingency. Seen this way, an artist is the person who does not merely receive the world through her senses, but equally, the one who gives something back.

And yet, there is another sense in which the world comes to us as the network of constraints and possibilities constituted by the circumstances of the millions of lives around us, in historic time. Here the world is not a figure of ontology, but of history. Frequently, these circumstances, which we may also call society and politics, are marked by injustice and suffering. They propel us into rage and/or despair. They turn us into partisans and warriors. On the days when history and politics overshadow the ontological significance of the present, the world does not seem possessed of infinity as much as it does of constraints.

The action which we call artistic then has to deal with the fact that it exists in the interstices between senses of the self’s relation to the world: one possessed of infinity and plenitude and another constructed in response to constraints and limits. The politically committed are drawn to art because it offers them a mode of imagining realities other than the ones that constrain their being in the world, and artists are drawn to the arena of political action because their cultivation of a sensibility founded on plenitude is a resource that actually can have radical currency in an arena accustomed to the burden of constraints: the traffic between art and activism.

**Time-out?**

The significance of the artistic act lies in the disturbance of balance sheets, of taxes, of wages, and of war by a sense of immeasurable immensity, plenitude, and infinity. The altitude at which the comedian Harold Lloyd hangs on to a clock’s hands, suspended over Manhattan while maintaining a poker face in the silent film *Safety Last* (1920), renders the framework of this clock-time measurability momentarily inoperable through a gesture that is both supremely comic and absurdly beautiful.

The value of a work of art consists of its ability to arrest, even if temporarily, the stream of purposive acts and routine dispositions. It affords us a moment’s respite from the strain of maintaining a purely functional, quantifiable profile within the boundaries of a conflicted and abrasive situation. This is not a dismissal of the mundane, but an attempt to seek
substance and plenitude in quotidian things, gestures, acts as one sees with them, and through them, with a kind of “second sight” into a zone that is not predetermined in terms of meaning by the way the world is administered and governed.

This respite is not like repose or slumber or rest or leisure or sleep. They all have been reduced to the function of replenishing the energies we have exhausted through labor, and are opportunities for the existing order to reproduce itself. This respite, on the other hand, works more like “time-out” in a game with only too well-established conventions. Sometimes, the contours of a new game can be discovered when the rules are in suspension—neither conformed to, nor yet concretely reinvented. It causes and inhabits an ontological rupture—time-out—a strike at time, at space and at being. Like the “time-out” when the game itself is changed and challenged, art offers an opportunity to glimpse the contours of the world, and ourselves, at a different state of play.

**Plugs and Sockets?**

A work of art does not have to conform to, nor confirm, the established order of the world. Were a work to be constrained thus, it would have to fit into an extant necessity in the existing arrangement of the world, much like a plug would fit a socket. When worn, it would have to be replaced—so long as the need for its presence existed—by an item identical to itself. Things of beauty, things that amuse and entertain or inform, may fulfill such requirements.

Each move in art has the liberty to be, at least to some extent, unprecedented. That is why we sometimes feel that a work of art, like a sudden and beautiful turn in a football game, or a moment with a lover, has set us free. The rapture and exhilaration of such moments may be few, but as Nietzsche says in *The Gay Science*, without them, “life would be utterly unbearable, honesty would invariably lead to nausea and suicide.”

A move made in a chess game played to pass the time in prison between inmates may be identical in appearance to a move played in a tournament between champions, and yet, nothing about what the move does to the players, and to time, is identical. Any move in art, like any ludic, playful gesture, has the same jewel-like ontological uniqueness both for the maker and for the beholder. This gesture strikes a chord, reminding the beholder that he, too, contains within himself something that is not reducible to the
banal necessities of the circumstances of his life. The artistic gesture breaches the limits of personal finitude, even if inarticulately, to act in the world.

**Protagonist?**

The early medieval aesthetician Bharata’s treatise on performance, *Rasa Sutra*, and the medieval Kashmiri philosopher Abhinavagupta’s commentary on Bharata’s text, *Abhinava Bharati*, produce a seemingly unending taxonomy of affective states and correspondences across stances, somatic transformations, and emotional nuances that explodes any ordinary sense and understanding of how we come to think of a body inhabiting a structure of feeling in the terms of finitude.4

Here, emotions such as desire, love, fear, anger, joy, or sadness are refracted through a multitude of transient affect–enactment–recognition configurations into ever-expanding constellations of what it means to become human through the representation of different experiences and situations. Thus, a performer can be required to induce between self and beholder the aesthetic equivalent (the *rasa*, or distillation) of a neural dance between the hair-raising experience of anxiety to the goose-pimpled-tingling of anticipated erotic excitement with a detour into the storm of arousal. This plenitude of affect is a serious interruption in the cut and dried models of selfhood and interaction between self and other demanded of us by our time.

To accommodate this transition, the viewer will have to acknowledge that she is more than the person who eats and shits, who gets up to work and returns fatigued, who pays taxes, makes contributions to the gross domestic product, obeys traffic rules, reads the newspaper and redeems debts, who allows herself to be governed by saying “yes” and “no” in response to questions that cannot be answered with yes and no.

Art, like play, like the erotic, is nothing if it does not express our humanity. And our humanity is as generously capable of expansion as the bellows of a well-tuned accordion. What makes us human is the ability to persistently ask what makes us human and the corresponding unfathomable facility to create new conditions for being human. It is the capacity to discover things within us that were facilitated by our willingness to undertake the artistic act, to do the work that the work of art requires us to do.

This, more than anything else, defines our role as protagonists on the world stage. Here, the protagonist is the one who sets things into motion by
witnessing what occurs when she asks the questions that reveal her own humanity to herself and the world, even and especially when this task is not without its attendant risks. What makes her a protagonist is the fact that she is not rendered immobile by her questions and the way she faces the world. This is an important difference from the stance of a critic, who, without a conception of creators, becomes overwhelmed by the way in which he constructs his criticism. In the first instance, the protagonist transforms her questions into the means by which she moves between being and becoming. In the second instance, the critic and the target of his criticism get locked in a death embrace.

Ultimately, art, play, and philosophy can ask that question, create those conditions, walk that path between being and becoming that cuts through the ties that entangle the critic. This can be done playfully, lightly, even whimsically. That is why play is sometimes called re-creation (in that the world, and we, are “re-created” through play). That is why art, at its best, is playful and philosophical at the same time. In other words, art may not be a means to ensure survival, but it certainly can be a reason for living.

**World?**

Art can invoke in us the desire to do what it means for us to be beyond our obligations and necessities in historic time. It can awaken in us our sense of our ontological obligations to ourselves. If asked why we live, rather than how we live, we would have to answer in terms borrowed from the languages of play, dream, and art. None of this is useful in concrete or pragmatic terms, but it does not make it any less essential. The dying man confronting sublime music or remembering a striking image may desire it because it might seem to him to be essential to ensuring that the last moments of his life and his passage into death have a certain grace. This grace may be of no utility to anyone, but no one can deny its cardinal place in the map of human existence.

In the final analysis, as Nietszche says in *The Birth of Tragedy*, “it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified.” If this is indeed the case, then the question at hand is not about what art needs to do in order to earn its rightful place in the world. Rather, it is a question of what kind of world we need to fashion in order for it to be able to answer and withstand the queries put to it by art. These queries are the way in which art acts on the world, and in the world. Art is action, in the
sense that Hannah Arendt talks of action in *The Human Condition*: as
insertions of human presence and beginnings into the world. As she says:
“This insertion is not forced upon us by necessity, like labour and not
prompted by utility, like work. It may be stimulated by the presence of
others whose company we may wish to join, but it is never conditioned by
them; its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world
when we were born, and to which we respond by beginning something new
on our own initiative. To act, in its most general sense, means to take an
initiative, to begin, to set something in motion.”

Because human beings act, they make themselves unique through their
actions in the world. This is what makes each human life as valuable as
another (because each and all are unique in equal but not identical ways)
and at the same time, this is what ensures that we cannot justify trading one
human being for another. Human beings are not fungible entities because
each person is new, and is renewed by his actions. The *newness* in them
prevents the emergence of a common denominator that can act as an
abstract unit of exchange mediating between them.

However, the assumed fungibility of human beings, of human actions,
is a prerequisite of the way in which economy, society, and the state are
organized. The congealment of human plenitude into the molds of
citizen and alien, worker and unwaged, consumer and spectators, are the
consequences of this reordering of the human condition to retrofit the
necessities of the rule of capital. Actions give way to labor, to work,
which enables the emergence of an arbitrary analytical category of the
general equivalence of laboring in the world. The plugs we become to fit
the sockets of this world require us to be bereft of significant portions of
our humanity, especially of our actions. This is why the abstraction of
wage labor, which slyly inserts fungibility into human affairs and
relationships by creating an illusion of a transactable standard of a means
to measure humans against the axes of production and time, violates the
plenitude of every human individual. The aesthetic, because of its
insistence on the incommensurability of an act against any grid that
seeks to equate one act with another through an abstraction welded out
of the measure of time and effort, is in perpetual insubordination to the
rule of wage labor.

We do not say that a newborn child “replaces” an aged grandparent,
merely because the productive years of the newborn are ahead of him, and
those of the grandparent behind him. Similarly, unlike goods in general, no
work of art can actually exchange for another, because, despite the market
in art, there cannot be a functional equivalence between any two artistic expressions. One artwork cannot be made to do the “work” of another, nor does it make sense for us to say that it involves the same amount of “labor” as another artwork. Art, despite the hyperactivity of the art market, is nonfungible, because of its specific ontological status as an index of what it means to be human.

The condition of slavery strikes us as inhuman precisely because it presupposes the fungibility of human beings, and disregards what may be unique, untransactable, and impossible to replace in any human being who happens to be a slave. A world without art can only be possible in a world where every man believes himself to be enslaved, and where every slave believes in the eternity and infinity of his slavery. Conversely, a state where human beings cease to be fungible objects in any way for the purposes of political economy is only possible through the multiplication of acts that insist on the unique agency of every human being. It may well be that such a state may never be attained in its entirety, but the insertion of each new work of art into the world may take us closer in the direction of its realization. The generalization of artistic agency may even lead to the disappearance of the figure of the artist, but that will be a minor price to pay for an infinitely richer, stranger and more joyous world, where all our senses (both the outer senses of hearing, touch and taste, but also the inner senses of balance, empathy, attraction and understanding) will be greatly amplified. It is in this sense that we can agree to Jacques Rancière’s insistence on the distribution of the sensible as a key to an understanding of why aesthetics, even while going beyond politics, is inherently political.7

The practice of art requires and demands that the distribution of the sensible be an open question. That the way we inhabit time, space, speech, belonging, be malleable to the ever-new possibilities opened out by artistic action.

Acts?

Asking questions about how best we could spend time, about the quality of our experience of time, about what can be visible in the spaces common to us, what can be spoken and who can do the speaking: these are the things that art does when it acts in the world. And that is why, to act artistically is to constantly challenge the realm of constituted politics, in the name of all the things that can and cannot be named.
A dysfunctional world becomes obsessed with utility. Intriguingly, utility itself may be rendered dysfunctional because of the commonplace prospect of having to make utilitarian choices between a plethora of the identically useful, as in a store aisle where we confront a hundred different shapes of the same mineral water. Similarly, a political language premised on the alienation of subjects from sovereignty overcompensates for its obvious disenfranchisement by its insistence on the primacy of representation. The combustive upsurge of insurgent crowds and masses are quickly, and urgently, sublimated by means of identity and unity: The enabling trick of representative politics trades the ambitions of leaders against the aspirations and practices for possible new configurations of collective life. The post-upsurge-state's violence towards strikers, critics, and dissidents bears out this fact time and again. In such circumstances, the freedom to be elusive and non-representable is sometimes the most alarming thing for regimes in order to maintain the circus of their rule.

**Storytellers?**

Walter Benjamin says in his remarkable meditation on the storyteller, “The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself.”

The righteous man encounters his righteousness, his rights, because the story that he tells about himself inserts the novelty of his being into the world as a subject who acts, dreams, desires, thinks. We remember why Plato banished storytellers from his republic. Perhaps because he was worried that the slaves would recognize themselves in the yarns peddled by storytellers, and in doing so, begin imagining what it would be for them to act through their drives, capacities, motives, desires, opinions, thoughts, and with confidence. The republic would have to change. But for this to occur, many unspeakable things will need to be heard.

In a world where the humanity of a slave or any unrecognized being is not borne by any word, it will first have to make itself heard in silence, as an absence in an image.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in *Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence* says, “what if language expresses as much by what is between words as by the words themselves. By that which it does not ‘say’ as by what it ‘says’. And what if, hidden in empirical language, there is a language raised to a second power in which signs once again lead the vague life of colours, and in which
meanings never free themselves completely from the intercourse of signs?"9 He goes on to make the remarkable claim that “Political thought itself is of this order” because our “theses” at any given time can only be “schematic formulations” that cannot accommodate within them “the excess of what we live over what has already been said.”10 And continues, “we must consider speech before it is pronounced, the background of silence which does not cease to surround it and without which it would say nothing. Or, to put the matter another way, we must uncover the threads of silence with which speech is mixed.”11

Significance?

The political significance of art (a matter greater than mere politics as we know it) lies in the fact that each artwork comes laden with its own invocations pointing towards a range of possible dispositions because it proposes something specific and unique with reference to being itself. Such an action takes us beyond the horizon of the political into questions of ontology, and paradoxically, that is why it is so urgently political. The most political thing in the world is that which shows the limits of politics. It is at this limit that being seeks to assert in a manner that cannot be contained within the language of arrangements and rearrangements of power, within the vocabulary of rights and duties.

Just as being with a person compels us to consider the quality of time that we spend with them, and to gauge what it will mean to spend time without them.

Just as being with a person forces us to think of what it means to be intimate and to be apart, close enough to touch something or far enough to think of horizons or produce eddies within us.

Just as being with a person provokes us to think about the way power, attraction, respect, desire and a host of other attributes of relationality flow between us, let us float or confine us in knots.

Just as being with a person makes us think of how we see him, how we hear her, how we touch him, how her weight feels when we hold her, so too, a work of art makes us consider our senses, together or apart. It makes things sharp and keen or blunt or soft. It makes us think about the intensity of yellow, the feeling of a minor chord, the heft of justice, the balance of forces, the friction of contrarian desires, the collisions of truths and the aftertaste of a lie.
Time?

Much of life we pass through zones marked by the sign of the unknown. We do not know where we stand, we are uncertain of our destination, even whether or not we will arrive. Sometimes, the information we receive is of use; often it only bewilders us.

Perhaps, in undertaking such a journey, we would be wise to say, each time, with Nietzsche, “My time is not yet, the tremendous event is still on its way, it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time. The light of the stars requires time, deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant star – and yet they have done it themselves.”

Like a deed done by the light of the most distant star, political action, illuminated by the imaginative amplitude produced by the work of imagination, requires time and even silence to unfold. Occasionally, art, like a telescope, can be a means by which it becomes possible for us to apprehend something that the “naked eye” of ordinary cognition would keep apart from us at the distance of a few light years. In such instances, the artistic act is the lens that transforms the optics of a situation, advancing a desire, telescoping what might take epochs into the intensity of a single moment of awareness and epiphany.

It requires the time to pass from one person to another and then to the multitude, and then back to the life of every individual. Art can foreshorten this time, but it cannot do away with it. It requires time, imagination and artfulness to pass, in each instance, from the sensed, the felt, the thought, the unsaid, to the said, the questioned, the answered, the decided and then to the done. Art is the playground where the desire for becoming more human than the world can account for at present continues to be tried on for size. In that playground, by the light of distant stars, we may recognize the artist as the angel of surplus at play.

Notes

10 Ibid., p. 248.
11 Ibid., p. 282.
Agency is the capacity of an individual (or group understood singularly) to operate, make decisions, and effect choices. It is not necessarily the same thing as subjectivity, although at times the terms are synonymous, describing a state in which artists, viewers, or both have the ability to construct and present identity and intention in the world. Agency is at issue for artist, audience, and content alike. At what point are artists just another cog in an economic machine that has little space for the role of culture, dissent, and intellectual inquiry? In what way can artists achieve a sense of agency? How might this relate to questions of aesthetics, of judgment, of the kinds of art presented to the world?

Contemporary artists and writers have used the concept of agency in diverse, complex, and ambitious ways. Agency is a condition, as Juliane Rebentisch argues in “Participation in Art: 10 Theses,” that contemporary art should strive to attain, especially as a kind of quasi-subjective dignity that has the ability to avoid being fixed or constrained to a deterministic model. And it is the goal of Tirdad Zolghadr to reveal in his essay “Fusions of Powers: Four Models of Agency in the Field of Contemporary Art, Ranked Unapologetically in Order of Preference” the various social conditions that make such a concept as agency possible. Having gained currency in the face of increasingly repressive politics in the last decade, agency has come to refer to abstract goals that have leftist, political implications.

Additionally, states of agency are posed as resistant to economic and cultural forces that attempt to instrumentalize artists, works of art, as well
as the populace. T. J. Demos, for example, looks at the art of Yto Barrada, Emily Jacir, and Steve McQueen in his “Life Full of Holes: Contemporary Art and Bare Life” in order to see how it is possible to represent those with no political agency—those, to borrow from the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who experience the condition of “bare life.” As Demos’s text suggests, the ramifications of the current economic and political landscape on the production and reception of contemporary art has become a source of fraught debate.
1 Within the framework of a very influential strand of modern aesthetics ranging from Theodor W. Adorno to Michael Fried, participating in art means transcending one’s subjectivity and partaking in something that possesses universal validity. Universality is a core element of the respective notion of autonomy, which seeks to set art apart from the world of consumable things as well as from its reduction to the expression of empirical subjectivity. The notion of autonomy of art thus possesses an ethical dimension; in said modernist tradition autonomy is conceived as art’s emancipation from the ascendancy of the subject. By transcending individual expression and eluding consumption, the autonomous work demands that the subject adopt an attitude other than that of willful disposal vis-à-vis the work, namely an attitude of recognition. This constitutes the quasi-subjective dignity of the autonomous work. To the extent that the work can attain the quality of a subject in its own right, this quality must not be reducible to the empirical subjectivity of the artist or recipient.

Consequently Adorno believed—and Alain Badiou, whose work updates central motifs of aesthetic modernism, now believes—that the ideal artist is one who brings out an aspect within the work that both frees it from the artist’s individuality (its expression) and defies the logic of subjective command over the material. By committing herself to the project of releasing art into its autonomy (freeing it from all concrete subjectivity, including her own), the “artist” is to become the “representative of the total social subject.” According to Adorno the subjectivity that manifests itself in the “work-subject” must therefore be free of all the limitations incumbent upon empirical forms of life and—hence—truly universal. “It is a We,” Adorno writes in his Aesthetic Theory, that speaks from art, “and not an I—indeed all the more so the less the artwork adapts externally to a We and its idiom.” For the side of aesthetic experience, this idea implies that participation in art must be conceptualized as partaking in this universality: The beholder, listener, spectator, or reader, by relating to the work, likewise is to overcome her own empirical
situatedness. In Adorno’s ideal aesthetic experience, the work of art is not assimilated to the experiencing subject; rather, the latter assimilates itself to the work. What Adorno, adopting a Hegelian term, sometimes calls Dabeisein—“engagement” or, more literally, “being present to it”—“puts the recipient qua empirical psychological person out of action, which benefits his relation to the work.” Under these conditions, a tinge of utopia accrues to aesthetic experience: for to have an aesthetic experience then means to partake in the adumbration of reconciliation.

Contemporary art, by contrast, quite explicitly opposes the modernist overburdening of art with the utopian project of anticipating the non-existent subject of a nonexistent total society. This project strikes many of today’s artists as corrupted: Modernist universalism has turned out, in too many respects, to be a particularism.

If this crisis of the utopian determination of art is indeed constitutive for many developments in art after 1960 that today fall under the rubric of “contemporary art,” what are the consequences to be drawn? The theory of “relational aesthetics” for example concludes from this crisis that the very idea of aesthetic autonomy must be regarded as irrelevant both for the theory and the practice of contemporary art. Instead of isolating art from life—and utopia from politics—in a modernist fashion, the advocates of relational aesthetics argue that both need to be transposed into a communicative practice that by virtue of being immediately inter-subjective counteracts social isolation and the capitalist corruption of structures of communication. In other words, instead of asserting art’s autonomy in order to represent a utopia unattainable to any concrete politics, art is to become an instrument of the practical-political realization of what is micro-topically possible: assisting in the creation of communicative social integration that enables social participation. In effect, however, this theoretical shift merely implements a paradoxical sublation of art into life that once again cements the difference between the ideal practice of art and a less-than-ideal reality. However, this difference is now a social difference: A communicative practice celebrates itself in the sheltered space of the art institution, relating to its other—a reality in which disintegration is otherwise prevalent—only from the distance of privilege.

Reducing art to a practical-political instrument of social integration moreover means eschewing any attempt to elaborate a concept of critical art that would enable us to think the fact that today’s art largely rejects the pathos of utopia along with the aesthetic quality of said art. By the same token, this reduction also blocks access to an alternative conception of
what it means to participate in art, a different understanding of aesthetic participation. To approach this conceptual task, however, we must first seek to form a more accurate picture of the artistic opposition to modernism. The modernist-utopian definition of art is tied to the presumption that the work possesses a “second reality” divorced from all other reality. Contemporary art undermines this presumption. If the highly variegated developments of “contemporary art” can be reduced to a common denominator at all, it is that they radically call the system of the arts and the self-containment of the work into question. In most instances we are confronted with decidedly open works that destabilize the boundary separating the aesthetic from the non-aesthetic. Yet such destabilization, far from obviating the question regarding the specificity of the aesthetic, raises it anew.

4 Philosophical aesthetics responded to this challenge as early as the 1970s by turning to the category of aesthetic experience. Unlike modernist aesthetics, the theories of aesthetic experience that subsequently emerged no longer afford the work’s methodological primacy over aesthetic experience but, on the contrary, now give the aesthetic experience primacy over the work. The conflict between the modernist aesthetics of the work and contemporary theories of aesthetic experience turns on how exactly we are to conceive the interrelation of artwork and experience (as opposed to whether aesthetic experience is an important category as such). Modernist aesthetics begins with the assumption that the work is an objective given, understanding aesthetic experience to be the subsequent reconstructive apperception of the work’s structure. Theories of aesthetic experience conversely define the work as a product emerging from the process of aesthetic experience.

Art, in other words, is not an objective given but comes into existence in and by virtue of the experiences it releases—which also means that the difference between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic is no longer conceived as that between a self-contained work and what is external to it. According to this view, the aesthetic does not constitute a special domain separate from the non-aesthetic at all. The aesthetic exists instead in the process of becoming aesthetic. The aesthetic and the non-aesthetic do not relate to each other as mutually external; instead, the aesthetic consists in a specific transformation of the non-aesthetic. This also allows us to envision the aesthetic point of open work-forms. For the many fragments of ordinary life that can be found in today’s art do not simply dissolve that art into life. To the contrary, the pieces of reality incorporated into art become dissimilar to themselves in their becoming something other than what they were. They are neither simply reality, nor unambiguous signs
for (another) reality. Precisely this ambivalence releases their representa-
tional potential: How and as what they appear to us is then inseparably tied up with us and the imagination’s share in our experience. This is dramatically emphasized by works that decidedly leave unanswered the question as to which elements should be regarded as elements of the work and which ones should not.

5 Because semblance cannot be cleaved from the aesthetic object, any meaning the work may acquire for us must always also withdraw back into the material from which it had emerged. This allows the materiality of the work to come to the fore. Aesthetic materiality is an effect of its tense relation to meaning and not its obtuse opposite, mere matter. This state of affairs is illustrated particularly well by pieces of reality isolated from their pragmatic functions and transposed into art. When Heimo Zobernig for example exhibits golden chairs, he primarily relieves them of any defined semantic charge. Yet the chairs are not simply left standing in their thingness, their facticity. The relationship between these chairs and meaning is rather indicated by the English preposition “without”; it is a paradoxical relationship, one with(out) the other. The reference to meaning, to something they potentially represent, remains essential to these chairs on exhibition even if this meaning can no longer be fixed unambiguously. They seem to be now the leftover props of a contemporary theater production; now the actors themselves, communicating with perfect eloquence with one another; now they form up into a golden pun on that modernist fetish, the Arne Jacobsen chair, which each one of them quotes; now they are uncannily disfigured, a legion of doppelgangers who eye each other with hostility; now they read as institutional critique, an exaggerated comment on the scarcity of seating in exhibition spaces; and so on.10 They develop a certain “spectrality,” as Jacques Derrida puts it;11 they are always more, and something other, than what they are. The same holds true for the performing body no longer subjected to the task of representing a role. A performer like Xavier Le Roy can appear as an insect, a tender blossom, a mesmerizing diva—his body swollen with meaning. Yet, both examples show that aesthetic spectralization is not dematerialization, not spiritualization, to the contrary such spectralization is internally linked to a heightened awareness of the materiality of the exhibited things, or the physis of the performing body.

6 Seen in this perspective, participation or partaking in art means acting out tensions—the tension between materiality and meaning, but also between two incompatible attitudes that, taken as extremes, both designate
Participation in Art: 10 Theses

exits from aesthetic experience: a “contentist” attitude on the one hand, and a “formalist” one on the other. That the tension between these two possible attitudes remains present within contemporary art is particularly evident in performance situations that know neither the distinction between stage and audience, nor a clear ontological separation between the real and fictional world. For such situations will not only render the physical presence of the actors more intensely: the intensity will, in a reflective movement, extend to the spectator. The latter is then no longer a consumer hiding in the dark, but rather an individual whose presence—and that includes his physical presence—influences the performance by virtue of his position in the room. A possible disruption of the event marks the remote horizon of the responsibility for the situation imposed upon the spectator, whether he is willing to accept it or not. The reader need only think of the performances of Marina Abramović, Yoko Ono, Santiago Sierra, or Christoph Schlingensief for vivid illustrations of the viability of this option. Yet any disruption of the performance, however moral its motives may be, inevitably cancels the aspect of theatrical production, negating the performance.

On the other hand, it is just as unhelpful to suggest, regarding performances that play with their own boundaries, that they are merely art and should thus be considered in purely formal terms. Something else is truly at issue: the creation of a tension between two attitudes that will inevitably disintegrate the unquestioned safety of the spectator’s position, and will do so to the degree that the boundary between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic, between art and non-art, between reality and fiction, becomes the focus of aesthetic play. Yet such forms of contemporary performance art only dramatize a paradox that, as Alexander García Düttmann emphasizes, permeates the contemplation of all, at least all non-formalist, art: that it demands both an element of immediate belief in the world it opens up and an attention to its being art, its being mediated, which fractures that belief. Art then takes place to the extent that the paradoxical union of immediate belief in the world disclosed by the work on the one hand and advertence for the mediated character of the artwork on the other is acknowledged, and carried out.

7 This double nature of participation in art becomes acutely important regarding the emotional—or, affective, a term often misleadingly used as though it were synonymous—dimension of aesthetic experience. Unlike instincts and reflexes, emotions are not part of a stratum located, as it were, beneath the plane of meaning. Rather, emotions are themselves meaningful. They are interwoven in a great variety of ways with our assumptions about the world, informed by a normative praxis that is always linguistically
mediated. We have learned to be ashamed, to feel revulsion; and we have learned to do so in relation to specific situations or objects. Emotions, that is to say, are not independent of the situations or objects that trigger them—or of our assumptions about them. To the contrary, interpretations of situations and objects usually first confer the contours of significance on our emotional agitations. Without knowing what someone’s emotions are about, or rather, without knowing her interpretation of what they are about, we will hardly be able to determine her emotional state.¹⁴

Now aesthetic experience will by necessity subject the connection between emotions and our normative orientations to a distancing re-presentation. It will do so, first, because the attention art demands to its mediated-ness conflicts with the immediacy of the emotional response it nonetheless provokes; and second, because the semantic openness of the work of art bends any interpretation, however immediate and even obtrusive it may seem to the recipient, back toward itself and the indeterminate materiality of the work. In a certain way, the emotions corresponding to her interpretations must then indeed, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, “become zero,”¹⁵ making the energies of affective agitation available for other semantic modulations, which is to say: for a different emotional meaning.

8 Conceived along these lines the artwork can never achieve the objective impartiality the modernist aesthetics of the work ascribed to it because it becomes a work only in and by virtue of the energeia of aesthetic experience. But because of the reflectivity of aesthetic experience, this does not imply that the work is powerless before the ascendancy of the recipient. “Aesthetic experience” must not be misunderstood as something the subject could, in an instrumental fashion make or, in a consumerist fashion, have. Rather, aesthetic experience designates a process that comprises subject and object alike and leaves neither unchanged. By implication the subject, too, undergoes transformation in its relation to the object, becoming an aesthetic subject. If the work is engendered as work only in and by virtue of the chains of associations it may call up in its beholders that means conversely that all meanings the same subjects may perceive in the work always also elude them; no such meaning can be conclusively and objectively bonded to the work. If the work is thus given to us forever only in the intangible and hence distanced mode of its appearance, we are always also referred back to ourselves and the social influences that have informed the ways we understand.

The subject of such experience is no longer the subject of modernism, transcending its particular situation by participating in art. Conceived instead as decidedly concrete and situated, this subject does not transcend
her own empirical conditions but rather reflects on them in a specific fashion. If contemporary art, by opening up toward concrete social contexts, always also addresses the heterogeneous social composition of its audience, that does not entail, pace Alain Badiou’s apprehensions, an affirmation of the given—as though such art merely confirmed the differences society has determined. The experience of such works opens the subjects to themselves by virtue of a figure of reflective self-estrangement. The subjects of this experience are referred back to themselves precisely to the degree to which they cannot simply situate themselves vis-à-vis the objects in an identificatory fashion—the degree to which their own conditioning confronts them as alien in the mode of aesthetic semblance. If art can indeed effect a change in consciousness that may spill over into political attitudes, it does so, in the perspective of more recent aesthetics—that is to say, the aesthetics of experience—not because it breaks with our finite worlds from the supercilious position of an “elevated […] star” (Badiou\textsuperscript{17}), but because in the semblance of art we encounter these same worlds in a different way.

Incidentally, the ethical-political potential of such experience is demonstrable not least in works that are generally considered to be representative of “relational aesthetics.” Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s work \textit{Lover Boys} (1991), for instance, a heaped-up pile of sweets, harbors potential not by virtue of the mere fact that the beholder can take some candy—that would be neither aesthetically nor politically significant. Rather, the work achieves expressive force only as we reflect on the discomfortingly unfathomable question of how taking a candy relates, or would relate, to the information that the weight of the pile is equal to that of the body of the artist himself, who died of AIDS in 1996, plus that of his lover, who also died of AIDS in the early 1990s.\textsuperscript{18} With regard to the suggested invitation to participate, every beholder is quite alone before this work. The inter-subjectivity such works broach does not consist in the concrete audience that happens to meet before a work at any given time. What becomes thematic in every individual beholder’s own reflection, rather, is the inter-subjectivity of our cultural and social praxis, which always already informs our experiences. A work of this sort, that is to say, develops ethical-political potential not by forming random groups, but by provoking reflective attention to those inter-subjectively formed convictions that—in individually specific ways—constitute us as historically and socially situated subjects.

Participation in art thus acquires a specifically aesthetic meaning. Its specific reflectivity distinguishes it from understanding as much as from acting (therein lies the distinction, the difference or autonomy of the
aesthetic vis-à-vis theory as well as practice). Accordingly, interpretations fall short that misread the fact that open works sometimes challenge their recipients to participate in their *production* as the expression of a practical “democratization” of the production of art. As Umberto Eco has insistently pointed out, the open form does not abolish the asymmetry between the artist and her audience. Instead, the audience’s interventions into the work are part of the artistic calculation; they take place within a horizon delineated by the artist even when the very frame separating art from non-art becomes the object of engagement.

What is at stake here is best illustrated by the significance of open works in the allographic arts, where such work-forms radically expand the zones of indeterminacy that have always existed between the work as (prescriptive) script (notation, choreography) and its interpretation in the performance, expanding them to the point where the script can no longer accomplish what Nelson Goodman has argued is the script’s primary function: to keep a work identifiable from performance to performance, from interpretation to interpretation. Yet such ways of calling the identity of the work in question in the register of the (open) work reflect a fundamental insight into the constitutive function of processes of interpretation for the autonomous life of the work of art itself. *Any* work of art, Eco writes, is constitutively open “to a virtually unlimited range of possible readings.”

But as open works illustrate with particular vividness, this does not imply that the individual interpretation is doomed to arbitrariness. Any execution and performance of a graphical notation, for instance, lays complete and even absolute claim to fidelity to the work, while also retaining awareness of the fact that it is one among infinitely many possible interpretations. But the tension between the aspiration to fidelity and the awareness of contingency that accompanies any attempt to live up to that aspiration is a specific feature of the engagement with art in general.

Participation in art, then, implies more than the literal-practical fabrication of one of its manifestations or the establishment of a meaning. Participating in *art* always also means partaking in the potentiality—or spectrality—of the work. It means experiencing its infinity.

10 The idea of a quasi-subjective dignity of the work of art that constitutes the ethical core of the modernist notion of autonomy returns transformed. Whereas the modernist aesthetics of the work recognized the autonomous dignity of the work in its self-sufficient closure, theories of aesthetic experience stress its potentiality. The work accordingly attains a quasi-subjective character not by possessing this or that determinate quality,
but on the contrary by forever exceeding the determinations it may take on in relation to any beholder, listener, spectator, or reader. The ethical idea of a quasi-subjectivity of the work of art then corresponds to a theory of the subject that emphasizes that the subject is always being and becoming at once. We in fact often feel a strange sting when someone we do not know very well says something perfectly true about us: you are \( x \). We then hasten to demonstrate that that is not everything we are, that we are also \( y \) and \( z \) and an infinite number of other things. Much though we yearn to be recognized for “who we really are,” we also suffer when, as Helmuth Plessner puts it, the judgment of others determines and “finitizes” us.\(^\text{22}\) It is not by accident that the spheres of love and friendship are where the individual receives the most comprehensive form of recognition. For unlike in the sphere of social appreciation, where we are recognized for the way we perform our various social roles, the recognition we experience in love and friendship also addresses our potential in excess of all social roles. We are fond of the friend or beloved not merely on the basis of his or her actual being this or that at any given time. Friendship and love, especially in their erotic dimensions, always also aim at the potentiality of the other. Friendship and love, then, exist essentially in and as the play of revelation and withdrawal, of actuality and potentiality whose dynamism keeps us in a lively relation to the other, rendering our recognition a constant challenge. To the extent that the work of art, conceived along the lines of a theory of experience, can likewise never be conclusively known but always only recognized, its quasi-subjective dignity consists precisely in its eluding any objectifying determination. That is why we sometimes return to works of art as though to good friends—why they mean more to us than mere objects, and why we can in their presence be more, as well as something other, than subjects who dispose of objects.

Notes

1 For a detailed analysis of this line of ethical-aesthetic thinking in modernism cf. Juliane Rebentisch, Ästhetik der Installation (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003).
5 Cf. ibid., p. 33.
6 Ibid., p. 317.
9 That was Peter Bürger’s claim in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 78.
16 Cf. Alain Badiou’s polemic against the “abolition of the universal” in favor of a “total exposition of particularisms” in his “Manifesto of Affirmationism.”
17 Ibid.
18 Nicolas Bourriaud did not fail to notice such dimensions in the work of Gonzalez-Torres, which he in fact described in detail. Yet these descriptions are always at odds with other passages in which he attempts to construe the public of a work of this sort as a community, however limited in time and intrinsically fragile it may be. Cf. Nicolas Bourriaud, “Joint Presence and Availability: The Theoretical Legacy of Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” in *Relational Aesthetics*, pp. 49–64, here especially p. 55.
21 Eco, op. cit., p. 21.
Fusions of Powers: Four Models of Agency in the Field of Contemporary Art, Ranked Unapologetically in Order of Preference

Tirdad Zolghadr

Drawing on personal experience as a writer and curator, I’ll circumscribe four distinct approaches to the notion of agency in an order that reflects my personal sympathies. Stringent definitions of “agency” are less pressing, I find, than understanding the atmospheres the term creates: agencies of agency, if you will. Among the different tenors I will discuss, a first de-emphasizes agency by defining the art as a strictly inconsequential affair; a second, not necessarily an antithesis of the former, believes agency to be both related and possible qua art. A third model sees agency as inconsequential and as a kind of withdrawal from engagement, while the last model treats agency as a given, emphasizing the inevitable consequences of the arts. This last example rallies not for a fusion of powers but for the spirit of checks and balances. In politics proper, the former system advocates unfettered efficiency, while the latter suggests a multiplicity of actors who willingly get in each other’s way, thereby tempering the damage a government is wont to wreak upon its surroundings. Agency here becomes a cause for damage control, not a best-case scenario, an ambrosial political resource to be rescued from the bowels of the art-world apparatus.

By and large, the predominant self-image of the arts is that of a harmless adolescent, full of dreams and ideals—but dwarfed by a gargantuan entertainment industry. I’d like to suggest a less cherubim insignia: A kid clumsily toying with a handgun, behind the wheel of a moving car with the headlights off. If we took this very book as an example, and compared it to, say, Tony Blair’s memoirs, the scope is seemingly negligible. But time and again, we’ve seen similarly innocuous publications trickle down through generations of students and authors. Chances are that everything from the conditions it offers its writers to the way it circulates as a textbook commodity advocating a sweeping meta-narrative of art (which in turn facilitates its circulation as a commodity) will leave unmistakable traces. This is where the potential for agency is quite impressive.
Now to clarify my position: If I can only rarely sympathize with the first two ideal types, I often find myself championing the third, and generally describe myself as a fairly typical specimen of the fourth. To state the obvious, the moods I describe tend to blend, overlap, morph, and transfigure. They’re atmospheres, not baseball teams. This is less about pinpointing individuals and the teams they root for, than about a mood that is set in a room when one discourse rather than another is resorted to. So if I have my preferences, I’ve nevertheless been guilty of subscribing to all variations at some point or other.

Indefinite Postponements

The notion of art being as inconsequential as actors screaming fire in a Broadway theater is sometimes a melancholic outlook. Art ideally should, but realistically cannot, harbor agency beyond the representational. The best art can do is acknowledge its chains and shackles to the circumstances designed by the powers that be. This position need not be melancholic necessarily, but can also be mediated by a rather chipper sense of faith in the unmeasurable, unthinkable, undefinable. Kant of the Third Critique is quoted; the political grist of Martha Rosler is regretted; and art’s status beyond any measure of functionality becomes a badge of pride.

What is striking here is the common ground as regarding art’s place in the world, whether the tone is melancholic or chipper. Both positions regard the notion of art’s agency as sheer superstition and prosopopeia: as pixie dust, curatorial snake oil, or an example of what Deleuze and Guattari have termed “fabriquer un bon Dieu pour les mouvements géologiques” (declaring what are inevitable tectonic movements to be proof of someone’s sovereign actions). By and large, this model is the most soothing of all temperaments regarding agency in the arts, for it’s the one that is least wracked with paradoxical imperatives exhorting one to action.

Both the chipper exclamations—art as the untouchable “over yonder”—and the melancholic pleas—art as agent, handmaiden, pawn, decorator, steward, geisha, lapdog, or court jester of “the bourgeoisie”—are rarely marked with unadulterated discomfort. To be sure, one of the most graceful ways to engage in conversation at an opening is to regretfully assert one’s relationship to something termed the bourgeoisie, to be an example of repressive tolerance, excessive tolerance, or repression tout court, and yet to insist the relationship is a mysteriously productive one, indeed
melancholically so. Art’s co-optation by the bourgeoisie is inevitable, one can sadly burble, since there’s nothing more bourgeois than being critical of the bourgeoisie.

The tacit assumption here is that the artistic and the bourgeois have become one and the same thing. The irony being that in order to more precisely understand and describe who has really profited from art’s relationship to the bourgeoisie one must successfully define the latter as something other than art itself. It is also necessary to then devise adequate abstract models with which one could embark on a long-term tracking of the behaviors of all decisive actors in this very relationship. Despite the occasional journalist tracing price data in auction house inventories, no such thing has been devised for the arts. And until this is done, the show must go on, at least until further notice of a better idea than the overthrow of the bourgeoisie.

Underlying the appetite for indefinite postponement is not only the sweetness of hazy suspension, but also the promise of ultimate redemption from the current state of innocuous limbo. This is a pattern that is patently visible in many different places, from particular, stringent strands of academic Marxism (Terry Eagleton, for example) to those who partake in the field with staggering success, albeit with that apologetic air of being knowingly shackled to the bourgeoisie. Art harbors within it a hint of meaning that will become apparent on judgment day, but for now, art, according to this model of indefinite postponement, it cannot conjure a counter-public sphere into existence. It cannot even fully exist until such a sphere has come into existence first.

**Catholics**

The following conception of agency is one that staunchly believes in a potential for positive transformations both beyond art and *qua* art. Even when this version of agency comes to hands-on interventions in the social realm, what is usually seen as the strongest part of the contribution is not the actual activism itself, but the representation thereof—the possibility to put things on the map. In this instance, the rationale of the respective art projects is not fundamentally different from that of photojournalistic and humanitarian endeavors. Even Doctors Without Borders see their agency—at least partly—in drawing attention to crisis zones in a manner that disregards boundaries between institutions, disciplines, nation-states, and ideologies.
Among the many means or media deemed adequate for good causes, shaming is a popular choice: shaming not only the bourgeoisie in all its contemporary iterations, but also shaming peers and colleagues who do not adhere to one’s political ethos. Shame is a primordial force that links knowledge to action not by physical contact but by consciousness alone, making it an attractive mode of agency to photojournalists and artists alike.¹ Karl Marx once famously said to Arnold Ruge that shame can be a revolutionary sentiment, “a kind of anger turned inward.” It is potentially like “a lion, crouching ready to spring.”² The dialectical pendant to shame is probably pride, akin to Martin Luther’s “Hier steh ich und kann nichts anders.” Here I stand and cannot do otherwise. The trouble with this prototype, still widely taught as a glittering jewel of political principle, as critic Mark Cousins once remarked, is that it obfuscates what exactly is being “done” by virtue of insisting so doggedly on what is being “stood” for. In other words, what is represented takes precedent over what is actually being enacted.

Art is undoubtedly transformative, but it’s always fascinating when people assume it transforms things for the better, along an authored axis comparable to a grassroots petition or a soup kitchen. I’m not objecting to the idea of an industry as hierarchical, exploitative, compromised, and ideologically contradictory, as the arts being a self-evident agent for change we can believe in. I’m happy to go with exceptions to the above modus operandi, be they few and far between. But I also believe a sober assessment of art’s empirical track record be can be tremendously helpful in any effort to understand how art always already is an arena of political agency, usually for the worse, if not necessarily so. Whether you’re publishing a book, curating a biennial, or teaching a class, you are always already forming such an arena with your students, artists, writers, or administrators. Unfortunately, our focus seems forever to remain on the arena beyond the classroom or commissioning process. What will the students do once they enter “The Real World”? How many readers will the book reach? What results when the character, quality, and political spirit of the book, the classroom, or the biennial are primarily marked by what happens during the commissioning process, the teaching method, or the conditions of production behind the scenes?

Allow me to share an anecdote recounted to me by artist and curator Hongjohn Lin. During the Taipei Biennial 2008, a violent demonstration against a visiting Chinese official unfolded near the museum, which left the artists, largely of activist disposition, depressed and frustrated. How
impotent the video installations look when compared to the grand roar of the streets! To state the obvious, whenever art is compared to tear gas and burning cop cars, it will look pretty frivolous, which in turn leads to the predictable aforementioned economy of shame and shaming, and to the sinking feeling that the symbolic, aesthetic, and representational are not enough. It bears mentioning that there are few things more symbolic, aesthetic, and representational than a burning cop car. This is not to say that the symbolic, the aesthetic, and the representational are inconsequential. The contrary is precisely my point.

Conspirateurs Professionnels

Thirdly, we have the gentle rebels: The multitudes of flâneurs and other fine souls united by a notion of the arts being some kind of accidental, open-ended conspiracy. The key idea here is that it is best to forget the shame of inefficacy and embrace it instead. Perform marginality, espouse latency, celebrate those pockets of semi-failure and hyper-ambiguity as a way of braving the predominant culture of high performance in a context of rampant post-Fordism. A man with a mandate, these “multidudes” will tell you (artist Dirk Herzog), is never free, for he has to act. The highest form of power, by contrast, is the privilege not to act.

Often, this distinctively Bartleby-inflected mindset is defined by a soft spot for the obtuse, the incommensurable, the unnamable, the Third Meaning. This is equally important to my first iteration of agency, indefinite postponement, but gentle rebels regard the ethics of open-endedness not with melancholia or cynicism, but will elevate it to the purest form of agency art can possibly offer.

Often the mindset is equally informed by a certain number of Italian theorists, Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno, and Giorgio Agamben etc., who are not homogeneous in disposition. Much like the impossible unity of French poststructuralist theory, the Italian corpus suggests a shared history, an “instinctive understanding of the strength in numbers that comes from a national cultural identity.”3 This, in actuality, is an apt description of how commodification and agency can successfully and productively go hand in hand, especially when—to varying degrees—the national-intellectual corpus in question grapples with comparable shades of biopolitical exodus. How to use powers vested in your creativity, your mobility, your emotional intelligence, even your pleasures, against a system that demands them?
These are some of the concerns at the crux of what might be called the biopolitical turn. Can your reproductive organs, your refusals, your bare life (to borrow Agamben’s term) be used as a weapon? This line of thought is at its most productive when coupled with an uncompromising departure from forms of teleologies or eschatologies, in favor of an investment in, and conceptualization of, the agency of pleasure in the here and now. If the means and the process are just as significant as proscenium and outcome, then a form of enjoyment that rigorously uncouples itself from any form of biopolitical instrumentalization is key. Agency thereby amounts to what is enacted, not what is resisted.

In 2008, the last Italian communist was voted out of parliament, and with his departure a complex of cultural phenomenon including the *feste dell’unità*, the tradition of operas and lectures held for workers in factory halls, met its end. What, then, can *operaismo*—the term that most generally forms the common ground between the above gentlemen to whom this model is indebted to—mean today, in a context where another kind of “factory hall” still host lectures, the Kunsthalle, which remind us not of Gramsci but of lofts we cannot afford? Withdrawal is a questionable strategy, especially when it becomes a substitute for structure, given that globalization as we currently know it has become so formidably successful at making capital mobile while domesticating everything else. This is why it seems that the idea of momentary tactics, employed project-by-project, position-by-position, only seem to confirm that if a position is defined by its opponents it lacks its own agenda. You can stylize withdrawal into a unique selling point of the arts, and maintain that art must exist beyond market demand, redefining its mandate again and again. But eventually, you will need to account for the fact that the selling point of art is not as unique as it sounds, for even capitalism itself is well beyond catering to demands. It actively defines them.

**Atheist Choir Boys**

Inefficacy is not an option if you consider that, through long-term, circuitous routes of mainstream fashion, advertising, politics, and pedagogy, the arts have monumentally effected society at large. From the 1960s conceptualists to the Young British Artists of the 1990s, artists can look back on a proud tradition of not just decorating or chaperoning but updating and refining the spirit of capitalism at large.\(^4\) Again, the challenge
for any theory bereft of a social movement is that of the wider hegemonic context becoming decisive. If you’re unfortunate enough to cling to the possibility of social movements informing your political theories, you must first, in my opinion, proceed to patiently interpret the prerequisites of conditions for such movements to emerge.

To return to French critical theory, poststructuralist philosophers prominently refused to see their contributions as discursive toolboxes for the movements unfolding around them in Paris and beyond, espousing instead a mentality of avowed restraint that embraced the institution as an arena for critique and reflexivity. Poststructuralists were operating in a comparatively vibrant context, and were widely accused of being lame ducks. Today, the art world underestimates these texts once again, using them as critical karaoke because there’s so very little we can otherwise share across space and time, project-by-project, position-by-position. Great theorists offer the warm comfort of family anecdotes recounted over Skype, frequently that evergreen of agency folklore: making-the-reader-a-writer. Sometimes we add that we need to abandon the position “next” to the proletariat. This is all good and true, but it lacks the reflexive rigor of the maîtres themselves. Publishers, curators, and lecturers roll out rigorous theorizations of political positioning to highlight good intentions or to define the idea of agency. Once again, I’d venture that, more often than not, the application of these theories to what happens within the actual editorial, curatorial, or pedagogical process would unearth a number of weird and wonderful contradictions.

As a fairly stereotypical writer/curator in many respects, I’m never really sure which type of knowledge it is I am pursuing, let alone the operations through which it’s being put into practice. I’d be the first to defend the Narrenfreiheit (unbridled freedom) of the arts, seeing its trans-professional porosity as one of the few perks it has to offer. The assumption, however, that curatorial concepts and artist projects constitute a benevolent cottage industry of criticality never accounts for the fact that compared to other cultural activities, contemporary art is a formidable example of self-exploitation, post-Fordist propaganda, semi-academic posture, and professional blackmail. Audiences, students, interns, political minorities, pop cultures, and painful local histories are being cuteified, tokenized, plagiarized, instrumentalized and condescended to, one venue after another.

Let’s take one of the more hands-on activist protagonists of the poststructuralist pantheon: Michel Foucault’s “Society Must Be Defended.” Even Foucault would typically introduce rigorous measures of self-reflexivity
on four to five different levels in any given lecture. In “Society Must Be Defended,” he contextualizes his work in terms of traditional academia (the “great and tender freemasonry of useless erudition”) and of a new intellectual movement unfolding around him (a “contemporary efficacy of discontinuous narratives”), before introducing his own agenda (the return of subjugated knowledges and “noncentralized theoretical production”). But he also mocks his own lecture notes as props for public performance, only then to define a *thème du jour*, that of “power as war by other means” (which in itself would be relevant here incidentally). With its barrage of self-positioning, a text of the kind imposes a punishingly reflexive disposition, one that achieved an unprecedented politicization of knowledge across the universities internationally.

**Strategic Essentialism**

One Agency. One Community. [….] We hold ourselves—and each other—to the highest standards. We embrace personal accountability. We reflect on our performance and learn from that reflection (CIA mission statement).

Lest I be accused of being a hyena and a curmudgeon once again (“Tirdad hates art”) allow me to sincerely concede that art can be undeniably empowering, even magically so. But what I’m arguing is nothing more odious than the fact that agency should also be traced within the field itself, not in faraway lands. The dynamics unfolding daily in your gallery, your classroom, even your inbox, are not comparable to those in a sweatshop, but are both more challenging to articulate, and have far more impact on the work you’re actually producing. Incidentally, the faraway lands beyond the Euro-American metropolis are where the brash calls for outright agency become downright hazardous, as I try to argue below. This is where the traumatic referent is irresistibly fresh and gleaming, this is where the art is to document, reflect, address the context around it, and thereby offer a veneer of the agency we in the Euro-American exhibition machine supposedly lack. Just as long as the work offers formal chestnuts, suggesting it “complicates-our-relationship-to-reality,” boundaries can be successfully blurred between basic political intelligence and airline bonus miles.

It’s an interesting case of the aforementioned rift between theory and context. Seeing as there’s a chronic lack of art infrastructure in places such as Tehran, Nicosia, and Murcia, international art-world attention can be
useful provided local actors can fine-tune the disproportionate weight of faraway support systems. Transnational funders, critics, and curators must always pay attention to developments in government relations and curatorial trends, and are liable to change priorities at a moment’s notice. Moreover, transnational incentives in the form of curatorial attention, critical fascination or hard cash can spark longstanding, toxic antagonisms between those who are deemed worthy and those who are not. This introduces a new perspective among the more worthy practitioners, who are no longer answerable to the very city context that lent them all the mana to begin with.

To some extent, this is inevitable. To think that art can be globalized without a moderate degree of epistemic violence is idiotic. However, this does not absolve the globalizers from an attentiveness to the act of “reining in.” As opposed to a dogged belief in agency through innocently “reaching out.” Art-world practitioners are usually well aware of the interests underpinning the expansion of contemporary art, and the fact that few things are as potent as women’s rights, fiscal restraint, and conceptual art to reassure foreign visitors. Admittedly, it’s hard to reflect these things in your own practice, but surely, at the very least, one can refrain from cutesy tropes of international exchange. To be sure, this is not about the nobility of depth. On the contrary, the idea that local context needs to be dug up and carefully accounted for, like Ginseng shoots or childhood traumata, is possibly the most destructive of all. Instead, and I’m aware this will sound as wistful as a UNICEF Christmas calendar, what’s implied here is a methodology based on an ethics of prolonged listening, which implies in turn that there should be an awareness of limits and limitations, checks and balances—an acceptance to keep one’s site-specific opinions to oneself every once in a while, which, no doubt, is a highly distressing exercise for your average arts professional.

