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Editors

Editorial

The processes of the factory have entered the museum in ways that Warhol and Duchamp could never have dreamed: the amount of art production now by far exceeds what can be processed or understood, and this often creates a degree of mistrust and an absence of common points of reference with which to not only discuss, but also to gain anything from the sheer volume of artworks placed on display today. The time to engage and digest work is often replaced by additional work—it just keeps coming down the line.

Hito Steyerl describes how the workers who left the factory have returned to the same space—now converted into a museum—as visitors. With the displacement of cinema to the space of the museum, Steyerl discovers the shape of a new form of labor in spectatorship at the social factory of the contemporary museum. When so much cinematic duration is placed on display—more than a single person can possibly see—making sense of an exhibition's totality then defers to the multitude to collectively reconstruct the meaning of the factory as a space of production and a space of work. "If the factory is everywhere, then there is no longer a gate by which to leave it—there is no way to escape relentless productivity."

Raqs Media Collective compares this multitude to a million earthworms collectively turning the soil of cultural work, each doing what they do best and in their own time. Though there may be no escape from the trials of performance and production, "Earthworms Dancing: Notes for a Biennial in Slow Motion" suggests that one way of reclaiming a relationship with what is produced could be through a measured patience. When one finds so many large-scale exhibitions in disparate locations making more or less the same claims, a "capaciousness and generosity towards realities that may either be, or may seem to be in hibernation, dormant, or still in formation" may also be the only means of engaging the often radically disparate contexts from which these similar expressions emerge.

Omnia El Shakry gives an account of how the Cairo Youth Salon became a hotbed of debate on the nature of artistic autonomy and curatorial sovereignty. When the Egyptian Ministry of Culture attempted to counteract its own bureaucratic inertness by inviting onto the jury of the annual exhibition a group of young artists and curators from outside its usual roster, the government institution found itself faced with a number of difficult questions concerning the complexity of its own role as a highly centralized arts institution vis-à-vis an increasingly savvy and dispersed art public. In subjecting its institutional understanding of public responsibility to artists working according to their private will (while still addressing a public), the Ministry inadvertently placed itself at the center of a debate about the complex role of a dynamic institution that must simultaneously serve and challenge a public.

Pauline Yao looks at how the overwhelmingly top-down paradigm of contemporary art in China can be overturned by means of initiatives that emerge from more modest forms of artistic engagement. If such forms of "engaged autonomy" can find ways of balancing the persistent realities of market interests in Chinese contemporary art with artistic approaches that either employ commerce in productive ways or assert their relevance without validation from the market, more immanent and sustainable systems of production and reception certainly might emerge.

One form of sustainable production and reception might be the "Art of Conversation." In her conversational sequel to her contribution from issue #3, **Monika Szewczyk** suggests that "we may be increasingly interested in considering the aesthetics of people talking together." Examining the core components of discursive practice, she traces its effects and affects back to class, oral traditions, and liberal education; recalls the power of a simple voice speaking truth to an emperor; and looks at silence as a strategy.

Boris Groys' "Self-Design and Aesthetic Responsibility" elaborates on the unforeseen side effects of modernist design, first discussed by the author in *e-flux journal* #0 in "The Obligation to Self-Design." Now that the modernist ethic of truthful and transparent design has been consolidated into an aesthetic mode to be invoked arbitrarily, any form of "honest design" becomes the object of deep suspicion. Artists have spoken to this with various forms of self-denunciation, confirming and re-confirming this suspicion by similarly designing themselves as charlatans and profiteers. Yet however these approaches may address the skepticism of an audience faced with artworks evaluated according to dubious market values, the question of how art can assert its own inner value under these conditions remains an open one.

In the last installment of **Michael Baers**' "Concerning Matters to be Left for a Later Date," Annika Eriksson asks our protagonist to pay a visit to Folkets Park in Malmö, a place that poses a number of questions for Baers about the origins and fate of social democracy in Sweden. Struggling with Eriksson to reconcile socialist optimism with the boredom of social consensus, Baers compares Folkets Park to "a socialist wildlife preserve"—a sign of ideological dismay—and returns home to receive a pamphlet in the mail for "Artisternas Park"...

Finally, **Brian Kuan Wood** crosses two contributions from issue #6—by Marion von Osten and by Mariana Silva and Pedro Neves Marques—in a reflection on the possibilities for asserting a universal legitimacy for artworks. If somehow the agency claimed by self-builders in response to the failed universalist aspirations of modernist town planning were taken in their individual instances as discrete proposals for entirely new towns, a mode of logic might emerge that is capable of asserting an inherent, however speculative, value for works of art.

—Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle

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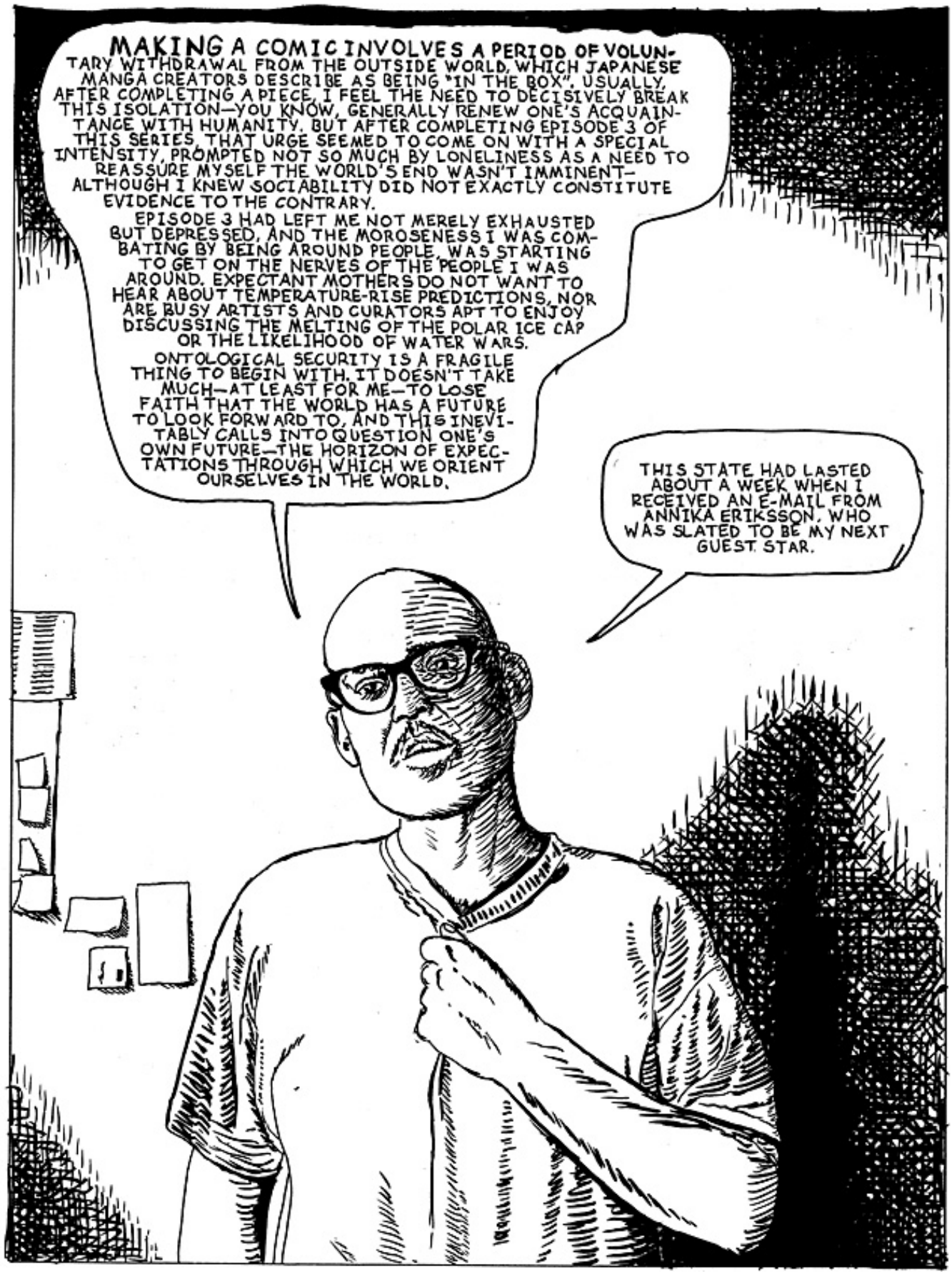
Michael Baers

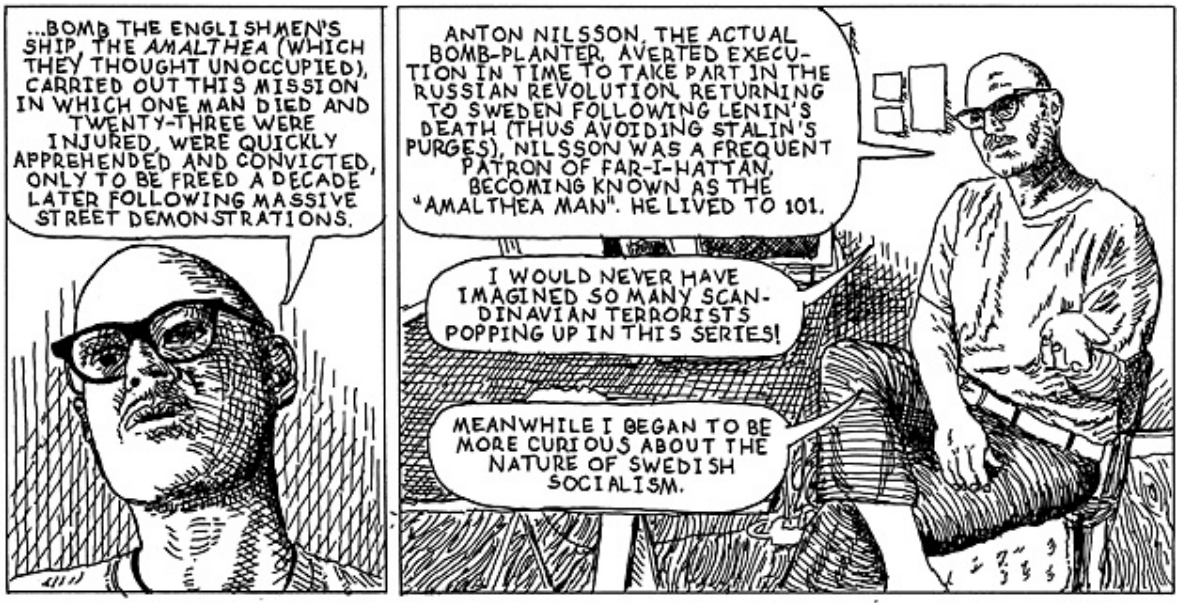
Concerning Matters to be Left for a Later Date, Part 4 of 4 (Guest-Starring Annika Eriksson)

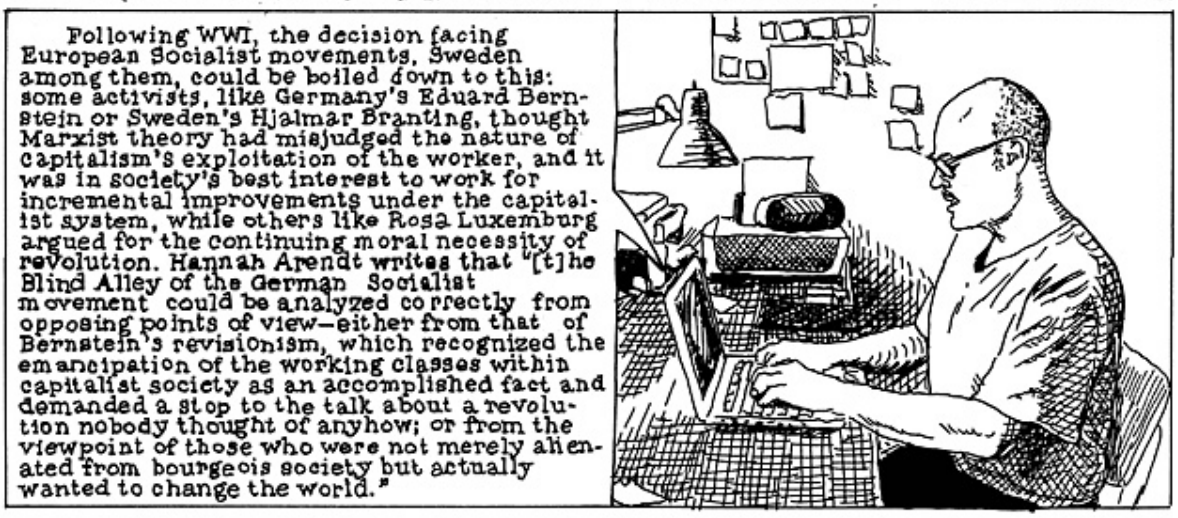

MAKING A COMIC INVOLVES A PERIOD OF VOLUNTARY WITHDRAWAL FROM THE OUTSIDE WORLD, WHICH JAPANESE MANGA CREATORS DESCRIBE AS BEING "IN THE BOX". USUALLY, AFTER COMPLETING A PIECE, I FEEL THE NEED TO DECISIVELY BREAK THIS ISOLATION—YOU KNOW, GENERALLY RENEW ONE'S ACQUAINTANCE WITH HUMANITY. BUT AFTER COMPLETING EPISODE 3 OF THIS SERIES, THAT URGE SEEMED TO COME ON WITH A SPECIAL INTENSITY, PROMPTED NOT SO MUCH BY LONELINESS AS A NEED TO REASSURE MYSELF THE WORLD'S END WASN'T IMMINENT—ALTHOUGH I KNEW SOCIABILITY DID NOT EXACTLY CONSTITUTE EVIDENCE TO THE CONTRARY.
EPISODE 3 HAD LEFT ME NOT MERELY EXHAUSTED BUT DEPRESSED, AND THE MOROSENESS I WAS COMBATING BY BEING AROUND PEOPLE, WAS STARTING TO GET ON THE NERVES OF THE PEOPLE I WAS AROUND. EXPECTANT MOTHERS DO NOT WANT TO HEAR ABOUT TEMPERATURE-RISE PREDICTIONS, NOR ARE BUSY ARTISTS AND CURATORS APT TO ENJOY DISCUSSING THE MELTING OF THE POLAR ICE CAP OR THE LIKELIHOOD OF WATER WARS.
ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY IS A FRAGILE THING TO BEGIN WITH. IT DOESN'T TAKE MUCH—AT LEAST FOR ME—TO LOSE FAITH THAT THE WORLD HAS A FUTURE TO LOOK FORWARD TO, AND THIS INEVITABLY CALLS INTO QUESTION ONE'S OWN FUTURE—THE HORIZON OF EXPECTATIONS THROUGH WHICH WE ORIENT OURSELVES IN THE WORLD.
THIS STATE HAD LASTED ABOUT A WEEK WHEN I RECEIVED AN E-MAIL FROM ANNIKA ERIKSSON, WHO WAS SLATED TO BE MY NEXT GUEST STAR.

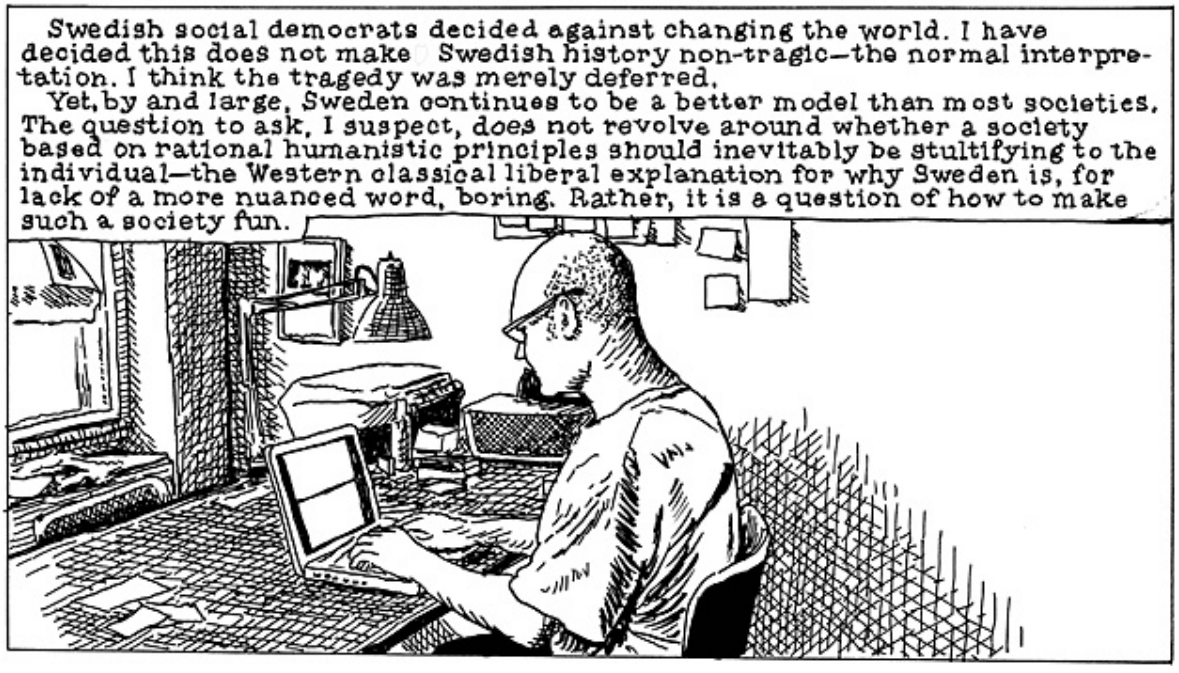

I've been thinking about how to structure our collaboration and I've decided to send you to the Folkets Park in Malmö. Just go there and see what you think. You go to Copenhagen all the time, so it's no problem for you, isn't it? Here's a Google map.
Yours,
Annika
SHE WROTE:
I WAS TRAVELING TO DENMARK IN A COUPLE OF DAYS AND ARRANGED TO LEAVE A DAY EARLY.
I DIDN'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT FOLKETS PARK. I IMAGINED A QUIET, REFLECTIVE PLACE WHERE EARNEST YOUNG PEOPLE TALKED...
...UNDER THE TREES WHILE PENSIONERS PLAY CHESS ON PARK BENCHES. BUT I WAS PREPARED TO RE-EVALUATE, AND TOWARDS THAT END HAD DONE NO PRIOR RESEARCH TO BE AS OPEN TO SENSE IMPRESSIONS AS POSSIBLE.
AS I STEPPED OFF THE TRAIN, I EXPERIENCED A FAMILIAR FEELING. MALMÖ'S ORIGINAL NAME, MALMHAUG, MEANS "GRAVEL PILE". AND THIS GOES SOME WAY TOWARDS EXPLAINING THE CITY'S ALLURE.
THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT MALMÖ...I'M IMMEDIATELY OVERTAKEN BY A KIND OF SWEDISH LETHARGY. A PERPETUAL SUNDAY AFTERNOON OF DESERTED STREETS AND INNER LISTLESSNESS. THERE IS NOTHING TO DO AND NOTHING ONE FEELS LIKE DOING. KNOWING THIS, I HAD SOME MISGIVINGS ABOUT ANNIKA'S ASSIGNMENT.
AFTER WALKING ABOUT FIFTEEN MINUTES, I WAS AT FOLKETS PARK.


MORISKAN
What is it I'm supposed to be noticing, I wonder? The several bronze busts I've passed are obviously SAP leaders. And I know the SAP's symbol is a red rose. That explains the rose fountain at the park's entrance—although it's pink, not red. The Moorish-style dancehall, I imagine, is a legacy of the 1910's. And I guess there's a fair cross-section of Malmö here today: young people, immigrant families, pensioners... If there's anything bad to me, it's the mix of social democratic rectitude and amusement park frivolity. Is this the Social Democratic Carnivalesque I've spoken of so often without ever knowing quite what it is?


