e-flux journal

issue #13

02/2010

e-flux Journal is a monthly art publication featuring essays and contributions by some of the most engaged artists and thinkers working today. The journal is available online, in PDF format, and in print through a network of distributors.

Editors
Julieta Aranda
Brian Kuan Wood
Anton Vidokle

Intern
Orit Gat

Copy Editor/Proofreader
Phillip Stephen Twilley

Graphic Design
Jeff Ramsey

Layout Generator
Adam Florin

PDF Design
Mengyi Qian

PDF Generator
Keyian Vafai

For further information, contact **journal@e-flux.com**

www.e-flux.com/journal

Editors

Editorial

Repeated attempts to dismantle the aura of value and rarity surrounding art objects have been, for the most part, unsuccessful. Why is that? The majority of these attempts throughout the twentieth century have consisted of infiltrating the economy of care, custodianship, conservation, and considered attention granted to art objects upon entry into the art establishment. While the introduction of impostors into this ecosystem in the form of real-world doubles (such as Duchampian readymades) served to short-circuit the aura of authenticity within spaces of art, over time these impostors nevertheless began to perform the function of ritualizing a general sense of disbelief with regard to the art establishment's unpredictable and indeterminate patterns of attention to art objects.

In essence, these attempts mistook the art establishment for being in the business of producing an aura of authenticity, when in fact the real commodity has always been this attention itself, the care and custodianship bestowed upon objects by this system. It could be said that the fear of encountering one's own double that Freud articulated in his notion of the uncanny no longer becomes relevant—such an encounter would not produce any kind of crisis of identity because a regulatory system has already been installed to accommodate the idiosyncrasies of exhibiting everyday, easily reproducible objects and formats. However, the real fear that remains even today is that an art object will encounter its material double (mass-produced or not) on the street one day, and—rather than experience some kind of crisis of identity—befriend it, forming the unholiest union possible: one that would simultaneously denigrate and distribute its care, conservation, and custodianship beyond the spheres where it can be safely regulated.

In this issue, **Sven Lütticken** opens his upcoming three-part series "Art and Thingness" by looking at how an approach to artworks through their status as common objects can reveal a way for art objects to overcome the aura of the complex contemporary commodity. Starting as a response to Paul Chan's "What Art Is and Where it Belongs" from issue 10, Lütticken echoes Chan's assertion that "art is both more *and* less than a thing," and further proposes that, rather than suppress art's thingness, looking at certain works as concrete objects absent of their added commodity value could allow "these alienated and hollowed-out objects … to be charged with new subjectivity."

Elisabeth Lebovici speaks with Pierre Bal-Blanc about the exhibition "The Death of the Audience" recently curated by Bal-Blanc at Secession in Vienna. In trying to work with "professional marginals"—artists who, "voluntarily or not, strayed from the movements through which they would otherwise have defined themselves as professional artists"—the exhibition attempted to engage with many of these artists' propensity for open forms and processes that evade straightforward completion or easy

commodification. Bal-Blanc further explains how the refusal of spectacle was mirrored is his approach to the exhibition as being less about inclusion than about exclusion.

Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez begins the first part of her series "Innovative Forms of Archives," looking at artists who amass or simply invent semi-authoritative archives of historical or contemporary material. Whether compensating for an absence of available resources locally—as did Lia Perjovschi's Contemporary Art Archive, started in the artist's Bucharest apartment in the 1980s—or working with documentary evidence as a form, many of these approaches nevertheless comprise displaced, improvisational, portable museums that question the authority of historical canons my mimicking their structure and presentation, sometimes in oblique and playful ways, and sometimes replacing their function altogether.

Bernardo Ortiz Campo takes a speculative look at how *October*'s editorial policy of publishing images of artworks in black and white speaks to a fundamental distance between the act of writing about art and the object of that writing: the artwork itself. Campo then proceeds to build an argument for the autonomy of the act of writing, which works at its best when it can take this distance for granted and use it to produce its own form of imagination, its own experiences and subjectivities, alongside and independent of artworks themselves.

Monika Szewczyk considers the role of labor in art through Allan Sekula's 1974 work *This Ain't China: A Photonovel*, an exhibition of which she is curating at e-flux's project space from February 20 to April 3. Documenting labor and social conditions at a fast food restaurant where the artist was once employed, the work's forty-one photographs alternate between the mock-heroism of demanding worker's rights in a typical American restaurant, the products of labor (pizza, hotdogs, burgers), and, as Szewczyk points out, the spectral presence of mass workers' movements in Mao's China and elsewhere at the time.

Finally, **Adam Kleinman** looks at the expectations heaped on artists and artworks to be validated through withstanding the "test of time," an understanding of historical relevance that is as constructed as it is projected. How do works then qualify for this privileged conservation? Kleinman proposes that such great works are in fact stand-ins for the conglomeration of culture and human activity that produced them, symbols of a preferred history. But the question remains: how do we then access these works when the elevation of their status has the simultaneous effect of placing them beyond critique?

—Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle

X

Julieta Aranda is an artist and an editor of *e-flux journal.*

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

Anton Vidokle is an editor of e-flux journal and chief curator of the 14th Shanghai Biennale: Cosmos Cinema.

Bernardo Ortiz Campo

Criticism and Experience

By Way of an Introduction

This text is an essay, and as such, it is also an exercise in speculation. To speculate here means to take the following question seriously: why would an art magazine only publish photographs in black and white? Insofar as this question implies the possibility of critically interpreting a design decision, this essay can speak about graphic design—but in an oblique way. What is really at stake here concerns the relationship between art and writing—a relationship that begs to be viewed broadly, and in such a way that we might consider the means, media, and channels through which writing on art circulates, hence the possibility of taking the question seriously.

It is seldom that art writing becomes involved in a debate about its own means and media, as has always been common with art-making. And although I do not address the political implications of this scarcity here, I do believe that it is something that warrants further consideration. Art writing, especially in the context of the last few decades, with its determination to erase all vestiges of belletrism, has renounced its experimental condition, which resonates with the Spanish word *ensayo* (which means "essay," but also "attempt"). In any case, this essay, or attempt, aims to suggest there to be more of a relationship between art and writing than simply what is implied by the conjunction "and" between the two words—in other words, a relationship surpassing that of a discipline and its object of study.

One can say that there is writing about art, above art, across art, after art, against art, along art, alongside art, amid art, among art, around art, as art, atop art, barring art, before art, behind art, below art, beneath art, beside art, besides art, between art, beyond art, by art, concerning art, despite art, except art, excluding art, failing art, following art, for art, from art, in art, including art, inside art, into art, like art, minus art, near art, next to art, notwithstanding art, of art, off art, on art, onto art, opposite art, out of art, outside art, over art, pace art, past art, per art, qua art, regarding art, since art, through art, throughout art, to art, towards art, under art, underneath art, unlike art, until art, upon art, versus art, via art, with art, within art and without art (and vice-versa). I assume that the act of writing allows one to understand things that can only be understood when written, just as there are things that can only be understood in the presence of art. The relationship between writing about art and experiencing art do not exclude each other. But at the same time, neither can be completely subsumed by the other. And both contaminate one another.

I.

October

There is a journal of art theory, criticism, and history that has a rather curious editorial policy: all the images that it publishes—which don't amount to many—appear in black and white. Since the journal in question has had a decisive influence on the ecosystem of contemporary art during the past twenty years, asking why they would make such a decision is hardly an outlandish question. Their editorial of their first issue addresses the matter:

> October will be plain of aspect, its illustrations determined by considerations of textual clarity. These decisions follow from a fundamental choice as to the primacy of text and the writer's freedom of discourse. Long working experience with major art journals has convinced us of the need to restore to the criticism of painting and sculpture, as to that of other arts, an intellectual autonomy seriously undermined by emphasis on extensive reviewing and lavish illustration. October wishes to address those readers who, like many writers and artists, feel that the present format of the major art reviews is producing a form of pictorial journalism which deflects and compromises critical effort. Limited and judicious illustration will contribute to the central aim of October's texts: the location of those coordinates whose axes chart contemporary artistic practice and significant critical discourse.[1]

Beyond this paragraph, not much has been written on the subject. This should come as no surprise; there seems to be little interest in decisions that are apparently formal and consequently lack importance. After all, the simple—and even boring—design of that journal is clearly intended to direct the reader's attention exclusively to its content.

But why should one shy away from these formal questions? Shouldn't those decisions—even if they are merely formal, or precisely because they are merely formal—be consistent with a position regarding the relationship between text and image? Positions that, instead of being articulated in writing, are materialized in the design of a journal about art? And, when thinking about an art journal, shouldn't one consider its form?

First I must state that there are most likely no technical or economic reasons behind the editorial decision to publish reproductions of artworks in black and white. Such rationales can be discarded if we consider that this journal, published by the MIT Press, boasts a long list of prominent benefactors, listed just as they often are in museums. This method of financing has, in fact, an important consequence of allowing the journal to maintain its editorial independence, thus liberating it from the multicolor advertisements that plague other journals and magazines. However, let me underline that this consequence must not simply be seen as a pleasant collateral effect of its financing scheme: if the design, as inconspicuous as it may be, is directed at emphasizing the journal's content, then it is the financing that makes it possible in the first place, precisely by avoiding unnecessary editorial pressures that typically demand that a layout use color photographs.

If the reason is not economic, one could allege that it is a matter of taste. A rather conservative or nostalgic taste. Perhaps it is a snobbish way to differentiate itself from other journals and magazines. As if black and white were the undisputed symbol of seriousness. But if that were the case, their editorial criteria would be arbitrary and frivolous. And if its founders went to great lengths to devise a financing scheme that guaranteed both editorial and advertising independence, it would be absurd for the journal's layout to be determined by taste. The journal's design should spring from the critical apparatus that gives form to the journal itself. One should recognize that critical writing is not devoid of formal issues.