What makes it so unsettling is both the tenacious sense of entitlement to an opinion always and everywhere, and the even more tenacious division of labor between the material and the narrative overlay, the work and the discourse, the mediated and the mediation. What to do with, say, a potential locus of agency that is mediated in a nonverbal, contingent, fleeting manner, and is easily eclipsed due to issues of language skills, pure and simple, or due to the text/image duality which implies the former is to the latter as speech is to action, or thought is to bodies, and which structures the field’s most central modi operandi? The frame of this essay will hardly allow for my own flimsy, tenuous answers to this question. Suffice to say that if
editors, curators, and lecturers used half as much verbosity to address their own work, as opposed to covering the objects of their attention in narrative bombast … well that wouldn’t be so bad.

The reason it’s pertinent to drag in such a devastatingly enormous topic, so late in the essay, is because it pertains to the way agency-as-action and agency-as-body are routinely merged into one. Through a blinding gesture of mutual reinforcements, the doing and the doer both become visible in one fell swoop. Prompting magically adequate expressions with miraculating potential, allowing one to speak through a *socius*, as an agent thereof. It’s what many call “essentialism,” which is basically a question of form over context. The postcolonial school likes to uphold essentialisms that are strategic and well chosen, of which I believe “Euro-American art world” is an example. Much as “art world” subdivides the Catholics or the Conspirateurs, or the Atheist Choir Boys, the “strategic” element in the strategically essentialist equation, in the best of cases, amounts to persistent deconstructive critique of the theoretical and discursive overlay, with “persistent” in turn meaning a critique that unfolds also—but not exclusively—at the moment of triumph. Here’s the challenge: To critique persistently whether you’re addressing someone who is lying face down in the gutter, hungover, heartbroken and bankrupt, having just witnessed a biennial and all of its glittering agency, or whether you’re addressing the biennial itself.

**Notes**

In her recent series of photographs, Yto Barrada glimpses at life slipping away from law. A street in Tangier appears in one image from a bird’s-eye view, an angle that centers sight on the ground, crops out the urban surrounds, and renders the space depicted nondescript but consequently generates a richness of metaphorical play: While the pavement seems to melt into a sea across which an old schooner sails, the street’s horizontal expanse alternately transforms into a vertical wall that bars visual passage as if to block escape. The image visualizes a geopolitical conflict that is ironic. Whereas such colonial vessels once transported the glory of European civilization to darkest Africa, their current-day avatars suggest only an imaginary return voyage that occurs in reality against enormous odds. The ship, actually an intricate model named “Le Détroit”—also French for “The Strait”—is carried across Tangier’s Avenue d’Espagne by a young man peripherally located in the corner of the image. He holds the vessel at shoulder level, which obscures his face, removing his visage from the camera’s visual access. This representational dislocation, the blurring of human being and boat that distances a man from his community, is the visual effect of a figure becoming the vanishing point of citizenship.

Barrada, a Moroccan artist based in Tangier, has for several years concerned herself with the Strait of Gibraltar, that contentious divide between Africa and Europe where two continents nearly touch but mobility is strictly regulated. A Life Full of Holes: The Strait Project (1998–2004), represents this area less as vivid geography than as zone of desire, one split between the would-be émigré’s longing for escape and the expatriate’s homesickness. In the image of the street in Tangier the turbulence between these two positions seems to lift our vantage point to a disembodied height, the uncertainty of which indicates the ungrounding of any single interpretation. Pledged to a certain ambiguity, the scene depicts not only a drama of displacement but also the experiential conditions of the refugee that have already seeped into everyday life.

I begin with this provocative photograph because it both inspires and provides one answer to a question I am left with after considering Giorgio
Agency

Agamben’s concept of “bare life,” meaning, here, life stripped of political identity—as in the case of the refugee—and reduced to mere biological existence. How can one represent artistically a life severed from representation politically, and what are the implications regarding agency of such an artistic representation?

In his essay “Beyond Human Rights,” Agamben makes a startling declaration: “Inasmuch as the refugee, an apparently marginal figure, unhinges the old trinity of state-nation-territory, it deserves instead to be regarded as the central figure of our political history.” If so, then our understanding of subjectivity must surely change, and with it the philosophical basis of human rights. Because the refugee—a figure Agamben comes to generalize radically, referring to voluntary expats, destitute asylum-seekers, and economic migrants—presents the very instantiation of bare life, insofar as the refugee exists outside of the nation-state, it exposes the “originary fiction” of national sovereignty. “Rights, in other words, are attributed to the human being,” Agamben notes, “only to the degree to which he or she is the immediately vanishing presupposition (and, in fact, the presupposition that must never come to light as such) of the citizen.” For if this realization—that human beings have no inalienable rights—ever did come to light, as it does precisely in the case of the refugee, so would the realization that rights are assigned arbitrarily, and thus unjustly, by virtue of one’s nationality.

For me, these theoretical questions are not marginal to contemporary artistic practice; indeed they go right to its heart, as they endow art with urgency in this time of crisis in relation to political being. And they constitute the central issues that are systematically explored by those artists whose work is currently among the most compelling in the contemporary field. I will consider here examples from only three—Steve McQueen, Emily Jacir, and Yto Barrada—but certainly my list is incomplete. The representing of bare life, of course, is not my concern alone. Not only did the intersection between art and bare life form, most notably, a significant thematic component of Documenta 11 (2002), organized by Okwui Enwezor, it was also enlisted in the conceptualization of Documenta 12 (2007), directed by Roger Buergel and Ruth Noack, and included as a central concern of its international magazine project. In addition, the topic of art’s relation to bare life has been taken up in numerous critical studies and has informed several art exhibitions ever since.

How can one document bare life? The two terms might appear homologous: Just as bare life is life severed from political identity, so,
too, documentary representation is representation reduced to its essence, shed of aestheticization. According to Enwezor’s formulation, “The meaning of the term ‘documentary’ that was of philosophical interest to our main purpose in Documenta 11 … refers to Giorgio Agamben’s idea of bare life or naked life.”

There seems to be a necessary link between the two, so that the existence of bare life, as an essential form of life, is somehow its own documentary realization. Enwezor complicates this equation by hybridizing “the documentary mode” (defined as “a purposive forensic inclination concerned essentially with the recording of dry facts”) by joining it to “the idea of vérité” (“a process of unraveling, exploring, questioning, probing, analyzing, and diagnosing a search for truth”). Still, one might question the basis of this homology altogether, arguing conversely that the negativity of bare life, of life as absence within the political field, can simply not be consonant with the positivity of visual representation.

But what if to represent is to make absent? And what if the documentary mode is always a form of representation, always a construction requiring the process of interpretation, its meaning never univocal or unambiguous? This is an old realization for sure, but one that writers on documentary practice don’t always critically put to task. In the “life full of holes” that Yto Barrada depicts, the rupture from political status brings about a troubling of representation, seen in the fragmentations, elisions, and visual blockages that characterize her photographs. “It’s their political disenfranchisement that’s expressed in these characters trapped in a state of absence,” Barrada echoes. Bare life is not at all, it turns out, a natural condition of documentary practice.

That said, documentary representation today often serves the interests of the state—to identify, to recognize, to know, to control—according to which photography and video, positioned within ever new and expanding surveillance systems, operate as judicial and forensic evidence, and “truth” and “objectivity” live on through their continued institutional and legal validation. Indeed the documentation of bare life appears closely aligned to the exercise of state power. As an application of force against the body of those denied political rights, this function was revealed in the shocking images American military personnel took of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison, where photography itself was enlisted as an instrument of torture, where the exposure of bare life was simultaneously its constitution. Of course the wider implication of the “War on Terror” is that as technologies of reproduction become increasingly available, and as protections for civil liberties and privacy are gradually eroded, we—whether undocumented
workers, terrorists, or law-abiding citizens—are all placed in the position of being perpetually surveilled, and consequently stripped of our political rights against the encroachments of governmental power. Conversely in Barrada’s work, photography does not operate as a technique of identification; rather it enacts a visual subtraction of figures that is multivalent, both melancholy in the way it allegorizes the social devastation to Moroccan culture and promising in its liberation of life, where identification, for better or worse, is freed from representation, and where representation acknowledges its absences. The documentation of bare life, in other words, only takes place negatively, that is, indicated through the lacuna, blurs, and blind spots that mar the image, which opens up possibility for subjective invention within it, contesting the representational victimization of the subject stripped bare of political representation.

A further reason why the refugee deserves to be elevated to the position of the “central figure of our political history,” according to Agamben, is because it proposes the elemental unit of a postnational social formation. In this regard, it is telling that Agamben wrote his essay in 1993 during the jubilant years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the hopes of a new Europe liberated from national borders and promising creative possibilities for re-imagining identity beyond the nation-state. Just as Hannah Arendt in 1943—startlingly—thought that “Refugees driven from country to country represent the vanguard of their peoples,” insofar as “history is no longer a closed book to them and politics is no longer the privilege of Gentiles,”¹¹ so for Agamben “the condition of the countryless refugee” today represents “the paradigm of a new historical consciousness.”¹² The situation of Israel becomes a case in point for Agamben to draw out the potentiality of his theoretical repositioning of the refugee in terms of a radically new conception of community:

Instead of two national states separated by uncertain and threatening boundaries, it might be possible to imagine two political communities insisting on the same region and in a condition of exodus from each other—communities that would articulate each other via a series of reciprocal extraterritorialities in which the guiding concept would no longer be the ius (right) of the citizen but rather the refugium (refuge) of the singular.¹³

This eminently democratic proposal—made before the start of the second intifada but equally compelling today—is extended in turn to the imagined reinvention of Europe not as a unity of nations (the European
Union) but as an “ateritoriality or extraterritorial space” in which all inhabitants would exist “in a position of exodus”; “the status of European would then mean the being-in-exodus of the citizen.” This call for the transvaluation of aterritoriality into a positive status, however, is extremely complicated. It is especially so when extended to geopolitical contexts where neocolonial occupation drives an emancipatory movement defined not by the embrace of aterritoriality but rather by the struggle for national independence, which is posed as the only viable solution for a stateless people. Emily Jacir’s project Where We Come From (2001–3) opens up this complexity in relation to Palestinians and movingly gestures toward a related resolution.

“If I could do something for you, anywhere in Palestine, what would it be?” With this question, Jacir solicited requests from Palestinians living within or outside Israel and the Occupied Territories who face severe Israeli travel restrictions that prohibit movement within the country. Jacir, Palestinian but holding an American passport, could travel and fulfill these requests—to visit someone’s mother in Gaza, to walk the streets of Nazareth, to photograph another’s family in Lahia, to light a commemorative candle in Haifa, and so on. A series of photographs document her performances, each of which is paired next to a text panel in Arabic and English that records the original pleas and offers explanation of each participant’s political circumstances that has rendered their mobility impossible. Rather than show the Palestinians who made the requests, which would have risked grounding them in their subjection through the very documentary process, Jacir allegorizes their deprived political status through their visual absence, fragmenting identity and thereby revealing documentation, as a form of representation, to be only a partial recognition of personhood. The piece, then, dramatizes the parallel between political illegibility and representational erasure, where the existence of the exiled subject is conveyed only through a skeletal descriptive language reminiscent of a depersonalized bureaucratic discourse.

One might view Where We Come From as exemplifying the privation of human rights—such as the freedom of movement, personal independence, equality, protection from discrimination and degrading treatment, and the right to nationality—in order to encourage their extension to all Palestinians. The apparent solution, which this interpretation supports, would ostensibly be Palestinian nationalization, which would guarantee basic political protections, putting right the wrongs suffered by those under occupation. This struggle identifies what is at stake for those commentators
who privilege the Palestinian-ness of Jacir's work over and above its relation to exile, diaspora, and mobility—terms of occasionally uncritical celebration within recent art-critical discourse—and seek to return Jacir's piece to its origins in “the localized context of Palestinian artistic expression and practice,” as critic Rasha Salti puts it.17

To dislocate Jacir's work from its geopolitical field by ascribing it to a fashionable category of contemporary art is tantamount to eviscerating and depoliticizing her practice. But to argue conversely that “Emily Jacir stands first and foremost as a Palestinian artist” raises its own specters, the most obvious being the resurrection of a nationalist framework to determine the meaning and significance of her art as well as its political agenda. The belief that national sovereignty will restore human rights, however, is questionable—in fact, the opposite appears to be more likely. The nation-state is the very power uniquely authorized to suspend law when it sees fit, creating a state of emergency—that zone of indeterminacy between law and non-law that opens a space for extrajudicial brutality (e.g., torture and executions) that is sometimes the fate of bare life—which is now threatening to become the rule.18 In reality Palestinians already exist in the shadow of the nation-state, precariously inhabiting Israel's seemingly permanent state of exception.19 While Jacir's work certainly does bear an inextricable relation to Palestinian identity, this framework cannot, in my view, delegitimize the recognition that her artwork holds within itself the potential to inhabit ever new contexts of reception. It thereby transforms exile into a corrosive force against the determination of nationality, and does so on the international stage where the artist chooses to exhibit.

Jacir's art is profoundly moving for its ability to cut through the polarized oppositions that deadlock political dialogue and perpetuate the conflict in order to engender a humane compassion between people. In Where We Come From, this relation is activated by the artist inhabiting the virtual position of another who is the subject of privation—the one who cannot go on a date in East Jerusalem, who cannot walk in Nazareth, and so on—but it is soon extended to the audience. When the viewer looks at the photographs, it becomes clear that he or she is inserted into them in the first person, as if that were my shadow floating across the grave or me who is on a date with this young woman whose quizzical gaze meets my own. This perceptual structure approximates the “reciprocal extraterritoriality” described by Agamben. The challenge of this work, then, is located not so much in thinking about how human rights might be extended to the refugee status of Palestinian identity within the
conceptual boundaries of the nation (though this is also a possibility) but rather in considering that figure as a “limit concept” that requires the creation of altogether new categories. Jacir’s project demands a renegotiation of one’s relationship to the Middle East conflict by engendering new virtual sites of identification beyond those determined by opposed national communities, however modest its immediate effects. Its promise is to imagine the possibilities of relating to exile by exiling oneself, which is the perceptual experience of Jacir’s art, and then to suggest a possible social formation, system of rights, and collective relation to territory, that is both constitutive of Palestinian identity and beyond the exclusionary logic of nationalism.

This is no mere aestheticization of politics, where art gives expression to freedom in lieu of its realization in reality; indeed to reveal new sources of possibility and restore hope for a future different from today’s course is the very ethico-political force of this art. Here the future is no longer a closed book, and politics is no longer the privilege of the dominant order—an achievement, also, of Steve McQueen’s.

In a recent show in Paris, McQueen presented two works that, between them, explore the rush of possibility that accompanies the release from subjection. Portrait as an Escapologist (2006), a series of photographic images depicting the artist with hands and feet bound by metal shackles, greeted visitors as soon as they entered the Marian Goodman Gallery. Appearing one after the next in grid formation like the repetition of proliferating posters or a patterned expanse of wallpaper, the images invoke a long history of artistic projects that have made plays on photography put to task by law to capture life, from Duchamp’s Wanted: $2000 Reward (1923) to Warhol’s Most Wanted (1964). Those precedents parodied official representations of the subject, flaunting its transgression of law to spite the documentary return to order. In McQueen’s piece the subject appears apprehended, bound physically as much as caught photographically. Yet the obviously posed figure of the artist, shot against a nondescript background and appearing smartly dressed in a neatly pressed white shirt, dark trousers, and polished black shoes, speaks with tongue in cheek, implying that this man will not stay trapped for long, for McQueen’s second piece brings about a release of the self from the grips of identity.

Descending to the basement level of the gallery, one entered a cavernous space that was completely dark, which was the context for McQueen’s second piece, Pursuit (2006). Punctuated only by flickering lights appearing
like uneven raindrops in all directions, the gallery was filled with ambiguous sounds of rumbling and dragging heard from somewhere overhead, as if someone was trying to free himself from containment in the space above. In the few intense minutes before one's eyes adjusted to the darkness, the void completely defamiliarized perceptual relations by removing all visual markers of spatial orientation. The installation effectively created a zone of indeterminacy in which the visitor could only navigate tentatively, recalling David Hammons's installation *Concerto in Black and Blue* (2003), in which the immense space of Ace Gallery in New York was thrown into a blackout and visitors, provided with miniature pressure-activated LED lights, were invited to explore the empty galleries, filling them with a pulsating web of blue luminosity.

Because the reflective environment of *Pursuit* produced the illusion of an abstract play of lights dissociated from material support and extended to infinity by luminous reverberations, it created a disruption of the normal relation between tactility and opticality. In this immersive space of precarious mobility and bodily uncertainty, where walking into walls, columns, and other bodies became a probability, one was forced to navigate the room more by touch than vision. Moreover, light itself became the sign for material presence and was physicalized against a black void, even while the sense of touch became a substitute for the visual scanning of space. What the installation achieved was the disorganization of sensation, disrupting the body's habitual relation to the world and others within it. This meant dissolving the space of individual self-possession, upsetting the sanctity of its proprietary territory, as one's personal location was surrendered to indeterminacy. With the withdrawal of visual perception from even the body's area of physical being came the blurring of the normally clear distinctions between self and other, as well as inside and outside. Consequently, at least for a brief period of time when defamiliarization was at its height, one experienced precisely the aterritoriality Agamben mentions, “where exterior and interior indetermine each other.” Faced with this deforming situation, *Pursuit* compelled visitors to recreate anew perceptual and physical relations to others, as the specific qualities that normally construct identity—fashion, bodily appearance, markers of class, race, gender—were stripped from the self by the darkness. While McQueen's work wasn't framed by an explicit thematics of denationalization, it nonetheless opened a line of flight from determination that eluded political inscription.

Stepping back, it becomes clear that these two projects were thoughtfully interconnected: Whereas *The Escapologist* indicts documentary photography
as performing the regimentation of the subject akin to a form of imprisonment, enmeshing it within its matrix of repetition and visibility, and making of it a challenge to his talents of flight, Pursuit catalyzes the diffusion of being into a phenomenological experience of becoming.23 It would be a mistake, however, to read McQueen’s work as advancing the viewer’s virtualization and mystification within the framework of a thoroughly institutionalized space (the commercial art gallery), thus confusing escapology with escapism; for his pieces revealed this arena to be conflicted between the forces of capture and release. McQueen’s work acknowledged and evaded this jail of institutionalization (of identity, of containment, of categorization) through multiple means, including a strategic employment of technology whereby video is directed against its own capacity to mesmerize and pacify its viewer; the transgression of cinematic conventions, creating an open plan without structured seating for optimized disorientation; and the exposure and subversion of documentary photography’s reifying functions.

By achieving this escape from the grips of representation, Pursuit engenders an extreme form of being-in-exodus that proposes an experimental social arena different from the other examples considered here. The installation distinguishes itself from Barrada’s melancholy gaze at the erosion of Moroccan identity in the face of expatriation, which in mourning its loss potentially energizes its reconstruction, and equally differs from Jacir’s attempts to build a political community around a sharing of the experience of exile that is distinctly Palestinian yet beyond nation-state identity. But like the projects of these other artists, Pursuit creates its own state of exception, which demands a creative redefinition of one’s relation to the self and to others, figuring as a phenomenological precursor to the political negotiation of social relations. As in the work of Barrada and Jacir, bare life does not designate merely the literal condition of being a refugee, with all it implies of existential distress and inhumane mistreatment; rather with McQueen’s work it opens an area of indeterminacy between law and life encouraging the experimental re-creation of being in the world—prompting the construction of agency beyond human rights. Upon the erosion of constituted forms of regulation, life is invited to negotiate its own identity and relationships to others anew. What if more came to accept this invitation? Only in such a world where “the citizen has been able to recognize the refugee that he or she is,” Agamben writes, “is the political survival of humankind today thinkable.”24 With these artworks, this recognition has now begun.
Notes

1 This text represents a condensed reworking of ideas first given form in “Life Full of Holes,” *Grey Room*, no. 24 (Fall 2006), pp. 72–88.


7 For instance, Grant Kester once wrote: “If social documentary can be recuperated as a new documentary, it is precisely because it was never entirely aestheticized in the first place.” See “Toward a New Social Documentary,” *Afterimage* 14: 8 (March 1987), p. 14.


9 Ibid., p. 101. He continues, “The hinge for the examination of naked or bare life is the vérité/documentary space.”

10 “Barrada in Conversation with Nadia Tazi,” in Barrada, op. cit., p. 60.


15 However, given the current conflict this mobility would no longer be possible for her.
16 See for instance the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the General Assembly of the United Nations, adopted December 10, 1948, which includes these rights.
20 We must abandon “the fundamental concepts through which we have so far represented the subjects of the political (Man, the Citizen and its rights, but also the sovereign people, the worker, and so forth) and build our political philosophy anew starting from the one and only figure of the refugee.” Agamben, “Beyond Human Rights,” op. cit. p. 16.
23 For me this figures as a further instance of the escape from regimentation that McQueen performs in Western Deep, where he develops the critique and reinvention of documentary representation in the course of exploring the brutal labor conditions of migrant workers within a gold mine in South Africa. I explore this work at length in “The Art of Darkness: On the Work of Steve McQueen,” October 114 (Fall 2005), pp. 61–89.
Until modernism, there had been in the Western tradition a strong connection between art and religion, with the former often functioning in the service of the latter. During the twentieth century, many artists embraced technology and engaged with the present, finding other ends for making art, whether personal exploration, philosophical exegesis, or political commitment. The contemporary art world for the most part is secular, while many societies around the world, with a few notable exceptions in Western Europe and elsewhere, have seen an increase in religious conviction. This is especially true for places where the Abrahamic religions dominate. Indeed, the fundamentalist strands of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism have profoundly impacted recent geopolitical events, and have become a defining feature of the times. As Sven Lütticken argues in “Monotheism à la Mode” the aesthetic and the religious are never completely separated, and both contemporary art and fundamentalist strands of religions share a history with the many manifestations of iconoclasm.

With fundamentalism, a more literal conception of the world emerges, one in which the past may be celebrated, the present derided, and the future (as the time of redemption) solicited. This is precisely what Terri Weissman observes in the contemporary American political landscape in her essay “Freedom’s Just Another Word.” It is no coincidence that many of the political, economic, and cultural factors that constitute globalization have fostered fundamentalist belief, making religion of this sort both a refuge and often a form of resistance to a world difficult to tolerate. Fundamentalism runs parallel to contemporary art, and its literalism puts
it at odds with the diversity of opinions, approaches, and worldviews that make up contemporary art and its contexts; it likewise pressures distinctions between visual culture and high art. Atteqa Ali, for example, reveals this very situation in her “On the Frontline: The Politics of Terrorism in Contemporary Pakistani Art.”
There is a specter haunting the world—and, attempts to revive communism notwithstanding, it is the specter of religion. After the much-trumpeted end of ideologies and the alleged end of history, after 1989, the contestation of triumphant capitalism has often taken on overtly religious forms. Even if religion has routinely been criticized by the left for being fundamentally a-historical in its worldview, this has never stopped it from being a major historical force. But to speak about “religion” as such is to accept the simplifications of those secularists for whom all religion is the same, namely unenlightened. What exactly are we dealing with in the apparent return of religion?

The dominant religions in the upheavals after the fall of the Eastern Bloc, and even more so after 9/11, have been the monotheistic “Abrahamic” religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For secularists, the latter in particular has come to stand for the nefarious, fundamentalist nature of religion as such, and especially of monotheism with its intolerant core (“Thou shalt have no other gods”). On the other hand, and rather oddly, some militant anti-Islam agitators claim that Islam is really not a religion at all, but an aggressive ideology masquerading as a faith.1 One way or another, many parties appear to accept a claim made by both Muslim, Christian, and Jewish fundamentalists: that they represent the essence of their respective faiths, that they speak in its name, in the only authentic voice. This is the real triumph of fundamentalism: that even those who claim to fight it accept its basic (and untenable) claim. While allegedly going back to their religion’s sources, its authentic kernel, the fundamentalists obliterate centuries of exegesis and contestation, of enrichment and polyvalence. If we accept this, then religion will indeed have been permanently remade by fundamentalists from Khomeini to Pat Robertson.

What is the role, or what are the possible roles, of art in all this? Frequently, it is seen as part of the mission of modern and contemporary art to be critical, which means that art should also comment on and intervene in the new “image wars.” However, such a conception remains rather external if we don’t emphasize that the aesthetic can never completely rid itself of the theological, and vice versa; that art is always already embroiled in image wars, and that these wars are never entirely secular; that we are dealing with
branching and multiple histories of iconoclasm, in which both contemporary fundamentalism and contemporary art are inscribed.\textsuperscript{2}

**Return of the Toad**

One ironical consequence of the secularization of Europe since the 1960s, which saw an exodus from Catholic and Protestant churches, is that this has proved beneficial precisely to those who stand for everything that the “quitters” resent most: the conservatives, the reactionaries, and the fundamentalists.\textsuperscript{3} One is reminded here of the famous remark made by Greta Garbo as the eponymous Ninotchka in Ernst Lubitsch’s film (1939), when asked about the latest news from Moscow: “The mass trials were a great success. There will be fewer, but better Russians.” For Pope Benedict XVI, it is a good thing when bad, “modernist” Catholics leave the church; the church will be all the better, purer for it, untainted by a secularist modern culture. In this sense, the “return of religion” is in fact a retreat, a defensive walling-in, quite distinct from, for instance, postwar attempts to forge a modern religious art, for which even atheist modernists like Matisse and Le Corbusier were roped in.

On the other hand, the militant, politicized avant-garde engaged in attacks on organized religion. Blaspheming was second nature to the surrealists, and after the Second World War a younger generation of bohemian artists and intellectuals took over. In 1950, a group belonging to the Lettrist movement disturbed the Easter Mass that was being celebrated at Notre Dame in Paris, a service that was being broadcast live on television. Dressed as a Dominican monk, during a quiet moment one of the conspirators started to proclaim a text that could hardly be more shocking at a ceremony celebrating the resurrection of Christ:

\begin{verbatim}
I accuse the Catholic Church of swindling,
I accuse the Catholic Church of infecting the world with its funereal morality,
Of being the running sore on the decomposed body of the West.
Verily I say unto you: God is dead,
We vomit the agonizing insipidity of your prayers,
For your prayers have been the greasy smoke over the battlefields of our Europe.\textsuperscript{4}
\end{verbatim}

The affair increased tensions between a more moderate and a radical wing in Isidore Isou’s Lettrist movement, eventually leading to a number of the
radicals forming the Lettrist international, which in 1957 would join forces with a number of other people and micro-movements to form the Situationist International (SI). Attacks on religion, especially the dominant religion in the West, Christianity, remained an important ingredient in the theory and practice of the Lettrist/SI, which Guy Debord increasingly modeled along Marxist lines, presenting it as a new incarnation of the First International, dedicating it to the overthrow of the hyper-capitalist Society of the Spectacle. Any serious contestation of this society could only be hindered by religion; after all, according to Marx the aim should be to tear away the “mystic veil” that occludes our sight of the true nature of productive relations and exploitations.5

When students, in part inspired by the SI, revolted in May 1968, some of their slogans were iconoclastic and blasphemous with a vengeance. “A bas le crapaud de Nazareth,” “Down with the toad from Nazareth,” one slogan proclaimed—as if in anticipation of a small scandal in 2008, when the Pope and local Catholics objected to a sculpture by Martin Kippenberger depicting a cartoon-like frog on a cross, that was being shown at the Museion in Bozen (South Tyrol, Italy).6 This affair once more pitted a dogmatic church against irreverent and frivolous modern art—but is a gesture such as Kippenberger’s, as an iconoclastic gesture, not also an intrinsic part of the history of monotheism? To be sure, the term iconoclasm is often used in a loose way for various gestures of defacement that have no religious background; and yet, many seemingly secular iconoclasms can be seen as continuing and radicalizing religious iconoclasm. Can the rigid division between secular, critical art and anti-modern religion really be upheld? Is monotheism itself not a machine of profanation?

Iconoclasm: A Modernology

The riots and protests occasioned by the Danish cartoons of the prophet Mohammed reflected not only anger (however manipulated) at the fact that Mohammed was caricatured, but also that he was depicted at all. After all, this is a breach of the ban on depicting the prophet, which is derived from a certain interpretation of the Mosaic ban on idolatry. The current image wars represent a new wave of the monotheistic idolatry critique enshrined in the Second Commandment in Exodus 20:4, forbidding graven images “or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” This is elaborated upon in Deuteronomy 4:15–19, where the Israelites are reminded that they
“saw no manner of similitude on the day that the LORD spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire,” and that representations of people and animals should be avoided because they might lead to “corruption,” to worshipping of these images (a similar danger existing in the case of the sun, moon, and stars).

These are, in effect, two prohibitions: God must not be represented, and living creatures (and the planets) must not be represented so as to avoid idolatry. But the first error, or sin, is idolatry as well. Idolatry is not only the worship of false gods but also the worship of Jehovah in an image; the image itself becomes a false god.\(^7\) At first, worshipping other gods was a real temptation; later, when this was no longer a danger, idolatrous tendencies within Jewish monotheism were seen as a risk. In practice, the degree to which images were made and the way in which they were used over the centuries varied widely in the Jewish religion, as well as in Christianity and—to a somewhat lesser degree—in Islam. The Christian doctrine of the incarnation mitigated the ban on the depiction of God and his creation; God had become man, the word had become flesh, and therefore open to depiction. Of course, Byzantine iconoclasts and Protestants argued that such images could still be put to idolatrous use, sometimes adding that images of Christ could only represent one of his two natures, the physical one, not his divinity.\(^8\)

The Muslim fear of a relapse into shirk, the “associating” of other deities or powers with God, manifests itself in a rather extreme ban on tasweer, on images that might stimulate such idolatry. While the Qur’an refers to Golden Calf, much more explicit pronouncements against image-making are to be found in the later Hadith, sayings attributed to the Prophet.\(^9\) But although contemporary Western as well as Islamists ideologues are intent on making Islam appear monolithic, the ban on depicting Mohammed himself was subject to successive waves of radicalization and relaxation and is not as universal as some contemporary ideologists suggest, as quite a number of old miniatures show. The repression of such unwelcome historical complexities allows fundamentalists to create a Manichean dichotomy between Islam and the idolatrous West—the new jahiliyya. This discourse can be seen as a more radical form of the Christian critique of Western culture.

For Christians, the Roman Empire remained the paradigm of an idolatrous society. Roman games in particular had been attacked by Tertullian in his *De Spectaculis* as prime examples of eidolatreia, and the fascination for Roman spectacle and decadence in late-nineteenth-century
and early-twentieth-century culture, from the paintings of Gérome and Alma-Tadema to later film productions, suggested that modern society might be a Rome returned—the triumph of idolatry disguised by Christian rhetoric. However, the Christian criticism of capitalist modernity was increasingly supplanted by a secularized discourse hailing from the Enlightenment and shaped by, yet also transforming and transcending, its monotheistic roots.

In *Du Culte des dieux fétiches* (1760), a text that encapsulates the Enlightenment’s transformation of monotheistic topoi into instruments of secular critique, Charles de Brosses claimed to unveil the most primitive form of religion, the embryonic first stirrings of idolatry: fetishism, or the worship of random objects rather than statues or other man-made images. Although the Enlightenment submitted religious dogma to an open-ended critique, this opposition of dogma and critique should not obscure the fact that the gesture of “revealing” gods to be idols or long-held truths to be superstitions is fundamentally the same, and that monotheistic discourse on pagan religion constituted a nascent form of critique—an idolatry critique transformed by modern critique of religions and society. In *Du Culte des dieux fétiches* (1760), a text that encapsulates the Enlightenment’s transformation of monotheistic topoi into instruments of secular critique, Charles de Brosses claimed to unveil the most primitive form of religion, the embryonic first stirrings of idolatry: fetishism, or the worship of random objects rather than statues or other man-made images. Although the Enlightenment submitted religious dogma to an open-ended critique, this opposition of dogma and critique should not obscure the fact that the gesture of “revealing” gods to be idols or long-held truths to be superstitions is fundamentally the same, and that monotheistic discourse on pagan religion constituted a nascent form of critique—an idolatry critique transformed by modern critique of religions and society.  

Religious dogmatism already contained the seeds of critique, just as critique may still be crucially dependant on dogma. In a letter written shortly after Theodor W. Adorno’s death, in which he attempted to explain why his friend had not been buried in accordance with Jewish rites, Max Horkheimer claimed that critical theory was based on the second commandment—the ban on representations of God, or, in more fundamentalist interpretations, of representation of all living beings. Modern critical theory, in other words, analyzed and opposed fascism and the culture industry as latter-day idolatry.

Although Horkheimer’s remark was obviously made during highly emotional circumstances, it is true that the modern critique of representation is in many ways a transformation of the monotheistic discourse on idolatry: The divine commandment fostered a suspicious and critical mentality that was finally turned against dogma itself. From De Brosses to Marx and beyond, the concept of the fetish as a primitive precursor of the idol still derives from monotheistic idolatry critique; Marx, of course, turned De Brosses’s African proto-idol into a capitalist commodity fetish, just as irrational and mystifying. However, in contrast to “idols” according to monotheism, such fetishes are seen as a betrayal of what true humanity might be rather than as transgressions of divine law. The difference between an early Christian diatribe such as Tertullian’s *De Spectaculis* and Guy
Debord’s Marxian treatise on *The Society of the Spectacle* is immense, even if the latter is indebted—however indirectly—to the former.

**The Profanations of Art**

Iconoclasm is profanation in action. The opposition of sacred and profane came to the fore in modern theory in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when religious scholars and anthropologists moved from a focus on beliefs and myths to a focus on religious practice, on behavior, on the enactment of myth, on the ritualistic and social dimension of religion—a development associated with names such as Robertson Smith and Emile Durkheim and his school. Both time and space now came to be seen as being radically split: Profane time finds its opposite in the sacred time of myth, actualized in rituals, and profane space finds its complement in the sacred space of cult sites. These oppositions were valid for practically all societies. Only in the West had time increasingly been homogenized, and space as well, major cathedrals increasingly being visited for art-historical rather than religious reasons—a mode of behavior immortalized by E. M. Forster in the “Santa Croce Without a Baedeker” chapter of *A Room With a View* (1908).

But narratives of progressive and linear secularization are highly questionable. In the 1930s, Georges Bataille desperately attempted to create new myths and rituals to counter the appeal that Nazism held for many, with its technocratic re-enchantment of the world. Not all forms of re-sacralization necessarily take conveniently regressive, archaizing forms. A few years after Bataille, Adorno and Horkheimer came to the conclusion that in capitalist and democratic societies the Enlightenment too was reverting into myth—because of the increasing reduction of ratio to mere “purposive rationality,” a rationality interested only in technocratic effectiveness. And had not Marx already, polemically, presented the commodity as a fetish brimming with “theological whims”? Bataille had actually seen commodities as the epitome of profanation, as purely useful, “this-worldy” goods that were denied the sacralizing ritual of the Potlatch—a wanton destruction of goods, taking them out of the profane realm. (*Potlatch* was also the title of the Lettrist International’s cryptic newsletter in the 1950s.)

However, as Giorgio Agamben has argued in recent years, a complete profanation may coincide with sacralization. Agamben has focused on the Latin term “sacer,” which can refer both to something elevated, dedicated to the gods, and to someone who has been cursed and cast out from society.
Is the commodity, with its seemingly autonomous exchange value, not precisely something that is set apart from lived reality? Is the commodity’s use value not an extra-economical surplus? In the current economy, Agamben argues, everything that is produced—including the human body, language, sexuality—is relegated to a separate sphere that, paradoxically, covers the whole of existence; it is the sphere of consumption, which is different from use. Consumption is the spectacle of use. “If to profane means to return to common use that which has been removed to the sphere of the sacred, the capitalist religion in its extreme phase aims at creating something absolutely unprofanable.”

In the wake of romanticism, modern art in the nineteenth, but also in the twentieth century, has often attempted to “re-enchant” or re-sacralize the world. Before the somewhat corporate “modern religious art” movement of the postwar years, there had been attempts by artists ranging from Caspar David Friedrich to Paul Gauguin to have their paintings function as altarpiece—to create a new Christian art. For the historical avant-garde, it was obvious that such projects had failed and were bound to fail, and yet, for all their intransigent attacks on organized religion, the surrealists and Georges Bataille’s various groups (especially Acéphale) attempted to create new myths, new aura.

In many ways, such avant-garde movements were a form of radicalized romanticism, creating a dialectic of iconoclastic profanation and mystification and re-enchantment. As deluded as Breton or Bataille may have been about the possibilities for action in the interwar years, what can be taken from them is the refusal to subscribe to any single linear scenario. Art is always to some extent entangled in its commodified and quasi-sacred status; it may be an important iconoclastic task for contemporary art to critique the aura of today’s image commodities, including those produced by media-savvy religious fundamentalists, but this is not to say that art could ever attain a status of pure “profanity.”

Among the more successful and important postwar projects that put art in the service of the sacred while (conversely) sacralizing art is the nondenominational Rothko Chapel in Houston (1971)—the chapel of a religion that does not exist, pure religiosity without dogma and even without much in the way of specific content and convictions. The chapel was a commission from patrons John and Dominique de Menil. In 1974 their daughter Philippa and her husband, art dealer Heiner Friedrich, created the Dia Foundation, focusing on large-scale projects by artists such as Walter de Maria and Donald Judd. Having converted to Sufism, the
mystical form of Islam, the couple also funded religious projects through Dia, such as a mosque on Mercer Street in New York, which was equipped with Dan Flavin lights.\textsuperscript{17}

While Flavin only barely tolerated this recontextualization of his work, the constellation of minimalist aesthetics and ascetic religiosity created by Friedrich and de Menil is suggestive. This is not to say, of course, that the white cube and the mosque can be equated any more than the white cube and the church or chapel. The most productive approach, beyond the equally doomed alternatives of rampant sacralization and pure profanation of contemporary art, might be to treat art as a field that is uniquely positioned to examine and intervene in the dialectic of profanation and (re-) sacralization. A black-and-white photograph by Lidwien van de Ven called *Islamic Center, Vienna* (2000), which shows three believers praying in a space whose ornamented austerity recalls some forms of arts and crafts and art nouveau, suggests parallels with modernist notions of aesthetic contemplation—and enacts a different, critical, and reflective approach to the image precisely by doing so. Rather than proclaiming murky sameness, van de Ven’s image relates to the cult space in a complicated game of repetition and difference.

**Erasures**

If *Islamic Center* was still printed as a photograph in a conventional manner, in recent years van de Ven usually applied her photos—frequently made in the Middle East, including some of the countries where in 2011 non-Islamist revolutions would challenge cherished European preconceptions and fears about the region—directly onto the gallery walls as posters. One important motif in her recent work is the full-body veil, which has figured in Western media extensively since 9/11 as an image of frightening Muslim an-iconocity. The veiling of women is seen as a cognate of spectacular acts of terrorist iconoclasm such the blowing up of the Bamiyan Buddhas—and, indeed, in countries such as Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia it does function as such, women being forced to submit to draconian sartorial edicts. What is problematical is the identification of these unacceptable practices with a monolithic “Islam as such,” which ultimately only increases the appeal of full-body veils and encourages their use as an image of otherness in media wars—as shown in van de Ven photographs such as *London, 4 September 2004: International Hijab Solidarity Day*. Like most of her works in recent
years, this photograph is shown in art spaces as a large print glued directly onto the walls, emphasizing the public status of the image.

The photo is a medium close-up of two women of whose faces only the eyes are visible (one wearing glasses) and a similarly black-clad teenage girl whose face is visible, protesting amidst a throng of onlookers, some of whom appear to be taking pictures. A man in the back wears sunglasses, an acceptable form of disguise that functions as the negative of the women’s veiled faces. In an exhibition in France, van de Ven had this and other photos covered with a thin layer of white paint, with the image still showing through to some extent—an erasure that heightens the image’s potency by problematizing it, making it difficult to read. At other times, the artist has included completely monochrome black or white surfaces in her exhibitions, which contrast with but also complement and complete her photos. While the latter are usually understated and mutated reflections, at times they develop a satirical bite; one shows a banner advertising the “heroes and leaders of Islam,” Iranian Shiite saints such as Khomeini and Ahmadinejad, with a TNT logo in the background—a reminder of the use of contemporary means of global communication by those who pretend to be able to turn back time.

Sometimes van de Ven incorporates external attacks on her images into her work. The photo Ramallah 11/09/2006 (Boy Sitting) (2010), printed on a large size as most of her other images, is grainier than most. The boy sitting in a doorway hides his face as if refusing to submit to the photographer’s gaze. When the work was shown at the Van Abbemuseum, visitors were informed that the image’s graininess was due to the fact that “the artist’s films were repeatedly and unnecessarily scanned at Ben-Gurion airport in Tel Aviv in an apparent attempt to destroy the negatives.” The resultant image was questionable from the beginning and questions its own status. Always latently a graven image, the work of art’s critique can never be fundamentalist; it is impure and always incomplete, suggesting another step into a history that is, against all odds, open-ended.

Notes


2 See also my book Idols of the Market: Modern Iconoclasm and the Fundamentalist Spectacle (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009).
One needs to distinguish between these terms: Roughly, one might state that conservatives oppose innovations and perverse traditions, while reactionaries actively want to turn back time, though not to the extent of fundamentalists, who aim to recover the lost purity of their religions’ beginnings. Catholicism is not conducive to fundamentalism strictly speaking; centuries of exegesis and theological creativity are such an essential element of Catholicism that one can hardly wipe them away and remain a Catholic. To do so would be to become a Protestant, a branch of Christianity much more given to fundamentalism. This is not to deny, of course, that contemporary Catholic reactionaries have much in common with fundamentalist Protestants.


Halbertal and Margalit posit the following “chain of criticism of religion”: the criticism of idolatry by monotheism, the criticism of folk religion by the religious Enlightenment, the criticism of religion in general by the secular Enlightenment, and finally the criticism of ideology. Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, Idolatry, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 112.


After the Second World War, Mircea Eliade would reduce this approach to a rather schematic but influential model.


Agamben’s writings, which combine impulses from Debord and Walter Benjamin, among others, have been attacked for the tendency “to suspect a crypto-theological background for any and all phenomena,” and for creating untenable analogies rather than forging concrete historical connections or writing a coherent history of ideas. Yet making montages of phenomena that may be far apart in time or in context is indispensable if one wants to move beyond history as the chronological arrangement of a series of tableaus that each represent an internally coherent and closed culture.


See Alexander Keeffe, “Whirling in the West,” in Bidoun, no. 23 (2011), www.bidoun.org/magazine/23-squares/whirling-in-the-west-by-alexander-keefe/. When Dia was restructured in the mid-1980s, the Mercer Street Mosque was closed. Its later, smaller post-Dia incarnation was at some point home to Imam Rauf, famous for initiating the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque.”

In 2011, van de Ven showed one of her “blanks” in response to censorship. Some time before, Bloomberg Space in London had axed a show of van de Ven’s work for political reasons, her work apparently being deemed too critical of Israel. A second attempt by the artist and this institution to find a modus vivendi led to renewed censorship. This time a photo of the launch of a new German right-wing, anti-Islam party called Die Freiheit could not be shown, apparently because of Bloomberg Space’s dependency on the Bloomberg headquarters in New York, which involved a long and complicated veto process. The photograph mainly shows a wall with the party’s name in various languages against a blue sky with clouds. This time, the artist let the show go ahead, but replaced the image in question with a monochrome rectangular field. See Monika Szewczyk, “Black, White and Grey Matters” (2011), Afterall online, www.afterall.org/online/black-white-and-grey-matters. The photograph was published as an illustration to Tom Holert’s article “Birth of the Rebel Citizen in Germany,” e-flux, no. 22 (January 2011), http://e-flux.com/journal/view/204.
Protest Scene

Those watching, reading, and listening to the news from November 28 through December 3, 1999, learned that the city of Seattle was effectively shut down by the actions of thousands of citizens protesting the Ministerial of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The WTO is an international trade body that administers global trade rules, though for those few days in Seattle, it became the focal point for concerns not only about WTO rules, but also about how those rules prioritize commercial or corporate interests over environmental, consumer, safety, and labor protections, as well as human rights. The images occasioned by these events could not have been more spectacular, with scenes of lootings, fires, and policeman dispensing tear gas, alongside those revealing women and men stripped naked despite the winter chill in demonstration against brand name bullies (GAP, Nike, Starbucks, McDonald's, Microsoft …). Viewers were shown police dressed in riot gear confronting protesters outside the convention center and local hotels: protesters in turtle suits, giant puppets, anarchists who called themselves the black bloc, rubber bullets, pepper spray, broken windows, and buses frozen in place by hand-holding nonviolent protesters. Ultimately, newscasters reported that the mayor declared a no-go zone and imposed a curfew.

Sensationalized pictures of the dramatic violence that transformed Seattle into an abstracted warzone characterized the mainstream news coverage of the Battle in Seattle, as it is now known. These images are what we might describe as sanctioned, by which I mean: official not in the sense of having been approved by some governing body, but conforming to a set of prescribed codes that dictate how information is staged for mediatized representation. But these are not the only extant pictures. A series of photographs produced by the artist Allan Sekula in a work titled Waiting for Tear Gas (white globe to black), from 1999–2000, are particularly effective counter-images. Unlike the above-described scenes of near societal dissolution and where predetermined news industry formats triumph over the event itself, his pictures re-appropriate the information process by, for instance, refusing to depict the crowd from above as an uncontrollable
mob, or showing protesters as nothing more than (wacky) individuals.¹ Sekula chronicles one chaotic day of walking through Seattle, interacting with the protesters, which yields sometimes seemingly banal pictures but ultimately provides a reoriented documentary practice where an emphasis on the durational strategically rejects the instantaneity of the media event.²

Waiting for Tear Gas has been installed as a slide installation in galleries, where it consists of eighty-one images, and it appears as a photo-essay at the end of a book about the Seattle protests (5 Days that Shook the World: Seattle and Beyond, by Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair) where it consists of thirty-two printed images. These are two quite different formats, and it is worth noting how Sekula effectively uses both to establish a space of contemplation outside of our mediatized world. Sekula is an artist whose work has long maintained a tension between aesthetics and politics, or between photography’s autonomy and its relation to life. Within the context of the book, Waiting for Tear Gas functions as a rejoinder to the mainstream media’s pictures of Seattle, which longed to turn images of the event into merely a passing moment in the mass-production of spectacle, in the manner already discussed. Similarly, presented as a gallery exhibition, Sekula’s work, while still demanding engagement and commitment from viewers, also provides the contemplative distance necessary to maintain a kind of provisional or relative autonomy of his work from the representations it opposes.

About Waiting for Tear Gas Sekula writes that his guiding principle was “to move with the flow of protest, from dawn to 3 a.m. if need be, taking in the lulls, the waiting and the margins of events.” He continues, “The rule of thumb for this sort of anti-photojournalism [is] no flash, no telefoto lens, no gas mask, no auto-focus, no press pass and no pressure to grab at all costs the one defining image of dramatic violence.”³ In this simple, short statement, Sekula outlines his refusal to show theatrical scenes of violence, which might feed the media’s appetite for the quick-lived sensational shot. The project apprehends time, and produces a sense of waiting and delay, and in so doing refuses the spectacular as such. Sekula’s decision to focus on the lulls and margins of the protest is key, for it leads him to produce, on the part of the viewer, an actual feeling of pause. Delay emerges both on the level of content (in some photographs we see representations of waiting, with people hanging out and wandering around), as well as formally (meaning is deferred as the sequence of images gradually unfolds as part of a political process that depends upon the viewer). The viewer in this construction mirrors the protesters’ position: We too are waiting, sensing
that something extraordinary might happen (or is supposed to have happened), something that might puncture our established, mundane framework for understanding the world.4

Yet we never see that thing, that event—only its preparation, sidelines, and after-effects. Waiting for Tear Gas might thus be thought of as representing nothing—and deliberately so. That is to say, in their simultaneous representation and enactment of the experience of waiting, Sekula's photographs effectively capture both the event's prior unintelligibility (prior to its happening the enormity and impact of the Battle in Seattle was unimaginable), as well as a future still unknown. The point I want to emphasize, then, is that Waiting for Tear Gas is structured around an indeterminacy of meaning that denies the viewer any pretense that she understands (or can even see) the total situation. And moreover, that this structured indeterminacy of meaning underscores the fact that some things simply elude representation. Sekula's images are as much about what is not represented as what is; they announce, in other words, their own representational limitations.

Sekula's employment of what might be considered photographic “mistakes” and visual obstructions further contributes to this interpretation. Throughout Waiting for Tear Gas we see lights that obscure rather than illuminate, glares and reflections that distort, figures caught unawares and with their eyes closed, and bodies out of focus. In one image we confront a young man covering his face after being attacked with tear gas. Head back and mouth open, his gesture and expression reveal the intense experience of suffering while simultaneously obscuring his face, in part because of his scarf, but also because his backward motion abstracts his features, and makes them unrecognizable. In another image we see a middle-aged woman who is half hidden by a scarf she raises to her face in order to rub her tearing eyes. All of these effects and framings, in the attention they call to the conditions of their own making, remind us of the always fragmentary nature of photographic representation.

Now we might understand this photographic fragmentation as issuing from the uncertainty of the individual's formation as a political subject. Mere participation in an event such as the Battle in Seattle does not guarantee a politicized subjectivity, because such subjectivity is not an effect of the ephemeral present alone; rather, it comes about when individuals convert the temporary appearance and sudden realization of political actualities forward in time and into a dedicated commitment. The emphasis in Sekula's images on waiting, the play between the visibility and invisibility
of the depicted subject, and the very real (yet mostly unspoken) possibility of the event’s disappearance all speak to the inherent instability of a protest scene as possibility more than actuality. This is the unpredictable space of action, or the real life (rather than the spectacular life) of an event. It is also, in the case of Waiting for Tear Gas, the public edge of photography where pictures are made to speak and encourage rational deliberation by leaving ultimate meaning undone.

By working against the prescribed codes of official images, Sekula brings spaces of art and social movements together—ambiguously at times, but always in a manner that reveals the news media’s beyond. Sekula’s project serves as a particularly interesting case study in this regard because it captures an aspect of the anti-corporate globalization movement in the United States at its height—and importantly, before the disastrous events of 9/11 led to the cancelling of protests and fracturing of the movement. In a post-9/11 world, such anti-photojournalistic models of representation are more and more necessary, yet even the very opportunity for their creation seems to be less and less available. Why is it that “official” imagery now threatens to overcome all else?

The Fundamental Right

What is clear is that mainstream media in the United States produces right-wing paranoia, and vice versa—right-wing paranoia produces mainstream media. The result is an American political discourse that often feels more fundamentalist than democratic.

In 1964, Richard Hofstadter, in his essay, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” a tract that has become famous as a description of right-wing conspiracy theory, wrote: “American politics has often been an arena for angry minds. In recent years we have seen angry minds at work mainly among extreme right-wingers, who have now demonstrated … how much political leverage can be got out of the animosities and passions of a small minority.” Of course, Hofstadter was referring to the Goldwater movement, but his general argument, that in the United States (and elsewhere) there tends to be a rise in right-wing movements when Democratic presidents are elected, certainly rings true today.

We can think, then, of the emergence of the John Birch Society in the 1960s as a response to J. F. K., and the demand for an investigation into Vince Foster’s suicide, the White Water investigation, and Bill Clinton’s
impeachment all as response to the perceived liberalism of the Clinton era. So, too, can we understand the rise of Sarah Palin’s Tea Party since Barack Obama’s election in 2008 as yet another such iteration. In short, right-wing populist movements are nothing new. Commonly characteristic to Hofstader’s theory, they all exhibit fantastic-paranoid conclusions—Clinton ordered Foster’s murder!; Obama is not an American citizen!—in conjunction with a heightened concern with factuality (i.e., the demand to see Obama’s original birth certificate replete with a doctor’s signature). To quote Hofstadter again:

One of the impressive things about paranoid literature … [is that] [i]t produces heroic strivings for evidence to prove that the unbelievable is the only thing that can be believed … The difference between this “evidence” and that commonly employed by others is that it seems less a means of entering into normal political controversy than a means of warding off the profane intrusion of the secular political world.6

Hoftstadter’s discussion of “evidence” here, his conclusion that its accumulation actually prevents one from entering into the political arena—that it wards off the profane intrusion of the political world—resonates with today’s political landscape where the construction of evil enemies and the invocation of religion and morality most often foreclose the possibility of meaningful democratic debate.