But in general I feel as I don't know what to "think" about this place. It's familiar, it's strange; it does not motivate me strongly to inquire further. I feel like my emotions are swaddled in cotton batting.
MALMÖ WAS A SINKHOLE FOR STRONG EMOTION, I DECIDED. THE FOLKETS PARK SHARED IN THIS CAPACITY TO ENERVATE.
FOLKETS PARK
IF I WERE TO PURSUE THE TOPIC FURTHER, I WOULD HAVE TO OVERCOME MY APATHY. MAYBE THE SECRET WAS HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT, SOMETHING SO UBIQUITOUS AS TO BE RENDERED INVISIBLE.
ANNIKA IS FROM MALMÖ, AND THE PARK IS CLEARLY IMPORTANT TO HER. SHE'S MENTIONED IT TO ME SEVERAL TIMES WITHOUT MY EVER DISCOVERING WHAT FOLKETS PARK ACTUALLY IS. I REALIZED THAT THE PARK I VISITED WAS NOT THE SAME PARK AS THE ONE ANNIKA KNOWS. SHE AND I HAD BEEN VISITING DIFFERENT PARKS, AND WHATEVER I MIGHT COME TO THINK ABOUT IT, FOLKETS PARK WOULD REMAIN SEIZED BY THIS DIFFERENCE.
Ooo
THIS IS WHAT I DISCOVERED UPON MY RETURN TO BERLIN: THE PARK WAS FOUNDED IN 1891 BY THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT, THE LAND BOUGHT ON SUBSCRIPTION BY PARTY MEMBERS. THE BUILDING THAT WOULD BECOME FAR-I-HATTAN ("FATHER IN THE HAT"—A COLLOQUIALISM WITH SEVERAL MEANINGS IN SWEDISH), WHERE POLITICAL SPEECHES AND EVENTS WERE...
...HELD, WAS BUILT IN 1891, MORISKAN IN 1903. A SECOND DANCEHALL AND AN AMUSEMENT PARK WERE BUILT SOON AFTER, THEN DURING THE WAR YEARS, ANOTHER DANCEHALL AND A BEAR DEN WITH A MOTHER AND THREE BEAR CUBS. AFTER THE PARTY SOLD A CONTROLLING SHARE IN FOLKETS PARK TO THE CITY OF MALMÖ IN 1976, WHO TOOK IT OVER COMPLETELY FOURTEEN YEARS LATER.
THEN, WHILE RESEARCHING THE HISTORY OF SWEDEN'S SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT, I FOUND A REFERENCE TO ONE ANTON NILSSON, WHO, IN 1908, TOGETHER WITH TWO COLLABORATORS, SAT IN FAR-I-HATTAN DURING A BITTER DOCK STRIKE PONDERING HOW TO DRIVE OUT A TROOP OF ENGLISH STRIKEBREAKERS. THEY RESOLVED TO...


...BOMB THE ENGLISHMEN'S SHIP, THE *AMALTHEA* (WHICH THEY THOUGHT UNOCCUPIED), CARRIED OUT THIS MISSION IN WHICH ONE MAN DIED AND TWENTY-THREE WERE INJURED, WERE QUICKLY APPREHENDED AND CONVICTED, ONLY TO BE FREED A DECADE LATER FOLLOWING MASSIVE STREET DEMONSTRATIONS.
ANTON NILSSON, THE ACTUAL BOMB-PLANTER, AVERTED EXECUTION IN TIME TO TAKE PART IN THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION, RETURNING TO SWEDEN FOLLOWING LENIN'S DEATH (THUS AVOIDING STALIN'S PURGES). NILSSON WAS A FREQUENT PATRON OF FAR-I-HATTAN, BECOMING KNOWN AS THE "AMALTHEA MAN". HE LIVED TO 101.
I WOULD NEVER HAVE IMAGINED SO MANY SCANDINAVIAN TERRORISTS POPPING UP IN THIS SERIES!
MEANWHILE I BEGAN TO BE MORE CURIOUS ABOUT THE NATURE OF SWEDISH SOCIALISM.

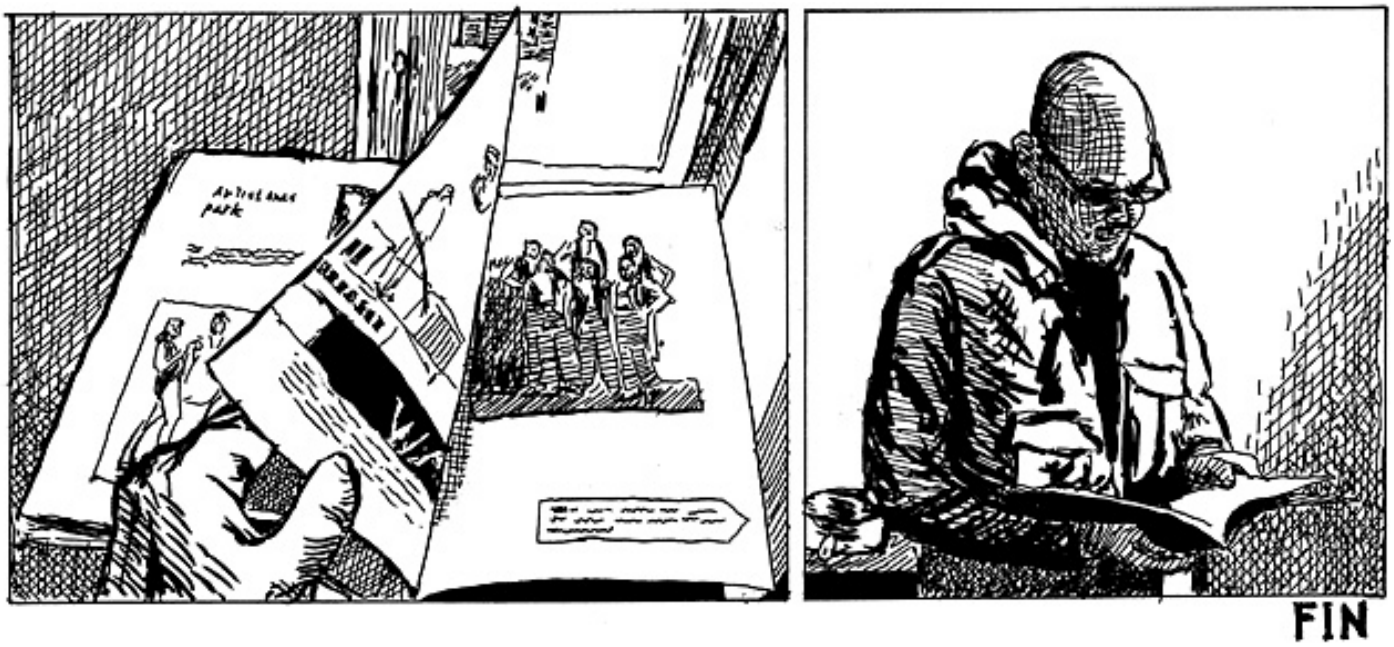

Following WWI, the decision facing European Socialist movements, Sweden among them, could be boiled down to this: some activists, like Germany's Eduard Bernstein or Sweden's Hjalmar Branting, thought Marxist theory had misjudged the nature of capitalism's exploitation of the worker, and it was in society's best interest to work for incremental improvements under the capitalist system, while others like Rosa Luxemburg argued for the continuing moral necessity of revolution. Hannah Arendt writes that "[t]he Blind Alley of the German Socialist movement could be analyzed correctly from opposing points of view—either from that of Bernstein's revisionism, which recognized the emancipation of the working classes within capitalist society as an accomplished fact and demanded a stop to the talk about a revolution nobody thought of anyhow; or from the viewpoint of those who were not merely alienated from bourgeois society but actually wanted to change the world."


Swedish social democrats decided against changing the world. I have decided this does not make Swedish history non-tragic—the normal interpretation. I think the tragedy was merely deferred.
Yet, by and large, Sweden continues to be a better model than most societies. The question to ask, I suspect, does not revolve around whether a society based on rational humanistic principles should inevitably be stultifying to the individual—the Western classical liberal explanation for why Sweden is, for lack of a more nuanced word, boring. Rather, it is a question of how to make such a society fun.


SUDDENLY I REALIZED MAYBE ANNIKA AND I WERE NOT MERELY THINKING OF DIFFERENT PARKS BUT A DIFFERENT SWEDEN AS WELL. I CALLED HER AND ARRANGED TO MEET.
I DON'T KNOW, ANNIKA. ESPECIALLY CONSIDERING MY RECENT TRIP EAST, I FIND I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH THE PARK. I MEAN...TO GO FROM THE LEVELS OF POVERTY AND DISORDER YOU SEE IN ROMANIA TO VISITING A SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AMUSEMENT PARK IN CLEAN, EFFICIENT SCANDINAVIA... THE DISCREPANCY IS A LITTLE TOO GREAT.
ON THE OTHER HAND, IF YOU LOOK AT WHAT FOLKETS PARK REPRESENTS— COMMUNITY, EGALITARIANISM, AND SO ON ARE PRECISELY THE THINGS WE LACK TODAY.
MAYBE WHAT HENRI LEFEBVRE SAID ABOUT NATURE APPLIES TO SOCIALISM: "EVERYONE WANTS TO PROTECT AND SAVE NATURE", HE WROTE, "NOBODY WANTS TO STAND IN THE WAY OF AN ATTEMPT TO RETRIEVE ITS AUTHENTICITY. YET AT THE SAME TIME EVERYTHING CONSPIRES TO HARM IT."
EXCEPT NOT EVERYONE WANTS TO SAVE SOCIALISM... QUITE THE CONTRARY.
I THINK IN EVERY WESTERN COUNTRY YOU HAVE A SIMILAR DISCUSSION ABOUT "TRADITION" AND "SOCIAL HARMONY", BUT LITTLE TALK OF WHAT REALLY THREATENS THOSE THINGS. MAYBE THAT'S WHY THE PARK SEEMS UNCANNY TO ME. IT'S OUTLIVED ITS OWN IDEOLOGICAL MOMENT AND ENTERED A KIND OF TEMPORAL NO-MAN'S LAND. SWEDEN'S SOCIAL DEMOCRATS GAINED POWER AND MANAGED TO LIVE WITH CAPITAL REDEFINING SOCIALISM AS A MATTER OF CREATING CONSENSUS BETWEEN SEVERAL WORKING CLASSES, WHEREAS THE REST OF THE EUROPEAN LEFT IMPLODED OVER THIS POINT. WHEN I THINK ABOUT FOLKETS PARK, I THINK ABOUT THE OTHER LEFTS THAT FAILED.
Esp
I WOULD ASK WHAT IT MEANS FOR TODAY TO DWELL ON THIS NARRATIVE. MAYBE THAT'S ALSO A WAY OF BURYING SOCIALISM. WAS BERNSTEIN RIGHT? WAS LUXEMBURG OR MEHRING OR GRAMSCI? CHRIST. MAYBE SWEDEN WAS SAVED FROM THE CARNAGE OF EUROPE BY ITS LACK OF THEORETICAL RIGOR.
BUT YOU'RE INVOLVED WITH THE HISTORY OF THE WORKING CLASS, AND I'VE HEARD YOU DISCUSS THE CLASS TENSION THAT STILL EXISTS IN SWEDEN. ARENDT SAYS LUXEMBURG BELIEVED REVOLUTION WAS A THEORETICAL NECESSITY BECAUSE SHE CONSIDERED SOCIETY AS IT WAS TO BE UNBEARABLE. ARENDT SAYS SHE WAS REVOLUTIONARY "ON MORAL GROUNDS. ON THE GROUNDS OF JUSTICE."
BUT WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH FOLKETS PARK?
DON'T YOU THINK FOLKETS PARK IS TOUCHED BY THIS WHOLE DEBATE ABOUT THE RIGHT COURSE FOR SOCIALISM? THAT THAT STRUGGLE IS PRESENT HERE, TOO?


THE IMPORTANT THING FOR ME IS THAT THESE POOR PEOPLE WITH ONLY A LITTLE BIT OF SAVINGS GAVE IT AWAY TO MAKE SOMETHING COLLECTIVE. I MEAN, THAT'S BEAUTIFUL!
WHAT MAKES FOLKETS PARK MELANCHOLY FOR ME IS PRECISELY THAT THESE VALUES OF SOCIALIST SOLIDARITY HAVE BEEN DRIVEN OUT OF THE REST OF SOCIETY. FOLKETS PARK IS LIKE A SOCIALIST WILDLIFE PRESERVE.
OKAY, I'LL ADMIT IT. TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH, I'M JUST NOT MOTIVATED. I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH THIS STORY. IN ITS INCEPTION, FOLKETS PARK WAS UTOPIC—THAT'S INTERESTING. BUT I FIND SOMETHING DEADENING ABOUT MALMÖ...
BUT IT STILL EXISTS THERE AND THAT'S IMPORTANT.
YOU THINK I LIKE IT THERE? ONE OF THE REASONS I HAVE A PROBLEM GOING TO SWEDEN IS THAT THE WAY THE SOCIETY IS CHANGING THERE **REALLY** AFFECTS ME. AND I HAVE TO GO THERE EVERY MONTH!


Artisternas
park



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Michael Baers is an artist based in Berlin. He has participated in exhibitions throughout North America and Europe, usually with graphical publications exhibited sculpturally. He frequently collaborates with **Fucking Good Art** and has contributed to many publications including **Chto Delat**, **SUM**, and **Princess Lulu**. An important correlate to his artistic practice is his work as a teacher. He has been a guest instructor in Denmark and Norway, conducting seminars that mix theory and artistic praxis. Currently he is an instructor at Det Fynske Kunstakademi in Denmark. He also occasionally writes catalogue essays, articles, and reviews.

Boris Groys

Self-Design and Aesthetic Responsibility

Production of Sincerity

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.[1] 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 my website on Facebook is 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 artworks, 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 by the spectator 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. However, 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."[2] 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 receded in our time. We are no longer ready to believe that minimalist design suggests anything about the honesty and sincerity of the designed 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 the initial suspicion directed toward every designed surface, 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 reason to

November 1, 2008: Natalie Portman was spotted wearing a mask as she left a party in Beverly Hills. Source: Just Jared.

Barbara Visser, From the Detitled series: EGG19992811/FT/L/c, 2000, color photograph. Courtesy Annet Gelink Gallery.

believe that we are allowed 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 though 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.

Participative art reacts to the modern state of affairs in art that can be described easily enough in the following way: 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 or herself 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 recognized as being 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. The statues produced by the artists of that time 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 also 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 antagonism 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

Wall paintings in the monasteries of Lake Tana. © Debre Maryam.

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 thus weakens the radical separation between artist and audience to a certain degree, 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.

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A version of this text was given as a lecture at Frieze Art Fair, London, on October 16, 2008.

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1
Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* , trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), 37.

2
Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essay and Reflections* , ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. H. Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 242.

Raqs Media Collective

Earthworms Dancing: Notes for a Biennial in Slow Motion

The earthworms take their time; let's take ours.

On Recovery and Anticipation

For any calendrical rite to be what it is, the moments before and after it can only make sense in terms of anticipation and recovery. In the case of events characterized by repetitive cyclical periodicity, recovery is always also anticipation, and the moment after the event is also the moment before the event.

An event is a plea against the equivalence of all moments vis-à-vis each other; it insists that, in a given space, a pre-selected duration has a greater significance than all other moments, save its own future echoes and its subsequent editions. However, each event's plea against time stands compromised by every other event's iteration of the same plea.

Competing claims on time produce sporadic peaks of attention, but when the same claims are seen in relation to each other, they flatten into a series of points on the same plane.

But what of the moment—or perhaps we should say the *momentum*—of the event itself? What happens to time during an event?

Judith Hopf, Natascha Sadr Haghighian, Florian Zeyfang, Proprio Aperto, 2005. single channel video, color, sound, 6 min. Courtesy of the artists and Johann König, Berlin.

On Simultaneity

Contemporaneity, the sensation of being in a time together, is an ancient enigma of a feeling. It is the tug we feel when our times pull at us. But sometimes one has the sense of a paradoxically asynchronous contemporaneity—the strange tug of more than one time and place. Often, an event may feature the simultaneous iteration of many processes. In such an instance, each process will bring to the surface of attention the imprint of its own particular time.

There may be many claims to contemporaneity emerging from different locations, cultures, and experiences—and each claim may also include dormant, barely discernible, and hibernating strands that can by their mere presence influence the tempo and pace of active processes. These strands may not occupy significant cognitive space, and still cast shadows; they are not necessarily limited by location, and may rather be present as tendencies and nascent energies that cut across cultures and geography to generate an "atmosphere" or an "ambience" rather than a concrete reality; regardless of their own ephemerality, they may still be quite influential in an understated or otherwise inarticulate way. In fact, their presence may occasionally be more critical in terms of the shaping of the contours of contemporaneity than other features that are more indexible and articulated. The shadow of these ambiguities makes it difficult—and in some ways unnecessary—to construct a hierarchy amongst different claims to contemporaneity. The ambiguities shade the surface of contemporaneity (taken as a whole) in a manner that is subtle yet conducive to the perception of depth and volume.

A keen awareness of contemporaneity cannot but dissolve the illusion that some things, people, places, and practices are more "now" than others. Seen thus, contemporaneity provokes a sense of the simultaneity of different modes of living and doing things without a prior commitment to any one as being necessarily more true to our times. Any attempt to design structures, whether permanent or provisional, that might express or contain contemporaneity would be incomplete if it were not (also) attentive to realities that are not explicit or manifest. An openness and generosity towards realities that may be, or seem to be, in hibernation, dormant, or still in formation, can only help such structures to be more pertinent and reflective.

On Multiplicity

For decades, the telephony infrastructure in India was beset by chronic underperformance and shortages. For as long as a fixed landline infrastructure wholly owned and operated by a single agency defined what telephony was, it could take up to seven years to get a simple telephone connection, even in a metropolitan center. It took even longer in villages and small towns. Within a few years

View of the Umbrella 2007 exhibition.

following the introduction of mobile telephony, India attained one of the highest densities of mobile telephone usage in the world, and has seen an exponential growth in rural telephone use. Today, India has one of the most dynamic cultures of mobile telephone usage in the world.

What kind of realities would suddenly surface if we were to extend this analogy of the transformation from a sluggish monopoly to a dynamic multiplicity to the sphere of the institutional life of contemporary art? If the museum and the large cultural institution were to contemporary art what the fixed landline telephony infrastructure was to telecommunication, what might be the equivalent of mobile telephony? If that equivalent phenomenon were to surface, how might the landscape of contemporary art and culture be transformed in places currently suffering from an infrastructural lag between themselves and the global metropolitan centers of contemporary art? What might such a transformation do to our understanding of contemporary art, and of contemporaneity itself?

How can the paucity or dereliction of museums and large art institutions, of spectacular events and festivals in some parts of the world, be seen not as a liability but as an asset? What might be necessary to make this a condition not of barrenness, but of fertility?

The cultivation of such terrain requires the patient ploughing of cultural soil, through multiple acts of turning, burrowing, tunneling, and composting. It requires, not the action of a single combine harvester but the agency of a million earthworms, doing what earthworms do best, in their own time.

For example, can we imagine a biennale stretching to become something that happens *across* two years rather than something that happens once every two years?

On Syncopation

Space is finite, but time is porous. Only a given number of people and processes can occupy a space at a given moment, but any number of things can happen over time. A process built on the principle of dispersal over time can

Judith Hopf, Natascha Sadr Haghighian, Florian Zeyfang, Proprio Aperto, 2005. single channel video, color, sound, 6 min. Courtesy of the artists and Johann König, Berlin.

allow for the unfolding of many more possibilities than one that seeks to cram as many things as possible into a single space.

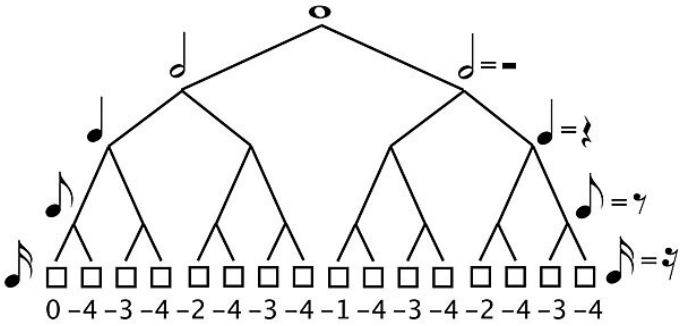
The Ottoman solution to the seemingly intractable conflicts over the control of different Christian churches built upon the site of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem evolved into a carefully calibrated arrangement in which the very important element of co-inhabiting time was deeply embedded. Because no single denomination could lay full claim to the space of the church, in order to ensure that no one had a monopoly, each was persuaded to agree to share time, such that no one felt completely left out of the running and maintenance of the site. While this was by no means a perfect solution, and conflicts (especially over procedure and precedence) could not always be avoided, it did go a long way towards settling endless disputes over ownership and control.

To co-inhabit a time is not to establish orders of precedence or chronology, but to create structures and processes by which different rhythms of being and doing can act responsively towards each other.

A musical analogy may be fruitful here. When two different instruments play to two different rhythms within the frame of the same composition, the two rhythmic cycles influence each other's sonic presence in time without necessarily entering into conflict with each other. The phenomenon of musical syncopation expresses what this mutual co-inhabitation is all about.

