

Corner College  
Summer School 2009  
Course Book

Texts by

David Hammons

Ken Lum

Artur Żmijewski

Boris Groys

Brian O'Doherty

Andrea Fraser

Wiesław Borowski

Hanna Ptaszkowska

Mariusz Tchorek

Michel Foucault

Jeff Wall

Seth Price

Jorge Luis Borges

In high school, college or university, students can enroll in classes for credit to be taken into account in their grade point average or their transcript. Generally, this credit is in one of two categories: remediation or advancement. For remediation, the summer school is used to make up credits lost through absence or failure. For advancement, the summer school is used to obtain credit for classes to accelerate progress toward a degree or in order to lessen the load of courses during the regular school year.

In academia the term can also refer to a type of conference. Typically, established academics will give presentations on advanced topics in a field to postgraduate students. This type of summer school is often organized at a national or international level, and no credits are awarded. In addition, a college or university sometimes offers a summer program for teachers or other professional workers wishing to round out their professional or general education.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Summer\\_school](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Summer_school)



In 2007 I wrote a book about Art school called “I got an A+ in Art and You can Too.” It’s an opinionated book about Art for Art school students. It calls attention to how the educational system can bankrupt not only bank accounts but also creativity. Today, Summer School arises out a feeling that Art can be instrumental in creating a better planet.

I have a feeling — and I feel it is shared by a growing population — that Art is more than a pretty picture, more than fashion and glamour, more than a career, more than a commodity. Truly, I feel, Art is an intoxicatingly powerful alive energy.

Summer School is what Philippe Parreno describes as an “alliance of aesthetics.” Rather than only teach you, I hope to learn with you. I am organizing Summer School and I am responsible for it but I feel both students and teachers must learn from one another. We all have knowledge and insights to contribute and it’s arrogant — and impossible — to know it all and to have all the answers. It makes me think that the punk rhetoric of do-it-yourself is somehow misleading. Given the crisis of our global situation, in the new millennium our phrase perhaps could be: Let’s do it.

Antoni Wojtyra  
Zürich, Summer 2009

1. I CAN’T STAND ART ACTUALLY. I’VE NEVER, EVER LIKED ART, EVER. I NEVER TOOK IT IN SCHOOL.

2. WHEN I WAS IN CALIFORNIA, ARTISTS WOULD WORK FOR YEARS AND NEVER HAVE A SHOW. SO SHOWING HAS NEVER BEEN THAT IMPORTANT TO ME. WE USED TO CUSS PEOPLE OUT: PEOPLE WHO BOUGHT OUR WORK, DEALERS, ETC., BECAUSE THAT PART OF BEING AN ARTIST WAS ALWAYS A JOKE TO US.

WHEN I CAME TO NEW YORK, I DIDN’T SEE ANY OF THAT. EVERYBODY WAS JUST GROVELING AND TOM-MING, ANYTHING TO BE IN THE ROOM WITH SOMEBODY WITH SOME MONEY. THERE WERE NO BAD GUYS HERE; SO I SAID, “LET ME BE A BAD GUY,” OR ATTEMPT TO BE A BAD GUY, OR PLAY WITH THE BAD AREAS AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS.

3. I WAS TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHY BLACK PEOPLE WERE CALLED SPADES, AS OPPOSED TO CLUBS. BECAUSE I REMEMBER BEING CALLED A SPADE ONCE, AND I DIDN’T KNOW WHAT IT MEANT; NIGGER I KNEW BUT SPADE I STILL DON’T. SO I TOOK THE SHAPE, AND STARTED PAINTING IT.

4. I JUST LOVE THE HOUSES IN THE SOUTH, THE WAY THEY BUILT THEM. THAT NEGRITUDE ARCHITECTURE. I REALLY LOVE TO WATCH THE WAY BLACK PEOPLE MAKE THINGS, HOUSES OR MAGAZINE STANDS IN HARLEM, FOR INSTANCE. JUST THE WAY WE USE CARPENTRY. NOTHING FITS, BUT EVERYTHING WORKS. THE DOOR CLOSES, IT KEEPS THINGS FROM COMING THROUGH. BUT IT DOESN’T HAVE THAT NEATNESS ABOUT IT, THE WAY WHITE PEOPLE PUT THINGS TOGETHER; EVERYTHING IS A THIRTY-SECOND OF AN INCH OFF.

5. THAT’S WHY I LIKE DOING STUFF BETTER ON THE STREET, BECAUSE THE ART BECOMES JUST ONE OF THE OBJECTS THAT’S IN THE PATH OF YOUR EVERYDAY EXISTENCE. IT’S WHAT YOU MOVE THROUGH, AND IT DOESN’T HAVE ANY SENIORITY OVER ANYTHING ELSE.

THOSE PIECES WERE ALL ABOUT MAKING SURE THAT THE BLACK VIEWER HAD A REFLECTION OF HIMSELF IN THE WORK. WHITE VIEWERS HAVE TO LOOK AT SOMEONE ELSE’S CULTURE IN THOSE PIECES AND SEE VERY LITTLE OF THEMSELVES IN IT.

6. ANYONE WHO DECIDES TO BE AN ARTIST SHOULD REALIZE THAT IT’S A POVERTY TRIP. TO GO INTO THIS PROFESSION IS LIKE GOING INTO THE MONASTERY OR SOMETHING; IT’S A VOW OF POVERTY I ALWAYS THOUGHT. TO BE AN ARTIST AND NOT EVEN TO DEAL WITH THAT POVERTY THING, THAT’S A WASTE OF TIME; OR TO BE AROUND PEOPLE COMPLAINING ABOUT THAT.

MY KEY IS TO TAKE AS MUCH MONEY HOME AS POSSIBLE. ABANDON ANY ART FORM THAT COSTS TOO MUCH. INSIST THAT IT’S AS CHEAP AS POSSIBLE IS NUMBER ONE AND ALSO THAT IT’S AESTHETICALLY CORRECT. AFTER THAT ANYTHING GOES. AND THAT KEEPS EVERYTHING INTERESTING FOR ME.

7. I DON’T KNOW WHAT MY WORK IS. I HAVE TO WAIT TO HEAR THAT FROM SOMEONE.

I WOULD LIKE TO BURN THE PIECE. I THINK THAT WOULD BE NICE VISUALLY. VIDEOTAPE THE BURNING OF IT. AND SHOOT SOME SLIDES. THE SLIDES WOULD THEN BE A PIECE IN ITSELF. I’M GETTING INTO THAT NOW: THE SLIDES ARE THE ART PIECES AND THE ART PIECES DON’T EXIST.

8. IF YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE THEN IT’S EASY TO MAKE ART. MOST PEOPLE ARE REALLY CONCERNED ABOUT THEIR IMAGE. ARTISTS HAVE ALLOWED THEMSELVES TO BE BOXED IN BY SAYING “YES” ALL THE TIME BECAUSE THEY WANT TO BE SEEN, AND THEY SHOULD BE SAYING “NO.” I DO MY STREET ART MAINLY TO KEEP ROOTED IN THAT “WHO I AM.” BECAUSE THE ONLY THING THAT’S REALLY GOING ON IS IN THE STREET; THAT’S WHERE SOMETHING IS REALLY HAPPENING. IT ISN’T HAPPENING IN THESE GALLERIES.

9. DOING THINGS IN THE STREET IS MORE POWERFUL THAN ART I THINK. BECAUSE ART HAS GOTTEN SO....I DON’T KNOW WHAT THE FUCK ART IS ABOUT NOW. IT DOESN’T DO ANYTHING. LIKE MALCOLM X SAID, IT’S LIKE NOVOCAINE. IT USED TO WAKE YOU UP BUT NOW IT PUTS YOU TO SLEEP. I THINK THAT ART NOW IS PUTTING PEOPLE TO SLEEP. THERE’S SO MUCH OF IT AROUND IN THIS TOWN THAT IT DOESN’T MEAN ANYTHING. THAT’S WHY THE ARTIST HAS TO BE VERY CAREFUL WHAT HE SHOWS AND WHEN HE SHOWS NOW. BECAUSE THE PEOPLE AREN’T REALLY LOOKING AT ART, THEY’RE LOOKING AT EACH OTHER AND EACH OTHER’S CLOTHES AND EACH OTHER’S HAIRCUTS.

10. THE ART AUDIENCE IS THE WORST AUDIENCE IN THE WORLD. IT’S OVERLY EDUCATED, IT’S CONSERVATIVE, IT’S OUT TO CRITICIZE NOT TO UNDERSTAND, AND IT NEVER HAS ANY FUN. WHY SHOULD I SPEND MY TIME PLAYING TO THAT AUDIENCE?

DAVID HAMMONS, 1986

# Ken Lum

## Something's Missing

The Canadian artist Ken Lum delivered the keynote address opening the 2006 Biennale of Sydney. The following is an excerpt.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, IN DAKAR, SENEGAL, on the occasion of Dak'Art, the largest art biennial in West Africa, I was on Gorée Island, a short ferry ride from Dakar, a place developed during the 17<sup>th</sup> century as an administrative post for the embarkation of slaves destined for the Americas. For more than three centuries, European nations fought for control of Gorée's lucrative trade in human beings. At the former fort and now museum known as Maison des Esclaves, or House of Slaves, a "door of no return" signals the threshold over which slaves would pass to begin their harrowing, often deadly transatlantic voyage, shackled to the low-ceilinged holds of wooden slave ships. The slaves were forced to lie on their backs, pressed up against one another in head-to-toe and toe-to-head formation. On display in the House of Slaves were various historical documents produced by colonial officials, including drawings that depict the organization of human cargo on the ships in stick-figure form. These drawings were, in essence, what businesses today would call efficiency-analysis charts, as they aided slave-trade officials in working out a ratio of the maximum possible human freight to the lowest acceptable number of deaths. While in the House of Slaves, I saw many people who had come to Gorée Island in an act of remembrance of their roots. It was quite a moving sight: grown men and women sobbing uncontrollably at the magnitude of the historical trauma.

Leaving the House of Slaves, I encountered a man selling what appeared to be scarves. They were made out of cloth and laid out like drying laundry in the sun. Painted on the cloth were stick-figure patterns that echoed the drawings I had just

seen. The man had used the stick-figure motif to create a pattern that could also seem abstract. The effect of his works hovered between historical and aesthetic engagement. I stopped to talk and I asked him about his work. He told me that they were paintings, works of art. I learned that he spoke several languages and had worked for some time as a Russian translator when Senegal was briefly a client state of the Soviet Union. He then asked me if I would be interested in buying one of his paintings for a thousand dollars. As I was about to leave—not committing to a purchase—he said that if I wanted a painting as a scarf, he would be willing to sell it for ten dollars.

This story from Senegal is a poignant reminder of the relationship between political economy and art. By political economy, I am referring to the social determinants of production that shape and place limitations on art. The man outside the House of Slaves saw himself as an artist and profoundly understood the ways in which he had been shaped by political economy. As I spoke to him, his poverty evoked in me the responsibilities so well formulated by Walter Benjamin in his essay *The Author as Producer*, in which he expressed his belief that it is incumbent upon the artist to identify with the poor. He wrote that upon seeing a poor man, an artist must recognize "how poor he is and how poor he has to be in order to begin again from the beginning."

Political economy is a constant yet largely unspoken referent in many of the contemporary-art biennials that take place around the world. In Dakar, I heard complaints from several visiting European and American critics and curators about how shoddy Dak'Art looked. Exhibition walls were not always properly

painted and the technical equipment was older and more modestly scaled than in the richer biennials of the West. Leading critics and curators failed to recognize the degree of lack in a place such as Senegal. Even immersed in the hard realities of West Africa, the myth that all artists start from the same place continued to be perpetuated.

We like to believe that art operates in a space separate from political economy. We even like to believe that this separation is necessary in order to maintain a critical distance from the social order. There is some validity to this separation, in that critical distance from one's own presuppositions can allow for different epistemic perspectives. But I am also wary of the ways in which this separation can be used in the service of a neo-colonialist logic in the context of places like Senegal, where, historically, cultural production has often been measured in imposed-from-afar formalist or anthropological terms, but seldom regarded in terms that recognize indigenously derived criteria.

There have been several occasions in my life when I contemplated withdrawing from art in order to find out what I did not know about art. But my withdrawal was in the manner of a Heideggerian withdrawal of the withdrawal. The trip I made to Dakar in 1998 was undertaken on my own initiative as a means of breaking out from the art system as I then knew it, an effort to deepen my understanding of how art could be defined differently. This was a time when I felt great disillusionment about art and great disappointment in myself, a crisis of being that I believe afflicts all artists from time to time. I had a choice: I could either stop being an artist or I could enlarge my frame

of understanding of art by looking away from what I was accustomed to.

I began to embrace an increasingly philosophical view of artistic purpose, one inscribed more in terms of the artist's life and less in terms of the art world's idea of the artist. I saw the necessity of letting go of the art world as I knew it in order to be more free, to rediscover the true purpose of art and to become re-encharmed with it by giving myself over to the world.

I became increasingly interested in initiating projects that could contribute to a wider understanding of contemporary art. In the mid-1990s, I wrote an on-line column for a leading English art magazine. In 1998, I was appointed project manager for the exhibition "The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945–1994." In 2001, I organized a symposium in Italy involving Palestinian and Israeli artists that centred on the question of how one makes art in an environment of great social and political distress. Last year, I co-curated two exhibitions, the first a historical project about China's troubled relationship to modernism during the pre-communist period of Republican rule. The second was the seventh Sharjah International Biennial, the most serious and ambitious art biennial in the Middle East. I saw all of these projects as extensions of my artistic practice, as I no longer saw artistic practice defined solely in terms of the production and exhibition of my art.

I am constantly asking myself: is this all there is to art? To ask such a question is to remain forever dissatisfied, a necessary condition for an artist. To be an artist means to be in a constant search for meaning. This calls up Bertolt Brecht's memorable two words from *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*: "Something's missing." In Brecht's opera, Mahagonny is a city built on illusions. It is "a hollow place" where the promise of human happiness is always tied to money and never met. I had started to think of the art world as such a hollow place, where something was missing beneath the plenitude of display and consumption.

Visiting Poland in 1999, I saw an exhibition of Polish conceptual art in Warsaw entitled "Conceptual Reflection in Polish Art: Experiences of Discourse: 1965–1975." At the time, I was a contributor to ARTMargins, a HTML-based publication of the University of California, Santa Barbara, concerned with issues of contemporary Central and Eastern European visual culture. The exhibition had as its objective a realignment of the field of conceptual art. From the perspective of the West, the primacy of American and Western European conceptual art was de rigueur in any formulation of art-historical narrative and usually went as follows: Eastern European artists, yearning to be free from tyranny, looked to Western artists and institutions for guidance. With its emphasis on dematerialized forms and metaphysical critique, a Western-formulated conceptual art imparted an inherently democratic ethos that made possible an allegorized critique of Poland's authoritarian social environment. The lessons offered by the West in terms of artistic strategy would inspire Polish artists to formulate their own conceptually based responses to their own subjugation.

But this asymmetrical narrative of conceptual art is but one example of the many problems and contradictions inherent in Western art-historical accounting. Important to consider is the specific political context from which Polish conceptual art emerged. Such a consideration offers a more complex understanding of conceptual art as a category. Western conceptualism used its connections to Polish conceptualism to dispel an agnostic ambivalence towards a positioning of art in relation to realpolitik. And Polish conceptualism needed Western conceptualism to push its allegory of politics under the guise of an apolitical universalism.

Polish conceptualism can only be understood by acknowledging the cruel absurdity of Poland's political and social environment. In a performance entitled *Memorizing*, by the Polish art collective Druga Grupa, a mnemonic exercise of a fortuitously chosen piece of text underlined the

many rules Poles were required to abide by in their daily lives under authoritarian rule.

A salient feature of Polish conceptualism was the insistence on audience interaction. In this way, it avoided the trap of metaphysical formalism so endemic to Western conceptual art. In Polish conceptual art, metaphysics was but the first step of a philosophical proposition, the second being its application and grounding in materialism. What is remarkable is how this second step did not render the works didactic, nor did it diminish any utopian allusions. On the contrary, by underpinning their art with an analysis of the political economy within which it was produced, Polish conceptual artists expressed a utopianism that was all the more painful and fragile to experience.

This is but one example of the insight I gained after my refusal to be confined by the parameters set by the art world. Another comes from teaching in Martinique in 1997. The Caribbean island is not far from South America or, for that matter, Florida, yet Martinique television aired only French stations and kiosks sold only French publications. The entire media focus was directed to and from France. The art education of the students at the Institut régional d'art visuel reflected Martinique's outre-mer status as a department of France. I was struck by their incertitude regarding the problem of incorporating their own situation into their art; the students doubted that their lives could be valid content for art.

They knew very little about contemporary art outside of France. They were familiar with Andy Warhol, of course, but a discussion of Warhol would inevitably lead to Pierre Restany, Martial Raysse and the Nouveaux réalistes, not to Pop manifestations in South America or Britain, and certainly not the United States. The collation of the school's pedagogical program with Paris was reflected in the faculty. Almost all of the instructors were given bonus isolation pay. And despite the paradisaical setting of Martinique, there was a palpable sense of humiliation among

the instructors for having to be there. My students were not very familiar with the work of Frantz Fanon, who wrote about the psychological effects of colonialism and the internalization of racism, and is—along with Aimé Césaire and Édouard Glissant—one of Martinique’s most celebrated thinkers. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon wrote:

*I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny. I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence. In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.*

I felt that the students of the Institut régional d’art visuel did not question enough the world that produced them. The problem was not complacency, as is often the case with art students from places of surfeit and privilege. Rather, they had not been given the tools to critique their own situation. As a result, they were unable to define themselves in relation to historical trauma in the context of the Caribbean. I sensed their sense of isolation, their sense of “something’s missing.”

When I asked where they had travelled to, they said they had not been anywhere except Guadeloupe, an island north of Martinique that is also an outre-mer department of France. Asked where they would like to travel, they unanimously responded Paris. While most people would like to travel to Paris, their response reminded me of a scene from *Touki Bouki*, a key film of the West African new-wave cinema of the 1970s, in which the two protagonists incessantly sing the Josephine Baker song “Paris, Paris.” *Touki Bouki* is about the psychic persistence of colonialism among the colonized; it persisted among my students in terms of where they desired to go. The film presents the dream of going to Paris as a self-searching journey and makes ironic the unfulfilled promises of the post-colonial condition. In my view,

my students saw the world in similarly bracketed terms. The art school in Martinique ran counter to my understanding of what art should do, which is to raise one’s consciousness of one’s place in the world, and to produce expression at the borders of what can and cannot be said in any given social and historical context.

These experiences in Martinique are never far from me, regardless of where I am. I believe that the role of the artist is to give expression to his or her experiences in a continuous act of self-definition. In a famous passage from Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, the fictional narrator describes the experience of eating a petite madeleine over lime-blossom tea:

*No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palette than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me... I put down the cup and examined my own mind.*

The passage articulates the centrality of sensory experience to artistic consciousness. Being an artist entails the assumption that everything in life is relevant. I have learned that the expression of experience need not be determined by the dictates of the art system. This does not mean that I have completely extricated myself from this system, only that I have re-evaluated what it means to be an artist.

In Delhi last year, I was part of a conference entitled “The Making of International Exhibitions: Siting Biennials,” organized by Geeta Kapur and Vivan Sundaram. The theme of the conference had to do with what Kapur has described as a reimagining of community that considers the specificities of the developing world’s relationship to modernism.

During an afternoon break, I took a bicycle-cab ride through Delhi’s busy streets to the Chawri Bazaar in Chandni Chowk, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century market considered by Delhiites

to be the soul of their city. Chandni Chowk is an utterly phantasmagoric experience. As I was navigated through its crowded passageways, I wondered what Walter Benjamin would have had to say about such a place. In his discussion of 19th-century Parisian shopping arcades, he describes the passageways within the arcades as spatialized pasts:

The bazaar is the last hangout of the flâneur. If in the beginning the street had become an intérieur for him, now this intérieur turned into a street, and he roamed through the labyrinth of merchandise as he had once roamed through the labyrinth of the city... The flâneur is someone abandoned in the crowd. In this he shares the situation of the commodity.

But the Chawri Bazaar in Chandni Chowk is far more hallucinatory in the breadth and depth of its sensory offerings. In contrast with Benjamin’s emphasis on the singularity of the flâneur’s experience in the Parisian arcades, spectatorial embodiment is completely broken down in the Chawri Bazaar. To enter this space is to enter a maze of narrow lanes teeming with people—from shoppers and urchin children to beggars and mendicants. Tiny shops saturated with colour and flashing lights compete for the attention of the throngs of people filling the narrow passageways. The market is divided into different quarters, each specializing in particular commodities and services, from foodstuffs and fabrics to chemicals and industrial appliances. Interspersed throughout are countless eateries engulfed in steam and filling the air with a plethora of smells. Barking voices from megaphones clash with music from loudspeakers. There are mosques, Hindu and Sikh temples and Catholic and Protestant churches all in close proximity to one other. Little children barely the height of my waist weaved themselves around the adults, heading for where I had no idea. Teams of long-limbed, yellow-brown monkeys darted from the shoulders of one person to the next, their sudden appearance surprising no one but me.

Tangled webs of electrical cables could be seen overhead in thick and unruly masses. I noticed a large knot of badly burned cables that had melted into a ball. Underneath this ball I could see the charred surfaces of a former shop, barely visible under a skin of brightly coloured posters. A man from the shop opposite noticed me and shouted, “It was a terrible event, the fire.” I looked at the man and then up at the burned-out cables.

I asked myself: how can art compete with what I have just experienced? How can art even come close to all that I have seen, smelled, touched and heard here? I realized that the question is not a fair one, for art cannot compete. Life is infinitely more complex.

And yet art should be about life, and draw from it sustenance and relevance. The purpose of art should be to offer a space for pause and

reflection. Nothing can take the place of what I experienced at Chandni Chowk, not even art. But what art can and should do is evoke Chandni Chowk.

Winter 2006

## Artur Żmijewski The Applied Social Arts

DOES CONTEMPORARY ART HAVE ANY VISIBLE SOCIAL IMPACT? Can the effects of an artist’s work be seen and verified? Does art have any political significance—besides serving as a whipping boy for various populists? Is it possible to engage in a discussion with art—and is it worth doing so? Most of all, why are questions of this kind viewed as a blow against the very essence of art?

Art had long struggled to gain autonomy, to free itself from politics, religion, authority, and everything else that sought to use art for its own ends. Independence was to have made art more important: every avant-garde movement saw art as being equal in stature with such reality-shapers as science, knowledge, politics, or religion. Aleksander Lipski wrote:

Non-figurative art has struck at the inviolable core of the traditional artistic paradigm requiring the depiction of figures. The global artistic revolution is therefore the culmination of the emancipation of art. The process whereby art severed all ties and allegiance to externalities such as politics, religion, philosophy, technology and the mores of the day was complete with the abandonment of one last principle—that of signification.<sup>1</sup>

The desire to be an active agent creating the social and political environment came up against a hidden enemy, however. That enemy was—and still is—shame. Politically committed art has often come to a tragic end. Artists supporting totalitarian regimes, like the Nazi sculptors Josef Thorak and Arno Breker, or filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl, compromised the very possibility of art becoming an instrument of politics. Polish art owes its sense of shame to its fling with socialist realism.

Guilt and shame associated with the past alongside the desire for art to be an active, contributing presence in public life has produced a paradoxical effect. All consequences attrib-

utable to art are now suspect; every visible change occasioned by its commitments has come under fire. The unseen authority that comes from the co-creation of symbolic realities lend structure to our shared world. whether we like it or not, even this is being challenged. That tangle of shame, fear of appropriation, and the desire for influence has led to alienation. Shame has set in motion the mechanisms of repression and denial. Instead of drawing enjoyment from the outcome of their actions, the visual and performing arts are content merely to dream of such outcomes: fantasy has supplanted reality.

The autonomy of art has therefore made it “inconsequential.” The actions of art no longer have any visible or verifiable impact. The deficit that Peter Bürger once discerned in bourgeois art has made its way into high culture: “the exaltation of art above day-to-day experience [is] typical for the status of a work of art in a bourgeois society... Aestheticism is also a manifestation of art’s failure to produce social consequences.”<sup>2</sup> Naturally, social consequences have occurred, but not necessarily the ones that were most desired. Over the last fifteen years or so, these consequences have included the following:

1. Scandals breaking out over the topics art proposed to introduce into public debate.
2. The continuing brutalisation of public debate has been attributed by *Gazeta Wyborcza* journalist Anna Zawadzka to the violent language used by art in the 1990s and the resulting media backlash.
3. Players from the realm of politics “learning” how to use subversive strategies that had once been proper to art. Subversive strategies “are the best example of Benjamin’s proposed shift of emphasis from ‘content’ to ‘apparatuses of production’ that enable one to use ‘foreign’ representations in mak-



ing one's own work."<sup>3</sup> One instance of such subversive action was when right-wing deputies to the Polish parliament Witold Tomczak and Halina Nowina-Konopczyna removed the stone (meteor) from the prone figure of pope John Paul II (Maurizio Catellan's *La Nona Ora*) during an exhibition in Warsaw's Zachęta gallery in December 2000. Tomczak and Konopczyna demonstrated they could "read and understand" the strategies of art, and were capable of using them. Once Tomczak and Konopczyna learned how to perpetrate a transgression, and violate the taboo associated with gallery spaces, they simply responded "in kind," using the language of gestures and visual action, or the language of performance. In 1997, Katarzyna Kozyra used a hidden camera to film women in a Budapest bathhouse, and did the same in a men's establishment two years later. The resulting film was shown at the Venice biennale, causing the inevitable uproar in the Polish press. Repetition and media coverage helped bring this "denunciatory" strategy into the mainstream. In 2002, newspaper editor Adam Michnik secretly recorded film producer Lew Rywin when the latter came asking for a bribe, while in 2006 member of parliament Renata Beger filmed her privately conducted negotiations with other politicians and released the recordings to the media. Kozyra, Michnik and Beger all engaged in similarly questionable behaviour while emphasising the ends justifying their choice of means. Transgression has thus become a valid political strategy. Since then, a whole series of "negative" transgressions or violations of democratic taboos have been perpetrated by education minister Roman Giertych.

4. Violating one set of taboos leads to the emergence of other taboos (Joanna Tokarska-Bakir); perhaps art contributed to redrawing the map with its focus on some parts of the body politic, as a result of which others became taboo. Art has therefore struggled to retain its power to act, but it should have remained as perpetually neutral as Switzerland in its exercise. And what would constitute fair use of that power? Let me quote an exhibition invitation sent out over the Web: "A profound interest in the physical and mental limitations of human beings has become the wellspring of Źmijewski's artistic inquiries, leading to questions his bewildered viewers ineffectually seek to answer." The foregoing provides a simple definition of what artists should make viewers: bewildered recipients ineffectually looking for answers. Evidently, art produces states of helplessness and generates questions to which there are no answers. The word "ineffectually" bespeaks the alienation art has unknowingly lapsed into. Asked what made him become an actor, Jeremy Irons, known for his portrayal of tragic lovers (*Swann's Way*, *Lolita*) answered that he wanted to be "outside of society."