Thus, on the one hand, I could not agree more with Hofstadter’s conclusions and the continued relevance of his argument. Indeed, the paranoid right today continues to see, as Hofstadter described over forty-five years ago, the world as a giant conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, where evil must be absolutely eliminated. (The unfortunate memory of George W. Bush’s language as president—his “axis of evil,” his vow to “rid the world of evil-doers,” etc.—speaks for itself here.) And yet, despite Hofstadter’s recent discursive re-emergence on such grounds, I would characterize the populist right in America today not as a manifestation of the paranoid style, but rather, as indicated above, as trend-ing toward the fundamentalist. Communities including that formed by the Tea Party structurally differ from their earlier paranoid cousins in that, unlike the anti-F.D.R. right or the John Birch Society, these groups self-consciously adopt the identity, visual logic, and self-presentation of civil rights campaigns—even as their actions and rhetoric ultimately removes them from the political world.7 Some of this involves large groups of people
being arrested together, as when thousands of anti-choice protesters were arrested during what is now known as the Summer of Mercy—a six-week period in the summer of 1991 when thousands descended upon Wichita, Kansas, in order to illegally block the entrance to a woman's clinic. Here the strategy clearly recalls the lunch-counter sit-ins of the early 1960s.

But one of the most disturbing examples of this of-the-people anti-establishment self-fashioning is the August 28, 2010 “Restoring Honor” rally organized by the conservative commentator, Glenn Beck. As many have remarked, Beck not only staged his rally on the anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington (when King delivered his “I have a dream” speech), but he also pointedly invoked M.L.K., asserting his desire to “reclaim the civil rights movement” (Beck's words). This brand of political “engagement” must be understood as the endorsement of pro-establishment policies designed to look like the protest for anti-establishment demands. Who besides property owners and people of economic means benefit from the kind of economic plan supported by Beck of spending cuts and lowered taxes? Still, this analysis gives the rally more credit as an act of political engagement than it deserves. Beck in fact claimed that the rally was not political and he urged his supporters not to bring political signs—and virtually no one did. There is, then, a kind of pretense to citizen participation, but no (or very little) actual engagement with politics, no antagonism, no debate. The political arena contorts into nothing more than a space of staging, where discourse—for the most part—is empty, where participants are positioned like distant spectators, and where “facts” appear to radiate with their own clarity. This is, in other words, precisely the kind of space that Sekula's Waiting for Tear Gas refuses to record and seeks to counteract by producing an intellectual and civic space of delayed meaning. Beck's audience is not so much a political public, but a spectacle of consumers. Sekula's audience both is and represents a movement of engagement, opposition, and politicization.

Now what initially leads me to describe the current American political climate as fundamentalist is the way in which the populist or paranoid right simultaneously insulates itself from the broader political sphere and stages moments of political engagement like “Restoring Honor.” But there are other qualities that further lead me to identify our current ideoscape as fundamentalist. Not least among these is the way that populist right-wing groups in America self-consciously consider themselves “traditionalist,” endorsing agendas that confirm long-established modes of authority in the workplace, family, and in society at large. There is even a movement (again,
promoted by Beck) to return to the gold standard—a fear of representation that seeks to restore “real” value to money.9 However, the populist right in America also embraces what Chantal Mouffe has observed with respect to the right in Europe, that is, traditional categories of collective identity, such as “the people.” As political parties in the United States (especially the Democratic Party) deny precisely this sort of category and strive to be identified with the imaginary bi-partisan middle, the fundamental right has effectively utilized such traditional groupings in order to garner support from the disaffected, and appear to offer a real difference.10

One of the strongest examples of contemporary fundamentalist thinking in the United States is the emergence of textual literalism. This is true especially, though not exclusively, with respect to the Constitution.11 When the Republican Party took control of the House of Representatives after the 2010 mid-term elections, one of its first acts was to read aloud the Constitution. The act of reading this document—of performing it—was meant both to exemplify the Republicans’ devotion to the Constitution as well as to demonstrate their special access to its meaning. Context and content are abandoned, as are the norms of reason and debate in favor of how beliefs are asserted and defended. As Ezra Klein has noted, “To presume that people writing what they think the Constitution means—or, in some cases, want to think it means—at the bottom of every bill will change how they legislate doesn’t demonstrate a reverence for the document. It demonstrates a disengagement with it as anything more than a symbol of what you and your ideological allies believe.”12

Consensus Overruling Democracy

How could it possibly have come to pass that a group of affluent well-educated white people (like the Tea Party) think of themselves as the inheritors of the civil rights movement?13 This, especially as they self-consciously reject the term “political.” One way to try to answer this question is to consider what exactly is politics, or more precisely—what is politics for a group like the Tea Party.

In a terrific essay about a communiqué issued in Iraq by jihadist militants, Thomas Keenan analyzes the relationship between violence and politics.14 Keenan’s argument is that the communiqué—which utilized the language of human rights in order to justify human rights violations—reveals the political character of the jihadist struggle and an awareness among jihadist
militants of the need to negotiate with public opinion. In this context, politics “hovers between the principle of ethics and the irreversibility of violence, between two kinds of absolutes. It should not be reduced to either one. But it always is. We are—politics is—forever losing sight of its boundaries, turning (in)to fundamentalism and war, without any possibility of mastering those limits once and for all.”

Let me be clear here: I am not in any way claiming any relationship of any kind between the American populist right and jihadist militant groups. However, what I am claiming is that politics as practiced by the radical right in the United States has lost sight of its boundaries in a manner that does relate to Keenan’s insight. The American radical right, for instance, recognizes the need to engage a political public sphere that is structured around rational deliberation, without actually engaging in rational debate. Obama’s health care law is declared unconstitutional simply because the words “health care” never appear in the Constitution.

Instead, these gestures towards exemplary elements of US political history enable conservative fundamentalists to manifest participation in political discourse. The idea that arguments based on evidence ought to determine the course of government, and that the unforced force of a better argument will prevail, is at the core of democratic politics. Without it, many institutions of actually existing democracy (legislatures, free press, independent courts) would lack motivation. But the fundamentalist reliance on textual literalism, and intense suspicion of established sources of knowledge, ensures that they only ever put one foot in the political public sphere. This embrace of democracy’s form, while rejecting its content, suggests that conservative fundamentalism masquerades as what Jacques Rancière calls “dissensus.” Rancière writes, “A dissensus is not a conflict of interests, opinions, or values; it is a division put in the ‘common sense’: a dispute about what is given, about the frame within which we see something as given … This is what I call dissensus: putting two worlds in one and the same world.” For Rancière, “consensus” is not agreement motivated by good reasons, but the particular device through which contemporary elites achieve hegemony: an administrative emptying of the political which dissensus can potentially undermine. But where for Rancière dissensus encodes the revolutionary potential of political subjectivity, the far right today is anything but a revolutionary movement. Of course, the reverse: Groups like the Tea Party embrace and celebrate the capitalist order while rejecting the necessary preconditions for rational deliberation. Conservative
fundamentalism in America may then—in Rancière’s terms—be considered a kind of dissensus-in-service-of-consensus.

The question becomes: What voices enter—have the power and strength to enter—the public sphere, and through what venues?

**Who Speaks Thus?**

The Citizens United case, which granted corporations the right to spend unlimited funds in elections in order to protect their (the corporations’) right to free speech, officially confirmed that in the United States the corporate megaphone is much bigger, louder, and more powerful than that of the real person. The very idea of free speech—though still conceptually foundational to our democracy—retains its meaning only in a modest sense. For very practically speaking, Supreme Court rulings such as Citizens United mean that fundamentalist groups like the Tea Party can receive endless amounts of corporate funding. But such rulings also mean something for the visual public sphere. What is at risk as the American far right begins to model itself on historic social movements, and practice a politics of consensus disguised as dissensus, is a profoundly warped remembering not only (specifically) of the civil rights movement, but also of politics in general. Lost is the unpredictable space of action, and along with it an imagery—like that created by Sekula—that retains a public edge, embraces a structured indeterminacy, and makes politics in a deliberative democracy visible.

There is perhaps a lot to overcome here, yet there are moments of resistance. In this regard, John Stewart and Stephen Colbert have played a surprisingly serious role in presenting news in an anti-corporate, anti-Fox News, fact-based (as opposed to an unreality-reality-based) manner. And their “Rally to Restore Sanity/March to Keep Fear Alive” on September 16, 2010 functioned as at least some kind of visual response to Beck and Palin’s “Restoring Honor” rally. The sheer number of handmade signs at the Stewart–Colbert event specifically referencing fundamentalism (i.e., “Fundamentalism is the real F-word”) further evidences just how well those in attendance grasped the fact that open and free access to political speech was somehow at stake.

But I want to conclude not by evoking the power of the independent (and comedy-based) media, but by returning to Sekula’s *Waiting for Tear Gas*. As I argued at the beginning of this paper, Sekula’s project, in its presentation of
The Rise of Fundamentalism

what some might consider unremarkable images, challenges the prescribed codes of official imagery and works against a model of photojournalism that exhausts the event by means of a sensationalizing gaze. That is, by producing pictures of an exceptional event that are precisely not exceptional, Sekula effectively links representation to political and social struggles in ways that require viewers to rethink the very nature of the photographic act, as well as the function of the photographic document. This kind of photography—this kind of documentary model—should, I believe, be thought of as a photography without end, or at least without a predictable end, and as such must be understood as resisting the closed circuit (consensus disguised as disensus) produced by an ever more fundamentalist-oriented public sphere. Sekula’s images function as propositions that necessitate response, though what that response is, cannot be known. Waiting for Tear Gas thus engenders a political process that is contingent upon the spectator, restoring to the photographic print the potential of its plurality. A plurality of voices that gives meaning to the word freedom.

Notes

2 Cramerotti, op. cit., p. 98.
6 Ibid., p. 85.
7 Though, in a creepy family history, David and Charles Koch, the brothers who fund the Tea Party, can claim lineage to the John Birch Society: their father, Fred, was among the select group chosen to serve on its governing body.
8 The term “ideoscape” comes from Arjun Appadurai’s well-known essay, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” in Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 27–47. In the essay, Appadurai identifies five dimensions of global cultural flow: ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes,
finanspaces, and ideoscapes, the last referring to ideologies of states and the counter-ideologies of movements.

9 Glenn Beck's on-air promotion of gold while working as a paid spokesman for gold companies is obviously unethical, but also illegal—and it seems entirely possible that he will face criminal charges one day.


11 Another interesting example relates to the Obama health care bill. Shouts from Tea Partiers of “read the bill read the bill” filled town hall meetings after the passage of the law as if to claim that representatives were being either hypocritical or brainwashed unless they had read every word on every page. Though of course I endorse law makers reading the bills they vote into law, these town hall demands to “read the bill” were intended to demonstrate that the shouters had special access to the legislation's deeper hidden meaning.


13 An April, 2010 *New York Times/CBS* poll found that self-identified Tea Partiers are better educated and wealthier than the general public.


15 Ibid., p. 62.

At the dawn of 2011, multiple gunshots rang out in Islamabad, Pakistan. A highly trained elite force officer gunned down the governor of the Punjab Province, Salman Taseer, in an apparent act of religious protectionism. The murderer—actually Taseer’s security guard—smiled as his fellow police officers arrested him. Mumtaz Qadri, the guard, believed that Taseer, a public official who openly challenged the blasphemy law of the nation, was deserving of the punishment. Indeed, Qadri felt that he had done his religion a great justice by killing a blasphemer. Taseer questioned the usefulness of the draconian rule that punished to death anyone found guilty of saying or doing something profane against Islam. In particular, he opposed the sentencing of a Christian woman who allegedly took the Prophet of Islam’s name in vain. During the days and weeks before his assassination, he received death threats for his support of the woman. Religious clerics protested Taseer’s stance against the law. Nonetheless, Taseer remained dedicated to his belief that the law needed to be removed from the constitution. He paid a dear price for his commitment.

Whether the killer was acting alone is not entirely certain. However, the intolerance and anger that has seeped into Pakistani society quite broadly is unequivocally clear from this episode. Increasingly, the religious right has created an atmosphere in which any anti-Islam pronouncement or deed is liable to meet severe repercussions. Their actions have fostered an unstable environment in contemporary Pakistan. This is nothing new for the nation. When the British granted independence and divided their colonies in South Asia along religious lines in 1947, fourteen million people migrated from one part of the subcontinent to another. Sectarian violence among Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims at the time resulted in one to two million deaths, and upward of 75,000 women raped. Today, suicide bombings, indiscriminate shootings, and militant attacks are a daily occurrence. Some might suggest that the American-led war on terrorism and its involvement of Pakistan as an ally have prompted the most recent violence occurring in the South Asian nation. These are facts of life in Pakistani society, both now and throughout its history. Yet, when the nation achieved independence, artists did not engage
with the local culture and politics. Instead, many adopted modes of painting coming from Europe, namely cubism, to make conventional images like still lifes, landscapes, and portraits. It is only in the last two decades that a significant number of practitioners have been more political in their artworks. And more particularly, it is after the events of 9/11 that political works have flourished. Growing up in the turbulent environment that defines Pakistan, artists today who live in the nation or have moved elsewhere choose to confront issues that plague a society in turmoil. They have come of age in the post-Zia period of Pakistan, attending art school after the brutal military dictatorship enforced a strict Islamic view of the nation for more than a decade. Although the harsh rule that Muhammed Zia-ul Haq wielded was abruptly put to rest through his death in an airplane crash in 1988, Pakistani society has turned more orthodox in recent years. Contemporary Pakistani artists have utilized their works as a platform for discussing topics like Islamic fundamentalist activities, and furthermore have not simply looked to Pakistani society for subject matter but also to fine art and local mass culture for methods. Exhibiting sensitivity to traditional materials, techniques, and styles (e.g., the miniature painting that has been practiced for centuries in the region), a number of artists have interrogated societal and national issues not only through subject matter, but also through forms that signify Pakistani society and nationhood. From two-dimensional paintings to digital prints and from mixed-media constructions to sculptures, these artists have found many artistic practices to discuss Islam and the politics surrounding it. They often have done so in an indirect manner, perhaps as a way to cope with possible repercussions from the religiously conservative society.

In the miniature painting project I love miniature (2009), Hasnat Mehmood suggests that many aspects of Pakistani society are quickly being edited to support religious extremist views—an insidious correction extending as far as representations of Pakistan’s founder, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, who, though secular in public and private life, established Pakistan on the basis of religion. The artist noticed that recently compiled history books in Pakistan delete his “Western” lifestyle and beliefs. He saw that currency notes have also been updated. The government released a bill in 2006 on which the founder’s portrait received a “cut and paste” treatment in which a sherwani (a formal coat worn in Pakistan) replaced the suit and tie he actually wore.

In one part of I love miniature, Mehmood includes a stamp that is a portrait of Jinnah in the style of Osama bin Laden. Underneath it
“Talibanistan” is written in Urdu. The artist renders the image in a highly realistic manner, utilizing an actual postage stamp as a reference, inserting a beard that resembles the one worn by bin Laden. In doing so, Mehmood posits the transformation of Jinnah's image and Jinnah’s Pakistan into something suitable for the zealots who aim to use the nation as a launching ground for religious war against the West. Mehmood references Osama bin Laden in *I love miniature* because the Al-Qaeda leader allegedly masterminded attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 that spawned the so-called war on terrorism—a battle that has involved Pakistan because of its strategic position as Afghanistan’s neighbor.

September 11 affected the United States directly, but the subsequent reactions have changed the lives and attitudes of people living in Pakistan because the nation has become a battlefield in this nebulous war. Ayesha Jatoi’s digital print, *Lens* (2009), posits that a distressing incident involving violence against a girl was allowed to happen in order to provide justification for the current American presence in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The episode in question took place in March 2009. A male member of a community flogged a girl while her brother held her down. The rest of the nation and the world watched a cell phone video that captured the punishment she received for leaving her home accompanied by a man who is not a member of her family (something unacceptable in the Taliban-dominated Swat region of Pakistan). A still from the video was the foundation of Jatoi’s digital image, which she enlarged to a poster-size print. On top of this she painted the guidelines seen through a viewfinder in a camera. The American and Pakistani governments are in fact closely watching Swat. Surveillance cameras are customarily used to collect data of suspicious individuals and happenings; however, an event like this managed to go unnoticed by them, perhaps intentionally as suggested by the artist.

Jatoi also made a series of works entitled *Sticks and Stones* (2009), in order to cope with the occurrence of such a terrible incident. It served a therapeutic function for the artist on a personal level because she was unable to make art or think about anything else at the time this event transpired. And the images might serve as therapy for a nation beleaguered by tragedy at the hands of fundamentalists. In these works, there is an explicit critique of Islamic fundamentalist ideas and activities. Using the same still employed in her digital print, the artist focused her attention on the group of men who simply stood and watched the event transpire. They did not do anything to stop the beating; in fact, their presence was required
so that the girl would be sufficiently humiliated, according to their interpretation of religious text. Her punishment was not the flogging, but the fact that her community witnessed it. In turn, Jatoi witnessed this event and used it as a platform to critique the extreme reaction to a seemingly innocent action. This is, indeed, what artists can offer in such circumstances: Their ability to witness, record, and comment on fundamentalist views helps to incite questions on the acts, words, and intentions of religious extremists. For Jatoi, this group that did nothing while a girl screamed as a man beat her were just as loathsome as her actual beater. She offered them no sense of humanity in her pictures by representing the group as an abstract entity, where individuals are indistinguishable. The girl, on the other hand, is a humanized victim of a heinous act, who stands out—literally, in red—against the gray tones of her attackers and onlookers.

In these works, Jatoi excuses neither the perpetrators or the governments that were unable or unwilling to interfere, nor the violence itself, which she instead offers as a reality upon which she comments through her act of appropriation and re-presentation of the isolated image. The artist does not create a violent picture; she transforms a depiction of tragic occurrence to show us again what had happened, and in doing so she begs us to think about its larger sociopolitical implications. But its relevance is also deeply particular, even local, as a reflection of life in the South Asian nation where Jatoi resides. With the Pakistani government’s ongoing involvement in helping fight the US’s war on terrorism, it has become a breeding ground for fundamental views rather than serving as an ally in this war. One worrying result is that Pakistan has become an extremely dangerous place to live. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, it is not uncommon for Pakistanis to know someone else in the country who was a victim of a terrorist attack.

The American government is perhaps acting on the assumption that its actions around the world are taken to protect its citizens. Yet, its foreign policy has created an unstable environment in Pakistan where innocent people are killed almost daily. Indeed, Pakistanis have become victims of the American-led war on terrorism because of its role as a battlefield in this fight. The war has not remained isolated in the northwest portion of the country where the Taliban have taken control; instead, it has spilled into city centers where deadly attacks are carried out, perhaps to gain more attention both locally and internationally. With the increasing frequency of bombings, ordinary Pakistani citizens are unwittingly usurped into this battle between Islamic fundamentalists and the West.
Ironically, it is Pakistanis—those who are in danger of being killed in a suicide bombing—who are looked at suspiciously when they travel outside of their nation. Although Huma Mulji lives in Pakistan, her work addresses a new reality for Pakistanis anywhere in the world—to be treated as a potential terrorist. Whether they live in the West or only travel there, Pakistanis have to cope with the fact that their nation is perceived as a hotbed of fundamentalism. This perception is both formed through and reified by the kind of stories that appear in Western mass media. Mulji addresses this phenomenon in her sculptural piece “Can you take off your shoes please?” of 2006, which includes extra-large versions of items that have recently become forbidden on board an airplane: scissors, a nail cutter, and a razor blade. The artist embedded these objects inside a large, constructed suitcase, customized with the title on its cover.

In post-9/11 airport travel, if a bag is scanned and a dangerous item is detected, the security person will likely ask, “Do you possibly have any sharp objects in your suitcase?” In the case of this artwork, only a positive answer can be given; there are only sharp objects inside this bag and, furthermore, they are gigantic versions of these everyday items. Typically, the artist displays the suitcase as a sculpture; however, in one instance she carried the work to Italy for an exhibition. Mulji faced difficulties at the airport because of the volatile nature of the case’s contents. Now that security guidelines have transformed seemingly innocuous items into possible weapons of mass destruction, anyone carrying a nail cutter is a potential terrorist. A serious message lurks in this humorous work. It is Mulji’s personal reaction to international travel and her experience going abroad. As she states: “The green passport [of Pakistan] is inevitably looked at skeptically, visas checked and rechecked, questions about previous travel and reasons for having the gall to want to travel to the west scrutinized. [There is a] humiliation [to] traveling today, something [that] should otherwise be a magical journey of discovery, fantasy, and knowledge …”

While Mulji provides a perspective of someone living in Pakistan, Alia Hasan-Khan, who lives in the United States, addresses the situation of Muslims (and, generally, brown people) traveling in the West after the September 11 attacks. Even as there are overlaps in the post-9/11 experiences for Pakistanis at home and in its diaspora, perhaps it has been more difficult for those living in the United States or other parts of the West. This is evidenced in the fact that a number of people have moved back to Pakistan after studying or working abroad in the last few years, despite the fact of violence in the South Asian nation. Hasan-Khan’s work captures some of these difficulties.
Greetings from… (2006), which includes visuals and text on postcards that exhibition visitors could take and distribute widely, shows sites of transit in Austin, Texas, where she had been living. On the reverse side of the postcards, the artist shared stories from fellow “brown” people—of Pakistani or Indian background—about their difficult experiences after the September 11 attacks. One includes an unpopulated airport lounge: Its rows of empty seats give the impression of sudden abandonment in a would-be bustling site. The attendant narrative reveals a young man who relates that he has internalized the suspicions of Americans, and has tried to make himself appear less like a terrorist when he travels by air. Still, he has faced problems because his name—Abbas—set off warning signals to the airport authorities. He recalls, “When faced with such surprises I would normally be more confrontational but given the current affairs I gave in. I surrendered my passport to officers who called in my ID numbers and we all waited at the terminal for their supervisors in FBI to tell them if I was a threat to homeland security or not.”

Greetings from… thus attempted to capture simple, ordinary events that happen to individuals in order to reveal how an entire community has been villainized. In the act of making cards available to exhibition visitors, the artist facilitated the distribution of these personal tales beyond the exhibition space.

Both Mulji and Hasan-Khan address personal events in the works described above; Mulji’s experience at the airport informed her work on international travel in the post-9/11 age, while Hasan-Khan relayed the tales of people within her social circle. Stories about personal trials and tribulations in the current period of history are beginning to be told more often in art, film, and literature. Artists and writers who live in the West find a need to provide a voice for Pakistanis who feel implicated because of their country’s role in global terrorism. And, more generally, it is their religion—Islam—that has transformed from one espousing peace to one that has violent associations. In the story that Mohsin Hamid tells in his novel, The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2007), the protagonist, Changez, does not experience any extreme racist incident living in the United States after the events of 9/11, but his story takes a radical shift. Up until this point, the young Ivy League school graduate hailing from Pakistan lives a fantasy life. However, he finds his situation in the United States post-9/11 to be reversed from being an inspirational tale of a young, up and coming financial whiz to that of a combatant within enemy lines. In his elite job, he no longer has the instincts of a shark that are required to manipulate and accomplish the complex tasks of his assignment. Instead, he is overcome by confusion and
anger as he transforms from being a willing participant in advancing the economic position of the world’s only superpower to one that interrogates American policies and its undertakings around the world. He becomes a reluctant fundamentalist. In a recent issue of *Granta* that focuses on Pakistani literature, an article explored a similar transformation in the case of Faisal Shahzad, the would-be 2010 Times Square bomber. The writer sets up the argument that American foreign policy fuels the development of individuals who want to carry out terrorist attacks against the nation. They do not have the typical profile of a potential terrorist as being religiously conservative, undereducated, and poor. Instead, both Changez and Faisal Shahzad had access to the finer things in life through their lives and jobs in the United States. Yet material wealth did not appease or make up for the senseless attacks on innocent victims, something they believe is the result of American actions around the world. While Faisal Shahzad decided to fight fire with fire, Changez returned to Pakistan to fuel more fighters against the superpower.

Artist Ambreen Butt uses paintings to comment on American foreign policy and the effects of 9/11. But unlike the fictional character Changez, Butt did not leave her adopted country. In her painting series, *I Must Utter What Comes to My Lips* (2003), she depicts a woman—an immigrant, a self-portrait—traversing a treacherous landscape. One work shows her in the middle of a tightrope with her arms out to keep balanced. The scene surrounding her resembles a war-torn place: There are birds feathered with a camouflage pattern, recalling army airplanes. Surrounding the woman is a smoke-filled sky; its hazy atmosphere is based on images of smoke billowing out of the World Trade Center towers in New York after airplanes hit them. More broadly, the series follows the woman, beset by exploding bombs, explosions, and fantastical trees, to reflect on her specific experiences in the United States as a Pakistani and Muslim.

In this new scenario in which it is uncertain who are victims or perpetrators, one thing is clear: many people are dying. Canada-based artist Tazeen Qayyum submits that we should consider all of the lives lost, including the terrorists, whether we believe what they have done is acceptable or not. It is still a life lost. For her, in our climate of killing today, not all deaths are treated equally. We kill cockroaches with such ease, spraying insecticide to rid our homes of unwanted pests; for Qayyum, people are eliminated in the same manner. According to the artist, “The dead cockroach is repeated in a pattern and is simultaneously rendered compelling and repulsive, commenting on human rights violations and
human fatalities in our current war-time environment.”\textsuperscript{4} Perhaps in acknowledging all casualties, there can be a move toward understanding why people choose to kill to have their voices heard. People are victimized for the sake of politics, whether by terrorist organizations acting on a distorted view of religion or governments claiming to free the world of terrorism. The artist draws our attention to the results of these political battles—death. She continues, “Where people are killed like insects we [need to] question our own insensitivity and the diminishing value of human life.”\textsuperscript{5}

Qayyum titles her work with the clinical warnings that are written on the side of insecticides—“May Irritate Eyes,” “Do Not Get on Skin or Clothing,” and “Do Not Inhale.” Her imagery comes from these bottles as well. In \textit{May Irritate Eyes} from 2006, the artist includes old-style spray insecticide cans—the spray action had to be produced manually through a pump. These cans are rendered in a decorative manner—a fanciful pattern covers the body of the cans. Next to the spray cans, rows of mortally wounded bugs have succumbed to the power of poison. Indistinct from each other, scores of bodies lie neatly. The dead bugs recall a factory assembly line; here, death is mass-produced. In this compositional decision, Qayyum’s work finds an allegiance with Ayesha Jatoi’s painting described at the beginning of this essay in which she depicts a large group of men watching a girl being beaten. Both of these artists incorporate notions of the masses. Whether they are dying or witnessing destruction, the masses become just that: all lumped together, by choice or circumstance. Here, the implication of the masses becomes critical. In the post-9/11 scenario, the Muslim community has been collectively held accountable for the acts of a few.

The artworks described here critique this development, born of circumstances by which Islam has taken center stage in the globalized world. The question thus becomes one of efficacy—to what extent does the radical change these artists gesture towards manifest outside of the space of representation? The last ten years have seen a progressive increase in the number of artists tackling local and global debates, ranging from the proliferation of nuclear weapons to the spread of fundamentalism. These voices have become stronger and more articulate since 9/11; but perhaps this development was happening anyway since the first generation of artists making sociopolitical artworks in Pakistan graduated from art school in the early 1990s (and began to influence students from their professorial posts by the end of the decade). Yet the impact of 9/11 and its collateral events is
undeniable. For the first time, however unwittingly and undesirably, these artists found themselves on the front line, where they continue to work, producing thought-provoking artwork.

Notes

2 Ibid., p. 87.
3 Interview with Ambreen Butt by author, July 2003.
5 Ibid.
Judgment

Few concepts are as vexing for the field of contemporary art as that of judgment—a notion, often understood to originate from Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790), that refers to a decision one makes with regard to whether a work of art is good or not. Commentators in the 1980s often said that aesthetic judgments were essentialist in constitution because of their implicit universalism. In the 1990s, when cultural difference was both emphasized and prized, and where works of art, exhibitions, and criticism attempted to critique normative conceptions of race, sexuality, and gender, writers as well as curators continued to downplay aesthetic judgments in favor of tactical maneuvers. It is this history that is at the core of João Ribas’s essay “Judgment’s Troubled Objects,” in which he focuses on the political efficacy of aesthetic judgments in today’s contemporary art world.

The at best ambivalent views toward the levying of distinctions, of admitting to or even following one’s intuition, have continued in the 2000s less because of the social and political issues marking the previous decades but, as Frank Smigiel describes in “A Producer’s Journal, or Judgment A Go-Go,” because of the sheer scale of the international art world, whose heterogeneity has created an accidental pluralism in which market forces rather than critical faculties determine value of all kinds. And yet, judgments are made constantly: in the artists included in exhibitions, in the artists discussed in articles and reviews, in the way certain artists become more important than others. In most instances, the judgment of taste is primarily an exercise of selection: one that often goes unsaid and rarely materializes as public record.
Yet, few issues could be more important for the understanding of contemporary art, especially in an art world trying to determine, as Lane Relyea suggests in “After Criticism,” how to stay relevant in highly networked and diversified circumstances. It is precisely because of the immense scale of the art world that judgments and distinctions between objects (kinds of objects as well as experiences; objects by the same artist; objects by different artists; and so on) need to be made. Yet, what still must be worked out is how to apply aesthetic judgments while accommodating the concerns of its critique, which additionally might suggest ways in which to think about contemporary art beyond particular, context-based circumstances.
Writing in *Artforum* in 1967, Clement Greenberg attempted an exasperated defense of his critical position, its formalism confronted by the artistic and critical practices of the 1960s. With the rhetorical brilliance and interpretive certainty that typifies his prose, “Complaints of an Art Critic” outlines the criteria for Greenberg’s evaluative form of art criticism. Aesthetic judgments, he argues, are “immediate, intuitive, undeliberate, and involuntary.” What validity they can claim results from taste as a kind of aesthetic intuition, where the “immediate experience of art” serves as the basis for the expression of judgments. As taste and judgment can neither be proven, argued, nor categorically defined, no verifiable criteria can exist besides the faculties of the critic and the paragon of quality handed down by history. From this authority of judgment arises the function of criticism to prescribe blame or approbation, as the only corrective to what David Hume had called “the variety and caprice of taste.”

The force of such impassioned argument reflects the fact that Greenberg’s central assertion—that “value judgments constitute the substance of aesthetic experience”—was largely in contention. Notably, Sol Lewitt’s “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” Robert Smithson’s “The Monuments of Passaic,” Dan Graham’s “The Book as Object,” and Mel Bochner’s “Serial Art Systems: Solipsism,” all texts suggesting critical and artistic paradigms freed from Greenberg’s strictures, were published around the time of his “complaint.” The publication in which Greenberg’s essay appeared was itself initially concerned with proposing his formalist model of criticism in reaction to the sensibilities of the New York School poets and the allusive prose found in publications such as *ARTnews*. By the 1970s, the rise of conceptual, minimal, and post-minimal art, and the attendant discourse of critical theory, led to a revision of Greenberg’s evaluative claims. If the modernist sense of judgment centered on notions of value and quality, many of the artistic practices of the 1960s and 1970s were developed in direct antagonism to them. The resulting pluralistic expansion of critical models in the following decades effectively repositioned the object of judgment itself.

Of particular challenge to Greenbergian formalism was the way conceptual practices attempted to negate judgment through the self-reflexive
absorption of critique. Artists such as LeWitt and Joseph Kosuth proposed that “conceptual art annex[ed] the function of the critic.”6 Such a seizure of criteria invalidated the epistemological authority of critical judgment, in favor of analytic, propositional, or social forms of artistic value.7 The dissolution of quality and judgment as central to critical discourse discounted the traditional role of criticism of identifying and evaluating, and so its “capacity to legitimate.”8 The “dematerialization of the art object,” as documented by Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, had as its corollary a reframing of the terms of what constituted the object of criticism as well. “A judgment on contemporary art is tentatively true,” Lippard wrote, “like a scientist’s law and unlike a legislator’s law.”9

What this devaluation of judgment adumbrates is the recent “crisis of criticism” announced throughout the last decade.10 There has been, by most accounts, an “ebb of judgment” in art critical writing since the late 1990s. Judgment and evaluative criteria have been traded for “informal opinions or transitory thoughts,” with critics “shy[ing] from strong commitments” and making judgments coming to seem “inappropriate,” in the words of one critic.11 Assessments of this “crisis” seem to concur that criticism no longer concerns itself mainly with questions of judgment, and that value and quality, abiding notions in Greenberg’s conception of modern art, are less central to the critical enterprise.12 Criticism offers literary description instead of critical discernment, connoisseurship, or an evaluative verdict. The causes offered are manifold, from the increasing role played by the art market in “arbitrating” value, to the “democratization” of opinion through social media, or the rise of the curator as displacing the adjudicating role of the critic.13

Such a “crisis” is perhaps the fate of judgment in the wake of postmodernism: the way its pluralism vitiates cultural value, and its relativism proliferates criteria; how its skepticism disputes the epistemological basis of judgment; and how the notion of socially situated knowledge affirms the ideological foundations of critical standards.14 Critical theory and poststructuralist thought effectively discredited traditional concepts of aesthetic value by politicizing judgment and demystifying cultural values. The political critique of taste as the basis for making judgments was shown to rely on normative conceptions of race, class, and gender, with aesthetic criteria naturalizing what are in fact relations of power and knowledge. The critic as arbiter of taste, as well as the contingency of value occluded by Greenberg’s model of criticism, was replaced by a critique of the hermeneutical and historical relativity of critical standards. The “pyrrhic victory” of postmodernism was to derail the validity of normative criteria for judging art.15
In comparison to a dependence on theory, value and judgment were largely marginalized within the “anti-aesthetic” character art criticism from the 1980s onward. Concepts such as “the archive,” and the “unconscious” gained the same critical relevance “quality” and “medium” had for critics like Greenberg previously. Taste was replaced by critique; quality displaced by context. Judgments and quality were postponed in favor of what Rosalind Krauss called “method,” or the “process of constituting the object of criticism.” Criticism inquired into “what does it mean,” instead of deciding “why is it good?,” in the words of one critic. Value, as the means by which criticism arrives at determinant judgments about its object, and the identification of such judgments with aesthetic criteria, was effectively ruptured.

While effected by postmodernism’s reframing of the social as the horizon of interpretation, the putative recent crisis also arose within a new set of artistic practices once again repositioning “the troubled objects” of criticism: value and judgment. This crisis corresponds with the emergence of a social turn in art in the late 1990s, with the rise of dialogic, collaborative, relational, and participatory forms of art. As theorized by Nicolas Bourriaud, such art was defined by “taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space.” Focused on forms of exchange and participation, these practices centered on the relations between participants instead of passive spectatorship or opticality, or the modernist notion of the autonomous artwork. For relational or socially collaborative forms of art, intersubjectivity is an aesthetic object in itself. By repositioning the artwork as a process of communication between active participants rather than contemplative viewers, such practices effectively ruptured aesthetic judgment from the criteria of critical appraisal. Bourriaud’s formation of a “relational art” sought non-formalist criteria to address these practices. Earlier varieties of art in the “expanded field,” in Krauss’s formulation, breached the formalist confines of medium specificity, and in so doing, the equation of this modernist premise with value and criteria for judgment.

Social and relational practices further de-emphasized medium and aesthetic quality over sociability and community, further exacting a need for new non-normative critical models.

The focus of such models would be on judging artworks on the basis of the social relations they can produce, be said to represent, or reveal—based, in short, on “social effects” rather than criteria related to aesthetic judgment. Yet what aesthetic criteria can be used to judge practices privileging
an ethics of participation? Bourriaud proposes a “co-existence criterion” for the forms of sociability produced by relational art: “Does this work permit me to enter into dialogue? Could I exist, and how, in the space it defines?”

As some critics suggest, such a measure equates aesthetic judgment with ethical and political criteria, and so fails to differentiate such interactions from social activism or forms of political agitation. Does their political concern still situate these practices within the domain of any formal or aesthetic criteria and so as artistic practices? How might judgment function within this ethical and social dimension to new artistic forms?

In proposing methodologies for the production of art, such practices have marked a return to the validity of judgment within discussions about contemporary artistic practice. As Paul de Man writes, “[the] notion of crisis and that of criticism are very closely linked, so much so that one could state that all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis.” The “crisis” of criticism of the past decade has prompted a polemical reassessment of what criteria can be brought to the heterogeneous field of contemporary art. The role of judgment has thus been reconceived from the arbitration of cultural value or taste, to a complex function within the varied aesthetic, institutional, ethical, and political aspects of current art. Such a reassessment has, however, ironically entailed a return to the very source of Greenberg’s formalist aesthetics, Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790). The aim of Kant’s inquiry into the aesthetic is to position judgment within the epistemology first announced in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787), concerned with the capacities of cognition, desire, and feeling of pleasure or displeasure. If understanding had its “proper domain” in the faculty of cognition, and reason in the faculty of desire, was the faculty of judgment, as intermediary between them, irreducible, or merely annexed, to those faculties? Could judging account for the feeling of pleasure or displeasure by which we find something beautiful or not? For Kant, aesthetic responses to “the beautiful and the sublime in nature or in art” must be grounded in an account of judgment that relates this faculty to some principle, as with the *a priori* principles of reason and understanding. Kant’s aim is thus to differentiate the faculty of taste and aesthetic judgments from the previously investigated principles of rational or moral judgment, while establishing their ground within the human faculties.

The critique of judgment centers on the capacity for judgments of taste, or a judgment on whether a particular object is deemed to be beautiful. To claim that something is beautiful does not ascribe a property to an object in
the same manner that to claim that a pencil is made of lead, or that a table is made of wood.33 The claim that something is beautiful asserts, rather, a relation between that object and a subject’s reflection on that thing, rather than an observable property of the beautiful used to define it, or universal criteria for what the beautiful might be.34 To judge a particular rose beautiful, for example, is not to subsume that flower under the concept of “rose” or under what we might know about the category of those things called roses (such “that roses in general are beautiful,” as Kant explains).35 What might be deemed beautiful cannot be reduced to any objective concept, as there “can be no rule in accordance with which someone could be compelled to acknowledge something as beautiful.”36 To judge something as beautiful is to do so independently of a concern for its purpose or exchange value; such a claim does not rely on the fact that it may be agreeable or on any practical utility derived from the object. The decisive aspect of judgments of taste is that they are aesthetic, that is, they are based on feeling, not determinate concepts, and thus about the subject’s representation of an object, rather than referring to the qualities or character of that thing.37

Yet to claim that something is beautiful is also to assert “validity for everyone,” or that the claim “this is beautiful” ascribes agreement or assent by others.38 Such a judgment implies normativity, asserting that everyone else ought to agree with it. Even if such a claim appears to be subjective, the judgment contains an appeal for agreement that is comparable to a demand based on an objective principle, such as a moral or cognitive one.39 To judge something as beautiful is to expect consent from anyone else making a judgment of taste on that thing. Something is not merely beautiful for me; rather, it supposes a necessary validity for others, a “subjective universality.”40

Aesthetic judgments thus make claims about the beautiful that surpass the particular experience of the subject who makes them—as a claim that others should agree with the judgment—yet that cannot be validated by a concept beyond that particular subjective experience.41 In this universal agreement lies the intersubjective character of judging: Based on a subjective principle common to everyone, aesthetic judgment relies on the claim that others ought to agree and so possess universal validity, a claim that cannot be verified by resorting to a concept or to forms of empirical proof. This universality grounds taste not in private sensation but in a common sense, what Kant called a sensus communis.42

Greenberg’s evaluative criteria were largely indexed to this subjective dimension of Kant’s aesthetic theory. In the 1960s, Greenberg turned to
Kant to reframe modernist aesthetics in light of the sustained influence of Duchamp and the readymade (a bête noire for Greenberg), and the rise of new forms of conceptual and post-minimal art, as Diarmuid Costello has argued. Kantian aesthetics was articulated as the outcome of such subjective judgment, the objectivity of which Greenberg found in the agreement on judgments of taste in the past, “probatively demonstrated in and through the presence of consensus over time.” The depreciation of judgment enacted by the critical methodologies of academic art writing denied this premise as foundational to productive critical discourse—the act of making judgments as what Michael Fried deemed the “lifeblood of the critical enterprise.” The return to beauty in the arch-populist writings of Dave Hickey, for example, can be seen as filling a void left by the resulting gap in critical activity. The re-evaluation of judgment and enumerated criteria, and their possible role within new artistic practices in contemporary art, is thus seen as “a remedy to the cauterized state of contemporary criticism.”

The reassessment of Greenberg’s critical model, most notably by Thierry de Duve, has consisted of returning to Kantian notions of judgment. Arguing for a rereading of aesthetics in relation to Greenberg’s formalist position, de Duve nevertheless suggests a shift in the focus of judgment from the traditional concern with “this is beautiful” to “this is art.” Kantian aesthetics is reinterpreted—replacing “art” where Kant writes “the beautiful”—through the rejection of taste and judgment implicit in Duchamp’s notion of the readymade. Kantian judgments after Duchamp reflect the coincidence of art with aesthetic experience: Greenberg argued the readymade proposed anything could be experienced aesthetically, and as such, as art. This re-evaluation of judgment allows de Duve to preserve “quality, aesthetic pleasure, [and] the judgment of taste” within critical discourse.

The normative claims suggested by the notion of a sensus communis gives judgment yet another, more expanded role in contemporary art. Kant had suggested that the universal validity of judgment implied assent by others. As examined in the late lectures of Hannah Arendt, this facet of Kant’s aesthetic theory is seen as containing a political philosophy, based on the “enlarged mentality” that enables judgment, or the “making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent.” For Kant, judging is itself inherently a social relation, referring to a shared world. When one judges, one does so through the sensus communis, in which one reflects from the perspective of others as a fulfillment of what Kant placed as the highest human end, sociability. Judgments, Arendt argues, are persuasive, based on the “hope of coming to an agreement with everyone else eventually.”
The political efficacy of judgment rests on the community engendered by this possibility. For Arendt, judgment is “the most political of man’s mental abilities.” Bridging the antinomies of aesthetics and politics, Arendt proposes both concern judgment on a common world and what appears in it. It is aesthetic judgment that decides how the world “is to look and sound,” while allowing for a “form of being together [shared judgment, community of taste] where no one rules and no one obeys. Where people persuade each other.” Formed in relation to others, taste and judgment not only presuppose community, but instantiate it. The collectively elaborated meaning and “transforming effect of social interaction” central to relational and dialogic art echo this notion: The “arena of exchange” created by an artwork is judged both by “the coherence of its form” and the “symbolic value” of the social relations it suggests, the image of human relations reflected in it.

A potent example of the political efficacy of judgment is found in the “politics of disgust” that frame much of the public debate around homosexuality. Disgust, with its complex cultural and evolutionary aspects, indicates a feeling towards a thing or act that is deemed repulsive or revolting. The object of disgust elicits aversion to something perceived as capable of contaminating or polluting, either by ingestion, proximity, or contact. This repugnance is commonly linked to the rejection of food, as well as to hygiene and sexuality. With its adaptive and sociological aspects, disgust has been shown to play a significant role in the enforcement and preservation of social norms.

Disgust, contagion, and revulsion are often evoked in the descriptions of same-sex practices. This “projective disgust,” as Martha Nussbaum has argued, indentifies a group or individual to objects of repulsion, used to establish normative ground against the legalization of same-sex marriage, for instance, or to uphold discriminatory laws. Commenting on a proposal to repeal a same-sex marriage bill, New Hampshire State Representative Nancy Elliott depicted gay marriage as “taking the penis of one man and putting it in the rectum of another man and wriggling it around in excrement.” Fear of contamination and the spread of disease, as well the repulsion towards objects of disgust, are used to position homosexuality as a potentially corrupting and contaminating practice.

Such projective disgust is reflected in the decision by the Smithsonian Institution to remove a video by artist David Wojnarowicz from an exhibition in late 2010 because of pressure from lawmakers and conservative groups. Described as the “first major museum exhibition to focus on sexual difference in the making of modern American portraiture;”
Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture featured Wojnarowicz’s 1987 film A Fire In My Belly, addressing political apathy towards the AIDS crisis in the United States through the 1980s, as well as the artist’s own illness.68 The four-minute excerpt of the original thirteen-minute film shown in the exhibition featured a brief scene of ants crawling over a crucifix. According to the Catholic League this was “designed to insult and inflict injury and assault the sensibilities of Christians,” and constituted a form of “hate speech” funded by taxpayer money.69

The rhetoric employed in calling for the removal of the work was underscored by a projection of anti-homosexual disgust. One politician described the exhibition as a “pro-gay exhibit” of “really perverted, sick stuff,” including the “ashes of an AIDS victim” and “lots of really kinky and really questionable kind [sic] of art.”70 A conservative news website listed its contents as “an ant-covered Jesus, male genitals, naked brothers kissing, [and] men in chains,” conflating sacrilege, homoeroticism, incest, and nudity. Both the Wojnarowicz film and other works in the exhibition—unambiguously same-sex themed—were described as “vile,” and as failing to uphold “common standards of decency.”71

Aesthetic judgment can be seen to be functioning here in a double sense. As a projection of disgust, the repulsion towards such images reflects the political dimension of aesthetic experience. Depictions of homosexual practices or same-sex themes are deemed disgusting and repellent, and as such, used to justify a political and moral order, in their appeal to universal assent in regard to the repulsion. In Arendtian terms, this reveals the social relations and moral claims reflected in the act of aesthetic judgment. Yet such an instance also highlights the productive potential of judgment in the terms of the “enlarged mentality” central to Arendt’s reading of Kant. The political efficacy of such images becomes precisely their ability to address the dialectic of identification and disgust through this thinking in the place of others, or what Arendt called “representative thinking.” As an alternative to the politics of disgust, depictions of homosexual practices can help offer the imaginative ability of thinking through alterity, and so to conceive of the political or ethical claims of others as similar to one’s own search for political recognition.72 One such example is Hickey’s assessment of the work of Robert Mapplethorpe—subject to similar decries of disgust in the “culture wars” of the 1980s—in which same-sex sadomasochism is arguably made “beautiful” through its allusions to art-historical tropes.73

Arendt’s restaging of Kantian aesthetics, de Duve’s reassessment of Greenberg’s critical model, and the calls for a re-evaluation of criteria
within the “crisis of criticism” of recent years all evince a return to judgment in critical discourse. If the social, collaborative, and participatory dimensions of contemporary art reflect an ethical and political turn, this also has placed value and judgment, once central to the critical valuation of modernist discourse, at the center of critical debates about contemporary art. Rather than a reactionary appeal to formalist criteria as a standard to mitigate the pluralism or heterogeneity of contemporary art, a reassessment of judgment offers the more productive possibility of rethinking the supposed inimical relation between politics and aesthetics. The oppositional relationship between political engagement and form, and between imagination and ethics, can be shown to rely on willful misreading, critical neglect, or ideological “blindness,” while the political character of cultural production expanded beyond the strictures of well-worn critical models of the postwar left, or the debates of postmodern cultural politics. At stake are both the ongoing political engagement of cultural forms, and the critical relevance of art in the conditions of contemporary politics.

Notes

4 LeWitt and Smithson’s articles were published in the Summer and December 1967 issues of Artforum respectively; Graham’s and Bochner’s in the Summer 1967 issue of Arts Magazine. See Lucy R. Lippard, Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).


11 See James Elkins, op. cit., pp. 78–79.


15 Princenthal, op. cit., p. 85.

16 Diarmuid Costello, “Greenberg’s Kant and the Fate of Aesthetics in Contemporary Art Theory,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65: 2 (Spring 2007), p. 217. Costello argues that aesthetics in contemporary art theory has been largely marginalized, particularly “on the basis of various infelicities” arising from Greenberg’s recourse to Kantian aesthetic theory, in favor of discourses such as poststructuralism.


23 Ibid., p. 22.
27 Claire Bishop, op. cit., p. 65 and Grant Kester, op. cit., p. 11.
33 Ibid., pp. 400–404.
34 Ibid., p. 404. See Kant, op. cit., 5:204, p. 89 and Henry E. Allison, op. cit., p. 51. Kant’s insistence, as Henry Allison argues, is that the claim about an object is about the “representational state of the subject” in apprehending that object. For a discussion on the relationship between perceptive qualities and datum to value judgments, see Elder Olson, “On Value Judgments in the Arts,” *Critical Inquiry* 1: 1 (September 1974), pp. 71–90.
39 Allison, op. cit., p. 156.


Costello, op. cit., p. 221.


Khonsary and O’Brien, op. cit., p. 7. See Bedford, op. cit.


Beiner, op. cit., p. 120.

Arendt, Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, op. cit., p. 8.

Beiner, op. cit., p. 105.

Quote in Beiner, op. cit., p. 138.

Arendt, Between Past and Future, op. cit., p. 223.


Judgment’s Troubled Objects


60 The term, contrasted with the “politics of humanity,” is Martha Nussbaum’s. See Martha Nussbaum, From Disgust to Humanity (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).


62 Ibid.


64 Nussbaum, op. cit., p. 15.


72 Nussbaum, op. cit., p. 48.

I’m certain that anyone who visits the major group exhibitions marking our time in the contemporary art world—whether biennials or art fairs—wishes to pose the same question: Why is this thing so BIG? I have rarely heard an important group show slighted for being too small. The art world does not lack density. It does not lack supply. I could only admire Roberta Smith who, before composing her Times review of the 2011 Venice Biennale, called out the daunting “Enormity of the Beast” in a blog post: “With all the additional pavilions scattered about town and the independent exhibitions that are out there, too, Venice currently has more contemporary art on offer than any one person can see, even without the usual considerations of time, money and eye-strain.”1 If supply has not outstripped demand, it still might be noted that the supply of contemporary art has outstripped anyone’s ability to account for it. Though Claire Bishop, noting the Venice Biennale’s “return to sculpture,” delivers some happy news: “the Arsenale can be completed in a relatively rapid five-hour circuit” (“[p]rovided you don’t fall hostage to Christian Marclay’s seductive twenty-four-hour epic, The Clock, 2010”).2

Even so, it’s no longer enough to tackle Venice’s beast; it’s no longer enough to stroll Chelsea and think you have a snapshot of contemporary art. Art gets made, circulated, and discussed everywhere. If I remain addicted to Artforum’s “Scene & Herd” column, it is not just for the world-trotting, soap opera saga of after parties, but for the sheer range of openings and art fairs and actions that flash their fireworks from Stockholm to Dubai, from Taipei and Guangzhou to Los Angeles and Mexico City. Where does one pick up the thread here? In San Francisco, I’m trying to imagine a setting for Eve Sussman and the Rufus Corporation’s latest project, whiteonwhite:algorithmicnoir (2011). A film noir set in the fantasy architectures of such places as Kazakhstan, Dubai, Azerbaijan, and New York, the single-channel video has no beginning or end. Instead, an algorithm manipulates 100 hours of shot footage (roughly 3000 clips anywhere between 10 seconds and 5 minutes in length) so that no linear sequence can be repeated twice. One searches for a limit here, like the
rigid rules of Marclay’s clock keeping real time. One wants to know where one is, and where one is going. But the characters keep going; the landscapes keep unfolding. *whiteonwhite:algorithmicnoir* will always outlast you.

As we struggle to locate ourselves in the global contemporary, Fredric Jameson’s postmodern injunctions seem as relevant as ever; writing in 1981, Jameson was certain: Art as a specific and autonomous sphere has been wiped away, not through master planning and bulldozing but through successful franchising. Postmodernity marks “a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life—from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself—can be said to have become ‘cultural’ in some original and as yet untheorized sense.” Art supersized to everything and everywhere, of which the global art world and its expanded group shows and expanding art centers and omnipresent events is itself just one small part.

The problem of the contemporary, outside and especially inside the art world, might then be framed as the problem of art’s infinite egress, of art being too much with us. Globally produced and promiscuous in form, contemporary art is also coupled with the democratization of aesthetics in everyday life, via the design of not just sleek new technologies but also utilitarian staples like toothbrushes and trash cans. Forms abound, and so formal judgments must be made *all the time*. Even as artists, art historians, critics, and theorists sought to complicate the register of aesthetic judgment by linking its formal pronouncements to context, politics, and history, the fact remains that form remains, everywhere. John Tierney’s article in the *New York Times* introduced me to two new terms: “decision fatigue” and “ego depletion.” Scientific method is proposing the following: The more you judge, it seems, the less you can judge. You cannot constantly weigh the forms of art and life; you will run out of steam. And as your judging powers expire, you’re increasingly at risk of losing yourself to what somebody else (or some corporation-as-body) prefers. You stop judging. Business as usual proceeds.

Most days, the original Regency dandy Beau Brummel is my hero. He once asked a manservant: “Which view do I prefer?” Where can I find the assistant who chooses what I prefer in landscapes and effects and maybe even toothbrushes? Then I’d have the bandwidth to choose everything else, maybe even those five hours in the Arsenale. Truth be told, the assistant can choose a Top Ten at Venice for me as well. I want the space and the time to
make the right judgment, not the judgment I have to make, on every occasion and on every art-world demand. I would like to weigh the contemporary less so that I might know the contemporary more.