On Biennales and Time

The visitor to a biennale finds him- or herself surrounded not only by an array of exhibits occupying positions within the space of the exhibition, but also by a set of loci within



Rhythm tree.

the global contemporary art system's emerging grid of circulation and meaning. Each biennale is at present an adjunct, a neighbor, a response, or a rival to every other biennale. Objects, exhibits, and artists that momentarily inhabit a biennale also circulate within networks of affinity, confirmation, and competition that are much more expansive than the boundaries of the biennale event itself. Thus a viewer is obliged to slice up his or her attention not only in order to take in the multitude of objects within a single exhibition but also to accommodate an awareness of how that multitude of objects and artists circulates between and across different exhibitions, different biennales. The ideas of trends, movements, singularities, and discoveries that biennales so efficiently signpost would not make sense were it not for the implicit comparative register that underpins the biennale system.

This slicing-up of attention—attention to different layers of simultaneous and overlapping, or immediately serialized, circuits of exhibition—leads to a rapid acceleration in the experience of artworks. The momentum of the experience of contemporary art then becomes a matter of being borne aloft by the velocities of the strong currents that propel exhibitions and/or artists from one show to another.

We have less time to experience what we encounter, even as we encounter much more of what we experience.

The attrition that accompanies the rush and exhaustion of attending a biennale provokes a rhetorical dismissal of the proliferation of biennales. The problem is not the arithmetical increase in biennales, but rather the temporal experience of compression within and between exhibitions that creates the bi-polarity of glut and famine within the attention economy of the global contemporary art system.

Towards a Biennale in Slow Motion

What would happen if a biennale were to forsake its claim to attention as a single event, and instead stretch across time—break its banks, overflow, demand a different,

Tabula Rasa, concept developed by Raqs Media Collective in collaboration with Denis Isaia for "The Rest of Now," Manifesta 7, Bolzano, 2008. Furniture Design by Nikolaus Hirsch and Michel Muller.

non-rivalrous order of consideration?

A biennale in rehearsal, a biennale in recess, a biennale at work, a biennale working overtime, a biennale taking stock, a biennale in waiting—the tempi of all these processes can add up to a biennale speculatively seen as one "in slow motion." The criteria for the evaluation of such a biennale would not be determined by the pace of other events, other biennales, but by the rhythms of life in the place where it is located.

In fact, location, place, the very "where" of a slow-motion biennale, can remain an open question. A biennale that sees itself as primarily spanning time need not, in the end, confine itself to a fixed place. A stretched-out biennale, like any image seen in slow motion, opens itself up like a loop that can be read across a range of possibilities. The amplification of detail in the rendition of objects and humans in a slow-motion image can cause them to appear to move in more than one direction.

Or, seen another way, the trajectories of moves made during such a biennale could unfold in unforeseen and unpredictable directions, causing processes to grow, mutate, fall back on themselves, hibernate when need be, change course, and proliferate. Such oscillations and transformations can happen without the anxiety of having to rush to premature conclusions within a slow-motion biennale's expanded field of attention.

Curatorially, a slow-motion biennale is a platform for the development—rather than the statement—of an argument. Works from the artists' atelier will not necessarily arrive at such a biennale fully formed, and may leave the biennale in a more mature state than when they first reached it.

A slow-motion biennale need not stage a high-intensity occupancy of infrastructure. Being accretive, it can expand and grow at its own pace, making moves across a flexible network of available (possibly dormant) buildings and spaces over the full span of two years rather than enact a demanding and intense short-term occupation of a single facility that would otherwise lie fallow until its next episode of high-intensity occupation.

Those responsible for the architectonics of a slow-motion biennale would then have to pay as much attention to the question of what to do within the extended span of occupancy of a given space as they would to spatial and architectural questions. The beginning, unfurling, and ending of processes—their rhetoric and their quality—would then be as important for the architect of such a biennale as questions of volume and scale in a building.

The space for art, art-making, and talking about art in any such endeavor would be pried open, unstable, untethered to institutional guarantees, and in some ways even rendered insecure. If given time, however, such an initiative may turn the top-soil of culture, making it porous and fertile in much the same way as earthworms have ploughed the earth for millennia. Here, in "slow-motion" processes such as the subterranean dance of the earthworms, lie the foundations for the fertility of the future.

The earthworms take their time; let's take ours.

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Raqs Media Collective (Monica Narula, Jeebesh Bagchi, Shuddhabrata Sengupta) has been variously described as artists, media practitioners, curators, researchers, editors, and catalysts of cultural processes. Their work, which has been exhibited widely in major international spaces and events, locates them squarely along the intersections of contemporary art, historical inquiry, philosophical speculation, research and theory—often taking the form of installations, online and offline media objects, performances and encounters. They live and work in Delhi, based at Sarai, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, an initiative they co-founded in 2000. They are members of the editorial collective of the *Sarai Reader* series, and have curated "The Rest of Now" and co-curated "Scenarios" for Manifesta 7.

Omnia El Shakry

Artistic Sovereignty in the Shadow of Post-Socialism: Egypt's 20th Annual Youth Salon

While questions of creative sovereignty (*hurriyat al-ibda*) tend to loom large in Egyptian academic writings, the artistic trajectory of the annual juried competition known as the Youth Salon has been marked, historically, by structural inertia. Established in 1989 by the Ministry of Culture, the exhibition was meant to encourage a new generation of Egyptian artists and increase their international visibility.[1] Jessica Winegar has explored the Salon as a "tournament of values" that is part and parcel of struggles surrounding the "shared ideal of the patron state."[2] Indeed, if the space of the exhibition is understood, as Boris Groys argues, as the "symbolic property of the public," then the debates surrounding the 2009 Salon illuminate the contested nature of artistic and curatorial sovereignty in the shadow of the legacy of state socialism and a purportedly democratic mass culture of artistic consumption and production.[3] An exploration of the controversies that erupted around the selections of the jury committee, the curatorial strategies employed in the exhibit, and the political reverberations of specific aesthetic choices, can elucidate the ways in which artistic and curatorial sovereignty can be forged in a range of historical circumstances—postcolonial, postsocialist, and beyond.

Due in part to the intense pressures placed on Egyptian artists to perceive entry into the Salon as indexical of future success, in part to the historic entry of a sizeable numerical percentage of artists into the Salon, the extreme selectivity of this year's competition was reported in the mainstream press, even before the official opening, as an affront to the democratic nature of the exhibit.[4] This year's jury, critics declared, had substantially narrowed the pool of artworks exhibited, rejected previous Salon winners, and subverted the expectation that an aesthetic of new media art would dominate the exhibit to the extent that the Salon would constitute a radical break from previous years. Critics of the Salon cited the original Paris *Salon des Refusés* of 1863, convened to allow public viewing of 3,000 rejected works of art, and referred to the March

event in Cairo as a "crisis"—one that cast doubt on the ability of the judges to arbitrate artistic value.[5] Yet, even in the past, the inclusive gestures of the Salon have, according to its critics, concealed the way in which certain aesthetic choices, particularly those that conform to the contemporary international biennial style, have been promoted through the yearly Salons.[6]

Rather than simply view the Salon as embodying conflicts between generations or around identity politics, I argue that the disputes surrounding the arbitration of aesthetic judgment were coded as a series of binaries: local–global, government sponsored–artist sponsored, authentic–contemporary, and nationalist–neo-liberal. Such binary representations seek to unequivocally categorize art, and mirror authoritative public discourse on art in Egypt, which seeks to delegitimize forms of artistic production that do not conform to the imperative to produce artistic work that is at once contemporary and nationalist, or at least identifiably "Egyptian." Clearly, similar parallels may be found elsewhere in postcolonial and/or postsocialist contexts. Thus, Igor Zabel has discussed the Russian context and the curatorial constraints surrounding the presentation of works of art that cannot be seen solely as art, but must always be inflected by their locale (revealing a "Russian essence," for example), while Western art alone is considered as icon of "contemporary art."[7] While all contemporary art is clearly "constitutively stained" by its location, only non-Western art is expected to have questions of identity function as a touchstone.[8]

The adjudication of aesthetic value is, of course, connected to institutional structures. The Ministry of Culture, founded in 1958 and itself a legacy of state socialism, sponsors the yearly salons as well as a formidable infrastructure of national galleries, viewing itself as the official arbiter of artistic production and consumption in Egypt. The recent influx of privately owned or artist-run gallery spaces and initiatives (quite different from their historical predecessors in their international outreach) mirrors the surge of interest in artists from the region and has complicated the picture substantially.[9] This has enabled an entire range of artistic practices that straddle the divide between the Ministry of Culture national art circuit and the less formal domain of privately owned gallery spaces. These practices range from the public to the informal and impromptu (for example, artistic interventions that take place in dynamic urban settings, such as kiosks or mechanic workshops) and exist alongside and in conjunction with the national art circuit, but are not necessarily embedded in the same sets of debates. Such artistic production need not be viewed in isolation of the state sanctioned public realm, since many artists operate within multiple spheres that often intersect and overlap.

Crucially, the 20th Salon appointed for its eight-member jury three successful contemporary artists and curators (whose work has circulated both inside and outside the Ministry of Culture circuit) who can be said to be a vital part of this artistic "third space."[10] It is unsurprising, then, that the local and international repute of the artists on the jury was consistently referenced by critics. Was appointing individuals who purportedly represented the global biennial style a conscious and transparent effort on the part of the Ministry of Culture to co-opt successful elements operating outside their circuit? Or was it a genuine attempt to explore artistic production occurring within what has become an increasingly vibrant artistic sphere? Regardless of the MoC's intentions (and of course intentionality is hardly a useful way in which to view institutional decision-making processes), we can gauge the effects (many of them unintended) of this decision on public art discourse as well as on broader notions of curatorial and artistic sovereignty.

In part due to the virulent negative response of the mainstream media and art establishment to the selections of the 2009 Salon, the decision of the three members to

convene an open panel to disclose the aesthetic choices of the committee speaks to the need for public justification and accountability at the conceptual heart of the Salon.[11] Many of the critiques of the 2009 edition centered on upsetting institutional boundaries and protocol, mobilizing many of the aforementioned binaries to delegitimize the jury. Thus, critics noted the "youthful" nature of the jury, the absence of any formal affiliation between them and the MoC as an institution, their aesthetic affinity with Western-oriented private gallery styles, their subversion of past jury decisions, and internal differences of opinion within the jury itself—in order to undermine the jury's competence and coherence.[12] In so doing, such critiques pitted the jury against a purportedly uniform culture of aesthetic judgment that was both government-sponsored and nationalist in its orientation.

Thus, among the key points of contention during the open panel was the decision of two members of the jury—Hassan Khan and Wael Shawky—to curate the exhibition (a role traditionally reserved for the MoC), rather than confine themselves to judging artworks. While this insistence upon taking responsibility for both the selection and the exhibition of the works yielded a large degree of curatorial sovereignty (understood as independence from the institutional domain of the Ministry of Culture), such sovereignty was likewise tempered by a willingness to justify their choices to an angry public of artists, curators, and institutional members. Reflecting what Boris Groys has described as "the institutional, conditional, publicly responsible freedom of curatorship," this concession to the public nature of curatorial work was further underscored by these jury members' agreement with the MoC to publish a book detailing the theoretical rationale behind their curatorial decisions.[13]

In their public justification of their work, the committee members focused on several key points: the creation of contemporary non-derivative art, the formation of a public exhibition culture based on selectivity, and the intensely heated question of artistic mediums. The strongest critiques levied against the jury selections were related to the question of mediums. Historically, the privileging of particular mediums has always drawn the ire of the art establishment, for example in the form of melodramatic proclamations of the "death of painting" and the concomitant privileging of installations and new media practices. But this year's exhibit confounded expectations that the jury would choose a preponderance of installation pieces or video work (in fact, only a handful of these were selected)—work that most closely conforms to the reigning conception of contemporaneity. Thus, the selection of a large number of works using "traditional" media such as figurative painting meant that such stock criticisms could not be levied against the jury.

Indeed, the jury cogently argued that the defensive emphasis on contemporaneity led to both the overvaluation of aesthetic mediums themselves as well as the derogation of the creation of a formal personal language in art. The issue of contemporaneity returns us to Igor Zabel's questioning of the implicit equation of "Western" and "contemporary" art within art historical criticism.[14] Indeed, one can argue that this is linked to a much longer-standing Enlightenment historical tradition that Reinhart Koselleck has referred to as an assertion of the "noncontemporaneity of the contemporaneous," that is to say, the notion that multiple histories, although occurring simultaneously, became "nonsimultaneous."[15] This is most clearly found in common perceptions of a temporal "lag" in the artistic production of the second and third world, and the notion that these regions will eventually "catch up" to purportedly more contemporary artistic and conceptual practices such as installation and video-based work.[16] In rejecting the notion that contemporaneity could be equated in any way to new media practices alone, the jury thus disrupted a common perception that contemporaneity could be reduced to a choice of materials alone, arguing instead for a criteria locating works' currency or relevance in more complex

and less reconciled approaches.

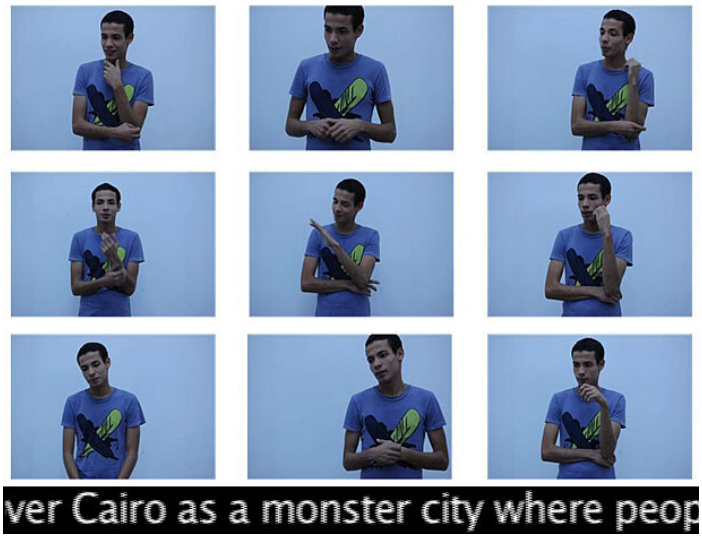
Clearly the Salon and the controversy surrounding it revealed a complex relationship between public and private drives, constituting a specific instance of a counter-public discursive moment.[17] Thus self-preservation on the part of the Ministry, as sole arbiter of artistic value, was justified in the name of the public; just as counter-public gestures (those of the jury) were justified through a complex mix of private intention and public necessity, namely, the creation of an independent contemporary art movement in Egypt .[18] This is in keeping with Boris Groys' contention that curatorial work is in large part related to the mediation of public opinion and the formation of a mass culture surrounding art.

But what becomes of artistic agency in the midst of such complex jockeying for access to public space and recognition? The 20th Salon is perhaps best understood as a momentary rupture in which artistic agency can be viewed not as emanating solely from the capacity of a sovereign subject who wills, but rather as the contingent product of a series of historically constituted events. Rather than view artistic agency solely as "the sovereign, unconditional, publicly irresponsible freedom of art-making,"[19] we can conceive of artistic agency—like *human agency* itself—"not as a calculating intelligence directing social outcomes but as the product of a series of alliances in which the human element is never wholly in control."[20] Artistic agency thus emerges from a complex assemblage of sovereign will, historical and structural constraints, opportunity, and mere chance. The emergence of conditions conducive to such agency have long been in the making, and are not to be seen as having been instantaneously produced by the 20th Salon. Rather, such conditions are related to a complex of historical factors, namely, the demise of state socialism and related attempts to centralize artistic production and consumption; the rise of neo-liberalism and the concomitant creation of privately owned and oriented gallery spaces; and, most importantly, the emergence of artistic production that has sought to move away from both the earlier antiquated state socialist model and the politically irresponsible neo-liberal model, marked by the creation of *homo economicus*.[21]

The interstitial location of many contemporary artists, between the state-socialist and neo-liberal models, has in fact accentuated disputes over artistic agency and autonomy. Indeed, the entire question of the autonomy of the artist came under fire in the Egyptian press, in terms that expose the legacy of state-socialist discourse. Usama Afifi, an art critic, railed against the notion of complete creative freedom (*hurriyat al-ibda al-mutlaq*), arguing that there is no such thing as absolute freedom, that all freedoms exist rather within societal constraints and that art should serve the needs of society.[22] In particular, he argued, art should address the major issues of the day that plague Egyptian society, rather than merely aping the West.[23] Thus, artistic freedom, according to Afifi, was related solely to mediums and methods. The confining of autonomy to materials and methods, while placing the thematic content of art within the domain of societal obligation, not only adheres to the general principle that art must address the social and political issues of its day, but similarly confines art to the ethics of socialist realism.

Clearly, artistic autonomy occurs within particular social contexts; arguably, within a postsocialist context, the notion of the autonomous artist is not as celebrated as in the West, in part because of the bourgeois associations with the idea of "freedom."[24] But if we return to Groys and view autonomy not as completely unconditional and sovereign, but simply as the "publicly irresponsible freedom of art-making," we can conceive of artistic autonomy in the Egyptian context as entailing a move away from the confining hegemonic public discourse surrounding the "traditional and the contemporary" and the constant need to assert the authenticity *and*

contemporaneity of one's art. At the same time, however, the pieces selected for entry could not be further from creating the neo-liberal autonomous subject that many claim contemporary Western curatorial practices in the Middle East and elsewhere seek to create.[25] The production of subjectivity, as Jason Read has argued, is in fact central to neo-liberalism and may be understood as the creation of a subject of interest (a self-interested individual), locked in competition.[26]



Mohamed Nabil, Interview with three artists, 2008. Color video.

Nowhere was this subversion of neo-liberal subjectivity more evident than in Mohamed Nabil's clever video installation *Interview with Three Artists*, consisting of a series of three video vignettes: "The Lebanese Artist," "The Egyptian Artist," and "The Palestinian Artist"—all played by Nabil himself. The piece self-consciously questions the role of the artist and the effects of self-representation, and subtly—implicitly, even—demonstrates the way in which a complex of curatorial decisions, and the need for artistic recognition and success, structures contemporary artistic production in the Middle East along stereotypical and conventional lines. Thus the Lebanese artist discusses the effect of the Lebanese civil war on his art and on collective memory; the Egyptian ruminates on the effects of life in a mega-city such as Cairo on notions of private and public space; and the Palestinian discusses how he would like to integrate the concept of a wall and a "country without any walls" into his work. One need only think of the contemporary success of certain Middle Eastern artists (and the curatorial decisions that buttress that success) to realize how acute and piercing Nabil's piece is. "Art," Hannah Feldman and Akram Zaatari insist, cannot "be made to represent geo-political identities without falling back on extreme simplifications."[27]

In his playful destabilization of artistic agency and autonomy, Nabil demonstrates the way in which the neo-liberal artistic subject is the *artifact* of the structural constraints of the art market and of the historical forces that shape its wider perception of the Middle East region (for example, the Lebanese civil war) and therefore the possibility of success within that market. Thus, the piece demonstrates a post-nationalist sensibility, but one that clearly cannot be equated with neo-liberal subjectivity. This belies the assertion of separate, dichotomous, spheres of art, particularly as related to the assumption that so-called Western-oriented artists and the MoC prefer a contemporary style based on video and installation mediums that promote a neo-liberal subjectivity. Rather than the reductive binaries of "nationalist" versus "neo-liberal," it may be more useful to understand the Egyptian art scene, like other art scenes, in terms of publics and counter-publics that are not necessarily isomorphic with "nationalist" and "neoliberal," but rather complexly formed fields that are co-constitutive and exceed their terms of reference.

top: Lamia Moghazy's painted portraits on vinyl. bottom: Ahmed Badry Aly, Made in China / Son' El Seen. Stacked cardboard boxes and silver paint.

In the same gallery as Nabil's installation were Lamia Moghazy's massive painting of a television screen replete with animated and human icons and Ahmed Badry Aly's massive construction of silver painted blocks (*Suni'a al-sin* [Made in China]). Their monumental size meant that they could best be viewed (and read) from the height of the exhibition site. Conceptually, their deconstruction of neo-liberalism and globalization were clear to all but the most recalcitrant of reviewers. It was, however, the curatorial decision of the jury to place these two works in a position of great prominence—as the first works encountered upon entering the exhibit—that upset reviewers.[28] Moreover, the monumental size of both pieces was in clear contrast to the selection of smaller sculptures that were placed serially and below eye level in a less valorized position on a top-level gallery floor. The

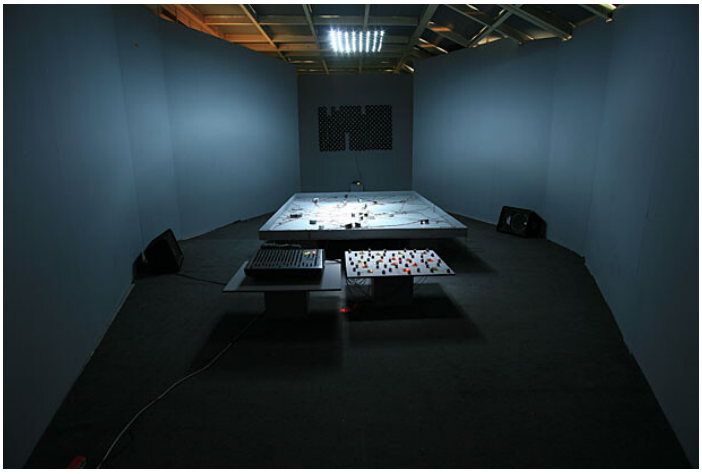
de-monumentalization of sculpture, what critics referred to as its "marginalization," was taken as an affront to one of Egypt's longest-standing arts (and to the *antiquity* of its claim to the visual arts)—a critique voiced even among reviewers sympathetic to the focus on new media arts and contemporary artistic practices.[29]

Mohamed Ahmed Mansour, It could be a family album, it could be not. Photographs (detail).