The consequence of the trauma of "being used" is refusal. Guilt and shame have been encoded in art as a "flight from"—an ongoing process of inner negotiation well-expressed in the title of an exhibition Grzegorz Kowalski and Maryla Sitkowska mounted on the centenary of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw: *Duty and Rebellion*.<sup>4</sup> Even though the exhibition concerned the academy as an institution, its title was indicative of a split present within art. This split allows art to "work for" the state and the national economy, and serve society as a shaper of environments, producer of visual information systems, designer of interiors and industrial goods, in short—to do its duty. On the other hand, art is kept from lapsing into dependence on the authorities by its rebelliousness, because it insistently challenges the taboo, nurtures dreams, proliferates freedom, and produces social knowledge, (art can be said to be an open university of knowledge). Art constantly offers and denies its services to the powers that be. In doing its duty it usually does not cross a certain line marked out by shame. The deadlock between duty and rebellion does not permit identification or affinity with other discourses that are somehow associated with authority. At most, art can impersonate or lampoon them: imitate the language of politics and religion, lampoon (different word) the language of the media, go for the grotesque. A sense of duty attenuates all attempts at rebellion, while outward rebellion compromises duty. This sets the frame for art, confined within the bounds of duty and subject to an ethics of, necessarily noble, rebellion delimited by shame. Thus does art erect a cognitive barrier for itself. Shame acts as an inner "parole officer" making sure rebellion is not taken too far. Art may be political as long as it stays away from politics—it can act politically in galleries but not in real-life debates unfolding in a different communal space, such as the media. It may be social as long as it does not produce social consequences. In the Nieznalska affair, for instance,<sup>5</sup> the accusations in the media, the indictment, the hearings in court, were treated by Dorota Nieznalska and her circle as a calamity rather than an opportunity to practice art "by other means." They baulked at the prospect of exerting social impact.

Having an effect implies some kind of power, and having power is what art fears the most. The problem is that it already has power. Art has the power to name and define, to intervene in the workings of culture, exert pressure on elements of the social structure by turning them into artefacts (art works). And every artefact is after all an apparatus for actively modelling fragments of reality. If politics is the power to name things, art has that power—perhaps even in spite of itself. Even a love story is an agent of cultural power because it can induce or channel emotional needs.

Let's get back to the freedom associated with rebellion. Is rebellion in art a manifestation of freedom? No, because it is limited by duty. Rebellion has its limits; these are reached much earlier than the ones laid down by civil and criminal law. Rebellion has been harnessed to achieve a dialectical rupture. Where there is no rebellion, duty reigns, and art is reduced to the ancillary function of satisfying social needs and supporting the authorities. Rebellion must be present to offset the performance of shameful duties. That is why it is part of the package with its illusion of autonomy. Rebellion is, so to speak, "a duty."

Since the 1990s, art has been growing increasingly institutionalised. Institutional critics, now in charge of defining the remit of art, have been moving to mitigate art's "ideological turpitude." Fantasies about the alleged "needs" of the marketplace are also discouraging more radical forms of expression. Defiance can only be taken so far nowadays, and besides: the art market will also commodify rebellion. Art is becoming more and more anodyne.

Shame constitutes a deep emotional substratum of art. Shame at having been implicated in power relations and endorsing totalitarian regimes prevents it from engaging in politics or explicitly creating discourses of knowledge. Anything political and scientific can only be a by-product of art. Owing to this reluctance to "take ownership of knowledge," attempts to call attention to social problems or discuss areas society would otherwise be indifferent to are accompanied by opposition and even hostility towards discourses appointed to handle these problems and issues, i.e. science and politics. Autonomy in art has gone so far as to become a measure of ideological purity, an acid test of "artistic integrity." Symbolic power, strength through knowledge, openly political attitudes are simply rejected.

On top of it all, one has to contend with the ignorance of artists. As Marcin Czerwiński wrote back in the 1970s, artists do not have "the ability to translate intuition into discursive language" and thus rely on "the germs of truth scattered across reality that have the potential to develop into either ideas or images."<sup>6</sup> That is one of the reasons why art has been called a social symptom. The euphemism refers to the unwitting, intuitive way it performs an assigned task. Artists as creative individuals are, according to this view, unwitting mediums of social processes. Willingly or not they visualise its crucial junctures in a perfectly mindless way. That makes the artist an idiot savant of sorts: someone with interesting and important things to say but no idea how these things came to them or what use to put them to. Czerwinski calls such a state "ideological abstinence," while Joanna Tokarska-Bakir has this to say on the subject:

The artists of today might in a somewhat 19<sup>th</sup> century way be perceived as secularised high priests who, acting 'through the symbolic medium that is the physical human body,' try to act out ritually a certain form of unexplored social relations that has come to dominate the world. The problem being that the relations they want to express through art are understood neither by themselves nor by the societies they want to reveal them to.<sup>7</sup>

It might, in fact, be in the interest of society to keep artists ignorant to some extent. The cognitive procedures of art based on risk and intuition seem threatening. The lameness of theoretical education in art schools might be a symptom of unconscious reluctance on the part of the community to enhance the intuitive tools of art.

Is there a way out of this trap? Is it possible to stop defining what does and does not befit a client of the authorities, of business, and even a rebel? Art has already made a step towards doing away with this dialectics. It has assumed the position of a judge, an evaluator—the paradoxical position of an "involved observer." It has elaborated strategies of social critique—a

hermeneutics of the "socially evident." With her action where she peeled potatoes in Warsaw's Zachęta gallery, Julita Wójcik encouraged us to read that commonplace activity as a statement about the shifting battlefield and a nod at things that are really hidden outside the pale of high culture. Wójcik contributed to changing the protagonist: the nature of reality is determined by an "invisible majority," rather than exotic exceptions. Critique along these lines can involve either artistic identification with "the causes of evil" or interventionist and remedial action insofar as that is possible. These are the constituents of a paradigm shift involving explicit support for processes of modernization or discourses of knowledge, sometimes even agreeing to undertake topical intervention and negotiate on behalf of vulnerable groups. One can say that this has partly helped overcome the alienation of art, its shying away from consequence, and its refusal to exert any real and verifiable influence. But there is more at stake: regaining control over the ideology that leads to the unthinking generation of autonomy and is the cause of continual regress, and limiting the audacity and scope of artistic action.

One of the reasons for the alienation of art is that it relies on the language of images. Despite their immediacy, images remain unclear to representatives of other disciplines. Pictures are not texts. Rather, they are read "all at once," and all their meanings are taken in with a single glance. Such a suspension of linear reading, and the fact that meaning reveals itself in a flash, opening up a whole range of associations is tantamount to "cognitive violence." There is less scope for "proprietary images" than reading a text provides. Texts stimulate the imagination: when we read we see images—a mosaic of visualisations emerging from the memory and "superimposed onto" the text. Therein lies the blankness of words: a word is not the things it names. Images are bolder in the way they refer to the object depicted. "In a picture the object surrenders itself entirely and its image is sure—as opposed to text and other perceptions that render the object blurred and debatable, and as such cause me to mistrust what I seem to be seeing."<sup>8</sup>

Confronted with a picture, the imagination works not to fill in the blankness of words, but to determine, "What is it that I see?" Yet what else can the thing I see be, since it is already, "Everything there is?" The inability to read images is surely a form of illiteracy, and experts from other fields could do with a few remedial classes. The ignorance here is twofold: artists are seen as ignorant by experts in other fields and vice versa: experts in the field of, say, science or politics are as helpless as children when it comes to "reading" images. Anthropology, for one, holds the view that art's involvement in various kinds of social criticism brings unclear effects:

Documentary practice has come to resemble fine arts photography—by drawing on the more subtle and abstract forms of photographic expression—at a time when photography as an art form is evolving into some kind of fuzzy social criticism, ambiguous rather than straightforward and literal: a function of how photographers perceive society than of systematic analysis.<sup>9</sup>

The findings that artists put forward are seen as too ambiguous and not verifiable in any scientific way. But this only shows how prone to “cognitive fundamentalism” science is when faced with an intuitive medium. The result is another ideological debate in which opposing arguments are derided as being unclear, vague, ambiguous, etc. The passage quoted above also tells us that science has learned “more subtle and abstract forms of photographic expression” from art. Now that it has “become aware” of the cultural ubiquity of images, does science not want to dominate over the ways they are read just as it has dominated our thinking about knowledge, by peremptorily persuading us it is the only credible source of that knowledge?

Furthermore, the knowledge that emerges as the product of artistic activity is obstinately reduced to the status of a merely aesthetic proposition by experts from other fields. Even though art literally “shows” what it has come to know, and its knowledge is discursive and lends itself to reasoning, the cliché that art is merely a producer of aesthetics is so ingrained that it produces an “indifference effect” among experts from other fields. The knowledge art has generated remains inaccessible to them – they are unable to read it. Meanwhile it was none other than an anthropologist who wrote the following passage:

In this language [of film] individual images/frames are words, shots and camera angles are the inflectional elements, while editing provides the syntax. [...] A series of images, arranged—organised—according to a certain convention (the grammar of cinema) into a collection of takes directly linked to one another in terms of meaning, makes up a phrase of editing. [...] Depending on the way images and shots are spliced together, on the phrases used in editing, the idiom of film may be used to construct ‘epic phrases’ declarative sentences of sorts, depicting a slice of life, an action sequence, fragments of an event. One can also compose (edit) so-called ‘reasoned phrases’—through the skilful arrangement of semantically unrelated visual and/or sonic (verbal, musical) fragments—thus evoking associations, bringing out analogies, and even constructing metaphorical sentences. In effect, a cinematic text may assume forms resembling discourse, and thus satisfy the basic requirement made of a scientific language.”<sup>10</sup>

As I have indicated, art has, of its own accord, rejected consequences, and turned its back on effects. Nonetheless, it still manages to come up with useful cognitive procedures. Existential algorithms, the use of which makes it possible to “keep your eyes open” when exploring social structures, and to enter into hidden places and true relations. In the cognitive equation we construct out of known and unknown qualities so that we may, in solving it, make the world a more transparent place, art has replaced speculation with existence. Existence speculates, thinks, and comes to know itself. Rather than drawing graphs, art becomes involved in real situations. Its cognitive strategies do not place reality in brackets like science does. It goes beyond the bracket—knowledge emerges within life, springs out of emotion, visions, sensations, and real experience. Suffused with con-

traditions and anxiety, mistakes and hopes, good and ethical deficiency, authoritarianism and timidity, it is all of these things at once. In order to know reality, art does not patronize but becomes one with it. “Impossible,” science would protest, “the observer must be external with respect to the object under observation. S/he is placed outside by the very act of observation.” Art, meanwhile, claims that this need not be the case. The bracket and its observer intermesh in a total cognitive experience. The observer emerges out of it through the image which becomes both the gateway to knowledge and its source—a referent, an address, a hotlink. Images as an extremely capacious form of writing in which contradiction and incoherence may be inscribed without detriment to the discourse, convey total knowledge—everything there is to know. But there are, in that simultaneity, orders of reading, layered like a theatre stage: upstage, centre-stage, downstage, wings, etc.

The problem has to do with the language of critical practice whose associations make it possible for art to be defined as inimical to society. One example is the language used to define the concept of an “artistic virus.” Art, it claims, produces artefacts: social and cultural events that “infect” various parts of the social system just like viruses infect an organism. They “damage” or “alter” it. The infected system must change: heal or be cured. The problem is that the associations produced by the word “virus” are all negative: poison, disease, parasite, enemy. The concept of art as a virus infecting and operating in various parts of the social system leaves no room for verification—what is the impact of the infection? Does it ever occur at all? How do we check what an “artistic virus” has done? Can the impact be anything other than just infection? Infection which is in itself an achievement because it sets in motion fantasies of change and influence.

Why must we talk about viruses, and not algorithms for instance? In mathematics, computing, linguistics, and related disciplines, an algorithm is a procedure (a finite set of well-defined instructions) for accomplishing some task which, given an initial state, will terminate in a defined end-state. “In mathematics and computer science algorithms are finite, orderly sets of clearly defined actions necessary to perform a task in a limited number of steps... Algorithms are to guide a system from a certain initial state to a desired final state.”<sup>11</sup> Such rigorous procedures would, of course be dysfunctional when applied to art. But if a virus can be a metaphor for action, so can an algorithm. Algorithms imply something operational and positive, a mode of purposeful action. I am not proposing that we artificially replace one term with another, but that we change the meanings of language; that the new meanings would allow us to consider the possibility of impact, to see art as a “device that produces impact” and operate as guides for systems from a certain initial state to a desired final state.

Neither the immunity of art nor its stature has any effect on science, and neither science nor politics are afraid of art. What ought to be done, now that too much autonomy has led to the alienation of art, so that it is “not heard” and most of the knowledge it generates is being squandered?

1. The first way could be for art to instrumentalize its own autonomy and thus regain control over it. Instrumentalization would mean reducing the role of autonomy to that of a tool

like other tools. Autonomy would then once more become useful for the carrying out of plans and would no longer be a means of controlling our (the artists’) “ideological purity.” Instrumentalization is a “choice of dependency.” Art could once again serve as an instrument of knowledge, science, and politics.

2. The second way would be to encroach upon other fields, such as science or politics, as a way of proving oneself. The point is to work with people who are not in awe of art. Stature is what protects artists and critics from being “called.” There is the famous story about Duchamp submitting a urinal he signed R. Mutt for an exhibition. The qualifying committee rejected the work, with only Duchamp himself voting in favour. The piece could only be shown once Duchamp admitted it was his work. What made the difference was the stature of the author.

The stature and immunity that protect art are unknown in sciences such as, say, anthropology or sociology. There, an artist’s statement is a verifiable hypothesis that can be refuted with the aid of other, more convincing arguments. Experts from other fields are substantively better prepared to debate the claims art makes. Since art is interested in social issues, what better interlocutor for it than a sociologist or social psychologist? I do not want to overestimate specialists in other disciplines—they too are limited by the invisible assumptions of their fields. Nonetheless art reviewers lack competence. They need sociological, philosophical and psychological expertise. Karol Sienkiewicz in *Sekcja*, an Internet magazine run by Art History students at Warsaw University, sums up the discussion around Repetition as follows:

Less relevant are the artistic merits of the project— “project” because it cannot be brought down to a forty-odd minute long film. I am not referring to the editing, the aesthetic categories or whether this or that critic was bored during the screening—such categories are irrelevant when trying to judge or interpret Repetition. Perhaps art history and criticism with all their tools are still helpless in the face of [the work]. An art historian wanting to take part in a discussion among sociologists and psychologists can only assume the role of a homespun connoisseur.”<sup>12</sup>

Critics often do not know enough; this lack of knowledge can lead art back to aestheticising. In the archaic, circular mode of communication where critics mediate between the artist and the viewer, lack of knowledge on the part of critics “forces” artists to simplify their message and return to a reduced art— one that is restricted to the bounds critics have set for it. With this art, their competence is able to “handle.” For what the critic cannot understand cannot be expressed and never makes it into the circuit of knowledge. It is not revealed within the work. That, too, is one of the effects—and causes—of alienation.

It would be interesting if a work of art were “defeated” in the course of a genuine discussion or a clash of arguments. At the moment, a discussion with such an ending is not possible: art overwhelms its opponents. You could say that the ability to defeat opponents is embedded in a work of art or the

tangle of its ambiguity, stature, and immunity. Opponents find this knot nearly impossible to disentangle; it perpetuates the symbolic violence encoded in art. Usually there is no dialogue in the first place. There is only a monologue where the artist provides a single canonical interpretation. If there are any battles at all, they are waged to maintain the supremacy of that interpretation.

3. It is also worth trying to keep statements by reviewers from being treated as decrees. Since the turn of the century we have been witnessing a clear ideological asymmetry—the voice of artists is growing fainter. It is being drowned by successive teams of reviewers proclaiming the emergence or obsolescence of certain subjects in art. Such was the case with the new banalists; with art meant to be helpful; with art addressing issues of globalization. The most notorious statement to that effect was made by Magdalena Ujma on the website of the Bunkier Sztuki gallery, when she said that taking an interest in power has become “passé.” The following year sociologist Jadwiga Staniszkis published *O władzy i bezsilności*<sup>13</sup> [“On Power and Powerlessness”], a book taking up the issue of new forms of power, its changing image and means of control, and last but not least its networked nature. Would Staniszkis also regard an [academic] interest in power as being “passé?” In a world where the authorities fall back on “the terrorist threat” in order to reassert their prerogatives, where the government eavesdrops on law-abiding citizens, and changes the meaning of language, can power be so naively dismissed? Magdalena Ujma’s comment brought out a crucial problem, that of the loss of an acquired competence. Encroaching upon the study of power relations gave art valuable competence in that field. But such competence has no chance of holding its own against the asymmetry of strength and frequency that obtains between statements by critics and artists. Artists “keep quiet”—they are reluctant to defend and explain their actions, and leave that task up to reviewers. What art will and will not be interested in can be determined by the skillful management of fads, by terming this or that “passé,” and by alternately praising and wounding the narcissist within every artist. This is where something I would call ideological amnesia and the amnesia of competence come in. Art becomes skilled in carrying out certain cognitive procedures; when these become useful and universally applied, they are compromised. This is what leads to ideological amnesia, or the loss of an acquired competence. Just as art accumulates knowledge about modes of visual action: composition, colour, spatial relations, so could it, in theory, verbalize and accumulate knowledge about the cognitive and critical procedures it applies.

Does that mean that extending the scope of freedom in art is not merely an illusion? “The decrees of reviewers” have left us with an internal hegemonic discourse where pluralism should have been. A true area of freedom could be obtained by simply using the plural: for example, if we had areas, fields of freedom. A variety of fields of interest and, above all, if we kept and developed the competencies we had once acquired.

Instrumentalization of autonomy makes it possible to use art for all sorts of things: as a tool for obtaining and disseminating knowledge and as a producer of cognitive procedures relying on intuition and the imagination and serving the cause

of knowledge and political action. Naturally, art may still perform its classical function and express “the most poignant moments of the human condition.” Control over autonomy is not the only kind of control that should be achieved. There is still the problem of originality and opaqueness. These too should be tools that can be used freely when the need arises. One would have to strip originality of its judgmental function, that is its propensity for control and exclusion.

I think that art could try and restore the original meanings of words. The term autonomy would then mean the right to choose a sphere of freedom instead of being an extreme personality trait. Originality would be a sign of creativity and not novelty at all costs. And, finally, opaqueness would be indicative of the difficulty of a message, not its illegibility and inability to communicate.

Will dependence on other discourses: politics and science not lead to an ideological reduction of content to what is useful from the standpoint of a group’s political interests, for instance? Such a risk does exist but there are at least two reasons why it should be taken up:

1. Art manages very well in risky areas, while the “uselessness” artists feel can encourage risky behaviour. Wilhelm Sasnal said he sometimes feels like a “gallery louse” in collaborating with an art world that produces tautological references. Dependence on clearly “utilitarian discourses” is in all likelihood a subconscious desire on the part of artists expressed in fantasies of change that could occur through the agency of art.
2. Politics, science, and religion can do what art no longer can: achieve a connection with reality by producing useful tools: tools for the implementation of power and of knowledge. By becoming once again dependent, art may learn how to be socially useful, even at an operational level (it already knows how to challenge reality and can count on support for its proliferation of rebellion).

A good example of an artistic activity not afraid of entering into various forms of dependence is film. Film is literally “used” by various discourses. Film is a way to intervene, fight for something, inform, educate, update knowledge, tell fairy tales, persuade, call attention to problems, critical junctures, etc. And film is very close to the realm of art. Today, the camera is the artist’s best friend.

In a text about Elżbieta Jabłońska critic Dorota Jarecka asked: “Whom should art serve today, and for what purpose?”... [Should it] engage in political discussion that will always be inadequate when placed against the discourse of philosophers and sociologists?”<sup>14</sup> Yes, it should engage in such discussion. Art will enhance that discussion with its ability to use different strategies, its familiarity with intuition, imagination, and premonition. Unfortunately, art also has severe weaknesses and tends to dismiss its own importance. It has infused its discourse with self-compromising, amnesia, and recurring ignorance. Theoretical subjects in art school are taught as if they were merely a device for expanding the memory rather than

exercises in thinking and discovering the world. There is doubtless some political interest in keeping art weak by forcing it to flounder between ignorance and knowledge and having it perpetuate seemingly useful clichés regarding beauty and the artsy types who produce it. In the collective circuit of power, art is never “charged” as its “inventions” are not accepted. Arrested on the verge of the rational, it makes its actions out to be nothing more than vivid yet irrational fantasies. In the 1990s it played the rube, paying its share of the bill for the changes happening in the country (that would partly account for the scandals around art in recent years) – knocking on a weak discourse pays off in the economics of national frustration. In any struggle for power somebody has to play the useful idiot – and art with its naivete and lack of defensive strategies was often used for such a purpose, notably by the LPR15 . We all lost out on our the failure to use the cognitive procedures developed by art to any greater extent. These procedures are based on intuition and imagination, denying one’s righteousness and giving up judgementalism.

Intuition and the imagination embrace repressed and denied fantasies, desires and needs, and help search for ways to satisfy them. Renouncing the role of judge will reveal our collective and individual complicity in the injustices of the system. Then it will no longer be “them” but us who will share responsibility for the way our shared reality looks.

Notes

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>1 A. Lipski, <u>Elementy socjologii sztuki. Problem awangardy artystycznej XX wieku</u> [Elements of the Sociology of Art. Issues of the Artistic Avant-garde of the 20th Century] (Wrocław: Atla 2, 2001).</p> <p>2 P. Bürger, <u>Theory of the Avant-Garde</u> (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).</p> <p>3 Ł. Ronduda, “Strategie subwersywne w sztukach medialnych” [“Subversive Strategies in the Media-based Arts”], <a href="http://www.exchangegallery.cosmosnet.pl/subwersywne_text.html">http://www.exchangegallery.cosmosnet.pl/subwersywne_text.html</a></p> <p>4 Powinność i Bunt. <u>Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie 1944–2004</u> [Duty and Rebellion. The Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw] (Galeria Zachęta, 2004).</p> <p>5 In 2001, Dorota Nieznalska showed a cruciform lightbox at the Wyspa gallery in Gdańsk. In the centre of the cross was placed a photo depicting male genitalia. The object was accused of offending religious sentiments, and a lengthy court case ensued.</p> <p>6 M. Czerwinski, <u>Samotność sztuki</u> [The Solitude of Art] (Warszawa: PIW, 1978).</p> <p>7 J. Tokarska-Bakir, “Energia odpadków” [“The Energy of Waste”] <u>Res Publica Nowa</u>, no. 3 (2006).</p> <p>8 R. Barthes, <u>Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography</u> (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1981).</p> | <p>9 D. Harper, “On the Authority of the Image: Visual Methods at the Crossroads” in <u>Antropologia obrazu</u> [Anthropology of the Image], ed. K. Olechnicki, (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2003).</p> <p>10 R. Vorbrich, “Tekst werbalny i niewerbalny” [“Verbal and Non-verbal Text”] in <u>Antropologia wobec fotografii i filmu</u> [Anthropology and Photography and Film], (Poznań: Biblioteka Tęgłte, 2004).</p> <p>11 Wikipedia, <a href="http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Algorytm">http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Algorytm</a>.</p> <p>12 K. Sienkiewicz, “Bezradność krytyka. Uwagi na marginesie dyskusji o Powtórzeniu Artura Żmijewskiego” [“The Helplessness of the Critic. Comments on the Discussion about Artur Żmijewski’s Repetition”], <a href="http://www.sekcia.org/miesiecznik.php?id_artykulu=107">http://www.sekcia.org/miesiecznik.php?id_artykulu=107</a>.</p> <p>13 J. Staniszkis, <u>O władzy i bezsilności</u> [On Power and Powerlessness] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2006).</p> <p>14 D. Jarecka, “To już fanaberia Jabłońskiej!” [“A Bee in Jabłońska’s Bonnet”], <u>Gazeta Wyborcza</u>, April 7, 2006.</p> <p>15 The League of Polish Families is a political party established in 2001 following the merger of several Catholic-national factions.</p> |
|---|---|

# Boris Groys

## Self-Design and Aesthetic Responsibility

These days, almost everyone seems to agree that the times in which art tried to establish its autonomy—successfully or unsuccessfully—are over. And yet this diagnosis is made with mixed feelings. One tends to celebrate the readiness of contemporary art to transcend the traditional confines of the art system, if such a move is dictated by a will to change the dominant social and political conditions, to make the world a better place—if the move, in other words, is ethically motivated. One tends to deplore, on the other hand, that attempts to transcend the art system never seem to lead beyond the aesthetic sphere: instead of changing the world, art only makes it look better. This causes a great deal of frustration within the art system, in which the predominant mood appears to almost perpetually shift back and forth between hopes to intervene in the world beyond art and disappointment (even despair) due to the impossibility of achieving such a goal. While this failure is often interpreted as proof of art’s incapacity to penetrate the political sphere as such, I would argue instead that if the politicization of art is seriously intended and practiced, it mostly succeeds. Art can in fact enter the political sphere and, indeed, art already has entered it many times in the twentieth century. The problem is not art’s incapacity to become truly political. The problem is that today’s political sphere has already become aestheticized. When art becomes political, it is forced to make the unpleasant discovery that politics has already become art—that politics has already situated itself in the aesthetic field.

In our time, every politician, sports hero, terrorist, or movie star generates a large number of images because the

media automatically covers their activities. In the past, the division of labor between politics and art was quite clear: the politician was responsible for the politics and the artist represented those politics through narration or depiction. The situation has changed drastically since then. The contemporary politician no longer needs an artist to gain fame or inscribe himself within popular consciousness. Every important political figure and event is immediately registered, represented, described, depicted, narrated, and interpreted by the media. The machine of media coverage does not need any individual artistic intervention or artistic decision in order to be put into motion. Indeed, contemporary mass media has emerged as by far the largest and most powerful machine for producing images—vastly more extensive and effective than the contemporary art system. We are constantly fed images of war, terror, and catastrophe of all kinds at a level of production and distribution with which the artist’s artisanal skills cannot compete.

Now, if an artist does manage to go beyond the art system, this artist begins to function in the same way that politicians, sports heroes, terrorists, movie stars, and other minor or major celebrities already function: through the media. In other words, the artist becomes the artwork. While the transition from the art system to the political field is possible, this transition operates primarily as a change in the positioning of the artist vis-à-vis the production of the image: the artist ceases to be an image producer and becomes an image himself. This transformation was already registered in the late nineteenth century by Friedrich Nietzsche, who famously claimed that it is better to be an

artwork than to be an artist. Of course, becoming an artwork not only provokes pleasure, but also the anxiety of being subjected in a very radical way to the gaze of the other—to the gaze of the media functioning as a super-artist.