2

A mythology of my locality in the Bay Area is that the vibrancy of the technology sector depends upon young visionaries unconcerned with the physicality of their own world because of an immersion in the virtual one. From early dot.com-era profiles to David Fincher’s The Social Network (2010), we see exceedingly rich start-up gurus who live in empty mansions or banal tract homes when their monetary profiles could afford so much more. This refusal of the “fashion system,” as Roland Barthes once called it, hints at a key element of judgment today: The need for space, or what Hal Foster describes in his excellent polemic, Design and Crime, as the need for “running room.” Steve Jobs’ sad uniform of mock black turtleneck and light-colored Mom jeans spoke a disjunction: I am the tech world of everything moving forward, only because my personal affect is static. It is the Beau Brummel response, in odd reverse: “I reject choosing fashion because I make what is fashionable. I cannot make fashion and be fashionable.” Many designers opt for such daily uniforms and so know this dictum well. Only their withdrawal from the scene of staging permits them to stage anything themselves. Oscar Wilde’s dictum from “Phrases & Philosophies for the Use of the Young” holds: “One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art.” You cannot be and have at the same time, much less make. For being and having, as we know from Freud and Lacan, are ultimately relational and not static. Which perhaps means that being and having and even making only mean something via the fractured field of the social.

We have lost the open space where different folks can do something other than consume their world—and that space where objects themselves can be something other than their circulation as commodities. Our judgment cannot ignore the market here. And so our own tangled artistic economy, where groups like W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) highlight the speculative crap shoot whereby artists foot the bill for appearing in prestigious and seemingly nonprofit exhibitions in the hope that their work will be carried by ever better and for-profit gallerists. In such a world, careerists and cynics abound, winking at or despairing of the situation where
any art that operates in a product system is just so many products. As Jerry Saltz noted in 2010 about a spectacular solo show in a globally-branded gallery, “Andy Warhol famously talked about a future of ‘business art.’ Here we have that, but without the art. Now we’re just getting the business.”

A group like W.A.G.E., self-described as “[a]n activist group of artists, art workers, performers and independent curators fighting to get paid for making the world more interesting,” looks for that elusive running room, imagining ways of doing business that support and don’t squash the art. They point to an interesting development in the contemporary art world: that it’s no longer impolite to talk about the money. In fact, it might now be impossible to talk art without talking economics. In New York, before the real estate and other financial bubbles showed any signs of collapse, I remember my naive outrage when traveling behind a museum curator who pointed out to some collectors available objects and their prices in an important solo exhibition. What blue chip review can resist some nod to the artist’s market value now? A few months after that New York show, I saw Andrea Zittel speak at the Marin Headlands Center for the Arts outside of San Francisco. Her preface: Ask me anything you want about making a living as an artist. Surprisingly then, no one dared (Lehman Brothers had yet to fail).

Today, I think that room would be talking, as we’re all talking about auction prices, sales at Art Basel, and forgiveness of our student loan debt. In my city, we’re also talking about young artists perpetually leaving because the rents are too high and the collector base is too small. Like W.A.G.E., we’re wondering what an alternative and sustainable arts ecology might look like. These structural discussions might happen alongside of or separate from evaluations of a work’s merits, success, or failure, but I’m increasingly interested in the ways that the structural analysis and the aesthetic review come together. Zittel inspires: Of course an artist talk should discuss the seemingly invisible means of support that make an artwork, practice, or life in the arts possible! Auction houses twin capital and connoisseurship all the time. Why not redirect the price + provenance reporting for other ends? Could there be a return-to-Brecht school of art criticism, one able to demonstrate the social situation of the work of art, the artist, and the institutions upholding both, atomizing all those economies in ready dollars and cents, while still delivering the object itself? Could there be such an artwork? I am interested here not in broad strokes but more in the nuts and bolts of economic reporting: How is such an object implicated in global, or even local, capital? How can it be a work of art but also be had in a system of exchange, at the same time?
Stephanie Syjuco’s *Shadowshop* tested the emerging possibilities for an economically expansive field of art objects and aesthetic judgment from late November 2010 to May 1, 2011. Staged at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), the piece, a pop-up store stocking over 200 invited and local artists’ “wares,” existed as a “live art” component of the collection exhibition *The More Things Change*. The latter exhibited works that SFMOMA has collected across object departments in the twenty-first century. The show spoke a great deal to fragility, entropy, and failure, whether through Pae White’s tapestry of a smoke exhalation, *Smoke Knows*, Mark Bradford’s gridded *Monster*, or Alec Soth’s photographs of detritus (both people and places) along the Mississippi river’s “third coast.” But the show also spoke to the intimate exchanges making themselves known over the last decade, whether Ryan Trecartin and his crew’s manic histrionics or the everyday poignancy of Harrell Fletcher and Miranda July’s *Learning to Love You More* archive. Full disclosure: I was one of ten curators on this show. Fuller disclosure: I curated Stephanie Syjuco’s *Shadowshop*. Even fuller disclosure: My curation had less to do with the project itself than in getting the project institutionally green-lighted. When Syjuco and her project manager, my colleague Megan Brian, got to work, I had almost nothing to do with the large contingent of Bay Area artists invited to sell their work in the shop. I did not interview every “guest worker” (as Syjuco dubbed them) who would serve as an attendant in the shop. And I certainly had little grasp of the almost overwhelming and also changing inventory *Shadowshop* made available for viewers of *The More Things Change*. In the end, when I would stroll through the shop’s gallery space, I was, at times, more like the day’s visitors than I cared to admit.

And so what did visitors see? We found a functioning retail store, a satellite museum shop closing some blockbuster exhibition. Yet the DIY aesthetic—from loading palettes as display bases and cases to the photocopied signage—suggested something else was at work. The stocked artists were invited to submit the full range of their output, from multiples to sketches to CDs and catalogues. Syjuco asked her local colleagues to examine their full range of production, to consider their studio and nonstudio practices that might circulate everywhere BUT in a gallery, and to use *Shadowshop* as a distribution hub for this uncertain product. The
artists selected the items, the pricing (up to $250), and would receive 100% of the profits. SFMOMA covered infrastructure (from shipping to guest worker salaries), sales tax, and credit card fees. Internally, I described the piece as “bad capitalism.” We put money in, but only artists would get money out.

Shadowshop became the platform for a number of public conversations hosted by Suzanne Stein, our community producer and editor for SFMOMA’s blog, Open Space, and Patricia Maloney, editor of the Bay Area online arts magazine Art Practical. Maloney’s review of the piece in her journal set the tone for the public conversations to come. As she rightly pointed out, the retail structure of the installation blocked one’s art vision, so that work that could have been evaluated and appreciated as art in a gallery became so many toothbrushes in that overwhelming Target aisle. Artists who set modest materials to higher price points (the $250 ceiling that would look bargain basement in a gallery) and also devised retail stacking displays over white cube spacing, like Zachary Royer Scholtz and his hand-cut blue packing material, 6610 (blue sheeting) – force of habit, made no sense to the shopping eyes enabled by Shadowshop. As Maloney points out, one went for the $20 or even $10 gift card set instead. Yet it’s also true that savvy arts insiders—including SFMOMA curators, San Francisco gallerists, and Bay Area collectors—thrilled to the price tags some well-loved artists affixed to their Shadowshop wares. Josephine Taylor’s small drawings (at 4 × 6 inches, a truly miniaturized version of gallery works that can unfold on paper sizes more like 8 × 6 feet) sold out in a few hours of the shop’s initial opening (and then on a subsequent re-stock). Her nineteen delicate images riffing on complicated child-like figures, positioned on a shelf below the main countertop display, would hardly have been spotted and sold so quickly to a casual shopper, even priced at $20 each. No, what Taylor buyers were looking for was some bargain basement art by real artists. Shadowshop’s goal—to focus on artists’ non-art products and to distribute them, was not always met. The artists bucked the system. The shoppers sometimes played the system well too.

And this overlay and opposition and overlay again of aesthetics and economics, of insiders and outsiders, of art and wares, continued throughout the Shadowshop exhibition. As the Open Space conversations began, this doubled vision provoked a number of headaches for the sessions’ participants, who wanted nothing less than the right corrective lenses. Self-described “emerging” artists felt that they had to accept Syjuco’s invitation to join Shadowshop because of its affiliation as an SFMOMA-sponsored
project. Others felt that the shop, under Syjuco’s sole authorship, exploited the participating artists by absenting their names in official museum wall texts. Everyone argued about whether they would include the project on their CVs.

But perhaps the surprising twist in these public conversations was the voiced argument that to present works in Shadowshop was to destroy both their market value and thereby their ontological status as works of art. Shadowshop’s play with the retail structure of the contemporary art world was seen to deflate all that that structure makes possible: namely, the production, circulation, contemplation, and critique of autonomous artworks, spaced well on a white wall. For artworks both to be what they are and also to be had in a system of exchange could not be shown and hence known together. Now that any gallery block cannot be read without the real estate lens of its booming or becoming neighborhood valuation, the desire to stay in this artistic game without naming it seems like my naive self aghast at money talk on the museum floor. I preferred my art front and center and my art market in the closet. Dollar bills are pretty dirty in the end, and their links to gluttony, monstrosity, and feces well noted. Our housing for art can’t be a mess—and, ideally, should follow architect Yoshio Taniguchi’s quip about MOMA’s early aughts’ expansion: “Give me enough money, and I will give you a beautiful museum; give me more money, and I will make it go away.”

Shadowshop, unlike MOMA’s new building, asserted its infrastructure, wedding art objects to their means of support, and thereby inaugurating a series of critical confusions. Clark Bluckner, reporting on the Shadowshop conversations, highlighted one woman, self-identified as “only a consumer,” who suggested that the wares-on-sale failed as artworks-on-view not because they were so many tchotchkas with price tags in a store, but because they lacked visible authors and intentions. Our consumer’s complaint is a curious one: Certainly the whole dilemma of the commodity form is its erasure of its scene of production in favor of its magical deployment in your own life. The artwork to anyone but a collector, however, is even more inscrutable. If you can’t take it home, what are you going to do with it? Why is it here? Who made it? As any museum’s Education department can attest, the art object must ever be aligned with some answers to these questions, via wall text, iPhone stops, online video, etc. What is so compelling to me about this problem is the perception that the art object needs to carry its own scene of production for it to be considered an art object at all.
This perceived lack—a people gap, really—is crucial to Shadowshop, as I would argue its success or failure as an artwork lies solely in its ability to twin the commodity with the community of its circulation, to double a product with the scene of its making, and to enact a DIY transformation on art objects as wares. Rejecting the sleek minimalism and haughty silence of the boutique, the shop ran on the “pitch,” knowing that an overload of products paired with an overload of signage hoping to explain those products is, in the end, simply an overload. And so anyone on the production side of the piece—our artist, stocking artists, project manager, rotating guest workers (who were themselves often stocking artists), and even this mostly absent curator—would hawk our Shadowshop wares. The complaint of a consumer who thought the wares failed as art because they lacked visible intention was hardly an isolated affair—it was, instead, the very engine of the piece. We Shadowshop hawks had a job to do: connecting people to objects and objects to people. Encountering the shop, and recalibrating themselves from art viewers to shoppers, our visitors did indeed want to know who made what, which inventory had the best value (for us, and by extension for them), and why they should be involved in the project at all. We made our sales pitches. We connected some dots. And visitors bought some wares. In the end, Shadowshop channeled over $100,000 to Bay Area artists. SFMOMA’s $30,000 project budget took work directly to the museum’s audiences and asked them to evaluate creative output that straddled commodity and art forms. That public did not fail to decide.

Shadowshop ended with a special performance by artists Packard Jennings, Steuart Pittman, and Scott Vermeire. The artists posed as QVC-like itinerant salesmen contracted by the store to sell our final stock via the web. Streaming online and selling in-person (Shadowshop sales had no online inventory), the performance spoke to the clichéd disjunction between the art world and the seeming “real” world, with the Red State attired pitchmen trying to thrill us with objects that looked, from their world’s perspective, at best inscrutable (San Francisco Giants pitcher Tim Lincecum’s rookie card signed by artist Lee Walton) and at worst naughty (Rebecca Goldfarb’s wax flashlight meets phallus sculpture). This was purely an inside job, with the performers playing up to our fantasies about the seemingly real America and to our certainties about “real” America’s
fantasies about us. This was community building as comedy roast. We were all in on or the butt of the jokes.

If I began this essay in global dislocation and exhaustion, imagining an art world impossibly everywhere and overproductive, I want to end with the “lure of the local,” as Lucy Lippard’s great book calls it, but with the “lure,” following Shadowshop’s dynamic engine, twinned with a “logic.” I hosted the eminent art historian Irving Sandler for a talk several years ago, when his memoir, A Sweeper-Up After Artists (2003), was published. The book, and his conversation with me that evening, spoke to the truly awesome scale of the contemporary art world. A Sweeper-Up might be sub-titled “Tenth Street,” for such is the original Manhattan neighborhood of the intimate art world Sandler recounts.

Thinking about Sandler’s Tenth Street now, it’s interesting to note that Sandler discovered the downtown neighborhood through midtown: In 1952, he had a “road to Damascus” moment when viewing Franz Kline’s painting Chief at MOMA: “it was the first work of art I really saw, and it changed my life, somewhat like Saul jumping into Paul, as Elaine de Kooning wrote of Kline’s own leap from figuration to abstraction.” But in Sandler’s case, the love of abstraction and of the painting led inevitably to the figures and locales making such things. In Sandler’s case, MOMA didn’t go away; instead it pointed out where, with whom, and how to live. It pointed downtown. By fall of 1953, Sandler finds himself in the Cedar Tavern, silently sitting across from the irrepressible Franz Kline. With enough hanging out near such artists, Sandler is now a part of their world; he writes: “Within easy walking distance of the Cedar [Tavern], Tenth Street between Third and Fourth avenues, where the Tanager Gallery was located (and where Sandler would eventually work), was the geographic hub of the international avant-garde, or so the artists who lived, exhibited, and congregated there had the self-assurance to believe.” If we no longer have such self-assurance about our centrality in the global contemporary, we still have hubs. Art remains local and social. And it will be from these local and social hubs that artists, artworks, hangers-on, sweepers-up, and judgments about them all will spring.

For me, the “lure” of the local is the lure of positioning oneself in an arts community. And it’s heartening to see just how many new arts communities constitute the global contemporary. If Shadowshop and Sandler prove instructive for me, it is because each example demonstrates how art is born from a social field of interests. And so the “logic” of the local, the sense that artworks both spring from and generate ways of looking at the world.
Though he’s evaluated a changing art world for over forty years, Sandler remains rooted to the logic of Tenth Street at its action painting apogee. He’s explored many neighborhoods since then, but the logic of individual dynamism, gesture, and even heroism remains his starting point. It is the logic of our own critical localities, like the scene of the artwork’s production, that must be surfaced today too.

My local logic, embodied in this Shadowshop examination, proceeds from artworks and art worlds that mind the gap, using disjunction to twin a seemingly impossible this and that. I like Eve Sussman and the Rufus Corporation’s whiteonwhite:algorithmicnoir because it is impossible to view in total. I admire the way that the difficulty of the production process rebounds on the viewer in the impossibility of the viewing process. I find myself wishing they had shot here too. San Francisco fogs are Noir 101, so I mourn our absence from the piece. Like our Shadowshop’s consumer and her complaint, I want to know the artist too.

So in the end these are a producer’s notes about supporting and evaluating contemporary art in a specific time and a place. If I can skip the jet-setting of the global contemporary, it is because my people and purposes are here and not there. Warhol used to say, “Pop Art is liking things.” I’ll say, “Judgment is loving things enough to make them happen for other people.” I pose this love-into-action as a means of engaging the sprawl of contemporary art. And while I sought to leave him out, isn’t this just Immanuel Kant in the end? Judgment as a universal subjective: We are so arrested by the thing that we determine and declare that everyone else must be arrested too. We fall hard for some thing, and we want to be a part of that thing we love. We want to find a way to make that thing happen, here, for us and for ours. And we want everyone else to love it too. So buy the postcard, start the conversation, or put on the show. The artwork will have it no other way.

Notes

10 Reading Brecht lately, I’m struck again by his insistence that theater must always witness its social significance. In “The Epic Theater and its Difficulties,” he argues: “The essential point of the epic theater is that it appeals less to our feelings than to the spectator’s reason. Instead of sharing an experience, the spectator must come to grip with things.” Yet he also notes, in “A Short Organum for the Theater”: “From the first it has been the theater’s business to entertain people, as it has also of all the other arts. It is this business which always gives it its particular dignity; it needs no other passport than fun, but this it has got to have.” The sensuous and the social must always be paired. *Brecht on Theater*, ed. and trans. John Willet (New York: Hill & Wang, 1957), pp. 23 and 180.
13 There is no blog post for Josephine Taylor’s work in *Shadowshop*, since the pieces sold out so quickly.
16 Ibid., p. 12.
17 Think of a Brechtian actor not embodying but demonstrating a role, or of Wilde’s aphorisms, or of Foster’s running room.
Reports of criticism’s demise have been snowballing for nearly two decades now. Contrast this to the strutting that characterized the 1960s and early 1970s, when art criticism was hailed for its “august clairvoyance” and “expansive confidence.”1 By “the middle to late 1970s,” Hal Foster remembers, “theoretical production became as important as artistic production ... Critical theory served as a secret continuation of modernism by other means ... it occupied the position of high art, at least to the extent that it retained such values as difficulty and distinction.”2 Indeed, some art magazines from back then get treated today with a level of reverence usually reserved for actual works of art. For example, if you go to abebooks.com or any other search engine for used-book sellers, you’d be lucky to find a back issue of *Artforum* from before the mid-1970s for under $25. Some go for over $200—like volume five, number ten, June 1967, which includes Michael Fried’s “Art and Objecthood,” Robert Morris’s “Notes on Sculpture,” Robert Smithson’s “Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site,” and Sol LeWitt’s “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art.” Whole graduate seminars have been built around that one issue. Now imagine that level of consideration being paid to any more recent issue. Hence the typical refrain: The old *Artforum* was a magazine you read, while today’s *Artforum* is a magazine you only glance through.

Some say it has always been thus, that criticism has never operated outside of hostile conditions. Since the beginning of modernism, with the crisis that arose in the nineteenth-century academies and official salons, the fear has been voiced—from all sides, including by artists and critics—that art criticism risks losing itself in the marketplace, or in some formless plurality of individual tastes, or in the always shifting sands of political fortune, or in the paranoid guardianship of cliquish connoisseurs. Supposedly fixed evaluative criteria crumble one after another, canons are revised by critique or simply succumb to scatterings of individual consumption. “We are asked to contemplate a great plethora of possibilities in the list that must now be used to draw a line around the art of the present,” complained Rosalind Krauss in only the second issue of *October* about the pluralism she saw overtaking the art world of the late 1970s. But in her very next sentence, Krauss unveils a totalizing “postmodern” conceptual frame.
able to prove that “all these separate ‘individuals’ are in fact moving in lockstep.”3 Chaos, increasing dispersal, or lockstep, greater order: now there’s a defining dialectic of modernism.

This dialectic continues into our present era of globalization, in which the art world, like other major business sectors, becomes increasingly de-centered while at the same time achieving ever-greater organizational and professional coherence. And yet conditions today do differ in some historically unique ways, which have impacted significantly the practice and status of art criticism. For one thing, over the last twenty-five years, as the art world has changed from a pyramid with one city at its apex to a sprawling horizontal matrix, and mobility has come to matter foremost, a new organizational norm has taken hold, one that emphasizes responsiveness and rapid adaptability as ways to accommodate accelerating change and turnover. Itinerant and post-studio approaches are more common among artists now, while museums increasingly rely on commissions and residencies, meaning that today the art world, like many other areas of social life, is largely characterized by flexible and short-term arrangements—by on-demand or just-in-time production, by outsourcing and temporary work teams—all interacting with one another in a loose, fluctuating network structure.

Indeed, already by the end of the 1970s Jean-François Lyotard was writing in *La Condition postmoderne* about how “the temporary contract [which] is in practice supplanting permanent institutions in the professional, emotional, sexual, cultural, family, and international domains, as well as in political affairs … is favored by the system due to its greater flexibility, lower cost, and the creative turmoil of its accompanying motivations—all of these factors contribute to increased operativity.”4 As well, the topography of culture has become more expansive, with focus shifting from the national and even international toward the transnational, global, and diasporic; at the same time, its analysis is more finely grained, as theorists abandon abstract totalizing and essentializing models of culture to attend more closely to particular, concrete actions. As a result, culture is thought of as more temporal and fleeting, less as an array of formalistic and static objects, or the mere effects of grand determining ideological frameworks, and instead as specific, embedded performative acts.

Moreover, the tendency is to treat these acts in nonhierarchical ways, to welcome the demise of consensus. The waning credibility of “master narratives” encourages the profusion of what Lyotard calls local “language games” with their more “heteromorphous nature.” But the decay of
metadiscourses, including both modernism and its postmodernist critique, the collapsing of structures that formerly organized collective practice and experience, the demise of canons and critical criteria, the inability to convincingly “draw a line around” what is most significant about contemporary art within deep historical logics or determinations is only one side of a simultaneously integrative process. Over the last twenty years we have witnessed the replacement of summarizing models of culture with new networked models based on ever-extending databases and platforms enhanced by better connectivity. Unlike stable enclosures, a database is characterized by two qualities emphasized by today’s general communicational mandates, which are extensiveness and easy retrievability. Databases are radically open-ended; they don’t tell stories; they don’t have a beginning or end, or determined development. They are simply collections of individual items, each with equivalent potentiality. Platforms, too, are open-ended; as the underlying structures built to bring into temporary relation the items of databases, they must be flexible enough to welcome a high variety of interfaces. Just as no single television show or pop song is as hot today as the TiVo boxes and iPods that manage their organization, so too with art it is the ease and agility of access and navigation through and across data fields that takes precedence over any singular, lone objet.

How then does a museum, for example, approximate the condition of a database or platform? No longer seemingly permanent and timeless, art exhibitions are—self-consciously—temporarily assembled. The better a museum or kunsthalle can do this ad hoc arranging, the better it will fall in line with the recent general business trend toward service provision: of offering different modular experiences from which customers can choose depending on whim or preference. Or as Marc Pachter, director of the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC, described his museum’s recent renovations, “You can choose your portal, you can mix and match as you want.” Even museum architecture has adapted accordingly—by, for instance, literally incorporating more interior portals, glimpses of faraway objects (which interject with one another), and other manners of disorientation. In Rosalind Krauss’s terms, this produces “a gesture which is simultaneously one of interest and of distraction: the serendipitous discovery of the museum as flea-market.” This bombarding of the viewer with choices better aligns the museum with today’s communicational protocols, and may help explain why museums have succeeded in attracting ever larger crowds while, for example, most venues for “serious” music like symphonies
and operas, which are limited in their presentational options to sequencing linear, set programs, struggle. It’s precisely by falling into ruin that structures like the museum or the canon become not obsolete but updated, how the space of art and culture become most recently modernized.

Under these conditions, art criticism, at least in the United States, undergoes a substantial recasting. On the one hand, the actual practice of criticism expands from a proclivity of elites to a broad form of social labor: Rating and recommending objects and experiences has become a mainstay of today’s ubiquitous social media, as well as an important cost-free source of value-adding for retailers. On the other hand, individual response to individual objects, the baseline formula for the work of critics, dwindles in significance. That’s because today’s world of network connectivity shows little regard for isolating boundaries, either those of the sovereign individual or the discrete artwork, the two poles between which free aesthetic judgment is to be punctually exercised. A communicational paradigm places too much stress on ever-changing relations and constant interaction and feedback to support criticism’s still dominant myth—that of a lone individual, armed with little more than her or his well-tuned sensibility, facing off against a similarly delimited object, a framed artwork, or precisely themed exhibition. And little is left for critique to unmask, since communication doesn’t raise the question, as does representation, of a referentiality or truth beyond the connection. What matters instead are links and circulations.

Thus the demonstration of aesthetic refinement today is more likely to unfold via the extent of one’s horizontal and multidirectional reach across myriad cultural niches. Indeed, a more networked subject has come to the fore over the last twenty years. No longer a distilled essence of a centered culture, whether high culture’s elitist snob or mass culture’s brainwashed couch-potato, the individual becomes a de-centered actor, what sociologists like to call the “omnivore,” or what Gilles Deleuze calls a “dividual” (someone who is not a “discontinuous producer”—making or consuming discrete, similar objects one at a time—but is “undulatory, in orbit, in a continuous network”). Criticism, at least when it’s imagined to be issued from some fixed position at a distance from the field of practice, will appear limited and diminished by its immobility and withdrawal from the field’s circulatory movement. Artist Liam Gillick is one of many in the art world who have noticed how, with the “general melding of roles between artist, curator and critic,” one result today is “a concurrent diminution of the role of the semi-autonomous critical voice.”
For a concrete example of the impact of such changes on criticism, look again at Artforum. In 1993 the magazine initiated a contributors page immediately following the table of contents. What the contributors page implied was, for one thing, expansion; in the newly globalized art world, it was no longer reasonable to assume that the magazine’s readership would recognize its authors by name alone. But the other was that recognition between readership and authorship was needed. It should be remembered that the author’s byline is itself a relatively recent invention, a modernizing innovation of the magazine and newspaper format for the purpose of rooting the previously sufficient text in an author, in a scene and an act or performance of writing as origination, in much the same way that sound recordings would later replace sheet music with a singular, originary act of embodied musical performance. The difference with Artforum in the 1990s is that it, like a lot of other magazines, introduced a contributors page not so much to tie each of its articles to a singular, unique and isolated source or origin but more so to open the articles out, to use the authors as a sort of hyperlink to myriad other professionals, sites, and projects. On the contributors page authors are introduced by a standardized biographical blurb listing professional accomplishments and affiliations, and thus each is plotted across a map of other publishers, exhibition venues, schools, art institutions and so on (and this at a moment when other areas of the magazine were becoming similarly hyperlinked, such as in the ads, which increasingly throughout the later 1990s listed email addresses and eventually websites). On the contributors page each author’s 100-word blurb—the bureaucratic CV in prose—accompanies a thumbnail head-shot (ranging in style from off-the-cuff and personal to slick and modish). Here, as a response to the twin problems of growing dispersion and anonymity on the one hand and increased interconnectedness on the other, the answer is a standardized form of introduction which, through the personalization of its address, invites intimate investment.

Another change at Artforum, one that the contributors page helps track, is the allotment of column space in the magazine to fewer independent critics and to more and more professional art historians who are more institutionally networked. The critic, by comparison, looks isolated and unconnected: she or he is too inward turned, still supposedly privileging a subjective interior, the place where the experience of art is received and submitted to aesthetic judgment. The art historian instead privileges an exterior, a field of not only other objects but also disciplinary discourses, all bridged and related. Art historians are strongly identified and integrated as
professionals; they conduct their practices within institutionally defined fields that are striated and organized by title, rank, and collegiality; they belong to professional associations; they advance their respective fields by situating their efforts first and foremost in relation to contributions by fellow practitioners. In short, they are abundantly hyperlinked; with their widely disseminated and standardized institutional base of codified training, historians of contemporary art exist and operate within networks. Critics don’t have any equivalent of academia or the museum world; they lack institutional grounding and organization; they have no well-organized system of training that erects high educational barriers of qualification. They don’t have that same kind of transcontinental archipelago of professionally linked colleagues, with their cross-advertised conferences and symposia, etc., through which to travel, mingle, connect. Compared to professional historians, critics are unincorporated, even amateurish.9

Also since the mid-1990s *Artforum* has run more interviews, roundtable discussions and multi-authored features, which represent, over and above whatever specific topics the discussants happen to be addressing, the connectedness and “liveness” of communicational interface. Here writing, with its associations to interiority and “thinking to oneself,” is replaced by something closer to talk, which is more exteriorized and socialized, thinking that’s always addressed, that’s about transmission, that’s heard rather than overheard (to borrow John Stuart Mill’s famous distinction between rhetoric and poetics). This is another crucial ingredient in the recent construction of a new ideal for art discourse. Not only are connections to be made, but these connections need to be socially tight and thus informationally rich. Measured in communicational terms, the only thing more valuable than extensive reach is complex, intimate feedback. As organization theorist and current Harvard Business School dean Nitin Nohria explains, “The structure of face-to-face interaction [as compared to long-distance communication or typical customer suggestion-box mechanisms] offers an unusual capacity for interruption, repair, feedback and learning … These are the relationships that provide the foundation on which the rest of the network depends.”10 And this becomes all the more important now that, instead of being based predominantly on anonymous commodity exchange or impersonal institutionalization and canonization, art-world transactions are increasingly grounded in short-term contracts that involve social interactions stressing interpersonal qualities like trustworthiness, loquaciousness, and likeability. A new art-world map is being drawn—by art magazines but also by museums, biennials, art schools, and so on—which, while
omitting a centered and centering idea of culture, and leaving instead just overlapping concrete practices, appears both much bigger and much smaller, its boundless extension providing the backdrop to small pockets of high-intensity social involvement, of quasi-contract-based collaborative projects, of face-to-face interaction. This has been described as a “social turn” in art, but it’s also how business gets done today: within a vast universe of international radar blips, one zooms in here and there to join in on private, proximate performances, entering organic and immediate spaces stirred with breathy, spontaneous conversation. (Indicative here is the “Scene & Herd” column that headlines Artforum’s website, where art events spanning the globe are covered in an intimate tone and scale, an intimacy reinforced by the accompanying photos, in which effervescent encounters with fellow attendees and personalities are captured with what appears to be a handy pocket instamatic or digital point-and-shoot—or even cell phone camera—which, rather than looking in from an anonymous position outside, is instead itself entirely immersed in the action, one more spontaneous element in the participants’ overall performative play.)

Also, whereas up until the late 1980s Artforum seldom ran anything but art ads, limiting the few product advertisements that were accepted to the back of the magazine, over the course of the 1990s more and more product advertising appears—for clothes, liquor, mints, eyeglasses, restaurants, bars, airlines, hotels, even financial services—interspersed with the gallery announcements throughout the entire issue. And whereas formerly the ad section and the editorial content had been strictly segregated, now they co-mingle, alternating page to page. This mingling helps to disarticulate the editorial content and allows for more diversification, as short “think pieces” by intellectual-columnists are now interrupted by upcoming exhibition “previews” and various types of news reporting—on art institutions and their intertwined affairs, on the comings and goings of curators, etc. There are also more lists (“Hot List,” “Top Ten”), in which the designating of something as “the best” no longer isolates but integrates it into one long cue lined up with other long cues. Many of the new sections in Artforum (“Openings,” “Thousand Words,” etc.) also appear regularly. Which means that, not only does the magazine take on a more diverse institutional art system as its subject matter, but the magazine itself, as it becomes more diverse, also becomes more systematized, more templated, accommodating only those changes in content that don’t exceed its structure’s built-in flexibilities (again the website provides a clear example of this). And finally there is more emphasis on practical information, on news and the art
world's general functionality, which makes the magazine more a resource and guide and less a venue for criticism. It could be argued that this is indicative of a larger tension in art today—between an emphasis on practice and practicality on the one hand, on the everyday and design and even activism, and the supposed continuing need on the other hand for criticism with its refusals and negativity and its tearing things down. The annual “best and worst” section in Artforum, an occasion for more lists introduced in 1994, had the “worst” half permanently deleted only three years later, in 1997.

Many of these recent changes, especially the interspersing of advertising and editorial content, have been cited as evidence of Artforum’s decline. But that argument is exceedingly simplistic, and proves only that what’s really in decline is the ability to think critically about the current conditions of possibility for criticism itself. The more challenging argument is that Artforum has never been stronger. We may excuse ourselves that we don’t read it anymore, but that hasn’t stopped it from becoming all the more paradigmatic of what it means to be an active participant in the art world today. Artforum still dominates—not despite but because of its being a magazine you only glance through. That’s how it has succeeded in updating and modernizing itself—by loosening its allegiances to an older print culture and the techniques of silent reading, so crucial to ideas of individual autonomy and interiority, of critical distance and thinking as an isolated, independent act, and instead aligning itself more to the protocols of information management, to the practices and effects of user interface and instantaneous electronic communications. Criticism might indeed matter less to Artforum today, but that doesn’t mean the magazine’s dominance has tapered. Indeed, if you look at the “Statement of Ownership” published in each year’s November issue, you’ll find that after a long stagnation lasting from the early 1980s through the mid-1990s, Artforum has experienced one of its biggest jumps in overall print run, nearly sixty percent, in the past fifteen years. It’s never been more popular. To say that the Artforum of today has simply fallen below its previous standards of quality, to begrudge it for not being what it used to be, is not only nostalgic but a thorough denial of our present historical moment.

The task facing criticism today is not only to own up to these changes in the structures that govern and determine its production and dissemination, but furthermore to aggressively update the historically, collectively accumulated conceptual and rhetorical resources that constitute so much of the practice itself, its sanctioned models, categories, terminology, value assumptions and so on. Flexibility, nomadic mobility, dialogical feedback—too
much art criticism still complacently assumes these to be challenges to the system, despite the fact that they are the very attributes the dominant system most loudly promotes. Applying to the art of today the same critique that was formulated thirty or more years ago actually deflects considerations of present conditions; it replaces a contemporary social frame of reference with a canonical art historical one, and diverts attention away from ruptures between then and now in favor of a reassuring illusion of historical continuity. It’s up to art criticism to prove that it can answer our present moment, not just parrot analyses from criticism’s heyday in the 1970s. Either that or admit that criticism itself has become history.

Notes

9 In the 1960s and 70s, many of Artforum’s feature articles developed out of what were intended to be reviews—the few sectional divisions in the magazine were entirely porous. And while it’s true that many of Artforum’s early main contributors, like Michael Fried, trained in and subsequently taught academic art history, many did not (Max Kozloff left NYU’s graduate school to work fulltime as a writer and Artforum editor; painter Sidney Tillim had only a BA and Peter Plagens an MFA, etc.). As for later art historians like Krauss and Foster, they admired and identified themselves as critics first and foremost, and wrote magazine and catalogue essays almost exclusively, rather than
research-laden tomes. And yet their more recent students have helped reverse this trend by embracing more academic careers and models of research and publishing.


11 I hesitate to even bring up Artforum’s website, especially its “Scene & Herd” column, since shifting focus to such overly caricatured and marginalized examples risks distracting from my main argument about the new priorities, behaviors, and functions of today’s art press more generally. As with most magazines, the importance of Artforum’s website as part of its overall information platform shouldn’t be overstated, if mainly because it leverages nothing near the hardcopy’s status and cultural capital and brings in comparatively little revenue. What I’m trying to stress here are new forms of organization, while also not reducing these down to a matter of particular technologies (e.g., websites on the internet), since such a move invites deterministic fantasies that risk losing sight of other forces—changes in culture, social structure, markets, etc.—that are relatively, but significantly, independent of developments in the various technologies they draw on.
The late 1980s was marked by a severe recession and a subsequent art-market crash, one that proved to be a strong corrective to a hyper-inflated art economy. It was during the heady days of the early to mid-1980s that galleries first established waitlists for unmade works of art, and provided sizable stipends and signing bonuses (on top of income earned from sales) to artists whose prices escalated to heights previously unknown. The 1990s were calmer, as the burgeoning and newly international art market regained balance. The increased prevalence of international biennials, which brought new artists to the market, and later, new collectors into the fold, contributed to the steady growth during this period.

But the most notable escalation of the global art market occurred in the years after the September 11 attacks, when the financial markets righted themselves after the initial shock. The first decade of 2000 became the era of the hedge fund, marked by the trading of securities, and a massive housing bubble. Olav Velthuis tackles this history in his “Globalization and Commercialization of the Art Market,” arguing that against the prevailing rhetoric commercialization is in fact a cyclical rather than a constant force in the art world of the last twenty or so years.

The exuberance of the financial markets has mirrored the art market, where auction houses achieved record sales and art fairs—like Art Basel, Art Basel Miami Beach, and Frieze—grew in importance. Fairs have become the financial focal point of the contemporary art world, a place where galleries conduct a majority of their business. Certainly galleries, both big and small, are key factors in the shape of the art market, yet
commentators often misconstrue and generalize how in fact they impact the economic face of the art world as well as their importance in creating and maintaining local art scenes. A more nuanced and complicated perspective of galleries comes from interviews with Mihai Pop, Sylvia Kouvali, and Andrea Rosen, who own spaces in Cluj and Berlin, Istanbul, and New York, respectively.

The recession that began in 2007–8 did little to change the dynamics of the art market. It has, though, added further fuel to a wide body of literature critical of the art-market’s structure. One of the greatest challenges today is to come to terms with the operation of this system, while still accounting for aesthetic changes not necessarily related to the market. Indeed, it is often the perspective of artists that is lost in discussions of this kind. Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri redress this issue in “Untitled,” which takes their contribution as a political intervention. Their poetic critique makes clear that to see the market as merely a hegemonic force obviates a great deal of interpretive nuance, since one must still recognize that virtually everyone in the art world unwittingly or otherwise participates in the functioning of the market.
Globalization and Commercialization of the Art Market

Olav Velthuis

Introduction

At first sight, the market for contemporary art hardly seems different from the late 1980s, or, for that matter, from half a century ago: Its fundamental market structure and principal actors have remained the same, with two key intermediaries, art galleries and auction houses, vying for market share. Unlike in other cultural industries such as the music business or journalism, the internet has hardly modified the way contemporary works of art are exchanged. New York remains the center of the art market, where the largest and most influential art dealers are headquartered and the main contemporary art auctions are organized. The way new works of art are marketed is by and large identical to the way this happened throughout the twentieth century. Indeed, one could argue that the dealer-critic system, which was established in France in the second half of the nineteenth century as the modern art market was born, is still in place: Art dealers continue to represent a limited number of artists on a more or less permanent basis, and try to make a market for their work by inserting it into the taste-making machinery of the art world. This implicit, negated marketing strategy entails raising the interest of critics, curators, collectors, and other art-world members who dispose of the symbolic capital required to create artistic reputations and consecrate new works of art. This socially constructed artistic value, in turn, can be translated by art dealers into economic value, i.e. higher prices and sales.

The Rise of the Art Fair, the Internet, and the Auction Houses

This stable market structure notwithstanding, the art market has gone through a number of interrelated institutional developments in the last two decades, which have had a significant impact on the exchange of art—both structurally and culturally. In particular, the rise of the art fair, the internet,
and the increased competition of auction houses on the contemporary segment of the art market both reflect and further propel the globalization and commercialization of the art world; the latter much to the dismay of those artists, critics, and other members of the art world who claim that commerce, in one way or another, contaminates art. I will first discuss the rise of these three institutions and afterwards their effects on the art world.

Whereas the first art fair—Art Cologne—was established in 1967, they have only started flourishing since the end of the 1990s: The number of participants per fair rose (nowadays in the average art fair several hundreds of dealers have a booth), and so did the number of fairs worldwide, their number of visitors, and the media attention which is devoted to them. The rise of the fair should be understood as a response to a changing market environment. First of all, it has provided a new means for art collectors to economize on search time for art. This is crucial for the art market’s clientele whose scarcest resource is not money but time: Traveling regularly to individual gallery shows out of town has become a luxury that the richest can no longer afford, unlike the leisure class of yesteryear who used to be the main customers. The role of the art fair as an economization device is all the more important in an art world where “local” has become a pejorative term. As the art-market correspondent of The Economist put it: “‘local artist’ has become a synonym for insignificant artist … ‘International’ is now a selling point in itself.” In other words, a global habitus (read: an interest in what is marketed in New York, London, Berlin, Zurich, and a handful of other centers of cultural commerce) is required from all market participants, including collectors. The art fair enables this habitus by temporarily bringing the globally consecrated supply of art under one roof.

Secondly, the fair is the art world’s response to a more general event culture, exemplified by for instance the proliferation of film festivals or art biennials. Within this event culture, the consumption (not necessarily acquisition) of contemporary art is packaged as a social and cultural experience, livened up by the artistic performances and round-table discussions of experts which have now become standard elements of the art-fair format.

Thirdly, the art fair has become a successful exchange platform because of its fit with the status-driven nature of the market: The fair embodies a fine-grained tool to both represent and reproduce the status hierarchies embedded within the market. It distinguishes visitors by providing selected groups with VIP-treatment, access to pre-(and pre-)openings, afterparties, or the houses of collectors in the vicinity of the fair. Those types of access are now broadly recognized as signs of status among the cultural elite—the
more exclusive the venue, the stronger the signal. Likewise, for the art dealers themselves, being admitted to a select group of art fairs, most notably Art Basel and Art Basel Miami Beach, has become one of the main sources of gallery reputation.

As against the exclusive logic of the fair, the logic of the art auction is a democratic one: whoever has the purchasing power gets access to coveted works of art. The auction houses have pointed at the restrictive business strategies of art dealers who, in the case of extremely popular artists whose production is far smaller than demand, exclude collectors on the basis of—in the eyes of the auctions—obscure criteria. Those collectors, who may not have the social network or the cultural credentials to get access to desired works of art at the gallery, seek recourse at the auction house.

The rise of the auction house on the market for contemporary art is a tale of a broken gentleman’s agreement: Throughout the twentieth century, an implicit division of labor used to split the art market into a primary segment which was the domain of art galleries and a secondary or resale market which was dominated by the auction houses. Since the culture of the market stipulated that works of art would not be re-commodified after being sold in the gallery, at least not any time soon, this meant that auction houses mostly ignored contemporary art and instead focused on old and modern masters. From the 1970s onwards, however, auction houses have increasingly discovered contemporary art as a new source of income.

Their turn to the contemporary can be explained by the drying-up of the stream of old and modern masters offered for sale (their supply is by definition fixed). Of contemporary works of art, by contrast, there is permanent supply. Simultaneously, the demand for contemporary art rose in the last two decades, as part of a wider societal trend towards novelty rather than patina as markers of status, or a more general predilection for rapidly changing trends rather than stable canons of taste. This increased demand is reflected in price levels for the top segment of contemporary art, which between 1990 and the peak of the market in 2008, rose more than sixfold. In other market segments, price increases were more modest. Between 2003 and 2007 the size of the contemporary art market grew spectacularly by 851 percent worldwide, again much higher than the 311 percent growth of the overall art market.7 As a result, for the auction houses contemporary art has now become a core business, which accounts for the largest share of their revenue. And while they are still concentrated on the secondary market, i.e. re-sales, the successful Hirst sale at Sotheby’s in September 2008 warned art dealers that the days of the traditional division of labor between
the auction houses and the art galleries may be numbered: Hirst auctioned off 223 works which came straight out of his studio. This was the first time an auction house manifested itself so clearly on the primary art market and an artist decided to bypass his art dealers so publicly—that is, at least, in the West. In China and India, by contrast, artists selling new works of art directly at auction is common practice.

The third key institutional development of the art market has been the cautious embracement of the internet. The internet initially failed to get a grip on the art market; the digital adventures of Sotheby’s, among others, failed, and the attempts of eBay and other ecommerce companies to enter the art market have been restricted to decorative and amateur arts. More recently, however, the internet has started to change commercial practices, although still to a far lesser extent than for instance in the music industry. Most art dealers now display samples of their artists’ work on—almost without exception minimally designed—websites. Some are experimenting with areas for private viewing which are restricted to selected clients. Others have ventured into the practice of selling recognizable, blue-chip works of art, made by established artists, from jpegs which are displayed on for instance artnet.com. The buyers are frequently unknown to the art dealer. As a culmination of this ecommerce development, in January 2011, the first online art fair took place, in which many established dealers from the United States and Europe participated. As in the case of auctions, globalization may further spur this development; especially in India, internet sales and online auctions are considered much more legitimate and more common as sales venues than in Europe and the United States.

**Globalization and its Limits**

The art fair, the internet, and the auction house share a propensity to deterritorialize the exchange of art: Whereas the traditional exchange of contemporary art involves artists, dealers, and collectors who have built up dense trust relationships, the new institutions may “disembed” the market from local social structures in which it used to be, at least to some extent, embedded. They have contributed to a global market architecture, which channels the new wealth of buyers in emerging economies to contemporary art produced in the West as well as the old wealth of buyers in Europe and the United States to new art produced in emerging art worlds. Indeed, Sotheby’s and Christie’s now organize sales dedicated to art from India,
Russia, China, or Latin America, and have opened branches in for instance the Middle East and Hong Kong. In 2008, the size of the auction market for contemporary art in China surpassed the one of France. And while in 2002, only one Chinese artist was part of the list of the world’s top 100 artists (computed on the basis of auction revenue), in 2008, this list contained thirty-four Chinese artists as against twenty American artists.\textsuperscript{11} The art fairs in the West have seen new participants and visitors from emerging markets, and have devoted special theme sections to those markets, while a host of fairs have been established in new art capitals such as Shanghai, New Delhi, Moscow, and Abu Dhabi. Here we find an additional reason why the art market boomed so strongly in the first decade of the new millennium: the influx of new multimillionaires from emerging economies.\textsuperscript{12} Between 2004 and 2009, the number of buyers from the Middle East at Christie’s rose by 400 percent. Nowadays, the share of high net worth individuals from Latin America and Asia buying art is higher than the share of American high net worth individuals doing so.\textsuperscript{13}

To what extent the art market is truly global nowadays is, however, up for debate. First of all, the markets which have emerged in for instance India and China are far from completely integrated globally. While a small group of Chinese artists, predominantly working in the styles of cynical realism and critical pop, have international reputations and a following of European and American collectors willing to pay five- and six-figure prices for their work, the majority remains unknown outside of the country’s national borders. Instead, they are bought by local collectors through local intermediaries such as Poly International Auction (in spite of Poly’s exclusive focus on the Chinese market, it now has the fifth-largest revenue of auction houses worldwide).

Although they buy into the ideology of internationalism which predominates in the art world, and maintain that nationality does not factor in the artists they represent, the practices of the average Western art dealers have likewise remained by and large local: They have a local clientele and predominantly represent artists who have the same nationality as their own.\textsuperscript{14}

As far as a global market does exist, it operates through a small number of auction houses and powerful galleries such as the Gagosian Gallery, the Pace Gallery, or Hauser & Wirth, who have several offices worldwide to cater to a global demand. But even this top segment of the market can hardly be called global since these market agents and the artists they represent are almost without exception European and American. In fact, in the international marketplaces such as Art Basel, the overwhelming number of
art dealers still comes from a small number of countries, most notably the United States and Germany.15

In short, just like what happened in the media and entertainment industries, a multi-polar art world, in which regional centers exist, which are only partially interlinked through a global framework, is in the making.16

Commercialization

The internet, the auction houses, and the art fair have seemingly resulted in a further commercialization of contemporary art. This commercialization of art has been deplored, both by actors within the market as well as by outside observers, for a number of reasons. First of all, the three institutions, foremost the auction and the art fair, are considered to be inappropriate physical contexts to view and appreciate art. They highlight the commodity character and the status value of art to the detriment of its artistic properties. Also, these disembedded contexts inhibit the discursive interaction which according to dealers themselves should accompany the exchange of art. Secondly, the institutions have contributed to the construction of a specific type of agency among market participants: Artists would no longer be interested in producing an uncompromised oeuvre of lasting quality, but more in earning short-run profits, producing art that is fashionable, establishing a quick career, receiving widespread media attention, and gaining a celebrity status. No doubt the most exemplary artist of this celebrity culture is Damien Hirst, who was on the chart of the wealthiest individuals in Britain and Ireland, The Times Rich List, with a net worth of £235 million. Likewise traditional collectors, who buy with their eyes rather than their ears, have a love for art rather than a love for money and status, have allegedly been crowded out by those who see art as an investment. The latter include supercollectors such as Charles Saatchi, who buy cheap in the gallery and sell dear afterwards at auction.

A third detrimental effect of commercialization has been the destabilization of artistic careers. The often aggressive attempts of auction houses to get works on the market that only a season ago were still hanging in the gallery, have provoked strong complaints among artists and dealers: They accuse the auction houses of acting like parasites, with a perverse interest in making quick, short-run profits. Their commercial interference would work against the attempts of dealers to establish a secure, stable, and long-term market for the artist. Moreover, dealers and artists argue that the
auction houses are not entitled to the windfall profits the auction sales may generate if the artist's work is in short supply, and the auction price therefore rises much higher than its current gallery price: In that case, the artist fails to be compensated fairly for artistic labor and the dealer for promotional and market-making activities.  

Fourthly, the new market institutions have contributed to the social definition of a work of art as a financial asset, which can be used for investment purposes, rather than a cultural good. Indeed, in the slipstream of the auction houses, an infrastructure has emerged in the last decade and a half that facilitates rationalized investment in art. This infrastructure encompasses art investment funds and advisory firms, art investment services offered by commercial banks, and a confidence indicator, which measures the level of confidence art investors have in the stability of the market. Companies such as artnet.com and artprice.com have been established, which systematically collect and distribute data on auction prices worldwide. As a result, a new type of actor has been attracted to the art market, who is not looking for artistic value but for a new means to diversify his portfolio or to hedge against risks such as inflation.

The Limits of “Hostile Worlds”

This pessimistic story of the commercialization of the art market in the last decade fits into a wider “hostile worlds” story, which can be retrieved throughout the history of art. It implicitly assumes that an intrinsic conflict exists between art and money, that economic interests have increasingly come to contaminate the art world, and that the incommensurable value of art is at stake now that its commodity character is displayed so prominently.

But a number of responses against this story can be formulated. First of all, the commercialization of art is by and large restricted to a top segment of the art market, where prices have risen fastest, and the influence of the art fairs, the internet, and the auction houses has been strongest. Practices in the remainder of the market have not been impacted that much by the rise of these institutions.

Likewise, the extent to which art has indeed become financialized is easily overestimated. For instance, of the about fifty art investment funds which were active or scheduled to become active in 2005, only twenty survived at the end of the decade. The reasons for this failed financialization are among others the high risks involved in art investments, the high transactions costs
related to buying and selling art, the difficulties for those investment funds in getting access to works that have the potential of rising in value, and the lack of liquidity of the market: Once an art investor would want to sell his holdings, the risk is that he may have to search long for a buyer.

Also, the interest of well-known hedge fund managers-turned-art buyers such as Stephen Cohen, Daniel Loeb, and Kenneth Griffin has too easily been interpreted as a sign of contemporary art’s financialization. This interpretation is hardly convincing given that the amounts of money they spend on art and the potential profits dwarf the holdings of their hedge funds and the profits they make on them. While these hedge fund managers have economic capital in abundance, the more likely interpretation is that they buy art out of status anxiety, that is, because of a deficit in cultural capital and social capital related to specific elite groups.21

Secondly, actors in the art world are no passive victims of commercialization, but have themselves developed strategies to compete or resist. For instance, artists are known to resist the lure of more powerful, commercial galleries, out of loyalty to the art dealer who nurtured their careers early on. Likewise, art dealers have responded to the entry of auction houses on the contemporary art market by actively trying to keep works away from the auctions. For instance, they have stipulated a right of first refusal in selling agreements. Also, they have drawn up blacklists of collectors who they refuse to do business with because these collectors have a reputation of reselling quickly at auction. And when it comes to the predominance of art fairs, dealers in for instance Berlin have actively organized themselves to provide an alternative to the fair. For example, they have come up with annual gallery weekends, when openings and other art events are scheduled and collectors from out of town are invited.

Most importantly, one of the assumptions of the “hostile worlds” discourse is dubious: that the commercialization of art is an ongoing process, that markets get an ever-stronger grip on art, and that a reversed trend is inconceivable. The crash of the art market, which began in the fall of 2008, has proved this assumption wrong. It has meant a watershed and resulted in amendments in the market culture, much like the crash of the art market in 1989 meant a radical break with the overtly commercial market culture of the 1980s. Artists and dealers had economic reasons to deplore the latest market crash, but nevertheless speak about it in terms of purification: a slowing down of the market’s pace, a welcome expulsion of commercially or financially motivated buyers, and a reconfiguration of the market participants’ agency.
The opposition between the art market’s superstar culture of the 1980s on the one hand and the much more prudent, inward-looking culture of the 1990s on the other, is homologous with the opposition between the first boom decade of the new millennium and the sobering era which started in 2008. In short, rather than a linear, ongoing process, commercialization seems to be cyclical, with the market producing its own countervailing tendencies.

Notes

5 “Global Frameworks; Contemporary Art,” *The Economist* (June 26, 2010).
11 Artprice, op. cit.
12 See e.g. McAndrew, op. cit.


The Editors (TE): How did you decide to start Plan B?