These sculptures were placed in dialectical tension with Mohamed Ahmed Mansour's Godard-like photos, which exhibited an awareness of the constructed nature of artistic subjectivity. In a series of photographs titled, "It could be a family album, it could be not," Mansour situates himself in a series of locales, such as a gas station, a supermarket, and an abandoned building, with speech bubbles containing statements on the order of "Nothing special it's just an old fashioned coffeeshop," "For me abandoned buildings are very interesting," "I do like historical places," and "It's my favorite gas station"—thereby self consciously placing the role of the artist at the forefront of the work.

Also highlighted in the works chosen for the exhibit were the fetishization of progress and contemporaneity within hegemonic public art discourse. In *Sounds Cells: An Electro-Magnetic Orchestra*, Magdi Mostafa explored electromagnetic square-wave sound technology used in the 1950s and 1960s in a cellular structure placed in a darkened room. Rather than simply being an homage to an anachronistic earlier sound technology, its visceral and reverberating sonority—felt throughout the exhibition halls—was a reminder that art need not be enslaved to the postcolonial desire to undo the "noncontemporaneity of the contemporaneous."

The sonority of *Sound Cells* was matched by that of *80 Million* (the proverbial population of Egypt), in which Eslam Zen Elabden and Mohamed Hossam produced a prize-winning video installation in which the frenetic and infectious sounds of the *tabla* filled the gallery space



Magdi Mostafa, Sounds Cells: An Electro-Magnetic Orchestra, 2009. Sound installation.

while onlookers came to notice the duo drumming—in perfect musical synchronicity—without drums. *80 Million* is remarkable in its pared-down evocation of place, refusing to conform to the fetishism of authenticity through mega-cities and masses, choosing instead as its medium the circulation of energy, both real and imagined.

Faten Dessouky, Untitled. Performance.

The evocation of place was further explored in Faten Dessouki's performance piece in which she recreated a traditional *ahwa* (coffeeshop) with numerous chairs and tables on a platform centered around a television set. Dessouki's intention was to create a performance centered on the everyday urban practice of "people watching television in public spaces." The piece functioned brilliantly as a performance without a performance artist. The actors chosen by Dessouki wandered for a time through the exhibition space but

Eslam Zen Elabden and Mohamed Hossam, 80 Million. Video.

before long fixated on this space, taking seats and creating their own spontaneous and impromptu café in the midst of the gallery.

Altogether, many of the pieces in the exhibit could be considered attempts to "escape from the game of representations, from the position of being others' other."[30] In so doing, they served as a crucial reminder that art reduced to the status of geo-political identity politics is evacuated of all meaning. In the end, the 20th Salon will be remembered by its opponents as an example of how the Ministry of Culture failed to control its own exhibition space; but for those sympathetic to the jury's work it marked the possibility of expanded artistic and curatorial sovereignty, however limited, and the hope of a conversation to come.

X

Images of panel discussion courtesy Mona Gamil.

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1
Ministry of Culture, hereafter abbreviated as MoC.

2
Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 158, 161.

3
Boris Groys, "Politics of Installation," *e-flux journal*, no. 2 (January 2009), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/02/68504/politics-of-installation/ .

4
Only 101 artworks were selected out of a total of 1,293 submissions, as against the usual 300 or so.

5
"Salon al-shabab al-'ishrun bayn al-tajdid wal-taqti'a" ("20th Youth Salon: Between renewal and disruption"), *Ruz al-Yusuf*, April 12, 2009, 14.

6
For an overview of these criticisms, see Winegar, *Creative Reckonings* , 158–174.

7
Igor Zabel, "We and the Others," *Moscow Art Magazine* 22 (1998) http://www.guelman.ru/xz/english/XX22/X2208.HTM .

8
See Saba Mahmood on Judith Butler's discussion of the way in which theoretical formulations, purportedly universal and abstract, are "constitutively stained" by their examples, in *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 163.

9
Such as the recently founded (2004) Contemporary Image Collective in Mounira, Cairo, "founded in 2004 by a collective of artists and professional photographers, focusing on the visual image and the development of contemporary visual arts and culture in Egypt." See http://98.131.142.138/about/mission.aspx .

10
The members of the 2009 Youth Salon Jury were Hend Adnan, Sahar El Amir, Bassam El Baroni, Hassan Khan, Mohamed Radwan, Moataz El Safty, Wael Shawky, and Ahmed Shiha (President of the Jury).

11
The panel took place the day after the official opening on March 30, 2009, and included: three of the members of the Salon jury committee, Bassam El Baroni, Hassan Khan, and Wael Shawky; Mohammed Tala'at, the director of the Ministry of Culture's Palace of Arts; the head of the jury committee, Ahmed Shiha; and the head of the Fine Arts Sector in the Egyptian Ministry of Culture, Mohsen Sha'alan.

12
Samar Nawar, "Al-mustab'idun min salon al-shabab yuftahun al-nar 'ala lajnat al-tahkim wa wizarat al-thaqafa"["The *Refusés* of the Youth Salon open fire on the jury committee and the Ministry of Culture"], *Al-Badil,* April 2, 2009, 12; Fatima Ali, "Salon 'lajnat al-tahkim' wa laysa 'salon al-shabab'," [The 'Jury Committee Salon', not the 'Youth Salon'"], *Al-Qahira,* April 14, 2009; Salah Bisar, "Salon al-shabab al-ishrun...dawra dun al-mustawa," ["20th Youth Salon...A session without quality"], *Al Qahira,* April 21, 2009, 15; "Salon al-shabab al-'ishrun bayn al-tajdid wal-taqti'a" ["20th Youth Salon: Between renewal and disruption"], *Ruz al-Yusuf*; ; Dina Sadiq, "Dawra bahta min salon al-shabab" ["A perplexing session from the Youth Salon"], *Al-Shuruq Al-Jadid,* April 6, 2009, 12.

13
Groys, "Politics of Installation."

14
Zabel, "We and the Others."

15
Coexisting cultural levels could then, through synchronic analysis, be ordered diachronically, within the framework of a universal "world history." See Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* , trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 231-288.

16
See, for example, Laura U. Marks, "What is That *and* Between Arab Women and Video? The Case of Beirut," *Camera Obscura* 18, no. 3 (2003), 43–44.

17
I am using the term "counter-public" discourse to refer to practices that are oppositional to normative hegemonic public art discourse in Egypt, which focuses on the creation of a contemporary artistic movement that is rooted in a (national) identity-based sensibility.

18
I thank Brian Kuan Wood for bringing this point to my attention.

19
Groys, "Politics of Installation."

20
Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-politics, Modernity (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 10* .

21
The period of state socialism in Egypt is usually designated as 1952–1970. Economic liberalization is said to have begun with Sadat's 1974 "open door" economic liberalization policy. Jason Read develops Foucault's idea of homo-economicus as defined by an anthropology of competition (rather than exchange, as in classical liberalism) in "A Genealogy of Homo Economicus: Neo-Liberalism and the Production of Subjectivity," *Foucault Studies* 6 (February 2009), 25–36.

22
The phrase "total creative freedom" was used in the introductory essay of the Salon's catalog by Commissioner George Fikry, and was part of the open call that was sent out for the annual competition.

23
Usama Afifi, quoted in "Salon al-shabab al-'ishrun bayn al-tajdid wal-taqti'a." See also Nawar, "Al-mustab'idun min salon al-shabab yuftahun al-nar."

24
See Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: the Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 10–14, on Lefort's paradox of socialist ideology, exemplified in the "objective of achieving the full liberation of society and individual . . . by means of subsuming that society and individual under full party control." See his discussion of the book *Marxist-Leninist Theory of Culture* and the idea that "in the socialist context, the independence of creativity and the control of creative work by the party are not mutually contradictory but must be pursued simultaneously" (12).

25
Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*, 156.

26
Read, "A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus," 26–32.

27
Hannah Feldman and Akram Zaatari, "Mining War: Fragments from a Conversation Already Passed," *Art Journal* 66, no. 2 (2007): 50.

28
Bisar, "Salon al-shabab al-ishrun...dawra dun al-mustawa."

29
Bisar, "Salon al-shabab al-ishrun...dawra dun al-mustawa;" "Salon al-shabab al-'ishrun bayn al-tajdid wal-taqti'a."

30
Igor Zabel, "We and the Others."

Hito Steyerl

Is a Museum a Factory?

The film *La hora de los hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces*, 1968), a Third Cinema manifesto against neocolonialism, has a brilliant installation specification.[1] A banner was to be hung at every screening with text reading: "Every spectator is either a coward or a traitor."[2] It was intended to break down the distinctions between filmmaker and audience, author and producer, and thus create a sphere of political action. And where was this film shown? In factories, of course.

Now, political films are no longer shown in factories.[3] They are shown in the museum, or the gallery—the art space. That is, in any sort of white cube.[4]

How did this happen? First of all, the traditional Fordist factory is, for the most part, gone.[5] It's been emptied out, machines packed up and shipped off to China. Former workers have been retrained for further retraining, or become software programmers and started working from home. Secondly, the cinema has been transformed almost as dramatically as the factory. It's been multiplexed, digitized, and sequelized, as well as rapidly commercialized as neoliberalism became hegemonic in its reach and influence. Before cinema's recent demise, political films sought refuge elsewhere. Their return to cinematic space is rather recent, and the cinema was never the space for formally more experimental works. Now, political and experimental films alike are shown in black boxes set within white cubes—in fortresses, bunkers, docks, and former churches. The sound is almost always awful.

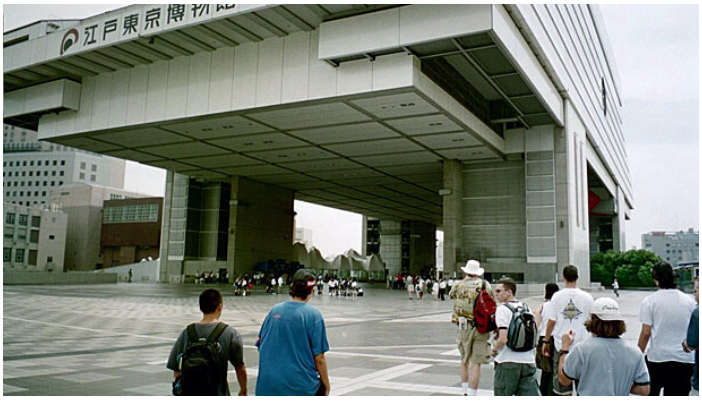
But terrible projections and dismal installation notwithstanding, these works catalyze surprising desire. Crowds of people can be seen bending and crouching in order to catch glimpses of political cinema and video art. Is this audience sick of media monopolies? Are they trying to find answers to the obvious crisis of everything? And why should they be looking for these answers in art spaces?

Afraid of the Real?

The conservative response to the exodus of political films (or video installations) to the museum is to assume that they are thus losing relevance. It deplores their internment in the bourgeois ivory tower of high culture. The works are thought to be isolated inside this elitist cordon sanitaire—sanitized, sequestered, cut off from "reality." Indeed, Jean-Luc Godard reportedly said that video installation artists shouldn't be "afraid of reality," assuming of course that they in fact were.[6]

Where is reality then? Out there, beyond the white cube and its display technologies? How about inverting this claim, somewhat polemically, to assert that the white cube *is* in fact the Real with a capital R: the blank horror and emptiness of the bourgeois interior.

Workers Leaving The Lumière Factory, Luis Lumière, 1895.

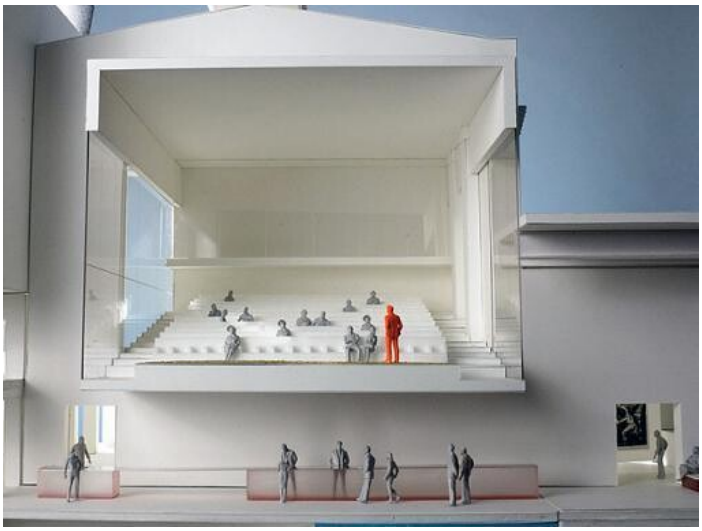


Visitors entering the museum, Edo-Tokyo Museum, 2003. Courtesy istaro.

On the other hand—and in a much more optimistic vein—there is no need to have recourse to Lacan in order to contest Godard's accusation. This is because the displacement from factory to museum never took place. In reality, political films are very often screened in the exact same place as they always were: in former factories, which are today, more often than not, museums. A gallery, an art space, a white cube with abysmal sound isolation. Which will certainly show political films. But which also has become a hotbed of contemporary production. Of images, jargon, lifestyles, and values. Of exhibition value, speculation value, and cult value. Of entertainment plus gravitas. Or of aura minus distance. A flagship store of Cultural Industries, staffed by eager interns who work for free.

A factory, so to speak, but a different one. It is still a space for production, still a space of exploitation and even of political screenings. It is a space of physical meeting and sometimes even common discussion. At the same time, it has changed almost beyond recognition. So what sort of factory is this?

Andy Warhol's Silver Factory.



OMA model for the Riga Contemporary Art Museum, to be built in a converted power plant, 2006.

Productive Turn

The typical setup of the museum-as-factory looks like this. Before: an industrial workplace. Now: people spending their leisure time in front of TV monitors. Before: people working in these factories. Now: people working at home in front of computer monitors.

Andy Warhol's Factory served as model for the new museum in its productive turn towards being a "social factory."[7] By now, descriptions of the social factory abound.[8] It exceeds its traditional boundaries and spills

over into almost everything else. It pervades bedrooms and dreams alike, as well as perception, affection, and attention. It transforms everything it touches into culture, if not art. It is an a-factory, which produces affect as effect. It integrates intimacy, eccentricity, and other formally unofficial forms of creation. Private and public spheres get entangled in a blurred zone of hyper-production.

In the museum-as-factory, something continues to be produced. Installation, planning, carpentry, viewing, discussing, maintenance, betting on rising values, and networking alternate in cycles. An art space is a factory, which is simultaneously a supermarket—a casino and a place of worship whose reproductive work is performed by cleaning ladies and cellphone-video bloggers alike.

In this economy, even spectators are transformed into workers. As Jonathan Beller argues, cinema and its derivatives (television, Internet, and so on) are factories, in which spectators work. Now, "to look is to labor."[9] Cinema, which integrated the logic of Taylorist production and the conveyor belt, now spreads the factory wherever it travels. But this type of production is much more intensive than the industrial one. The senses are drafted into production, the media capitalize upon the aesthetic faculties and imaginary practices of viewers.[10] In that sense, any space that integrates cinema and its successors has now become a factory, and this obviously includes the museum. While in the history of political filmmaking the factory became a cinema, cinema now turns museum spaces back into factories.

Workers Leaving the Factory

It is quite curious that the first films ever made by Louis Lumière show workers leaving the factory. At the beginning of cinema, workers leave the industrial workplace. The invention of cinema thus symbolically marks the start of the exodus of workers from industrial modes of production. But even if they leave the factory building, it doesn't mean that they have left labor behind. Rather, they take it along with them and disperse it into every sector of life.

A brilliant installation by Harun Farocki makes clear where the workers leaving the factory are headed. Farocki collected and installed different cinematic versions of *Workers Leaving the Factory*, from the original silent version(s) by Louis Lumière to contemporary surveillance footage.[11] Workers are streaming out of factories on several monitors simultaneously: from different eras and in different cinematic styles.[12] But where are these workers streaming to? Into the art space, where the work is installed.

Not only is Farocki's *Workers Leaving the Factory*, on the level of content, a wonderful archaeology of the (non)representation of labor; on the level of form it points to the spilling over of the factory into the art space. Workers who left the factory have ended up inside another one: the museum.

It might even be the same factory. Because the former Lumière factory, whose gates are portrayed in the original *Workers Leaving The Lumière Factory* is today just that: a museum of cinema.[13] In 1995, the ruin of the former factory was declared a historical monument and developed into a site of culture. The Lumière factory, which used to produce photographic film, is today a cinema with a reception space to be rented by companies: "a location loaded with history and emotion for your brunches, cocktails and dinners."[14] The workers who left the factory in 1895 have today been recaptured on the screen of the cinema within the same space. They only left the factory to reemerge as a spectacle inside it.

As workers exit the factory, the space they enter is one of cinema and cultural industry, producing emotion and attention. How do *its* spectators look inside this new factory?

Cinema and Factory

At this point, a decisive difference emerges between classical cinema and the museum. While the classical space of cinema resembles the space of the industrial factory, the museum corresponds to the dispersed space of the social factory. Both cinema and Fordist factory are organized as locations of confinement, arrest, and temporal control. Imagine: Workers leaving the factory. Spectators leaving the cinema—a similar mass, disciplined and controlled in time, assembled and released at regular intervals. As the traditional factory arrests its workers, the cinema arrests the spectator. Both are disciplinary spaces and spaces of confinement.[15]

But now imagine: Workers leaving the factory. Spectators trickling out of the museum (or even queuing to get in). An entirely different constellation of time and space. This second crowd is not a mass, but a multitude.[16] The museum doesn't organize a coherent crowd of people. People are dispersed in time and space—a silent crowd, immersed and atomized, struggling between passivity and overstimulation.

This spatial transformation is reflected by the format of many newer cinematic works. Whereas traditional cinematic works are single-channel, focusing the gaze and organizing time, many of the newer works explode into space. While the traditional cinema setup works from a single central perspective, multi-screen projections create a multifocal space. While cinema is a mass medium, multi-screen installations address a multitude spread out in space, connected only by distraction, separation, and difference.[17]

The difference between mass and multitude arises on the line between confinement and dispersion, between

OMA diagram for the Riga Contemporary Art Museum, 2006.

homogeneity and multiplicity, between cinema space and museum installation space. This is a very important distinction, because it will also affect the question of the museum as public space.