I would characterize this anxiety as one of self-design because it forces the artist—as well as almost anybody who comes to be covered by the media—to confront the image of the self: to correct, to change, to adapt, to contradict this image. Today, one often hears that the art of our time functions increasingly in the same way as design, and to a certain extent this is true. But the ultimate problem of design concerns not how I design the world outside, but how I design myself—or, rather, how I deal with the way in which the world designs me. Today, this has become a general, all-pervasive problem with which everyone—and not just politicians, movie stars, and celebrities—is confronted. Today, everyone is subjected to an aesthetic evaluation—everyone is required to take aesthetic responsibility for his or her appearance in the world, for his or her self-design. Where it was once a privilege and a burden for the chosen few, in our time self-design has come to be the mass cultural practice par excellence. The virtual space of the Internet is primarily an arena in which MyFace and MySpace are permanently designed and redesigned to be presented on YouTube—and vice versa. But likewise in the real—or, let’s say, analog—world, one is expected to be responsible for the image that he or she presents to the gaze of others. It could even be said that self-design is a practice that unites artist and audience alike in the most radical way: though not everyone produces art-

works, everyone is an artwork. At the same time, everyone is expected to be his or her own author.

Now, every kind of design—including self-design—is primarily regarded not as a way to reveal things, but as a way to hide them. The aestheticization of politics is similarly considered to be a way of substituting substance with appearance, real issues with superficial image-making. While the issues constantly change, the image remains. Just as one can easily become a prisoner of his or her own image, one's political convictions can be ridiculed as being mere self-design. Aestheticization is often identified with seduction and celebration. Walter Benjamin obviously had this use of the term “aestheticization” in mind when he opposed the politicization of aesthetics to the aestheticization of politics at the end of his famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” But one can argue, on the contrary, that every act of aestheticization is always already a critique of the object of aestheticization simply because this act calls attention to the object's need for a supplement in order to look better than it actually is. Such a supplement always functions as a Derridean pharmakon: while design makes an object look better, it likewise raises the suspicion that this object would look especially ugly and repellent were its designed surface to be removed.

Indeed, design—including self-design—is primarily a mechanism for inducing suspicion. The contemporary world of total design is often described as a world of total seduction from which the unpleasantness of reality has disappeared. But I would argue, rather, that the world of total design is a world of total suspicion, a world of latent danger lurking behind designed surfaces. The main goal of self-design then becomes one of neutralizing the suspicion of a possible spectator, of creating the sincerity effect that provokes trust in the spectator's soul. In today's world, the production of sincerity and trust has become everyone's occupation—and yet it was, and still is, the main occupation of art

throughout the whole history of modernity: the modern artist has always positioned himself or herself as the only honest person in a world of hypocrisy and corruption. Let us briefly investigate how the production of sincerity and trust has functioned in the modern period in order to characterize the way it functions today.

One might argue that the modernist production of sincerity functioned as a reduction of design, in which the goal was to create a blank, void space at the center of the designed world, to eliminate design, to practice zero-design. In this way, the artistic avant-garde wanted to create design-free areas that would be perceived as areas of honesty, high morality, sincerity, and trust. In observing the media's many designed surfaces, one hopes that the dark, obscured space beneath the media will somehow betray or expose itself. In other words, we are waiting for a moment of sincerity, a moment in which the designed surface cracks open to offer a view of its inside. Zero-design attempts to artificially produce this crack for the spectator, allowing him or her to see things as they truly are.

But the Rousseauistic faith in the equation of sincerity and zero-design has disappeared in our time. We are no longer ready to believe that minimalist design suggests anything about the honesty and sincerity of its designing subject. The avant-garde approach to the design of honesty has thus become one style among many possible styles. Under these conditions, the effect of sincerity is created not by refuting this initial suspicion, but by confirming it. This is to say that we are ready to believe that a crack in the designed surface has taken place—that we are able to see things as they truly are—only when the reality behind the façade shows itself to be dramatically worse than we had ever imagined. Confronted with a world of total design, we can only accept a catastrophe, a state of emergency, a violent rupture in the designed surface, as sufficient to allow for a view of the reality that lies beneath. And of course this reality too must show itself

to be a catastrophic one, because we suspect something terrible to be going on behind the design—cynical manipulation, political propaganda, hidden intrigues, vested interests, crimes. Following the death of God, the conspiracy theory became the only surviving form of traditional metaphysics as a discourse about the hidden and the invisible. Where we once had nature and God, we now have design and conspiracy theory.

Even if we are generally inclined to distrust the media, it is no accident that we are immediately ready to believe it when it tells us about a global financial crisis or delivers the images from September 11 into our apartments. Even the most committed theorists of postmodern simulation began to speak about the return of the real as they watched the images of September 11. There is an old tradition in Western art that presents an artist as a walking catastrophe, and—at least from Baudelaire on—modern artists were adept at creating images of evil lurking behind the surface, which immediately won the trust of the public. In our days, the romantic image of the poète maudit is substituted by that of the artist being explicitly cynical—greedy, manipulative, business-oriented, seeking only material profit, and implementing art as a machine for deceiving the audience. We have learned this strategy of calculated self-denunciation—of self-denunciatory self-design—from the examples of Salvador Dalí and Andy Warhol, of Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst. However old, this strategy has rarely missed its mark. Looking at the public image of these artists we tend to think, “Oh, how awful,” but at the same time, “Oh, how true.” Self-design as self-denunciation still functions in a time when the avant-garde zero-design of honesty fails. Here, in fact, contemporary art exposes how our entire celebrity culture works: through calculated disclosures and self-disclosures. Celebrities (politicians included) are presented to the contemporary audience as designed surfaces, to which the public responds with suspicion and conspiracy theories. Thus, to make

the politicians look trustworthy, one must create a moment of disclosure—a chance to peer through the surface to say, “Oh, this politician is as bad as I always supposed him or her to be.” With this disclosure, trust in the system is restored through a ritual of symbolic sacrifice and self-sacrifice, stabilizing the celebrity system by confirming the suspicion to which it is necessarily already subjected. According to the economy of symbolic exchange that Marcel Mauss and Georges Bataille explored, the individuals who show themselves to be especially nasty (e.g., the individuals who demonstrate the most substantial symbolic sacrifice) receive the most recognition and fame. This fact alone demonstrates that this situation has less to do with true insight than with a special case of self-design: today, to decide to present oneself as ethically bad is to make an especially good decision in terms of self-design (genius=swine).

But there is also a subtler and more sophisticated form of self-design as self-sacrifice: symbolic suicide. Following this subtler strategy of self-design, the artist announces the death of the author, that is, his or her own symbolic death. In this case, the artist does not proclaim himself or herself to be bad, but to be dead. The resulting artwork is then presented as being collaborative, participatory, and democratic. A tendency toward collaborative, participatory practice is undeniably one of the main characteristics of contemporary art. Numerous groups of artists throughout the world are asserting collective, even anonymous authorship of their work. Moreover, collaborative practices of this type tend to encourage the public to join in, to activate the social milieu in which these practices unfold. But this self-sacrifice that forgoes individual authorship also finds its compensation within a symbolic economy of recognition and fame.

The modern state of affairs in art can be described easily enough: the artist produces and exhibits art, and the public views and evaluates what is exhibited. This arrangement would

seem primarily to benefit the artist, who shows himself to be an active individual in opposition to a passive, anonymous mass audience. Whereas the artist has the power to popularize his or her name, the identities of the viewers remain unknown in spite of their role in providing the validation that facilitates the artist's success. Modern art can thus easily be misconstrued as an apparatus for manufacturing artistic celebrity at the expense of the public. However, it is often overlooked that in the modern period, the artist has always been delivered up to the mercy of public opinion—if an artwork does not find favor with the public, then it is de facto devoid of value. This is modern art's main deficit: the modern artwork has no “inner” value of its own, no merit beyond what public taste bestows upon it. In ancient temples, aesthetic disapproval was insufficient reason to reject an artwork. Their statues were regarded as embodiments of the gods: they were revered, one kneeled down before them in prayer, one sought guidance from them and feared them. Poorly made idols and badly painted icons were in fact part of this sacred order, and to dispose of any of them out would have been sacrilegious. Thus, within a specific religious tradition, artworks have their own individual, “inner” value, independent of the public's aesthetic judgment. This value derives from the participation of both artist and public in communal religious practices, a common affiliation that relativizes the space between artist and public.

By contrast, the secularization of art entails its radical devaluation. This is why Hegel asserted at the beginning of his *Lectures on Aesthetics* that art was a thing of the past. No modern artist could expect anyone to kneel in front of his or her work in prayer, demand practical assistance from it, or use it to avert danger. The most one is prepared to do nowadays is to find an artwork interesting, and of course to ask how much it costs. Price immunizes the artwork from public taste to a certain degree—had economic considerations not been a factor in limiting the immediate expression of public

taste, a good deal of the art held in museums today would have landed in the trash a long time ago. Communal participation within the same economic practice also weakens the radical separation between artist and audience, encouraging a certain complicity in which the public is forced to respect an artwork for its high price even when that artwork is not well liked. However, there still remains a significant difference between an artwork's religious value and its economic value. Though the price of an artwork is the quantifiable result of an aesthetic value that has been identified with it, the respect paid to an artwork due to its price does not by any means translate automatically into any form of binding appreciation. This binding value of art can thus be sought only in noncommercial, if not directly anti-commercial practices.

For this reason, many modern artists have tried to regain common ground with their audiences by enticing viewers out of their passive roles, by bridging the comfortable aesthetic distance that allows uninvolved viewers to judge an artwork impartially from a secure, external perspective. The majority of these attempts have involved political or ideological engagement of one sort or another. Religious community is thus replaced by a political movement in which artists and audiences communally participate. When the viewer is involved in artistic practice from the outset, every piece of criticism uttered becomes self-criticism. Shared political convictions thus render aesthetical judgment partially or completely irrelevant, as was the case with sacral art in the past. To put it bluntly: it is now better to be a dead author than to be a bad author. Though the artist's decision to relinquish exclusive authorship would seem primarily to be in the interest of empowering the viewer, this sacrifice ultimately benefits the artist by liberating his or her work from the cold eye of the uninvolved viewer's judgment.



# Brian O'Doherty

## Inside the White Cube: Notes on the Gallery Space, Part I

A recurrent scene in sci-fi movies shows the earth withdrawing from the spacecraft until it becomes a horizon, a beachball, a grapefruit, a golf ball, a star. With the changes in scale, responses slide from the particular to the general. The individual is replaced by the race and we are a pushover for the race a mortal biped, or a tangle of them spread out below like a rug. From a certain height people are generally good. Vertical distance encourages this generosity. Horizontality doesn't seem to have the same moral virtue. Far away figures may be approaching and we anticipate the insecurities of encounter. Life is horizontal, just one thing after another, a conveyor belt shuffling us toward the horizon. But history, the view from the departing spacecraft, is different. As the scale changes, layers of time are superimposed and through them we project perspectives with which to recover and correct the past. No wonder art gets bollixed up in this process; its history, perceived through time, is confounded by the picture in front of your eyes, a witness ready to change testimony at the slightest perceptual provocation. History and the eye have a profound wrangle at the center of this "constant" we call tradition.

All of us are now sure that the glut of history, rumor and evidence we call the modernist tradition is being circumscribed by a horizon. Looking down, we see more clearly its "laws" of progress, its armature hammered out of idealist philosophy, its military metaphors of advance and conquest. What a sight it is—or was! Deployed ideologies, transcendent rockets, romantic slums where degradation and idealism obsessively couple, all those troops running back and forth in conventional wars. The campaign reports that end up pressed between boards on coffee-tables give us little idea of the actual heroics. Those paradoxical achievements huddle down there, awaiting the revisions that will add the avant-garde era to tradition or, as we sometimes fear, end it. Indeed tradition itself, as the spacecraft withdraws, looks like another piece of bric-a-brac on the coffee-table—no more than a kinetic assemblage glued together with reproductions, powered by little mythic motors and sporting tiny models of museums. And in its midst, one notices an evenly lighted "cell" that appears crucial to making the thing work: the gallery space.

The history of modernism is intimately framed by that space. Or rather the history of modern art can be correlated with changes in that space and in the way we see it. We have now reached a point where we see not the art but the space first. (A cliché of the age is to ejaculate over the space on entering a gallery.) An image comes to

mind of a white, ideal space that, more than any single picture, may be the archetypal image of 20th-century art. And it clarifies itself through a process of historical inevitability usually attached to the art it contains.

The ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is "art." The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself. This gives the space a presence possessed by other spaces where conventions are preserved through the repetition of a closed system of values. Some of the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, the mystique of the experimental laboratory joins with chic design to produce a unique chamber of esthetics. So powerful are the perceptual fields of force within this chamber that once outside it, art can lapse into secular status—and conversely. Things become art in a space where powerful ideas about art focus on them. Indeed the object frequently becomes the medium through which these ideas are manifested and proffered for discussion—a popular form of late modernist academicism ("ideas are more interesting than art"). The sacramental nature of the space becomes clear, and so does one of the great projective laws of modernism: as modernism gets older, context becomes content. In a peculiar reversal, the object introduced into the gallery "frames" the gallery and its laws.

A gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church. The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light. The wooden floor is polished so that you click along clinically or carpeted so that you pad soundlessly, resting the feet while the eyes have at the wall. The art is free, as the saying used to go, "to take on its own life." The discreet desk may be the only piece of furniture. In this context a standing ashtray becomes almost a sacred object, just as the firehose in a modern museum looks not like a firehose but an esthetic conundrum. Modernism's transposition of perception from life to formal values is complete. This, of course, is one of modernism's fatal diseases.

Unshadowed, white, clean, artificial, the space is devoted to the technology of esthetics. Works of art are mounted, hung, scattered for study. Their ungrubby surfaces are untouched by time and its vicissitudes. Art exists in a kind of eternity of display, and though there is lots of "period" (late modern), there is no time. This eternity gives the gallery a limbolike status; one has to have died already to be there. Indeed the presence of that odd piece of furniture, your own body, seems superfluous, an intrusion. The space offers the thought that while eyes

and minds are welcome, space-occupying bodies are not—or are tolerated only as kinesthetic mannequins for further study. This Cartesian paradox is reinforced by one of the icons of our visual culture: the installation shot, sans figures. Here at last the spectator, oneself, is eliminated. You are there without being there, one of the major services provided for art by its old antagonist, photography. The installation shot is a metaphor for the gallery space. In it, an ideal is fulfilled as strongly as in a Salon painting of the 1830s.

Indeed, the Salon itself implicitly defines what a gallery is, a definition appropriate for the esthetics of the period. A gallery is a place with a wall, which is covered with a wall of pictures. The wall itself has no intrinsic esthetic; it is simply a necessity for an upright animal. Samuel F. B. Morse's Exhibition Gallery at the Louvre (1833) is upsetting to the modern eye: masterpieces as wallpaper, each one not yet separated out and isolated in space like a throne. Disregarding the (to us) horrid concatenation of periods and styles, the demands made on the spectator by the hanging pass our understanding. Are you to hire stilts to rise to the ceiling or to get on hands and knees to sniff anything below the dado? Both high and low are underprivileged areas. You overheard a lot of complaints from artists about being "skied" but nothing about being "floored." Near the floor, pictures were at least accessible and could accommodate the connoisseur's "near" look before he withdrew to a more judicious distance. One can see the 19<sup>th</sup>-century audience strolling, peering up, sticking their faces in pictures and falling into interrogative groups a proper distance away, pointing with a cane, perambulating again, clocking off the exhibition picture by picture. Larger paintings rise to the top (easier to see from a distance), and are sometimes tilted out from the wall to maintain the viewer's plane; the "best" pictures stay in the middle zone; small pictures drop to the bottom. The perfect hanging job is an ingenious mosaic of frames without a patch of wasted wall showing.

What perceptual law could justify such (to our eyes) a barbarity? One and one only. That each picture was seen as a self-contained entity, totally isolated from its slum-close neighbor by a heavy frame around and a complete perspective system within. Space was discontinuous and categorizable, just as the houses in which these pictures hung had different rooms for different functions. The 19<sup>th</sup> century mind was taxonomic, and the 19<sup>th</sup>-century eye recognized hierarchies of genre and the authority of the frame.

How did the easel picture become such a neatly wrapped parcel of space? The discovery of perspective coincides with the rise of the easel picture, and the easel picture, in turn, confirmed the promise of illusionism inherent in painting. There is a peculiar relation between a mural- painted directly on the wall- and a picture that hangs on a wall; a painted wall is replaced by a piece of portable wall. Limits are established and framed; miniaturization becomes a powerful convention that assists rather than contradicts illusion. The space in murals tends to be shallow; even when illusion is an intrinsic part of the

idea, the integrity of the wall is as often reinforced by struts of painted architecture as denied. The wall itself is always recognized as limiting depth (you don't walk through it), just as corners and roof (often in a variety of inventive ways) limit size. Close up, murals tend to be frank about their means- illusionism breaks down in a babble of method. You feel you are looking at the underpainting and often can't quite find your "place." Indeed murals project ambiguous and wandering vectors with which the spectator attempts to align himself. The easel picture on the wall quickly indicates to him exactly where he stands. For the easel picture is like a portable window that, once set on the wall, penetrates it with deep space. This theme is endlessly repeated in northern art, where a window within the picture in turn frames not only a further distance but confirms the windowlike limits of the frame. The magical, boxlike status of some smaller easel pictures is due to the immense distances they contain and the perfect details they sustain on close examination. The frame of the easel picture is as much a psychological container for the artist as the room in which he stands is for the viewer. The perspective positions everything within the picture along a cone of space, against which the frame acts like a grid, echoing those cuts of foreground, middle-ground and distance within. One "steps" firmly into such a picture, or glides in effortlessly, depending on its tonality and color. The greater the illusion, the greater the invitation to the spectator's eye; the eye is abstracted from an anchored body and projected as a miniature proxy into the picture to inhabit and test the articulations of its space.

For this process, the stability of the frame is as necessary as an oxygen tank to a diver. Its limiting security completely defines the experience within. The border as absolute limit is confirmed in easel art up to the 19th century. When it curtails or elides subject matter, it does so in a way that strengthens the edge. The classic package of perspective enclosed by the Beaux-Arts frame makes it possible for pictures to hang like sardines. There is no suggestion that the space within the picture is continuous with the space outside it.

This suggestion is made only sporadically through the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as atmosphere and color eat away at the perspective. Landscape is the progenitor of a translucent mist that puts perspective and tone/color in opposition, because both contain, among other things, opposite interpretations of the wall they hang on. Pictures begin to appear that put pressure on the frame. The archetypal composition here is the edge-to-edge horizon, separating zones of sky and sea occasionally underlined by beach with maybe a figure facing, as everyone does, the sea. Formal composition is gone, the frames within the frame (coulisses, repoussoirs, the braille of perspective depth) have slid away. What is left is an ambiguous surface partly framed from the inside, by the horizon. Such pictures (by Courbet, Caspar David Friedrich, Whistler and hosts of little masters) are poised between infinite depth and flatness and tend to read as pattern. The powerful convention of the horizon zips easily enough through the limits of the frame.

These and certain pictures focusing on an indeterminate patch of landscape that often looks like the “wrong” subject introduce the idea of noticing something, of an eye scanning. This temporal quickening makes the frame an equivocal and not an absolute zone. Once you know that a patch of landscape represents a decision to exclude everything around it, you are faintly aware of the space outside the picture. The frame becomes a parenthesis. The separation of paintings along a wall, through a kind of magnetic repulsion, becomes inevitable. And it is accentuated and largely initiated by the new science—or art—devoted to the excision of a subject from its context: photography.

In a photograph, the location of the edge is a primary decision, since it composes- or decomposes- what it surrounds. Eventually framing, editing, cropping- establishing limits- become major acts of composition. But not so much in the beginning. There was the usual holdover of pictorial conventions to do some of the work of framing- internal buttresses made up of convenient trees and knolls. But the best early photographs reinterpret the edge without the assistance of pictorial conventions. They lower the tension on the edge by allowing the subject matter to compose itself, rather than consciously aligning it with the edge. Perhaps this is typical of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The 19<sup>th</sup> century looked at a subject- not at its edges. Various fields were studied within their declared limits. Studying not the field but its limits, and defining these limits for the purpose of extending them, is a 20<sup>th</sup>-century habit. We have the illusion that we add to a field by extending it laterally, not by going, as the 19<sup>th</sup> century might say in proper perspective style, deeper into it. Even scholarship in both centuries has a recognizably different sense of edge and depth, of limits and definition. Photography quickly learned to move away from heavy frames and to mount a print on a sheet of board. A frame was allowed to surround the board after a neutral interval. Early photography recognized the edge but removed its rhetoric, softened its absolutism and turned it into a zone rather than the strut it later became. But one way or another, the edge as a firm convention locking in the subject had become fragile.

Much of this applied to Impressionism. where a major theme is the edge as umpire of what’s in and what’s out. But this is combined with a far more important force, the beginning of the decisive thrust that eventually altered the idea of the picture, the way it was hung, and ultimately the gallery space: the myth of flatness, which became the powerful logician in painting’s argument for self-definition. The development of a shallow literal space (containing invented forms, as distinct from the old illusory space containing Unreal” forms) put further pressures on the edge. The great inventor here is, of course, Monet.

Indeed the magnitude of the revolution he initiated is such there is some doubt his achievement matches it, for he is an artist of decided limitations, or one who decided on his limitations and stayed within them. Monet’s landscapes often seem to have been noticed on his way to or from the real subject. There is an impression that he is sealing for a provisional solution; the very featurelessness relaxes your eye to look elsewhere. The informal subject

maker of Impressionism is always pointed out, but not that the subject is seen through a casual glance, one not too interested in what it’s looking at. What is interesting in Monet is “looking at” this look—the integument of light, the often preposterous formularization of a perception through a punctate code of color and touch which remains (until near the end) impersonal. The edge eclipsing the subject seems a somewhat haphazard decision that could just as well have been made a few feet to left or right. A signature of Impressionism is the way the casually chosen subject softens the edge’s structural role at a time when the edge is under pressure from the increasing shallowness of the space. This doubled and somewhat opposing stress on the edge is the prelude to the definition of a painting as a self-sufficient object—a container of illusory fact now become the primary fact itself, which sets us on the high road to some stirring esthetic climaxes.

Flatness and objecthood usually find their first official text in Maurice Denis’ famous statement in 1890 that before a picture is subject matter it is first of all a surface covered with lines and colors. This is one of those literalisms that sounds brilliant or rather dumb depending on the zeitgeist. Right now, when we’ve seen the end-point to which nonmetaphor, nonstructure, nonillusion and noncontent can take you, the zeitgeist makes it sound a little obtuse. The picture plane, the everthinning integument of modernist integrity, sometimes seems ready for Woody Allen, and has indeed attracted its share of ironists and wits. But this ignores that the powerful myth of the picture plane received its impetus from the centuries during which it sealed in unalterable systems of illusion. Conceiving it differently, in the modern era, was an heroic adjustment that signified a totally different world view, which was trivialized into esthetics, into the technology of flatness.

The literalization of the picture plane is a great subject. As the vessel of content becomes shallower and shallower, composition and subject maker and metaphysics all overflow across the edge until, as Gertrude Stein said about Picasso, the emptying out is complete. But all the jettisoned apparatus- hierarchies of painting, illusion, locatable space, mythologies beyond number- bounced back in disguise and attached themselves, via new mythologies, to the literal surface which had apparently left them no purchase. The transformation of literary myths into literal myths—objecthood, the integrity of the picture plane, the equalization of space, the self-sufficiency of the work, the purity of form—is unexplored territory. Without this change art would have been obsolete. Indeed its changes often seem one step ahead of obsolescence, and to that degree its progress mimics the laws of fashion.

The cultivation of the picture plane resulted in an entity with length and breadth but no thickness, a membrane which, in a metaphor usually organic, could generate its own self-sufficient laws. The primary law, of course, was that this surface, pressed between huge historical forces, could not be violated. A narrow space forced to represent without representing, to symbolize without benefit of received conventions. generated a plethora of

new conventions without a consensus- color codes, signatures of paint, private signs, intellectually formulated ideas of structure. Cubism’s concepts of structure conserved the easel painting status quo; Cubist paintings are centripetal, gathered toward the center, fading out toward the edge. (Is this why Cubist paintings tend to be small?) Seurat understood much better how to define the limits of a classic formulation at a time when edges had become equivocal. Frequently, painted borders made up of a glomeration of colored dots are deployed inward to separate out and describe the subject. The border absorbs the slow movements of the structure within. To muffle the abruptness of the edge, he sometimes papered all over the frame so that the eye could move out of the picture—and back into it—without a bump.

Matisse understood the dilemma of the picture plane and its tropism toward outward extension better than anyone. His pictures grew bigger as if, in a topological paradox, depth were being translated into a flat analog. On this, place was signified by up and down and left and right, by color, by drawing that rarely closed a contour without calling on the surface to contradict it, and by paint applied with a kind of cheerful impartiality to every part of that surface. In Matisse’s large paintings we are hardly ever conscious of the frame. He solved the problem of lateral extension and containment with perfect tact. He doesn’t emphasize the center at the expense of the edge, or vice versa. His pictures don’t make arrogant claims to stretches of bare wall. They look good almost anywhere. Their tough, informal structure is combined with a decorative prudence that makes them remarkably self-sufficient. They are easy to hang.

Hanging, indeed, is what we need to know more about. From Courbet on, conventions of hanging are an unrecovered history. The way pictures are hung make assumptions about what is offered. Hanging editorializes on matters of interpretation and value, and is unconsciously influenced by taste and fashion. Subliminal cues indicate to the audience its deportment. It should be possible to correlate the internal history of paintings with the external history of how they were hung. We might begin our search not with a mode of display communally sanctioned (like the Salon), but with the vagaries of private insight- with those pictures of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century collectors elegantly sprawled in the midst of their inventory. The first modern occasion, I suppose, in which a radical artist set up his own space and hung his pictures in it, was Courbet’s one-man Salon des Refuses outside the Exposition of 1855. How were the pictures hung? How did Courbet construe their sequence, their relationship to each other, the spaces between? I suspect he did nothing startling. Yet it was the first time a modern artist (who happened to be the first modern artist) had to construct the context of his work and therefore editorialize about its values.

Though pictures may be radical, their early framing and hanging usually is not. The interpretation of what a picture implies about its context is always, we may assume, delayed. In their first exhibition in 1874, the

Impressionists stuck their pictures cheek by jowl, just as they would have hung in the Salon. Impressionist pictures which assert their flatness and their doubts about the limiting edge are still sealed off in Beaux-arts frames that do little more than announce Old Master—and monetary-status. When William C. Seitz took off the frames for his great Monet show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1960, the undressed canvases looked a bit like reproductions until you saw how they began to hold the wall. Though the hanging had its eccentric moments, it read the pictures’ relation to the wall correctly and, in a rare act of curatorial daring, followed up the implications. Seitz also set some of the Monets flush with the wall. Continuous with the wall, the pictures took on some of the rigidity of tiny murals. The surfaces turned hard as the picture plane was “overliteralized.” The difference between the easel picture and the mural was clarified.