Mihai Pop (MP): It’s quite a long story but to make it short, I was running another gallery: the University of Arts in Cluj. I was a student in the master class in 2000, and I ran that space for two years and a half. That was a very good practice for me and I met many of the artists I’m working with now. They were students, and I organized their exhibitions. It was very interesting for all of us to exercise without any commercial reasons or power structures and things like that. Afterwards, I had a break of two years, and decided to open my gallery. I called the gallery Plan B because it was based on the previous experience, which was not necessarily the most positive one. My program was built on what’s going on in the world now, and also financially, I knew that in order to be able to run a long-term project, I needed to have some money from the beginning, some support. From this perspective we immediately jumped into the art market. The public money in Romania in 2005 was problematic. Now it’s better, but it’s better because of the integration in the European Union in 2007. But when I opened the gallery it was impossible to base such a project on public sources so we all decided—me and artists like Adrian Ghenie, Victor Man, and Ciprian Muresan—that it’s time to step into the market.

TE: Was there a market in Cluj?

MP: No. Luckily, we had a friend, a young guy who wanted to build an art collection. It was Adrian Ghenie, mainly, and myself, working for this guy as kind of advisors. Something between friendship and advisor. Looking back I would say we were not so clear who’s the gallerist, who’s the artist. Now it’s clearer. Being active internationally you have to make everything more professional. But at the beginning we did what we thought correct. So we were just advising this guy to buy good art and to buy from Romanian artists. We told him, it’s better to concentrate on Romanian art of the last forty years because the public institutions in Romania didn’t have the budget to collect, and it was also something urgent, because many good artists are now old and dying and their works will go directly to the trashcan. That’s really a problem, so we said look, we know these guys, please collect
these good works and you will have an important collection that will be a foundation for international curators to research.

**TE:** How did you orient yourself internationally from Cluj?

**MP:** Some of us already went abroad, like Victor Man. Mircea Cantor went very early to France. He emigrated from Romania to France and they said wow, this is an interesting artist! So he built his career there. But what's interesting with him is the fact that he's a carrier of good energy. He always brought good things from Romania to France and he brought from France information to Romania. And actually this happened with Plan B in general later because we played this role too, we did this work of emancipating a bit of the local context. We didn't do this on purpose. We are not patriots, it's not about that. But I see the results, it's important to go outside and to bring real information inside because these small art scenes, they develop through frustrations and a false image of the real art scene.

**TE:** You mean they develop because they have an idea of what's happening in New York or Berlin and they want to imagine it …

**MP:** Yeah. So it's important to be on the real art scene and on the real art market and to bring the correct information back, especially for the young guys. People like Mircea Cantor and Victor Man, they were kind of pioneers for me, for my gallery. We went first to the Vienna art fair. Because Vienna had this tradition and maybe postcolonial complex of looking to the ex-Austrian empire, so they support the East European context and Balkans and so on. So they had this focus on these countries, so we got a little bit of support from the Vienna art fair, so it was easy and was cheap for us to go there and to pay for a booth. We packed the van and drove everything up. And in 2005 there were many American collectors going to Vienna. They were fascinated by this idea of the East of Europe as a reservoir for good artists. And in 2006 we got an invitation to apply to the Armory Show and we said why not? And we applied and we got accepted.

**TE:** So art fairs are part of your business model, and were critical from the beginning?

**MP:** Art fairs were very good, but they could be very bad. We realized later that it was good to have seven to ten years of being anonymous because it offered us the chance to develop our work away from the art market. When we went out into the world we had works, we had artists that were not spoiled by the market.
TE: And has that changed?

MP: You know I think we belong to that generation that was never interested in leaving the country. We realized that our good source is Cluj. We realized that if we want to build a real career we have to go where this effort is appreciated. We have to contribute to our local art scene, but we don't have time to wait until it will be good enough to offer us all the resources. So in 2008 we decided to have a second permanent space in Berlin. This decision came with a double meaning. First, to escape the constant national art scene feeling, and on the other hand to be treated as one of the galleries in the world, not just the exotic gallery from Romania.

TE: Can you describe your involvement with the Venice Biennial in 2007?

MP: That's another hybrid from the East because it's hard to imagine a commercial gallery being a commissioner of a national pavilion in Venice. I'm sure that in the Western countries something like this is quite impossible, but in our case it was about the development of the Romanian art scene. The ministry of culture decided that we are more able as a private gallery to organize the pavilion. I was the commissioner, so I took care of the technical, organizational stuff. The concept belongs to Mihnea Mircan, he's a Romanian curator and a good friend of mine.

TE: Did you have to raise money for the pavilion?

MP: The government provided a budget, which was not sufficient, and I put some money through Plan B. It was not a big amount. We decided to keep it low-key. But still, the budget we had was ridiculously small. I think it was the same as what Germany had just for the opening party.

TE: Could you speak about the hybrid situation that the East provides?

MP: I see this hybrid more and more as something good, as something coming from our area, something about us, something that makes a difference. It was always like this. During Communism it was very hard to have clear positions because the artists who did subversive art—political subversive art—were also part of the Communist union of artists. They had to be part of the official structure; nobody was out of these structures. So, of course, that changed the perspective of what subversive art is. These in-between situations created these hybrids. I also honestly don't see any reason for following blindly a pattern that is not our pattern. So I'm on the Western market because that's super developed and evolved and so on, but I don't want to follow all the rules of that
market. It’s their party; it’s not my party. We have this idea of look, that’s not our society, that’s not our party, but we have to use it. They created structures and we will use these structures. But we don’t necessarily have to fit that context.

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The Editors: When did you open Rodeo Gallery?


TE: Why Istanbul?

SK: I had never worked in a commercial space before. I never knew what running a gallery really meant besides going to galleries since I was a child in Athens with my father. Then I was here in Istanbul. I did my studies here and got an internship in an art center. There was a moment when I thought I would go back to London or New York, and work as a receptionist or archivist at a gallery. The other option was to stay in Istanbul. There was a particular moment for me in Manifesta 6—the one that didn't happen in Cyprus. I was for the time in Nicosia, but living in Istanbul, yet coming from Athens, being part of a generation that is starting a discussion about this part of the world.

I couldn't be in Athens because I found the galleries and the art system too focused on economic concerns. At that time, in the early 2000s, it was still possible for Athenian galleries to be self-sustaining. It was around that time that I came to Istanbul, where I found a space for a new way of dealing with art in a commercial way. I decided to open the gallery while I was at Manifesta, seeing the potential in Istanbul, while knowing things about Greece, and also Cyprus. There were similar sensitivities amongst the artists from the region, even amongst those of different ages. The name Rodeo is kind of a joke, but it also comes from Latin: to circulate, to surround and contain.

TE: How would you describe the art scene and the art market in Istanbul? How has it changed from when you started the gallery?

SK: It has taken a very interesting direction, growing during this time—as with everything in Turkey. Anything that happens in the arts is a private initiative, whether at the behest of a bank or a very wealthy family. The Istanbul Modern, for example, comes out of a private family collection. There is the Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Center, founded by Vasif Kortun in 2001; that is a key moment, where things start to happen. Vasif is a catalyst, able to convince a bank to give him the funds to curate a
collection as he wished. This was a radical move for Turkey, and other banks have followed. As part of this activity many galleries have opened as well.

*TE:* What's the relationship between the private sector, those that support the arts, and the politicians of Turkey?

*SK:* There is a huge gap between these groups, and in my opinion it's good. It's great that these people choose to take culture into their own hands. I'm not saying that this is ideal. Of course, we'd all prefer to have a Ministry of Culture that functions and stands next to a European Ministry of Culture. There is a huge gap between those in the private sectors supporting art and people in the government. I don't think they can sit at the same table. The one always feels that they are losing power over the other.

*TE:* With the gaps between the private sector and the public sectors do you feel there is a stable foundation for the Istanbul art market?

*SK:* Ninety-five percent of the art market is in development. Turkey is a country made of youth. I think if those people are really absorbing what's happening right now, it's great. And with the economic growth, to have the means to go abroad, to study, and then come back ... then the foundation is good. I have no idea what can happen financially here because we are part of another bubble. Turkey wants to become a role model of the region but still struggles to take care of its basic problems.

*TE:* How would you define the region? Where do you see Istanbul?

*SK:* Everywhere. I always like to put Istanbul next to New York because they are both self-obsessed and self-consuming places. But I think Istanbul is becoming more open in terms of accepting what it was and what it forgot in the last 100 years. Istanbul is a cosmopolitan place and always has been. Of course Istanbul is part of Turkey, but then it's not. It's like how New York is part of America, but it's not.

*TE:* How do art fairs play into your programming?

*SK:* They are major. It wouldn't be possible without them because my program would not be able to survive here. Turkish collectors tend to buy “Turkish” art or what fits under this category. Without art fairs there wouldn't be Rodeo. It would have to migrate somewhere else.

Art fairs make art scenes happen not just in Istanbul but also in Berlin, in London. You see all the East London galleries at fairs and you wonder why. Collectors aren't coming to the East End. They prefer to fly to Berlin...
or Vienna for the weekend than taking a cab to the East End. Collectors often don’t get out of their comfort zone.

Everything that a fair offers is a lifestyle decision. It is a package that covers a certain treatment, certain educational aspects like visiting collectors’ houses; it becomes sexier and maybe more interesting. I went to FIAC last year without exhibiting in it. It was great. It’s very interesting, especially not working there. You do business, you see exhibits, it’s like a fun-fair for grownups.

TE: How different is your understanding of art fairs to that of biennials, especially the Istanbul Biennial?

SK: The first days of the Istanbul Biennial are really like an art fair. I had people coming into the gallery for the first time saying I want that and that. Perfect. It’d mean I wouldn’t have to do so many art fairs.

Basel will still be Basel, but now we have fairs in Hong Kong, Mexico City, Colombia. All those places that people now prefer to go see an art fair rather than Paris or London. It makes things blur, especially in places like Istanbul or São Paulo or Sharjah. At the end of the day, the crowds mix together, collectors buy works on view in biennials, and curators learn about artists from dealers. We don’t really know how to separate art fairs from biennials anymore.

I was talking with a friend yesterday about how many more curators can the world take? I could have become an independent curator and have far less worries. We will see more and more galleries growing from all those curators without jobs. There are not enough institutions, and there is not enough public money to sustain them. Institutions are dying, and as a result we are going to have so much more interesting galleries around. Galleries made out of young curators. And then art fairs will have to go through an identity crisis. There are so many good galleries around, so many good artists around. Fairs are going to have to become bigger but this isn’t really possible. It’s all becoming this huge machine and we don’t even know how the world will be able to archive this in a hundred years. When you’re so myopic and really into your own thing, dealing with accounting in Istanbul, say, you don’t even think about the whole system, but when you get out of it you’re like “whoa,” maybe I should really go and grow tomatoes.

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The Editors: When did you start your gallery?

Andrea Rosen (AR): The gallery opened in 1990, though I decided to open it the year before. I’d worked at a number of galleries and actually had
left the art world to get a Masters in a completely different field. At different points I was disillusioned with how much artists wanted to seek out careers as opposed to making work that was meaningful. But I came back. I felt like there was clearly a theoretically-informed generation, which was sort of my generation, who had grown up with all of the self-questioning of the ’80s but was also then free to take another step, which was to make work that was meaningful within an aesthetic context. And so I felt like it was my obligation to contextualize by opening a gallery.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who I knew through his projects with Group Material, definitely became the backbone of my gallery and probably represented my entire identity to some degree: a core of content and responsibility within an aesthetic framework. We opened in January of 1990 with a show of Felix’s, just before the first major recession. So it was interesting to see how that moment also for better, for the most part, really affected the gallery as well.

You know, it’s shockingly over two decades later, and his model is still absolutely the focus of the gallery. As a gallery, I’m probably known for being very concerned about the gallery’s responsibility to keep archival records, which revolves around an idea about longevity or maybe the desire to create history around artwork. But on a personal level the part that’s most important and interesting to me is actually the immediate, the everyday aspect of the gallery, which is that galleries, unlike museums, are free to the public. People have the right to come in and have a point of view—and the right to walk in and walk out. While there’s a press release about any given show, information on hand, and so on, it’s ultimately up to an individual to decide the meaning for herself without being dictated to. On a social-political level it is about encouraging not only this right to a point of view, but the responsibility to a point of view, which is also, I would say, a position that I shared with Felix.

TE: How has the growth of your gallery transformed your ideals?

AR: It has been very curious to see how developing and keeping a long-term and sustainable community of people working together has become such a compelling part of the job. Obviously art remains at the root. But I have been moved by collectors, too. As much as we can talk about the market in recent years, collectors still come to buy art because they want to be inspired, because, even though they themselves are usually exceptional, at the top of their respective fields, they want their lives to be fuller and more meaningful. They believe that it is art that will immortalize them and our times.
And there’s something very legitimate about the market. To say that history comes exclusively through museum exposure and critical attention is absolutely not true. For me to be able to say, for the first time only very recently, and without self-effacing guilt, that I am a dealer—and not cloak myself behind my curatorial practice—has been liberating. To be clear, as a good gallerist, part of my job is to protect artists from some parts of the market. As they evolve there’s less protection in that way, but to understand what it means to put an artist in the market appropriately is crucial. Is there a history without a market? And, again, to undervalue the significance of the collector as patron, as caretaker, as the person who will eventually donate work to museums, or to not address the unfortunate—to no fault of their own—limitations of institutions (in their acts of censorship, necessity for consensus, and more) is naive. We have to recognize what they are up against.

TE: To your mind, how has the globalization of the market changed the nature of collecting?

AR: There are amazing new and knowledgeable collectors all over the world now. There’s the Middle East, India, China, Korea … This is all very exciting, and parts of that very real, but in the last few years an alternate market has developed, which is not totally based in transparent truths. I think we’re just beginning to see the divergence of the truth and the not-truth and that artists who are not necessarily historically significant are being played with in the market. And unfortunately there is a reliance on emerging markets in order to play this out. We are beginning to see artists being chosen for this alternate market path without being proven. It seems they’re chosen because they are blank slates. One of the problems with that illusion is that I’m not even sure that the artists are being told; it’s almost as if those dealers don’t care what they pay the artist because what they want is to keep up a certain illusion. Many people fall into the why-pay-less category: whatever artwork is the highest priced must be the best. It’s a game that plays on the least knowledgeable. How long can this sustain itself?

TE: So how do you counter this?

AR: For me the goal is longevity in any career. What most artists want for the most part is to be historically significant and to be historically significant entails a lifetime battle—no matter how great you are. If you’re the best artist for a couple years or an entire decade or more, it isn’t enough; unless you continue to be historically relevant you will be eliminated, and that’s a
really difficult reality. Understanding this, some go another route and say, well, I’m not going to get there so I might as well at least make some money. Yet I would also say for the artist who is evolving and making history and sustaining himself for a long time and becoming historically relevant and remaining historically relevant, they tend to be quite level headed, less vulnerable to influence, and ultimately the most successful.

The idea that I can make a career though, even for an artist for whom this historical relevance seems certain, is another illusion. I suppose the status of a gallery makes a difference, but each artist has to prove it for themselves. And it’s possible that a gallery like mine could sustain an artist longer than they deserve to be sustained … that I would say, non-indefinitely. However, I really believe so deeply that people want to be inspired, that great work will shine and there’s a whole, it’s not me, it’s not the gallery, there is a real consensus because art ultimately makes up all of our history, so it tends to be primarily sincere and responsible.

It was interesting because one of my artists recently said to me, “Oh, all these artists live in this fiction that there’s a system where your gallery can call up a museum and get you a show, and the illusion that you have to have this kind of show and then you need that show in order to reach your goal …. ” I mean, it just doesn’t happen, and I always tell other artists that it just doesn’t work like that.

It is important that artists are responsible for evolving as a person in order to evolve as an artist. You have to be exceptional and you have to keep that room to evolve yourself. This might sound sentimental. I think that in order to be great, it’s really difficult not to find a space to be an exceptional human being.
How do you approach a book like this? We often enter a process using a question or two, something like “how does x work and how can we change the way x works?”

And we read, look for ideas, positions, friends … then try to produce encounters and interrogate further with those we involve in the process. The questions we choose are critical, because they already imply a horizon.

In this case, the field of art and the market has been circumscribed for you. Should one answer a question that is not one’s own? As artists who have devoted a good part of their practice to exploring relations, struggles, lives that have attempted to thwart and avert destruction or death from the disproportionate force allotted to money today, it is a task, not without its irony and even gravity. To say yes requires a struggle over terms and a struggle over how to approach the question.

Would you call this a political intervention? Yes, we would.

How can one intervene politically in such a book? At which level do the politics take place? Clearly every essay in this book carries with it, tacitly or implicitly, political considerations or positions. Even the mode of address, the way one approaches a question, the way that language is used, and its relation to the reader has a politics to it.

What does it mean to foreground the political considerations explicitly and make this a potential terrain of its very legibility, especially in a section devoted to the market? We would like to make the claim that there is no more suitable place to intervene politically in a book aspiring to encapsulate the discourse about art since 1989 than by addressing the dispositif of “the market.”

Furthermore, we assert that no book that attempts to speak about contemporary artistic practices after 1989 could be considered legitimate without addressing the larger dynamics, the hegemonic norms, and the unquestioned assumptions that have driven the institutional developments and structures supporting artistic production in that same period.
Lastly, as artists, we would like to use this space of the book to give voice to the kinds of concerns and considerations that inform our practice and the practice of many friends. We believe this is more difficult to access in historical accounts of art, which disproportionately focus on the reception of specific works and are written from the perspective of spectatorship, albeit an “informed” one.

You refer to the dispositif of “the market.” How are you using this term? Dispositif is a technical term we borrow from Michel Foucault. The French word can be translated as an “apparatus” or a “device,” but instead of simply thinking of a gadget, it refers to a whole set of norms, bodies of knowledge, institutions, practices, laws, police or military measures, and beliefs that together function like a device, aiming “to manage, govern, control, and orient—in a way that purports to be useful—the behaviors, gestures, and thoughts of human beings”\(^1\) intervening in relations of/to knowledge and of/to power.

In his essay ‘What is a dispositif?’ Giorgio Agamben has argued that it arrives as “a set of practices and mechanisms that aim to face an urgent need and to obtain an effect that is more or less immediate.”\(^2\) Can you speculate what “the market” is responding to?

The 1960s and 1970s produced the last global challenge to capitalism through struggles against colonialism, worker exploitation, racism, sexism, and imperialism. Neoliberalism was born out of the ashes of those struggles, and the dispositif of “the market” we inherit today is largely a response to that crisis. That response, according to David Harvey, resulted in a diabolical pact: Neoliberalism may recognize or even subsume your identity claims into the marketplace, grant your demands for greater individual freedom and sexual emancipation but you must drop your call for collective social justice, for economic equality, for environmental sustainability. What better way to understand Pier Paolo Pasolini’s Salò, Or the 120 Days of Sodom (1975) then as a critique of the ways in which the emancipatory struggles of the 1960s were already by the mid-1970s being instrumentalized into a new kind of totalizing, objectifying logic?

This tacit pact was accompanied by the steady transformation of the role of a state from one of protecting the welfare of its citizens to that of caring for the interests of corporations. If historically every government protects the interest of capital, under this new regime this hidden secret was not only made public but also said to be the only way.
1989 was used as a marker and further vindication of the claims that “the market” is a sturdier and a more accurate arbiter of the expressions, needs and well-being of the world’s inhabitants than any political claim or paradigm. In this way, the dispositif of the market was and is intended to homogenize and delegitimize other experiences, approaches, systems of value, forms of exchange, political considerations, and ways of thinking about how we can live or organize ourselves.

Your comments recall Fukuyama’s oft-quoted proclamation of the “End of History” where he speculated:

… in a world where struggle over all larger issues had been settled, a purely formal snobbery would become the chief form of expression of megalothymia, of man’s desire to be recognized as better than his fellows. In the United States, our utilitarian traditions make it difficult for even the fine arts to become purely formal. Artists like to convince themselves that they are being socially responsible in addition to being committed to aesthetic values. But the end of history will mean the end, among other things, of all art that could be considered socially useful, …

Each one of these assertions has been proven false over the last twenty years of wars, genocides, economic crises, extra-judicial detentions, assassinations, ecological devastation, continued processes of dispossession, psychic upheavals, revolutionary upheavals …

One wonders whether Fukuyama has reconsidered these claims in light of what transpired over the last twenty years?

It appears that in 2009 he did reconsider and determined “History is Still Over,” going on to explain how capitalism has survived this crisis, even managing “genuinely positive results,” citing, for example, the ability to replace the G8 with a more inclusive G20, leading to a to “a larger and less arrogant” IMF.

But the fact Fukuyama has not disavowed his proclamations does not surprise us. The zealots of capitalism are like any orthodox believers of a religion. Walter Benjamin once theorized capitalism as a cultic religion. But whereas, in Clement of Alexandria, oikonomia (translated into Latin as dispositio) “merged with the notion of Providence and indicated the redemptive governance of the world and human history”—in capitalism, according to Benjamin, there is no redemption. It is “probably the first instance of a cult that creates schuld (the German word for both debt and
guilt) not atonement.”6 Benjamin wrote about worry; today we call it anxiety, precarity, depression. For Benjamin, the cult of capitalism finds its culmination only when all share in the guilt/debt.

Of course today, Benjamin’s hallucinatory analysis appears far closer to reality than Fukayama’s. How else can one understand a phenomenon such as micro-finance, which in the name of empowerment and ending poverty enables new forms of capital or collateral (one’s reputation in a community) to borrow against as well as share the schuld?

But if you take, for example, the majority of critical thinkers that are invited by cultural institutions to reflect on global developments the claim that after 1989 all remaining issues can be resolved through “the market” would be subjected to a radical critique, if not ridiculed.

Yes, but at the same time, a majority of those same cultural institutions which invite such critiques (museums, universities, public, private, for- or not-for-profit institutions) have either willingly, through norms dictated by states (as protectorates/captives of the dispositif of the market) or by their largely corporate-minded boards, had to assume this ridiculous “rationality” of this cult as the reality under which they can continue to survive, not theoretically, but operationally.

What is so outrageous is that even euphemisms like “sustainability” are used to bring in the corporate logic and governance. Meanwhile, this same corporate governance is destroying our planet and is anything but sustainable.

Maybe this is what is meant by the term “capitalist realism?” What we believe “capitalist realism” gets at is the constructivist dimension of thirty plus years of neoliberalism. It is not enough to simply govern people; you must produce subjects. And this is why we like the term dispositif because it implicates the conglomeration of disparate entities, ranging from ideas, to laws, to how things are done, produced, and finally to the production of subjects who have hardly experienced another channel, let alone another rationality.

Can capitalist realism be combated?

Francis Bacon used to say that as an artist he was interested in producing facts that contradict and resist the consensus reality. It isn’t enough to simply not believe in the “capitalist reality” or to run away from it. The flight should be active, producing counter-facts, other temporalities, other spaces, other accesses to reality. But the idea of a lone artist, able to do that
in their studio may be insufficient considering the challenges. So the relation to others, the invention of new ways of working and struggling with others is critical to dissipate capitalist realism.

*The financial crash of 2008 is a critical moment, because “the market” showed itself unable to even act as the “best arbiter” for the economic well-being of the majority of the world’s inhabitants. It laid bare an economic logic of privatizing gains (or resources) into the hands of very few and socializing or externalizing losses (or pollution) for the many. Is there a chance of a kind of dissolution, as we witnessed in 1989?*

The nature of a book is that it remains long after the words have been printed onto its pages. So what is important here is not the answer yes or no. It is the fact that this question has been asked, and that, in this particular moment, even a few crazy people sat around and thought seriously about this. So we respond to preserve a trace of this moment, rather than prophesy a future.

But we have seen a formidable resistance to neoliberalism over the last twenty years. The alter-globalization movements did a lot to bring attention to the economic crimes of entities like the IMF or World Bank, and for more than a decade in Latin America we have seen a resurgence of efforts to introduce more just economic policies. And what we see unfolding in North Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East is clearly a part of the inability of “the market” to answer the needs of many people. Even in the face of nuclear fallout a “market”-driven society can only find its resolution in continuing as before. But the cracks of such an unsustainable course are becoming more evident. And the polyphony of whistleblowers and hackers that have entered the machine, seen the violence it produces, and decided to share this knowledge with others is growing. The entrenched forces that would like to restore “stability” after such events are many. But a sequence of such moments has the potential to arouse or even force people to reconsider their trust in such a course.

If we return to art briefly. One could argue that the entrenched world of art and its institutions has grown too comfortable with its corporate sponsors and collectors and has yet to adopt these insights mentioned previously. We don’t yet see those changes or cracks reflected in art institutionally. On the contrary, the only changes from 2008, thus far, have pitted institutions receiving public funds against one another, having them compete for reduced funds on account of austerity measures that are
characterized as unavoidable public sacrifices for sustaining the speculation of “the market.”

Artists have to find ways to create their own realities, their own spaces, temporalities, organizations of long or short duration; and to make sure their work is not completely subsumed by any institution which takes too facile a relation to the corporatization of art. Of course, these funding cuts will place more publicly funded institutions at the whim of corporations or corporate-minded “philanthropists,” who even if they mean well, often cannot help but bring and apply their business practices into those institutions. Nevertheless, within these same institutions there are always allies who are aware of these dynamics; so you work together. But there is a kind of equation one must invent for oneself, and hopefully with others, how to retain this space of producing another experience, time, and space for the work one does.

What are the differences between 1989 and 2008, if we see them in this parallel construction you have been proposing of a collapse of illusions?
Clearly there are many differences. But one could say there is no new political paradigm that has attempted to claim victory over the failures of the regime of “the market.” Neither a politicized Islam nor the emergent racist, nationalist, anti-immigrant movements in the West or East include a radical critique of capitalism. Instead the first signals we see in much of the world, in the midst of this crisis, are to continue with the same assumptions, allowing the banks, sovereign wealth funds, hedge funds, and major corporate interests to determine and impose what should stand for good policies with respect to social welfare, health, education, science, development, environment, culture, food, economics, and whatever else one can imagine.

It is remarkable that in 1921 Benjamin was able to write the following lines: “Capitalism is entirely without precedent, in that it is a religion which offers not the reform of existence but its complete destruction.” What we feel more than ever today is this destruction. We feel it in the deaths of innocents in daily bombings and the body bags of soldiers fighting for oil. We see it the insane rationality that continues to build nuclear plants, prisons, and military weapons as efforts to “jumpstart” the economy. We feel it with each suicide and each person we see sleeping without a home. We see it in the fundraisers for elderly or those suffering from disease because they cannot afford health care. We see it in the billions of impoverished lives, even of the wealthy, who are subjected to this guilt/debt-tripping machine.
This is what has caused various thinkers in the last years to proclaim that it is easier today to envisage the destruction of the world rather than an end to capitalism.

There are a few points you make that are interesting to pursue. Let's start with another religion, Islam. Let's think for one moment that you are reflecting on the subject of “Art and Islam after 1979,” instead of “Art and Markets after 1989.” If this book were being written from the trajectory of 1979 and the Iranian Revolution, the set of references as well as developments addressed with respect to culture change quite a lot. Yet, we can also link these developments to 1989, by seeing the renewal of a politicized Islam as a part of a struggle by Western capitalist interests to eliminate socialism and communism at all costs. So 1979 is a contested and ambiguous moment in history. There is no question that it was a truly popular revolution, involving communists, feminists, Islamists, independents, victims of political persecution, the disenfranchised, and all those struggling for social justice.

But what were the forces that unleashed the revolution?
We would argue that the impulse of the revolution was not simply based upon interest alone, but came from a gradual build-up of a plane of oscillation. And through that a social desire took hold based upon struggles against injustice, torture, autocratic rule, inequality, political persecution of oppositional views, the need to restore accountability of a state to its people, and an affirmation of a more dignified life. But no specific demand or response, for that matter, can contain or sum up the forces of that or any revolution.

And today, in no small part due to the historic efforts by Western capitalist interests to dismantle and discredit the socialist or communist vision throughout the world, political Islam has filled that vacuum.

People are hungry for other ethics, other ideas of value, of knowledge, of development, and of justice. Politicized Islam has been able to axiomatize upon a desire to oppose Western indifference to regional autocratic governments and an unequal “market”-driven paradigm that benefits the few while plundering the resources of a country.

Can any religion offer an alternative to the market fundamentalists?
Firstly, it must be mentioned that according to David Graeber much of the language and theory of “the market,” even examples by Adam Smith, are taken from Medieval Islam. So any simple opposition has to be ruled out. But even if we exclude all the limitations any theocracy may pose for those who are not believers or who do not want to live under its system of values,
norms, justice we should recall Benjamin’s observation that “the Kingdom of God is not the telos of the historical dynamic, it cannot be set as a goal,” since it literally would be the end of history. So, even with Fukuyama and the market fundamentalists, we are entering a kind of messianism.

Seeing this problem, Benjamin insisted that the “quest of free humanity for happiness” must be erected upon a profane order. The only caveat is once we see capitalism as another religion we can no longer uncritically invoke a notion of the secular. We will need to rethink the division between the religious and the secular.

So does that leave us seeking or constructing an alternate political ideology? Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari once asserted “there is no ideology, there are only organizations of power.” They don’t want to downplay the critique of capitalism; on the contrary, this is what gives force to their writing. But simply revealing capitalism’s contradictions is not enough. Moreover, they argue that ideological battles can mask repressive forms of organization which can take hold under any new conception of the world.

Their analysis of how desire is not simply channeled and woven into the economic infrastructure and political life but is a constituent element of their organization is very rich and introduces another analysis for approaching the problems we have alluded to. It also introduces a place for aesthetic experiments or processes which critique capitalism not simply on the order of ideological representation, but approach the realm of feelings, perceptions, sensations, tastes, social relations, relations to technology, to work, to the conduct of everyday life, to exchange, to consumption, to our environment, to what we eat, to production, to education, to race, to gender, and all of the levels at which desire is invested and connected to the dominant economic infrastructure.

They introduce questions that help us see how individuals whose interests might diverge with a particular organization of power may nevertheless partake and even fight for it. Their conception of desire is not based on lack, nor a simple idea of something repressed which needs expression. Desire is immanent; it is social and takes place between bodies. It can become an itinerant line, sometimes forming assemblages that can include persons, ideas, objects, tools, organic and non-organic matter, which together can threaten existing dispositions of power. Or it can be channeled and reinvested through various social formations toward heteronormative, patriarchal, racist, exclusionary, imperialist or colonial projects. The medieval crusades, for example, can be a story of how an itinerant line, a desiring
machine of social unrest is recouped by the Catholic Church toward imperial ends and sovereign control.

The organizations of power they refer to, the networks formed by the heterogeneous set of codes, institutions, ways of thinking, living could be likened to Foucault’s notion of dispositif. When a particular social formation exhausts itself, as was the case in 1917, 1979, 1989, and we claim we may be on the cusp of such a moment today, it seems to follow what Deleuze describes as, “all sorts of things decode themselves, all sorts of uncontrolled flows start pouring out.”

The concepts that Deleuze and Guattari introduce—becoming minor, deterritorialization, lines of flight, bodies without organs, the rhizome, desiring machines, war-machines, schizoanalysis—all of these concepts are part of an attempt to theorize revolutionary processes and possible collectivities that could avoid repressive organizations of power and the dispositifs that attempt to contain and reorient the emancipatory potential of such processes or collectivities. The fact that aesthetic, performative, and literary figures traverse their individual and collaborative writings and the building up of these aforementioned concepts gives us an indication that art is not ancillary to and may even be a central part of emancipatory struggles.

*Today, people speak of nothing existing outside “the market,” inferring either we are doomed or that all innovation will take place through capitalism. How do you position yourselves in relation to this?*

Maybe they only believe this because capitalism’s particularity is in its capacity to impose and overcome its own limits. It “vamps” off of, lives off of decodings. Deleuze would describe the basis of capitalism as an axiomatic of decoded fluxes. In other words, capitalism is able to axiomatize, that is break into rules and profit off of the very flows that decode its previous ability to channel and embed desire into a new economic assemblage. We alluded to such a process when we were describing the birth of neoliberalism in the mid-1970s. Or consider the parallel body of analysis under the heading of post-Fordism—which argues that many of the demands from this period of struggle informed a radical transformation of capitalism—and how it would create value, and exploit labor in this new epoch.

You can see today, for instance, how established industries and states (often on their behalf) fight to criminalize and delegitimize people's desire to share information and data freely through various peer-to-peer file-sharing networks. Until of course, a corporation is able to axiomatize upon this openness to share, reorient that unremunerated energy into a profit
model, and find a way to turn social cooperation into a new model for conducting business.

But we must distinguish these freely cooperative forces, innovations, or lines of flight from capitalism. Of course, even when some things are “recouped” other things have to be left aside, separated, some residual elements that cannot be monetized or absorbed. For instance, in all the talk of recuperating the Situationist discourse on architecture and urbanism—especially among the architects who have today consigned their work and their fate to the so-called “laws of the market,” as if they were natural and unchangeable—there are elements that escape or remain outside because they simply cannot be absorbed. For instance, in Constant’s architectural proposals private property does not exist.

In making this example we are not espousing a morality play in which private property is original sin. We are simply saying that this sacred and holy cow of capitalism that is today pressed into the world of ideas, code, images, and words is potentially deterritorializable. If artists and anyone else is interested in resisting this delirious logic, which looks back at the past twenty years and reaffirms that “history is still over”; then our work cannot remain satisfied with inventing new forms for the marketplace, or to introduce fluxes or oscillations which will readily become a part of a new regime or organization of power. To escape the “overcode,” to borrow a phrase from Brian Holmes, we will need to orient our activities toward innovations which can harm, destroy, profane, render inoperative this insidious logic of guilt, worry, debt, property, poverty, competition, conflict, exploitation, profit, and destruction that is capitalism.

If artistic practice has any vocation today, it will have to resist becoming a cheap labor or research and development wing for what capital would like to call “the creative industries.” Artists will have to resist modeling and exploring new ways to absorb and reorient collective desires toward modes of profit making. Instead, in these next decades, artists and other cultural practitioners may invent practices which wean themselves off of over-legitimized circuits of support and open to the world, explore different modes of thinking and doing, undoing, constructing planes of consistency, plugging into revolutionary processes, inventing mytho-poetic processes and artistic devices which if absorbed by capitalism, will help bring about its demise.

**ambition**  
*n. 1a* An appliance made of wood, metal, or rope, usually portable, consisting of a series of bars (“rungs”) or steps fixed between two
supports, by means of which one may ascend to or descend from a height. 
b To or towards a higher position or plane; from a lower to a loftier level or 
object; in an ascending course or direction. 2 An elongated, usually 
horizontal, subterranean stem which sends out roots and leafy shoots at 
intervals along its length. 3 Like woven fabric, ambition consists of 
horizontal and vertical elements. However, ambition’s horizontal elements 
moves towards social formations, its vertical elements form hierarchical 
isolations. 4 Philosophy being necessarily bipolar.

art  n. 1 A point or topic to be investigated or discussed; a problem, or a 
matter forming the basis of a problem. 2a For what reason? From what 
cause or motive? For what purpose? Wherefore? b In what way or manner? 
By what means? c Of what account, consequence, value, or force? d At 
what time? On what occasion? In what case or circumstances? 3 The 
opening or passage into a space. 4 The Sea! The Sea! The open Sea!… 
Without a mark, without a bound. 5 A glossary is provided for those who 
don’t know their camshafts from their crankcases.

art fair  n. 1 An extensive area, esp. an aggregate of many areas, under 
the ultimate authority of one person. 2 A place where a quantity of things; spec. 
one lent on credit by a usurer for resale, usu. to the usurer himself. 
3 Authority; esp. delegated authority to act in a specific capacity or manner. 
spec. Authority to act as agent for another in trade; payment to an agent dis-
proportional to the amount involved in a transaction, a random percentage 
on the amount involved. 4 (colloq.) pretentiously artistic. 5 Something 
resembling this; a whip, a scourge. 6 An idea that insinuates itself. 7 Mere 
talk, chatter, babble. 8a Suddenly snap or bite (at something). b Suddenly 
catch at a thing, in order to secure hold or possession of it. v. t. 9 Discharge 
the contents of, empty. 10 The third mood of the second syllogistic figure, 
in which a particular negative conclusion is drawn from a universal nega-
tive major premise and a particular affirmative minor premise. 11 A puff, a 
whiff; a short blast, a small explosion. 12 When it comes to believing things 
without actual evidence, we all incline to what is most attractive. 13 The 
storm had given fair warning of its approach. 14 Heads I win, tails you lose.

artist  n. capitalist ideology 1 A person who studies or practices the art of 
transmuting metals: now usu. connoting the pursuit of transmutation of 
baser metals into gold, and the search for the elixir of life, etc. 2a A wrinkle, 
a crinkle, a small crease or fold; (also) an undulation. b A ripple on the
surface of water. Literary Theory. 3 The impossibility or indefinite deferral of any ultimate or metaphysical signification, on account of the constantly changing and proliferating relationships between the linguistic signs in any sentence or utterance; an instance of this. 4 I keep thinking I just have to get through today, you know?

biennial n. 1 A building fitted with stalls, loose-boxes, rack and trappings and other appliances. 2a The application of a trade-mark or brand to a city. b To frame the city to investors’ appetite. c They had been speculating in city lots. 3 Television programs that are made up like boxes of assorted chocolates leave one with a confused taste in the mouth. 4 Nothing passed more than what is usual after long absences. 5 I am well aware of it, you need not tell me.

blue-chip artist n. 1 An animal, a member of the mammalian order Cheiroptera, and especially of the family Vespertilionidae; consisting of mouse-like quadrupeds (whence the names Rere-mouse, Flitter-mouse), having the fingers extended to support a thin membrane which stretches from the side of the neck by the toes of both pairs of feet to the tail, and forms a kind of wing, with which they fly with a peculiar quivering motion; hence they were formerly classed as birds. They are all nocturnal, retiring by day to dark recesses, to which habits there are many references in literature. 2a The sound made by a cash register when it rings up a sale. Freq. allusively, implying the acquisition of (large amounts of) money. b Indicating the acquisition of (large amounts of) money; expressing happiness at such an acquisition; (also more generally) expressing celebration of or happiness at an achievement. 3 He discovered a good investment for his skill, sagacity, and endurance. Now dial. 4 A country bumpkin; a clown, lout, boor; a heavy dull creature; a blundering fool. 5 Now, don’t you call me any names, or you will find that two can play at that game. 6 The less said the sooner mended.

board of directors n. 1a A team or organization which prepares motor cars for racing; a group of racing cars owned by the same enterprise. b More widely, an establishment which trains or produces persons, etc., esp. of a characteristic quality or type. Also, a group of persons (spec. in publishing) under the same management or trained at the same place. 2 A form of poker in which each player is dealt two cards face down, and combines these with any of five community cards to make the best available five-card hand. 3a Clergymen who are inclined to (in addition to preaching in their own church) preach in somebody else's parish. b Clergymen who preach all
the time.  

4 The philanthropy culture is probably most highly developed in the USA, where charity fundraising ideas, for museums and art galleries in particular, are innovative and constantly changing.  

5 This action is goal-oriented.  

6 They hold their own self-interest to be the devoted guide of their whole conduct.  

7 The prerogative of being cannot withstand the deconstruction of the word.

**collector**  

*n.*  

1 A skillful or an unskillful hunter.  

2 Quick to seize or grasp at something, someone, etc. *(lit. & fig.)*  

3 A person mentioned by name; *spec.* the person named in connection with a prescribed method or process for finding unknown numbers or positions.  

4 Gray-haired or gray with age and having a favorite subject or occupation that is not one’s main business.  

5 Olive and black with a white spot on the nose.  

**adj.**  

6 Well-fed, of larger size than is usual; large in comparison with others of the same species.  

7 A simple card-game player often playing with special cards.  

8 A fair-weather friend.  

9 A person of unknown origin.  

10 Someone who has an excessive longing for something.  

**pl.**  

11 Shifting and fluid cliques of society.  

12 *My house is lonely* I and my bees have the estate all to ourselves.  

13 *He hungered to explain who he was.*  

14 The clock slowly inclined forward and fell.  

15 *We pay double the price we formerly did.*  

16 He had shown so little emotion about anything.  

17 Poor Catherine and I are not made for each other, and there is no help for it.  

18 *The customer is king.*  

19 Bernadine wanted to tell him that he could take his little Barbie doll and leave now.

**creative industries**  

*n.*  

1 A graphic symbol that conforms to middle-class taste.  

2 Pseudo-establishment mingled with; added as an ingredient.  

3 A character impressed upon something; an attribute communicated by, and constituting evidence of, some agency; “stamp,” “impression.”  

4 Accountants and graphic designers busily gentrifying the shell-shocked terraces are just as hungry for pleasure.  

5 Keep in mind, however, that no existing property is this typical.  

6 I think it was in the early eighties.  

7 Place a ruler from A to B and join A to the straight line.

**curator**  

*n.*  

1a A person who promotes styles.  

b A person noted for or aspiring to good taste.  

2 A person who goes everywhere.  

3 To perceive to be the same as something or someone previously known or encountered; to identify (something that has been known before).  

4 *This is what I like.*  

5 Why looke you strange on me? You know me well.
emerging artist  n. 1 A swimming bird of which species are found all over the world. 2 Transferred uses. a A term of endearment. b A fellow, “customer,” 3 May I try to explain? 4 There was nothing unusual in his departure except its suddenness.

gallerist  n. 1 A person skilled in applying the laws of refraction for the correction of visual defects. 2a The owner and manager of a shop. b A person whose occupation is the sale of goods or commodities for profit. Now rare. 3 A person who shares with another in anything; a partner, a colleague, and ally. 4 A cholesterol-lowering agent. 5 They always kept a gap, a distance between them. 6 I’ll stick where I am, for here I am safe.

investment  n. 1 A joke-book wisdom. 2 False expectation of something desired; false desire combined with expectation. 3a Now usually in bad sense: having or showing skill in achieving one’s ends by deceit or evasion. b A crafty or fraudulent device of a mean or base kind; an artifice to deceive or cheat. 4 The flows of affliction. 5 A chain that ascends in a continuity of links. The weak at the mercy of the strong and the ignorant of the crafty. 6 Where there is so much of Competition, and Uncertainty, you must expect Self-interest will govern.

laziness  n. Why in the name of all patience should you work so hard as this?

market  n. 1 A place of refuge for specific scheme of ideas, usually relating to politics, economics, or society and forming the basis of action or policy. 2 Substituting for or taking the place of the principles or standards of a person or society, and unifying the personal or societal judgment of what is valuable and important in life. 3 As if certain, established as fact, not to be called in question: there is no mistaking! 4 A safe answer. 5 Fancy business schools have more to offer than the University of Life. 6 A heterogeneous set that includes virtually anything, linguistic and non-linguistic, under the same heading: discourses, institutions, buildings, laws, police measures, philosophical propositions, and so on. The network that is established between these elements. 7 To exercise restraint or direction upon the free action of; to hold sway over, exercise power or authority over; to dominate, command. 8 As such, it appears at the intersection of power relations and relations of knowledge. 4 Resembling a fable, absurd.
market fundamentalism  n. 1 The belief or theory that the world has no real existence; the rejection of all notions of reality. 2 A three-dimensional matrix of control corresponding to a two-dimensional one. 3 The formation, or coming to a head, of an abscess; the formation or accumulation of pus; treatment to induce suppuration. 4 We know the object as one previously perceived … we recognize it. 5 This story will, I fear, run and run. 6 Stealing is stealing whether you use a computer command or a crowbar, and whether you take documents, data or dollars. 7 Ouch! Stop it! 8 Big, strong, violent. 9 Look: I am a pro-growth, free-market guy. I love the market.

mid-career artist  n. 1 A domesticated carnivorous mammal, which typically has a long snout, an acute sense of smell, non-retractile claws, and a barking, howling, or whining voice, widely kept as a pet or for hunting, herding livestock, guarding, or other utilitarian purposes. 2 What’s that fellow doing here? 3 I shall not be the person to discourage him.

museum  n. 1 An edifice devoted to the worship of division. 2 An uninhabitable house. 3 A place that attracts tourists and provides for their entertainment and recreation. 4 God said Let there be light: and there was light.

neoliberalism  n. 1 A doctrine in which government is subject to economic rationality. 2 Of life or a way of living reduced to calculation. 3 Decisions marked or characterized by material benefit derived from a property, position, etc.; income, revenue. 4 Human existence = a business man’s insistence. v. 5 To put forward as an assertion or statement to be dealing with matters in accordance with practical rather than theoretical considerations or general principles; to allege, assert, contend to be aiming at what is achievable rather than ideal; to claim, declare oneself (with intent to deceive) as matter-of-fact, practical. 6 As if identical with “The state of human affairs, the state of things.” 7 A proprietary name for a constructional toy consisting principally of small interlocking plastic blocks; such blocks collectively to form a church, school, university, college, museum, bank, hospital, asylum, reformatory, mission, NGOs or the like. 8 An entity that repeats the words or ideas of others mindlessly, mechanically, or without understanding. 9 The economy drive in preparation for Hate Week. 10 The college is calculated for the reception of sixty students. 11 It is possible to make the watch gain by making the balance heavy at its lowest point. 12 It was a great big thing, the size of a small haystack. 13 The door is opened to a host of frauds.
post-Fordism  *n.* 1 An oppressive hot wind from the west or northwest, which blows at intervals for about fifty days and fills the air with dust. 2a Fear-inspiring; gloomy, strange, weird. b *The city was nervous, starting at every sharp sound.* c A gray nervous cloud was scurrying eastward. 3 The Great Transformation. 4a Emotions collectively: to make capital out of emotions. 5 To apply, exert oneself. 6 A labor regime in which worker mobility and variable hours are accompanied by continuous electronic surveillance and the managerial analysis of performance. 7 Le Nouvel Esprit du Capitalisme. 8 The Metamorphosis of the One-Dimensional Man. 9 Everyone working everywhere all the time. 10 A flood-plain; land susceptible to flooding. 11 *But the passage I have quoted suggests a second observation.* 12 This story will, I fear, run and run. 13 *We have been having bad weather these last few years.*

privatization  *n.* Much about the same, I should say. And further repetitions express continued laughter.

property  *n.* 1a The object of veneration. b Something that cannot not be questioned or criticized. 2 Kept or regarded as inviolate from ordinary use, and appropriated or set apart for religious use or observance; consecrated, dedicated. 3 An unquestionable fact or truth. 4 Another kind of God, one not self-sufficient or absolute, but ... requiring the existence of other beings. 5 *The first car built by the Daimler Company at Coventry.* 6 *Where God is pleased to reveal Himself most, is called His house.* 7 *I return to my château this evening.* 8 *The boat of my desire is guided.* 9 To a feather-brained schoolgirl nothing is sacred.

speculate  *v.* 1 To be always occupied in calculating the potential economic value, of one's own education, marriage, childrearing, altruism, friendliness, cleanliness, etc.. 2 To valuate human potential on charts and screens of post-social traders. 3 To encourage the individual to constantly assess his or her own value in monetary terms. 4 To journey toward disaster. 3 A rich-man's dance, in which two or more (mostly) men improvise to the accompanying gold-rush sound. Also attrib., and transf., the place where such dancing occurs. 3 *His multi-million dollar collection all began in Uncle Robert's garage in Kansas City.* 4 If you say to a lot of people, “PopArt is meant to be one word with a capital A in the middle,” they look at you like you're really up your own ass. 5 Ask the experts! How they shake the...
head o'er these characters,... Call them forgery from A to Z! 6 Convivial slogans which use exclamations instead of question marks—“Have You Been Rippled Yet?”

**sponsor**  
*n.*  
1 A concealed identity under a different name or title.  
2 A person who sometimes damages something.  
3 Supplying milk or oil in a strategic manner.  
4 The name of a character in a novel represented as the perfect valet, used allusively.  
5 *He was none of your ordinary cocks, for he had a pedigree as long as your arm.*  
6 Very well, we’ll expect you at nine this evening. Who did you say this was?  
7 If this is the way they eat all the time in America I won’t be a bit hungry and I’ll be fine and fat, as they say in Limerick.

**work**  
*n.*  
1 A letting loose, abandonment or surrender to natural impulses; hence entire freedom from artificial constraint or from conventional tram-mels, unconstrainedness of manner, careless freedom, dash.  
2 That has been washed clean. Also: worn away by washing.  
3 The action of waiting or delaying.  
4a The action of remaining, staying, or dwelling in a place; a stay, a period of residence. Freq. in *place of work.* Now somewhat *rare.*  
4b Continuance, duration, permanence, enduring; an instance of this.  
5 Removed or detached by rubbing or scraping.  
6 *Lots of time taken up telling your aches and pains.*  
7 After thinking the matter well over, we have determined not to compete.

**work of art**  
*n.*  
1 Communication of a communicability.  
2 Self-opening and concealing.  
3 A paradigm of human activity and life without a specific end in mind.  
4 A pair of peasant shoes.  
5 *What matters who’s speaking,* someone said what matters who’s speaking.

**Notes**

4 Francis Fukuyama, *Newsweek* (December 6, 2009).  
5 Giorgio Agamben, op. cit., p. 11.
7 Ibid., p. 289.
10 Ibid., p. 44.

* The text was written July 28, 2011.
The questions of how, why, and to what end an artist should be educated have long animated discussions regarding art-school structure and pedagogy. In recent years, the incursion of collectors and curators—and hence the “market” more abstractly—into students’ studios and the increasing professionalization of the creative class have contributed to many transformations regarding the training of artists. This is one of the focal points of Katy Siegel’s wide-ranging discussion of American art education in “Lifelong Learning.” For Siegel, the increased professionalization of the artist contrasts starkly with the diminished career prospects of the current economy. In response to the narrowly conceived professional artist, Anton Vidokle in “Art without Institutions” describes his own efforts to repurpose art education by using the pre-existing model of a school and construing it as something completely different, creating an educational experience that is neither compulsory nor predicated upon institutional tradition.

Important in these shifts is the legacy of post-studio practice. Indeed, beginning in the 1970s, as many artists began to work outside the studio (and often abjured the production of objects in favor of ideas, performances, and time-based or ephemeral projects), education shifted to reflect this reality. The Bauhaus model, for example, based on material experimentation within an interdisciplinary situation—so prevalent for much of the twentieth century—gave way to the cultivation of discourse. New issues arose: What kinds of knowledge and skill were to be
transmitted in the absence of medium-oriented, craft-based learning? Did the model of the master and the disciple still obtain?

Likewise critical are problems of legitimation, as the MFA degree began to function as a prerequisite to exhibition and teaching opportunities; even the viability of a studio PhD is up for debate. In this environment, historical models of emulation and originality brush up against the creation of so many autonomous yet networked individuals. There is also the issue of the differences between traditions of art education throughout the world. Pi Li’s “Will the Academy Become a Monster?,” for instance, describes the condition of Chinese art academies, in which the demands of art education, the constitution of departments, and the relationship between artists and students, confront a monolithic and inflexible state apparatus.
The history of art education—the education of artists—in twentieth-century America begins with the mission to teach artists to be teachers and ends with the mission to make artists. In the first decades of the twenty-first century, certain aspects of this history remain resonant, brought to the fore especially by current social conditions. But there have been apparently new and somewhat surprising developments as well, visible in the contrasting extremes of the institutional drive towards a PhD in studio art, and the self-generated, informal school—each offering answers to longstanding (if newly interested) questions of how to teach art. Considering why art school—its very ubiquity as an object of consideration—may open a window onto its what. “What” figures art school today throughout the United States and Europe; “why” belongs to a still more global condition. This essay, however, will focus on art school in the United States.

Hyper School

Fine art has long been taught at American public colleges and universities as simply one discipline among many. Students enrolled as undergraduates in these art departments and art schools graduated with medium-based competencies, knowing how to develop photographs, carve and cast sculptures, stretch and gesso canvases, and paint paintings. By contrast, Yale is the only elite university that historically has emphasized the graduate study of art; most others had small, weak programs with no graduate study or even an undergraduate BFA degree, as the artist’s role was too vocational to fit comfortably into the elite university and its image of a liberal arts education. That is, being an artist was both tied to specific manual labor skills and a “calling” (and it therefore remained socially marginal; art was and still is to some extent vocational and so fits more comfortably into public school).

In the past ten or so years, elite schools have turned their attention and finances to their arts programs in general, and to the teaching of fine art more specifically. The most visible aspect of this has been the application
of a star system philosophy to programs such as Columbia University’s MFA in studio art, with much attention and success, as recent graduates (and current MFAs) got gallery representation, and a general sense of “buzz” in terms of collectors and dealers and art-world personalities attending open studios and exhibitions (effects that seem to be fading amidst conditions I will describe). Still more recently, there has been a push for PhD degree programs in studio art, a phenomenon that already has considerable traction in Europe and the UK. A topic of intense discussion at both art schools and universities including the School of the Art Institute in Chicago and Stanford University, the PhD is a symptom of art’s awkward fit in higher education—and purported cure.