Public Space

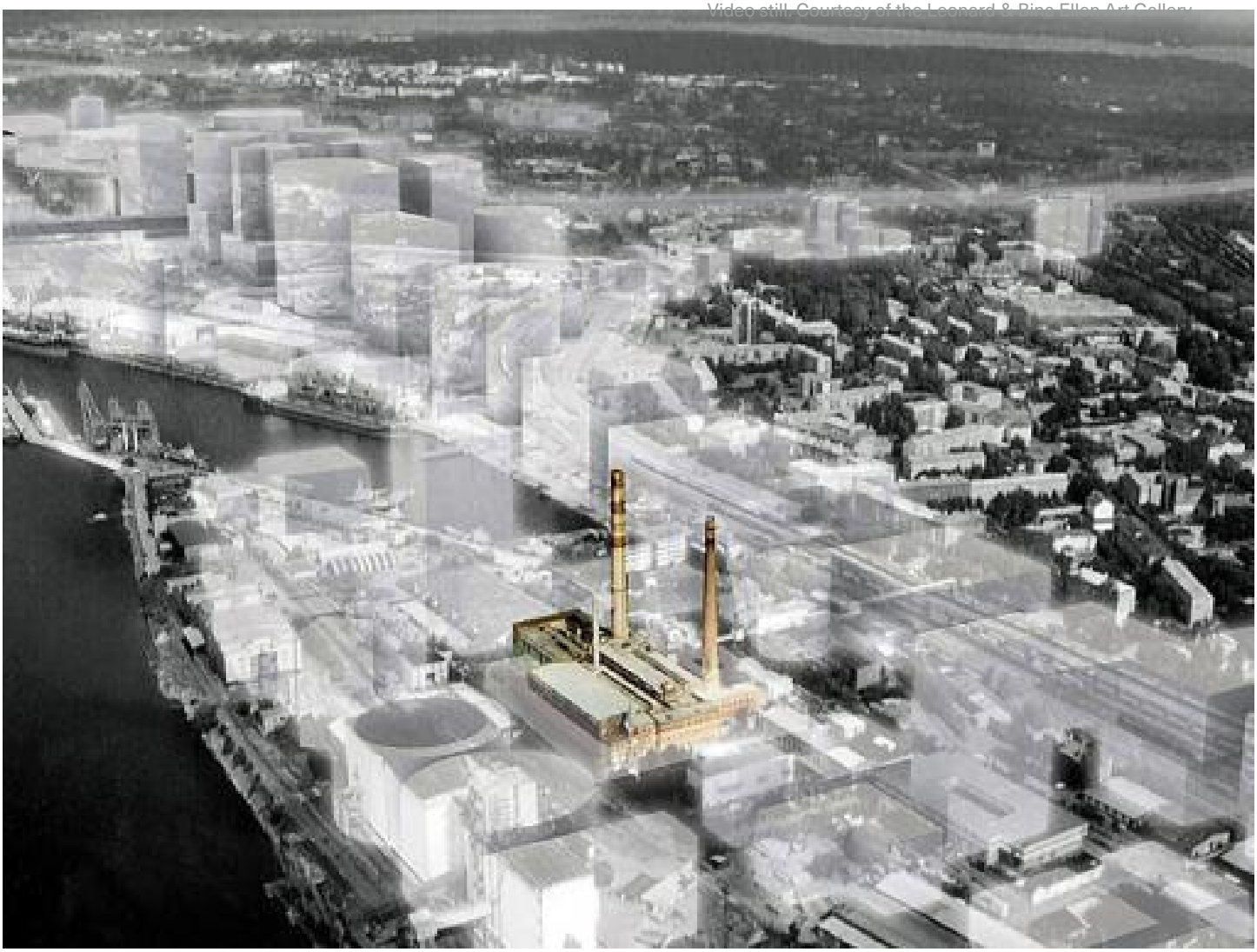
It is obvious that the space of the factory is traditionally more or less invisible in public. Its visibility is policed, and surveillance produces a one-way gaze. Paradoxically, a museum is not so different. In a lucid 1972 interview Godard pointed out that, because filming is prohibited in factories, museums, and airports, effectively 80% of productive activity in France is rendered invisible: "The exploiter doesn't show the exploitation to the exploited."[18] This still applies today, if for different reasons. Museums prohibit filming or charge exorbitant shooting fees.[19] Just as the work performed in the factory cannot be shown outside it, most of the works on display in a museum cannot be shown outside its walls. A paradoxical situation arises: a museum predicated on producing and marketing visibility can itself not be shown—the labor performed there is just as publicly invisible as that of any sausage factory.

This extreme control over visibility sits rather uncomfortably alongside the perception of the museum as a public space. What does this invisibility then say about the contemporary museum as a public space? And how does the inclusion of cinematic works complicate this picture?

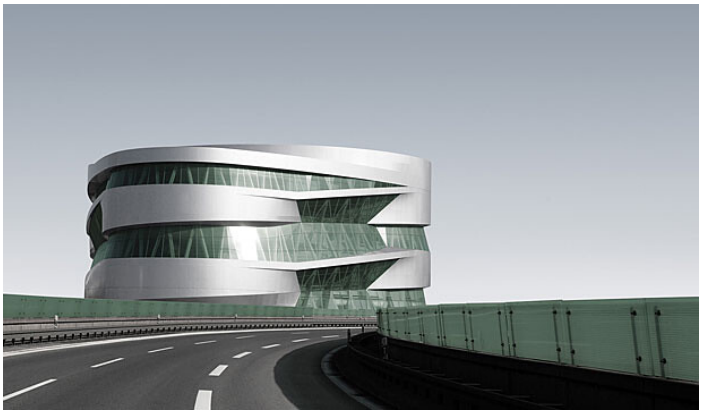
The current discussion of cinema and the museum as public sphere is an animated one. Thomas Elsaesser, for example, asks whether cinema in the museum might constitute the last remaining bourgeois public sphere.[20] Jürgen Habermas outlined the conditions in this arena in which people speak in turn and others respond, all participating together in the same rational, equal, and

transparent discourse surrounding public matters.[21] In actuality, the contemporary museum is more like a cacophony—installations blare simultaneously while nobody listens. To make matters worse, the time-based mode of many cinematic installation works precludes a truly shared discourse around them; if works are too long, spectators will simply desert them. What would be seen as an act of betrayal in a cinema—leaving the projection while it lasts—becomes standard behavior in any spatial installation situation. In the installation space of the museum, spectators indeed become traitors—traitors of cinematic duration itself. In circulating through the space, spectators are actively montaging, zapping, combining fragments—effectively co-curating the show. Rationally conversing about shared impressions then becomes next to impossible. A bourgeois public sphere? Instead of its ideal manifestation, the contemporary museum rather represents its unfulfilled reality.

Harun Farocki, Workers Leaving the Factory in Eleven Decades, 2006. Video still. Courtesy of the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery



OMA diagram for the Riga Contemporary Art Museum, 2006.



Mercedes-Benz Museum, Stuttgart.

Sovereign Subjects

In his choice of words, Elsaesser also addresses a less democratic dimension of this space. By, as he dramatically phrases it, arresting cinema—suspending it, suspending its license, or even holding it under a suspended sentence—cinema is preserved at its own expense when it is taken into "protective custody."[22] Protective custody is no simple arrest. It refers to a state of exception or (at least) a temporal suspension of legality that allows the suspension of the law itself. This state of exception is also addressed in Boris Groys' essay "Politics of Installation."[23] Harking back to Carl Schmitt, Groys assigns the role of sovereign to the artist who—in a state of exception—violently establishes his own law by "arresting" a space in the form of an installation. The artist then assumes a role as sovereign founder of the exhibition's public sphere.

At first glance, this repeats the old myth of artist as crazy genius, or more precisely, as petty-bourgeois dictator. But the point is: if this works well as an artistic mode of production, it becomes standard practice in any social factory. So then, how about the idea that inside the museum, almost everybody tries to behave like a sovereign (or petty-bourgeois dictator)? After all, the multitude inside museums is composed of competing sovereigns: curators, spectators, artists, critics.

Let's have a closer look at the spectator-as-sovereign. In judging an exhibition, many attempt to assume the compromised sovereignty of the traditional bourgeois subject, who aims to (re)master the show, to tame the unruly multiplicity of its meanings, to pronounce a verdict, and to assign value. But, unfortunately, cinematic duration makes this subject position unavailable. It reduces all parties involved to the role of workers—unable to gain an overview of the whole process of production. Many—primarily critics—are thus frustrated by archival shows and their abundance of cinematic time. Remember the vitriolic attacks on the length of films and video in Documenta 11? To multiply cinematic duration means to blow apart the vantage point of sovereign judgment. It also makes it impossible to reconfigure yourself as its subject. Cinema in the museum renders overview, review, and survey impossible. Partial impressions dominate the picture. The true labor of spectatorship can no longer be ignored by casting oneself as master of judgment. Under these circumstances, a transparent, informed, inclusive discourse becomes difficult, if not impossible.

The question of cinema makes clear that the museum is not a public sphere, but rather places its consistent *lack* on display—it makes this *lack* public, so to speak. Instead of filling this space, it conserves its absence. But it also simultaneously displays its *potential* and the *desire* for something to be realized in its place.

As a multitude, the public operates under the condition of partial invisibility, incomplete access, fragmented realities—of commodification within clandestinity. Transparency, overview, and the sovereign gaze cloud over to become opaque. Cinema itself explodes into multiplicity—into spatially dispersed multi-screen arrangements that cannot be contained by a single point of view. The full picture, so to speak, remains unavailable. There is always something missing—people miss parts of the screening, the sound doesn't work, the screen itself or any vantage point from which it could be seen are missing.

Rupture

Without notice, the question of political cinema has been inverted. What began as a discussion of political cinema in the museum has turned into a question of cinematic politics in a factory. Traditionally, political cinema was meant to educate—it was an instrumental effort at "representation" in order to achieve its effects in "reality." It was measured in terms of efficiency, of revolutionary revelation, of gains in consciousness, or as potential triggers of action.

Today, cinematic politics are post-representational. They do not educate the crowd, but produce it. They articulate the crowd in space and in time. They submerge it in partial invisibility and then orchestrate their dispersion, movement, and reconfiguration. They organize the crowd without preaching to it. They replace the gaze of the bourgeois sovereign spectator of the white cube with the incomplete, obscured, fractured, and overwhelmed vision of the spectator-as-laborer.

But there is one aspect that goes well beyond this. What else is missing from these cinematic installations?[24] Let's return to the liminal case of Documenta 11, which was said to contain more cinematic material than could be seen by a single person in the 100 days that the exhibition was open to the public. No single spectator could even claim to have even seen everything, much less to have exhausted the meanings in this volume of work. It is obvious what is missing from this arrangement: since no

single spectator can possibly make sense of such a volume of work, it calls for a multiplicity of spectators. In fact, the exhibition could only be seen by a multiplicity of gazes and points of view, which then supplements the impressions of others. Only if the night guards and various spectators worked together in shifts could the cinematic material of d11 be viewed. But in order to understand what (and how) they are watching, they must meet to make sense of it. This shared activity is completely different from that of spectators narcissistically gazing at themselves and each other inside exhibitions—it does not simply ignore the artwork (or treat it as mere pretext), but takes it to another level.

Cinema inside the museum thus calls for a multiple gaze, which is no longer collective, but common, which is incomplete, but in process, which is distracted and singular, but can be edited into various sequences and combinations. This gaze is no longer the gaze of the individual sovereign master, nor, more precisely, of the self-deluded sovereign (even if "just for one day," as David Bowie sang). It isn't even a product of common labor, but focuses its point of rupture on the paradigm of productivity. The museum-as-factory and its cinematic politics interpellate this missing, multiple subject. But by displaying its absence and its lack, they simultaneously activate a desire for this subject.

Cinematic Politics

But does this now mean that all cinematic works have become political? Or, rather, is there still any difference between different forms of cinematic politics? The answer is simple. Any conventional cinematic work will try to reproduce the existing setup: a projection of a public, which is not public after all, and in which participation and exploitation become indistinguishable. But a political cinematic articulation might try to come up with something completely different.

What else is desperately missing from the museum-as-factory? An exit. If the factory is everywhere, then there is no longer a gate by which to leave it—there is no way to escape relentless productivity. Political cinema could then become the screen through which people could leave the museum-as-social-factory. But on which screen could this exit take place? On the one that is currently missing, of course.

X

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1
Grupo Cine Liberación (Fernando E. Solanas, Octavio Getino), Argentina, 1968. The work is one of the most important films of Third Cinema.

2
A quote from Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* . The film was of course banned and had to be shown clandestinely.

3
Or videos or video/film installations. To properly make the distinctions (which exist and are important) would require another text.

4
I am aware of the problem of treating all these spaces as similar.

5
At least in Western countries.

6
The context of Godard's comment is a conversation—a monologue, apparently—with young installation artists, whom he reprimands for their use of what he calls technological *dispositifs* in exhibitions. See "Debrief de conversations avec Jean-Luc Godard," the Sans casser des briques blog, March 10, 2009, https://web.archive.org/web/20090622154655/https://bbjt.wordpress.com/2009/03/10/debrief-de-conversations-avec-jean-luc-godard/ .

7
See Brian Holmes, "Warhol in the Rising Sun: Art, Subcultures and Semiotic Production," 16 Beaver ARTicles, August 8, 2004, http://web.archive.org/web/20090623012443/http://16beavergroup.org/mtarchive/archives/001177.php .

8
Sabeth Buchmann quotes Hardt and Negri: "The 'social factory' is a form of production which touches on and penetrates every sphere and aspect of public and private life, of knowledge production and communication," in "From Systems-Oriented Art to Biopolitical Art Practice," NODE.London, https://web.archive.org/web/20090622213433/http://publication.nodel.org/node/74/ .

9
Jonathan L. Beller, "Kino-I, Kino-World," in *The Visual Culture Reader* , ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 61.

10
Ibid., 67.

11
For a great essay about this work see Harun Farocki, "Workers Leaving the Factory," in *Nachdruck/Imprint: Texte/Writings* , trans. Laurent Faasch-Ibrahim (Berlin: Verlag Vorwerk, New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2001), reprinted on the Senses of Cinema Web site, https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2002/harun-farocki/farocki_workers/ .

12
My description refers to the Generali Foundation show,"Kino wie noch nie" (2005). See http://foundation.generali.at/index.php?id=429 .

13
"Aujourd'hui le décor du premier film est sauvé et abrite une http://institut-lumiere.org/francais/cinema/ssalle.html https://web.archive.org/web/20090622132557/https://www.institut-lumiere.org/francais/cinema/sallecine.html de 270 fauteuils. Là où sortirent les ouvriers et les ouvrières de l'usine, les spectateurs vont au cinéma, sur le lieu de son invention," Institut Lumière.

14
"La partie Hangar, spacieux hall de réception chargé d'histoire et d'émotion pour tous vos déjeuners, cocktail, dıners...(Formule assise 250 personnes ou formule debout jusqu'à 300 personnes)," Institut Lumière.

15
There is however one interesting difference between cinema and factory: in the rebuilt scenery of the Lumière museum, the opening of the former gate is now blocked by a transparent glass pane to indicate the framing of the early film. Leaving spectators have to go around this obstacle, and leave through the former location of the gate itself, which no longer exists. Thus, the current situation is like a negative of the former one: people are blocked by the former opening, which has now turned into a glass screen; they have to exit through the former walls of the factory, which have now partly vanished. See photographs at ibid.

16
For a more sober description of the generally quite idealized condition of multitude, see Paolo Virno *A Grammar of the Multitude*, trans. Isabella Bertoletti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (New York and Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2004).

17
As do multiple single screen arrangements.

18
"Godard on *Tout va bien* (1972)," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnx7mxjm1k0 .

19
"Photography and video filming are not normally allowed at Tate" (https://web.archive.org/web/20090129002208/http://www.tate.org.uk/about/media/copyright/). However, filming there is welcomed on a commercial basis, with location fees starting at £200 an hour (https://web.archive.org/web/20090909000758/https://www.tate.org.uk/about/media/filming/). Policy at the Centre Pompidou is more confusing: "You may film or photograph works from permanent collections (which you will find on levels 4 and 5 and in the Atelier Brancusi) for your own personal use. You may not, however, photograph or film works that have a red dot, and you may not use a flash or stand." (http://web.archive.org/web/20090623042812/https://www.centrepompidou.fr/Pompidou/Communication.nsf/0/3590D3A7D1BDB820C125707C004512D4?OpenDocument&L=2).

20
Thomas Elsaesser, "The Cinema in the Museum: Our Last Bourgeois Public Sphere?" (paper presented at the International Film Studies Conference, "Perspectives on the Public Sphere: Cinematic Configurations of 'I' and 'We,'" Berlin, Germany, April 23–25, 2009.

21
Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* , trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, [1962] 1991).

22
Elsaesser, "The Cinema in the Museum."

23
Boris Groys, "Politics of Installation," *e-flux journal*, no. 2 (January 2009), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/02/68504/politics-of-installation/ .

24
A good example would be "Democracies" by Artur Zmijewski, an un-synchronized multi-screen installation with trillions of possibilities of screen-content combinations.

Monika Szewczyk

Art of Conversation, Part II

In continuing this written monologue about conversation, I am becoming aware of the sheer weirdness of thinking in this way about something that behaves so differently than writing "for the record." But if, as Maurice Blanchot demonstrates, conversation can be defined as a series of interruptions—perhaps the most powerful of which being the neutrality of silence—then writing, which is a kind of silent speech, may itself constitute an interruption to the way conversation is imagined.[1]

Watching What We Say

When I think of conversation I increasingly think of *over* hearing. Recall Gene Hackman in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation.* Hackman's character—Harry Caul—is a professional wiretapper whose obsessive records of conversations are haunted by the possibility of fatal consequences. One job may have cost a man his life; another job, the one underway during the film, may prevent another man's death. The film, which won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in May 1974, was a fortuitous echo of the Watergate Scandal that came to a boil in the summer months of the same year—a political event that churned around the *over* hearing of conversations, thereby accentuating wiretapping as an invaluable political tool—provided that one does not get caught. Richard "Tricky Dick" Nixon was the unlucky Republican president who did get caught, and he was nearly impeached for indiscriminately wiretapping the conversations of his opponents in the Democratic Party during their convention at the Watergate Hotel in Washington. Nixon and Henry Kissinger, his Secretary of State, also compulsively recorded their own conversations, understanding that what is said seemingly "off the record" is often of the greatest political consequence. The recordings of their secret and semi-secret conversations, many of which took place between 1971 and 1973, are now available online. Just as they hold the potential to reveal the truths of policy and power, so too do they paint a general picture of a cynical political era that saw a fundamental transformation in the popular conception of conversation as not only something that shapes and reflects values—of wit, pleasure and elegance, of time well spent—but also as information, tangible evidence, something to be placed before the Law.

To be sure, spies and other lucky listeners had overheard conversations for centuries and used them for political gain, but it was only with the increasingly rampant wiretapping of the Cold War era that words could be spoken "for the record" without the speakers' knowledge or willingness. Hence *everything* you said could be used against you. And this has come to beg the question: How do we watch what we say as a result? Have we become more cautious, even paranoid, about how we break a silence, less able to test our radical ideas in the open—all because there is a greater chance of the record of such conversations coming back to haunt us, even once we have changed our minds? If so, the amount of willfully

The Conversation, film poster.

recorded and also scripted conversations—and their recent proliferation in the art world—becomes particularly curious. Artur Zmijewski's video for Documenta 12, *Oni* [They] which synthesized an entire body of behavioral research about wordless conversations among Polish artists of his and earlier generations; Falke Pisano's script for *A Sculpture Turning into a Conversation,* performed on occasion with Will Holder; Gerard Byrne's re-enactments of printed interviews from past decades, such as *Homme à Femmes (Michel Debrane)*, based on Catherine Chaine's 1977 interview with Sartre about women , or *1984 and Beyond,* which restages a speculative volley between futurologist writers such as Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clarke, and Robert Heinlein; and Rainer Ganahl's continuous photographic documentation of talks and symposia—these examples only scratch the surface, highlighting the most formalized instances, which may not always involve something to be heard, but always offer a view onto conversation.[2] But there are also conversations that seemingly replace other ways of showing art, examples of which I will come to shortly. All this is to say that, in the realm of contemporary art, we do not seem to be watching what we say in terms of holding back. Rather, we may be increasingly interested in considering the aesthetics of people talking together.

But what to make of the sheer volume of conversation in art? It may be that, in our hyper-communicative world, any record of a person's speech is just a droplet in an ocean of such taped talk. In this kind of "infinite conversation" it might in fact be the volume that counts.[3] Is the idea to talk more so as to turn the droplet into a weightier drop, maybe even a "new wave"? If so, it remains to be seen whether a shared horizon of social change grounds many of the artistic and curatorial projects that have taken up conversation as a subject and form of late.

The most convincing arguments regarding the rise of discursive activity point to its foundational relation with a kind of informal education that allows for various, often oral and communal means of transmitting knowledge and shaping thoughts and values. All this is happening as education in the humanities and the arts experiences ever-greater pressures to standardize its approaches, especially in Europe under the Bologna Process. In response, there arises a growing need for a heterodox educational exchange that allows new information, and (especially) the type of knowledge that cannot even be quantified as information, to flow more easily. It has been noted that this expansion blurs the boundaries between educational time and free time, or that it secretly hopes to erase the category of work time as an isolated activity. The expansion and cultivation of minds must not be restricted to a few years at school, after which the professional life follows; rather, these activities constitute the (necessarily constant) "care of the self"—a concept from Ancient Greek philosophy resuscitated by Foucault. The more I think about it, the more important it becomes to reactivate the category of the *aesthetic* in this context as a frame of mind that combines education and pleasure, that does not reduce knowledge to information, and, perhaps most problematically, that grounds the faculty of judgment in categories that are difficult to set in stone—often requiring conversations and debates to bring these to life.