The relation between the picture plane and the underlying wall is very pertinent to the esthetics of surface. The inch of the stretcher’s width amounts to a formal abyss. The easel painting is not transferable to the wall, and one wants to know why. What is lost in the transfer? Edges, surface, the grain and bite of the canvas, the separation from the wall. Nor can we forget that the whole thing is suspended or supported- transferable, mobile currency. After centuries of illusionism, it seems reasonable to suggest that these parameters, no maker how flat the surface, are the loci of the last traces of illusionism. Mainstream painting right up to color field is easel painting, and its literalism is practiced against these desiderata of illusionism. Indeed these traces make literalism interesting; they are the hidden component of the dialectical engine that gave the late modernist easel picture its energy. If you copied a late modernist easel picture onto the wall and then hung the easel picture beside it, you could estimate the degree of illusionism that turned up in the faultless literal pedigree of the easel picture. At the same time the rigid mural would underline the importance of surface and edges to the easel picture, now beginning to hover close to an objecthood defined by the “literal” remnants of illusion- an unstable area.

The attacks on painting in the ’60s failed to specify that it wasn’t painting but the easel picture that was in trouble. Color field painting was thus conservative in an interesting way, but not to those who recognized that the easel picture couldn’t rid itself of illusion, and who rejected the premise of something lying quietly on the wall and behaving itself. I’ve always been surprised that color field- or late modernist painting in general—didn’t try to get onto the wall, didn’t attempt a rapprochement between the mural and the easel picture. But then color field painting conformed to the social context in a somewhat disturbing way. It remained Salon painting; it needed big walls and big collectors and couldn’t avoid looking like the ultimate in capitalist art. Minimal art recognized the illusions inherent in the easel picture and didn’t have any illusions about society. It didn’t ally itself with wealth and power, and its abortive attempt to redefine the relation of the artist to various establishments remains largely unexplored.

Apart from color field, late modernist painting postulated some ingenious hypotheses on how to squeeze a little extra out of that recalcitrant picture plane, now so dumbly literal it could drive you crazy. The strategy here was simile (pretending), not metaphor (believing): saying the picture plane is “like a.” The blank was filled in by flat things that lie obligingly on the literal surface and fuse with it, e.g. Johns’s Flags, Cy Twombly’s blackboard paintings, Alex Hay’s huge painted “sheets” of lined paper, Arakawa’s “notebooks.” Then there is the “like a window shade,” “like a wall,” “like a sky” area. There’s a good comedy of manners piece to be written about the “like a” solution to the picture plane. There are numerous related areas, including the perspective schema resolutely flattened into two dimensions to quote the picture plane’s dilemma. And before leaving this area of rather desperate wit, one should note the solutions that cut through the picture plane (Fontana’s answer to the Gordian surface) until the picture is taken away and the wall’s plaster attacked directly.

Also related is the solution that lifts surface and edges off that Procrustian stretcher, and pins, sticks or drapes paper, fiberglass, or cloth directly against the wall to literalize even further. Here a lot of Los Angeles painting falls neatly — for the first time! — into the historical mainstream; it’s a little odd to see this obsession with surface, disguised as it may be with vernacular macho, dismissed because of geographical misplacement as provincial impudence.

All this desperate fuss makes you realize over again what a conservative movement Cubism was. It extended the viability of the easel picture and postponed its breakdown. Cubism was reducible to system, and systems, being easier to understand than art, dominate academic history. Systems are a kind of P.R. which, among other things, push the rather odious idea of progress. Progress can be defined as what happens when you eliminate the opposition. However, the tough opposition voice in modernism is that of Matisse’ and it speaks in its unemphatic, rational way about color, which in the beginning scared Cubism gray. Clement Greenberg’s Art and Culture reports on how the New York artists sweated out Cubism while casting shrewd eyes on Matisse and Miro. Abstract- Expressionist paintings followed the route of lateral expansion, dropped off the frame, and gradually began to conceive the edge as a structural unit through which the painting entered into a dialogue with the wall beyond it. At this point the dealer and curator enter from the wings. How they — in collaboration with the artist — presented these works contributed, in the late ’40s and ’50s, to the definition of the new painting.

Through the ’50s and ’60s, we notice the codification of a new theme as it evolves into consciousness: How much space should a work of art have (as the phrase went) to “breathe?” If paintings implicitly declare their own terms of occupancy, the somewhat aggrieved muttering between them becomes harder to ignore. What goes together, what doesn’t? The esthetics of hanging evolves according to its own habits, which become conventions, which become

laws. We enter the era where works of art conceive the wall as a no-man’s land on which to project their concept of the territorial imperative. And we are not far from the kind of border warfare that often Balkanizes museum group shows. There is a peculiar uneasiness in watching artworks attempting to establish territory but not place in the context of the placeless modern gallery.

All this traffic across the wall made it a far from neutral zone. Now a participant in, rather than a passive support for the art, the wall became the locus of contending ideologies and every new development had to come equipped with an attitude toward it. (Gene Davis’s exhibition of micro-pictures surrounded by oodles of space is a good joke about this). Once the wall became an esthetic force, it modified anything shown on it. The wall, the context of the art, had become rich in a content it subtly donated to the art. It is now impossible to paint up an exhibition without surveying the space like a health inspector, taking into account the esthetics of the wall which will inevitably “artify” the work in a way that frequently diffuses its intentions. Most of us now “read” the hanging as we would chew gum- unconsciously and from habit. The walls’ esthetic potency received a final impetus from a realization that, in retrospect, has all the authority of historical inevitability: the easel picture didn’t have to be rectangular.

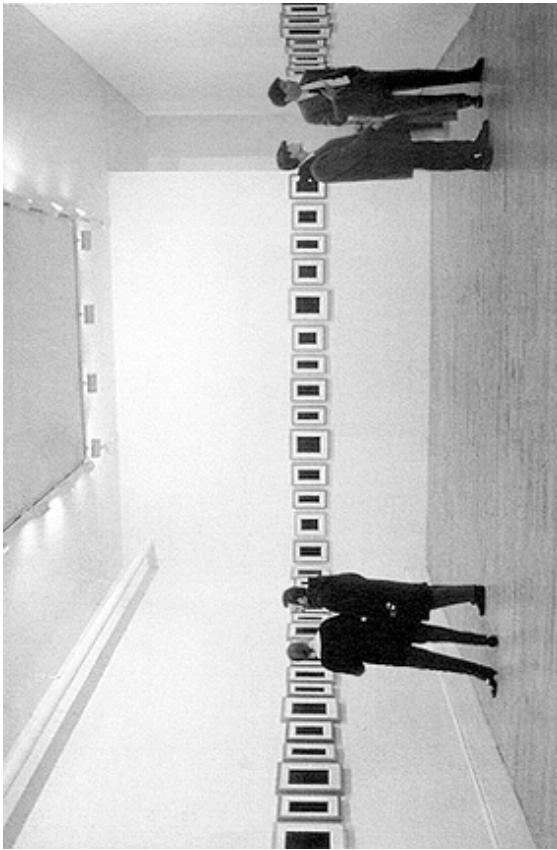
Stella’s early shaped canvases bent or cut the edge according to the demands of the internal logic that generated them. (Here Michael Fried’s distinction between inductive and deductive structure remains of one of the few practical hand tools added to the critic’s black bag). The result powerfully activated the wall; the eye frequently went searching tangentially for the wall’s limits. Stella’s show of striped U-, T- and L-shaped canvases at Castelli in 1960 “developed” every bit of the wall, floor to ceiling, corner to corner. Flatness, edge, format and wall had an unprecedented dialogue in that small uptown Castelli space. As they were presented, the works hovered between an ensemble effect and independence. The hanging here was as revolutionary as the paintings; since the hanging was part of the esthetic, it evolved simultaneously with the pictures. The breaking of the rectangle formally confirmed the wall’s autonomy, altering for good the concept of the gallery space. Some of the mystique of the shallow picture plane (one of the three major forces that altered the gallery space) had been transferred to the context of art.

This result brings us back again to that archetypal installation shot — the suave extensions of the space, the pristine clarity, the pictures laid out in a row like expensive bungalows. Color field painting, which inevitably comes to mind here, is the most imperial of modes in its demand for lebensraum. The pictures recur as reassuringly as the columns in a classic temple. Each demands enough space so that its effect is over before its neighbor’s picks up. Otherwise the pictures would be a single perceptual field, frank ensemble painting, detracting from the uniqueness claimed by each canvas. The color field installation shot should be recognized as one of the teleological end-points of the modern tradition. There is something splendidly

luxurious about the way the pictures and the gallery reside in a context that is fully sanctioned socially. We are aware we are witnessing a triumph of high seriousness and hand-tooled production, like a Rolls-Royce in a showroom that began as a Cubist jalopy in an outhouse.

What comment can you make on this? A comment has been made already, in an exhibition by William Anastasi at Dwan in New York in 1965. He photographed the empty gallery at Dwan, noticed the parameters of the wall, top and bottom, right and left, the placement of each electrical outlet, the ocean of space in the middle. He then silkscreened all this data on a canvas slightly smaller than the wall and put it on the wall. Covering the wall with an

# Andrea Fraser May I Help You?



May I Help You?  
1991

ANDREA FRASER

*The New York art gallery is installed with an exhibition of approximately 100 of Allan McCollum’s Plaster Surrogates. The objects, which have black centers, white mats, and frames in shades of red, are hung in a single continuous row that wraps around three of the gallery’s walls.*

*Seated behind a desk along the south wall of the exhibition space are three performers who constitute “The Staff.” They are “busy” with what looks like gallery business hidden behind a low, white, plaster-board wall.*

*A visitor enters the gallery and makes her way to the center of the exhibition space. As the visitor begins to look at the exhibition, one member of The Staff gets up, walks over and begins to speak.*

1.

*The Staff member's manner is gracious and unconcerned. She is self-assured, authoritative but unthreatening. She is ease and sureness. Her posture and bearing are "perfect." She draws out and lingers over her vowels. (Her manner changes over the course of the performance.)*

*The Staff member approaches the visitor.*

It's a beautiful show, isn't it.  
And this . . .

*She walks over to one of the Plaster Surrogates.*

. . . is a beautiful piece.

*She pauses for a moment, looking.*

I would say that this work is the apotheosis of abstraction. It's an abstraction that implies an absolute simplification and reduction within a language of well balanced purity. It has extraordinary colors and formal intensity.

The first time I saw it I fell in love with it. It's a radiant work—and one of the most original. It's one of a kind. A sophisticated composition of austere dignity.

It's sublime—almost transcendent. It's distinctive, disinterested, gratuitous, refined, restrained, sober, calm, guileless, good, simple, certain. It's perfect. It has such tact, such grace, such quiet self-assurance. It's . . .

*She pauses again, then moves closer to the work. She looks at it for a moment. As she looks her expression becomes increasingly peaceful as if, in looking, all of her wants are satisfied.*

. . . so far away from the passions that ordinary people invest in their ordinary lives. This is art. This is culture.

*She turns back to the visitor, looking far away at first. Now there's a hint of sadness in her expression, a hint of loss. She brings the visitor back into focus then slowly looks her up and down, without moving her head. She looks into the visitor's eyes for a moment with a blank expression, then smiles. She continues with the same manner as before, only now addressing the visitor as someone known to her.*

2.

*The manner of The Staff member changes slightly. It becomes less formal, softened by a familiarity extended to the objects as well as the visitor. With a gesture toward the visitor to follow her, she walks toward the rear of the exhibition space.*

I always tell my clients that the criterion for buying an artwork should be whether you would want it in your home. Loving something means having it with you.

Your collection expresses the texture and quality and even the smell of your life. It permeates everything about you, from the condition of your teeth to the way that you love.

You're branded by the objects you love. They mark you as the property of your culture, the property of your class.

*Abruptly, she turns to an object.*

Now, imagine this picture tattooed on my shoulder.

*She turns back to the visitor, unfolding her arms in an elegant, graceful gesture, elaborating her body rather than the words she speaks.*

It's like that. Imagine the clothes that I'm wearing and the rest of my environment have been painted on my skin and then the whole thing is turned inside out so that it's the stuff inside—the shoes, the sofa, the dining room.

You know, these are the things for which you'll be remembered. These are the things for which you'll be loved.

It's always with you. It's inside. And it's outside, at the same time, for everyone to see. It's a prison.

*She suddenly becomes transfixed by something she sees over the visitor's shoulder (but isn't really there). She draws a breath sharply.*

Oh! Look at that.

*She gestures along a wall.*

It belongs to a more polite society, a more polished, better placed world of bearing and harmony: the total, beautiful environment of an ultimate life of appreciation on the highest level of response.

It's the expression of a fully developed taste—the taste that allows you to give such coherence to your collection.

*She moves to another Plaster Surrogate.*

Now this is a beautiful work.

You know, what counts for me, first of all, is the beauty of the thing. The value isn't what counts. It's the pleasure that it gives you.

My favorite clients have always been the ones who collect out of love, just as children collect postage stamps. You fall in love with a thing that pleases you and you can't resist it.

I always prefer pleasure.

Pleasant things are non-necessary things. That's our inheritance. Freedom from the lower, coarse, vulgar, servile, material, demands of the social world.

*She gestures toward the Plaster Surrogate.*

Look! It's the illusion, first of all, that it hasn't been made, that the plaster and paint were never produced and mixed and cast and applied, coat after coat, by a studio of labor. It's the illusion that none of this was paid for and nothing will be bought, and it hangs there as if it just spread itself out before us voluntarily, of its own volition. It has always been there and will always be there—for us.

The only work you do is wanting: I want it and I have it. It's as simple as that.

And then you produce it's value—an inward value, an emotional value—when you've wanted it, you've looked for it and, at last, you've found it.

And you would do anything to have it. You want it more than your mother's love—more than money.

You have to buy with your eyes, not your ears. You really buy with your soul.

At certain times of day, the way the light floods in through these windows . . . Stunning! It's a wonderful space.

*She leads the visitor to another Plaster Surrogate*

I was born into a world of art.

My mother, you know, was an extremely cultured and sensitive woman. All her life she was an attractive, simple worshiper of what everyone knows is the best: the best society, the best individuals, the best standards of living with all its appurtenances.

When I go to a museum, like the Metropolitan, I feel right at home.

*She gestures around the gallery.*

That's how my mother hung her collection—but in the foyer, the dining room, the living room, the bed rooms, the guest rooms, the halls, in the bathrooms . . .

*Turning toward a Plaster Surrogate.*

She had one of these in the bath.

*Turning again to look around the gallery.*

It's a wonderful house. Quiet, calm and cool, like fresh linen laid in wicker trays, with something beautiful in every corner, flowers, and the freshest smell.

*She inhales deeply then turns back to the object, gesturing toward it's blank, black center.*

That's my Grandmother there. She was beautiful. And that's me.

*She straightens the Plaster Surrogate, touches the top of it, looks quickly at her hand for traces of dust, turns around, frowning, then looks to the front of the gallery and to the back for the person responsible. She leans toward the visitor.*

You know, some people come in here and they want to invest and then they haven't got the time. Imagine! They haven't got the time to be personally interested.



On the one hand investment and on the other, total incompetence. If you stuck a piece of shit on the wall it would be all the same to them as long as someone told them the shit was worth money. That's the *nouveau-riche* approach.

Pork bellies.

And I detest souvenirs. Oh, I've bought little knick-knacks and trinkets that I've distributed to all and sundry, but I'd never clutter *myself* up.

*She turns around suddenly. Projecting her voice across the gallery, toward the door to the street.*

May we have some quiet in here, please!

*She moves back toward the visitor.*

You'd think that there was a mob of people, pushing. I hate crowds, filling the air with their breathing and their noise.

For example, suburban secretaries who fill their gardens with gnomes, windmills and similar rubbish. Mummy used to say, "It's outrageous. Making things like that ought to be banned. Horrible. Horrible habits. They don't even know how to eat, those people, heavy, thick, bloated and fat with hunger on cheap foods."

*She stops and steps back from the visitor.*

Well, I suppose I always spoke up for everyone's right to have their own taste. Why not? At least they have . . . a taste!

3.

*The formality and restraint that have marked the performance thus far disappear from The Staff member's manner. She begins to bring her body into her relationship with the objects. The poise and self-assurance that remain now have the aspect of defiance and dismissal. They are things to be displayed.*

I think it's charming!

*She turns sharply to address another Plaster Surrogate. She gestures toward it with her shoulders and head as well as her arms.*

It's the shirt on her back. It's her neighborhood bar. It's the songs her mother sang to her when she was a child. It's the man she loves. It's her life.

And it's not expensive! Not expensive! It's incredible.

It's a woman in a bikini at a cocktail party, it's so outrageous. Everyone thinks it's outrageous—except me, of course. I think it's funny. And it's sexy. And it's one of the ugliest smears of paint I have ever seen.

It's the top. It's a Waldorf Salad.

What do you think?

I think I must have been born with a love of the unfamiliar. It's something you can't be taught.

And I'm happiest with works of my time. They reflect me.

4.

*The Staff member's manner changes. It becomes less poised and more businesslike. Her speech becomes more direct and pragmatic. She shortens her vowels and sharpens her consonants, emphasizing each word in each sentence. She becomes more outwardly engaged. She extends to the objects and the visitor the kind of earnest and thoughtful enthusiasm with which she might approach a problem to be solved—a problem with which she foresees no serious difficulty.*

My favorite clients have always been the ones who try to be out on the edge, even if they have unlimited resources—and most of them don't. It's better to be buying artists who search out new directions, to be in the forefront with them. By the time it gets into the museums and the auctions, it's safe. There's no discovery.

Hey, where I grew up there was no art. There were a few family things, pictures passed on. There was no culture. I'm the first in my family to go to college—almost. I had to leave them behind. This wouldn't mean a thing to them. Except that I'm a success. It just shows you how narrow *their* lives are. I've always wanted art to question what I know already, to open me up as a human being so that *my* life is more deeply significant.

It's so simple and fervent, so direct, so real. Sturdy, happy, uncomplicated: leave it unspoiled and just enjoy it. That's what I always say.

My mother, you know, was just an attractive, simple worshiper of what everyone thinks is the best. She wasted her life on linen and flowers. It was an empty, empty, airless, dusty, meaningless life. Suffocating. Sumptuous and boring.

Heirlooms? Don't make me laugh.

I just can't bear the gentility of some galleries and museums.

There's just so much work around now that I find completely grim.

It doesn't appeal to me. I can't be bothered with it. I think it's complete tripe. And I hate people who are producing neat, tidy work. I just don't like eggs.

*Gesturing around the gallery with enthusiasm.*

Now this is an artist who's doing exactly what she wants. It's a breath of fresh air!

I asked her once what attracted her to this subject and she said, "It just interests me, it's what I want to do."

She has the capacity to surprise me on a regular basis.

Sometimes she's here and I offer her coffee and I get the feeling that the cup isn't clean enough for her and then the next thing I hear she's off in Africa somewhere—rolling in the mud.

Have you been to Africa?

*Moving to another Plaster Surrogate.*

Now this is a piece that I find wildly exciting. This piece really has it, a tremendous wallop. What a thrill.

She's the real thing! She's still out there—she's really out there.

And she puts everything into her work.

*A Plaster Surrogate attracts her attention. She turns to it to support her point.*

Now this is a piece that I find extremely challenging, okay.

This is a work that no one without our precise history and educational background could possibly fathom.

Can you believe there are still people asking that tired old question, is it art? Right?

This is about process. This is about procedure. It's too easy to say, It's in a gallery.

You know, she's really an intellectual: self-possessed, reflexive. And in this work she's forcing the viewer to be reflexive too.

*She pauses for a moment to reflect on the work. She looks at it, nodding her head slightly. She turns to the visitor, still nodding, then back to the work.*

It's a very risky work. It's critical. That's the kind of work she dares to do. She's never made a safe decision in her life. She doesn't know how to. And that's terrific.

You know, for a long time she didn't even make anything to sell.

*She turns away from the work.*

It's so far away from the rational, quantitative world of business and finance. But just like in business, you have to take risks if you want an edge. Art keeps your mind limber.

I always prefer risk: creating, building, inventing, investing in visions of change and opportunity.

Hey, I was having lunch with David Rockefeller the other day at the Modern, and David said to me, he said . . .

*For a moment she takes on the voice and manner of The Staff member during first section of the performance.*

"Andrea, there's just no place for you on the board. Go back to the Now Museum or wherever it is you—"

Imagine! That's what I want. Old money. That's not culture. That's blood.

5.

*The Staff member's manner changes. She becomes uneasy with her body and her speech. She checks and corrects herself, as if she's watching herself through the visitor's eyes.*

Oh, where I grew up there was no art. There was no culture.

We lived on the edge of the rich part of town. They really hated us. I'd never bring friends over. There were always buttons missing on my mother's dress.

*Looking around the exhibition space.*

I went to museums and galleries to see what it would be like to live in a big, clean, quiet house.

*She absently looks at the visitor's shoes.*

I learned just from looking.

*She picks up her head and smiles.*

I always wanted to be a beautiful person.

*She turns to address a Plaster Surrogate. While she talks about the object she continues to smile, displaying the pleasure she takes in the work.*

It's interesting isn't it. It's abstract. It's sort of simplified, reduced in a way, maybe, purified.

*She looks at the visitor's clothes.*

But it's aesthetically beautiful because of the colors and the formal relationships. I like it.

It has a kind of presence. It's original. And it's obviously very sophisticated. It's, it's almost...

*She turns back to the object.*

It's almost...

*She looks intently at the object. She looks to buy time to find the right words to describe it; to adjust herself, her shirt, her hair. She looks to the visitor then back to the object almost as if she's checking herself in the mirror. As she turns to the visitor one last time her smile fades into an expression of defeat. She turns back to the Plaster Surrogate and continues, speaking to herself now, instead of the visitor.*

Oh, I don't know how to put it. Is it . . . Is it the subject or the technique?

What do you think?

6.

*The Staff's manner changes. Defeat becomes weariness and fatigue. She drops her hands and clasps them loosely in front of her. She speaks casually and confidently as if to someone in her home, as if she has paused while clearing coffee cups to the kitchen.*

It's pretty, isn't it? It's nice. It's cheerful.

Maybe it's a silly picture for me to like.

I stop everyday, once or twice, and look at it, and somehow, I feel better. Don't ask me why. I'll be tired and I'll be sitting on a chair with my head down nearly to the floor, and I look up and there it is. I don't claim to be competent.

I like art, but I don't know very many artists' names. I'd like to, but I haven't got the time.

It's always the same, you've got to have the time.

*She becomes more animated.*

I've got a lot of trinkets and odds and ends that I found in aunts' and uncles' attics. They were terribly tarnished and rusty but I cleaned them up. All those things are worth a bit now they're cleaned up.

*She gestures around the exhibition space.*

This is the kind of thing that only means something to a particular type of person. Don't think that I don't understand it. I understand it. I understand that it was produced to mystify me, that it was produced to exclude me.

*Standing in front of the object she turns to the visitor.*

You know, if you're not one of those people who affects history—and most of us are not—then how are you supposed to enjoy looking for personal meaning in the souvenirs of that class of people who manipulate history to your exclusion? I think it takes a pretty blind state of euphoric identification to enjoy another's power to exclude you.

When I visit galleries or museums, I often end up feeling angry and powerless. I find myself thinking, "Who are these people? Where did they get their money? What does all of this have to do with my experience?"

I don't need to come here to be told I don't belong here.

I don't need to come here to get culture.

Culture is ordinary, culture is common. . . .

*The Staff gestures around the gallery. Another visitor catches her eye. As she walks toward the visitor The Staff returns to the manner with which she began the performance.*

It's a beautiful show isn't it.

And this. . .

*She walks over to one of the Plaster Surrogates.*

. . . is a beautiful piece . . .

7.

*The Staff member's manner changes slightly once more. She speaks now in the space of the gallery and to a stranger, with the casual confidence about things that are, for her, commonplace. She turns back to the same Plaster Surrogate.*

Maybe this is a fine piece of art, but it's not for me. I wouldn't know what to do with it.

Sources (by section):

1. Ester Coen, *The Collection of Lydia Winston Malbin* (Sotheby's: New York, 1990); Aline B. Saarinen, "Provincial Princess: Mrs. Potter Palmer" and "C'est Mon Plaisir: Isabella Stewart Gardner," *The Proud Possessors* (Random House, New York, 1958); from an interview with a lawyer whose "family belongs to the Parisian grande bourgeoisie," quoted in Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1984); *Guide* (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984); from interviews with Betty Parsons and Andre Emmerich, quoted in de Coppet and Jones, ed. *The Art Dealers* (New York, Clarkson N. Potter Inc./Publishers, 1984); "For Love Not Money," *Artnews* (December 1990); "Holly Solomon," *Flash Art* (January/February 1990)

2. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*; Michael Harrington, *The Other America* (New York, Penguin, 1962); Saarinen, *Provincial Princess*; Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1925); from an interview with a Boston accountant, quoted in Robert Coles, "The Art Museum and the Pressures of Society," in Sherman E. Lee, ed., *On Understanding Art Museums* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall Inc., 1975)

3. Langston Hughes, "Slave on the Block," *The Ways of White Folks* (New York, Vintage, 1933); from an interview with a lawyer whose "family belongs to the Parisian grande bourgeoisie," quoted in Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*; from interviews with Betty Parsons and Andre Emmerich, quoted in de Coppet and Jones, ed., *The Art Dealers*; "The Art of the Dealer: Keeping Pace with Arne Glimcher," *New York* (October 10, 1989); Christie Brown, "They Reflect Me: Ileana Sonnabend," *Forbes* (May 1, 1989); "Bit by the Collecting Bug," *Newsweek* (May 13, 1985); "I Don't Like Eggs: Janet Green, British Collector, Speaks Out on Art and the Art World," *Artscribe* (Summer 1990); Saarinen, "Americans in Paris: Gertrude Leo, Michael and Sarah Stein," *The Proud Possessors*

4. "For Love Not Money," *Artnews*; Giancarlo Politi, "Peter Halley" in *Flash Art* (January/February 1990); "Barbara Gladstone," *Flash Art*; George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty* (New York, Bantam Books, 1981)

5. From interviews with a Parisian nurse and a Parisian teacher, quoted in Bourdieu, *Distinction*; Carmen de Monteflores, *Cantando Bajito/Singing Softly* (San Francisco, spinsters/aut lute, 1989)

6. From an interview with an unemployed man in Boston, quoted in Coles, "The Art Museum and the Pressures of Society," from an interviews with a "baker's wife" and a "foreman's wife" in Grenoble, quoted in Bourdieu, *Distinction*; James Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," *The Fire Next Time* (New York, Dell, 1962)

7. From an interview with an unemployed man in Boston, quoted in Coles, *The Art Museum and the Pressures of Society*; David Robbins, "An Interview with Allan McCollum," *Arts Magazine* (October 1985); Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," *Resources of Hope* (New York, Verso, 1989)

May I Help You? was first performed by Ledlie Borgerhoff, Kevin Duffy and Randolph Miles at American Fine Arts Co., New York, February 1991, in an exhibition produced in cooperation with Allan McCollum. It was also performed by Andrea Fraser at the Galerie Christian Nagel book, Art Cologne, November 1991, and at Orchard, New York, May 2005, in an exhibition that also included works by Allan McCollum.