Most flat-footedly, the PhD is the ultimate in academic credentials, a truly terminal degree that would aim to put art on an equal footing with other disciplines in the university. It insists that art school has the same rigor and measurable standards as chemistry or the study of German literature. The anxiety that art be perceived as the equal of other disciplines is one of professional pride and also job security. Tenuring faculty in art has always been a problem; sitting around a table with people from other departments, an art department chair has always had a hard time justifying his support for one of his artists and explaining the professional criteria for evaluation. This perplexity of the university in the face of what artists do is evident in a recent book on the PhD in studio art. The book opens not with the question of what is contemporary art or how best to teach it, but the problem of professional certification to teach art: “It appears that before too long, employers will be looking for artists with PhDs rather than Masters or college degrees. For the best jobs, it will be no longer enough to have an MA or MFA…. “3 A surprising number of students already pursue an MFA in studio art primarily because they want to teach, rather than to make art; they don’t see teaching as a fall-back to a real career in art, but as itself a real career in art (although in light of the changing and precarious nature of university teaching, hardly a safe haven).

The most pervasive and longer-term mutual adaptation of art and university has been the (itself much-discussed) emphasis on discourse in and around art: Crits and competence in reading art theory and writing artists statements have replaced developing manual skill in art-school curricula. Related to this turn towards discourse (alternately laid at the feet of conceptual art in the 1960s or the rise of critical theory in the late 1970s) is the current emphasis on research. As the head of the Mellon Foundation opined recently at an arts-in-the-university conference, “Every child is born
with an instinct for research … a thrill in discovering various types of order.”¹ The sentiment that everyone is born not an artist but a researcher lacks a certain utopian ring, though it conjures the touching image of wide-eyed babes rifling through databases. Naming research as the content of the studio PhD would appear to be a retreat into the ivory tower; the concern that art made in the university would acquire an enervated, solipsistic quality is longstanding. A 1966 report on art and higher education speculated that training artists in the university would make them want to return to the “purity” it represented, setting the conditions for art more “real through verbal description than in the fact of its own existence.”⁵ At that moment, studying art in a pure sense meant hewing to disciplinary thinking, as opposed to broader social needs. The advance of art framed by Clement Greenberg as serial solutions to a professional problem, not, as Leo Steinberg and others complained, unlike Detroit car design, was exaggerated in school, where the ideas and theories underlying art were stressed, rather than craft or individual passion. But today, the university stands against purity, replacing that value with that of interdisciplinary. For example, Stanford’s proposed PhD in arts practice shifts “the focus away from ‘pure’ creation toward the management of networks, links, flows, translations, and mediations.”⁶

Art is perfectly suited to this ambition. It is the discipline where one can exercise any other discipline—from cooking to sociology to architecture to biology to theater—free of the normative rules proper to those disciplines, professions, schools. This loosening makes the category of art useful to individuals who want to engage these other activities without really learning them in their material and social sense, and without extended study and accreditation: as amateurs who won’t be judged as architects or actors but as artists. This identification is itself necessarily and increasingly weak. Many younger artists today don’t even want to announce what they do as making art, but as just making, tout court, free even of that disciplinary grounding. The hyper school’s PhD in art recognizes the contemporary artist’s propensity for research and problem solving, but doesn’t try to make the case that contemporary art has a separate discourse and development of its own that itself can sustain the advanced graduate work of artists.⁷

Finally, reverting to collectivity and laboratory models not only is more comprehensible and serious-sounding to a university; it can also be cost-effective. Art takes up a lot of space and money: everyone needs her own studio; you need table saws and charcoal and oil paint and video cameras and monitors and now also computers. By contrast, the research model
advocates shared square footage and classroom time and attention from faculty, directed at groups rather than individuals.

**Amateur Institutions**

Apparently on the other end of the spectrum from the intensification of professional accreditation is the un-school, or self-directed school, or, to borrow critic Lane Relyea’s term, the DIY art school. Relyea described yoga classes and cooking sessions at places like Los Angeles’ Sundown Schoolhouse, which took place in artist Fritz Haeg’s geodesic dome, schools where students spent long days (and nights) hanging out. These rebellious and anti-hierarchical structures were designed to resist official art schools, institutions condemned for their academic, outdated courses and even more for their commercialized funneling of approved products directly into the art market. The new para-schools did indeed resist the former, but often seemed to merely improve on the methodology of the latter aspect of art school. Many became important sites for networking and connection-making, their loose curricula geared to middle-class students/artists who understood the benefits of working outside old-fashioned constraints like medium and disciplines.

The past few years have seen the growth of still more peer-generated schools that are not linked to a “real” academy; they also increasingly lack the serious social capital of the slightly earlier schools (which in the United States were primarily based in Los Angeles, a location where schools of all kinds have always been more central to the art world than New York). “Institutions” such as The Independent School of Art, Public School, The Art School in the Art School, and the Anhoek School are appearing (and disappearing—they are not stable forms) not only in Los Angeles and New York, but also in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh and Minneapolis; some of them are peripatetic, but not to the extent of Future Academy and other European para-schools that stress global connections and networking. (They are paralleled in museums and curatorial work by what has been called “the new institutionalism,” a focus on education and dissemination rather than conventional exhibitions that attend to the protocols of art history.)

In the United States, these schools tend to have both less official imprimatur and less theoretical rationale behind them. They increasingly deal in more specific (or minor) histories and subjects, from a teacher’s strike in Brownsville, Brooklyn to felt-making for nomads; they often reflect on
the form of “marginal pedagogies” itself as subject. Critical theory, the curricular heart of older schools such as 16 Beaver, is one option among many; the distinguishing characteristics are politics that fall somewhere between American self-reliance and anarchism, and also at least some practical training in manual trade skills. Sometimes the skill is even obviously art-related, such as darkroom photography, or the now-ubiquitous life-drawing classes, held as intimate clubs or as open calls in bars. Art students (like those in law and medicine) often have to teach themselves after school the things their actual work really requires. In the old days, it was assumed that for artists this meant professional practices: how to shoot your work, get a gallery, write a statement, etc. Now all of that stuff is learned, formally or informally, at school, and the missing professional, real-life information is more likely to be how to make and build things. Parallel to and overlapping the DIY art school are the informal meets to swap skills and exchange lectures like Brooklyn Skillshare (the name alone speaks of the current US turn to education as vocation). Even the art-school projects range wildly in and out of, beyond and around art—even experimental art—proper, beer-making, Bataille, crocheting, self-publishing, Scrabble.

These skills may be useful or just fun to learn; they also seem somewhat arbitrary choices to facilitate interaction among people, people who are not so much like-minded as belonging to the same sector of the same socioeconomic class, and may prove to be useful professional contacts (schoolroom as golf course). The most peer-driven, anti-hierarchical classroom, whether real or self-driven, might eschew the teacher as Beuysian demagogue only to replace him with endless, pointless dialogues—or “conversation,” to use current art-world lingua franca. That's the worst possible scenario. I tend to see the ongoing popularity of the homemade school in the US city more charitably, as a matter of survival: finding other people to depend on when it comes to locating a studio, to help you pick up hours as a preparator, to lend a hand in building a frame for a large wooden sculpture, or moving that sculpture across town. Taking the measure of the education of the late modern artist as recently as around the year 2000 meant describing a shift in the historical aim of art school, from making art (1940s) to making artists (1990s)—the slide from signature style to personal style. Just a decade later, the individual artist and his subjectivity no longer seem to be the pedagogical object of art school, but rather collaboration, and even for the individual, the context of a life lived, with others.
Professional Amateurs

Thinking about the two extremes of hyper schools and amateur schools points out a number of shared conditions: the exteriorizing of the artists by getting rid of studios, working in teams or collaborating, as well as the intersection of different disciplines. Most basically, both extremes radically extend the time spent in school. Those conditions are symptomatic of the more general condition of the large submerged middle between them: all the art schools and departments filled with art students and teachers.

These developments in art education reflect a still broader perspective: changes in the role of professionals generally. For one thing, the dominant or desired image of the professional has been changing, as I have briefly hinted, from a buttoned-down man in a gray flannel suit to a casual, flexible creative person. This outside-the-box CEO or knowledge worker has been discussed at length in critiques of neoliberal reimagining of work, including its implications for art. Much has been made—celebratory and derogatory—of popular author Daniel Pink’s catchy line “the MFA is the new MBA,” quoted in a New York Times story.³ What the MFA as MBA and the PhD as MFA have in common is the instrumentalization of “right brain noodling”: research, collaboration, transdisciplinarity, an emphasis on both means and ends, process and accountability. As the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities put it recently, art education can promote “21st Century Skills, or habits of mind, and include problem solving, critical and creative thinking, dealing with ambiguity and complexity, integration of multiple skill sets, and the ability to perform cross-disciplinary work.”¹⁰

The changing nature of the professional naturally implicates its opposing term, the amateur. The amateur is the new professional: The provisional, flexible, and self-invented is the new condition of business. The appearance of the savvy and well-connected nonprofessional, hailing from the groovy un- or de-institution, reflects this; If you’re so under the radar, why are you in Artforum? The instant apotheosis and embrace by big-money collectors of educational art collective Bruce High Quality Foundation (which has its own university) reveals the truth of this career strategy. As the Bruce High Quality Foundation slogan goes, “Professional Problems. Amateur Solutions.”

As the concept of the professional has changed, so have his material conditions. More quotidian, and less popular a topic than the putative
shift to the knowledge economy is the clear decline of the professional in American society. Rewards for doctors, employment possibilities for lawyers—the quintessential professions—have been fading in recent years. This aspect of “social reform”—the removal of all moneys, not just that of the classically working class, to the top one or two percent—is leading towards the disappearance of what in the United States is called the middle class. Middle-class security and status have evaporated: a degree earned in a field, a lifetime working in that field for a single employer, an upward trajectory of stability, saving, status. Now instead there is the absence of stability, replaced by flexibility, and the constant imperative to learn new skills, to give oneself over to the “retooling process” (as Bill Clinton called it), perpetually starting over as an amateur and having to figure out the new, next thing. The shape of life is changing. Long after we gave up on the Hegelian line of progress in history, art, or even painting, belief in the individual narrative of increasing accomplishment and success has lingered on. There was nothing sadder in the 1950s than peaking young, an artist who had “fallen off,” in Greenberg’s damming slight to Pollock. Now, whether one thinks of it as retooling or deschooling, the “trajectory” of the individual career or life looks more like a flat line. (With the upside being, you’re never too old.)

**School as Form**

All of these factors put pressure on the social value of education, and the possibility that higher education is itself obsolescent is an argument surprisingly being floated by the far left and the right in America. School, as one of the last bastions of public, putatively universal social rights, is being attacked both ideologically and by budget cuts throughout Europe and the United States (where the project of privatizing state universities is being furthered by their evisceration). As education becomes both less universal and more standardized, it hews increasingly to 1970s left-wing critiques of school as an instrument of social subjugation and reproduction. Most global is the fact that the very point of school for so many—not the long-gone ideal of the well-rounded gentleman/citizen, but even the more modest goal of attaining a middle-class life through a good job—is no longer in any way guaranteed by higher education. Conservative professors, pundits, and CEOs are perhaps quicker to see this than liberals, and hold up the examples of Bill Gates and other
non-matriculators as having made more rational (and yet passionate!) decisions than the legions of plodding college-goers. This amounts to even more stress on the ability of a few spectacular (or spectacularly lucky, or spectacularly vicious) individuals to become super-rich. A stodgy ivory tower education, it is implied, may not prepare you for the brave new world; more neutrally, it may just not be cost-effective. At least for now, undergraduate and graduate degrees do make a statistical difference in income, but costs are rising exponentially, and the benefits (basically, decent employment) for attending college are dropping in relation to not attending. It is hard to imagine this heading in any other direction any time soon.

How do the people formerly known as middle class, the ones raised with certain social expectations, caught in this shift, react? There have been large and violent protests across Europe; in the United States, there have been protests in California, largely driven by low-income students who seem to have a better grasp of the threat. The reaction of the middle-class culture has been more inclined towards the broad glamorization of skilled jobs such as cook and bartender and even traditional handicrafts. Whether one considers them to be manual or service work, these jobs have acquired the patina of cultural capital formerly reserved for professionals (without the accompanying stability). In part, work that needs to be done is thus rendered dignified (or at least cool) for those who expect work to be dignified. And in part, often, there has been a passionate return to pre- or early industrial practices like cheese-making which require not formal education but apprenticeships and vocational training. This same retro-passion for institutions and practices that suddenly appear obsolete and therefore attractive also applies to print culture; as newspapers and magazines migrate to the web or just disappear, we have experienced a revival of those antiquated forms in a variety of intellectual and social niches, art among them.

One might start to think of school in the same way: No longer burdened with being a central and viable institution, it is similarly available as a subject for artists in a very material way. One might see the art schools that pop up everywhere young people gather as in some ways akin to the broadsheets, off-print posters, newspapers, and magazines that they are producing en masse. In the familiar Benjaminian trope, the old medium becomes the subject content of the new one. As discussed above, for younger artists the role of student-participant can take the place of art, whether they are in self-formed schools and/or in “real” school: with radically
dispersed and even random-seeming subjects, self-consciously holding lectures and workshops primarily points not to any pressing curriculum but to school itself. (Like post-studio theories of art, this educational emphasis stresses the social rather than the individual as the maker of art—should we call it “pre-studio”? ). Theorized as transpedagogy or deschooling, teaching and learning—the practices of schools—morph into making art in the work of mature artists such as Tania Bruguera and Pablo Helguera.11 (Again, this has correlations in the educational activities of museums and other art institutions, where lectures and educational events have become much more self-conscious as formal objects, experimenting with forms like Pecha Kucha, the super-short Japanese presentation of twenty images in under seven minutes.)

It also affects older artists in their roles as faculty. For the major European figures in this respect, following the powerful example of Joseph Beuys, the role of teacher is much like that of the avant-garde leader of a social movement, even if the models of learning are not necessarily grandiose. There is a more subtle and widespread change in the nature of artist as teacher, which stretches broadly throughout the major art schools in the United States. People no longer find it odd that someone like Mike Kelley would teach even after his career was financially sustaining, assuming that art school was a fecund arena even for a productive, successful, and nominally anti-establishment artist, for vague reasons like the “energy” of being around young artists. If the class pictures that Michael Smith (acting as his everyman character Mike Smith) takes every year with his University of Texas students are unusual, both moving and creepy, it’s extremely common for artists to talk about the integration of their teaching and art-making—and not just in job interviews. A myriad of artist/teachers like Liam Gillick and Fia Backström are known for teaching classes and for making art that depends and draws on local social dynamics of group making, with an unstable line dividing the two. Ernesto Pujol typifies this blurring in describing himself as “a contemporary artist who sees no difference between my studio and my teaching practice (they form a seamless legacy)”; it may not be an accident that this is in fact the first sentence in the first essay in the recent book Art School.12 In the past the choice has been primarily either to model being a “real artist” for students, even if that meant being taciturn, hostile, or solipsistic, or to gradually stop showing and then even making art. The modernist self-reflexivity once reserved for asking, “what is painting?” is now directed at school.
Before and After

School is still not completely synonymous or continuous with life—it represents and embodies a particular interlude in an artist’s life. The “bubble” is what Hunter College students call it.¹³ What do they mean? They live in Brooklyn or Queens, and when in Manhattan for school/studio time hardly confine themselves to their urban “campus.” They are referring to a moment in their lives when school and school loans provide temporary respite from a life of full-time employment and/or worrying about money; while in school they can work only twenty hours a week (or whatever part-time looks like today), and still survive. Other students at fully-funded programs often don’t work at all. What school gives them is “space,” as one SAIC MFA student put it. Real space—an accessible studio in a central urban location—time space, and head space. Most broadly, art school is a place to think about what one wants to do. Most narrowly, it is a place and time where the art student has a studio, exhibits his work, and receives intense critical attention. Quite straightforwardly, art school is the only opportunity most artists have to behave in a discipline-specific manner—to be artists. While the former aspect is valued and accounted for by new developments in art school, the latter is less and less crucial.

The question then becomes: space between, amidst what? That space is the “and” between a “before” and an “after” that are less and less different from each other. If in the 1990s, faculty at the coolest art schools prided themselves on treating the students entering their schools not as students but as people who were already artists, one might say that today when artists leave school, they are still students in some sense. Without the acquisition of a finite body of professional knowledge or the promise of a career—which, to be honest, art (unlike law or medicine) never really held out—before and after aren’t really so different, lacking the post-degree shift into professional life or adult status, and the money that has historically marked those life passages for the middle class. For most, school brings no magical metamorphosis, whether a transubstantial and internal conversion, or a Lana Turner-style discovery that transforms the artist’s social status.

But while the instrumentality of school may never materialize for most artists, the potential pleasure of school itself—the pleasure of potentiality—and so the value of prolonging that pleasure as long as possible, remains certain. It’s the pleasure gotten from something that doesn’t work. From
obsolescence and consequent openness. Even from the lack of a guaranteed job waiting at the end. There are positive aspects to the new trajectory offered by the crumbling of institutions. In a funny way, there is freedom in the way that artists were supposed to be free: poor, piecing together a life, but not driven by a narrative of success and failure. Art school can’t say this, of course, without violating the belief system of higher education. But it’s something school offers, nonetheless.

Notes

2 Witness the ArtsEngine conference at the University of Michigan on “The Role of Art-Making and the Arts in the Research University” (May 5, 2011).
7 Thanks to Lane Relyea, who generously read this essay in progress, for this observation.
11 Irit Rogoff “Turning,” e-flux (November, 2008); Tom Holert, “Art in the Knowledge-based Polis,” e-flux (February 2009); Paul O’Neill and Mick Wilson, eds., Curating and the Educational Turn (London: Open Editions, 2010). There have been a number of conferences as well, including, “You
talkin’ to me? Why art is turning to education” (July 14, 2008) ICA London; and linked conferences at New York and London (at MOMA and the Serpentine Gallery, 2009 and 2010 respectively) on “transpedagogy” and “deschooling.”

13 Thanks to the group of Hunter students who met with me in January 2011 to talk about their experiences in art school, as well as the SAIC students whom I spoke with during the course of the academic year 2010–11, particularly Nicholas Cueva.
Art without Institutions

Anton Vidokle

The Editors (TE): One way to start would be to ask you about your relationship to art school, as well as to its increasing professionalization.

Anton Vidokle (AV): Well I dropped out. I never finished.

TE: You never finished school?

AV: No. It’s a funny story: I was at graduate school at Hunter College. And I did the coursework; I did a thesis show. I wrote the thesis and submitted it. It was accepted, but then I found out that in order to actually get my degree, I needed to put together all of these papers in a specific kind of a black plastic folder, which could only be purchased at this one stationery store. The secretary told me that the department chairman kept the folders in a closet in his office and that the folders had to conform to the dimensions of its shelves. I was idealistic and thought that the MFA meant something … but it came down to a surreal formalism. I never got the folder or the MFA!

TE: That’s bureaucracy.

AV: Right. Education is one part of the professionalization problem. The whole art field is becoming professionalized in a very, very narrow way. There’s still the old Marxist problem that professionalization is really about a division of labor and division of labor is about alienation. It’s kind of a contradiction that a lot of people go into the arts because they want to be a little bit less alienated from what they do, but more and more what is imposed on artists—and it comes both from market sector and public sector—is the increasing professionalization of their activity.

For one thing, I think this transformation has to do with the disappearance of bohemia, which was an intellectual space that allowed for a fluid communication between poets and artists and dancers and writers. And that went out the window sometime in the 1970s; it just vanished. And the visual art sphere just became much more self-reflexive. On the other side of it, it’s interesting to look at artist initiatives like the original White Columns, which was started by Gordon Matta-Clark as a garage on Greene Street in
New York. Any artist basically could have it for a day to do whatever she wanted: use it as a studio or a social space or whatever else.

Of course, if you compare that to what White Columns is now, there is a pretty radical difference. And I don’t mean to pick on White Columns, since I think it goes across the spectrum. Artists decided that to legitimize themselves, they needed to mimic existing institutions and become more institutionalized, so that’s another strong influence on what’s been happening.

TE: How and why did you decide to take up the school as a model for your own practice?

AV: For me it was actually very different because the art school was a model—but it was not only the art school. When we started working on Manifesta 6 [the European Biennial of Contemporary Art, which took place in Nicosia, Cyprus, in 2006], the reasons were pragmatic. We looked at the situation in Cyprus, and realized that we needed to deal with the fact of its postcolonial legacy. The ruling power, Great Britain, actually did not want to create cultural or other kinds of national institutions because it would have undermined the colonial project. After colonization ended the island immediately plunged into ethnic tension, which is something that the British created through their divide-and-rule colonial strategy. So now there are writers and some filmmakers and artists, but they lack a basic cultural network that we take for granted. I grew up in Moscow where there was a very strong network of art academies, art museums, opera houses, theaters, and a well-defined cultural sphere. In Cyprus it was almost completely absent.

We then thought about what it meant to have a biennial in Nicosia for 100 days. What would happen when the exhibition structure disappears? So we thought that maybe the most productive thing would be to use the resources we had, and to use this occasion, to start a temporary art academy, which could potentially become permanent if local people wanted it to continue. I started working on this and doing more and more research, when I came across all of these earlier models. For one thing, it’s really uncanny how embedded teaching and being an artist really is. And not just now, while some people support themselves by teaching, but since the beginning of formalized activities of artists—you know, being a teacher, having apprentices, getting students, starting a school, or a class. And there was such a proliferation of that at the beginning of modernism because I think people understood that you could not continue teaching with the same
methodology. Completely, radically different practice and new situations had to be developed. And this may be banal, but the Bauhaus is so interesting because its tiny initiative had a disproportionate effect in terms of changing curriculum and the whole structure of art education in Europe and the United States. Black Mountain College was also very inspirational.

I also thought that what was so attractive about what happens at school, is that the different kinds of activities that comprise the sphere of artistic work, are more integrated than within the exhibition sphere or other of aspects of a professional life of an artist. It seems in the exhibition context the discursive part is always inevitably marginalized: It’s always put in the basement somewhere, as an afterthought. Research is disregarded completely in favor of display even though recently there’s been this kind of fad of artistic research; but one has to be a bit skeptical.

In taking up the school as a social form, the idea was to see if it could actually create a situation where these different elements came to exist in a more balanced way. So that’s basically the interest in education. I don’t teach, I never taught, and I’m not really interested in that. I think that with *unitednationsplaza* or *nightschool* what I keep doing is taking existing social forms, like a video rental shop or pawn shop, and use them as kinds of shells for other kinds of activity. It’s the same with a school—school as a kind of a concrete social formation that could be used in a different way as space and object of artistic practices.

**TE:** When you think about the form of a school do you want to reorient the structure of that form? It’s hard to think of learning as not being hierarchical in some fashion. The traditional model requires that someone has more knowledge than someone else.

**AV:** I was not so much concerned with the politics of education as I was concerned with the politics of exhibition and conditions of production for an artist. So *nightschool* did not represent a reversal of roles. There were the people that gave lectures, there were the people that listened to lectures, there were students, there were speakers … so it’s not a political project in that sense. Somebody actually needs to transmit knowledge. Things are not equal because we’re not equal: intellectually, by way of experience, by way of talent, even. But a person in a position of authority need not abuse that authority.

Plus you have to realize that we’re not dealing with a school that one is forced to attend. As much as education is a right, education is also something that we are socially forced into—one has to be educated to function in
society, so it’s not something that everybody does voluntarily. It is compulsory. I fully understand the power of conflict, because if you don’t want to be in a class and there’s this asshole that’s talking down to you, that’s something that makes you want to rebel. But when you’re dealing with a situation that is completely voluntary—nobody had to come to nightschool, nobody had to attend unitednationsplaza—people only chose to be there because they wanted to. There were no grades, and these sessions had absolutely no bearing on the participants’ careers. There are completely different motivating factors that bring this particular group of people together, which might again be closer to an exhibition in its radical openness. In an exhibition, you can leave at any point you want, you don’t have to look at the work if you don’t want to … nobody’s forcing you to do any of this.

TE: But how do you balance that with the opposite problem: having more students wish to participate than you could accommodate? How did you select students?

AV: Well there are a couple of structural things here. The idea of the core group of participants started with Manifesta because it was on a small island, where—counting both the Turkish and Greek sides—maybe sixty or seventy people have specific interests in the kind of discussion offered by this kind of programming. Sure, for the opening there would be 10,000 people flying in from abroad, but they would leave after three days and then we would be there for 100 days with empty rooms. So we tried to restructure this in a way that we actually get people to come and commit for three months to experience the duration of this program. We also tried to subsidize them being there. So there were several thousand people who applied, and we couldn’t provide for all of them, so we chose about a hundred. This had to do with our economic capacity alone.

When Manifesta 6 was canceled I decided to realize my part of the project independently in Berlin as unitednationsplaza. Most of the people who were supposed to be part of the school on Cyprus came to Berlin instead at their own expense, which was very special. We had no means of supporting them; they came on their own, and some of them stayed for one seminar, and others stayed for months. This was really interesting because it reproduced the radically open nature of an exhibition, where we dealt with a drifting audience. But then if you think about the totality of the project, it became important to have somebody who saw the whole thing because there were thematic components that moved from one seminar to another.
The core group involved with *nightschool* got a chance to experience the entire thing. And you know the selection was fairly random there's not much you can tell from a one-page statement of intent. Some of those people were great, some of these people were not particularly interesting, but that's just kind of the nature of this. We asked the applicants not to send images because it wasn't really a school for only artists. The idea was to have a combination of participants, some curators, some art historians, there was an investment banker…

**TE:** It seems that you believe that *unitednationsplaza* worked better than *nightschool*?

**AV:** Yes. The difference is in the museum.

**TE:** How would you differentiate between the institutional aspect of *unitednationsplaza*—especially by the project’s end—and working with another institution as such? *nightschool* already had a sort of cache, something built upon what you’d established in Berlin.

**AV:** Well thank God for that, because otherwise it would have been completely squashed by the New Museum and their agenda. But still the New York version was really a compromise compared to what was possible in Berlin and most of those things are really simple: When you deal with durational processes such as education, you have to be able to continue talking as long as it takes to discuss whatever needs to be discussed. It is hard to work with arbitrary hours—ok, it’s 10:30 so you have to close the doors—so even the temporality of the thing was radically different. In Berlin there were seminars that ran until 3:00 in the morning. And look if there is something urgent enough to talk about, that keeps people up until 3:00 in the morning, it’s so incredible, you know. Also what was radically different was that in Berlin we didn’t have to spell out the rules of the place or effect people’s behavior. After Berlin, being in the New Museum felt a bit like a jail, imposing limits on one’s physical behavior through regulated movement and consumption. For example: In the beginning we were told that we could not bring water into the auditorium—a kind of a bureaucratic prohibition without explanation. Some of those lectures were two and a half hours long, and you simply need to drink. Then after a month, suddenly they decided to do a tequila party at the end of the seminar, so it went from no drinking to drinking hard liquor … typical institutional schizophrenia where everything pretends to be a kind of a law, but the fact is that there is no rational explanation for this; it’s completely subjective.
And maybe the most important difference is that in Berlin one of the key elements was that there was no clear limit to what degree audiences or participants could enter the project and how involved they could get. I mean, they could essentially become lecturers, they could become presenters, they could make an artwork and display it there. Of course in the New Museum you could see the limits right away, which short-circuited the project by telling people exactly where the limit of their involvement was from the start.

TE: So what did you do with that? You must have worried about that from the outset for the nightschool project.

AV: Well I realized that it's not going to be as good, but I thought that the benefits outweighed the flaws. The reason why I agreed to do it is that I used to work in the New Museum a very long time ago when Marcia Tucker was the director and they were on Broadway. I used to help them install art exhibitions and I remember from the time that New Museum used to have a fantastic publications program and Brian Wallis really focused it on publishing. Under Dan Cameron and even more so now, they ignored their own intellectual legacy, so this was an opportunity in some way to bring that back to the museum.

TE: How much do you think the actual city determines the success of such a project? What is determined by place?

AV: I do think that there are different kinds of art contexts and certain places that are less market driven and much more ideological in nature. For example in the Middle East, some artists become successful on the market and some have careers in commercial galleries, but they don't really care about this all that much, because what is at stake is something else, which is much closer to ideology, to some kind of production of national culture, to upholding certain kind of values. It's just a different valuation system. This also has its own limitations because a lot of times it becomes a very local conversation.

TE: So in your thinking about this, how do you differentiate teaching from school, or are these terms necessarily...

AV: Well school is just an excuse. That's what I mean by a form or a shell.

TE: But could teaching be that too for you or is that somehow different?

AV: Yeah because I would be in the position of a teacher and I really don't want to occupy that position. I'd rather be a student.
TE: And of course these roles constantly shift.

AV: There are moments where someone has more, and you sort of give or vice versa, and then you receive, and I think that's something very interesting, this exchange of knowledge. Certain situations afford that better than others and a traditional classroom or art school is not necessarily the best place for that. To finish the point about institutions from before, it seems that you need such a delicate balance to make all this work: just the right amount of institutional structure, to sort of give it a format or a system to work with, but not too much that it becomes repressive. And you need just enough people interested but maybe not too many before it becomes like a real “thing” and then it has to become professionalized.

For me it clearly needs to end. I mean, I was not interested in starting a new institution. Instead, the idea was to make a temporary project. There were certain objectives, like a certain kind of curiosity—if you do it like this would it actually work? And then sometimes we answered these questions. I think for me it was not necessary to continue with this. I mean somebody else can continue something else, because when you continue doing something past the point of urgency, it just becomes like formalization. I guess the most interesting part is really the experiment itself.

TE: So how does e-flux journal relate to any of this?

AV: Very directly. The journal is very much an extension of unitednationsplaza and nightschool. It's printed to reach much broader audiences, because for the schools you had to be in Berlin or New York. And I suspected that there were a lot more people interested in the kind of conversations that were taking place there, but they were inaccessible for them. So the journal idea was just to take it one step further and to develop it as a kind of a textual platform that could be accessed from anywhere in the world. It’s less of a conversation because it’s more of a one-way communication, but it gets the ideas out there, it circulates the ideas.

TE: Editorially, when you think of the journal, within this sort of extension of the school, what type of audience do you conceive of reading it?

AV: From the start we didn’t want to publish exhibition reviews. You know we wanted to have an art journal, but I’m afraid that it’s becoming less and less of an art journal and more something yet to be defined,
some kind of general intellect publication or something like that. But we simply could not find the kind of writing about art that we were particularly interested in publishing right now; so much of it was too academic. There is a certain kind of writing about art that I love, historically, you know, like Paul Valery, or even early T. J. Clark, but somehow writing about art also got so professionalized and so formalized that I don’t feel the kind of richness or depth that would make me want to say well, it’s urgent that we publish this, it’s urgent that people read this. Whereas a lot of theoretical texts and political texts that deal with art and culture in a way impress a sense of urgency.

Our original idea was triggered by this strange failure of an experiment of Documenta 12 [2007]. They wanted to do this journal project—documenta journal—which I thought initially was brilliant. They were proposing to give substantial space and resources to hundreds of art journals from all over the world because art journals are kinds of think tanks. Then they just went in the opposite direction and instead of asking these publications what is urgent for you to think about, what is urgent for you to publish, we’re going to tell you what you should think and write about, and in fact we’re not even going to fund it or translate it. You have to pay for it yourself. So they basically monopolized the budgets of this entire sphere for self-serving topics. In the end it was almost nothing. All I saw there was a big table with some magazines strewn on it … and it made me very angry and it made me think that we should really try to do something. The resulting project is not too set on an editorial agenda, but we reach out to people, to thinkers, that live in very different locations. We ask what is urgent for them to think about, and make that available to our international readership. And this is the editorial direction that we’ve followed the last couple of years and will continue.

TE: And is an international scope essential to this?

AV: Absolutely because I think it’s an international conversation at this point.

TE: Where do you distinguish knowledge and information?

AV: Well to me knowledge always had to do with understanding. Information is just information if you don’t understand it; if you don’t understand it there is no knowledge. And understanding is really something that is so contingent on the subject, right, because it requires an understanding subject. So I think the two things are really kind of
pretty different, and I don’t know how to produce knowledge because only the thinking subject, understanding subject, can produce it for themselves. It seems to me that I can only produce information, hoping that it finds an understanding subject.

Note

1 The unitednationsplaza was a one-year project held in Berlin in 2007. It followed the cancelation of Manifesta 6 by Cypriot officials. Unitednationsplaza maintained the model of an open school originally planned for Nicosia, but smaller in overall scope. Nightschool continued the tradition of unitednationsplaza in New York; it was held for most of 2008 and parts of 2009 at the New Museum.
Criticism of Chinese universities from scholars in a variety of fields has grown over the past several years. The main focus of this criticism has been the question of power and its distribution in university administration; in the humanities, for instance, there is the basic moral problem of independence and autonomy in scholarly research, while, in the sciences, there is that of national resources primarily supporting pragmatic disciplines and “bureaucrat scientists” to the exclusion of others. But perhaps such questions are, at times, only the surface of the true problems at hand.

The Chinese education system has experienced change on a massive scale since 2000, manifested in the fluctuation of number and size of individual universities. In order to keep pace with the accelerated speed of economic development, the state initiated large-scale university reform, the fundamental reasoning of which intended to integrate and consolidate existing educational resources in order to make their operations more effective. Under this directive, a large number of small-scale specialized schools with their own advantages and characteristics were merged into large-scale comprehensive university and institute systems: Take, for example, the Central Academy of Art and Design, a highly specialized and accomplished design institute founded in the 1950s that was merged into Tsinghua University.

Because all Chinese universities theoretically belong to the state, the realization of such projects is not difficult. Minister of Education Yuan Guiren began to admit in 2011 that the greatest disadvantage of the educational reform of the past decade has been the standardization of education: The universities have begun to lose their defining characteristics in terms of the distribution of disciplines and training of talent, among other issues. Although Chinese art schools differ from general universities in some ways, the recent wave of criticism has revealed a variety of ills and abuses here as well—problems that are often overshadowed by the continued expansion of campus facilities, the introduction of new majors, and increased enrollment numbers.
The most defining characteristic of the Chinese art academy that emerges in comparison with other universities and educational institutions may be that, under the current state education system and because of the effects of the art market, those employed as professors often also maintain separate identities as artists with a degree of economic independence. Views of the matter vary according to perspective: This economic independence can either offer creative autonomy or cause conflict between artistic ideals and the sustained transformations of the academic spirit, thus forcing the artist to retreat to his or her own world.

At the same time, the state seems to lack a critical standard for the evaluation of art schools. For most universities such a standard of success might be determined by the percentage of students able to find work within a year of graduation, the number of instructors whose work merits accolades at a national level, and the frequency of essays or research published in state-owned periodicals or journals. According to such a standard, the employment rates of the art schools would be the lowest among all other majors and departments in general universities, while national recognition from government awards and state-owned periodicals appears to instructors engaged in contemporary art as a form of mockery. This mockery, of course, goes both ways: A professor undergoing evaluation will find that an exhibition at MOMA is less significant than one at a provincial art museum, that the Venice Biennale is worth less than the national exhibition held every five years, and that art criticism published in any venue other than a state periodical may as well not have been written at all.

Art schools in China previously enjoyed a certain number of privileges because they were managed directly by the Ministry of Culture, but, following the guidelines of university reform, they are now fully managed by the Ministry of Education. Because of this background, the academy finds itself squeezed between free artists and conservative bureaucrats; at times attempts at balancing these two sides result in expanding the scale of the school and raising enrollment numbers in order to seek the favor of the official system while, on the other hand, developing programs in new media and experimental art to temper the dissatisfaction of professors.

With our academy beaten into such a corner by government norms and quotas, we may have forgotten the basic role of the university within our cultural ecology. If we still believe that universities are systems for the storage and production of knowledge, it is with no small measure of regret that we find art schools functionally deteriorating into repositories of selective memory. Rather than representing the realities of
current transformations in art, they choose to focus on phenomena legitimized only by their own partial criteria.

Two climactic moments in recent memory frame the situation of Chinese art education, occurring respectively during the mid- and late 1980s. Most artists active in the art world today graduated between 1985 and 1986, and their activity leading up to and just after those years has become known as the 85 New Wave movement. Later, the student movement of 1989 produced in those who would go on to graduate that summer a special quality, as well as the school of cynical realism. These two peak periods in the art schools were able to occur in the 1980s for several reasons: First, the education system, obliterated by the Cultural Revolution, presented itself in that moment as a blank slate; and, second, students of that era typically entered the academy only with great difficulty and after many years of experience living in society at large—they were already linked with social realities in innumerable ways. As a direct consequence of the 1989 student movement, however, schools facing a shortage of instructors refused to hire artists or professors who had engaged in protest activities. Even more significantly, they also developed a complete set of systemic measures for control, including the eventual university reform program and procedures of evaluation mentioned at the outset of this essay.

Now subject to forms of control far stricter than those of the 1980s, our schools are no longer an important agent in the creation of new art; at present, they lack both standards and a stable grounding in reality. They produce value judgments linked to the retention of power and focus on their own choices, but do not consider the origins of their values or their relationship to society. In fact, concepts of contemporary art production initiated as early as 1979 have been unable to fully enter the academic system of these schools. The artistic products of the past three decades are reduced to the status of decoration within the national educational rubric, which seems to have been constructed in something of a hurried panic. These new concepts appear rather as images, broken into fragments and scattered through the syllabus of art education.

With the passage of time and the marketization of education, many successful artists have been invited into the academy, including both some who drifted abroad in the early 1990s and other contemporary painters who have achieved significant commercial success. The choice of specific figures is often random, often depending—like the Chinese political system itself—on personal taste. In this context, the organization and educational transmission of art and artistic production is based on a series
of exclusions centered around a certain group of people and lacking any rational premise. Even for those invited into and employed by the academy, without the systematic and scholarly work of coherent organization they too will be reduced to the reproduction of certain symbols and schematics. Because the fundamental educational methods and systems have yet to change, the symbolic meaning of the entry of these artists into the academic fold is greater than any substantial value they may contribute; at times the image of successful artistic practice they offer actually encourages young students to study a certain “science of success,” copying imagery and symbols from their mentors but failing to constitute a methodical and general concept of culture.

Despite years of reform, the educational system of the Chinese art schools has failed to change. In contrast to the Western education system, the greatest defining characteristic of the Chinese academy may lie in the fact that its disciplines and majors of study are divided according to media, including ink painting (or Chinese painting), oil painting, printmaking, sculpture, and so on. Since 2000, the academies have expanded to include new institutions in design, architecture, and public art in accordance with education reform and marketization, merging previously distinct departments into new institutions focusing on the “plastic arts.” But such changes have not incited transformation in terms of how training works within these institutions: Our mode of training continues to assume as its core task the mastery of a particular medium and skill in the plastic production of form, utterly lacking in terms of any training on a conceptual level. For this reason the academy in China does not emphasize attempting to break down the barriers between disciplines, but instead produces a new set of traditions by which students are recruited and tested based on their skill in modeling existing forms. This has caused the ossification of system and spirit alike within the academy.

Even as these schools become rigid and atrophic in spirit and structure, however, they are rapidly expanding in scale. The trend of expanding enrollment first spread to art schools beginning in the 1990s as institutes sought new sources of revenue, a wave of expansion that was not accompanied by any genuine democratic or educational reform. Its only real function has been to encourage the proliferation of cram schools aimed at applicants hoping to pass the academies’ still-rigorous entrance examinations. Now numbering in the thousands, these training centers—veritable concentration camps—allow students without high school diplomas who seek to become “successful artists” to adopt the rigid tastes of the academy two or three
Will the Academy Become a Monster?

years prior to actually entering its halls. Rather than fueling creativity by exposing these students to fresh artistic sensibilities, such classes provide three-hour sessions on sketching, coloration, and production according to existing school standards. From the perspective of the academy, students can only form their own perspectives after mastering these skills; from the standpoint of true art, on the other hand, thinking no longer matters once these standards have come to control the mind.

This trend toward expansion also raises questions about the pedagogical direction of the academy. We excessively focus on cultivating “useful” talents, often forgetting that “useless” talents are also important to society. A democratic society requires democratized education, but this does not give universities the authority to use technique to blot out thinking. The emphasis on technique at the expense of thinking has allowed enrollment to increase tenfold over the past thirty years, but the increase in instructors has been limited by the exclusivity and conservatism of the institutional academic system. This has not proven an obstacle to the training of students in foundation courses like sketching, coloration, and drafting for two years before making them master the standardized language of a certain medium and a certain genre—a method of training that cultivates not the thinking of the student but rather a particular sensibility of technique.

Under this model, the discussion of thinking within the academy becomes inappropriate and inadvisable, because such thinking cannot help but lead to suspicion of the entire education system. Art has become increasingly democratic, and strong artists have more opportunities than ever outside of the academy. Even artists within the university system focus more on their identities as artists, not instructors—the latter can only lead to a discussion of technique without thinking. Consequently, the education offered by these institutes comprises only verbal instruction; the hands-on, personal mentoring component has faded. This latter component has now been transferred to personal friendship, which occurs only outside of the academy and occasionally even then.

Indeed, the very possibility of teaching by example is disappearing. In order to alleviate the tension between simultaneous growth in enrollment and the sealing off of the educational realm, our art schools have often joined the newly constructed “university cities” formed by campus relocations to the rural edges of major cities, as has occurred in Guangzhou and Chongqing. We might suspect that the large-scale removal of university campuses to suburban areas involves an intentional model of quarantine or
imprisonment, and can confirm with some certainty that it functions as such at least on a symbolic level. The art schools, many of which have long histories, were previously located in the city centers, and this central location guaranteed an ability to listen and perceive within artistic practice. With the expansion of the scale of education, however, these urban campuses are no longer sufficient for ballooning enrollment, and the government is unwilling to make available more land in the same area.

In the past ten years, most of the art schools have moved to the urban fringe for the sake of space to grow. But as campuses have grown in size, they have also moved further and further away from their instructors. Under the old economic system, campuses in the city centers functioned with high efficiency, serving as spaces for learning and for living for teachers and students alike. Now, instructors are left in the city while students are cast out to the fringe, connected only by one shuttle bus at 8:00 in the morning and another at 5:00 in the afternoon. This peculiar geographic phenomenon means that students' activities, spaces, and perceptions are as constrained as their thinking. Their worlds are limited to grassy suburban scenery and three-hour sessions of standing straight to sketch live models in their studio classes. They are connected to the real world only by a limited version of the internet in which even Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* (1866) is filtered as pornographic material. We might fear that expecting them to obtain any kind of valuable or real experience from such sources—anything other than the glib sarcasm of netspeak—is an exercise in futility.

Further complicating the issue, art schools use hastily established programs in “new” and “experimental” disciplines in order to advertise an ostensible ability to keep up with the times. Those that attract the most attention are the programs in experimental art and new media art: The former is used to educate students in practices that differ from contemporary art executed in traditional media, while the latter is used to develop art in all manner of comprehensive or mixed media. Both are reduced to concepts of media and medium rather than emphasizing the substance of experimentation and cultural negativity. Experimental art and new media appear open but actually constitute little more than a fig leaf for the ossified academic system; that much of the experimental art program is engaged in painting, for example, seems strikingly inappropriate. As such, experimental art programs have become Installation Departments and new media programs have become Video Departments.

More importantly, the revelation of any resolute cultural attitude or artistic motive within the scope of such “new” or “experimental” programs
would make them immediately incompatible with the academy as a whole. For this reason, experimental art can only ever extend within the framework of “experimentation,” a word that, in Mandarin, fails to capture the halo of cultural investigation and exploration but rather implies immaturity and imminent cancellation. New media, on the other hand, has become another name for the creative industries, laying undue emphasis on the practical capabilities of art. What is required is not a concept or thought but an idea—a modular, key idea. Faced only with this requirement, experimental art and new media fail to develop in any systematic way; without the ability to preserve even fundamental knowledge, however, what more can we ask of them? These programs ultimately provide training in the use of various software and facilities, which students learn as if they were memorizing characters or learning brush strokes—hardly the way to engender true creative inspiration. To the contrary, these majors only serve to further shape students into useful if thoughtless cogs in a commercial machine that understands exactly how aesthetic talent can be made useful.

Despite significant economic progress in recent decades, China is actually becoming increasingly conservative in both culture and politics, leading to the ossification of the education system among other problems related to the spirit of cultural preservation and innovation. Just as economic growth has encouraged this conservative and stubborn pride, expansion of the universities in terms of scale and facilities has managed to obscure the inherent conservatism of the education system. At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, we must continue to ask ourselves: Will the academy become a monstrosity? With a massive infrastructure, advanced constitutive facilities, the ability to repair its injuries, and the will to reinvent its likeness according to changes in the outside world, there is nothing it cannot devour. Remaining imprisoned of its own volition, however, it lacks both thought and soul. We must constantly and anxiously ask: What can we do?
Long the provenance of art criticism, contemporary art history has recently become a field in its own right. As art historians traditionally focused on art of the past, many American art history departments cautioned against such insurrections against the “objectivity” presumably necessary to the work of the field, only recently allowing, for example, students to write dissertations on living artists. The expansion of the contemporary art world since 1989 has generated an incredible growth in contemporary art history. This is most apparent in North American universities, where the professionalization of the discipline has progressed rapidly. With an increasing number of participants attempting to make sense of the recent past, the vast subject of study has been divvied up into particular case studies, extending a more conventionally accepted model of the monographic project. Still, a host of methodological questions have arisen, as practitioners become more self-reflexive about the challenges of analyzing historical events that are still unfolding. This is the impetus behind Our Literal Speed’s contribution “Our Literal Speed,” which emphasizes both the reclaiming of the supposed uselessness of art-historical work as well as the importance of studying the space and movement between art and non-art, what they call “the bleed.”

Through their essay as well as the others in this chapter a number of questions arise: Is contemporary art history just another form of criticism? What constitutes scholarly work when a contemporary art-historical study is the first sustained work on an artist? How does one determine if a living artist is of historical significance? Is contemporary art history a general
field, or is it divided into specialties like contemporary Chinese art history, contemporary Latin American art history, etc.? This latter question is central to Chika Okeke-Agulu’s essay “Globalization, Art History, and the Specter of Difference,” in which he argues, using the example of contemporary African art, that the field of art history in its attempts to be a global discipline must attend to the methodological challenges non-Western art provides, making it clear that a comparative kind of art history is necessary.

There are also broader issues about the relevance of contemporary art history to the wider contemporary art world; whether or not, for example, it participates in its discourses? For Carrie Lambert-Beatty, as she stakes out in “The Academic Condition of Contemporary Art,” it resoundingly does. The university with all its attendant complications is nevertheless a place that supports a kind of art writing given to sustained reflection, and not immediately pressured to be timely, or put another way, contemporary. It is often suggested, somewhat naively, that the university is a refuge from the machinations of the culture industry. This is obviously no longer the case, and in this realization comes the need to re-evaluate what it means to write the art history of the present.
Our Literal Speed

Our Literal Speed

This event took place in an art gallery at Fabbrica del Vapore in Milan, Italy, November 3, 2010.

Two actors ascend a shallow gray stage, a stage that had been treated heretofore as a sculpture within the gallery. John Spelman (JS) plays an artist. Abbey Shaine Dubin (ASD) plays an art writer. They hold papers that one assumes are the scripts for the performance. They occasionally refer to them for guidance, but not too often. They begin.

ASD [politely laughs, makes sweeping gesture with hand]: So, John Spelman … thanks for being here. I know this is a bit awkward, I mean, as an artist to be asked to present your contribution to a volume on contemporary art in this way. [gestures with hand]

JS [politely smiles]: Yes, it’s nonstandard, but it’s really my pleasure.

ASD: Just to start with your recent artist’s statements. You say that the discourse around art, the words, inflections, tones, things like that, the marginal attributes that make art feel, well, like art, all those things are, um, more important than the art itself. Is that right? Is that fair to say?

JS [with a serious expression]: Yes, I guess that’s fair to say, though what I really said was that the demarcations between art and the non-art that surrounds art have grown so ambiguous over the last twenty years that it’s really the bleed that you analyze now, not so much the art gestures themselves.

ASD: The bleed? That sounds like what you mean is the “trickling-over” of non-art into art.

JS: Well, um, you know, in music recording, bleed refers to a sound—usually undesirable and hard to control—that happens when one instrument is picked up by a microphone dedicated to another instrument. Maybe we could say that the art world had been set up to “record” art through one “microphone” and non-art (curators, critics, historians, etc.) through another. Sure, those sounds were sometimes intentionally mixed together after they were recorded—think conceptual art or institutional critique—but what happens with art and non-art in the 1990s is a lot like recording engineers discovering feedback in the 1960s.
Undesirable and hard to control “noise” around the intended sound began to seem raw and sexy, even a lot more interesting than the sound itself—same thing with art over the last two decades: The non-art reverberations around the art started to be channeled, controlled and directed by artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija and Anton Vidokle, or enterprises like Bernadette Corporation. You could say that Tino Sehgal’s *This Progress* on the ramps of the Guggenheim was the art version of *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida*, a big explosion of raw feedback.

ASD [hesitantly]: Okay, uh … Okay, I see. So you’re saying that the artist’s talk in Walid Raad’s work is not an additive to the art, it *is* art itself or for Sehgal, museum employees play more important roles than any objects created by the artist …

JS [cuts in]: Right. There are no objects.

ASD: Or in Tania Bruguera’s art, openings and presentations become performances, though she does not necessarily notify anyone of this fact beforehand.

JS: So we can say that stuff near art …

ASD [cuts in]: … that is not art…

JS [cuts in]: … began to be treated as if it were art. As a result, the professional and discursive framing that allowed us to rapidly, almost automatically, distinguish art from its near-art, yet non-art surroundings, has been transformed in challenging ways. So, what I mean is, uh, that you cannot say that the art is HERE [points to the ground] and the non-art is over THERE [points away]. What this means, I think, is that the stuff around the art, especially all of the curating, writing and talking about art, but not only the curating, writing and talking—all sorts of different aspects of the art situation in general—they waver between just pure and simple decoration and [raises hands as if holding something in front of him] meaningful extrapolations, disruptions, affirmations, or negations. [hands go down] Or maybe all of that wrapped together in one package.

ASD: According to you, then, you have to analyze the bleed from one area to the other, from the clearly marked out ART area to OTHER areas, and vice versa. And as an art spectator—or, for me, as an art writer—you judge whether this bleed exhibits the density, complexity and vitality that we attribute, or at least traditionally have attributed, to artworks.

JS: Exactly.
ASD: To me, this sounds like relational aesthetics, right?

JS: It’s not far off. The thing about relational aesthetics is that there’s never any honest to God uncertainty about the art and non-art—art becomes a social interstice, as Nicolas Bourriaud says, it opens up, but the producers remain the producers and the consumers remain the consumers. Art just ceases to be self-contained in rigidly obvious ways.

ASD: But there’s more?

JS: Right, there’s more. What I am saying is that at the same time that you had art colonizing all of these practices that had not been part of conventional art experience, activities and situations that no one ever thought were art started to seem kind of artful. They started to seem to be art in a backdoor kind of way.

ASD [quizzically]: So anything near art began to glow from the radiation cloud of relational aesthetics and the aftermath of conceptualism and institutional critique? [pause] So non-art near art started to become art-like by accident?

JS [searching for exact words]: Yes, more or less, um, yes. I mean some people will say, “Oh Duchamp did this a century ago,” but this is different, I think. I’m not talking about an artist pulling non-art into the art zone. This is not the Readymade here. I’m talking about situations in which it really, literally became hard to say where the “edges” of the art might be, uh, where you could comfortably shut down the analytical tools that you use for coming to terms with art, uh, experience and, you know, switch on other tools. Surfaces, textures and relationships already present in the culture, yet not recognized as artful—were assuming a sense of artful “form”—producing “new edges.” Like all of the non-art near-art effects connected to things like Utopia Station, Rainer Ganahl’s photographs, and Jackson Pollock Bar’s “theory installations”—or Hila Peleg’s film A Crime Against Art—all of these would be examples of this process of edge-formation in action.

ASD [slowly and deliberately]: So if you place these “newly edged” forms in juxtaposition to each other—they then “vibrate”—in your words, they [scare quotes] “bleed,” creating odd psychological atmospheres, professional expectations, and collective assumptions—the pedagogical unconscious of art, so to speak.

JS: Right.
ASD: Because later this situation will be analyzed. You then produce “new edges” around the bleed—and THEN you analyze the bleed from the NEWLY edged thing, and so on. In the process the viewer or reader experiences zones of opacity that demand new analytical criteria, but all of this happens outside the constraints of any overarching goal. Is that right?

JS [a little confused]: Yeah. I think that’s right. It’s not a matter of convincing people of something. [shaking head and gesturing with arms]

ASD [with slight sarcasm]: Criteria for criteria’s sake, then?

JS: More like complex interpretations as a means to grasp complex forms. You know, so, uh, for example, [looks out at audience, addresses audience] what you are looking at right now, is this art? I mean it looks and feels like something near art but probably not exactly art art, as Allan Kaprow would say. Like, this is an interview situation, but not an interview as art.