Elaborating on the care of the self in a lecture on *parrhesia,* or fearless speech, Foucault underscores the need to step back, not so much to judge oneself, but to practice an "aesthetics of the self." The distinctions he draws between aesthetics and judgment are lucid, and help to clarify the spirit in which I am proposing that an "art of conversation" may be aesthetically conceived and practiced:

> The truth of the self involves, on the one hand, a set of rational principles which are grounded in general statements about the world, human life, necessity, happiness, freedom, and so on, and, on the other hand, practical rules for behaviour. And the question which is raised in these different exercises is oriented towards the following problem: Are we familiar enough with these rational principles? Are they sufficiently well-established in our minds to become practical rules for our everyday behaviour? And the problem of memory is at the heart of these techniques, but in the form of an attempt to remind ourselves of what we have done, thought, or felt so that we may reactivate our rational principles, thus making them as permanent and as effective as possible in our life. These exercises are part of what we could call an "aesthetics of the self." For one does not have to take up a position or role towards oneself as that of a judge pronouncing a verdict. One can comport oneself towards oneself in the role of a technician, of a craftsman, of an artist, who from time to time stops working, examines what he is doing, reminds himself of the rules of his art, and compares these rules with what he has achieved thus far.[4]

Foucault's notion of aesthetics might be applied to conversation as much as to the self. But in the former case, it needs to be understood dialectically—within a notion of conversation that is as much the *means* of constructing an aesthetics as it is the *object* of this stepping back. Such a double role complicates critical distance. And what is at stake is not some conclusive verdict on what it means to have a conversation, but a continual grasping at what has been accomplished (what can be seen and said) and what else needs to be crafted through an infinitely interrupted speech. When we step back for a moment from a conversation, there arises a golden opportunity to catch something of the strange knowledge it produces.

If the catch here is to sense things anew and (as Foucault would have us consider) to perceive the truth of a situation, such perception is (ironically) often reserved for

the uneducated. Recall the small child in Hans Christian Andersen's *The Emperor's New Clothes,* who is the only one able to cry out the truth about the emperor. Parading a purely discursive wardrobe through town, the sovereign is too afraid to admit that he cannot see the "nothing" under discussion as his finest clothes. In a perfect premonition of the dematerialized art object, Andersen describes how the elaborate descriptions offered by two tricksters, conjuring clothes so fine they are invisible to the riff-raff, gains the support of the king's ministers who dare not contradict their king or, worse still, betray their arbitrary authority by admitting to seeing nothing. They keep up the appearance by elaborating the descriptions in conversation. This conversation upholds the regime. The fact that it takes a child to cry out the simple truth that the emperor has no clothes aligns with a moral habit of sorts: it used to be the aim of art education to get adults to challenge the status quo by thinking like children, *again*. (Consider Paul Klee before WWII and COBRA afterwards, or Rafie Lavie at the Israeli Pavilion in this year's Venice Biennale). Now the game is different. In an information economy, the power of discourse to shape the world gives conversation ever more complex and concrete potential. And the question becomes how to employ conversation as a medium.

And if conversation can be a medium, it is also increasingly subject to mediation. This childlike, unmediated view gives way to another fantasy: a neutral or *other* perspective. The plurality of conversation—made up of so many interruptions—may forge a complex neutral space. And, currently, the roaming eye of a film or video camera still seems to embody this neutrality with lenses that have carried the mantle of truth since their inception; to a lesser extent, the still photograph or the electronic sound recording could be trusted. Hence the proliferating documents of conversational activity in art may be understood as carving out that neutral space of conversation—an aesthetic means of stepping back. Put differently, there seems to be a hope that the increasing number of intersections of conversation and recording technologies may produce a point of reflection that teaches us what we cannot perceive when we are *in the middle of* such a discursive event.

Thus immersion is, paradoxically, part and parcel of the stepping back. I do not think, moreover, that the obsession with documentation becomes strongest amongst those driving some radical and absolute social change. Rather, it seems most logical for those who see themselves as the guardians of a living history, which may not be popular or part of the most widely taught curriculum—the most visible reality—but nevertheless exists. This history may be forged in parallel with official records; i.e. it is interested in continuing and perhaps refining *aspects of* the status quo. If there is any hope of social change at stake, another notion of revolution haunts it—one that assures the *continuation* of a minor history. The flourishing of a documentary impulse for keeping records then becomes competitive. This is less about turning things upside down than it is about keeping the proverbial wheels turning, ensuring that "we" survive.

Quiet as It's Kept

"I can't believe we're not filming this!" whispered a friend of mine recently, during the final (and the most polyphonic and animated[5]) of three symposia entitled "The Rotterdam Dialogues: The Critics, The Curators, The Artists" held recently at the Witte de With, where I work as the head of publications. The entirety of the three events was recorded for sound only—a self-conscious wiretapping that nevertheless excluded numerous exchanges in the corridors, or at the bar, or in the back of the gallery spaces that were converted into stages for panels and dialogues. These offstage sites may have been where the "real" conversations took place. Certainly for me, this friend's whispered comment was crucial and will likely filter into the official talk about how Witte de With will shape a book from these comings together that cannot be fully re-presented. Granted, it would have taken a Cold War mentality to record all of the pertinent exchanges in full. For now, it is up to the people who attended the symposia to allow their most valuable conversations to continue to do their work after the event.

In light of this work of witnessing, I wonder what would have happened had we insisted on cutting *all* electronic recording devices and committed ourselves more consciously to the role of living archives? I have also wondered for some time about what is being kept silent by the presence of cameras at numerous discursive events that I have attended or helped organize recently. Would something different be shared were there no cameras rolling, were the sound recorders turned off? In thinking this, I am inspired by the example of an artist like Ian Wilson who, over the course of the past forty-one years, has organized specific, meticulously framed discussions, which always take place *in camera*, but without cameras or other recording devices that could transmit the proceedings to those who did not attend.[6] The only thing that remains, if the work is collected, is a certificate stating that a discussion has taken place (and when and where). This certificate is only produced if the work is bought, not if it is presented without purchase, as has been the case on occasion. The gesture of generating a certificate thus intersects specifically and somewhat paradoxically with the money economy: on the one hand, there is the implication that money cannot buy the real heart of the work, the experience of the discussion which could be made available, albeit at a remove, were an index created; on the other hand, the commodification of a discussion does ensure that a paper record of its having taken place exists for posterity. A discussion is only visible if it involves the exchange of currency. People who come across such a record forty years after the event will wonder—I certainly did—what precisely was said when this discussion took place in New York in 1968? The administrative blankness of the small typed notes holds a

There was a discussion in New York City, in 1968,
on the idea of Time.

Ian Wilson

Signed: Ian Wilson

Ian Wilson, Discussion Note.

great, almost conspiratorial promise. Adding to this is the artist's conduct: Wilson never divulges the details of the discussions he organizes; he prefers to talk about the structure and the larger frames of the project. He honors a shared secret that only those present can fully enjoy and remember.

Having only ever been *outside* an Ian Wilson discussion, and as someone who encountered first a certificate and then sought out the artist himself, I wonder about entering this structure. Would my attention—especially my sight and hearing—be more acute at such an event due to its elaborate frames and the lack of a camera? Or—without the distractions of snapping pictures, the worry that some recording device is out of batteries, or the carelessness that comes from knowing that you can come back to what is said via a recording—would I forget about remembering and be fully present at the event once and for all?

Brian Jungen, Talking Sticks, 2005.

Recently, I tried to test these questions in the course of a public conversation that I was invited to at the Western Front in Vancouver. Jonah Lundh and Candice Hopkins had asked me to elaborate upon my interest in thinking through what it might mean to consider conversation as an art today; hence the occasion had something of the *mise en abyme* about it.[7] The audience was made up largely of friends, so it seemed especially necessary to make things a little ceremonial, a little strange. I borrowed a *Talking Stick* made by Brian Jungen from a friend who had been given this work—one of several baseball bats that Jungen had had router-carved with archly ironic slogans alluding to the simultaneous embrace and disempowerment of First Nations cultures in Canada.[8] Jungen often "misuses" sports equipment in his art, and I have always fantasized about misusing this particular work of his in turn; that is to say, I wanted to take the art object, which is usually presented with a "Do Not Touch" sign, and simply use it. In this case, misusing it meant to use it *literally*. In the course of our public discussion, we ended up passing the carved baseball bat around, going through the motions of an idea of oral culture that we could hardly access, the systematic persecution of such practices in Canada having broken much of the continuity that ensures the life and survival of storytelling. Nonetheless, this very physical thing in the midst of the dematerialized space of conversation did somehow render material the movement of ideas around the room, even as it all remained rather theatrical, especially since everything was wired for sound, and a camera looked me right in the eye as I sat at the head of the room.

This tension between the logic of oral culture and the logic of recording gatherings and conversations seemed to be working against the spirit of what I had intended, and at some point I insisted on switching off the camera and the sound recorder that had been rigged up in the room. In my mind, and some who were there may disagree, the moment the recording devices were unplugged, another kind of electricity also faded away. The performative flair of many people's utterances dissipated and there was a lot of straight talk, mostly about the naıveté of my gesture. Judy Radul—an artist and onetime poet who performed live at the Western Front and who has shifted her focus to experiments with the roles cameras play, especially in defining space as mechanisms of law and sovereignty—was most adamant in reminding me that, were it not for the people who bothered to turn *on* the cameras and other recording devices in the very room where we sat, much of what has been called the "whispered" history of art in Vancouver would have been lost. This is a history of media experimentation, persona formation, poetry, music, and other variants of the living arts that have received much less historical attention than what is known internationally as the "Vancouver School of Photography."[9] She also pointed out that cameras have the uncanny ability to capture the non-verbal aspects of conversation, especially the incredible power of—and here she stopped speaking for what seemed like eternity, though it was probably less then a minute—silence. The next day, Hopkins and I discussed how Radul's long silence had brought the electricity back into the room and how we regretted not capturing it on camera. This is partly why I am writing about it, but only a camera could have fully represented this strange interruption. Subsequently, my ears have since been more attuned to such silences.

And recently (midway through writing this text, in fact), I had an encounter with a self-declared silence in the form of a conversation—a kind of non-work (or maybe a meta-work?)—in the midst of an exhibition by Oskar Dawicki at Raster in Warsaw.[10] This took the form of a typed-out text, simply pinned on the doors dividing the two exhibition spaces of the prewar Warsaw

apartment-turned-gallery. It is entitled "I have never made a work about the Holocaust," and in it Łukasz Gorczyca—who founded Raster—questions Dawicki about this pronouncement and another conversation the artist had with Zbigniew Libera. We read about Libera's concerns regarding the reductive approaches to the subject.[11] Artist and curator further discuss feeling called upon to address the Holocaust, particularly in Poland, and the simultaneous impossibility of creating something that preserves an artwork's integrity—that is, its autonomy—in relation to this subject.[12] Here conversation performs a limit by paradoxically speaking a type of silence. Adorno and Wittgenstein haunt the text, especially Adorno's assertion that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz. But I'm interested in how this impossibility bears on the other, more properly autonomous works in the exhibition, which grant the conversation the status of something on the edge of art making—something that is done when making work is impossible.

This brings me to another conversation I would like to discuss—and I realize I am employing a rather loose definition of the term "conversation," allowing it to hold together various forms of discourse; as may be clear by now, in each case my defining criteria involve interruptions by means of silence and a shaky claim to the status of art. The conversation in question is in fact twice removed from (what I'll dare to call) "a natural state": not only is it a staged trial (and therefore another kind of meta-conversation), but it is also a record of this staged event—a very purposeful document that used several cameras, and was strongly manipulated in its editing into a film.[13] We might say that art has been made of a conversation, which was a kind of performance art in the first place. Yet this artfulness is particular in that the film never really asserted itself as gallery art, but was rather distributed on the festival circuit and left open to various classifications.

I am thinking here of Hila Peleg's *A Crime Against Art*, a film which is based on an eponymous mock trial staged at the 2007 ARCO Art Fair in Madrid. The charge: collusion with the bourgeoisie. Here again, silence speaks volumes about a very current taboo, but one that has been with us for centuries. There is a lot to say about how this film captures a particular network within the art world, and how it articulates positions, constructs contradictions, and crafts a subtle comedy. But I will concentrate on one decisive detail of the cross-examination. Asked directly whether he considers himself to be a member of the bourgeoisie, the defendant blankly stares just shy of the camera's dead center and remains silent for a moment worthy of a Harold Pinter play.[14] At this point, it is difficult to tell what he is thinking, but this interruption in the communicative exchange lets viewers consider the question in some detail. And (perhaps depending on whether you've read your Blanchot or not) you might say that this is precisely where the real conversation begins. By the time the answer yes is uttered—an effective admission of "guilt"—the binary code of yes/no has been filled with the neutrality of saying nothing. The cinematically amplified silence refreshes the question of class at a time when the charge that artists are affecting bourgeois norms—gentrifying neighborhoods, making more money than is good for them, and so on—is becoming something of a staple (a self-congratulatory one, as well) in art-related discourse. Here we get to the neutral ground of non-judgment that keeps a question alive.

Nothing Gold Can Stay

The moral of the story is thus temporary and tentative: maybe we need to think more about what class is, as well as which one we (want to) belong to. Considering that we are only "we" because we share values, and therefore can continue to create things that will prove valuable for us to exchange, it would be interesting to ask to what extent this creation and exchange of value is understood as a situation in which the sole or most important currency is money. In thinking this, readers might keep in the back of their minds a couple of conversations painted (so as to be watched, but not heard?) by Antoine Watteau during a time of growing confusion surrounding the ruling classes: *Le Pèlerinage à l'île de Cithère* [The Pilgrimage to the Island of Cythera] from 1717 and *L'Enseigne de Gersaint* [Gersaint's Sign] from 1720–1721, both of which hang today in the Schloss Charlottenburg in Berlin. In thinking further through the *currency* of conversation, it seems crucial to ask what values are both created and traded in the course of contemporary conversations. What interruptions are admitted and which ones are yet to be registered?

A caveat (rich in irony): I'm writing this on a train from Warsaw to Berlin, and I've just been interrupted by a very polite Polish man who distributes language books abroad and is passionate about collecting coins and about the treatment of "our" people in Germany—Austria and Switzerland are better, he assures me, even though everyone speaks German there too. "As long as a German is your boss, he or she will be nice to you. If it's the opposite, well . . ." This is irritating—I don't want to think about collectible coins but about a wholly different kind of currency. And I'm weary of his notion of the "we." I thought of telling him that he is paranoid and that we all need to think less about nations and more about cities, better still about *civitas.* But I've decided to interrupt our conversation with my silence. I'm fully focused on my screen now, though I continue to think: whose interruption would I value at this moment? Here comes the German conductor—I hope she's nice so my neighbor has no base on which to build his biases!

The cinematic silence of one accused of collusion with the bourgeoisie may be the base for thinking about how conversation has everything to do with the construction of social class—especially one that is still difficult to name. I say "class" rather than "community" because the word

Antoine Watteau, Le Pèlerinage à l'ıle de Cithère [The Pilgrimage to the Island of Cythera], 1717.

resonates with key allusions, and it is also in danger of losing some of its *punctum*.[15] The question of whether a class is being constructed by virtue of the co-presence of certain people at certain conversations and not others is perhaps only interesting if that notion of class escapes easy classification. Rather than advocating a return to Marxist dogma, I am thinking of something that hovers somewhere between two more particular senses of the term. One is employed by Diedrich Diederichsen at the end of his essay *On (Surplus) Value in Art*:

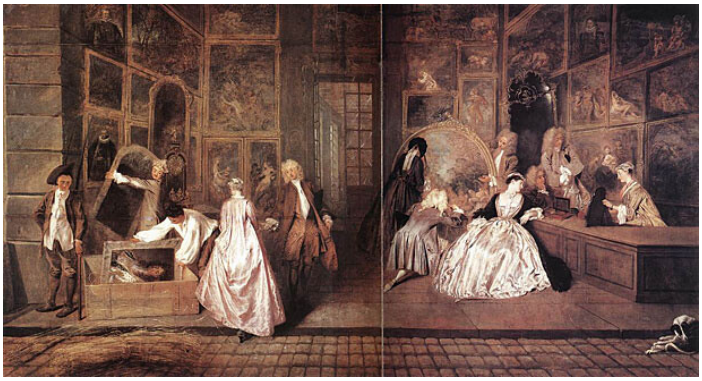
> Previously, the bourgeoisie was a stable, cultural class that had its place at the center of cultural production, which it regulated by means of a mixture of free-market attitudes and subsidies, staging its own expression as both a ruling class and a life force that stood in need of legitimation. The bourgeoisie is now fragmenting into various anonymous economic profiteers who no longer constitute a single, cultural entity. For most economic processes, state and national cultural formations are no longer as crucial for the realization of economic interests as they were previously. As a result, the bourgeoisie, as a class that once fused political, economic, and cultural power, is becoming less visible. Instead, the most basic economic factors are becoming autonomous. Once these factors become autonomous, the obligation towards cultural values that even the worst forms of the culture industry kept as standards, disappears.[16]

The notion of class cannot be understood primarily in economic terms, Diederichsen reminds us, especially when we think of the "ruling class" and even if we think that money rules the world these days. Once money becomes the only currency that people trade in, the ruling class disappears. Conversely, it might be said that members of a specific class develop mechanisms for appearing to each other, and at a certain moment this can be called a shared aesthetics or a shared worldview. But we might ask: does watching what we say mark this process in its formation? And this brings up the other, more literal sense of class: namely, people who learn things together. If emphasis is placed on coming together to converse and to trade valuable information, what can then be seen in the process of many such activities is the

construction of a style of living and a set of values that can only be exchanged by those who not only have read the same books, but who are also able to embody their knowledge and its most interesting limits.

The idea of knowledge as something that only a good conversation can transmit is inherited in part from the aristocracy, a class that did not distinguish between art and life, or not as much as we do. Interestingly, aristocrats only began to obsess about the subtleties of conversation as they grew closer to losing their claims to a divine right to rule. In *Watteau's Painted Conversations,* Mary Vidal writes about aristocratic notions of conversation in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France as a "disguised, diluted, non-bourgeois type of education."[17] Sound familiar? Accused of an instrumental approach to all knowledge, the bourgeoisie was feared for promoting a trade in information that could be institutionally/democratically taught, which for the aristocrats amounted to an unnatural knowledge. Vidal argues that what Watteau depicts in his paintings is never the content of the conversations as something distinct from their form—never the pointed, instructional gestures of a Gainsborough painting that exaggerate things so as to render them readable, even to the (morally) unschooled. Rather, their secret knowledge is always embedded—a set of values (elegance, harmony with nature) is expressed in paintings that espouse those very values and posit conversation as an art of living. Vidal makes a strong case for considering the "naturalness" of the corseted aristocrats that Watteau painted in terms of being "God-given" and full of grace—something that might escape a contemporary (secular) eye which looks for naturalness in wildness or the absence of technology. The paintings are strange to us, perhaps because they do not reflect our values, but they are also somewhat *unheimlich* insofar as they point to the contemporary representation of conversation as the potential for creating a set of values, a common currency, a kind of network.

There is great interest nowadays in representing networks. The recent disclosure by the makers of Facebook that they will not fully delete records of their users—even those who choose to deactivate their accounts—underscores a somewhat paranoid logic that potentially preys on friendship as a mapping of consumers that lead to more consumers. It is with this in the back of my mind that I look at both of Watteau's aforementioned paintings. The shop sign in the form of a painting was made for the art dealer Edme-François Gersaint and shows people evaluating and appreciating other paintings. The mass and mobility of these pictures—which are no longer attached to castle or church walls (as was customary for major commissions until about the 15th century), but can be packed in a crate (as shown on the left) and shipped to hang in anyone's home—are a source of titillation. This early picture of the art market makes a point of exhibiting conversation as a basis of the market transaction. In some ways, conversation is the real value being exchanged; or it might be said that conversations arise in the places where value must be negotiated.



Antoine Watteau, L'Enseigne de Gersaint [Gersaint's Sign], 1720-1721.

Sure, I am reading into the picture—speculating, projecting, appreciating it in a way that might not be appreciated by scholars—but I do see a speculative sense of value in *L'Enseigne de Gersaint* that may account for the greater sense of tension in this image—greater even than is perceptible in Watteau's earlier depiction of a pilgrimage to the Island of Cythera, the ludicrously lovely dwelling place of Aphrodite.[18] If the earlier painting is gratuitously graceful—to my eyes at least—the heavenly element (embodied by the putti in the background of *Le Pèlerinage à l'île de Cithère*) is gone from the shop sign (and perhaps this is the reason for the midsummer melancholia of the embarkation). I'll even play a little faster and looser with art history still, and posit that perhaps this grace has been replaced by another "other" in the very front of the picture—a dog that is quite obviously not taking part in the conversations at Gersaint's shop. Since "dog" only spells "god" backwards in English, it is unlikely that Watteau was thinking in the same vein—seeing divinity in an animal and thus a true "other" to converse with—but even in French they say " *Le bon Dieu est dans le détail*," and this one needs some attention.