Wiesław Borowski,  
Hanna Ptaszkowska & Mariusz Tchorek  
An introduction  
to the general theory of place



© Paweł Althamer

PROGRAM Galerii Foksal PSP

an introduction to the general theory of PLACE

Art has many times in the course of its history proclaimed itself to be liberal art. But by so doing it expressed not what it actually was, but rather what it desired to become. In fact it always remains art in the process of self-liberation.

As it has been more than once stated in similar circumstances it is being liberated from its own inherited characteristics; it strips them off and leaves them behind.

Let us forget all those hatreds that used to haunt art whenever it had taken a glance at its own face. However, the time has arrived when we can no longer refrain from revealing and naming that wherefrom art is now liberating. The time has arrived to reveal the present object of hatred. Let us emphasize at the outset, however, that this is a purely internal affair. The hatred of art towards itself is involved, and only those are entitled thus to hate who are within.

At least one side of the object of hatred is readily apparent. So close at hand it is that to notice it a radical shift of view point must be made. Let us for the moment no longer look at works, but instead let us stop before the territory occupied by them. Let us not enter the exhibition, let us stay at its threshold. What shall we find out?

I. The essence of exhibition is its transparence. It is conceived as nonexistent. It must not act upon the work.

But here are the facts: Exhibition acquires flesh of its own, it becomes an independent actuality. It is an exhibition instead of the work of art that becomes a fact. An individual work becomes subject to the independent actuality of the exhibition. It functions ever since as its element. The work conceived as unique is now one among the many. Has the work of art been made for any coexistence whatever? Has it ever been thought of as showing up in a flock of others?

II. An exhibition is a post factum operation. The fact of artistic realization had been fulfilled within the walls of the workshop. The finished, final work begins a completely new existence on the exhibition. It communicates what is already the past. What it makes available, are but traces of decisive actions. An exhibition is but a communicate about what had passed, somewhere and at a time indefinite. Its actuality has no relationship at all with the actuality of creative act.

III. The beholder. He appears at the exhibition to endorse final formalities connected with its reception. His presence has a merely legal significance. And for all that, too much freedom has been allowed him, while he generally doesn't know how to use it. This freedom releases no activity on his part, as e.g. a simplest restriction might have done. As a result, all those present at the exhibition chose one way of behaving: they contemplate. The contemplative attitude warrants distance towards a work of art, it ascertains the legitimacy of the beholder's presence at the exhibition, it allows him to compare, to check, to purchase etc.

IV. The author. The artist has nothing more to do at the exhibition except holding the flowers. He is now a mere beholder, bored or stimulated by no longer genuine experiences, or else he is an ambassador of his own future designs; his position is that of a servant kept staying without sensible reasons after he had performed his duties.

The artist's personality, which is said to be manifested in its purest form, is revealed at the exhibition mutilated, artificially portioned, and dosed in a rythm that is incompatible with his actual maturing. The artist is hanging as a cut beef, while we are trying in vain to reconstruct the living animal out of the cuts. Besides the author, persuaded by the learned that sincerity is his essential virtue, feels an awkward uneasiness seeing the result of his frankness in festive splendour of a public show.

Why not to make this uneasiness, as the most genuine feature of the event, into its very object?

The PLACE then. Well the PLACE. The PLACE, for certain.

The PLACE is an area that arises by virtue of setting aside all and any principles holding in the universe.

The PLACE is not a space category, it not an arena, a scene, a postument, a screen, a pedestal, and above all it is not an exhibition.

The PLACE is isolated and at the same time it must get exteriorised. Its existence is not a merely subjective matter and it cannot be called into being by purely private endeavours. It must be conspicuous and significantly objective, while at the same time it cannot subside if it fails to protect itself against the world's impact and against getting identified with the world.

The PLACE is a sudden gap in the utilitarian approach to the world. All and any standards valid beyond the PLACE no longer hold within it. Therein space is devoid of its utilitarian significance; all its measures, reasons, Euclidean and non-Euclidean

interpretations are left behind. Events, if they occur at all, are deprived of any outer meaning whatever. There is no hesitation within the PLACE, since there is no difference between the wrong and the right, the good and the good-for-nothing, everything merely and simply is there. The PLACE is neither strange nor common, refined or vulgar, wise or stupid. It is neither dream nor wake.

The PLACE is not transparent. What it is, is the actual presence. There are no criteria of better or more valuable filling of the PLACE. It may even be empty but, its emptiness must be conspicuously present.

The PLACE is one and unique. It cannot be divided and it does not procreate. The PLACE is what we are in.

Only when we step outside, can we conceive it as one among many places comparable with it. The PLACE can become an object of hatred only from abroad.

Any area of the world may be possessed and thus constituted as the PLACE. From worldly point of view this is by no means a peculiar area. The PLACE cannot be recognized by its appearance. It does not modify the world's laws because it has nothing to do with them at all. The PLACE may indeed look exactly like any other fragment of reality. However, there are some areas in the world that are thought of as particularity fit for becoming PLACES.

The PLACE is neither a construction nor a destruction. It comes into being as a result of an indemnified decision. The PLACE has no sufficient reason in the world. It is in the artist that this reason subsists. It is he that calls forth the PLACE. It is created by him who steps within it. It is only in the PLACE, and not outside of it, that „art is created by all“. The PLACE cannot be mechanically fixed up but it must be incessantly perpetuated.

A slightest moment of inattention may be enough for it to get sunk in what is around it. There are numerous anonymous forces that professionally destroy the PLACE or produce its fake substitutes. These forces take advantage of the PLACE still left and they manipulate with elements taken up from it — with element restituted to real standards and measures. The PLACE cannot be bought or collected. It cannot be arrested. It cannot be an object of virtue.

Protection of the PLACE is not one more among many endeavours with definite authorship, nor is it a product of the present. It appears again and again in the course of the history of art, but it only emerges to prominence at moments of radical shifts.

Such was the moment of transsubstantiation of the picture into the PLACE. In the temple a picture had not or could not have been the PLACE. Its presence was legitimate at all only inasmuch as it served the temple and contributed to the effort of incessant perpetuation of this exceptional area that ever since the expelling of the buyers and sellers had been by itself the one and only PLACE.

However the picture had gained independance and for a while it remained solitary. It is the frame that remained as the only witness of the event. The frame, a naive embodiment of the dam protecting against the world's impact.

Thus began the tendency of the picture to produce an inner bondage of its own that would save it as the PLACE without any additional ramparts.

This is how composition has arisen.

But composition, at last a perfect realization of the enclosure, has remained shut on its own side, while it has left us on the side of the world. The most we can do is to conceive composition as the PLACE, but we always remain at the outside. Since it is finished and closed, since it is undestructible though defenseless, since nothing more can ever happen to it, composition has been sentenced to be manipulated from without. It has been hung up in architectural space, it has become an inspiration for utilitarian space. It used to be adopted and readjusted. It used to be thought of as a necessary element of human environment, it has been sunken in the world. In its initial and relatively purest form it has appeared on the exhibition. But there it has lost its solitary character of the only perfect solution and it began to assemble in flocks.

At an exhibition we thus walk from PLACE to PLACE while performing „illegitimate“ procedures like those of evaluating, comparing, coming and carrying in and out, buying etc. We try in vain to be somewhere — we are nowhere.

PLACES are here representing to each other the strange outer world with all its aggressive force. What is going on is selfdestruction of PLACES. On the ruin feeds the new monster, the exhibition. Intended to have been transparent, called forth as a natural reservation for PLACES, the exhibition has turned out to be an illegal, selfsustained product, a faked PLACE, a PLACE — deception and a PLACE — heresy and a PLACE — treason.

The PLACE is a sudden gap in the utilitarian approach to the world. The PLACE arises, when all the laws holding in the world are suspended. The PLACE is one and indivisible. PLACE.

WIESŁAW BOROWSKI  
HANNA PTASZKOWSKA  
MARIUSZ TCHOREK

Delivered in August 1966, Puławy

Und so haben sich die in der Ausstellung Anwesenden für eine Verhaltensweise entschieden:

die kontemplative Betrachtung. Die kontemplative Haltung gewährleistet Abstand zum Kunstwerk, sie sichert die Legitimität der Gegenwart des Betrachters in der Ausstellung, sie erlaubt ihm zu vergleichen, zu prüfen, zu erwerben usw.

IV. Der Autor. Der Künstler hat in der Ausstellung kaum mehr zu tun, als die Blumen zu halten.

Er ist jetzt Betrachter, gelangweilt oder angeregt von Erlebnissen, die keinen Wirklichkeitswert mehr besitzen, oder aber er ist Botschafter seiner eigenen zukünftigen Handlungen; seine Position ist die eines Dieners, der ohne einsichtigen Grund zum Bleiben angehalten wurde, nachdem er seine Pflicht erfüllt hat.

Die Persönlichkeit des Künstlers, die sich angeblich in ihrer reinsten Form manifestiert, zeigt sich in der Ausstellung verstümmelt, künstlich beschnitten, und eingefügt in einen Rhythmus, der mit seinem tatsächlichen Reifeprozess inkompatibel ist. Der Künstler hängt dort als Stück Fleisch, während wir vergeblich versuchen, das lebendige Tier aus den Stücken zu rekonstruieren. Vom Gelehrten überzeugt, dass Aufrichtigkeit seine wesentlichste Tugend darstellt, empfindet der Autor zudem ein merkwürdiges Unwohlsein, wenn er das Ergebnis seiner Offenheit im festlichen Prunk einer öffentlichen Show erlebt.

Warum machen wir dieses Unwohlsein nicht, als authentischstes Thema des Ereignisses, zu seinem eigentlichen Gegenstand?

Der Ort dann. Also der ORT. Der ORT, ganz sicher.

Der ORT ist ein Bereich, der dadurch entsteht, dass alle und jede Grundsätze, die in der Welt gelten, außer Kraft gesetzt werden.

Der ORT ist keine Kategorie des Raumes, er ist keine Arena, keine Szene, kein Rahmen, kein Bildschirm, kein Sockel, und vor allem ist er keine Ausstellung.

Der ORT ist isoliert, und doch muss er nach außen gerichtet sein. Seine Existenz ist keine rein subjektive Angelegenheit, und rein private Anstrengungen können ihn nicht ins Leben rufen.

Er muss auffallen und deutlich objektiv sein, kann aber zugleich nicht fortbestehen, wenn es ihm nicht gelingt, sich gegen den Einfluss der Welt und die Identifikation mit ihr zu schützen.

Der ORT stellt eine plötzliche Lücke im utilitaristischen Zugang zur Welt dar. Jegliche Normen, die über den ORT hinaus gelten, verlieren in ihm ihre Gültigkeit. Im Inneren des ORTES ist Raum, frei von jeder utilitaristischen Bedeutung; all seine Maßstäbe, Gründe, euklidischen und nicht-euklidischen Interpretationen sind ungültig. Ereignisse, wenn sie denn überhaupt eintreten, entbehren jeder äußeren Bedeutung. Im Inneren des ORTES gibt es kein Zögern, weil es keinen Unterschied zwischen Falsch und Richtig gibt, zwischen Gut und Gut-für-Gar-Nichts, alles ist eben nur einfach dort. Der ORT ist weder merkwürdig noch gewöhnlich, ausgefeilt oder vulgär, weise oder dumm. Er ist weder Traum noch Erwachen.

Der ORT ist nicht transparent. Was er ist, ist aktuelle Präsenz. Es gibt keine Kriterien einer besseren und wertvolleren Füllung des ORTES. Er kann sogar leer sein, aber seine Leere muss auffällig präsent sein.

## Eine Einführung in die allgemeine Theorie des ORTES

Die Kunst hat sich im Lauf ihrer Geschichte immer wieder als frei erklärt. Damit hat sie jedoch nicht ausgedrückt, was sie tatsächlich ist, sondern eher, was sie zu sein anstrebte. Tatsächlich bleibt sie immer Kunst im Prozess der Selbstbefreiung.

Wie unter ähnlichen Umständen immer wieder festgestellt wurde, befreit sie sich von – von ihr selbst übernommenen – Charakteristika; sie legt sie ab und lässt sie hinter sich zurück.

Vergessen wir doch all jene Gefühle des Hasses, die die Kunst immer wieder verfolgt haben, wenn sie einen Blick auf ihr eigenes Gesicht warf. Jetzt ist die Zeit gekommen, ohne Zurückhaltung zu enthüllen und zu benennen, wovon sie sich nun befreit. Jetzt ist die Zeit reif, den augenblicklichen Gegenstand des Hasses ans Licht zu bringen. Zu Beginn sollten wir jedoch betonen, dass es sich hier um eine rein interne Angelegenheit handelt. Hier geht es um den Hass der Kunst sich selbst gegenüber, und daher sind nur jene zum Hass berechtigt, die darin involviert sind.

Zumindest eine Seite des Gegenstands des Hasses ist ganz offensichtlich. Sie liegt so nahe, dass wir unsere Sichtweise radikal ändern müssen, um sie zu bemerken. Führen wir im Augenblick also keine Werkbetrachtung durch, sondern halten wir vor der Fläche inne, die die Werke einnehmen.

Betreten wir nicht die Ausstellung, sondern bleiben wir an deren Schwelle. Was finden wir heraus? I. Die Essenz der Ausstellung liegt in ihrer Transparenz. Sie ist als nicht existent geplant. Sie sollte auf das Werk keinen Einfluss nehmen.

Die Fakten aber sind folgende: Ausstellung eignet sich eigene Substanz an, sie wird zur unabhängigen Aktualität. Eine Ausstellung wird selbst zu einem Faktum anstelle eines Kunstwerks.

Ein individuelles Werk wird der unabhängigen Aktualität der Ausstellung untergeordnet. Ab diesem Zeitpunkt fungiert es als ihr Element. Das Werk, das als einzigartig konzipiert wurde, ist jetzt nur noch eines unter vielen.

Ist das Kunstwerk überhaupt für irgendeine Koexistenz geschaffen? Wurde überhaupt je daran gedacht, dass es Teil einer Herde sein könnte?

II. Eine Ausstellung ist ein Vorgang „post factum“. Das Faktum der künstlerischen Umsetzung wurde innerhalb der Wände des Ateliers vollendet. Das beendete, endgültige Werk beginnt in der Ausstellung eine völlig neue Existenz. Es kommuniziert, was schon in der Vergangenheit liegt. Es ermöglicht lediglich einen Zugang zu abgeschlossenen Handlungen. Eine Ausstellung ist nur Kommunikation darüber, was vergangen ist, irgendwo und zu unbestimmter Zeit. Ihre Aktualität steht in keinem Bezug zur Aktualität des kreativen Aktes.

III. Der Betrachter. Er tritt in der Ausstellung auf, um letzte Formalitäten zu erfüllen, die mit ihrer Rezeption zusammenhängen. Seine Präsenz ist von legaler Bedeutung. Und trotz alledem wurde ihm zu viel Freiheit zugestanden, auch wenn er im Allgemeinen nicht weiß, was er damit anfangen soll. Denn diese Freiheit lässt ihn seinerseits nicht aktiv werden, was beispielsweise eine sehr einfache Einschränkung bewirken könnte.



Der ORT ist eins und einzigartig. Er lässt sich nicht aufteilen, und er vervielfältigt sich nicht. Der ORT ist das, worin wir uns befinden.

Nur wenn man sich außerhalb von ihm befindet, kann er als einer unter vielen Orten wahrgenommen werden, die mit ihm vergleichbar sind. Nur außerhalb seiner eigenen Grenzen kann der ORT zu einem Gegenstand von Hass werden.

Jeder Bereich der Welt kann in Besitz genommen und daher als ORT eingesetzt werden. Aus Sicht der Welt ist dieser Bereich keineswegs bemerkenswert. Durch sein Vorkommen allein kann der ORT nicht erkannt werden. Er modifiziert die Gesetze der Welt nicht, denn er hat mit ihnen überhaupt nichts zu tun. Tatsächlich könnte der ORT genau wie jedes andere Fragment der Realität aussehen. Es gibt jedoch einige Bereiche in der Welt, die als besonders geeignet dafür gelten, zu ORTEN zu werden.

Der ORT ist weder eine Konstruktion noch eine Destruktion. Er entsteht als Ergebnis einer freien Entscheidung. Der ORT an sich verfügt über keine ausreichende Daseinsberechtigung in der Welt. Allein im Künstler besteht diese Berechtigung fort. Nur er ruft den ORT hervor. Der ORT wird von ihm geschaffen, er tritt in sein Inneres. Nur im ORT, und nicht außerhalb dessen wird „Kunst von allen geschaffen“. Der ORT kann nicht mechanisch gefestigt sein, sondern er muss immer wieder von neuem gefestigt werden.

Die geringste Unaufmerksamkeit kann ihn in seiner Umgebung versinken lassen. Unzählige anonyme Kräfte zerstören den ORT professionell oder produzieren künstlichen Ersatz. Diese Kräfte benutzen den noch vorhandenen ORT, und sie manipulieren mit Elementen, die sie von ihm aufnehmen – wobei das Element zu realen Normen und Maßstäben zurückgeführt wird. Aber der ORT kann nicht gekauft oder gesammelt werden. Er lässt sich nicht arrelieren. Er kann nicht Gegenstand von Kennerschaft sein.

Der Schutz des ORTES gehört nicht zu den vielen Anstrengungen mit eindeutigem Urheber, auch ist er kein Produkt der Gegenwart. Im Lauf der Kunstgeschichte spielt dieser Schutz immer wieder eine Rolle, aber nur in Augenblicken umwälzender Veränderungen rückt er wirklich in den Blickpunkt.

Ein solcher Augenblick war die Wandlung des Bildes zum ORT. Im Tempel war ein Bild kein ORT gewesen und hätte es auch nicht sein können. Die Gegenwart des Bildes war nur insofern legitim, als es dem Tempel selbst diente und dazu beitrug, jenen außergewöhnlichen Raum zu erhalten, der seit der Verbannung von Käufern und Verkäufern in sich selbst der eine und einzige ORT war.

Das Bild jedoch hatte seine Unabhängigkeit gewonnen, und eine Zeit lang blieb es auf sich selbst gestellt. Einzig der Rahmen blieb als Zeuge dieses Ereignisses bestehen. Der Rahmen, der auf naive Weise den Damm verkörpert, der gegen die Einwirkung der Welt Schutz bietet.

So begann das Bild also immer mehr, eine eigene innere Bindung herzustellen, die es als ORT ohne zusätzliche Schutzwälle bewahren sollte.

Und so entstand die Komposition.

Aber Komposition, zu guter Letzt eine perfekte Umsetzung der Einfassung, blieb ihrerseits verschlossen; sie ließ uns am Rand der Welt allein. Wir können Komposition nur als den ORT planen, aber immer bleiben wir an ihrer Außenseite. Da sie beendet und abgeschlossen, unzerstörbar und zugleich schutzlos ist, da ihr nichts mehr jemals passieren kann, ist Komposition dazu verurteilt, vom Draußen manipuliert zu werden. Sie wurde im architektonischen Raum aufgehängt, sie ist zur Inspiration des utilitaristischen Raums geworden. Immer wieder wurde sie angenommen und angepasst. Sie galt als notwendiges Element der menschlichen Umwelt, wir haben sie in die Welt eintauchen lassen. In ihrer ursprünglichen und relativ reinsten Form trat sie in der Ausstellung in Erscheinung. Dort aber verlor sie ihre einsame Eigenschaft der perfekten Lösung und begann sich in Herden zu versammeln.

Aus diesem Grund wandern wir in einer Ausstellung von ORT zu ORT und führen dabei „illegitime“ Verfahren durch wie jene des Einschätzens, des Vergleichens, des Kommens und des Hinein- und Hinaustragens, des Kaufens usw. Vergeblich versuchen wir, irgendwo zu sein, – wir sind nirgendwo.

ORTE führen sich hier selbst die befremdliche Außenwelt mit all ihrer aggressiven Kraft vor Augen. Tatsächlich geschieht eine Selbstzerstörung der ORTE. Aus den Ruinen nährt sich das neue Ungeheuer, die Ausstellung. Transparent geplant, ins Leben gerufen als natürlicher Schutzraum für ORTE, hat sich die Ausstellung als ein regelwidriges, sich selbst erhaltendes Produkt erwiesen, ein unechter ORT, ein ORT – Täuschung und ein ORT – Häresie und ein ORT – Verrat.

Der ORT ist eine plötzliche Lücke im utilitaristischen Zugang zur Welt. Der ORT tritt in Erscheinung, wenn alle Gesetze der Welt außer Kraft gesetzt sind. Der ORT ist eins und unteilbar. ORT.

Wiesław Borowski  
Hanna Ptaszkowska  
Mariusz Tchorek

Vorgetragen im August 1966, Pulawy

# Michel Foucault Of Other Spaces

## Chapter 20

### Michel Foucault OF OTHER SPACES<sup>1</sup>

THE GREAT OBSESSION of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history: with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis and cycle, themes of the ever-accumulating past, with its great preponderance of dead men and the menacing glaciation of the world. The nineteenth century found its essential mythological resources in the second principle of thermodynamics. The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skin. One could perhaps say that certain ideological conflicts animating present-day polemics oppose the pious descendants of time and the determined inhabitants of space. Structuralism, or at least that which is grouped under this slightly too general name, is the effort to establish, between elements that could have been connected on a temporal axis, an ensemble of relations that makes them appear as juxtaposed, set off against one another, implicated by each other – that makes them appear, in short, as a sort of configuration. Actually, structuralism does not entail a denial of time; it does involve a certain manner of dealing with what we call time and what we call history.

Yet it is necessary to notice that the space which today appears to form the horizon of our concerns, our theory, our systems, is not an innovation; space itself has a history in Western experience and it is not possible to disregard the fatal intersection of time with space. One could say, by way of retracing this history of space very roughly, that in the Middle Ages there was a hierarchic ensemble of places: sacred places and profane places; protected places and open, exposed places; urban places and rural places (all these concern the real life of men). In cosmological theory, there were the supercelestial places, as opposed to the celestial, and the

celestial place was in its turn opposed to the terrestrial place. There were places where things had been put because they had been violently displaced, and then on the contrary places where things found their natural ground and stability. It was this complete hierarchy, this opposition, this intersection of places that constituted what could very roughly be called medieval space: the space of emplacement.

This space of emplacement was opened up by Galileo. For the real scandal of Galileo's work lay not so much in his discovery, or rediscovery, that the earth revolved around the sun, but in his constitution of an infinite, and infinitely open space. In such a space the place of the Middle Ages turned out to be dissolved, as it were; a thing's place was no longer anything but a point in its movement, just as the stability of a thing was only its movement indefinitely slowed down. In other words, starting with Galileo and the seventeenth century, extension was substituted for localization.

Today the site has been substituted for extension which itself had replaced emplacement. The site is defined by relations of proximity between points or elements; formally, we can describe these relations as series, trees, or grids. Moreover, the importance of the site as a problem in contemporary technical work is well known: the storage of data or of the intermediate results of a calculation in the memory of a machine; the circulation of discrete elements with a random output (automobile traffic is a simple case, or indeed the sounds on a telephone line); the identification of marked or coded elements inside a set that may be randomly distributed, or may be arranged according to single or to multiple classifications.

In a still more concrete manner, the problem of siting or placement arises for mankind in terms of demography. This problem of the human site or living space is not simply that of knowing whether there will be enough space for men in the world – a problem that is certainly quite important – but also that of knowing what relations of proximity, what type of storage, circulation, marking, and classification of human elements should be adopted in a given situation in order to achieve a given end. Our epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites.

In any case I believe that the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time. Time probably appears to us only as one of the various distributive operations that are possible for the elements that are spread out in space.

Now, despite all the techniques for appropriating space, despite the whole network of knowledge that enables us to delimit or to formalize it, contemporary space is perhaps still not entirely desanctified (apparently unlike time, it would seem, which was detached from the sacred in the nineteenth century). To be sure a certain theoretical desanctification of space (the one signaled by Galileo's work) has occurred, but we may still not have reached the point of a practical desanctification of space. And perhaps our life is still governed by a certain number of oppositions that remain inviolable, that our institutions and practices have not yet dared to break down. These are oppositions that we regard as simple givens: for example between private space and public space, between family space and social space, between cultural space and useful space, between the space of leisure and that of work. All these are still nurtured by the hidden presence of the sacred.

where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror, I discover my absence from the place where I am, since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.

As for the heterotopias as such, how can they be described, what meaning do they have? We might imagine a sort of systematic description – I do not say a science because the term is too galvanized now – that would, in a given society, take as its object the study, analysis, description, and 'reading' (as some like to say nowadays) of these different spaces, of these other places. As a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live, this description could be called heterotopology. Its *first principle* is that there is probably not a single culture in the world that fails to constitute heterotopias. That is a constant of every human group. But the heterotopias obviously take quite varied forms, and perhaps no one absolutely universal form of heterotopia would be found. We can however classify them in two main categories.

In the so-called primitive societies, there is a certain form of heterotopia that I would call crisis heterotopias, i.e., there are privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc. In our society, these crisis heterotopias are persistently disappearing, though a few remnants can still be found. For example, the boarding school, in its nineteenth-century form, or military service for young men, have certainly played such a role, as the first manifestations of sexual virility were in fact supposed to take place 'elsewhere' than at home. For girls, there was, until the middle of the twentieth century, a tradition called the 'honeymoon trip' which was an ancestral theme. The young woman's deflowering could take place 'nowhere' and, at the moment of its occurrence the train or honeymoon hotel was indeed the place of this nowhere, this heterotopia without geographical markers.

But these heterotopias of crisis are disappearing today and are being replaced, I believe, by what we might call heterotopias of deviation: those in which individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed. Cases of this are rest homes and psychiatric hospitals, and of course prisons; and one should perhaps add retirement homes that are, as it were, on the borderline between the heterotopia of crisis and the heterotopia of deviation since, after all, old age is a crisis, but is also a deviation since, in our society where leisure is the rule, idleness is a sort of deviation.

Bachelard's monumental work and the descriptions of phenomenologists have taught us that we do not live in a homogeneous and empty space, but on the contrary in a space thoroughly imbued with quantities and perhaps thoroughly fantasmatic as well. The space of our primary perception, the space of our dreams, and that of our passions hold within themselves qualities that seem intrinsic: there is a light, ethereal, transparent space, or again a dark, rough, encumbered space; a space from above, of summits, or on the contrary a space from below, of mud; or again a space that can be flowing like sparkling water, or a space that is fixed, congealed, like stone or crystal. Yet these analyses, while fundamental for reflection in our time, primarily concern internal space. I should like to speak now of external space.

The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time, and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another.

Of course one might attempt to describe these different sites by looking for the set of relations by which a given site can be defined. For example, describing the set of relations that define the sites of transportation, streets, trains (a train is an extraordinary bundle of relations because it is something through which one goes, it is also something by means of which one can go from one point to another, and then it is also something that goes by). One could describe, via the cluster of relations that allows them to be defined, the sites of temporary relaxation – cafes, cinemas, beaches. Likewise one could describe, via its network of relations, the closed or semi-closed sites of rest – the house, the bedroom, the bed, etc. But among all these sites, I am interested in certain ones that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect. These spaces, as it were, which are linked with all the others, which however contradict all the other sites, are of two main types.