ASD: Well, I don’t know—what are you saying? That we have to pump up the affective intensities for it to be art-like? Sensationalize it or numb it? Produce some obvious drama or something? I mean …

JS [cuts in]: What we have here are two people talking about art in an art situation, but that situation is mediated by a lot of traditionally non-art signifiers. To me, this “reads” as a legitimate non-art situation near art.

ASD: But some people are seeing this in a gallery in Milan on the third of November 2010. They are seeing this as a performance or something like a performance. And they probably think this is some kind of really mannered, decadent, self-reflexive art-thing thing, you know?

JS: Sure. And it kind of is. But the idea is that some people are going to read this conversation in a book on contemporary art?

ASD: Yes, that’s the idea.

JS: Good luck with that. To me, I have to admit, the contemporary academic is, as they say, “the businessperson without a business”—someone who sincerely believes that he does something valuable, but who rarely convinces anyone that he produces anything of much value.

ASD [nodding her head]: It’s true. Every art scholar now plays the role of a middle manager who just happens to know a few facts about Agnes Martin’s
brushstroke—a person who is informed at regular intervals that he is ripe for termination in the university curriculum; a person who is informed that, in fact, the stuff being produced in the business schools and law schools is serious, and that the academic who knows about Agnes Martin’s brushstroke should be grateful he gets a paycheck at all. And, just to be clear: Agnes Martin’s brushstroke is important and the scholar who writes about it is doing something valuable. We’re just doing a rotten job of proving it.

JS: Logically, the right move here would not be to make scholarship more “relevant” or more friendly to law and business—the best approach would be to make it …

ASD [cuts in]: Stranger. Stop trying to justify our worth and just emphasize that what we do has no worth and never will.

JS: You don’t convince people of the value of the forest by turning it into a Denny’s parking lot. You don’t convince people of the value of the arts and humanities by making them [scare quotes] “more relevant, more accessible.” People go out of their way to go to the forest because it’s alien to them, not functional, not familiar, not useful in any way. [pause] The sad truth: People don’t care about the guy who knows about Agnes Martin’s brushstroke …

ASD: … because they presume that he has no balls (figuratively speaking). Who cares what he thinks?

JS: Right. So those people who buy (or, let’s face it, download for free) this contemporary art volume are going to be reading this as a transcript, this stuff on these pages [waves script], and thinking: Hey, out of bounds, this is totally self-indulgent, uh, you know, crap. Not informative at all. Just …

ASD [nods head vigorously, cuts in]: Yeah, it’s, I mean, a totally valid criticism. I just want to point out, that up to now, academics have secretly hoped that they were more talented than the business, marketing, communications, or legal people—but they were always afraid to act on that feeling.

JS: Rappers succeed by pointing to their own success.

ASD: And academics would too. It’s a circular model of production. You know, a businessperson gets to drive a Mercedes and stay at the Ritz-Carlton, but he has to be on guard against competitors. The market has cycles.
JS: Such are the vagaries of capitalism.

ASD: Every tenured professor in the United States should say loud and proud (and preferably in rhyming form): I am obligated to work maybe four hours a day for maybe three days a week and I get four months of vacation. Arts and humanities professors should brag about doing whatever they want and not working.

JS [somewhat irritated]: Isn’t that exactly the wrong approach? I mean you’re drawing attention to what everyone already hates about academics … non-tenured people will get fired or have their workloads increased. It sounds, well, stupid.

ASD: You just have to abandon the conception of the arts and humanities as an underperforming branch office in the corporate culture and view them for what they really are: an easy lifestyle that millions of young people would envy if they only knew how it worked. Rich kids know that academia is a pretty good deal for the talkative, lazy and dreamy, middle-class kids generally don’t. That’s why the arts and humanities have no problem existing at elite schools, but are collapsing for the middle class everywhere. But if middle-class kids got the message …

JS [cuts in]: You get to do whatever you want within reason, have no boss, can’t get fired without a raft of lawsuits, and are surrounded by smart, attractive young people …

ASD [cuts in]: And on top of that, my guess is that field would be a pretty popular university major.

JS: If rappers whined about cruising around in Honda Accords and working afternoons at Taco Bell, while complaining that their chances of getting rich were pretty slim, they would probably move fewer units. Right now, people look at the arts and humanities and they see these frightened, cowering people begging administrators and legislators to have pity on them.

ASD: Therefore we—the academics—are moving fewer units. Look, I can go to just about any city in the United States and convince that city to build a $150 million art museum. Why? Because people seem to think art museums are important, even though they have no idea why. Cities around the country build modern and contemporary art spaces even though most people have no idea what modern and contemporary art are. Why? Because they are acting unconsciously on the repressed awareness that the art in
those museums expresses something wild, free, crazy and self-involved that they don't experience directly in their daily lives. Just like those art museums, universities should be filled with discursive provocation and glamorous uselessness in the service of absolutely nothing. The future of the arts and humanities is the arts and humanities.

JS: I don't know … it seems like corporate culture today trades on the myth of “wild, free, crazy and self-involved” lives. It's the dominant aesthetic of capital.

ASD [cuts in]: Yes, but in museums people glimpse something, or at least THINK they glimpse something “wild, free, crazy and self-involved” that is not entirely reducible to consumerist myth-making. They perceive this stuff in museums as useless and inscrutable, not intoxicating or empowering. It’s like a product that you can't imagine how to use. Anything can be in a museum for any reason, [pause] or that's how it seems, despite forty years of Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke. There's no obvious motive, [pause] no easily trackable motives. The same way that we don't expect teachers to be selling us something in the classroom. We expect museums and teachers to be, you know, in some other psychic space.

JS: Then maybe the figure of the scholar promises something other than more consumerism?

ASD: So far, not really. Art writing today is like art around 1900. We are living in the Age of the Scholar-Bouguereau, of Salon scholarship. Academia is still tied to a completely obsolete model of production and consumption, a one-size-fits-all situation of timeless standards and shared cultural assumptions about value, quality, and pedagogical propriety.

JS: So now it's time to drive illusionistic space out of scholarly activity?

ASD: That's one way to put it. It's a matter of making things more difficult, not easier. For example, right now—you have to admit there's a paradox working here, because what you are looking at in front of you, in the book or on the screen, I mean, if you are reading the book and not here at this moment in the gallery, then those book pages or scans or computer screen images are definitely not art. They are non-art near art.

JS: Obviously. It's a contribution on contemporary art in a book on contemporary art.

ASD: But that contribution, you'd have to admit, is also crucially not not art.
JS [slowly]: ... Okay, right. It’s too involved with art-like stuff to be obviously not art ... like, this all feels as if it might be art, but, all the same, it is not art. So the bleed, then, to me, maybe, is the space in which not not art lives.

ASD [with growing enthusiasm]: I think so, yes. So this bleed, this zone of not not art, is something like looking at art’s entrails. Like a mystical, pagan thing—outwardly arbitrary, yet still somehow convincing. Like “This lamb’s heart looks like it has bad news for me.” Am I going to ignore that lamb’s heart? No. But do I really comprehend its message? Also no. And you know the inevitable punchline here: [pause] The most compelling art today probably makes you feel like it’s not not art.

JS [smiling]: That has to be right.

ASD: But let’s get back to the main thing: What about your ongoing art projects?

JS: Well, in Pretoria, down in South Africa, I just built a 73,000 gallon, uh... waterfall ... that circulates water gathered from all the lakes and rivers in South Dakota with Native American names. We worked for three years with a whole cadre of great people, all local tribes, up there in South Dakota to collect it. It's called water-fall, with a dash between water and fall.

ASD: Nice title.

JS: So the water. Well, we pumped it all into a tanker docked in Duluth that had been registered to the North Korean government—we sent out a call to former North Korean nationals—mostly living in South Korea—who had some experience with the merchant marine—and then we had a documentary film crew that had worked with Allan Sekula interview all of them about their experiences back in North Korea and on the sea, you know, about their lives on the water and under totalitarianism. So, that's how we got the water to South Africa from South Dakota. With a bunch of South Korean–North Korean sailors.

ASD: But there's more?

JS [nervously, but smiling]: Yes, there’s more. We built a combination solar/hydroelectric power plant and a warehouse at the top of the waterfall. The warehouse has 32 projection rooms that show the documentary films of the sailors, all shot with old Bell & Howell 8 mm cameras. You can watch the interviews anytime, night or day, translated into 157 languages and dialects. And then over the warehouse and the waterfall, there's a huge,
really massive neon sign, made by skilled artisans in Volgograd, in Russia. It used to be Stalingrad, but now it’s Volgograd—in, um, uh, an old tank factory we had three whole workshops building this neon sign for two years. It’s 60 meters tall and 300 meters wide and it flashes continuously—I mean it is bright for a minute, then it goes dark for a minute. Then bright again for a minute. So 12 hours a day bright/12 hours a day dark. At night, you can see it 15 miles away.

ASD: 365 days a year?

JS: Yes, absolutely. And the neon is blue. The color is called *Profound Ocean Blue*.

ASD [*under breath*]: *Profound Ocean Blue*.

JS: Yes, and you know what phrase the neon flashes above that waterfall in Pretoria, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

ASD: What does it say?

JS: It says [*raises his hands above his head and his left hand moves to punctuate each word*]: HUMANITY WILL TRIUMPH NO MATTER WHAT THE CAPITALISTS DO BECAUSE HUMAN NATURE IS A LOT BETTER THAN THEY THINK IT IS. [*lowers right hand, keeps left hand aloft, forming a balled fist which he shakes slightly*] And there’s an extra bold period at the end of the phrase. The period is in a different color. It’s called *Sundrenched Saffron*. [*lowers left arm*]

*Actors hold their final poses a long second, then exit the stage.*
The great challenge for twenty-first-century art history is how to come to terms with previously underrepresented texts, scholars, artistic traditions, and artworks. Motivated, as Arjun Appadurai would argue, by rampant forces of globalization, it has become fashionable within Euro-American art history of the last ten years to speak of a global art history. I am concerned with two immediate problems that the global turn raises: The first regards strategies of normalizing difference; the second involves the prospects of art history as a parochial discipline with aspirations for global relevance. Moreover, my anxiety about the motivation for and goals of a global art history stems from what Shelly Errington calls the “intertwined history” of art history, European national consciousness, and colonialism.¹ To what extent might a global art history represent the triumph of the darker side of globalization, the homogenization of world culture?

My experience of teaching an art history survey in an American university informs my anxiety about the nefarious potential of a global art history, especially as it pertains to contemporary art. Before I taught this course, which normally begins with prehistoric art and ends with the present, my colleagues—all from Euro-American art history backgrounds—skipped the few chapters of Marilyn Stokstad’s book that dealt with non-Western artistic traditions, maintaining instead the normative Egypt–Greece–Rome–Paris–New York genealogy. I agreed to teach this course with the understanding that I would include African art; but I also added the sections of Stokstad dealing with pre-Columbian art, Asian, Islamic and African Art, as well as a few supplementary texts. Initial enthusiasm quickly dissipated because, as some colleagues pointed out, students were missing key materials on northern Renaissance, Dutch, and Rococo periods as a result of these non-Western introductions. My experiment, in other words, had disrupted the normative narrative, and had to be shelved.

Despite the professed desire for a more inclusive survey, an art history long-premised on the idea of an extant family tree can expand on the condition that new members justify their inclusion without disrupting the genealogical narrative. This obsolete model of art history still maintains
conditions utterly insensitive to the realities of our historical pasts and the present day.² As Basil Davidson suggests, in his review of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*, the purification of Europe's culturally complicated history coincided with the onset of modern European nationalism and imperialism from the eighteenth century onwards.³ This returns us to the problem of art history's originary links to national myths and imperial ideologies, and the urgent need of rethinking its deeply embedded disciplinary assumptions.

The task of recent art history is not just to develop an inclusive history of art, but also to take stock of the methodological and historiographical challenges African art, for example, brings to the discipline as it grapples with the realities of contemporary art (especially of the last thirty years). In teasing out some of these difficulties it will become clear that I suspect that, whatever form this global art history takes, its practitioners might see in this art history an effective replacement for the bewildering multiplicity of practices, each informed by peculiar historical, intellectual, and political conditions of our contemporary world. I suggest that Africanist art history—with all of its peculiarities—offers useful ideas for reframing the work of art history in the present.

To be sure, Africanist art history poses numerous challenges. Western art-historical accounts narrate the succession of artistic events through time, and the recuperation of texts illuminating this history constitute art-historical research—but not for most Africanist art history. With the exception of parts of Northern Africa and Ethiopia, where writing in Arabic and Amharic respectively were established before the arrival of Portuguese explorers in the fifteenth century, the cultures of the rest of the continent developed without systematic writing as we know it.⁴ Genealogies and historical events were mostly transmitted instead through oral traditions, and although there are rare instances where such oral histories maintain remarkable fidelity centuries back in time they are often limited to accounts of distinguished kings and lineage ancestors. Even among the Yoruba, who have ritual poems called *oriki*, some of which mention the work of dead artists, such information is fragmentary, mytho-poetic, and resistant to biographical interpretation. The result is the absence of a narrative historical memory of African visual cultures.

African art history's apparent resistance to chronological narration stems from the very nature of the art's forms. The majority of African art and design in museum collections date no earlier than the mid-nineteenth century largely because they were rendered in wood, textiles, and other organic materials ill-suited for survival in the humid tropics. But also only
very rarely were objects kept and valued for their age by their owners; in fact, the quest for iconographic novelty and stylistic innovation, or the need to retain ritual efficacy, often meant that aging sculptures were replaced by new ones. It also reflects changes in the economic status of the owners or the impact of newer aesthetic ideals. The seeming lack of respect for old works of art is tied to cosmological systems characterized by a view of life and time as a cyclical continuum of birth, death, and rebirth. Thus the uniqueness of the arts of nonliterate African societies as subjects for art-historical inquiry is all too obvious.5

While this scenario calls for and has provided occasional opportunity for fresh approaches, it often leads to what the archaeologist Peter Garlake described as “the frustrations of African archaeology and art history.”6 Except in the few cases, such as Benin, where some written records exist in European archives of centuries-old interaction of value to art historians, Africanist research depends on ethnographic methods, rather than archival research—except if one thinks of human beings as living archives (as the Malian writer and ethnographer Hampâté Bâ asserted with his much-cited claim at a UNESCO 1960 conference that the death of an old man in Africa is equivalent to the burning of a library).7

Indeed, the arrival of African-born scholars in Western universities has highlighted the necessity for the introduction of native discourse into African art-historical scholarship to counter obfuscation of indigenous ideas when Western terms are used to describe them. And, it was not until the work of these scholars thoroughly versed in languages and cultural practices of their native societies that scholarship began to mine the rich resources lodged in oral traditions.8

The forms and patterns of art-historical research in African universities reveal further the considerable differences in what constitutes art history within and outside the continent. European and non-African courses or materials are absent from curricula in Ghana and Nigeria; an art history student might complete his/her education through the doctoral level with little knowledge of Western and Asian art. At the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, home to the oldest art history program in Nigeria, at the graduate level, there are course topics on seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Western art; twentieth-century Western art; African American art of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and African American art of the twentieth century. There are also topics in Japanese, Chinese, Oriental art, and such, but these are more or less merely cosmetic, since all of the program’s instructors have always been strictly Africanists. So, to Nigerian
art history students names like Wölfflin, Riegel, Michael Fried, T. J. Clark, Gombrich—the staples of the American historiography class—are likely to be read second-hand, without much significance placed on the specific intellectual contexts of their work, if they are known at all. And, in the case of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi in Ghana, another important center of humanistic studies in West Africa, its MA/PhD in art is strictly focused on “African Art and Culture.”

This raises the question of how to explain the apparent absence of Western (or any other non-African) art-historical studies in the programs at Nsukka and Kumasi? Practically, why teach art the students will most likely never see in the original? If art history has depended on the close encounter between the scholar/observer and the artwork, it makes little sense to pretend to engage with the works of European artists lodged in collections guarded by impossible visa regimes. Of course, there have been rare occasions when some minor works by European modernists, such as Picasso and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, were respectively presented in small exhibitions in Senegal and Nigeria during the 1960s. But for the most part, Euro-American art comes to Africa only in reproduction. Although libraries on the continent could import art books and texts in the early post-independence period, the imposition of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) by the IMF and World Bank in the early 1980s effectively decimated university resources, including the capacity of libraries to maintain foreign journal subscriptions, and compromised the ability of scholars to participate in overseas conferences and workshops. Starved of foreign exchange many African governments insisted on locally manufactured products since imports were either prohibited or totally impossible to obtain. For their part scholars (and artists) were forced to turn further inwards. This constriction of the little pre-SAP access to Euro-American scholarship resulted in virtually autonomous development of scholarship.

But there are ideological factors, too, related to Anglophone African political decolonization movements. Artists and intellectuals working within the realm of culture frequently re-engaged and identified with indigenous African cultures threatened by the imposition of Western-style education and Christian missionary doctrines by colonial regimes. More broadly, early nationalist movements often sought to resist the imposition of European cultural ethos on the colonial peoples. This is evident in the support of polygamy and native dress by the late nineteenth- and early
twentieth-century Lagos nationalist elites bent on differentiating their vision of an African modernity from that promoted by the colonial administration and the church. Indeed this counter-Western ideological practice was important to the rhetoric of pan-Africanism and black affirmative movements in Africa; it would later inspire the complex anti-Europeanism of such postcolonial dictators as Mobutu Sese-Seko of Zaire/Congo, who promulgated a national *authenticité* program emblematized by the state-sanctioned changes of both given names and surnames, from European to Congolese to reflect ancestral lineages, for all citizens in the 1970s. While this represents one of the more extreme manifestations of the politics of anti-Westernism, it underscores the idea that the absence of serious Western art studies in the curricula of Ghanaian and Nigerian universities was not always determined by the availability of material resources. Rather the focus on national and continental art histories is justified by the need to write the self into, and to make up for, lost history. It moreover reminds us of the complex ways ideology and national imaginaries determine the direction of scholarship.

To be sure, the attainment of political independence in Anglophone West Africa beginning in the 1950s coincided with the establishment of new universities and the autonomy of colleges formerly affiliated with British universities. This commonly was followed by the replacement of European faculty with African scholars and, more crucially, the development, in the spirit of pan-Africanism, of Africa-focused curricula with intensive research on indigenous artistic forms, practices, and cultural traditions. At the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, for instance, virtually all research-based undergraduate honors theses as well as graduate dissertations written in the school’s art/art history program are based on primary research in the traditional and contemporary arts of southern Nigeria. At some level the narrow focus on African or even, for the most part, national arts in these post-independence art history programs fulfill the need to generate substantial scholarship where none existed, especially in the modern and contemporary field.

Like so-called traditional African art, contemporary African art—which in the past decade or so has emerged as a distinct sub-discipline in Africanist scholarship—presents significant challenges to any conversation about possibilities of globalized art history today.11 It seems to me that the crisis variously imagined as the “end” of art or art history by scholars as diverse as Arthur Danto and Hans Belting, might not only be symptomatic of a wider
anxiety about the decline of Euro-American political hegemony as Noël Carroll has suggested. Rather it is the consequence of the disorientation caused by the rupturing—by art, artists, and artistic knowledge from outside of the West—of centuries-old art history practice built around a unitary history of Western art as the history of art. That is to say, what has more or less ended with contemporary art since 1989 and inaugurated by the exhibition Magiciens de la Terre at the Centre Georges Pompidou, are insular traditions of Western art. And this is where, faced with the heterogeneity of contemporary art, continuing attempts to make sense of the chaos simply by homogenizing the troubling difference, or forcing it into narrative order based on the evolution of form over time, are doomed to fail.

What is more, there is the ever-present danger of reducing the work of African artists—and artists from the so-called “Third World”—to the mimicry of Euro-American models, when close attention to the complex intersections of local and international formal and conceptual sources in global twentieth-century art can, as the art historian Ikem Okoye has argued, suggest new ways of thinking about the history of art as such. Allied to this attitude is the tendency to assume that the quality of art history outside of the West must be measured by the extent to which it approximates the structure of and trends in Euro-American scholarship. I am reminded of James Elkins’ suggestion that the absence of Baxandall and other canonical Western art historians in South African art history curricula represents a case of collective amnesia, as if to say the intellectual investments of South African art historians must align with those of their American counterparts. But also, while it seems logical to bemoan the apparent lack of mastery of the texts of the Western art historical canon—and thus the insufficiency of African or Asian scholars as respectable players in the global field—the tendency by Western scholars to ignore extant work of their African and Asian counterparts is indicative of the one-sidedness of globalist art history transaction.

To take but one example: American art historian Rosalind Krauss published a brilliant essay on the work of South African artist William Kentridge in 2000, thus bringing an African artist, arguably for the first time, into the rarefied intellectual orbit of October—and into the (Western) art history mainstream. Yet a cursory inspection of her references revealed a surprising absence of any text by the African art historians and critics who had written already quite extensively and compellingly on the artist’s work. Krauss’s essay gives the impression that critical discourse on Kentridge only started in the late 1990s, and in the West. This highlights the revelation of what could be the underlying motivation for the now desirable consolidation of the islands
that constitute the world of art history: the quest for new materials and digestible subjects for Euro-American art history. The crucial question is whether the new-found curiosity for art from outside of Euro-America is matched by interest in scholarship generated by this same art in their inaugural sites, for without the latter there cannot be a truly mutual exchange and transaction of ideas that ought to form the basis of a global art history.

Granted, the quality of art-historical scholarship, say, in Nigeria, has suffered from the general malaise in that country’s educational system in the wake of economic decline and brain drain precipitated by the Structural Adjustment Programs of the 1980s. Yet I am not convinced that it is enough to wield the hammer of “quality”—which for long had been used to keep out women, black, and minority artists and scholars from entering the castle of white, male, Euro-American art history—in order to justify the lack of meaningful, critical engagement with scholarship produced or circulating outside the Western academic network.

My concern is how art history as a field today can effectively accommodate the multiplicity of narratives, methods, and ideological positions that inform the different manifestations of the discipline in many parts of the world and resist the impulse to homogenize not just the methods, but also the subjects of art-historical inquiry. The overhaul of the idea of contemporary art inaugurated by Jean-Hubert Martin’s controversial *Magiciens de la Terre* show, and the subsequent restructuring of the geographies of contemporary art by third-generation (3G) international biennials (Havana, Dakar, Johannesburg, Istanbul, Gwangju for instance) signaled the end of (art) history, and the impossibility of genealogical narratives that supposedly provided the most compelling accounts of art across time and cultures. For whereas Martin successfully challenged the Eurocentrism of twentieth-century modern/contemporary art by dispensing with the hierarchical system of evaluating art from different parts of the world, the 3G biennials dispelled the idea that the most ambitious contemporary could only be seen in New York, Paris, and London, or at Venice and Documenta. The biennials not only shook up the center/periphery paradigm; they dramatically expanded the field of contemporary art, made us aware of its global dimensions, and of the diverse cultural, political, and socioeconomic histories from which it is constituted.

In the given scenario, it becomes clear that the methodologies I have ascribed to African art studies can suggest ways of dealing with global contemporary art without recourse to the unworkable regime of genealogical narration. Where Africanist scholars, forced by the nature of their subject
and material, developed ingenuous, complex methodologies, but without
the anxieties of establishing genealogies of art forms, historians of contem-
porary art must also overcome apprehensions of constructing a unitary his-
tory of contemporary art, and imagine new ways of comprehending its
multitudinous nature.

The globalization of contemporary art and art history ought not simply
conduce to a universal approach to the study of art; rather it must draw
primarily—though not necessarily exclusively—from local intellectual tra-
ditions, and speak to each other from those locations. Moreover, the
problem of imposing patently Western perspectives on art from other
world cultures is no longer intellectually defensible, especially when the-
ories developed “elsewhere”—such as postcolonial theory—are never
tested for their universal applicability by the same Western advocates of a
global diffusion.16

The recognition of the multitudinous nature of art, cultures, and art
histories—as well as the discrepant intellectual traditions subsisting in sites
of knowledge production across the globe—calls for the re-mapping of the
landscape of world art and disciplinary art history’s approach to it. Haunted
as it is by the specter of its own self-induced obsolescence, the revitalization
of art history will require recovery of the essence of multiculturalism: the
recognition of varieties of cultural (and artistic) experiences and histories
without the hierarchical assumptions of post-Enlightenment european
knowledge systems. A multiculturalist approach would strengthen rather
than flatten out difference; it would also serve as a bulwark against neo-
imperial tendencies of globalization.

Methodologically, this process calls for the development of comparative
art history. Despite the criticisms that have been leveled against the disci-
pline of comparative literature, its recognition of the validity of multiple
literatures and literary traditions that can be studied relationally provides a
model for contemporary art history, criticism, and theory. Unlike positivist
art history, comparative art history demands familiarity with multiple
contexts, histories, and geographies of art, as well as the willingness to step
outside of the confines of an increasingly untenable and parochial Euro-
American canon. A comparative art history will equally mean replacing
standard units of art-historical analyses tied to the enduring notion of fixed
borders, nationalities, and regions, with ones that emphasize contact zones
and the polycentricity of contemporary artistic production and traffic, and
the experience of history. The ultimate shape this project might take must
be different from old regime art history.
Notes

4. There are countless syllabaries, sign systems and scripts, including nsibidi of the Efik and adinkra signs of the Akan, as well as the Vai and Njoya scripts of the Mande and Bamun peoples respectively.
9. To be sure, the problem of circulation of publications has been significantly ameliorated by online resources in the past few years.
10. At the University of Khartoum, its archaeology program is focused on Sudanese and Middle Eastern archaeological history. On the other hand, at the American University in Cairo, the three-year art history survey is strictly modeled after the standard (Western) art history survey one finds in Euro-American universities. The transformation in the early 1960s of the Ecole des Beaux Arts, Casablanca curriculum from its earlier focus on Western art traditions to studies of Arabic, Islamic, and Berber arts once Farid Belkahia and his colleagues took over leadership of the school is part of this postcolonial ideological imperative operative, I believe, in Ghana and Nigeria.
11. To clarify, “Contemporary African art,” as used here refers to work discussed and circulated in the same spaces one might encounter international contemporary art.
I am thinking here of the various writings of the South African art historian Michael Godby and Okwui Enwezor on the work of William Kentridge during the 1990s.

One needs only look at the contents of *October* and *Third Text*, for instance, to appreciate the discursive distances separating scholarships in contemporary art produced for the Euro-American and the Third World.
Art historians are always apologizing. Phrases like “I’m sorry you can’t see it in this slide, but …” and “if you were there, you’d see that …” are no less a feature of art history lectures in the age of digital archives, QuickTime, and PowerPoint than they were in the days of magenta-hued 35 mm. In fact, when it comes to relatively recent art, we probably voice more and more complicated versions of these disclaimers now. Older media like painting and drawing at least share their two-dimensionality—and sculpture its stasis—with the photographic media of art-historical presentation. The characteristic formats of contemporary art, like installation, video, or performance, exceed it by design. Temporally closer than other art historians to the art we study, contemporary art historians wind up doubly contrite about distance.

Of course, the more space between art and academia the better, many people would say. A gallery website that mentions the interest in history of one of its artists quickly adds that “her art avoids any kind of academic approach.”1 When a Brecht-quoting video artist won a major prize recently, an art critic worried that “artistic values may be becoming so submerged in academic values that it’s difficult for many people to make out the difference.”2 He didn’t explain what he thought that difference was—he didn’t need to. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “academic” referred to art sanctioned by the national academies, adhering to hierarchies of genre and strictures of style that modernists aimed to disrupt. But “academic” continues to be a slur. Now, as then, the adjective connotes sterility, predictability, and a general lack of sexiness. The academy is where art goes to die.

If so, we have a problem, because art and academia do seem closer all the time. Artists pursue PhDs in art-making, and art historians dissertate on living artists. But most obviously, academia and art draw closer as a new place is made for contemporary art in departments of art history. In the last decade universities have rapidly added courses, accepted graduate theses, and created faculty lines in “contemporary” as opposed and in addition to “modern” or “twentieth-century” art. In fact, there are consistently more job openings each year in contemporary than any other art-historical subfield.3
Within the academy, some worry that committing resources to contemporary art represents a disregard for historical precedent and a diminishing commitment to the deeper past. Outside academic walls the concern is exactly the opposite: that contemporary art will become more historical. Veteran critic Donald Kuspit envisions an adversarial relationship in which art history tries to control the “heterogeneous and fertile” contemporary, reducing art “to sterile homogeneity.” Under historical care art “withers on the contemporary vine.” A multiplicity of critical interpretations keeps recent art “in contemporary play,” but an historical approach would have it “reified into some historical milestone on the road of a predetermined narrative of artistic progress.” Such ossification, Kuspit continues, is “no doubt academically satisfying, but it is far from the complex reality.”

Fertility versus sterility, predetermination versus complexity, unanimity versus plurality, reification versus play, and, finally, academia versus reality itself: Kuspit’s resistance to historical approaches is more undisguised than most, but it captures aspects of a wider discomfort with the art historicization of contemporary art. This is the case even among art historians. Though in many ways quite different from apologizing for a faded slide, this view of art history’s dysfunctional relation to recently produced art is a form of art-historical contrition, stemming from the same, seemingly commonsensical assumption: Criticism is done in the presence of art, art-historical presentation in its absence. Art criticism is contemporaneous with the objects it keeps in play; art history is always after them. Art history, though, need not be conceived as adjunct to and inherently failing the object of its study; experiencing art and historicizing it need not be understood as opposing operations. What is needed is a shift in attitude about the art historicization of contemporary art, which requires rethinking the assumption that contemporary art is in and of the last five minutes, on the one hand, and on the other entertaining the possibility that, like galleries or biennials, art history’s journals, conferences, and classrooms are primary avenues for art’s dissemination.

The Contemporary is not the Present

Sharon Hayes recites transcripts of the kidnapped Patty Hearst’s 1974 phone calls. Mark Tribe restages speeches by Cesar Chavez and Angela Davis. Jeremy Deller does a full-scale reenactment, on the original site, of the violent culmination of a 1984 labor strike. Matthew Buckingham makes
thousand-year time capsules and recovers a forgotten inventor of cinema. Marcelo Brodsky finds all the classmates from his 1967 school picture who were not “disappeared” during Argentina’s dictatorship. Amie Siegel reshoots, in post-unification Berlin, cold-war era films set in the GDR side of the city. Michael Blum creates a historical museum in tribute to a Turkish feminist who may or may not have been the lover of Mustafa Kemal. Shimon Attie projects historical photographs of Jewish neighborhoods on their original sites in Berlin and Rome. Zoe Leonard and Cheryl Dunye meticulously create the archival record of a forgotten black lesbian movie star. Carola Dertnig constructs a character to narrate Viennese actionism from the women’s perspective. The Atlas Group (Walid Raad) displays the archives of an invented historian of the Lebanese civil wars. These projects represent a wide range of artistic approaches, take very different forms, and stem from a variety of art-historical legacies. What they share is the understanding that a principal task for contemporary art is to recover and rethink connections to the past. Each work is deeply invested in particular histories; each considers historical research to be an artistic tool; and each sees historical understanding as something complex, nonlinear, open-ended, and of paramount importance in the present.

Not all contemporary art is “about” pastness, of course. But the argument can be made—and has been, in one of the most ambitious attempts to theorize and historicize this field—that the defining feature of contemporary art is its foregrounding of an “awareness of the coexistence of different ways of being in time.” For Terry Smith in What is Contemporary Art?, this is what contemporeneity means—the question of “what it is to be with time,” in a postcolonial condition, under globalized capitalism, and through networked information technologies. Though his argument is oddly totalizing, it’s helpful to have his view of “immersion in multiple temporalities” as the very essence of contemporary art. Though one assumption in the way of an unapologetic vision of the relation between art history and contemporary art is the seemingly reasonable idea that contemporary art is art “of the present,” it would seem that an uncomplicated sense of the present tense is the one thing not available in contemporary art. Other fields of art history should get their due in resources and attention, of course, but not because historical thinking as such is threatened as more students congregate at the near end of art history’s timeline. To teach, write, or talk about contemporary art is to pressure presentism.

Art forms that are site-specific or time-limited, like installation or performance, have been the norm in art since at least the 1970s, while
maintaining an air of rebellion relative to traditional media of visual art. But these temporary, localized forms are structurally invited by the reigning paradigm now, which is the temporary exhibition. This is in part a function of a changing museum culture. Collections are now rearranged to make new thematic or historical connections (as MOMA famously did when it was renovated in 2002–4). Collections are increasingly conceived as fungible, with challenges made to old, patrimony-based rules mandating that artworks could not be decommissioned to cover operating costs. Museums’ newer civic functions—regional branding, tourism, and trade—are arguably best served not by guarding a collection of masterpieces, but by staging artistic events, particularly those specially oriented to the site of display.

Most dramatically, however, the tendency toward the temporary has been powered by the proliferation of biennials and art fairs around the world since the 1990s. It’s easy enough to see how this has affected art reception. “I have been fortunate enough to be able to experience contemporary art as it first appeared to its publics in many parts of the world, on most continents, and do so, in recent years especially, at a constant rate.” So Smith gives his credentials, at the beginning of What is Contemporary Art?. He is describing his research process, and establishing his expertise for readers about to follow him through a couple of hundred pages of argumentation. That is to say, as a capsule description of the way an expert looks at art, his statement describes a normative form of viewership today. The transnational mobility of arts professionals—artists, curators, critics, and now, art historians—escalated sharply in the 1990s, of course, as it did in fields like finance or technology. This travel is a kind of gilded-mirror-image of labor migration and emigration in the same period, and they are not unrelated: The boom in temporary, recurring, international art exhibitions is part and parcel of economic and cultural globalization. The proliferation of these exhibitions then contributes to an event-culture mentality in the artistic sphere. And when the temporary exhibition becomes the basic form of art experience, expertise becomes, in part, a matter of mobility.

It is a question of being in the right places; and it is also a question of being there at the right times. Or rather, the right time: Notice the value Smith places on experiencing contemporary art as it first appeared to its publics. Elsewhere he stresses the need to “convey the sense of this art as it happened, to evoke the sites and spaces of its occurrence, the aura of its arrival, the qualities of its incipience, its present tension.” Smith’s book argues for multiple, discordant, nonlinear temporalities and sees being together in time as the problem on which contemporary art turns. Yet
here, in a little aside about his own experience, artworks unproblematically occur. They have a singular moment of origin, and this is the point of their maximal meaning and value. If you encounter a work as it appears not first, but second, you are presumably not quite as fortunate—or expert—a viewer. Smith isn’t responsible for this condition, but his words reveal an implicit class structure in contemporary art spectatorship. If you do not have the resources for constant travel, or if you have commitments that don’t allow it, you cannot be a first-class citizen of the global art world.

You don’t see contemporary art, you catch it. As art zips by, the practicalities of the global economy meet an ingrained philosophical privileging of the original, the primary, and the immediate. Walter Benjamin described the auratic value possessed by the singular art object before reproducible media sent its images proliferating around the world. This condition seems paradoxically reinvented when the paradigm of the art object gives way to the art event. This is not to biennial-bash: There are many reasons to preserve an optimistic view of the potential of the large-scale, temporary, international exhibitions, not least because they can serve historical memory. Sociologist Maurice Roche describes perennial sports mega-events like the World Cup as “resources for sustaining personal time structure in contemporary conditions that threaten this,” and something similar could be said art historically. For example, referring to the 1993 Whitney Biennial situates us in relationship to the moment at which debate about critical race politics in art came to a head. But, the scale, speed, and sheer preponderance of biennials and the like, the semi-exclusivity and glamour of their openings, and their utility in identifying the next new thing for the market combine to make them agents of a problematic acceleration in art reception—one that I would argue is related to, but does not well serve, the important work art is doing. If the phrase “contemporary art” implies presentism, it is not the fault of the art but its system.

But can you separate art from its system of distribution? The last thing I would argue for is “the art itself,” a phrase that recurs like a conceptual tic in conversation about art and art history, expressing the undying assumption that art could somehow be pried out from among the crisscrossing vectors of situation, context, and reception. Rather, I am arguing that effective alternatives to the biennial model already exist; that through these alternate means of distribution art functions differently; and that academia is prime among them, precisely because it is a medium defined by delay, displacement, and mediation.
Art History is not the Past

If art is event, art historians are essentially performance scholars. Researchers who study dance, plays, and especially performance art have spent decades pinpointing the unique value of ephemeral art experience, but they also have articulated a series of critiques of the idea that the essence of performance is its liveness. These have been built in part on the writing of Jacques Derrida, in which Western philosophy's attraction to the idea of presence came to look like a kind of reaction-formation. Amelia Jones used his idea of the supplement—which not only augments, but reveals the lack in the thing supplemented—to argue that "seemingly acting as a 'supplement' to the 'actual' body of the artist in performance, the photograph of the body art event or performance could ... be said to expose the body itself as supplementary ..."12 Kathy O'Dell reminded us that there is a phenomenological experience of the document; that looking at an image is as much a present-tense experience—and as much an experience of absence—as encountering a performing body.13 Philip Auslander made the more historically direct argument that it is only when recordings, broadcasting, and mass media come into play that a special value is put on performances happening "live."14 In this kind of thinking, liveness and embodiment are functions of—or at least inextricable from—mediation and representation.

In other words, performance studies taught us to be careful about the assumption that meaning resides primarily in the moment of the live performance. Since around 2004, when Marina Abramovic enacted new versions of historical performances at the Guggenheim Museum, there has been a renewed discussion about this as artists and museums have experimented with performance artworks of the past. Some diehards continue to find this a travesty; others see nothing wrong with the proliferation of supplements over the extended life of an artwork already invested in the supplemental. What the debate as a whole indicates, however, is that the dialectic of event and image, original and representation, presence and lack, present and past is what performance art now is.

Academic art history is to biennial culture as photography is to performance. Just as the critique of presence in performance studies brought out the complexity of the relation between a performance and its document—and the importance of that complexity in the structure of "the art itself"—so the role of contemporary art history in relation to art's production and dissemination must be reassessed.
Art history always misses the opening. It shows up at the biennial the day after it closes. By the time an art historian’s article is researched, written, peer-reviewed, and published by an academic press, anything simplistically “contemporary” about it is over. But because of this condition of delay, art history can challenge the ideal of contemporaneousness itself. It can tangle the unreeling timeline of trendiness, and this can give art a chance to do its work with viewers—even if they are viewers of a slide in a lecture hall, or of an essay in a course reader. In an era when art slips by, academia offers traction.

For a few centuries, art as it was being produced didn’t have its own art history, but something called criticism. Perhaps “contemporary art” needs art history instead precisely because of the rushing, expanding, global system it has become. Art history is characterized by delay, decontextualization, and mediation: seeming weaknesses that we might instead celebrate as correctives to a condition of art as event. This means, among other things, that the difference between contemporary art criticism and contemporary art history might turn out to be a question about conditions of production; a matter of resources and time. Along with a renewed appreciation for the stipends, salaries, and sabbaticals that at least make our relationship to market forces indirect, would come a valorization of the tools of academic art history: the darkened lecture hall or seminar room, the seated students, and the projected images of works of art. While I am arguing on the one hand that the belatedness of art history is of value for contemporary art, on the other I want to rethink the after-the-factness of the art-historical apparatus. Certainly, in the classroom works are scaleless, flattened, and pixilated. They are mediated for the students by technology and by the professor, and they are removed from the context of exhibition. And yet these works of art are being experienced. Students and professor are perceiving, feeling, thinking, talking, learning, and working with art in ways impossible under other conditions. This IS an exhibition context; one that situates its viewers as subjects in and of history.

The experience is in no way the same as the one in the gallery where the work “first” appeared. But it has some advantages, if you think of art as having, and want it to have, a cultural function. Art as a system has impact economically. Works of art should have different abilities: to enforce or alter
commonsense, to shape ways of seeing, expose unexamined beliefs, retune our senses, provide images and experiences through which to think the worlds we live in. There are certainly other ways to conceive of and defend art’s value, but personally I am interested in art exactly to the extent that it has this culture-shaping function. The system of art events diminishes the possibility for art to affect culture, through individuals and audiences, in this sense. While I am sure such work gets enacted in biennials and art fairs, I will say, unapologetically, that as things are currently configured it happens at least as powerfully in classrooms, libraries, lecture halls, panels, conferences, and journals. The art historian’s job in relation to contemporary art is not to tuck it away into Kuspit’s “predetermined narratives” but to give it a chance to do its indeterminate work. To say so isn’t to devalue the other kinds of art experience, but to reinvest in one that is misunderstood, both inside the academy and out.

If this is self-aggrandizing (a working title for this essay was “reasons to get up in the morning”), it is also a statement of responsibility. It should affect our choices about what we teach, and to whom; how we write, and for which audiences. An important objection to a re-valorization of academia in relation to contemporary art is the limited, elite audience art history reaches. It shouldn’t be forgotten, though, that art history does not belong only to ivy-covered bastions of privilege but happens at a whole range of institutions (at least until the next round of budget cuts). It involves people who are the first in their families to go to college, or who are working their way through, or who are getting into impossible debt, as well as the stereotypical, dabbling scions. (Besides, the fact that most of the people who experience art history are relatively privileged, or are becoming so in getting the education of which it is part, would be a strange reason not to take its culture-shaping role seriously.) Yet I accept the objection in the sense that my position makes it incumbent upon us to broaden access to higher education—an imperative now more urgent, and less feasible than ever. This raises a political question: In this period of budget slashing and standardization of education worldwide, a time of danger particularly for the humanities, including art history, whose side is “the art world” going to be on?

What I am advocating is simply an attitudinal shift in academic endeavor related to contemporary art, one that stresses the potential in art history’s relationship with the art world, rather than apologizing for its encroachment. This shift means that while continuing to take advantage of opportunities for students to see art “live,” we invest in the kind of
extended, situated, social, and dialogical art encounter academic spaces can cultivate. It means thinking more about how to model the experience of an artwork as an ongoing, conversational process, and less about how to dazzle with virtuosic interpretations and art-historical expertise. It means inviting artists and curators into class to launch conversations that a spin through a biennial doesn't allow; or doing what's possible to get audience questions more than a harried few minutes at the end of a conference panel. It means resisting the culture of being there “first,” and embracing the unfashionable just-past, for, far from rushing art into an art-historical grave, our job is to give it time to work. None of this is different from what art historians and teachers are already doing, all the time. It just means doing it from the conviction that under current art conditions such work is part of, and not an add-on to, the main event. Do I sound like a therapist, or cheerleader? Is this becoming a manifesto? No matter. No more apologies. Academia isn't contemporary art's funeral parlor. It is its current address.

Notes

2 Sebastian Smee, “Foster Prize Winner Looks at Film with a Critical Eye,” The Boston Globe (December 16, 2010). The artist is Amie Siegel, a colleague of mine at Harvard.
4 Donald Kuspit, “The Contemporary and the Historical,” Artnet (April 13, 2005), www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/kuspit/kuspit4-14-05.asp. From the Venice Biennale to the “trendy magazines,” Kuspit feels art institutions are trying too hard to predict what will be art-historically important, rather than representing as much of the vast spectrum of contemporary art as possible. It must be mentioned that the critic’s example of premature historicization is the fame, to him undeserved, of artist Ana Mendieta relative to her teacher and romantic partner Hans Breder—a charge so problematic that it raises the question of what political opinions the use of “academic” as an epithet might encode.
6 Ibid., p. 4.
Ibid., p. 198.

Recent cases have involved the Fisk University Stieglitz Collection and the National Academy Museum, for example. See Robin Pogrebin, “Museums and Lawmakers Mull Sales of Art,” *New York Times* (January 14, 2010).

Smith, op. cit., p. 3.

Smith, op. cit., p. 2.


This does not mean that all the ways it shapes and changes culture are for the good, nor that it is self-evident or predictable how this function is enacted, nor that what the artist intends the function to be is the function it winds up having, nor that this function is set once and forever at a certain historical moment. Note also, though this requires more argumentation, that what I am calling function is not the same as instrumentalization.
INDEX

Abhinavagupta: *Abhinava Bharati* 257
Abramović, Marina 271, 462
abstract art/capitalism 130
abstract motion (Penck) 127, 128
Abu Ghraib prison 289–90
academia
  and art 457–8
  art historians 457
  contemporary art 465
  corporate culture 443, 444
  criticism of universities 429–32
  experimental art 434–5
  Foucault 284
academic, as slur 457
Ace Gallery, New York 294
Acéphale 306
ACT UP 238
activism
  art 232, 255
  Chile 237
  cultural 235, 239, 240–1
  direct democracy 45
  diversified 242
  feminist 237, 251, 252n3
  knowledge production 205
  networked 241
power 242–3
transformation 234–6
visual 238
Adamson, Glenn 246
Adorno, T. W. 134, 267, 304, 305
  *Aesthetic Theory* 267–8
advanced art 56
aesthetics
  and culture 180–1
  democratized 347
digital media 149–50
economics 351–2
experience 108, 192, 193–4, 197, 269–70, 271–2
gap politics 2–3
judgment 331, 337
modernist 269, 272
participation 269, 273–4
philosophical 269
and politics 103, 186, 260, 293, 312
religion 298, 300–1
Afghan war rugs 249–50
Africa
  archaeological history 455n10
  art history 437, 448–50, 453–4
  masks 29

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Africa (cont’d)
  nationalist movements 450–1
  nation-states 18
  notation systems 448, 455n4
  Structural Adjustment
    Programs 450
  Western art exhibition 450
African American artists 102
Agamben, Giorgio 281
  aterritoriality 294
  bare life 266, 288–9, 295
  “Beyond Human Rights” 288, 297n20
  biopolitics 113, 282
  contemporaneity 25n1
  critiques 310n15
  extraterritoriality 292–3
  refugee 290
  sacred 305–6
  “What is a dispositif?” 389
agency 265–6, 277, 286
  artistic practices 216
  enactment 282
  four approaches 277–86
  human rights 295
  refugee 288
  shame 280, 281
age-value 30, 33, 34
Aitken, Doug 141
Alberro, Alexander 23, 26n21, 110
algorithmic film 346–7
Ali, Atteqa 299
allographic arts 274
Allora & Calzadilla 142
altermodernism 23, 40
Althusser, Louis 215
Alýs, Francis 24, 57, 229
The Rumor 124
amateurism 39, 206, 413–14
ambition, defined 397–8
Amer, Ghada: The Reign of Terror 249
American Civil War 247
Amor, Monica 37, 100
Anastas, Ayreen 368, 388–97
Anderson, Perry 45, 47
Andre, Carl 120
Annalee 156
anti-art 53, 55
anti-form artists 86–7
anti-globalization
  see also Sekula, Allan
Antilles, creolité 11
anti-war movements 247
Antoine, Jean-Philippe 6
apartheid, end of 8
Appadurai, Arjun 320–1n8, 447
appropriation 218–19
a.r. 73
archaeological history 455n10
architecture 40–1, 50, 51
archival work 33–4, 385, 459
Arendt, Hannah 338, 339, 340
  The Human Condition 259
Argentina 236, 240
Armaly, Fareed 109, 110
(re)Orient 115
Armory Show 380
art
  aurtic 111, 461
  as cultural capital 376
  defined 398
  as discipline 410
  as consequential 277, 278–9
  as investment 374
  near-art 439–40
  non-art 438–9, 445
  as open-ended conspiracy 281–2
  playfulness 258, 263
  post-mediality 150
  as propaganda 92n1
  research model 410–11
  social turn in 335, 363
  transformative 279–81
  see also artwork; autonomy of art;
      contemporary art
Index 469

Art & Technology Exhibition, Los Angeles County Museum of Art 145
Art Basel 13, 367, 371, 373–4
Art Basel Miami Beach 367, 371
Art Cologne 370
art criticism: see criticism
art dealers 372, 373–4
art education 406–7, 408, 413–14, 415–16
see also art schools
art fairs 171, 367–8, 369–72, 380–1, 383–4, 398
art historians
academia 457
and artists/curators 465
neoclassicism 29
networking 361–2
as performance scholars 462
South Africa 452
things past 35–6
art history
academic 462
Africa 437
categorization 179
challenges for 447
comparative 454
contemporaneity 463
global 447, 453
information technologies 149
normative narrative 447–8
practice 6, 34–5
revitalization 454
see also contemporary art history
Art in General 225, 227
art market 182, 367–8, 369–72, 376, 386, 388–9
Art Practical 351
art scholars 437, 439, 441–3, 444
Art School 416
art schools 408–9
academy 406–7
China 429, 430, 432–3
media divisions 432
peer-generated 411–12
qualifications 407–10, 457
as space to be artist 417–18
Art Since 1900 97
Artforum
advertisements 363
back copies 357
changing content 362, 363–4
contributors’ page 361
feature articles 365–6n9
Greenberg in 333
“Scene & Herd” 346, 363, 366n11
artists
activists 232–3
art historians 465
blue-chip 349, 372, 399–400
collaborating with engineers 137
and dealers 376
defined 398–9
diasporic 183
Indian 186, 190n16
local/international 370
north/south 178–9
as teachers 416
as witnesses 325
ARTnews 333
artwork 404
arresting time 255–6
artist/beholder 256–7
authorship and 88
exchange 259–60, 349
experience 269
as financial asset 375
humanity 257
liberating 256
materiality 270
political significance 262
quasi-subjectivity 274–5
sensing of 262
art-world
  business practices 393
  China 62–3
commercialization 370, 374–5
contemporary 22–5
functionality 364
global 171, 362–3, 370
Arup 142, 146
Asia Society 179
Asian artists 101
Asia-Pacific Triennial 180, 181, 188n8
assemblage 166, 167
Atelier van Lieshout: Scatopia 199
aterritoriality 291, 294
Athenian galleries 382
Atlas Group 459
Attie, Shimon 459
auction houses 369–72, 373, 374–5
Auerbach, Lisa Anne: Body Count Mittens 248
Augustine, Saint 27n30
Auslander, Philip 462
Austrian Airlines, sponsors 109
Auther, Elissa 246
autonomy of art
  autopoietic units 123
  engaged 64
  and institutions 8
  liberating 133
  Maria Eichhorn Public Limited Company 118
market forces 62–3
modernism 274–5
organization of work 124
Sekula 312
universality 267
Yang 102
avant-garde 72–3, 79, 82n5
Argentina 236
attacking religion 301
China 189n12

indigenous 178–9
Poland 76
and Romanticism 306

Bà, Hampâté 449
Backström, Fia 416
Bacon, Francis 391–2
Badiou, Alain 267, 273
Baghdad Biennial 195
Bahc Mo 101
Balteo, Alessandro 57
Banksy 39, 42, 43, 44, 46
bare life (Agamben) 266, 288–9, 295
Barrada, Yto 266, 290, 295, 296n2
A Life Full of Holes: The Strait Project 287–8, 289
Barrow, Mark 91
Barry, Robert 87
Bartana, Yael: Trembling Time 123
Barthes, Roland 88, 348
Basbaum, Ricardo: Would You Like to Participate in an Artistic Experience? 206
Baselitz, Georg 129, 130
Basquiat, Jean-Michel 43
Bataille, Georges 305, 306
Battle in Seattle 238, 311–14
Baudrillard, Jean 109
Bauhaus model 406, 422
beauty 336–7
Beauvoir, Simone de 246
Beck, Glenn 316, 317, 321n9
Beckman, Karen 252n3
Belting, Hans 451
Benedict XVI, Pope 301
Benin 449
Benjamin, Walter
  auristic value of art 461
capitalism 390–1, 393–4
class divide 132
and end of history 395
and Krauss 107
painting as dead  131
  radical art  39
  on storytellers  261
Bennett, Tony  225
Berlin 8, 9, 376, 423–5
Berlin Biennale 14, 172, 173
Bernadette Corporation 439
Bernal, Martin:  *Black Athena*  448
Bethlehem Steel  142
Beuys, Joseph  416
*Bewildered Youth* (Harlan) 111, 114
Bharata:  *Rasa Sutra*  257
biennials  7–8, 173, 399
  and art fairs  384
  challenges  175–6
  critiques of  172
  culture  192, 194, 195, 197–8
  curators  173–4, 175, 188n8
  diachronic/synchronic sequence 174
  elite  47
  event-structures 195
  as exhibition  175
  formats  172–3, 174
  funding  176
  increasing numbers  2, 5, 76, 169–70, 171
  market values  171
  participation 211
  as poor man’s museum  182
  site-specific  174–5
  in South and East  180–2, 188n7
  third generation  453
  uniqueness  177
biopolitics  113, 114, 281–2
Bishop, Claire  100, 217, 225, 346
Black Mountain College  422
Blackstone Bicycle Works  206
Blair, Tony  207
*bleed* concept  438–9, 440–1, 445
Blom, Ina  137
Blu  44
  Bluckner, Clark  352
  blue-chip artist, defined  349, 372, 399–400
  Blum, Michael  459
  board of directors, defined  399–400
  Bochner, Mel  333
  body  137, 149, 150, 153, 237, 289–90
  body art  193
  Bois, Yve-Alain  70, 86, 89
  Bolivia  240–1
  Bonami, Francesco  12–13
  Bonaventure hotel (Portman)  41
  Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo  238
  Bourdieu, Pierre  235, 336
  Bourgeois, Louise  246
  Bourriaud, Nicolas
    “Altermodernism”  23, 40
    art as social interstice  440
    form  223n15
    on Gonzalez-Torres  276n18
    participatory art  335
    relational aesthetics  52, 163, 224, 225
  *Relational Aesthetics*  82n4, 216–17
Bradford, Mark:  *Monster*  350
  branding  42, 43–4, 204
  Brazil  50, 51, 53–4, 56–7
  Bread and Puppet  247
  Brecht, Bertolt  356n10, 356n17
  Breitz, Candice  92
  Breton, André  76, 306
  Brett, Guy  178
  Brian, Megan  350
  Brodsky, Marcelo  459
  Brogan, Jack  144
  Broodthaers, Marcel  34, 35
  Brooklyn Skillshare  412
  Bruce High Quality Foundation  413
  Bruguera, Tania  416, 439
  Brukman factory  240
  Brussels World’s Fair  111
Bryan-Wilson, Julia 233
Brzękowski, Jan 73
Buchloh, Benjamin H. D. 10, 132
Buchmann, Sabeth 105
Buckingham, Matthew 458–9
Buergei, Roger 288
Bulloch, Angela: Macro World 154
Buren, Daniel 8, 78, 216
Burton, Johanna 202
Bush, George W. 314–16
Butt, Ambreen: I Must Utter What Comes to My Lips 328
Büttner, Georg 110
Cabelo 58
CADA (Coectivo Acciones de Arte) 237
Cage, John 200
Cai Guo-Qiang 101, 195, 198
Cultural Melting Bath 192
Campbell, Jim 129
Campus, Peter 80–1
Cantòr, Mircea 380
capital flows 7, 109
capitalism
abstract art 130
Benjamin 390–1, 393–4
Enlightenment 305
global 120
hypermodernity 24
industrial 109
informationalized 45
markets 395, 396
modernity 304
Pedrosa 52
private property 397
realism 391–2
as religion 300, 395
technocracy 139
Carlson & Co. 140–1, 142, 145–6, 147
Carroll, Noël 452
Carson, Rachel 139
Cash Flow 109
Cast Off 250
Catholic Church 301, 395–6
Caycedo, Carolina 57
censorship 236, 237
center/periphery 10, 57
Central Academy of Art and Design (Beijing) 429
Centre Georges Pompidou: Magiciens de la Terre 10–11, 13, 452, 453
Centro Cultural de la Raza 238
Cézanne, Paul 126–7, 128, 129
Chandler, John 334
Chavez, Cesar 458
Chiesa San Stae: Homo Sapiens Sapiens 193
Chile 237
China
art practices 60, 61–3, 64, 431
art schools 429, 430, 432–5
auction houses 372, 373
avant-garde art 189n12
creative industries 63
cultural conservatism 435
Cultural Revolution 431
education 429, 435
fabricators 146
institutional framework 61
Internet, limited 434
pedagogy 433
postmodernism 60–1, 69n2
superpower status 18
techniques training 432–3
Tiananmen Square 8, 234
toy-making 252
universities 429–32, 433–4
Christianity 298, 300, 302–4
Christiansen, Betsy: Knitting for Peace 251
Christie’s 372–3
Chrysler Airflow 144
CIA mission statement 284
Citizens United 319

civil disobedience 234, 238
Clark, Eric: *The Real Toy Story* 252
Clark, John 69n3
Clark, Lygia 53, 55, 121–2
Clark, T. J. 235, 427

class divide 46–7, 131–2, 461
Clegg, Michael 109, 110
Clement of Alexandria 390
Clinton, Bill 207, 314–15, 414
Cockburn, Alexander: *5 Days that Shook the World* 312
Coectivo Acciones de Arte (CADA) 237
Cohen, Stephen 376
Colbert, Stephen 319
Cold War aftermath 17–18, 23, 72
Colectivo Situaciones 240
collage 121, 164, 165
Collective Action Group 236
collective art 55, 57, 89, 100, 214
collector 42–3, 96, 400
Colomina, Beatriz: *Privacy and Publicity* 112–13
Columbia University 409
commercialization 370, 374–5, 377
commodification 250, 281, 304
commodities 161, 305, 306
Communism 130, 282, 381, 394
fall of 2, 24, 46
community projects 224
computer-aided manufacturing (CAM) 141
computer-numerically controlled (CNC) milling 146
conceptual art
challenging tradition 87
data-mining 138
discourse 236
Krasinski 78
Krauss 107–8
medium specificity 105, 107
participation 205