I've always been told that dogs in paintings are code for some abstract notion of "loyalty," but this one's not very convincing. If anything, he denaturalizes the entire scene. And if the dog refuses to play his allegorical part, his presence on the edge of the frame may be pointing to the fact that the pictures are *framed*, movable, and thus of continually reframed value. Looking at that oddly placed dog in Watteau's painted conversation, I wonder how *we* fit into this picture. On a couple of occasions, I have heard Martha Rosler confront her interlocutors in a public forum with the problem of forgetting about bohemia. For her, the staginess of conversations nowadays has evacuated some of the fun and much of the real political force from what she experienced when people gathered together in the sixties and seventies.[19] But the real problem seems to be a kind of waning of a particular class-consciousness—a sense of common values involving a self-imposed poverty for the sake of other riches. Maybe Watteau's dog is a

budding bohemian, or better still Diogenes, the "dog philosopher" who, when asked by Alexander the Great if the admiring Omnipotent could grant him any wish, any riches, simply requested that the emperor get out of his sun. The question of class might become more interesting if we begin to ask ourselves whether it is not just bohemia, but the middle class, that is being eclipsed—and with what. The other (increasingly urgent) question of what we are currently projecting onto animals will have to wait for another time, another conversation.

X

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1
Part I of this ongoing essay, published in *e-flux journal* no.3, worked through Maurice Blanchot's notion of conversation developed in his polyphonous book *The Infinite Conversation*, ed. and trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). It focuses particularly on Blanchot's idea of conversation as interrupted thought and speech; and on genuine interruption as coming from autrui, or "the other." Blanchot's notion of autrui, which is somewhat enigmatic and radically open, posits silence as a key form of interruption and a space of neutrality. Thus conversational interlocutors that greet us with silence – such as God, animals, and finally a rock (as these are found in certain films, artworks, and poetry) – featured prominently in the text. Further following Blanchot's notion that *true conversation* is sh aped by the profound silence of the other, which is always understood beyond binary opposition, Part I posed the question of whether what currently passes for conversation is really that. The question may never be resolved, but is likely to spur the continuation of this multi-part essay infinitely, without end or a clear horizon.

2
Thanks to Michał Woliński for noting Zmijewski's legacy recently.

3
Though this is not to say that this is what Blanchot meant with the title of his eponymous book!

4
See Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), 165-166.

5
As audience participation matched the engagement of the invited speakers.

6
I have never attended one of Wilson's discussions so cannot elaborate on their content, but what I know from meeting the artist is that the crafting of a discussion is of great importance, and that of absence of all recording devices makes for an atmosphere that puts a much greater emphasis on participation and the role of each participant as a witness to an event. The task of memory could here be taken as primary. Or, given the inability to remember perfectly, one could completely give oneself over to participation and let oneself then be the evidence of what took place by virtue of any transformation of the person.

7
Jonah Lundh is a freelance curator developing a program of conversations for this artist-run center, and Candice Hopkins is the curator of exhibitions there.

8
As can be seen in the photograph, Jungen's *Talking Sticks* are usually displayed to emphasize their relation to the sports equipment they are made from – baseball bats. But in the context of his work, which often takes up questions of First Nations identity and its commercialization in North American sports culture, they are often seen to echo totem poles (at the size they might be made for the tourist industry). Having worked with Jungen at the time he developed these carvings, I do recall discussions of their formal relation to the kind of carved staffs, which are often decorated with First Nations motifs and paraded at official functions by the Lieutenant Governor of the province of British Columbia (the Queen's representative) or the presidents of the universities in Vancouver. Each time, such objects slyly enact a kind of transfer of sovereignty from the First Nations, which never took place legally and continues to be a point of debate.

9
See *Whispered Art History: Twenty Years at the Western Front* , ed. Keith Wallace (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002).

10
What are you reading now was added towards the end of writing this text, but it seemed right to interrupt myself in this context.

11
Recall Libera's highly controversial *LEGO Concentration Camp* (1996), which was recently purchased by the Jewish Museum in New York.

12
This is not the first instance in which Dawicki has used conversation as a form of meta-art to stress impossibility or refusal. In his earlier work with the members of the artists' "supergroup" Azorro (supergroup in the sense that each artist also has an independent practice), entitled *Everything has been done* (2003), a conversation expresses the impossibility of making certain works of conceptual art quite simply because they have already been conceived. But in the case of the current work about the difficulty of addressing the Holocaust in art, the tone is very different. The conversation is situated amidst works that deal much more symbolically with the search for knowledge, failure, death, and palliatives, using a variety of neo-conceptual pictorial media (and one soft-sculpture consisting of the artist's clothes, tied together to form an escape line out of the window of the gallery). Ironically, this conversation about strategic silence was totally missed by a reviewer in Gazeta Wyborcza, who took time to mention every other work in the exhibition. See Dorota Jarecka, "Przegrywamy do Końca" *Gazeta Wyborcza*, May 28, 2009, 14.

13
The structural undercurrents of conversation in court proceedings and the construction of judgments in particular are explored in a recent single-channel video work by Judy Radul: a seemingly natural conversation that turns out to be completely constructed on the basis of the three elements announced in its title: *Question, Answer, Judgment* (2008).

14
Those who have seen the film may know that the defendant happens to be one of the editors of this journal, Anton Vidokle. And I am as aware that my text may be read as an act of collusion (with those already accused of collusion!) as I am interested in forging a way to speak from within such conditions of complicity. In eschewing the fiction of critical distance, it might be possible to think through more complex notions of thinking critically, not only about dead or distant figures, but also about the people we tend to have conversations with and the very conditions we are immersed in.

15
Interestingly, in a recent review of Vidokle's activities by Taraneh Fazeli in the Summer 2009 issue of *Artforum* titled "Class Consciousness," the focus is not awareness of social class – rather the title alludes to the educational activities of e-flux, which are discussed in terms of social consciousness, but not in terms of class.

16
Diedrich Diederichsen, "On (Surplus) Value in Art," ed. Nicolaus Schafhausen, Caroline Schneider, and Monika Szewczyk (Rotterdam and Berlin: Witte de With Publishers and Sternberg Press, 2008), 48.

17
Mary Vidal. *Watteau's Painted Conversations: Art, Literature and Talk in Seventeeth and Eighteenth-Century France* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 95. Thanks to Søren Andreasen for recommending this fascinating book.

18
Not that the latter is void of tension. In fact there is some debate about whether the aristocrats are already on the island and finding it difficult to leave, or whether they are about to embark. Regardless of whether the good trip is deferred or coming to an end, the conversationalists are in limbo.

19
One was "The New York Conversations," in June 2008 in the new e-flux space; another was the above-mentioned "Rotterdam Dialogues: The Artists" at Witte de With, where Rosler was a keynote speaker.

Brian Kuan Wood

A Universalism for Everyone

Universe I see your face looks just like mine...

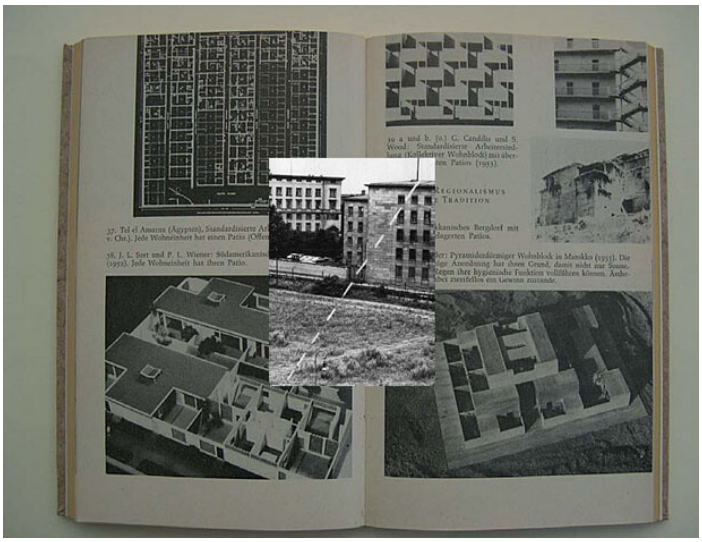
— The Microphones, "Universe"

It can be difficult today to reconcile oneself with modernist ideals that seem to still contain some liberating promise, considering how in practice so many of these ideals have proven to be ineffective at best, and quite oppressive at worst. Likewise, while ideological systems that accompanied these ideals are no longer reliable, their straightforward certainty and romantic clarity of purpose somehow remain captivating prospects for relieving some of the anxieties found in distributed, competitive systems of negotiated and renegotiated value. After all this time, we are still seduced by modernism's emancipatory promises just as we are stifled by its models of democratic managerialism.

The field of art not only suffers from these unreconciled desires and realities, but often finds itself in the uncomfortable position of having to negotiate with them in order to ensure its very existence. But in this negotiation, the variables always seem to slip out of one's grasp: the rediscovery of ideology gets pitted against the melancholia of its collapse; the desire to be instrumental beyond the field of art is bracketed by a fear of being instrumentalized by those same forces; assertions of artistic autonomy translate into performative disappearance; straightforward engagement risks severe compromise—all of this to try and access a latent and bonding value in art, whether on its own terms or in collaboration with the forces to which it is subject. There is no real solution to this, but then again, these are not necessarily problems either.

But these conditions do describe a degree of discomfort and a general sense of mistrust with regard to art's capacity to generate its own value, and it might be useful to think a bit about ways in which art can be less subject to conditions that are often conflicting and confusing by advancing some form of universal significance to be found in the artistic act. Though this would necessarily borrow from certain ambitious universalist claims found in early modernism and beyond, this understanding would inevitably have to constantly disengage itself from the strictures of any particular authority or framework that would limit its movement or threaten to revoke its consideration as art. This is to say that it would have to rely mainly on the same unreconciled and distributed subjectivities mentioned above. Though this may sound like a slightly paradoxical thing to expect, thinking further about how it might be possible could release some of the

pressure of the less productive and confusing paradoxes that art confronts us with today, and could even comprise an attempt at accessing some of the emancipatory promises that got us here in the first place. A couple of texts from the last issue of *e-flux journal* may be of help here.



Disengagement

In issue #6, Marion von Osten's "Architecture Without Architects—Another Anarchist Approach" looked at how modernist urban planning projects in the French colonies, while built with the intention of liberating their inhabitants, became inadvertently used to control and limit their movement, mechanizing subjects around a strict top-down logic of control.[1] Though the architects of these projects imagined themselves as gracious liberators, it seems as though they overlooked a crucial flaw in the modern project: that no central plan is really going to liberate anyone, much less one transposed from one society onto another. As a natural consequence, inhabitants of these buildings and urban grids began to appropriate these structures and, using improvised building practices, absorbed the logic of the grid into one that worked for them.

Von Osten suggests that their resolution comes from their breakdown into informal, negotiated systems of horizontal exchange in which universal modernist forms are abandoned altogether, often by inhabitants who return these notions back to real life. In many ways, it seems this is the direction in which things are headed: if modernism's emancipatory promises are to have any degree of sustainable relevance, it makes much more sense to consider these promises not as something granted by a central authority to subjects down below, but claimed by those very subjects using an assortment of available materials in ways that could not have been imagined by a central planner.[2] The pure formal vocabulary that modernism offered as a complete project from start to finish was accepted only on the basis of being an incomplete skeleton—a shell of an idea that would not be complete until it could be inhabited by something else. In essence: it now seems clear that if any system is to carry any sort of liberating capacity, it has to lay the foundation for the subject to claim his or her own means of finding freedom—to some extent, one has to reconstitute the system for oneself.

Here, self-building works as an interesting blueprint for a means of disengaging from a structure of meaning without literally or physically abandoning its premises. Beyond the purely resistant dimension of these actions, there is a latent energy in self-building that also reflects modernism's own irreversible transformative capacity—total in its breadth and inescapable in its weight. Insofar as it is a response to the logic of the central planner, so does self-building likewise form an extension to the plan. In a sense, one could argue that every gesture within an experimental laboratory is itself an experiment. And if these experiments do indeed automatically surpass their original intention, they can be considered within a broader frame of significance. Taken this way, the repurposing of a central plan by its inhabitants does not replace a universalist conception with a kind of small-scale pragmatism of a withered subject picking through the wreckage, but rather opens up an entirely new field of possibility in the understanding that each response to the failure of the central plan constitutes its own universalist claim. The idea here is not to find a container to accommodate these—to reinstall the role of the planner—but to suggest a more ecstatic sphere that can unlock these possibilities or disengage them from their purely pragmatic foundations.

"But perhaps they still understood that the most radical form of design emerges when the people begin to represent themselves without mediators and masters."[3]

While self-building is testament to the death of a certain type of author—the architect of large-scale urban projects—it can be interesting to imagine this phenomenon not in terms of an absence of authorship or authority, but more in terms of its widespread distribution. Since one is certainly not lost without the central planner, surely authorship is still in play somehow. And if this authority shifts to the realm of the subject, then though the subject may only have the space of a single unit, a single block within the grid to work with, what could be interesting would be to suppose that the small-scale strategies that emerge in opposition or response to the central planner can parallel modernism's scale and reach in the power and ambition of their vision. Though these responses may not even necessarily be destined for concrete implementation in a real setting, i.e. their power may lie completely within the symbolic realm, one can suggest them to be no less ambitious than those of Corbusier himself, which is to say that a small-scale response can contain an entirely new central plan within

its logic.

What modernism never took into account with its idea of the universal subject was in fact the subject's own universe. Granted, this is what the slightly paradoxical idea of "open plans" sought to liberate, but more importantly, self-building simultaneously calls out the bluff and the promise of modernism's surface by replacing the logic of central authority with the development of subjective worlds inside and around the units of the grid. One could say that the aesthetic terrain that provided this promise still retains it. In other words, when we find failure in the implementation of the model, we perhaps fail to recognize the latent energy within the model itself. And claiming the means to direct this energy has less to do with modernism than with the terrain on which we locate the material of cultural work, and here things begin to return to art. Because what we are implicitly looking for here in the absence of centralized forms of legitimation is a logic for understanding how artistic works might find their own legitimacy without having to resort to a central authority to grant it. While this begins with a break from that authority, how does one then start to think about reconstituting that legitimacy in its absence? Perhaps by looking to the latent energy that surrounds such a claim to legitimacy at its inception, and by thinking about a kind of displacement that might already have marked a gesture as art before it was even aware of itself.

Your Legitimate Claim

> Utopia, through the abolition of the blade and the disappearance of the handle, gives the knife its power to strike.
>
> — Jean Baudrillard, *Utopia deferred...*[4]

So far, I have tried to identify a potential for a universalist significance in small-scale or marginal responses to a social system, yet the problem is that this claim remains trapped in the space of a subjective projection—within, say, a single apartment in a grid of housing projects. In the last issue, Mariana Silva and Pedro Neves Marqes' text "The Escape Route's Design" explored the embedded potential of artworks to escape the dead space between the indeterminacy of an artistic proposal and the overt instrumentality of pragmatic social engagement or concrete political action.[5] This may be an opening through which an artwork might to some degree assert its own inherent value, or rather, in their words, "the continuous affirmation of the possibility of exchange value beyond the gathering of consensus or multiplicity." While in the end, their assertion is highly reliant upon the dynamics of this multiplicity—that of an individual subject within a cloud of potential possibilities—they attempt to take things a step further with a claim to this individual's freedom to reconstitute the meaning of artistic work. But this freedom is not only activated by a simple matter of the subject asserting a will or a desire for an act to be considered within a broader frame of significance (though surely this is a part of it), but is also an assertion of a latent set of conditions—conditions that might be invisible, sleeping, inert, or displaced—that together comprise a more objective, however speculative means of legitimating an artistic act as such. It is a matter of aligning this act with the conditions that make it possible as art—similar to what the Kabakovs called the "sudden occurrence" that renders an unsuccessful project a successful one—that grants its legitimacy. And this alignment can be a simple matter of a shift in perspective.

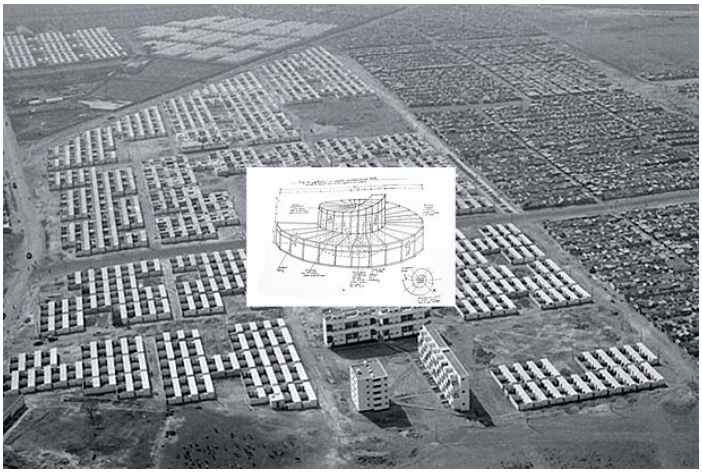
> All of this together represents a long and arduous process where repeatedly selected variations and "sudden occurrences" participate simultaneously. In this sense, it is impossible to refer to any project as unsuccessful—it can only be referred to as an unsuccessful variation of something which in a different altered view or with a shift in components, in a word, a "sudden occurrence"—will turn out to be the correct resolution, absolutely successful.[6]

In the text, Silva and Marques compare Ilya and Emilia Kabakov's *Palace of Projects* to various strategies for crossing the Berlin Wall unnoticed. Where *The Palace of Projects* was a large structure that contained sixty-five displays of sculpture and schematic drawings suggesting larger scale artworks, actions, ideas, or statements, all yet to be realized, the "attempts at crossing the Berlin Wall in its verticality," while similarly speculative in nature, were for obvious practical reasons intended solely to be executed in real life.[7] Yet for Silva and Marques, both of these "projects" converge in their allusion to an action that lies just further afield, and is to varying degrees realizable or unrealizable. *The Palace of Projects*

maintains a fundamentally utopian structure in that it always projects the completion of its projects into the future, and is from its outset, reconciled with its own impossibility. The proposal suggests a possibility, but then stops short: "the realizable is enmeshed in the unrealizable," and in this admission, *The Palace of Projects*, seen in its totality, becomes no more exemplary of something beyond itself than any monument.

On the other hand, the attempts at crossing the Berlin Wall comprise a similar schematic presentation, but with a radically different intention aimed at a literal application of what it illustrates: how to simply escape the GDR unnoticed. Likewise, if there is any utopian potential to be found embedded in these schematics, it is similarly negated by their intention towards actual, pragmatic action. However, when overlaid with the Kabakovs' proposals, Silva and Marques find in the possibility of Berlin Wall crossings' real world actualization an immanence that can cross over to also legitimate the Kabakovs' proposals as not only possible, but as having *already taken place*. This acknowledgement can come from aligning the proposed action with a set of conditions that have less to do with the kinds of consensus that legitimate objects and events within the realm of the real, but that have more to do with those that make objects and events *themselves* highly speculative and potentially incomplete. To draw a parallel to von Osten's self-builders, the self-built responses to modernist urban planning projects can be seen as themselves entirely new urban plans when they (or I, for that matter) invoke the modern grid as *itself* a speculative object, incomplete in its nature, and therefore contingent upon such interventions for its own entry into a sphere of completion. But how do we then invoke this incompleteness, or project it onto such structures? Where do we locate these weak points in the alleged completeness of built projects?

One way is to locate the *invisibility* of many projects' completion. Silva and Marques point out in the case of the Berlin Wall crossings that, in the act of crossing through



covert means, without the notice of the authorities, the completion of the project was effectively hidden, although in every real sense it had actually taken place.[8] The physical act of passing a body from the GDR to the West needed, and even required no audience to qualify its validity as action. To invoke this example would be to assert not only that projects are built and "un-built" without the necessary position of a spectator, but also that it is impossible to say for sure what has or has not been completed, if indeed we accept that real events can take place without our knowing.

By removing the audience from its role in validating an act, Silva and Marques open things up significantly to a myriad of readings. And it is with this in mind that they propose a kind of legitimacy for *The Palace of Projects* that passes its claim retroactively from the sphere of a proposal to that of the actual. This claim does not so much assert that a monument *is* built (though we cannot say with absolute certainty that it is not), but rather asserts that built monuments themselves are not necessarily complete, or have not yet fully achieved their own projected intentions within a real sphere.[9] In this sense, art draws the real back to itself—art becomes no longer subject to the real, but rather reality becomes subject to art. Furthermore, *The Palace of Projects* can be said to have already built its proposed projects by, metaphorically speaking, smuggling them through a checkpoint in the Berlin Wall.

Finally, for Silva and Marques, it is ultimately "through the prism of free attribution of value, kaleidoscopic in form" that the individual aligns an artwork or isolated instance with its expanded significance, whether in a social sphere or beyond. If we are to then take for granted that this attributive license is granted to anyone at any time, then why does the negotiation of artistic value present itself as such a burden? Perhaps it has to do with the void opened up by such an arbitrary distribution of meaning. But to then return back to von Osten's self-builders, any promises of free attribution made by the central plan will never be granted by that plan. Though it may implicitly hold the potential for a small-scale response to comprise an

entirely new plan through the free attribution of pragmatic *or* artistic value, this potential must somehow be activated.