First there are the utopias. Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces.

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. I believe that between utopias and these quite other sites, these heterotopias, there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror. The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there

The *second principle* of this description of heterotopias is that a society, as its history unfolds, can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion; for each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society and the same heterotopia can, according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or another.

As an example I shall take the strange heterotopia of the cemetery. The cemetery is certainly a place unlike ordinary cultural spaces. It is a space that is however connected with all the sites of the city-state or society or village, etc., since each individual, each family has relatives in the cemetery. In Western culture the cemetery has practically always existed. But it has undergone important changes. Until the end of the eighteenth century, the cemetery was placed at the heart of the city, next to the church. In it there was a hierarchy of possible tombs. There was the charnel house in which bodies lost the last traces of individuality, there were a few individual tombs, and then there were the tombs inside the church. These latter tombs were themselves of two types, either simply tombstones with an inscription, or mausoleums with statues. This cemetery housed inside the sacred space of the church has taken on a quite different cast in modern civilizations, and curiously, it is in a time when civilization has become 'atheistic' as one says very crudely, that Western culture has established what is termed the cult of the dead.

Basically it was quite natural that, in a time of real belief in the resurrection of bodies and the immortality of the soul, overriding importance was not accorded to the body's remains. On the contrary, from the moment when people are no longer sure that they have a soul or that the body will regain life, it is perhaps necessary to give much more attention to the dead body, which is ultimately the only trace of our existence in the world and in language. In any case, it is from the beginning of the nineteenth century that everyone has a right to her or his own little box for her or his own little personal decay; but on the other hand, it is only from the start of the nineteenth century that cemeteries began to be located at the outside border of cities. In correlation with the individualization of death and the bourgeois appropriation of the cemetery, there arises an obsession with death as an 'illness'. The dead, it is supposed, bring illnesses to the living, and it is the presence and proximity of the dead right beside the houses, next to the church, almost in the middle of the street, it is this proximity that propagates death itself. This major theme of illness spread by the contagion in the cemeteries persisted until the end of the eighteenth century, until, during the nineteenth century, the shift of cemeteries toward the suburbs was initiated. The cemeteries then came to constitute, no longer the sacred and immortal heart of the city, but 'the other city,' where each family possesses its dark resting place.

*Third principle.* The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. Thus it is that the theater brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another; thus it is that the cinema is a very odd rectangular room, at the end of which, on a two-dimensional screen, one sees the projection of a three-dimensional space; but perhaps the oldest example of these heterotopias that take the form of contradictory sites is the garden. We must not forget that in the Orient the garden, an astonishing creation that is now a thousand years old, had very deep and seemingly superimposed meanings. The

traditional garden of the Persians was a sacred space that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world, with a space still more sacred than the others that were like an umbilicus, the navel of the world at its center (the basin and water fountain were there); and all the vegetation of the garden was supposed to come together in this space, in this sort of microcosm. As for carpets, they were originally reproductions of gardens (the garden is a rug onto which the whole world comes to enact its symbolic perfection, and the rug is a sort of garden that can move across space). The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world. The garden has been a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of antiquity (our modern zoological gardens spring from that source).

*Fourth principle.* Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time – which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies. The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time. This situation shows us that the cemetery is indeed a highly heterotopic place since, for the individual, the cemetery begins with this strange heterochrony, the loss of life, and with this quasi-eternity in which her permanent lot is dissolution and disappearance.

From a general standpoint, in a society like ours heterotopias and heterochronies are structured and distributed in a relatively complex fashion. First of all, there are heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time, for example museums and libraries. Museums and libraries have become heterotopias in which time never stops building up and topping its own summit, whereas in the seventeenth century, even at the end of the century, museums and libraries were the expression of an individual choice. By contrast, the idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole idea belongs to our modernity. The museum and the library are heterotopias that are proper to Western culture of the nineteenth century.

Opposite these heterotopias that are linked to the accumulation of time, there are those linked, on the contrary, to time in its most fleeting, transitory, precarious aspect, to time in the mode of the festival. These heterotopias are not oriented toward the eternal, they are rather absolutely temporal [*chroniques*]. Such, for example, are the fairgrounds, these marvelous empty sites on the outskirts of cities that teem once or twice a year with stands, displays, heteroclite objects, wrestlers, snakewomen, fortune-tellers, and so forth. Quite recently, a new kind of temporal heterotopia has been invented: vacation villages, such as those Polynesian villages that offer a compact three weeks of primitive and eternal nudity to the inhabitants of the cities. You see, moreover, that through the two forms of heterotopias that come together here, the heterotopia of the festival and that of the eternity of accumulating time, the huts of Djerba are in a sense relatives of libraries and museums. For the rediscovery of Polynesian life abolishes time; yet the experience is just as much the rediscovery of time, it is as if the entire history of humanity reaching back to its origin were accessible in a sort of immediate knowledge.

*Fifth principle.* Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures. Moreover, there are even heterotopias that are entirely consecrated to these activities of purification – purification that is partly religious and partly hygienic, such as the hammam of the Moslems, or else purification that appears to be purely hygienic, as is Scandinavian saunas.

There are others, on the contrary, that seem to be pure and simple openings, but that generally hide curious exclusions. Everyone can enter into these heterotopic sites, but in fact that is only an illusion: we think we enter where we are, by the very fact that we enter, excluded. I am thinking, for example, of the famous bedrooms that existed on the great farms of Brazil and elsewhere in South America. The entry door did not lead into the central room where the family lives, and every individual or traveler who came by had the right to open this door, to enter into the bedroom and to sleep there for a night. Now these bedrooms were such that the individual who went into them never had access to the family's quarters; the visitor was absolutely the guest in transit, was not really the invited guest. This type of heterotopia, which has practically disappeared from our civilizations, could perhaps be found in the famous American motel rooms where a man goes with his car and his mistress and where illicit sex is both absolutely sheltered and absolutely hidden, kept isolated without however being allowed out in the open.

The last trait of heterotopias is that they have a function in relation to all the space that remains. This function unfolds between two extreme poles. Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory (perhaps that is the role that was played by those famous brothels of which we are now deprived). Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. This latter type would be the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation, and I wonder if certain colonies have not functioned somewhat in this manner. In certain cases, they have played, on the level of the general organization of terrestrial space, the role of heterotopias. I am thinking, for example, of the first wave of colonization in the seventeenth century, of the Puritan societies that the English had founded in America and that were absolutely perfect other places. I am also thinking of those extraordinary Jesuit colonies that were founded in South America: marvelous, absolutely regulated colonies in which human perfection was effectively achieved. The Jesuits of Paraguay established colonies in which existence was regulated at every turn. The village was laid out according to a rigorous plan around a rectangular place at the foot of which was the church; on one side, there was the school; on the other, the cemetery; and then, in front of the church, an avenue set out that another crossed at right angles; each family had its little cabin along these two axes and thus the sign of Christ was exactly reproduced. Christianity marked the space and geography of the American world with its fundamental sign. The daily life of individuals was regulated, not by the whistle, but by the bell. Everyone was awakened at the same time, everyone began work

at the same time; meals were at noon and five o'clock; then came bedtime, and at midnight came what was called the marital wake-up, that is, at the chime of the churchbell, each person carried out her/his duty.

Brothels and colonies are two extreme types of heterotopia, and if we think, after all, that the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens, you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development . . . but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.

Notes

- 1 This text, entitled 'Des Espaces Autres,' and published by the French journal *Architecture-Mouvement-Continuité* in October 1984, was the basis of a lecture given by Michel Foucault in March 1967. Although not reviewed for publication by the author and thus not part of the official corpus of his work, the manuscript was released into the public domain for an exhibition in Berlin shortly before Michel Foucault's death. Attentive readers will note that the text retains the quality of lecture notes. It was translated by Jay Miskowicz.

# Depiction, Object, Event

Jeff Wall

Modern and modernist art is grounded in the dialectic of depiction and anti-depiction, depiction and its negation within the regime of depiction. The self-criticism of art, that phenomenon we call both ‘modernist’ and ‘avant-garde’, originated in terms of the arts of depiction and, for the hundred years beginning in 1855, remained within their framework.

The forms of the depictive arts are drawing, painting, sculpture, the graphic arts, and photography. These of course are what were called the ‘fine arts’ to distinguish them from the ‘applied arts’. I will call these the ‘canonical forms’.

The depictive arts do not admit movement. Movement in them has always been suggested, not presented directly. The quality and nature of that suggestion has been one of the main criteria of judgment of quality in those arts. We judge the depictive arts on how they suggest movement while actually excluding it.

Movement is the province of other arts—theatre, dance, music, and cinema. Each of these arts also has its own avant-garde, its own modernism, its own demands for the fusion of art and life, and its own high and low forms. But in the 1950s, those who took up and radicalized the pre-war avant-garde convic-

same subject might have had. For Greenberg, this was a severe confusion.

But if that was a severe confusion in 1940, or 1950, or even 1960, it is not a severe confusion after that. After that we have a new order of confusion of the arts, a new dimension of it, because the mimesis, the blending and blurring of distinctions, is not confined to occurrences within depiction, even though they are taking place on the terrain called ‘contemporary art’, a terrain discovered, settled, and charted by the depictive arts.

The development of this dispute was at the centre of critical discourse between the early 1950s and the later 1960s, at which point the proponents of the new movement-based forms become dominant. In 1967, Michael Fried radicalized Greenberg’s arguments and staged the last and best stand in defense of the canonical forms. This was of course his famous essay *Art and Objecthood*, where he introduced the term ‘theatricality’ to explain the condition brought about by the rise of the new forms. The term made explicit the fact that the radical breach with the canonical forms is not effected by some unheralded new type of art but comes with brutal directness from theatre, music, dance, and film. Fried’s argument may have had its greatest effect on his opponents rather than his supporters, for it revealed to them with an unprecedented intensity and sophistication both the stakes in play and the means by which to play for them. The development of the new forms exploded and accelerated just at this moment, amidst the clamour of criticism of *Art and Objecthood*.

Fried’s accomplishment is founded on his close reading of the internal structure of painting and sculpture. His contestation with Minimal Art is framed in those terms. Yet implicit within his argument are at least two other aspects, two moments of transition between the criteria of the depictive arts and those of the emergent movement.

The first of these is of course the Readymade. The Readymade is the point of origin in the history of the attempt to displace

tion that art could evolve only by breaking out of the canonical forms, turned precisely to the movement arts. I am thinking here of Allan Kaprow, John Cage, or George Maciunas. They sensed that the depictive arts could not be displaced by any more upheavals from within, any more radical versions of depiction or anti-depiction. They came to recognize that there was something about the depictive arts that would not permit another art form or art dimension to evolve out of them. The new challenge to western art would be advanced in terms of movement and the arts of movement. Cage’s piano concert, *4’33”*, first presented in 1952, can be seen as the first explicit statement of this challenge.

This was, of course, opposed by proponents of the canon, pre-eminently Clement Greenberg. Greenberg published his essay *Towards a Newer Laocoon* in 1940, twelve years before Cage’s concert. In it he wrote, “There has been, is, and will be, such a thing as a confusion of the arts.” He argues that, in each era, there can be, and has been, a dominant art, one all the others tend to imitate to their own detriment, perversion, and loss of integrity. From the early 17th century to the last third of the 19th, he says that the dominant art was literature. What he calls modernism is the effort on the part of artists to reject that mimesis and work only with the unique, inimitable characteristics of each individual, singular, art. He says that this emphasis on uniqueness is central to the creation of the best and most significant art of the period between 1875 and 1940—in painting, from Cézanne to the advent of Abstract Expressionism.

For Greenberg and his generation—and at least one further generation—the confusion was confusion within the depictive arts. Even if literature or theatre were the models for painters and sculptors, the imitations were executed as paintings or sculptures. A painter did not put on a play in a gallery and claim it was a ‘painting’, or a ‘work of art’. The painter made a painting that, unfortunately, suppressed its own inherent values as painting in trying to create the effect a staged scene of the

the depictive arts. Yet it has an unusual relation to depiction, one not often commented upon.

The Readymade did not and was not able to address itself to depiction; its concern is with the object, and so if we were to classify it within the canonical forms it would be sculpture. But no-one who has thought about it accepts that a Readymade is sculpture. Rather it is an object that transcends the traditional classifications and stands as a model for art as a whole, art as a historical phenomenon, a logic, and an institution. As Thierry de Duve has so well demonstrated, this object designates itself as the abstraction ‘art as such’, the thing that can bear the weight of the name ‘art as such’. Under what de Duve calls the conditions of nominalism, the name ‘art’ must be applied to any object that can be legitimately nominated as such by an artist. Or, to be more circumspect, it is the object from which the name art cannot logically be withheld. The Readymade therefore proved that an arbitrary object can be designated as art and that there is no argument available to refute that designation.

Depictions are works of art by definition. They may be popular art, amateur art, even entirely unskilled and unappealing art, but they are able to nominate themselves as art nonetheless. They are art because the depictive arts are founded on the making of depictions, and that making necessarily displays artistry. The only distinctions remaining to be made here are between ‘fine’ art and ‘applied’ art, or ‘popular’ art and ‘high’ art, between ‘amateur’ art and ‘professional’ art, and, of course, between good art and less good art. Selecting a very poor, amateurish, depiction (say a businessman’s deskpad doodle) and presenting it in a nice frame in a serious exhibition might be interesting, but it would not satisfy the criteria Duchamp established for the Readymade. The doodle is already nominated as art and the operation of the Readymade in regard to it is redundant.

Moreover, a depiction—let’s say a painting—cannot simply be identified with an object. It is the result of a process that has taken place upon the support provided by an object, say a

canvas, but that has not thereby created another object. The depiction is an alteration of the surface of an object. In order that the alteration be effected, the object, the support must pre-exist it. Therefore any selection of a Readymade in this case could concern only the object that pre-existed any alteration or working of its surface. The presence of this second element—the depiction—cannot be relevant to the logical criteria for an object’s selection as a Readymade, and in fact disqualifies it.

Duchamp never selects any object bearing a depiction as a Readymade. Any time he chose objects bearing depictions (these are usually pieces of paper), he altered them and gave them different names. The three most significant examples are *Pharmacie*, a colour lithographic print of a moody landscape, selected in 1914, and the pair of stereoscopic slides, *Stereoscopie à la main* (Handmade Stereoscopy), from 1918, both of which are designated as ‘corrected’ Readymades; and the famous *LH00Q* from 1919, which Duchamp called a ‘rectified Readymade’. But these terms have little meaning. The works in question are simply not Readymades at all. They are drawings, or paintings, or some hybrid, executed on a support that already has a depiction on it. *Pharmacie*, for example, could stand as a prototype for the paintings of Sigmar Polke.

Since a depiction cannot be selected as a Readymade, depiction is therefore not included in Duchamp’s negation. This is not to say that the depictive arts are not affected by the subversion carried out in the form of the Readymade; far from it. But any effect it will have on them is exerted in terms of their exemption from the claims it makes about art, not their inclusion. They are exempt because their legitimacy as art is not affected by the discovery that any object, justly selected, cannot be denied the status of ‘instance of art’ that was previously reserved exclusively for the canonical forms. This new ‘inability to deny status’ adds many things to the category art, but subtracts none from it. There is addition, that is, expanded legitimation, but no reduction, no delegitimation.

plication itself cannot be denied status as a generic instance of art—and furthermore why logically and historically, this text not only cannot be denied such status, but is in fact the only entity that can authentically possess it, since it alone has become, or remained, art while having ceased to be a specific ‘work of art’. This reduction renders everything other than itself a member of a single category, the category of less historically and theoretically self-conscious gestures—mere works of art. From the new judgment seat of strictly linguistic conceptual art, all other modes or forms are equally less valid. All are equivalent in having fallen short of the self-reflexive condition of the reduction.

The substitution of the work by a written text stakes its claim, however, under very specific conditions. The text in question can concern itself with only a single subject: the argument it makes for its own validity. The text can tell us only why and under what conditions it must be accepted as the final, definitive version of the ‘generic instance of art’ and why all other kinds of art are historically redundant. But it cannot say anything else. If it does, it becomes ‘literature’; it becomes ‘post-conceptual’.

I am only going to note in passing here that, of course, this attempt at delegitimation was no more successful than the previous one. But that is not what is significant about it. The conceptual reduction is the most rigorously-argued version of the long critique of the canonical forms. All the radical proposals of the avant-gardes since 1913 are summed up in it.

All those proposals demanded that artists leap out of what has always been called ‘art’ into new, more open, more effectively creative relationships with the ‘lifeworld’, to use Jürgen Habermas’ term for it. This leap necessarily involves repudiating the creation of high art, and inventing or at least modelling new relations between the creative citizen—who is now *not* an artist—and the lifeworld. The neo-avant-garde of the 1950s distinguishes itself from the earlier avant-garde in that

The Readymade critique is therefore both a profound success and a surprising failure. It seems to transform everything and yet it changes nothing. It can seem ephemeral and even phantom. It obliges nobody to anything. Duchamp himself returns to craftsmanship and the making of works, and there’s no problem. Everything is revolutionized but nothing has been made to disappear. Something significant has happened, but the anticipated transformation does not materialize, or it materializes incompletely, in a truncated form. The recognition of this incompleteness was itself one of the shocks created by the avant-garde. That shock was both recognized and not recognized between 1915 and 1940.

The failed overthrow and the resulting reanimation of painting and sculpture around 1940 set the stage for the more radical attempt inaugurated by Cage, Kaprow, and the others and culminating in conceptual art, or what I will call the ‘conceptual reduction’ of the depictive arts. This is the second element concealed within *Art and Objecthood*.

‘Reduction’ was a central term at the origins of conceptual art; it emerged from the new discourses on reductivism set off by Minimal art in the late 1950s and early 60s. Painting and sculpture were both to be reduced to a new status, that of what Don Judd called ‘specific objects’, neither painting nor sculpture but an industrially produced model of a generic object that would have to be accepted as the new essential form of ‘art as such’.

Now, 40 years later, we can see that Judd, along with his colleagues Dan Flavin and Carl Andre, are clearly sculptors, despite their rhetoric. Others—Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, Terry Atkinson, Mel Ramsden, Michael Baldwin, Sol Lewitt—took up that rhetoric, and were more consistent. They pushed the argument past ‘specific objects’—or ‘generic objects’—to the ‘generic instance of art’, a condition beyond objects and works of art, a negation of the ‘work of art’, the definitive supercession of both object and work. Object and work are superceded by their replacement with a written explication of why the written ex-

it is more concerned with this social and cultural modelling than it is with artistic innovation as such. Concern with artistic innovation presumes that such innovation is required for a reinvention of the lifeworld, but the conceptual reduction has shown that this is no longer the case, since the era of meaningful artistic innovation has concluded, probably with the death of Jackson Pollock in 1956.

Therefore, the argument continues, those people who would have been artistic innovators in the past now have a new field of action and a new challenge. They are no longer obliged to relate to the lifeworld via the mediation of works of art; they are now liberated from that and placed directly before a vast range of new possibilities for action. This suggests new, more inventive, more sensitive forms of cultural activity carried out in real lifeworld contexts—the media, education, social policy, urbanism, health, and many others. The ‘aesthetic education’ to be undergone by these people will impel them beyond the narrow confines of the institutions of art and release their creativity in the transformation of existing institutions and possibly the invention of new ones. This of course is very close to the ideas of the ‘counterculture’ generated at almost the same moment, and the conceptual reduction is one of the key forms of countercultural thinking.

And yet, despite the rigour of the conceptual reduction and the futuristic glamour of the challenge it posed, few artists crossed that line it drew in the sand, few left the field of art to innovate in the new way in other domains. From the early 70s on, it seems that most artists either ignored the reduction altogether, or acquiesced to it intellectually, but put it aside and continued making works. But the works they made are not the same works as before.

Since there are now no binding technical or formal criteria or even physical characteristics that could exclude this or that object or process from consideration as art, the necessity for art



to exist by means of works of art is reasserted, not *against* the conceptual reduction, but in its wake and through making use of the new openness it has provided, the new ‘expanded field’. The new kinds of works come into their own mode of historical self-consciousness through the acceptance of the claim that there is a form of art which is not a work of art and which legislates the way a work of art is now to be made. This is what the term ‘post-conceptual’ means.

The reduction increased the means by which works can be created and thereby established the framework for the vast proliferation of forms that characterizes the recent period. The depictive arts were based upon certain abilities and skills and those who did not possess either had little chance of acceptance in art. The critique of those abilities, or at least of the canonical status of those abilities, was one of the central aspects of the avant-garde’s attack on the depictive arts, and conceptual art took this up with great enthusiasm. The Readymade had already been seen as rendering the handicraft basis of art obsolete, and conceptual art extended the obsolescence to the entire range of depictive skills. The de-skilling and re-skilling of artists became a major feature of art education, which has been transformed by two generations of conceptual and post-conceptual artist-teachers.

The reduction enlarged the effect of the Readymade in validating a vast range of alternative forms that called for different abilities, different skills, and probably a different kind of artist, one that Peter Plagens recently called the ‘post-artist’. In keeping with the utopian tenor of avant-garde categories, this new kind of artist would not suffer the limitations and neuroses of his or her predecessors, trapped as they were in the craft guild mentality of the canonical forms.

The closed guild mind values the specifics of its *métier*, its abilities, skills, customs, and recipes. The proponents of the distinction and singularity of the arts always recognize *métier* as an essential condition of that distinction, and they might

20

where the development was most drastic and decisive. The avant-gardes of the movement arts were more subdued. There are many reasons for this; suffice for the moment to say that none of them had any internal need to reach the same point of self-negation as did the depictive arts. The negation-process of the depictive arts established a theoretical plateau that could not be part of the landscape of the other arts. Each of the performing arts was closed off by its own structure from the extension, radicalization, or aggravation, of self-critique. They can be said to remain inherently at the pre-conceptual-art level. This is no criticism of them, simply a description of their own characteristics.

Still, aspects of the dynamic of self-negation made their presence felt in the movement arts from the beginning of the 1950s at least. This process brought the movement arts closer to the avant-garde of what was then still the depictive arts and opened passages through which influence and ideas could move, in both directions. Almost all the new phenomena between 1950 and 1970 are involved in this crossbreeding. As the movement arts are affected by radical reductivism—and Cage’s concert displays this clearly—their forms are altered enough that they begin to resemble, at least in some vague, suggestive way, radical works of depictive art. The silence of Cage’s concert resembles, in this sense, the blankness of Robert Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings* from the same years.

These affinities brought out the notion that an event could have the same kind of artistic status as an object; in this period the notion of the event as the essential new form of post-conceptual art crystallized and became decisive. And the event is, by nature, an ensemble of effects if not a ‘confusion’ of them. Movement outside the frame of depiction, out from the atelier, gives new possibilities of form to the domain of momentary occurrences, fugitive encounters, spontaneous flashes of insight, and any other striking elements caught up in the flow of the everyday and of no value or effect when abstracted from that

22

argue that it is one that can also have a radical and utopian dimension, as a space of activity that can resist the progressive refinements of the division of labour in constantly-modernizing capitalist and anti-capitalist societies.

The proliferation of new forms in the post-conceptual situation is unregulated by any sense of craft or *métier*. On the contrary, it develops by plunging into the newest zones of the division of labour. Anything and everything is possible, and this is what was and remains so attractive about it.

By the middle of the 1970s the new forms and the notion of the expanded field had become almost as canonical as the older forms had been. Video, performance, site-specific interventions, sound works, music pieces, and variants of all of these evolved with increasing rapidity and were rightly enough considered to be serious innovations. The innovations appeared not as music or theatre properly speaking but as ‘an instance of a specificity within the context of art’. They were ‘not music’, ‘not cinema’, ‘not dance’.

The other arts make what I will call a ‘second appearance’ then, not as what they have been previously, but as ‘instances of (contemporary) art’. It appears that in making this second appearance they lose their previous identity and assume or gain a second, more complex, or more universal identity. They gain this more universal identity by becoming ‘instances’, that is, exemplars of the consequences of the conceptual reduction. For, if any object (or, by obvious extension, any process or situation) can be defined, named, considered, judged, and valued as art by means of being able to designate itself as a sheer instance of art, then any other art form can also be so defined. In making its ‘second appearance’, or gaining a second identity, the art form in question transcends itself and becomes more significant than it would be if it remained theatre or cinema or dance.

The visual arts was the place where the historical process and dialectic of reduction and negation were taken the furthest,

flow as representation. They can only be sensed, or repeated, or made visible as some form of event, in which their contingency and unpredictability are preserved, possibly intensified, possibly codified.

The advent of the movement arts has also been a major factor in the project of blurring the boundaries between high art and mass culture. This is normally identified with Pop Art, as if the depictive arts themselves had the means to carry it out. But the depictive arts do not have those means because they have no distinct mass cultural forms. Mass culture produces millions of depictions of all kinds, but they are just that—depictions functioning in different contexts. They are not a different art form, just a different level or register of the depictive arts. Pop artists were obviously not the first to recognize this; what they did was to emphasize more strongly than anyone had previously that audiences and even patrons of art in a modern, commercial society may very well prefer the popular and vernacular versions of depiction to the more complex, more introverted, forms of ‘high art’. Pop Art restaged the threatening possibility of the popular forms of depiction overwhelming the high ones, something Greenberg had warned about in *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* in 1939. But, despite this, Pop Art, as depiction, is irrelevant to the development of new forms of neo-avant-garde art and of a new fusion of high art with mass culture. And this is true of even the most extreme version of Pop, Warhol’s.

Anything new in this regard is imported from the movement arts and from the creative or organizational structures of the movement arts and the entertainment and media industries based upon them. Warhol’s mimesis of a media conglomerate was more significant here than were his paintings or prints. Warhol did not cross the line drawn by the conceptual reduction, but he moved laterally along it, and did so at the moment the line was being drawn, or even before it was drawn. But he wasn’t very interested in extending his practice into the realms advocated by the radical counterculture. Quite the opposite. Warhol moved

21

into the crowded and popular domains of mass entertainment and celebrity, the engines of conformity. This is why he has been identified as the radical antithesis to artistic radicalism.

The process of blurring the boundaries between the arts, between art and life, and between high and low, takes place as a struggle between two equally valid versions of the neo-avant-garde and countercultural critique—the radical, emancipatory version, and the Warhol version. So it is not surprising that we can see aspects of the challenge set by the conceptual reduction operating in both.

Warhol’s mimesis of a media conglomerate is a model not just for lifting the taboo on the enjoyments of conformism in a prosperous, dynamic society. Partly because it was so wildly successful, it was also a model for any sort of mimetic relationship to other institutions, popular or otherwise.

If Warhol could imitate a media firm, others coming after him could imitate a museum department, a research institute, an archive, a community service organization, and so on—that is, one could develop a mimesis, still within the institution of art, of any and every one of the potential new domains of creativity suggested by the conceptual reduction, but without thereby having to renounce the making of works and abandon the art world and its patronage.