*Conceptual Art 2.0* 159, 160, 162, 164–6, 167
Constitution, US 317
consumerism 44
consumption 40, 53, 54, 306
contamination 90, 339, 370
contemporaneity
art history 463
as blind-spot 124
as concept 6, 22–5, 28
defined 17
and experience 192
India 185
monuments 31
virtuality 193
world picture 18
contemporary art
academia 465
African 451–2
art historians 464–5
Chinese 62, 63–4
documentation 33–4
globalization 3–4, 7
history of 58
India 185
market increases 371
museums 45–6
Nancy on 19–21
past/present 458–9
radicalization 181–2
contemporary art history 436, 457, 463–5
*Contemporary Art of Asia: Traditions/Tensions*
(Poshyananda) 179–80
Contemporary Image Collective, Cairo 211
content/form 84, 85, 88, 92, 271
corporate culture 443, 444
correspondence concept 7, 15n2
Costello, Diarmuid 338
countercultural tendencies 184, 246
Un Coup de Dés, Generali Foundation 34
Courbet, Gustave: L’Origine du monde 434
Cousins, Mark 280
craft 246, 251
environmental movement 247
memorialization 250
micro-economy 252
Middle East 249
as politics 246, 251
and war 246, 247, 248–50
Cramerotti, Alfredo 320n1
creative industries 63, 400
Crimp, Douglas 218–19, 223n19
“Appropriating Appropriation” 219
On the Museum’s Ruins 219–20
critical art concept 268–9
Critical Art Ensemble 120
critical theory 334, 357, 409, 412
criticism
American 131
Artforum 361
categorization 4
changes 364–5
connectivity 360
crisis of 334, 336, 341, 357
curatorial practice 186–7
formalism 333–4
history of 357
lack of institutional grounding 362
non-normative 335–6
postmodernism 335
practices 8, 463
taste and 335
crocheted work 245
Crowner, Sarah 91
Cuba, Havana Biennial 180–1
cubism 20, 29, 200, 323
cultural capital 376
cultural critics 15n3, 16n17
cultural tourism 169
culture
and aesthetics 180–1
depthlessness 40, 41
identity 162, 228
immediation 19
local 183
mass 63
performance 358
relativity 10
Cummings, Neil: Enthusiasm 206
curatorial practice 11–12, 182–3,
186–7, 204
curators 171
and art historians 465
biennials 173–4, 175, 188n8
defined 400
increasing presence 182–3, 211
Curlet, François 156
Cyprus, Manifesta (6) 421
Daniels, Dieter 151
Danish cartoons 302
Danto, Arthur 99, 451
Darboven, Hanne 164
data flows 41–2, 155
databases 359
data-mining 138, 167
Daumal, René: Le Mont Analogue 153
Davidson, Basil 448
Davis, Angela 458
Davis, Douglas: The Backward Television Set 128–9
Dayan, Daniel 158n11
De Brosses, Charles: Du Culte des deux fétiches 304
De Duve, Thierry 338, 340
De Man, Paul 336
De Maria, Walter 306–7
Dean, Tacita 24, 29
Debord, Guy 76, 302
The Society of the Spectacle 305
decolonization 18, 183–4
Index

deconstructionism 180, 237, 400
defamiliarization 118, 294
Deleuze, Gilles 272, 278, 360, 395–6
Deller, Jeremy 458
   The Battle of Orgreave 156
democracy 44, 45, 314, 317–19
Democratic presidents 314–15
demos, T. J. 266
derrida, jacques 270, 462
dertnig, carola 459
deschenes, liz 91–2
deschooling 416, 419n11
detteritorialization 183, 372, 396, 397
Deuteronomy 302
Dewey, john: Art as Experience 199–200
dia foundation 306–7, 310n17
dias, antonio 55
Diederichsen, Diedrich 115
DIF 229
digital cameras 43
digital information 137
digital media 149–50
digital platforms 163
dion, mark 110
   weltWissen 116n21
discourse 182, 199, 202–3, 236, 406–7, 409–10
disgust, politics of 339–40
dispositif 389–90, 391, 396
Documenta 11, 13, 169, 195
Documenta (11) 11, 117, 162–4, 183, 184, 188n10, 200n1, 288, 289
Documenta (12) 288, 427
Documenta 12 magazine 29
documenta journal 427
documentary practice 33–4, 289, 294–5, 312–13, 320
Documents sur l’Art 216
Draxler, Helmut 109, 110, 111
dubin, abbey shaine 438–46
Duchamp, marcel
   and conceptual artists 21, 22, 440
   creative act 161
   defining art 30–1
   readymade 338
   viewer 197
   Wanted: $2000 Reward 293
   and warhol 42
dunye, cheryl 459
durkheim, Émile 305
Düttman, Alexander Garcia 271
   eagleton, terry 279
    ebner, shannon 90
    eco, umberto 274
    economic crises 47, 62–3, 367, 368, 392
    economic factors 15n3, 16n17, 63–4, 351–2, 375–6
    Economist 370
    education
       china 429, 435
       marketization 431–2
       non-forced 422–3
       professionalization 420
       social value of 414–15
       see also art schools
e-flux journal 23, 24, 26–7n22, 211, 426–7
Eichenbaum, Boris 70
Eichhorn, Maria: Maria Eichhorn Public
   Limited Company 117–18, 123
85 New Wave movement 431
Eliasson, Olafur 142, 157, 192
   your black horizon 197–8
   your foresight endured 197
   your inverted veto 197
   your sun machine 197
Eliot, T. S. 70
    elite
       art schools 408–9
       elite art 39, 44, 45–7
Elkins, James 452
Ellegood, Anne 71
The Uncertainty of Objects 85
Elliott, Nancy 339
emerging artist, defined 401
emotions 257, 271–2
El Encuentro Internacional 211
End of History (Fukuyama) 390, 391
English, Darby 102
Enlightenment 170, 193, 196, 199, 304, 305
environmental movement 247
Enwezor, Okwui 23, 162–4, 183–4
Documenta (11) 11, 183, 184, 200n1, 288, 289
“History Lessons” 15n4
The Short Century 183
Trade Routes: History and Geography 9, 172, 183
Eriksson, Annika: Collectors 206
Errington, Shelly 447
Esche, Charles 64, 188n8
Escosteguy, Pedro 55
escrache 239
eteam 225, 230
International Airport Montello 225–6, 227
ethical factors 183–4, 210
ethnicity 98, 99, 101, 102
ethnography 10, 449
Etsy website 251–2
Eurocentrism 10, 453
Europe 109, 290–1, 301
Europe, Eastern 380, 381
Evans, Walker 89
event culture 370, 460
exchange
artwork 259–60, 349
avant-gardist 79
commodities 306
global art history 453
inter-generational 77–8, 82n8
platforms 370
exhibitions 2–3, 12–13
Africa 450
art fairs 171
database/platforms 359–60
India 185–6
politics of 422
size 346
subject-making 192
temporary 460
experience 196–7
aesthetics 108, 192, 193–4, 197, 269–70, 271–2
as archive 199
artwork 269
commodified 198–9
contemporaneity and 192
Dewey 199–200
discourse 199
embodied 197–8
Kant 199
as marketing tool 198
mediation of 138
modernity 199
participation 215
trajectories 192–6
experiential specificity 126
experimental art 434–5
experimentation/industrial fabrication 143–4
Experiments in Art and Technology 137, 145
extra-institutional zones 204
extraterritoriality 291, 292–3
EZLN (Zapatista National Liberation Army) 237

Fabian, Johannes 37
fabricators 142, 143–4
The Factory 144
fashion 31, 348
Fast, Omer 92
feminist activism 237, 251, 252n3
Fukuyama, Francis 390, 391, 395
Fuller, Matthew: I/O/D 42
Fundación Colección Jumex 229
fundamentalism 298–9, 314–17, 318
Gabri, Rene 368, 388–97
Gagosian Gallery 373
Galerie Lorenz, Paris 115
Galerie Nagel, Cologne 115
galleries 367–8, 369, 371
gallerist, defined 401
Ganahl, Rainer 440
Gao Shiming 188n8
Garaicoa, Carlos 98
Garcia, David 48n4
Garlake, Peter 449
gas masks 245, 248
Gates, Bill 210, 414–15
Gauguin, Paul 306
Gemini G.E.I. 144, 145
gendering of craft 246
Generali Foundation: Un Coup de Dés 34
generational contracts 77–8
Genoa G8 protests 238
Genzken, Isa 89, 90, 164
geopolitics 2–3, 5, 124, 292
Gerchman, Rubens 55
German art 129–30
Ghanaian art history 449
Ghenie, Adrian 379
Gibson, Ann 95
Gillette, Frank 151–2
Gillick, Liam 154, 156, 164, 202, 216, 217, 360, 416
Gilmore, James 198
Gimhongsok 64–6
Gioni, Massimiliano 169
Giunta, Andrea 232
Giza, Robert 144
Glissant, Édouard 11, 15n9–10
global literature 45
global warming 46
globalism 11, 95–6, 101, 102
globalization
of art 453–4
art markets 367, 386
contemporary art 3–4, 7
densification 161, 162
disintegration 18
epistemic violence 285
Europe 109
exploitation of resources 18–19
fundamentalism 298–9
Glissant 11
and globalism 95–6
Jameson 7
labor divisions 162
limits 372–4
readymades 162
visibility 12
Goldfarb, Rebecca 353
Goldstein, Jack 218
Gomes, Fernanda 57
Gone Formalism, ICA 85
Gonzalez-Foerster, Dominique 156, 217
Roman de Münster 14
“Tropical Modernity” 57
Gonzalez-Torres, Felix 109, 216, 385
Lover Boys 273
Goodman, Nelson 274
Google 160–1
Gordon, Douglas 156
Cinema Liberté/Bar Lounge 206
Graeber, David 394
graffiti 43
Graham, Dan 14, 333
Figurative 159, 160
Gramsci, Antonio 282
Grand Tour (2007) 13–14
Granny Peace Brigade 250
Granta 328
Gratz, Bill 143
Green, Renée: Import-Export Funk Office 115
Greenberg, Clement
art as discipline 410
in Artforum 333
and Dewey 200
formalism 92, 102–3
freeing art from meaning 92n1
on Kant 337–8
Krauss on 117
medium specificity 84, 85, 105, 120, 123
modernism 52
New Criticism 70
opticality 91, 93n2
reactions to 86
subjective judgment 337–8
Greenham Common Peace Camp 247
Greer, Betsy 251
Griffin, Kenneth 376
Griffin, Tim 5
Group Material 8, 109, 111, 385
Groys, Boris
“Comrades in Time” 24
“The Politics of Installation” 63
Grupo de Arte Callejero (GAC) 239, 240
Gschwandtner, Sabrina: Wartime Knitting Circle 248
Guangzhou Triennale 188n8
Guattari, Félix 118, 272, 278, 395–6
Gullar, Ferreira 52, 55
Gupta, Subodh 98
Mind Shut Down 162
Guttmann, Martin 109, 110
Gwangju Biennale 9, 172
H. R. Pifnstuf (Krofft Enterprises) 145
Haeg, Fritz 411
Haghighian, Natascha Sadr:
unternehmen: bermuda 209–10
Hamid, Moshin: The Reluctant Fundamentalist 327–8
Hammer Museum: Thing: New Sculpture from Los Angeles 85
Hammon, David: Concerto in Black and Blue 294
handmaking 250–1, 252
see also craft
Hanru, Hou: Cities of the Move 180
Hansen, Mark
Listening Post 41
New Philosophy of New Media 149
Hardt, Michael 7, 45
Empire 7, 15n3, 40, 96
Haring, Keith 43
Harlan, Vett 113, 116n18
Bewildered Youth 111, 114
Harper’s Bazaar 159, 160
Harrison, Rachel 90, 164, 165–6
Tiger Woods 165
Harvey, David 389
Hasan-Khan, Alia 326
Greetings from… 327
Hatoum, Mona
Corps Etranger 193, 194
Keffieh 249
Hauser & Wirth 373
Havana Biennial 9, 172, 180–1
Hayes, Sharon 458
health care, Obama 318, 321n11
Hearst, Patty 458
hedge fund managers 376
Heidegger, Martin 20, 21, 197
Heldr, Fritz 119
Helguera, Pablo 416
Helms, Jesse 220
Herkenhoff, Paulo 188n8
Hermes, Manfred 113–14
Hernández Chong Cuy, Sofia 203
Herzog, Dirk 281
Hickey, Dave 338, 340
hijab 307
HIJOS association 239
Hill, Christine 216
Hirschhorn, Thomas 164
Hirshhorn Museum: *The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas* 85
Hirst, Damien 23, 39, 42, 44, 46, 371–2, 374
For the Love of God 162
hobbyist craft 245, 246
Höfer, Candida 41–2
Hofstadter, Richard 315
“The Paranoid Style in American Politics” 314
Holloway, John 237
Holmes, Brian 397
Holt, Nancy: *East Coast West Coast* 80–1
homosexuality 339–40
Horkheimer, Max 304, 305
hostile worlds story 375–7
Huan, Zhang 142
Huggonier, Marine: *Traveling Amazônia* 57
human rights 239–40, 295
humanity 254, 257, 259
Hume, David 333
Hunter College students 417, 419n13
Huyghe, Pierre 92, 156, 164
Hyde, Lewis 165
hypermodernity 24

**IAM (International Airport Montello)**
(eteam) 225–6, 227, 229

ICA, Philadelphia: *Gone Formalism* 85
iconoclasm 301, 302–7
identity politics 70–1, 193, 232–3
ideoscape 18, 316, 320–1n8
idolatry 302–4
image 129, 235, 300–3, 311
imaging technologies 193
immigration issues 238
improvisation 212–13

inclusiveness 182–3, 204
indeterminacy, zone of 274, 292, 294, 295
India 185–6, 190–1n17, 190n16, 372–3
Indonesian New Art Movement 236
industrial fabrication 142–4
information 154–5, 159
*Information, Museum of Modern Art, New York* 159
information processing 153, 155, 157
information retrieval 160
information technologies 149, 154–5
*informe* 86
inSITE 227
installation 117, 192, 459–60
institutional critique 8–9, 119–20, 236–7, 242
institutional frameworks 5, 7, 24, 61, 230–1, 295
instrumental technology 140
instrumentalization 265–6, 282
interactivity 167, 215
interdisciplinary 55, 144, 236, 406, 410
international art 3, 4, 5, 331, 373–4
Internet 137, 161–2, 372, 434
interpellation 186, 215
interpretation 37–8, 88, 274
investing in art 374, 375, 401
Iranian Revolution 394
Iraq 317–18
Islam
artists of 329–30
fundamentalism 298, 300
market 394–5
politicized 394
post-9/11 300
*shirk* 303
Islamabad shootings 322
Issou, Isidore 301–2
issue-related art 99
Istanbul, Rodeo Gallery 382–4
Istanbul Biennial 188n8, 384
Istanbul Modern 382
Italian theorists 281

Jacir, Emily 24, 266, 288, 291–3, 295
Where We Come From 291–3

Jackson, Michael 206
Jackson Pollock Bar 440
Jacobsen, Arne 270
Jakobson, Roman 70
Jameson, Fredric 37
architecture 41
globalization 7
positive/negative 45–6
on postmodernism 39–40, 45, 347

Jetol, Ayesha 329
Lenses 324
Sticks and Stones 324–5

Jay, Martin 199
Jennings, Packard 353
Jensen, Sergej 91
jihadist militants 317–18
Jinnah, Mohammed Ali 323–4

Jobs, Steve 348
Joergensen, Marianne 249
Johannesburg Biennial 9, 172, 180
John Birch Society 314, 315, 320n7
Johns, Jasper 133
Johnson, Lyndon B. 214–15
Jonas, Joan 80–1
Jones, Amelia 462
Jones, Caroline 170
Joselit, David 138
Joseph, Philippe 156

JR 44
Judaism 298, 300
Judd, Donald 35, 97, 120, 142, 143, 164, 306–7
“Specific Objects” 52
judgment
aesthetics 331, 337
beauty 336–7

as concept 331
devalued 334
perception 120
politics 339
postmodernism 334
taste 333, 336–7

Julian, Isaac 24
July, Miranda: Learning to Love You
More 350
junk art 87

Kafka, Franz 130, 133–4
“In the Penal Colony” 129, 130–1
Kant, Immanuel
Critique of Judgment 278, 331, 336–7, 338
Critique of Pure Reason 336
experience 199
Greenberg on 337–8
schema 21
sensus communis 196, 337, 338

Kantor, Tadeusz: Panoramic
Sea-Happening 79–80

Kaprow, Allan 86, 200, 441
Kapur, Geeta 170
Century City 189–90n15
Katz, Elihu 158n11
Kauffman, Craig 144
Kawara, On 216
One Million Years 164

Kee, Joan 71
Keenan, Thomas 317–18
Keller, Christopher: Kiosk 211
Kelley, Mike 416
The Uncanny 35

Kelly, Ellsworth 141
Kentridge, William 24, 452, 456n15
Kester, Grant 296n7
Khakhar, Bhupen 191n17
Kienholz, Ed 93n7
Kim, Byron: Synecdoche 98–100
Kimmelman, Michael 12
Index

Kippenberger, Martin 302
Kittler, Friedrich 149, 150
Klaer, Iain 90
Klein, Ezra 317
Klein, Yves 99
Kline, Franz: Chief 354
Klinghoffer, Shirley: Love Armor Project 249
Klüver, Billy 145
knitted work 245, 247, 248, 250
knowledge production 194, 205, 207, 454
knowledge/understanding 427–8
Kobro, Katarzyna 73–5, 76
“Rzez ‘ba stanowi …” 74
“Spatial Compositions” 73, 74
Konsthall C, Stockholm 211
Koolhaas, Rem 12
Kooning, Elaine de 354
Koons, Jeff 23, 39, 42, 44, 142
Balloon Dog 146
“Celebration” series 141
Kortun, Vasif 188n8, 382–3
Kosuth, Joseph 87, 334
Kouvali, Sylvia 368, 382–4
Kozloff, Max 99–100
Krauss, Bernd: The Shop 212
Krauss, Rosalind
art value 131
conceptual art 107–8
expanded field of art 224
formalism 70, 102
on Fried 117
on Greenberg 93n5, 117
interest/distraction 359
on Kentridge 452
medium specificity 105, 106
method of criticism 335
in October 357–8
Perpetual Inventory 117
A Voyage on the North Sea 150
Kreibber, Michael 110
Krofft Enterprises: H. R. Pifnstuf 145
Kuhn, Thomas 139
Kunsthalle Bern
Live In Your Head exhibition 159
When Attitudes Become Form 87
Kunstverein Hamburg:
Formalismus 84
Kunstverein München 112
Kuo, Michelle 137
Kuspitt, Donald 457, 464, 465n4
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology 449–50
Kwon, Miwon 14
“One Place After Another” 8
Kworks 156
Kyong Park: Lost Highway Project 207
labor divisions 162, 420
Laboratoire Agit-Art 236
Lacan, Jacques 348
Laclau, Ernesto 46
Lacy, Suzanne 224
Lambert-Beatty, Carrie 437
Lamprecht, Franziska 225
Las Vegas Strip 40–1, 44
Laskey, Ruth 91
Latin America
auction houses 373
censorship 236, 237
cultural activism 240–1
human rights 239–40
repression 236, 239–40
resistance politics 392
L’AUA 57
layers concept 108
laziness, defined 401
Le Corbusier 111, 112, 113, 114–15, 301
Le Roy, Xavier 270
Learning from Las Vegas (Venturi, Scott Brown & Izenour) 40, 44
Index

Lee, Pamela 58
Leo X, Pope 210
Leonard, Zoe 109, 459
Leonardo da Vinci: Codex
  Leicester 210
Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim 105
Lettrist International 305
Lettrist movement 301–2
Levine, Sherrie 8, 88–9, 109, 166, 219, 220
  Postcard Collage #4, 1–24 166
Lewandowska, Marysia: Enthusiasm 206
Lewis, Mark 29
LeWitt, Sol 87, 143, 166, 333, 334, 357
Li, Pi 407
Lin, Hongjohn 280–1
Lind, Maria 202
Linecum, Tim 353
Lippard, Lucy 236, 334, 354
Lippincott foundry 144
Live In Your Head, Kunsthalle Bern 159
live media events 158n11
living sculpture 208–9
Lloyd, Harold 255
Locher, Thomas 110
Łódź 73–5
Loeb, Daniel 376
Long, Charles 91
Los Angeles Museum of
  Contemporary Art 44
Lost Highway Project (Kyong,
  Stealth & Potrc) 207
Lowry, L. S. 43
Lozano, Lee 88
Lubitsch, Ernst 301
Lucas, Renata 58
Luhmann, Niklas 118–19, 120–1, 123–4
Lüpertz, Markus 129
  The Death of a Donald Duck 130
Luther, Martin 280
Lütticken, Sven 298
Lyon Biennial 192
Lyotard, Jean-François 21
  La Condition postmoderne 358
macramé 245–6
Magiciens de la Terre, Centre Georges
  Pompidou 10–11, 13, 452, 453
Maharaj, Sarat 188n8
Make It Now, SculptureCenter 85
Maldagan, Juan 57
Malevich, Kazimir 99
  Arkitekton 52
Mallarmé, Stéphane 34
Maloney, Patricia 351
Malraux, André 10
Man, Victor 379, 380
The Man Who Fell to Earth (Roeg) 40, 41
Manga characters 156
Mangold, Robert 133
Marcuse, Herbert 139
Marian Goodman Gallery 122, 293
market, defined 401
market forces 171, 282, 331, 348, 349, 368, 394–5, 396, 431–2
market fundamentalism, defined 402
Martin, Agnes 441–2
Martin, Jean-Hubert: Magiciens de la
  Terre 10, 171, 178–9, 453
Martin Headlands Center for the
  Arts 349
Marx, Karl 199, 280, 302, 304, 305, 309n5
materiality 91, 126–7, 129, 219, 270–1
Index

Matisse, Henri 301
Matta-Clark, Gordon 216, 420–1
Maturana, Humberto 123
Mawurndjul, John 24
May 1968 protests 302
McCracken, John 141
McDonald, Anne 247
McElheny, Josiah: The Last Scattering Surface 146
McEvilley, Thomas 98
McKee, Yates 23
McLuhan, Marshall 53, 105, 109–10
McPherson, Ron 145
McQueen, Steve 24, 266, 288
Portrait as an Escapologist 293, 294–5
Pursuit 293–5
Western Deep 297n23
media
formats 164
installation 117
marginalization of art 149
material/immaterial 115
new 107
postmodernism 110, 113
right wing fundamentalism 314–17
Medina, Cuauhtémoc:
“Contemp(t)ory: Eleven Theses” 23–4
medium 107, 109–10, 118–19, 120–1, 122, 128–9
medium specificity 105–6
Fried 117, 120
Greenberg 84, 85, 117, 120, 123
Krauss 107–9
Maria Eichhorn Public Limited Company 118
material 126
multimedia installations 107
Stella 120
updating of 150
Mehmood, Hasnat: I love miniature 323–4
Meireles, Cildo 10
Melbourne Craft Center
“The Revolution in Handmade” 251
Mellon Foundation 409–10
memorialization 250
memory 156
Menil, John and Dominique 306, 307
Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence 261–2
The Message as Medium 109–10
Mexican Revolution 227
Mexico 227–8, 229, 230, 238
Michelangelo 210
mid-career artist, defined 402
Middle East 18, 249, 307
Mies van der Rohe, Ludwig 143
Migros Museum, Zurich: While Bodies Get Mirrored 85
Mike Smith Studio 142, 146
Milgo Industrial 143
Mill, John Stuart 362
Miller, John 35
Mills, C. Wright 139
miniature paintings 323–4
minimalism 8, 105, 120, 137
Mircea, Mihaea 381
Mockus, Antanas 229
Moderegger, Hajoe 225
Moderna Museet: Collectors 206
modernism 6
aesthetics 269
autonomy of art 274–5
Brazil 50
Catholic Church 301
and classicism 29
critical theory 304
criticism 357
dialectic of 358
Greensbergian 52
as monument 34
Pedrosa 50
Index

and postmodernism 45
primitive 178, 179
style 219
world-wide 37–8
modernist-utopian art 268, 269
modernity 17–18, 199, 304
Möller, Regina: Regina 209
Molzan, Dianna 91
Mondrian, Piet 200
montage 113, 115, 165, 167
Monte, James: Anti-Illusion 87
monuments 30–1
Moretti, Franco 45
Mori, Mariko: Wave UFO 196
Morris, Robert 140, 142, 357
“Anti Form” 86–7
relational aesthetics 218, 223n16
Morris, William 251
Mosquera, Gerardo 188n8
Mouffe, Chantal 222n3, 317
MP3 players 159–60, 163
Mujer Pública 240–1
Mujeres creando 240–1
Mulji, Huma: “Can you take off your shoes please?” 326
Müller, Christian Philipp 8, 109, 110
Forgotten Future 111–12, 113, 114, 115
multimedia installations 106, 107, 109
Mumford, Lewis 139
Murakami, Haruki 23
Murakami, Takashi 42, 44, 101, 142
Muresan, Ciprian 379
museum, defined 402
Museum in Progress, Vienna 109
Museum of Arts and Design: Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting 248
Museum of Modern Art, New York 86, 352, 460
Information 159
Pour Your Body Out 193
Museum of Modern Art, Vienna: The Uncanny 35
museums 8, 9, 182, 359–60
Muslims in US 326–7
NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) 237
Namuth, Hans 86
Nancy, Jean-Luc 19–22, 26n4
Nanjo, Fumio 188n8
National Art Gallery, Beijing 62
National Gallery of Art, Washington 98
National Socialism 129, 130, 305
nation-building 65, 228
native relevance standard 97
Negri, Antonio 45, 281
Empire 7, 15n3, 40, 96
neo-avant-gardes 140
neoclassicism 29
neoconceptualism 44
neocreativism 51–2, 53
neo-documentary photography 210
Neo-Expressionism 129–30, 132
neoliberalism 228, 231, 239, 252, 389, 392, 402
Nesbit, Molly: Utopia Station 11, 198–9, 440
Neto, Ernesto 57
nets/formats 164–6
New Brazilian Objectivity exhibition 55
New Critics 70
new genre art 224
New Museum, New York 424–5
Unmonumental 85
New York Times 12, 347, 413
Newman, Barnett 29, 133, 143
Nietzsche, Friedrich 263
The Birth of Tragedy 258
The Gay Science 256
Nigerian art history 449–50
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>486</th>
<th>Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9/11 aftermath 238–9, 300, 323, 324, 367</td>
<td>9/11 aftermath 238–9, 300, 323, 324, 367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noack, Ruth 288</td>
<td>Noack, Ruth 288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nodes/formats 164–6</td>
<td>nodes/formats 164–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nohria, Nitin 362</td>
<td>Nohria, Nitin 362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noland, Kenneth 121</td>
<td>Noland, Kenneth 121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nomads + Residents 207</td>
<td>Nomads + Residents 207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Object, Theory of 52, 55</td>
<td>Non-Object, Theory of 52, 55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nussbaum, Martha 339</td>
<td>Nussbaum, Martha 339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nye, Joseph 26n3</td>
<td>Nye, Joseph 26n3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Object of Labor anthology 250</td>
<td>The Object of Labor anthology 250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obrist, Hans-Ulrich</td>
<td>Obrist, Hans-Ulrich</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cities of the Move 180</td>
<td>Cities of the Move 180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utopia Station 11, 198–9, 440</td>
<td>Utopia Station 11, 198–9, 440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 22–3, 217, 357–8, 452, 456n16</td>
<td>October 22–3, 217, 357–8, 452, 456n16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oda Projesi collective 205, 209</td>
<td>Oda Projesi collective 205, 209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O’Dell, Kathy 462</td>
<td>O’Dell, Kathy 462</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oguibe, Olu 98</td>
<td>Oguibe, Olu 98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio Valley Indian mounds 29</td>
<td>Ohio Valley Indian mounds 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oiticica, Hélio 53, 54, 59n6, 108</td>
<td>Oiticica, Hélio 53, 54, 59n6, 108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“General Scheme of the New Objectivity” 55–6</td>
<td>“General Scheme of the New Objectivity” 55–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tropicalia 57, 116n6</td>
<td>Tropicalia 57, 116n6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okakuro, Kazuo: The Book of Tea 254</td>
<td>Okakuro, Kazuo: The Book of Tea 254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okeke-Agulu, Chika 436–7</td>
<td>Okeke-Agulu, Chika 436–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okoye, Ikem 452</td>
<td>Okoye, Ikem 452</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oldenburg, Claes 141</td>
<td>Oldenburg, Claes 141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giant Ice Bag – Scale A 145</td>
<td>Giant Ice Bag – Scale A 145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profile Airflow 144</td>
<td>Profile Airflow 144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>online publication 39</td>
<td>online publication 39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ono, Yoko 271</td>
<td>Ono, Yoko 271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>opacity 11–12, 86, 441</td>
<td>opacity 11–12, 86, 441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>open-endedness 87, 281–2, 359, 459</td>
<td>open-endedness 87, 281–2, 359, 459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>opticality 86, 91, 93n2, 294, 335</td>
<td>opticality 86, 91, 93n2, 294, 335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oral tradition 448, 449</td>
<td>oral tradition 448, 449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon Women’s Political Caucus 246</td>
<td>Oregon Women’s Political Caucus 246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organic line (Clark) 121–2, 123</td>
<td>organic line (Clark) 121–2, 123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orozco, Gabriel 122, 216</td>
<td>Orozco, Gabriel 122, 216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Run 122</td>
<td>Home Run 122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sand on Table 119</td>
<td>Sand on Table 119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ouattara 98, 100</td>
<td>Ouattara 98, 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Literal Speed 436–7</td>
<td>Our Literal Speed 436–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ozawa, Tsuyoshi 64–6</td>
<td>Ozawa, Tsuyoshi 64–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pace Gallery 373</td>
<td>Pace Gallery 373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pachter, Marc 359</td>
<td>Pachter, Marc 359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paik, Nam June 151</td>
<td>Paik, Nam June 151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>painting 86, 90, 121–2, 131–2</td>
<td>painting 86, 90, 121–2, 131–2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestinians 291–3</td>
<td>Palestinians 291–3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palin, Sarah 315</td>
<td>Palin, Sarah 315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Paloma 145</td>
<td>La Paloma 145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pan-Africanism 451</td>
<td>pan-Africanism 451</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pape, Lygia 54</td>
<td>Pape, Lygia 54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paris Biennial 10, 195</td>
<td>Paris Biennial 10, 195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parker, Rozsika: The Subversive Stitch 251</td>
<td>Parker, Rozsika: The Subversive Stitch 251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parreno, Philippe 156</td>
<td>Parreno, Philippe 156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount Analogue 153</td>
<td>Mount Analogue 153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participation 44, 202, 204, 220</td>
<td>participation 44, 202, 204, 220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>advanced art 208</td>
<td>advanced art 208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aesthetics 269, 273–4</td>
<td>aesthetics 269, 273–4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>biennials 211</td>
<td>biennials 211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conceptual art 205</td>
<td>conceptual art 205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contradictions 213</td>
<td>contradictions 213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exclusivity 209</td>
<td>exclusivity 209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experience 215</td>
<td>experience 215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interactivity 215</td>
<td>interactivity 215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-Western art 203</td>
<td>non-Western art 203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>performative art and 208–9</td>
<td>performative art and 208–9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relational practices 219, 228</td>
<td>relational practices 219, 228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spectator 54</td>
<td>spectator 54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spectrality 274</td>
<td>spectrality 274</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
participatory art
   Bourriaud 335
   contextual components 211–12
   discourse 202–3
   failures 204
   institutional context 230–1
   practices of 224–5
   setting 206
   social context 229, 230
   social-welfare state 202
   participatory practices 205–6, 207, 210, 211, 212–13, 214
   Pasadena Art Center: “Radical Craft” 251
   Pask, Maria: Beat It 206
   Pasolini, Pier Paolo: Salò, Or the 120 Days of Sodom 389
   pastness 35–6, 458–9
   peace marches 247
   Pecha Kucha 416
   Pedrosa, Mario 50
   adversity 56
   anti-art 53, 55
   capitalism 52
   colonial history of Brazil 51
   everyday/objectivity 52–3
   pop art 53
   “World in Crisis” 54–5
   Peleg, Hila: A Crime Against Art 440
   Penck, A. R. 127–8, 129, 133, 134n3
   People's Global Action 240
   Performa 173
   performance art 20, 193, 208–9, 257, 270
   Periferic Biennial 211
   Peterman, Dan: Blackstone Bicycle Works 206
   PhDs in art-making 407, 408, 409, 410, 457
   photography 90, 91–2, 289–90, 314
   photojournalism, alternative 312–14, 320
   Picasso, Pablo 127
   Guernica 21, 235
   Pickhan 142
   Pictures Generation 88–9
   Pine, Joseph 198
   Pink, Daniel 413
   Piper, Adrian 88, 237
   Pittman, Steuart 353
   Plan B gallery 379, 380–1
   Plan Condor 240
   Planet Plastics 144
   Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Center 382
   platforms 162–4, 359, 370
   Plato 261
   Plessner, Helmuth 275
   pluralism 12–13, 14, 37
   Poland 74–5, 76, 206
   Polich Tallix 142
   political art 23, 323, 324
   politics 46
   and aesthetics 103, 186, 260, 293, 312
   American art criticism 131
   and art 232, 236, 255, 262
   art market 388–9
   craftwork 251
   fundamentalism 314–16
   Islam 394
   judgment 339
   textiles making 250
   violence 317–18, 325
   Pollock, Jackson 166, 200
   Full Fathom Five 86
   Poly International Auction 373
   Pop, Mihai 368, 379–82
   Pop Art 53, 130, 355
   populism 18, 37, 39, 40, 42, 44, 46–7
   Populism catalogue 45
   Portman, John 41
Poshyananda, Apinan: *Contemporary Art of Asia: Traditions/Tensions* 179–80
postcolonialism 70–1, 178, 182, 183–4, 186, 193, 286, 451, 454
post-Fordism 396, 403
postindustrialism 7, 45
post-medium condition 117, 150, 151
postmodernism
  appropriation 219
  China 60–1, 69n2
  criticism 335
  Jameson 39–40, 45, 347
  judgment 334
  Lyotard 21
  media 110, 113
  modernism and 45
  Pedrosa 50
  popularized 37, 47
  post-medium condition 117, 150, 151
  world-wide 38
postmodernity 18, 185
poststructuralism 283, 334
post-studio practice 406–7, 416
Potlatch 305
Potrc, Marjetica 57
  *Lost Highway Project* 207
presentism 20, 27n30, 30, 459, 461
primitive/modern 178, 179
Prina, Stephen 109, 110
Prince, Richard 42
privatization, defined 403
production
  commodities 161
  discourse 182
  flexibility 160
  mechanized 140, 143
  networks rerouted 146
  postindustrial 147
  printing 144
  reproduction 45
  sculpture 144
site 182
  technical inventions 151
  professionalization 413–14, 420, 426, 427, 436
Project Row Houses, Houston 211
property, defined 403
protagonists on world stage 257–8
*Proyecto Meteoro: escuela de oficios* (Fernandez) 229, 230
Przybos, Julian 73
public art 202, 224, 432
Pujol, Ernesto 416
Qadri, Mumtaz 322
Qayyum, Tazeen 328–9
  *May Irritate Eyes* 329
quality 96–7, 100
Queensland Art Gallery, Asia-Pacific Triennial 181
queer theory 71
Quinlan, Eileen 91
Qur'an 303
Raad, Walid 210, 439, 459
Rabah, Khalil 188n8
“Radical Craft,” Pasadena Art Center 251
*Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting*, Museum of Arts and Design 248
radicalism 24, 181–2, 250–1
Rajadhyaksha, Ashish 190n15
Rama, Edi 229
Rancière, Jacques 196, 260, 318–19
  *Hatred of Democracy* 46
Raqs Media Collective 24, 233
Rauschenberg, Robert 145
Ray, Charles: *Hinoki* 141
reactionaries 301, 309n3
readymades 21, 162, 338, 440
Reagan, Ronald 220–1
real-time technologies 156, 157
Rebentisch, Juliane 265
recursivity 106, 123–4, 150, 157
Redcat, Los Angeles 211
reflexivity 158n12, 283
see also self-reflexivity
Reformation 47, 309n8
refugees 288, 290
Reinhardt, Ad 98, 99, 100
relational aesthetics
art/non-art 440
autonomy of art 268
Bourriaud 52, 82n4, 163, 202, 216–17, 224, 225
examples 273
Foster 218, 222–3n13
interactivity 167
Morris 218, 223n16
participatory works 100, 219
religion 298, 300–1, 304, 322
Relyea, Lane 332, 411
representation 127–8, 138, 183–4
repression 236, 239–40, 265
reproduction 45, 461
Republican Party 317
re-sacralization 305, 306
resistance 237, 241, 319
Restore Sanity rally 319
Restoring Honor rally 316, 319
“The Revolution in Handmade,” Melbourne Craft Center 251
Reyes, Pedro 230
Palas por pistolas 228, 229
Ribas, João 331
Richards, I. A. 70
Richter, Gerhard 29
Riegler, Alois 31–2
The Modern Cult of Monuments 29–30
right wing backlash 314–18
Riley, Bridget 133
Rio de Janeiro Museum of Modern Art: New Brazilian Objectivity 55
Rist, Pipilotti
Homo Sapiens Sapiens 193
Pour Your Body Out 193
Riwaq Biennale 188n8
Robins, Freddie: CRAFT KILLS 245, 246, 252
Roche, Maurice 461
Rodeo Gallery 382
Roeg, Nicolas: The Man Who Fell to Earth 40, 41
Roman spectacle 303–4
Romania 379–80
Romanticism 29, 306
Rosen, Andrea 368, 384–7
Rosenfeld, Lotty 237
Rosler, Martha 8, 108, 278
Garage Sale 205
Roszak, Theodore 139
Rothko Chapel, Houston 306
Rubin, Ben: Listening Post 41
Rufus Corporation: whitewhite:algorithmicnoir 346–7, 355
Ruge, Arnold 280
Ruscha, Ed 126, 127, 129
Ruskin, John 251
Russian art 373
Ryman, Robert 98
Rypson, Piotr 75, 76
Saatchi, Charles 374
Saatchi Collection: The Empire Strikes Back 186
sacred/profane 305–7
Safety Last 255
St Clair, Jeffrey: 5 Days that Shook the World 312
Salti, Rasha 292
Saltz, Jerry 349
Salzburger Kunstverein: Formalism: Modern Art Today 84–5
same-sex practices 339–40
Sandler, Irving 355
A Sweeper-Up After Artists 354
São Paulo Bienal 2, 54, 169, 172, 180, 189n14
Sassen, Saskia 161
Saunders, Matt 91
Scanlan, Joe 222–3n13
Schiller, Friedrich 28, 35
Schindler, Rudolf 163, 164
Schjeldahl, Peter 172
Schlingensief, Christoph 271
Schneider, Ira 151–2
Schöffer, Nicolas 113–14

La ville cybernétique 111
Scholtz, Zachary Royer: 6610 (blue sheeting) – force of habit 351
Schulmann, Peter 247
Schwitter, Kurt: Merzbau 52
scientific exhibitions 115
Scott, Joan 199
sculpture 8, 34, 90, 144
SculptureCenter, New York: Make It Now 85
search engines 160
Seattle protests 238, 311–14
secularism 181, 300, 301
Sehgal, Tino 208–9
This Progress 439
Sekula, Allan: Waiting for Tear Gas 311–14, 316, 319–20
self-reflexivity 150, 157, 283–4, 333–4, 420
semi-autonomous art 204, 206, 211
Sennett, Richard 163

The Culture of New Capitalism 159–60
Serra, Richard 102, 133, 142
sexuality, critiqued 237
Shahzad, Falsal 328
Shakespeare, William: The Tempest 210
shame 280, 281
Shaoxiong, Chen 64–6
Sharjah Biennial 172
Sherman, Cindy 219
Shiff, Richard 106
Shklovsky, Viktor 70
Shonibare, Yinka 12
Siegel, Amy 459
Siegel, Katy 406
Siegelaub, Seth 110
Sierra, Santiago 208–9, 210, 271
Sillman, Amy 90
Singapore 188n8
situatedness 268, 272–3
situationism 155
Situational International 216, 302
Skulptur Projekte Münster 13, 14
slavery 260
Small, Irene V. 106
Small Post-Fordist Drama: homonymous project 207
Smigel, Frank 331
Smith, Adam 394
Smith, Allison 249
Needle Work 248
Smith, Michael 416
Smith, Roberta 346
Smith, Robertson 305
Smith, Terry 6, 460–1

What is Contemporary Art? 27n31, 458–60
Smithson, Robert 80–1, 108, 113, 333, 357
Smithsonian Institution: Hide/Seek 339–40
Snow, C. P. 70, 139
Snyder, Sean 154–5
social art practices 224–5
social documentary 296n7
social networking 39, 138, 167, 204
social responsibility 207
social turn 335, 363
socialism 130
societal shifts 7–8, 9–10, 19
Soth, Alec 350
Sotheby’s 371–3
South Africa 8, 452, 456n15
Soviet Union 236
spectacle 155, 186, 193–4, 302, 303–4, 306
spectator 54, 88, 197, 204, 218–19, 271, 461
spectrality 270, 274
speculate, defined 403–4
Spelman, John 438–46
Spencer-Brown, George 121
Spero, Nancy 10
Spivak, Gayatri 37
sponsorship 109, 392–3, 404
Stallabrass, Julian 37
Der Standard 109
standards of evaluation 96
Stanford University 410
Stars Group 61–2
Stażewski, Henryk 73, 78
Stealth: Lost Highway Project 207
Stein, Suzanne 351
Steinberg, Leo 410
Stella, Frank 53, 120, 121
Stemmrich, Gregor 107
Stewart, John 319
stints/commons 165
Stokstad, Marilyn 447
street art 42, 43–4
Streminiński, Władysław 73, 74
Strewen, Dirk 91
style 72, 219
subaltern condition 56
subjectivity 134, 267, 272–3, 360
Subversive Cross Stich 251
Subversive Seamster 251
Sui Jianguo 98
Suman, Ed 146–7
Summer of Mercy 316
Superflex: Free Beer 205
supersizing of art 346–7
Sussman, Eve 346, 355
Susteric, Apolonija: Juice Bar 212
Sydney Biennial 195
Syjuco, Stephanie: Shadowshop 350–3, 354
systems theory 118
Szeemann, Harold 195–6, 200
When Attitudes Become Form 87
Tagore, Rabindranath: The Religion of Man 254
Taipei Biennial 211, 280–1
Taliban 324, 325
Tanuguchi, Yoshio 352
Tarde, Gabriel 154
Taseer, Salman 322
taste 333, 335, 336–7
see also judgment
Tate Modern 43–4, 48–9n20, 189–90n15
Tatlin, Vladimir: Counter-reliefs 52
Taylor, Josephine 351
Tea Party 315, 317, 318–19
teachers/artists 416
technicity of art 152, 155
techniques, training in 432–3
techno-existential approach 153–4
technological determinism 147
technology/art 137, 139–40, 298
television/video art 151–2
temporality 24–5, 426, 460–1
temporary art academy 421–2
temporary exhibitions 460
terrorism 249, 252n3
Tertullian: De Spectaculis 303, 304–5
textiles 245, 250, 251
textual literalism 317, 318
Thek, Paul 34
Thing: New Sculpture from Los Angeles, Hammer Museum 85
Third Text 456n16
third way politics 207–8
Thompson, Nato 225
Tiananmen Square 8, 234
Tierney, John 347
time
  art 260–1, 263
  form/medium 120
  placed 108
  profane/sacred 305
  and space 24, 73–4
  Time 221
  time-out 255–6
  The Times 346
Tirana Biennial 172
Tiravanija, Rirkrit 156, 217, 439
  Cinema Liberté/Bar Lounge 206
  Secession 163–4, 165
  Utopia Station 11, 198–9, 440
Tokyo Biennial 195
toy-making, China 252
transformative art 279–81
transnational transculturalism 183
Transportation and Security
  Administration, US 245
Trecartin, Ryan 89, 90, 350
Treitel-Gratz Co., Inc. 142–3
Tribe, Mark 458
Trocker, Rosemarie 246
Tsong-zung, Johnson 188n8
Tucker, Marcia 425
  Anti-Illusion 87
Tucumán Arde 236
Turkey 382–4
Tuttle, Richard 133
2008 Prospect, New Orleans 14
typefaces 89

The Uncanny, Vienna Museum of
  Modern Art 35
The Uncertainty of Objects and
  Ideas, Hirshhorn Museum 85
Universal Declaration of Human
  Rights 297n16
University of Arts, Cluj 379
University of Nigeria 451

Unmonumental, New Museum 85
un-monumental art 91
Unpacking Europe 183, 188n9
Valery, Paul 427
Van Bruggen, Coosje 141
Van de Ven, Lidwien 310n18
  Islamic Center, Vienna 307
  London, 4 September 2004 307–8
  Ramallah 11/09/2006 (Boy
    Sitting) 308
van der Pol, Bik: Absolut Stockholm 212
Varela, Francisco 123
Varèse, Edgard 111, 112, 113
veil, full-body 307
Velthuis, Olav 367
Venice Biennale 195
  (1966) 53
  (1993) 122
  (2003) 11, 12, 66
  (2007) 193
  (2011) 171
  and Grand Tour 13
  international pavilions 173
  large scale works 169
  Plan B 381
  return to sculpture 346
  status of 430
  Utopia Station 198–9
  Wave UFO 196
Venturi, Robert 40, 44
Vermeire, Scott 353
Verwoert, Jan 71
video art 92, 151–2, 193
video technologies 89–90
video-sharing services 138
Vidokle, Anton 23, 406, 420–8,
  423–4, 439
  nightschool 211, 422–3, 424, 425,
    428n1
  unitednationsplaza 422–4, 428n1
Vienna art fair 380
Vienna Secession 163
Vietnam War 246, 247
viewer: see spectator
Viola, Bill 24
violence 237, 285, 289–90, 317–18, 322, 325
Virno, Paolo 281
virtuality 163, 193, 348
voting rights act 214–15

W.A.G.E. 348–9
wage labor 259, 260
Wallerstein, Immanuel 162
Walton, Lee 353
war against terror 239, 289–90, 323–4, 325
war/craft 246, 247, 248–50
Warhol, Andy 42, 44, 48n15, 99, 100, 355
Diamond Dust Shoes 40
The Factory 144
Most Wanted 293
Web 2.0 39, 44, 167
Weissman, Terri 298
Werthein, Judi 227, 230
Brinco 226–7, 229
West, Franz 91, 217
Wetner, Lawrence 87
When Attitudes Become Form, Kunsthalle Bern 87
White Bodies Get Mirrored, Migros Museum 85
White, Pae: Smoke Knows 350
White Columns 420, 421
Whitechapel Art Gallery: Street 212
Whitney Biennial 99, 100, 461
Wikipedia 241
Wilde, Oscar 348
Williams, Raymond 192
Winckelmann, Johann: History of Ancient Art 29

Wojnarowicz, David: A Fire In My Belly 339–40
Wolfram Alpha 49n26
work, defined 404
work of art, defined 404
world fairs 194–5
Wright, Frank Lloyd 143
WTO (World Trade Organization) 311–14

Xenakis, Iannis 111, 113
Xiamen Dada group 62
Xijing Men 64–6, 68
Xu Bing 164

Yale School of Art and Architecture 40
Yale University 408
Yang, Alice 101
Yang Haegue 100–1
DINA4/DINA3/DINA2
Whatever Being 95, 102, 103
Yao, Pauline J. 38
yellow ribbon knitting drives 252

Yokohama Triennale of Contemporary Art 188n8
Yoruba peoples 448
Young British Artists 21, 282
Yuan Guiren 429

Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) 237–8
Zheng Guogu 64, 66–7
Age of Empire 67–8
Zia-ul Haq, Muhammed 323
Zinny, Dolores 57
Zittel, Andrea 14, 349
Zmijewski, Artur: Them 205
Zobernig, Heimo 110, 217, 270
Zolghadr, Tirdad 265