X

Brian Kuan Wood is an editor of *e-flux journal*.

1
Marion von Osten, "Architecture Without Architects—Another Anarchist Approach," *e-flux journal* , no. 6 (May 2009), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/06/61401/architecture-without-architects-another-anarchist-approach/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CArchitecture%20without%20Architects%E2%80%9D%20was%20the,and%20productivity%20of%20self%2Dbuilt .

2
See Gean Moreno and Ernesto Oroza's contribution in issue #6 as well for a detailed account of this dynamic: https://www.e-flux.com/journal/06/61399/learning-from-little-haiti/ .

3
von Osten, "Architecture Without Architects—Another Anarchist Approach."

4
Jean Baudrillard, "Utopia deferred..." in *Utopia Deferred: Writings for Utopie (1967–1978)* , trans. Stuart Kendall (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), 62.

5
Mariana Silva & Pedro Neves Marques, "The Escape Route's Design: Assessment of the Impact of Current Aesthetics on History and a Comparative Reading Based on an Example Close to the City of Berlin," *e-flux journal* , no. 6 (May 2009), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/06/61403/the-escape-route-s-design-assessment-of-the-impact-of-current-aesthetics-on-history-and-a-comparative-reading-based-on-an-example-close-to-the-city-o/ .

6
Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, *The Palace of Projects* , excerpt from text written in *There are No Such Things as Unsuccessful Projects* .

7
See detailed documentation of each project with translations of text in the drawings here: https://web.archive.org/web/20080703162839/http://srg.cs.uiuc.edu/Palace/projectPages/palace.html .

8
"The performative character of these events would then simultaneously translate into a non-commensurable action, a production of meanings and free spaces, conditions and acts of self-identification, precisely through this absence of an intentional audience, the absence of a predefined performative structure; therefore of a demonstration understood as conscious and intentional, as is frequently the case in the production of artistic value, quantifiable and quantified by law. This exemplary character is then paradoxically extracted from its own characteristics of *un-example* , namely its unformed and undetermined characteristics, foreign to any commensurable regulation in the effective making of the action. ... The effective act of crossing the Berlin Wall distances itself thus from the *Palace of Projects*, given that only when the monument, itself a symbol of aspiring potentiality, is effectuated through the attempts at crossing the Berlin Wall, is it accomplished in Life. Nevertheless, this recognition of the symbolic diluted in life, that is, unrecognizable as such while it occurred, would implicate the negation of the proper identity of monument, its understanding as such, given that the permanence of its status would necessarily make its de-signified establishment in the world impossible. Solely by denying the monument its proper self-referential status as monument could it perhaps, differentiated by this precise negation, permit its own dissolution in the life-world"

9
"Accordingly, and in view of the state of democratic negotiability of value mentioned above, one is confronted with a situation in which history seems to reply retroactively to the proposals elaborated by the Kabakovs' authors, precisely by the particularity of the attempts at crossing the Berlin Wall in its verticality. The cases of escape from the Soviet regime, perpetuated by numerous people during a determinate period in time, by transgressing the boundary of the Berlin Wall, is equivalent to an equal or corresponding innumerability of projects, whose conception and realization, of individual or collective design, could then constitute an answer or a historical counterproposal to the Kabakovs' projects. This response, as counterproposal, is given by its exemplary character in opposition to the previously cited demonstrative enunciation of the artist. Put differently, the character of the aforementioned events imposes precisely and necessarily the will or act of taking the design in hand, no longer understood as a project or model but as the physical actuality of an act in its simplicity of idea. With a multiplicity of common objects used for and during its concretization, it does not cease to propose its execution to each inhabitant, individually and without exception. ... That the meaning found in the Palace's proposals would have been extrapolated in their unfinished condition and consequently demonstrated a real existence of these individual gestures of social significance, in that the referred projects would have already, truly, at a given moment, and even if in another time and by other means, been effectuated."

Pauline J. Yao

A Game Played Without Rules Has No Losers

That contemporary art in China has developed in response to the cultural, political, intellectual, economic, and social conditions of its particular (and highly transformative) environment is beyond doubt. Yet to what extent we view art as merely reflective, illustrative, or representative of its specific cultural context, rather than endowed with the capacity to transcend difference and engage critically to change, readapt, redesign, or push against these contested frameworks, has nearly always been in question. It is this contradiction—between art's capacity to reveal certain social determinants and its ability or willingness to effect change upon them—that underlies much of contemporary art production today. The tendency to go against prescribed systems and institutional structures in the art world, cross the boundaries of art, or question how we define art in the first place, has become accepted shorthand for closing the gap between art and everyday life, itself a gesture widely interpreted as promoting positive values and contributing to the betterment of society at large. How such transgressions might come to be envisioned, realized, and recognized, in a place like contemporary China—with its underdeveloped art infrastructure and overdeveloped sense of control—still remains to be seen.

China finds itself today in a peculiar position vis-à-vis the global art world. While international art centers struggle to define the role of art institutions, and countless artists and curators appear eager to jettison their modernist frameworks and container aesthetics, China is eagerly adopting the very institutional systems and structures that the Western art world is ready to abandon. The overarching narrative of contemporary art in China, starting with the late 1970s, has been largely predicated on acknowledgement, acceptance, and recognition by the "official" system, even as Chinese artists struggled with its ideologies and prescribed stylistic conventions. The debates and discussions which followed centered on the exclusion of certain art forms from the official ranks, without calling into question the inequalities and injustices of the system itself. Today, ongoing efforts are similarly so mired in the rush to professionalize, to establish boundaries and structures of governance for the sphere of contemporary art to the extent that experiments performed outside or against these efforts have become scarce and of indeterminable gain. The legacy of anti-institutional practices that we most readily associate with contemporary art in the West barely exists in the Chinese context; if anything, it represents a conundrum for artists who strive to maintain a critical stance while supporting the aim of mainstream acceptance. The process of reconciling these two goals—of gaining entry into hitherto closed institutions locally while at the same time maintaining an "outsider" or "anti-establishment" aesthetic or political position in the eyes of the global community—produces a tension that underlies artistic production in China, just as it does in many other developing art centers.

The ongoing conundrum around art's autonomy—the

View of Zheng Guogu's Age of Empire in process, 2008. Photo courtesy of the artist.

degree to which art should be responsible to itself alone or to its own particular context and society—is a global issue left largely unresolved. As the world faces a shrinking global economy and the collapse of world financial markets, questions surrounding art's sovereignty have become all the more pressing. We are all well aware of the ineffectiveness of art criticism in the face of the market, and of the superficialities that have accompanied the art world's recent bout of lavish overspending and self-aggrandizement.[1] But statements that demonize the market or advocate a turn towards sobriety, a "return to substance," or going back to "art making as it should be," not only suggest an air of non-complicity, but imply that there is some clear consensus on what it is we should be returning to. By now we are well aware that art has never only been about the market or business-end strategies. The presence of commerce is not anathema to creativity, nor does its absence immediately restore art to a state of purity and innocence. Indeed, the insistence that art production should remain totally free from the market runs dangerously close to one that confines those same aesthetic practices to a space of meaningless insignificance, independent of the social and political conditions that inform and ensure its own very existence.

Rather than look to the market as culprit, we might turn instead to factors that sustain rather than misappropriate artistic production. If we recognize the art market as a subset of concerns contained within a larger entity we know as the art world, then what can be said of the concerns of the art world itself? In order to meet the demands of the market, contemporary art in China has witnessed an unprecedented ramping up of production, and this tendency has threatened outlets for critical reflection and thinking, which in turn thwarts long-term sustainability. Moreover, if the imported aesthetics that inform contemporary Chinese art—installation art, video, and new media—on the one hand trigger suspicion in official institutions and academies raised on a diet of traditional painting and socialist realism, they provide on the other hand a much-needed image of progress and modernization to cover for the government's totalitarian attitudes. Assessing art's relationship to autonomy, sovereignty, and independence in the midst of China's pronounced lack of autonomy in other spheres of life—namely, certain political and social freedoms and values we associate with civil society—becomes entangled not only in social and political concerns, but in increasingly present economic ones. On the surface it would appear that support for contemporary art in China has reached new heights, proven by the influx of art fairs, exhibitions in state-run institutions, and even new forms of government funding.[2] But the spirit that underlies these ventures remains solidly aimed at capital gain, market interests, and the business end of art production, with little, if any evidence of support for activities outside this sphere. Whatever subversive tendencies that might remain from earlier periods is quietly tolerated, but more often commercially packaged or even neutralized by the government's apparently open stance on contemporary art—a position only leveraged by certain individuals when it is deemed convenient (read profitable) or when it follows the prevailing political wind.

In his essay "The Politics of Installation," published in this journal, Boris Groys reminds us that although artworks cannot escape their commodity status, they are also not expressly made for buyers and collectors; in other words, the multitude of art biennials, art fairs, and major blockbuster exhibitions has generated an "art public" in which the typical viewer is someone who rarely views the work as a commodity. For Groys, this is evidence that the art system is "on its way to becoming part of the very mass culture that it has for so long sought to observe and analyze from a distance."[3] Such an assessment may hold true for the bulk of the Western art world, but carries less weight in China or in many non-Western regions where contemporary art is still far from being a constitutive element of mass culture. Despite growing numbers of visitors to museums and arts districts in China, contemporary art remains mostly unrecognized by mainstream culture, only haltingly accepted into government-run institutions, absent from the average university art department, and virtually unknown to the average citizen. These truths are often forgotten, especially when one's time is spent sealed within the gallery-filled espresso culture of the urban contemporary art world. However, there is a sense that this is all about to change, and this makes it all the more important to pay attention to how the groundwork is laid for creative and aesthetic practices that operate apart from, away from, or in resistance to the dominant spheres of commercialism surrounding them. The phenomenon of self-contained "art zones" such as Beijing's 798 Art Zone are symptomatic of both a desire to segregate art from regular life and an effort to enhance its marketability by referencing its own legacy of success. In the absence of any counterpoint with which to understand this activity, contemporary art continues to be treated explicitly as a form of entertainment, a photo backdrop, or a moneymaking scheme for the burgeoning middle and upper classes.

An unusual building being built at the foot of the mountain for Zheng Guogu's Age of Empire, 2009. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Media attention, private sponsorship, corporate ventures, and personal museums do little to counteract a growing perception that equates contemporary art with investment and market value.

The most enduring dilemma lies in the government's own directives, which consciously limit art's interactions with the rest of society. Lumped together into the amorphous designation of "creative industries" and isolated within "creative industry zones," contemporary art has found itself walled off in places that both contain art and impose a sense of hermeticism. The rapid territorial expansion of contemporary art in Beijing in particular has not only stimulated studio-bound, market-oriented artistic practices, but has further limited site-specific practices to being responses to physical sites at the expense of social or political ones. This radicalization of space serves as a constant reminder of the contested nature of public space in China, and of a lurking authoritarian presence that seeks to control artistic as well as personal participation in the creation of everyday culture.

Distinguishing art from the rest of social life serves the interests of certain groups more than others. Keeping art at a safe distance from (or above) meaningful political engagement and in limited contact with society perpetuates its dependence on status quo economic conditions and social structures, no matter how radical its aesthetics might appear. While the Western appetite for "resistance" has a tendency to cast all art production in China as oppositional or "anti-regime," this is rarely the case. It may be true that in the absence of meaningful civil society, political society encompasses everything, but by the same token this stimulates an utter indifference with regard to politics itself. Contemporary art in China is plagued by the absence of politics and worse, by the banalization of it. What we need are models that do more than critique the commercial atmosphere surrounding art (while operating from a position of safety)—models that engage meaningfully with the social determinants of production that shape and form art in the first place, asking not what is made, but who makes it, for whom, and under what conditions.[4]

Xijing Olympics, 2008. Tsuyoshi Ozawa during competition. The Xijing Men. Photo courtesy of the artists.

Contemporary art throughout China today suffers from being cut off from both the traditions of the past and the life of the present. Attempting to untangle the knot of aesthetic autonomy in this context only magnifies art's two perceived dead-ends: autonomous irrelevance or engaged complicity.[5] The model of "engaged autonomy" that Charles Esche proposes is thus an intriguing one, suggesting a way to think of autonomy not as something that is invested in the object itself but rather as an action or a way of working.[6] It advocates not only an active and participatory attitude, but replaces traditional top-down methods of assigning value and worth with more homespun measures of self-declared legitimacy and collective gain.

Efforts to detach contemporary art from its enclaves have already begun. Art collectives, alternative art spaces, deterritorialized social and relational practices all fit within this schema and present possible critical models for how we understand and witness the ways in which art can exert its own energy upon a given environment or social context, rather than simply emerge as its byproduct. I myself have helped initiate one such endeavor in Beijing called the Arrow Factory—a modestly sized art space where artistic production comes up against the social realities of its own immediate environment. Below I highlight two further art projects which embody possible strategies for an "engaged autonomy" that demonstrates a desire not only to create something that lies beyond the boundaries of the art world, but also to reach new, unprepared audiences.

The work of the Xijing Men is rooted in everyday life and addresses the concerns of average individuals while simultaneously embracing and shattering nationalist

Xijing Olympics, opening ceremony, 2008. The Xijing Men. Photo courtesy of the artists.

frameworks by collaborating across cultural and linguistic borders. Their 2008 *Xijing Olympics* project has received wide international acclaim, due in part to its availability on websites such as YouTube. Formed by Chinese artist Chen Shaoxiong, Japanese artist Tsuyoshi Ozawa, and Korean artist Gimhongsok on the premise that there exists a northern capital (Beijing), a southern capital (Nanjing), and an eastern capital (Tokyo), but no western capital as of yet, The Xijing Men have taken it upon themselves to explore the option of making one. Collectively hailing from the fictional place of Xijing, their fixed attitudes towards nationhood and cultural or regional identities are overshadowed by values of plurality, multiplicity, and open-ended experimentation from the very start. Collaboration between these three artists from three different Asian countries conjures complicated notions of Asian-ness while offering a discourse centered less on the homogenizing forces of globalization than on the celebration of difference. One key to understanding the Xijing Men can be found in their method of communication. Without a common verbal language, the artists rely instead upon a mixture of broken English, physical gestures, hand-drawn sketches, and occasional handwriting (Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans all share an understanding of Chinese characters) to convey their ideas to one another. Even though they hail from different cultural background, the equalizing factor is language, with each from the very start working outside his 'zone of comfort' linguistically.

Staged in August 2008 during the official Beijing Olympic Games, *Xijing Olympics* presented a humorous yet provocative take on the unabashedly spectacular Olympics mania that gripped China last summer. In the outskirts of Beijing, the artist group carried out their own version, casting themselves as "athletes" and their family and friends as "audience." Drawing from everyday objects and experiences—kicking watermelons instead of soccer balls, marathon napping, giving massages with boxing gloves, and other absurdities such as a three-way table tennis match using shoes as paddles—their version mocked the seriousness and solemnity with which the Chinese government (and by association, the Chinese public) treated the glitzy theatrics of the real Beijing Games. The Xijing Men replaced themes of winning, success, and public entertainment with modesty, simplicity, and failure. If the Games themselves constituted the supreme performance of Chinese national pride under the auspices of international diplomacy (never mind the subtext of China's own eager aspirations to secure its position among the global superpowers), then the Xijing Olympics represented a caricature of these attitudes in which humor, playfulness, and aimlessness are injected into the highly scripted and ceremonial tone of the official games. Their antics worked to present a kind of informal locality to offset the trope of national spectacle, and in the process identified more directly with the concerns of average citizens, whose struggles to negotiate the massive transformations enveloping their way of life go largely unnoticed. The low-tech theatrics of the *Xijing Olympics* reflected a form of practice that is refreshingly human-scaled and attuned to the proximity of individuals rather than traditional groupings conditioned by notions of the "mass" and the "people."

Xijing Olympics, 2008. Table Tennis Competition. The Xijing Men. Photo courtesy of the artists.

Continuing the logic of game-playing, artist Zheng Guogu's ambitious *Age of Empire* (2001–) is part land art, part playground, and part social experiment. Inspired by the computer game series *Age of Empires*, in which players control historical world civilizations, Zheng is gradually transforming an agricultural area on the outskirts of Yangjiang city into a real-world replica of the game's virtual community. It began in 2000, when a friend gave him a tip on some cheap land in the outskirts of the city, after which he soon bought up 5000 sq m. By 2005 he had acquired more neighboring plots to arrive at 20,000 sq m, which has today grown to 40,000 sq m (approximately 10 acres) and counting. Zheng has since replaced the existing landscape with an entirely new one that includes hills and mountains and a small village area, all surrounded by a stone wall.

Age of Empire is a project that does not concern itself with making a finished artwork—to date not a single building has been completed—rather, it functions as an exercise in turning the fictional into reality, or, more accurately, as an experiment in the social process of making itself. For many contemporary artists in China, art is viewed as a profession—treated as an occupation rather than a way of life. The prescribed categories of artist, calligrapher, or architect are all designations that Zheng disavows and slowly works to dissolve. Although ostensibly meant to house an artist studio, a small

museum, and living and entertainment quarters, the real achievement of *Age of Empire* lies in its integration of life and art. As Zheng recreates his made-up game on real land, he faces real-world concerns about securing money, building rights, and the location of materials. Thus the sleepy coastal town of Yangjiang—small by Chinese standards, with a population of some 2 million—comes to stand as a microcosm for survival: underneath lurks a contested ground, a community full of underground systems and partial struggles that inform everyday life, and, by association, Zheng's diverse practice.

View of Zheng Guogu's Age of Empire site, 2008. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Though his work deals with familiar themes of consumerism and tropes of transformation, he is also content to show us that which is constant and unchanging—a glimpse into the steady pace of life in his hometown of Yangjiang in the southern province of Guangdong. As Zheng knowingly acquired his land through illegal means (though he exchanged money and signed agreements with all the farmers he bought from, this land was legally not theirs to sell, as all land in China belongs to the state), which essentially means that local building officials can give him constant headaches for building on it and potentially obstruct the whole enterprise. Thus Zheng's daily activities have quickly become consumed by wining, dining, and bribing the local officials in efforts to curry favor, maintain good relations, and negotiate with the proper channels. In making *Age of Empire*, he cooperates with the system in order to transcend it, becoming complicit yet independent at the same time. As Zheng says, "I live here and drink with my friends all day. I can let them know the traces of an artist. I can talk about art to a fishmonger today, to a man eating abalone tomorrow. Or I can talk to the boss of a snack bar." His family, friends, objects, experiences, social interactions, and recreational activities—nearly everything in his life and surroundings—embed themselves and leave traces in his art. From this stable position, a certain sense of freedom enables Zheng to take risks that transcend the usual boundaries of art. In this sense, Zheng Guogu presents us with a sort of hypothesis: if real life can become art once it enters the world of art—by means of galleries, museums, and exhibitions—then what are the ways in which art can be returned to become a part of one's everyday existence?

Projects like *Age of Empire* and the work of the Xijing Men will continue to operate spontaneously with no fixed timeframe, set limits, or defined outcome. Zheng has calculated a means of living his art through his daily actions, calling into question our awareness of our own practices as artists, critics, curators, historians, and audience members—practices that define the boundaries of the art world in the first place. Like Zheng talking to the man eating abalone, or to the fishmonger, we are witnessing the art world's traditional borders becoming indivisible from those of the social order it is inclined to merely portray. As Zheng says, "The artist is around them, and he does leave a trace. It's a gradual process to see the effect of that."[7] The question becomes whether this trace is deemed immanent in the utopian processes we attribute to art.

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magazine and helped co-found the storefront art space the Arrow Factory in Beijing in 2008. Yao is one of four curators of the upcoming 2009 Shenzhen Hong Kong Architecture and Urbanism Bi-city Biennale.

1
For more on the state of contemporary art criticism in China, see my text “Critical Horizons: On Art Criticism in China,” *Diaaalogues*, Asia Art Archive Online Newsletter, (December 2008), http://www.asiaartarchive.org.hk/ .

2
By “government funding” I refer to the Beijing Culture and Development Fund’s establishment of the Art Beijing Fund, a fund of 5 million Chinese yuan (roughly 732,000 US dollars) which was recently put to use sponsoring galleries to participate in the Art Beijing art fair.

3
Boris Groys, “Politics of Installation,” *e-flux journal*, no. 2 (January 2009), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/02/68504/politics-of-installation/ .

4
For more on issues of production, see my book *In Production Mode: Contemporary Art in China* , [Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Books, (in cooperation with CCAA), 2008].

5
Charles Esche, Foreword, *Afterall Journal, no. 11* (2006).

6
Ibid.

7
Zheng Guogu, interview by Hu Fang, *Jumping out of Three Dimensions, Staying Outside Five Elements* . Guangzhou: Vitamin Creative Space, 2007. (unpaginated)