Since the early 1970s, a hybrid form, an intermediary structure, has evolved on the basis of the fusion of Warhol’s factory concept with post-conceptual mimesis. Artists were able to remain artists and at the same time to take another step toward the line drawn in the sand. Instead of disappearing from art into therapy, communitarianism, anthropology, or radical pedagogy, they realized that these phenomena, too, can make their own second appearance within, and therefore as, art. Within the domain of second appearance, artists are able to try out this or that mimesis of extra-artistic creative experimentation.

In the past 15 or 20 years, they have refined and extended the reflection on the challenge to abandon art. It is as if, in moving

24

The critique of the depictive arts has always concentrated on the question of the autonomy of art, and the corollary of autonomy—artistic quality. Autonomous art has been mocked as something ‘outside of life’ and indifferent to it. The avant-gardes’ critique cannot be reduced to this mockery—but in demanding the breaching of the boundedness of the canonical forms, the avant-gardes have failed—or refused—to recognize that autonomy is a relation to that same world outside of art. It is a social relationship, one mediated, it is true, by our experience of a thing, a work of art, but no less social therefore than a get-together at a community hall. Defenders of autonomous art—‘high art’—claim that when works of art attain a certain level of quality, their practical human utility expands exponentially and becomes incalculable, unpredictable, and undefinable. They argue that it is not that autonomous art has no purpose, something that is commonly said about it, but that it has no purpose that can be known for certain in advance. Not even the greatest scholar of art can know what the next individual is going to discover in his or her experience of even the best-known work of art. He could not have predicted that Duchamp would want to deface the *Mona Lisa* as he did. The autonomy of art is grounded on the quality it has of serving unanticipated, undeclared, and unadmitted purposes, and of serving them differently at different times.

This is frustrating for those who have purposes, no matter how significant those purposes may be. Often, the more compelling the purpose, the greater the frustration and the more intense the objection. But for there to be works that can be depended on to serve a known purpose, the quality that makes the works autonomous must disappear and be replaced with other qualities. And there are thousands of other qualities. Just as there are now thousands of works displaying those qualities.

For 100 years, the programmes of critique have targeted the ‘problem of autonomous art’ in the name of those wider domains of creativity, whether called the proletarian revolution, the de-

23

26

along the boundary, negotiating the patronage provided by the art economy, or the art world, in combination with probing the actual effects of their mimesis in the world nearly outside the art world, they are attempting gently to erase that line, or even to move it slightly on the institutional terrain. This is the art of the global biennales—the art of prototypes of situations, of an institutionalized neo-situationism.

The biennales and the grand exhibitions—now among the most important occasions on the art calendar—are themselves becoming prototypes of this potentiality, events containing events, platforms inducing event-structures—tentative, yet spectacular models of new social forms, rooted in community action, ephemeral forms of labour, critical urbanism, deconstructivist tourism, theatricalized institutional critique, anarchic interactive media games, radical pedagogies, strategies of wellness, hobbies and therapies, rusticated technologies of shelter, theatres of memory, populist historiographies, and a thousand other ‘stations’, ‘sites’, and ‘plateaus’.

This is a new art form and possibly the final new art form since it is nearly formless. It promises the gentle, enjoyable dissolution of the institution of art, not the militant liquidation threatened by the earlier avant-gardes.

I am not here to make predictions. But, through the gentle process of mimesis and modeling, the prototypes may become more and more mature, more complex, and more stable. They will still be called ‘art’, since there is no means to deny them that name if they elect to be known by it. But they may begin to function as autonomous nomads, moving from festival to festival. Whatever purpose they might have may become institutionalized. The resulting institution could have an ‘art look’: if a gallery can resemble a wellness centre, then a wellness centre may come to look like an installation piece, and even be experienced as one. Then it would not be as if anyone renounced art, but that art itself became diffuse, and lost track of its own boundaries, and lost interest in them.

25

mocratized public sphere, the post-colonial polis, the ‘other’, or the ‘multitude’. But as long as the dispute took place within the boundaries of the depictive arts, it was impossible to dispose of the principle of artistic quality. Subversions of technique and skill are permanent routines by now, and they are just as permanently bound by the criteria they challenge and with which they must all eventually come to terms. And the most irritating thing about these subversions is that the most significant of them are accomplished by artists who cannot but bring forward new versions of autonomous art, and therefore new instances of artistic quality. The canonical forms of the depictive arts are too strong for the critiques that have been brought to bear on them. As long as the attempts to subvert them are made from within, they cannot be disturbed. As soon as the artist in question makes the slightest concession to the criteria of quality, the criteria as such are reasserted in a new, possibly even radical way.

This was the dilemma faced 50 years ago by those who, for all their by now famous reasons, were determined to break what they saw as the vicious circle of autonomy, subversion, achievement, and reconciliation. They recognized that their aims could never be achieved within the *métiers* and the canon. Once again they attempted the complete reinvention of art. They cannot be said to have failed, since they discovered the potential of the second appearance of the movement arts, the movement arts recontextualized within contemporary art as if they were Readymades.

In this recontextualization, the aesthetic criteria of all the *métiers* and forms could be suspended—those of both the movement arts and the depictive arts. The criteria of the movement arts are suspended because those arts are present as second appearance; those of the depictive arts, because they could never be applied to the movement arts in any case.

So ‘performance art’ did not have to be ‘good theatre’; video or film projections did not have to be ‘good filmmaking’, and

27

could even be better if they were not, like Warhol’s or Nauman’s around 1967. There was, and is, something exhilarating about that. The proliferation of new forms is limitless since it is stimulated by the neutralization of criteria. The new event-forms might be the definitive confusion—or fusion—of the arts. An event is inherently a synthesis, a hybrid. So the term ‘confusion of the arts’ seems inadequate, even obsolete. Now art develops by leaving behind the established criteria. The previous avant-gardes challenged those criteria, but now they do not need to be challenged; they are simply suspended, set aside. This development may be welcomed, or lamented, or opposed, but it is happening, is going to continue to happen; it is the form of the New. This is what artistic innovation is going to continue to be, this is what artists want, or need, it to be.

This shows us that the canonical forms are no longer the site of innovation. Moreover, in comparison to the new forms, it now appears that they might never really have been, at least not to the extent claimed by the familiar histories of the avant-garde.

Burdened by their own notions of quality, the depictive arts have been able to question their own validity only in order to affirm it. To practice these arts is to affirm them or fail at them, even though that affirmation may be more dialectical than most negations. The emergence in the past 30 to 50 years, of a contemporary art that is not a depictive art has revealed the depictive arts as restricted to this negative dialectic of affirmation. This is the price paid for autonomy.

Contemporary art, then, has bifurcated into two distinct versions. One is based in principle on the suspension of aesthetic criteria, the other is absolutely subject to them. One is likewise utterly subject to the principle of the autonomy of art, the other is possible only in a condition of pseudo-heteronomy. We can’t know yet whether there is to be an end to this interim condition, whether a new authentic heteronomous or post-autonomous art will actually emerge. Judging from the historical

record of the past century, it is not likely. It is more likely that artists will continue to respond to the demand to transcend autonomous art with more of their famous hedging actions, inventing even more sophisticated interim solutions. We are probably already in a mannerist phase of that. This suggests that ‘interim mimetic heteronomy’—as awkward a phrase as I could manage to produce—has some way to go as the form of the New. It may be the form in which we discover what the sacrifice of aesthetic criteria is really like, not as speculation, but as experience, and as our specific—one could say peculiar—contribution to art.

Jeff Wall was born in 1946 in Vancouver, Canada, where he currently lives and works. He studied art history at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver (1964–70) and undertook postgraduate studies at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London (1970–3). Since the mid seventies, he has acquired international recognition with his transparent colour photographs mounted in lightboxes. In these works he deconstructs the pictorial traditions of Western painting, cinema and documentary photography, while acknowledging the heritage of conceptual art and other critical movements. Parallel to his studio practice, Jeff Wall has become known as the author of many influential essays on art, such as *Dan Graham’s Kammerspiel* (1984), *‘Marks of Indifference’: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art* (1995), and *Monochrome and Photojournalism in On Kawara’s Today Paintings* (1996).

# Seth Price Dispersion

*The definition of artistic activity occurs, first of all, in the field of distribution.* Marcel Broodthaers



One of the ways in which the Conceptual project in art has been most successful is in claiming new territory for practice. It’s a tendency that’s been almost too successful: today it seems that most of the work in the international art system positions itself as Conceptual to some degree, yielding the “Conceptual painter,” the “DJ and Conceptual artist,” or the “Conceptual web artist.” Let’s put aside the question of what makes a work Conceptual, recognizing, with some resignation, that the term can only gesture toward a thirty year-old historical moment. But it can’t be rejected entirely, as it has an evident charge for artists working today, even if they aren’t necessarily invested in the concerns of the classical moment, which included linguistics, analytic philosophy, and a pursuit of formal dematerialization. What does seem to

hold true for today’s normative Conceptualism is that the project remains, in the words of Art and Language, “radically incomplete”: it does not necessarily stand against objects or painting, or for language as art; it does not need to stand against retinal art; it does not stand for anything certain, instead privileging framing and context, and constantly renegotiating its relationship to its audience. Martha Rosler has spoken of the “as-if” approach, where the Conceptual work cloaks itself in other disciplines (philosophy being the most notorious example), provoking an oscillation between skilled and de-skilled, authority and pretense, style and strategy, art and not-art.



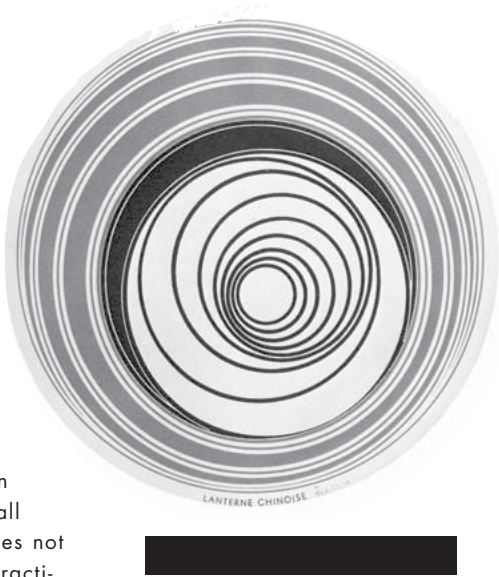
Hermann Hugo. Pia Desideria. 1659.

Duchamp was not only here first, but staked out the problematic virtually single-handedly. His question “Can one make works which are not ‘of art’” is our shibboleth, and the question’s resolution will remain an apparition on the horizon, always receding from the slow growth of practice. One suggestion comes from the philosopher Sarat Maharaj, who sees the question as “a marker for ways we might be able to engage with works, events, spasms, ructions that don’t look like art and don’t count as art, but are somehow electric, energy nodes, attractors, transmitters, conductors of new thinking, new subjectivity and action that visual artwork in the traditional sense is not able to articulate.” These concise words call for an art that insinuates itself into the culture at large, an art that does not go the way of, say, theology, where while it’s certain that there are practitioners doing important work, few people notice. An art that takes Rosler’s as-if moment as far as it can go.



Not surprisingly, the history of this project is a series of false starts and paths that peter out, of projects that dissipate or are absorbed. Exemplary among this garden of ruins is Duchamp’s failure to sell his Rotorelief optical toys at an amateur inventor’s fair. What better description of the artist than amateur inventor? But this was 1935, decades before widespread fame would have assured his sales, and he was attempting to wholly transplant himself into the alien context of commercial science and invention. In his own analysis: “error, one hundred percent.” Immersing art in life runs the risk of seeing the status of art—and with it, the status of artist—disperse entirely.

These bold expansions actually seem to render artworks increasingly vulnerable. A painting is manifestly art, whether on the wall or in the street, but avant-garde work is often illegible without institutional framing and the work of the curator or historian. More than anyone else, artists of the last hundred years have wrestled with this trauma of context, but theirs is a struggle that necessarily takes place within the art system. However radical the work, it amounts to a proposal enacted within an arena of peer-review, in dialogue with the community and its history. Reflecting on his experience running a gallery in the 1960s, Dan Graham observed: “if a work of art wasn’t written about and reproduced in a magazine it would have difficulty attaining the status of ‘art’. It seemed that in order to be defined as having value, that is as ‘art’, a work had only to be exhibited in a gallery and then to be written about and reproduced as a photograph in an art magazine.” Art, then, with its reliance on discussion through refereed forums and journals, is similar to a professional field like science.



What would it mean to step outside of this carefully structured system? Duchamp’s Rotorelief experiment stands as a caution, and the futility of more recent attempts to evade the institutional system has been well demonstrated. Canonical works survive through documentation and discourse, administered by the usual institutions. Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, for example, was acquired by (or perhaps it was in fact ‘gifted to’) the Dia Art Foundation, which discreetly mounted a photograph of the new holding in its Dan Graham-designed video-café, a tasteful assertion of ownership.

That work which seeks what Allan Kaprow called “the blurring of art and life” work which Boris Groys has called biopolitical, attempting to “produce and document life itself as pure activity by artistic means,” faces the problem that it must depend on a record of its intervention into the world, and this documentation is what is recouped as art, short-circuiting the original intent. Groys sees a disparity thus opened between the work and its future existence as documentation, noting our “deep malaise towards documentation and the archive.” This must be partly due to the archive’s deathlike appearance, a point that Jeff Wall has echoed, in a critique of the uninvitingly “tomb-like” Conceptualism of the 1960s.

Agreement! A paragraph of citations, a direction, the suggestion that one is getting a sense of things. What these critics observe is a popular suspicion of the archive of high culture, which relies on cataloguing, provenance, and authenticity. Insofar as there is a popular archive, it does not share this administrative tendency. Suppose an artist were to release the work directly into a system that depends on reproduction and distribution for its sustenance, a model that encourages contamination, borrowing, stealing, and horizontal blur. The art system usually corrals errant works, but how could it recoup thousands of freely circulating paperbacks?



“Clip Art,” 1985.



Dan Graham. Figurative. 1965.

It is useful to continually question the avant-garde's traditional romantic opposition to bourgeois society and values. The genius of the bourgeoisie manifests itself in the circuits of power and money that regulate the flow of culture. National bourgeois culture, of which art is one element, is based around commercial media, which, together with technology, design, and fashion, generate some of the important differences of our day. These are the arenas in which to conceive of a work positioned within the material and discursive technologies of distributed media.

Distributed media can be defined as social information circulating in theoretically unlimited quantities in the common market, stored or accessed via portable devices such as books and magazines, records and compact discs, videotapes and DVDs, personal computers and data diskettes. Duchamp's question has new life in this space, which has greatly expanded during the last few decades of global corporate sprawl. It's space into which the work of art must project itself lest it be outdistanced entirely by these corporate interests. New strategies are needed to keep up with commercial distribution, decentralization, and dispersion. You must fight something in order to understand it.

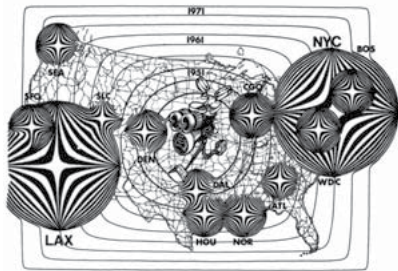
Mark Klienberg, writing in 1975 in the second issue of *The Fox*, poses the question: "Could there be someone capable of writing a science-fiction thriller based on the intention of presenting an alternative interpretation of modernist art that is readable by a non-specialist audience? Would they care?" He says no more about it, and the question

stands as an intriguing historical fragment, an evolutionary dead end, and a line of inquiry to pursue in this essay: the intimation of a categorically ambiguous art, one in which the synthesis of multiple circuits of reading carries an emancipatory potential.

This tendency has a rich history, despite the lack of specific work along the lines of Klienberg's proposal. Many artists have used the printed page as medium; an arbitrary and partial list might include Robert Smithson, Mel Bochner, Dan Graham, Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, Stephen Kaltenbach, and Adrian Piper, and there have been historical watersheds like Seth Siegelaub and John Wendler's 1968 show *Xeroxbook*.



"Literature being reeled off and sold in chunks"—Grandville, 1844.



You Are Information  
Ant Farm, 1960s.



2000.

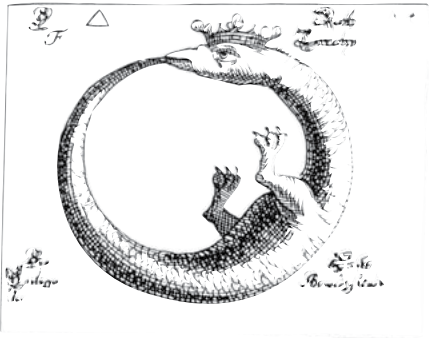
The radical nature of this work stems in part from the fact that it is a direct expression of the process of production. Market mechanisms of circulation, distribution, and dissemination become a crucial part of the work, distinguishing such a practice from the liberal-bourgeois model of production, which operates under the notion that cultural doings somehow take place above the marketplace. However, whether assuming the form of ad or article, much of this work was primarily concerned with finding exhibition alternatives to the gallery wall, and in any case often used these sites to demonstrate dryly theoretical propositions rather than address issues of, say, desire. And then, one imagines, with a twist of the kaleidoscope things resolve themselves.

This points to a shortcoming of classical conceptualism. Benjamin Buchloh points out that "while it emphasized its universal availability and its potential collective accessibility and underlined its freedom from the determinations of the discursive and economic framing conventions governing traditional art production and reception, it was, nevertheless, perceived as the most esoteric and elitist artistic mode." Kosuth's quotation from Roget's Thesaurus placed in an Artforum box ad, or Dan Graham's list of numbers laid out in an issue of Harper's Bazaar, were uses of mass media to deliver coded propositions to a specialist audience, and the impact of these works, significant and lasting as they were, reverted directly to the relatively arcane realm of the art system, which noted these efforts and inscribed them in its histories. Conceptualism's critique of representation emanated the same mandarin air as did a canvas by Ad Reinhart, and its attempts to create an Art Degree Zero can be seen as a kind of negative virtuosity, perhaps partly attributable to a New Left skepticism towards pop culture and its generic expressions.

Certainly, part of what makes the classical avant-garde interesting and radical is that it tended to shun social communication, excommunicating itself through incomprehensibility, but this isn't useful if the goal is to use the circuits of mass distribution. In that case, one must use not simply the delivery mechanisms of popular culture, but also its generic forms. When Rodney Graham releases a CD of pop songs, or Maurizio Cattelan publishes a magazine, those in the art world must acknowledge the art gesture at the same time that these products function like any other artifact in the consumer market. But difference lies within

these products! Embodied in their embrace of the codes of the culture industry, they contain a utopian moment that points toward future transformation. They could be written according to the code of hermeneutics:

"Where we have spoken openly we have actually said nothing. But where we have written something in code and in pictures, we have concealed the truth..."



A. Eleazar. Ouroboros. 1735.

C	61
D	34
A	33
A	39
A	1-21
A	0030
A	0033
A	0050
A	0057
A	0032
A	0079
A	0047
A	0042
A	0079
A	0033
A	0033
A	0025
A	0029
A	0041
A	0036
A	0059
A	0041
A	0059
A	0034
A	0037
A	0039
A	0039
A	0035
A	0056

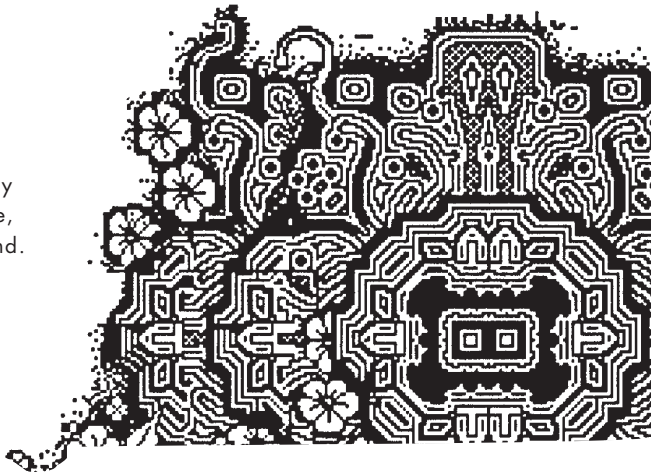




Let's say your aesthetic program spans media, and that much of your work does not function properly within the institutionalized art context. This might include music, fashion, poetry, film-making, or criticism, all crucial artistic practices, but practices which are somehow stubborn and difficult, which resist easy assimilation into a market-driven art system. The film avant-garde, for instance, has always run on a separate track from the art world, even as its practitioners may have been pursuing analogous concerns. And while artists have always been attracted to music and its rituals, a person whose primary activity was producing music, conceived of and presented as Art, would find 'art world' acceptance elusive. The producer who elects to wear several hats is perceived as a crossover at best: the artist-filmmaker, as in the case of Julian Schnabel; the artist as entrepreneur, as in the case of Warhol's handling of Interview magazine and the Velvet Underground; or, as with many of the people mentioned in this essay, artist as critic, perhaps the most tenuous position of all. This is the lake of our feeling.

One could call these niches "theatrical," echoing Michael Fried's insistence that "what lies between the arts is theater... the common denominator that binds... large and seemingly disparate activities to one another, and that distinguishes these activities from the radically different enterprises of the Modernist art." A practice based on distributed media should pay close attention to these activities, which, despite lying between the arts, have great resonance in the national culture.

Some of the most interesting recent artistic activity has taken place outside the art market and its forums. Collaborative and sometimes anonymous groups work in fashion, music, video, or performance, garnering admiration within the art world while somehow retaining their status as outsiders, perhaps due to their preference for theatrical, distribution-oriented modes. Maybe this is what Duchamp meant by his intriguing throwaway comment, late in life, that the artist of the future will be underground.



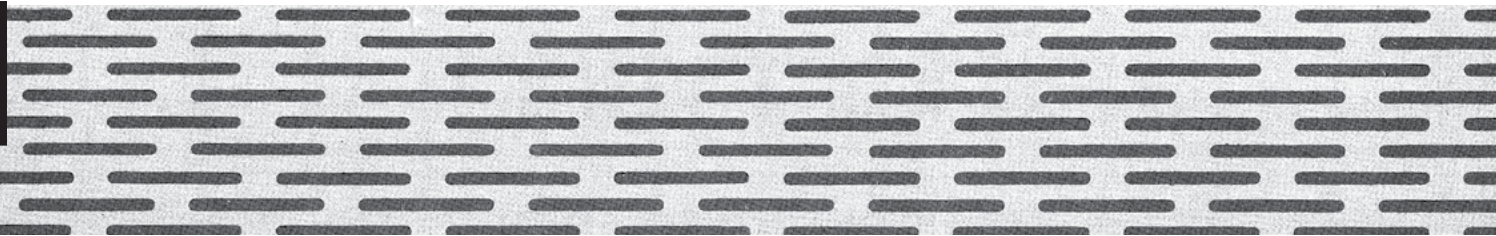
If distribution and public are so important, isn't this, in a sense, a debate about "public art"? It's a useful way to frame the discussion, but only if one underlines the historical deficiencies of that discourse, and acknowledges the fact that the public has changed.

The discourse of public art has historically focused on ideals of universal access, but, rather than considering access in any practical terms, two goals have been pursued to the exclusion of others. First, the work must be free of charge (apparently economic considerations are primary in determining the divide between public and private). Often this bars any perceptible institutional frame that would normally confer the status of art, such as the museum, so the public artwork must broadly and unambiguously announce its own art status, a mandate for conservative forms. Second is the direct equation of publicness with shared physical space. But if this is the model, the successful work of public art will at best function as a site of pilgrimage, in which case it overlaps with architecture.

*Puppy, after Jeff Koons. S. Price.*

The problem is that situating the work at a singular point in space and time turns it, a priori, into a monument. What if it is instead dispersed and reproduced, its value approaching zero as its accessibility rises? We should recognize that collective experience is now based on simultaneous private experiences, distributed across the field of media culture, knit together by ongoing debate, publicity, promotion, and discussion. Publicness today has as much to do with sites of production and reproduction as it does with any supposed physical commons, so a popular album could be regarded as a more successful instance of public art than a monument tucked away in an urban plaza. The album is available everywhere, since it employs the mechanisms of free market capitalism, history's most sophisticated distribution system to date. The monumental model of public art is invested in an anachronistic notion of communal appreciation transposed from the church to the museum to the outdoors, and this notion is received skeptically by an audience no longer so interested in direct communal experience. While instantiated in nominal public space, mass-market artistic production is usually consumed privately, as in the case of books, CDs, videotapes, and Internet "content." Television producers are not interested in collectivity, they are interested in getting as close as possible to individuals. Perhaps an art distributed to the broadest possible public closes the circle, becoming a private art, as in the days of commissioned portraits. The analogy will only become more apt as digital distribution techniques allow for increasing customization to individual consumers.





Ettore Sottsass. Lamiera. Pattern design, Memphis collection. 1983.

The monumentality of public art has been challenged before, most successfully by those for whom the term ‘public’ was a political rallying point. Public artists in the 1970s and 1980s took interventionist praxis into the social field, acting out of a sense of urgency based on the notion that there were social crises so pressing that artists could no longer hole up in the studio, but must directly engage with community and cultural identity. If we are to propose a new kind of public art, it is important to look beyond the purely ideological or instrumental function of art. As Art and Language noted, “radical artists produce articles and exhibitions about photos, capitalism, corruption, war, pestilence, trench foot and issues.” Public policy, destined to be the terminal as-if strategy of the avant-garde! A self-annihilating nothing.

An art grounded in distributed media can be seen as a political art and an art of communicative action, not least because it is a reaction to the fact that the merging of art and life has been effected most successfully by the “consciousness industry”. The field of culture is a public sphere and a site of struggle, and all of its manifestations are ideological. In *Public Sphere and Experience*, Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge insist that each individual, no matter how passive a component of the capitalist consciousness industry, must be considered a producer (despite the fact that this role is denied them). Our task, they say, is to fashion “counter-productions.” Kluge himself is an inspiration: acting as a filmmaker, lobbyist, fiction writer, and television producer, he has worked deep changes in the terrain of German media. An object disappears when it becomes a weapon.



Anonymous.

The problem arises when the constellation of critique, publicity, and discussion around the work is at least as charged as a primary experience of the work. Does one have an obligation to view the work first-hand? What happens when a more intimate, thoughtful, and enduring understanding comes from mediated discussions of an exhibition, rather than from a direct experience of the work? Is it incumbent upon the consumer to bear witness, or can one’s art experience derive from magazines, the Internet, books, and conversation? The ground for these questions has been cleared by two cultural tendencies that are more or less diametrically opposed: on the one hand, Conceptualism’s historical dependence on documents and records; on the other hand, the popular archive’s ever-sharpening knack for generating public discussion through secondary media. This does not simply mean the commercial cultural world, but a global media sphere which is, at least for now, open to the interventions of non-commercial, non-governmental actors working solely within channels of distributed media.

A good example of this last distinction is the phenomenon of the “Daniel Pearl Video,” as it’s come to be called. Even without the label PROPAGANDA, which CBS helpfully added to the excerpt they aired, it’s clear that the 2002 video is a complex document. Formally, it presents kidnapped American journalist Daniel Pearl, first as a mouthpiece for the views of his kidnappers, a Pakistani fundamentalist organization, and then, following his off-screen murder, as a cadaver, beheaded in order to underline the gravity of their political demands.



دانيال بيرل اليهودي



Computer Technique Group. Cubic Kennedy. 1960s.

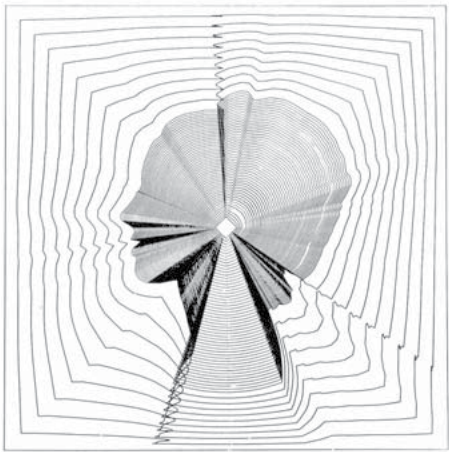
One of the video’s most striking aspects is not the grisly, though clinical, climax (which, in descriptions of the tape, has come to stand in for the entire content), but the slick production strategies, which seem to draw on American political campaign advertisements. It is not clear whether it was ever intended for TV broadcast. An apocryphal story indicates that a Saudi journalist found it on an Arabic-language web-site and turned it over to CBS, which promptly screened an excerpt, drawing heavy criticism. Somehow it found its way onto the Internet, where the FBI’s thwarted attempts at suppression only increased its notoriety: in the first months after its Internet release, “Daniel Pearl video,” “Pearl video,” and other variations on the phrase were among the terms most frequently submitted to Internet search engines. The work seems to be unavailable as a videocassette, so anyone able to locate it is likely to view a compressed data-stream transmitted from a hosting service in the Netherlands (in this sense, it may not be correct to call it “video”). One question is whether it has been *relegated* to the Internet, or in some way created by that technology. Does the piece count as “info-war” because of its nature as a proliferating computer file, or is it simply a video for broadcast, forced to assume digital form under political pressure? Unlike television, the net provides information only on demand, and much of the debate over this video concerns not the legality or morality of making it available, but whether or not one should choose to watch it—as if the act of viewing will in some way enlighten or contaminate. This is a charged document freely available in the public arena, yet the discussion around it, judging from numerous web forums, bulletin boards, and discussion groups, is usually debated by parties who have never seen it.



This example may be provocative, since the video’s deplorable content is clearly bound up with its extraordinary routes of transmission and reception. It is evident, however, that terrorist organizations, alongside transnational corporate interests, are one of the more vigilantly opportunistic exploiters of “events, spasms, ructions that don’t look like art and don’t count as art, but are somehow electric, energy nodes, attractors, transmitters, conductors of new thinking, new subjectivity and action.” A more conventional instance of successful use of the media-sphere by a non-market, non-government organization is Linux, the open-source computer operating system that won a controversial first prize at the digital art fair Ars Electronica. Linux was initially written by one person, programmer Linus Torvalds, who placed the code for this “radically incomplete” work on-line, inviting others to tinker, with the aim of polishing and perfecting the operating system. The Internet allows thousands of authors to simultaneously develop various parts of the work, and Linux has emerged as a popular and powerful operating system and a serious challenge to profit-driven giants like Microsoft, which recently filed with the US Securities and Exchange Commission to warn that its business model, based on control through licensing, is menaced by the open-source model. Collective authorship and complete decentralization ensure that the work is invulnerable to the usual corporate forms of attack and assimilation, whether enacted via legal, market, or technological routes (however, as Alex Galloway has pointed out, the structure of the World Wide Web should not itself be taken to be some rhizomatic utopia; it certainly would not be difficult for a government agency to hobble or even shut down the Web with a few simple commands).



After an anonymous cameo, circa 18<sup>th</sup> century. S. Price

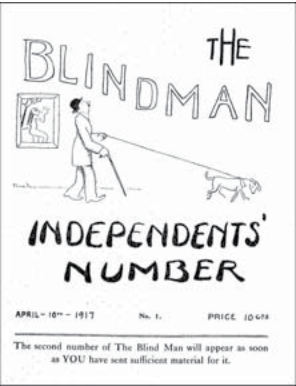


Computer Technique Group. Return to a Square. 1960s.

Both of these examples privilege the Internet as medium, mostly because of its function as a public site for storage and transmission of information. The notion of a mass archive is relatively new, and a notion which is probably philosophically opposed to the traditional understanding of what an archive is and how it functions, but it may be that, behind the veneer of user interfaces floating on its surface—which generate most of the work grouped under the rubric “web art”—the Internet approximates such a structure, or can at least be seen as a working model.

With more and more media readily available through this unruly archive, the task becomes one of packaging, producing, reframing, and distributing; a mode of production analogous not to the creation of material goods, but to the production of social contexts, using existing material. Anything on the internet is a fragment, provisional, pointing elsewhere. Nothing is finished. What a time you chose to be born!

An entire artistic program could be centered on the re-release of obsolete cultural artifacts, with or without modifications, regardless of intellectual property laws. An early example of this redemptive tendency is artist Harry Smith’s obsessive 1952 *Anthology of American Folk Music*, which compiled forgotten recordings from early in the century. Closer to the present is my own collection of early video game soundtracks, in which audio data rescued by hackers and circulated on the web is transplanted to the old media of the compact-disc, where it gains resonance from the contexts of product and the song form: take what’s free and sell it back in a new package. In another example, one can view the entire run of the 1970s arts magazine *Aspen*, republished on the artist-run site ubu.com, which regularly makes out-of-print works available as free digital files. All of these works emphasize the capacity for remembering, which Kluge sees as crucial in opposing “the assault of the present on the rest of time,” and in organizing individual and collective learning and memory under an industrialist-capitalist temporality that works to fragment and valorize all experience. In these works, resistance is to be found at the moment of production, since it figures the moment of consumption as an act of re-use.

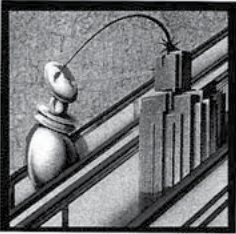


The Blind Man. 1917.

It’s clear from these examples that the readymade still towers over artistic practice. But this is largely due to the fact that the strategy yielded a host of new opportunities for the commodity. Dan Graham identified the problem with the readymade: “instead of reducing gallery objects to the common level of the everyday object, this ironic gesture simply extended the reach of the gallery’s exhibition territory.” One must return to *Fountain*, the most notorious and most interesting of the readymades, to see that the gesture does not simply raise epistemological questions about the nature of art, but enacts the dispersion of objects into discourse. The power of the readymade is that no one needs to make the pilgrimage to see *Fountain*. As with Graham’s magazine pieces, few people saw the original *Fountain* in 1917. Never exhibited, and lost or destroyed almost immediately, it was actually created through Duchamp’s media manipulations—the Stieglitz photograph (a guarantee, a shortcut to history), the *Blind Man* magazine article—rather than through the creation-myth of his finger selecting it in the showroom, the status-conferring gesture to which the readymades are often reduced. In *Fountain*’s elegant model, the artwork does not occupy a single position in space and time; rather, it is a palimpsest of gestures, presentations, and positions. Distribution is a circuit of reading, and there is huge potential for subversion when dealing with the institutions that control definitions of cultural meaning. Duchamp distributed the notion of the fountain in such a way that it became one of art’s primal scenes; it transubstantiated from a provocative objet d’art into, as Broodthaers defined his *Musée des Aigles*: “a situation, a system defined by objects, by inscriptions, by various activities...”

i’m in heaven when you file

Hot on the heels of last year’s Output compilation of Commodore 64 tunes comes Game Heaven, a collection of computer soundtracks from 1982-1987. This selection comes from across the board of home entertainment, culled from collections of internet files which have been hacked from ageing consoles and outmoded arcade machines before being traded by techno fetishists. Mercifully, the bulk of these tunes are rather easier on the ears than the psychosis-inducing Commodore collection; while sharing the same lo-fi aesthetic, the 19 tracks display a surprising level of invention and variation. The tracks have been compiled by the artist Seth Price, who is represented at the 2002 Whitney Biennial. Price was born and raised in Jerusalem’s volatile West Bank but has lived and worked in New York since 1997. All the pieces on the CD are unlisted and uncredited, raising several issues pertinent to digital culture: the acknowledgement of authorship, the loss of information as systems become obsolete and the point at which commercially or mass produced work becomes artistically valid. “The genre represents unique limitations,” Price explains. “Designed for adolescent boys intent on play, the tracks must be energetic, but not distracting; the consummate background music.” Eight-bit muzak as art, anyone? JUSTIN QUIRK  
Game Heaven is available at the Whitney Museum Bookshop, 945 Madison Avenue, New York (212 570 3676).



i-D Magazine. 2002.

The last thirty years have seen the transformation of art's "expanded field" from a stance of stubborn discursive ambiguity into a comfortable and compromised situation in which we're well accustomed to conceptual interventions, to art and the social, where the impulse to merge art and life has resulted in lifestyle art, a secure gallery practice that comments on contemporary media culture, or apes commercial production strategies. This is the lumber of life.



Iakov Chernikhov. Constructive Theatrical Set. 1931.

This tendency is marked in the discourses of architecture and design. An echo of Public Art's cherished communal spaces persists in the art system's fondness for these modes, possibly because of the Utopian promise of their appeals to collective public experience. Their "criticality" comes from an engagement with broad social concerns. This is why Dan Graham's pavilions were initially so provocative, and the work of Daniel Buren, Michael Asher, and Gordon Matta-Clark before him: these were interventions into the social unconscious. These interventions have been guiding lights for art of the last decade, but in much the same way that quasi-bureaucratic administrative forms were taken up by the Conceptualists of the 1960s, design and architecture now could be called house styles of the neo-avant-garde. Their appearance often simply gestures toward a theoretically engaged position, such that a representation of space or structure is figured as an ipso facto critique of administered society and the social, while engagement with design codes is seen as a comment on advertising and the commodity. One must be careful not to blame the artists; architecture and design forms are all-too-easily packaged for resale as sculpture and painting. However, one can still slip through the cracks in the best possible way, and even in the largest institutions. Jorge Pardo's radical *Project*, an overhaul of Dia's ground floor which successfully repositioned the institution via broadly appealing design vernaculars, went largely unremarked in the art press, either because the piece was transparent to the extent of claiming the museum's bookstore

and exhibiting work by other artists, or because of a cynical incredulity that he gets away with calling this art.



Liam Gillick. Post Legislation Discussion Platform. 1998.



Ettore Sottsass. Design of a Roof to Discuss Under. 1973.

A similar strain of disbelief greeted the construction of his own house, produced for an exhibition with a good deal of the exhibitor's money. It seems that the avant-garde can still shock, if only on the level of economic valorization. This work does not simply address the codes of mass culture, it embraces these codes as form, in a possibly quixotic pursuit of an unmediated critique of cultural conventions.

An argument against art that addresses contemporary issues and topical culture rests on the virtue of slowness, often cast aside due to the urgency with which ones work must appear. Slowness works against all of our prevailing urges and requirements: it is a resistance to the contemporary mandate of speed. Moving *with* the times places you in a blind spot: if you're part of the general tenor, it's difficult to add a dissonant note. But the way in which media culture feeds on its own leavings indicates the paradoxical slowness of archived media, which, like a sleeper cell, will always rear its head at a later date. The rear-guard often has the upper hand, and sometimes *delay*, to use Duchamp's term, will return the investment with massive interest.



Michael Green. From Zen and the Art of Macintosh. 1986.

Let's not overreach. The question is whether everything is always the same, whether it is in fact possible that by the age of forty a person has seen all that has been and will ever be. Must I consult art to understand that identity is administered, power exploits, resistance is predetermined, all is shit?

To recognize...the relative immutability of historically formed discursive artistic genres, institutional structures, and distribution forms as obstacles that are ultimately persistent (if not insurmountable) marks the most profound crisis for the artist identified with a model of avant-garde practice.

So the thread leads from Duchamp to Pop to Conceptualism, but beyond that we must turn our backs: a resignation, in contrast to Pop's affirmation and Conceptualism's interrogation. Such a project is an incomplete and perhaps futile proposition, and since one can only adopt the degree of precision appropriate to the subject, this essay is written in a provisional and exploratory spirit. An art that attempts to tackle the expanded field, encompassing arenas other than the standard gallery and art world-circuit, sounds utopian at best,



and possibly naïve and undeveloped; this essay may itself be a disjointed series of naïve propositions lacking a thesis. Complete enclosure means that one cannot write a novel, compose music, produce television, and still retain the status of Artist. What's more, artist as a social role is somewhat embarrassing, in that it's taken to be a useless position, if not a reactionary one: the practitioner is dismissed as either the producer of over-valued decor, or as part of an arrogant, parasitical, self-styled elite.

**B**ut hasn't the artistic impulse always been utopian, with all the hope and futurity that implies? To those of you who decry the Utopian impulse as futile, or worse, responsible for the horrible excesses of the last century, recall that each moment is a Golden Age (of course the Soviet experiment was wildly wrong-headed, but let us pretend—and it is not so hard—that a kind of social Dispersion was its aim). The last hundred years of work indicate that it's demonstrably impossible to destroy or dematerialize Art, which, like it or not, can only gradually expand, voraciously synthesizing every aspect of life. Meanwhile, we can take up the redemptive circulation of allegory through design, obsolete forms and historical moments, genre and the vernacular, the social memory woven into popular culture: a private, secular, and profane consumption of media. Production, after all, is the excretory phase in a process of appropriation.



Albrecht Dürer. Melencolia I. 1514.

# Jorge Luis Borges

## The Library of Babel

By this art you may contemplate  
the variations of the 23 letters...  
*The Anatomy of Melancholy,*  
*part 2, sect. II, mem. IV*

The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries, with vast air shafts between, surrounded by very low railings. From any of the hexagons one can see, interminably, the upper and lower floors. The distribution of the galleries is invariable. Twenty shelves, five long shelves per side, cover all the sides except two; their height, which is the distance from floor to ceiling, scarcely exceeds that of a normal bookcase. One of the free sides leads to a narrow hallway which opens onto another gallery, identical to the first and to all the rest. To the left and right of the hallway there are two very small closets. In the first, one may sleep standing up; in the other, satisfy one's fecal necessities. Also through here passes a spiral stairway, which sinks abysmally and soars upwards to remote distances. In the hallway there is a mirror which faithfully duplicates all appearances. Men usually infer from this mirror that the Library is not infinite (if it were, why this illusory duplication?); I prefer to dream that its polished surfaces represent and promise the infinite... Light is provided by some spherical fruit which bear the name of lamps. There are two, transversally placed, in each hexagon. The light they emit is insufficient, incessant.

Like all men of the Library, I have traveled in my youth; I have wandered in search of a book, perhaps the catalogue of catalogues; now that my eyes can hardly decipher what I write, I am preparing to die just a few leagues from the hexagon in which I was born. Once I am dead, there will be no lack

of pious hands to throw me over the railing; my grave will be the fathomless air; my body will sink endlessly and decay and dissolve in the wind generated by the fall, which is infinite. I say that the Library is unending. The idealists argue that the hexagonal rooms are a necessary form of absolute space or, at least, of our intuition of space. They reason that a triangular or pentagonal room is inconceivable. (The mystics claim that their ecstasy reveals to them a circular chamber containing a great circular book, whose spine is continuous and which follows the complete circle of the walls; but their testimony is suspect; their words, obscure. This cyclical book is God.) Let it suffice now for me to repeat the classic dictum: *The Library is a sphere whose exact center is any one of its hexagons and whose circumference is inaccessible.*

There are five shelves for each of the hexagon's walls; each shelf contains thirty-five books of uniform format; each book is of four hundred and ten pages; each page, of forty lines, each line, of some eighty letters which are black in color. There are also letters on the spine of each book; these letters do not indicate or prefigure what the pages will say. I know that this incoherence at one time seemed mysterious. Before summarizing the solution (whose discovery, in spite of its tragic projections, is perhaps the capital fact in history) I wish to recall a few axioms.

First: The Library exists *ab aeterno*. This truth, whose immediate corollary is the future eternity of the world, cannot be placed in doubt by

and latrines for the seated librarian, can only be the work of a god. To perceive the distance between the divine and the human, it is enough to compare these crude wavering symbols which my fallible hand scrawls on the cover of a book, with the organic letters inside: punctual, delicate, perfectly black, inimitably symmetrical.

Second: *The orthographical symbols are twenty-five in number.*<sup>1</sup> This finding made it possible, three hundred years ago, to formulate a general theory of the Library and solve satisfactorily the problem which no conjecture had deciphered: the formless and chaotic nature of almost all the books. One which my father saw in a hexagon on circuit fifteen ninety-four was made up of the letters MCV, perversely repeated from the first line to the last. Another (very much consulted in this area) is a mere labyrinth of letters, but the next-to-last page says *Oh time thy pyramids*. This much is already known: for every sensible line of straightforward statement, there are leagues of senseless cacophonies, verbal jumbles and incoherences. (I know of an uncouth region whose librarians repudiate the vain and superstitious custom of finding a meaning in books and equate it with that of finding a meaning in dreams or in the chaotic lines of one's palm... They admit that the inventors of this writing imitated the twenty-five natural symbols, but maintain that this application is accidental and that the books signify nothing in themselves. This dictum, we shall see, is not entirely fallacious.)

For a long time it was believed that these impenetrable books corresponded to past or remote languages. It is true that the most ancient men, the first librarians, used a language quite different from the one we now



speak; it is true that a few miles to the right the tongue is dialectical and that ninety floors farther up, it is incomprehensible. All this, I repeat, is true, but four hundred and ten pages of inalterable MCV’s cannot correspond to any language, no matter how dialectical or rudimentary it may be. Some insinuated that each letter could influence the following one and that the value of MCV in the third line of page 71 was not the one the same series may have in another position on another page, but this vague thesis did not prevail. Others thought of cryptographs; generally, this conjecture has been accepted, though not in the sense in which it was formulated by its originators.

Five hundred years ago, the chief of an upper hexagon<sup>2</sup> came upon a book as confusing as the others, but which had nearly two pages of homogeneous lines. He showed his find to a wandering decoder who told him the lines were written in Portuguese; others said they were Yiddish. Within a century, the language was established: a Samoyedic Lithuanian dialect of Guarani, with classical Arabian inflections. The content was also deciphered: some notions of combinative analysis, illustrated with examples of variations with unlimited repetition. These examples made it possible for a librarian of genius to discover the fundamental law of the Library. This thinker observed that all the books, no matter how diverse they might be, are made up of the same elements: the space, the period, the comma, the twenty-two letters of the alphabet. He also alleged a fact which travelers have confirmed: *In the vast Library there are no two identical books*. From these two incontrovertible premises he deduced that the Library is total and that its shelves register all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographical symbols (a number which, though extremely vast, is not infinite): Everything: the minutely detailed history of the future, the archangels’ autobiographies, the faithful catalogues of the Library, thousands and thousands of false catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of those catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of the true

catalogue, the Gnostic gospel of Basilides, the commentary on that gospel, the commentary on the commentary on that gospel, the true story of your death, the translation of every book in all languages, the interpolations of every book in all books.

When it was proclaimed that the Library contained all books, the first impression was one of extravagant happiness. All men felt themselves to be the masters of an intact and secret treasure. There was no personal or world problem whose eloquent solution did not exist in some hexagon. The universe was justified, the universe suddenly usurped the unlimited dimensions of hope. At that time a great deal was said about the Vindications: books of apology and prophecy which vindicated for all time the acts of every man in the universe and retained prodigious arcana for his future. Thousands of the greedy abandoned their sweet native hexagons and rushed up the stairways, urged on by the vain intention of finding their Vindication. These pilgrims disputed in the narrow corridors, proffered dark curses, strangled each other on the divine stairways, flung the deceptive books into the air shafts, met their death cast down in a similar fashion by the inhabitants of remote regions. Others went mad... The Vindications exist (I have seen two which refer to persons of the future, to persons who are perhaps not imaginary) but the searchers did not remember that the possibility of a man’s finding his Vindication, or some treacherous variation thereof, can be computed as zero.

At that time it was also hoped that a clarification of humanity’s basic mysteries — the origin of the Library and of time — might be found. It is verisimilar that these grave mysteries could be explained in words: if the language of philosophers is not sufficient, the multiform Library will have produced the unprecedented language required, with its vocabularies and grammars. For four centuries now men have exhausted the hexagons... There are official searchers, *inquisitors*. I have seen them in the performance of their function: they

always arrive extremely tired from their journeys; they speak of a broken stairway which almost killed them; they talk with the librarian of galleries and stairs; sometimes they pick up the nearest volume and leaf through it, looking for infamous words. Obviously, no one expects to discover anything.

As was natural, this inordinate hope was followed by an excessive depression. The certitude that some shelf in some hexagon held precious books and that these precious books were inaccessible, seemed almost intolerable. A blasphemous sect suggested that the searches should cease and that all men should juggle letters and symbols until they constructed, by an improbable gift of chance, these canonical books. The authorities were obliged to issue severe orders. The sect disappeared, but in my childhood I have seen old men who, for long periods of time, would hide in the latrines with some metal disks in a forbidden dice cup and feebly mimic the divine disorder.

Others, inversely, believed that it was fundamental to eliminate useless works. They invaded the hexagons, showed credentials which were not always false, leafed through a volume with displeasure and condemned whole shelves: their hygienic, ascetic furor caused the senseless perdition of millions of books. Their name is execrated, but those who deplore the “treasures” destroyed by this frenzy neglect two notable facts. One: the Library is so enormous that any reduction of human origin is infinitesimal. The other: every copy is unique, irreplaceable, but (since the Library is total) there are always several hundred thousand imperfect facsimiles: works which differ only in a letter or a comma. Counter to general opinion, I venture to suppose that the consequences of the Purifiers’ depredations have been exaggerated by the horror these fanatics produced. They were urged on by the delirium of trying to reach the books in the Crimson Hexagon: books whose format is smaller than usual, all-powerful, illustrated and magical.

We also know of another superstition of that time: that of the Man of the Book. On some shelf in some

hexagon (men reasoned) there must exist a book which is the formula and perfect compendium *of all the rest*: some librarian has gone through it and he is analogous to a god. In the language of this zone vestiges of this remote functionary’s cult still persist. Many wandered in search of Him. For a century they have exhausted in vain the most varied areas. How could one locate the venerated and secret hexagon which housed Him? Someone proposed a regressive method: To locate book A, consult first book B which indicates A’s position; to locate book B, consult first a book C, and so on to infinity... In adventures such as these, I have squandered and wasted my years. It does not seem unlikely to me that there is a total book on some shelf of the universe;<sup>3</sup> I pray to the unknown gods that a man — just one, even though it were thousands of years ago! — may have examined and read it. If honor and wisdom and happiness are not for me, let them be for others. Let heaven exist, though my place be in hell. Let me be outraged and annihilated, but for one instant, in one being, let Your enormous Library be justified. The impious maintain that nonsense is normal in the Library and that the reasonable (and even humble and pure coherence) is an almost miraculous exception. They speak (I know) of the “feverish Library whose chance volumes are constantly in danger of changing into others and affirm, negate and confuse everything like a delirious divinity.” These words, which not only denounce the disorder but exemplify it as well, notoriously prove their authors’ abominable taste and desperate ignorance. In truth, the Library includes all verbal structures, all variations permitted by the twenty-five orthographical symbols, but not a single example of absolute nonsense. It is useless to observe that the best volume of the many hexagons under my administration is entitled *The Combed Thunderclap* and another *The Plaster Cramp* and another *Axaxaxas mlö*. These phrases, at first glance incoherent, can no doubt be justified in a cryptographical or allegorical manner; such a justification is verbal and, *ex hypothesi*, already figures in the Library. I cannot combine some characters

*dhcmrlchtdj*

which the divine Library has not foreseen and which in one of its secret tongues do not contain a terrible meaning. No one can articulate a syllable which is not filled with tenderness and fear, which is not, in one of these languages, the powerful name of a god. To speak is to fall into tautology. This wordy and useless epistle already exists in one of the thirty volumes of the five shelves of one of the innumerable hexagons — and its refutation as well. (An *n* number of possible languages use the same vocabulary; in some of them, the symbol *library* allows the correct definition *a ubiquitous and lasting system of hexagonal galleries*, but *library* is *bread* or *pyramid* or anything else, and these seven words which define it have another value. You who read me, are You sure of understanding my language?)

The methodical task of writing distracts me from the present state of men. The certitude that everything has been written negates us or turns us into phantoms. I know of districts in which the young men prostrate themselves before books and kiss their pages in a barbarous manner, but they do not know how to decipher a single letter. Epidemics, heretical conflicts, peregrinations which inevitably degenerate into banditry, have decimated the population. I believe I have mentioned suicides, more and more frequent with the years. Perhaps my old age and fearfulness deceive me, but I suspect that the human species — the unique species — is about to be extinguished, but the Library will endure: illuminated, solitary, infinite, perfectly motionless, equipped with precious volumes, useless, incorruptible, secret.

I have just written the word “infinite.” I have not interpolated this adjective out of rhetorical habit; I say that it is not illogical to think that the world is infinite. Those who judge it to be limited postulate that in remote places the corridors and stairways and hexagons can conceivably come to an end — which is absurd. Those who imagine it to be without limit forget that the possible number of books does have such a limit. I venture to suggest this solution to the ancient problem: *The Library is unlimited and cyclical*. If an eternal traveler were to cross it in any direction, after centuries he would see that the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder (which, thus repeated, would be an order: the Order). My solitude is gladdened by this elegant hope.<sup>4</sup>

Translated by J. E. I.

Notes

1 The original manuscript does not contain digits or capital letters. The punctuation has been limited to the comma and the period. These two signs, the space and the twenty-two letters of the alphabet are the twenty-five symbols considered sufficient by this unknown author. (*Editor’s note.*)

2 Before, there was a man for every three hexagons. Suicide and pulmonary diseases have destroyed that proportion. A memory of unspeakable melancholy: at times I have traveled for many nights through corridors and along polished stairways without finding a single librarian.

3 I repeat: it suffices that a book be possible for it to exist. Only the impossible is excluded. For example: no book can be a ladder, although no doubt there are books which discuss and negate and demonstrate this possibility and others whose structure corresponds to that of a ladder.

4 Letizia Álvarez de Toledo has observed that this vast Library is useless: rigorously speaking, *a single volume* would be sufficient, a volume of ordinary format, printed in nine or ten point type, containing an infinite number if infinitely thin leaves. (In the early seventeenth century, Cavalieri said that all solid bodies are the superimposition of an infinite number of planes.) The handling of this silky vade mecum would not be convenient: each apparent page would unfold into other analogous ones; the inconceivable middle page would have no reverse.