The decision to only publish black and white photographs had to be the fruit, the material condensation, of an idea concerning the relationship between text and image in critical writing. It's as if the editors were saying, "Our position is such-and-such, therefore the journal has this format, these texts, and these photographs. That is why it takes this form." Understood in this way, an editorial policy becomes open to aesthetic appreciation. And for a while, this small twist turned into an obsession for me: I had to understand the logic behind that form, the logic in the decision to only publish photographs in black and white—a Logic that I would have to derive from the journal itself.

Rodchenko

In the spring of 2000 in an article on Nikolai Tarabukin, the journal reproduced three monochrome paintings by Alexander Rodchenko: *Pure Red Color*, *Pure Yellow Color*, and *Pure Blue Color*.[2] These three paintings, reproduced in black and white, resulted in three rectangles showing different shades of gray. As I looked at them, I found myself asking whether it made sense to reproduce them at all. I even entertained the possibility that the reproductions weren't images of the actual paintings, that perhaps they had been "rendered" by the journal's photomechanical process, and that the only thing that identified them as paintings by Rodchenko were the captions. I intuited that this extreme case could offer a reason for the black-and-white reproductions—hypothetical, of course, for being the fruit of my speculation, but a reason nonetheless.

Parenthesis

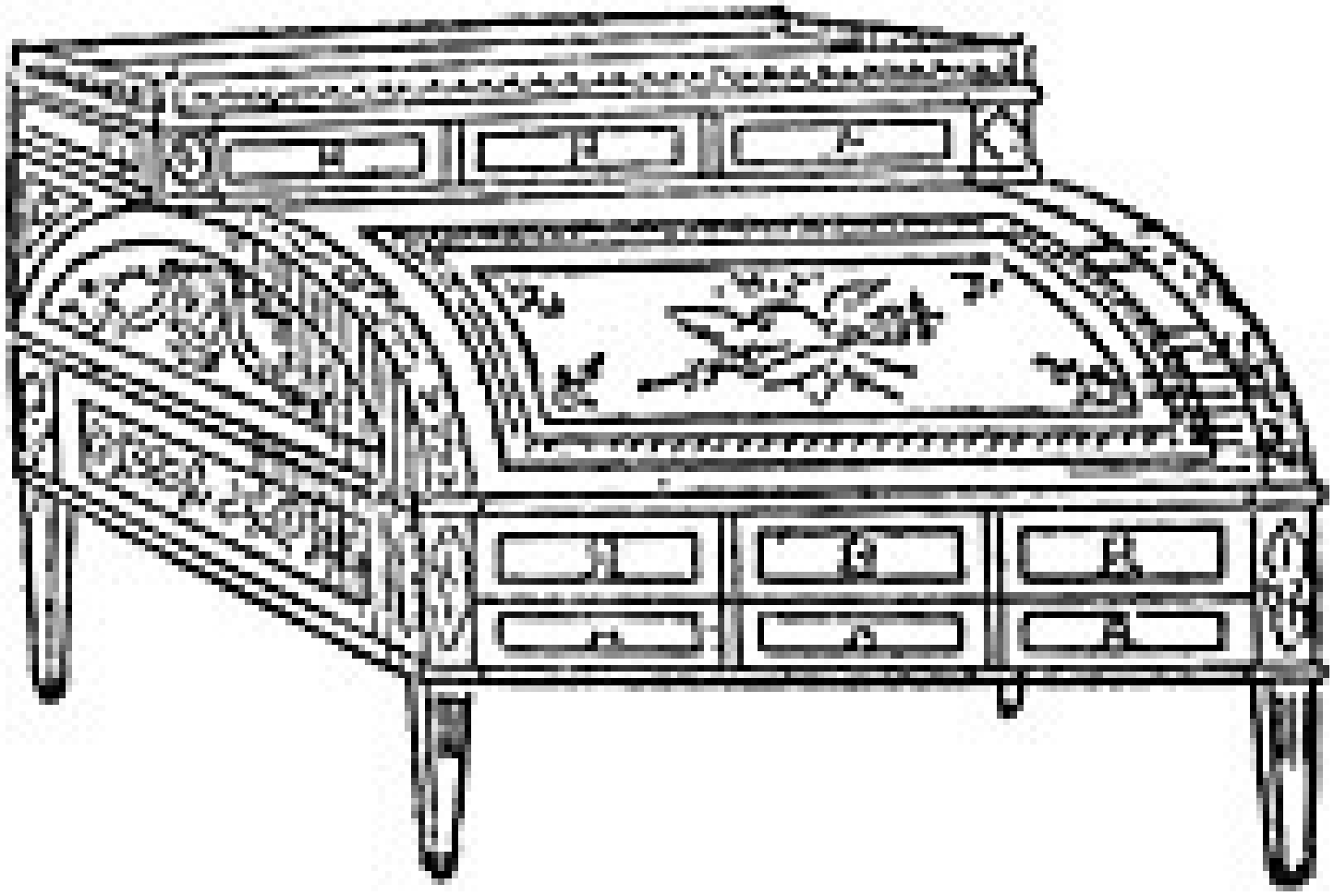
In retrospect, it turns out to be significant that it was an article on the Soviet avant-garde that shed some light on the subject. Not just because the journal is called *October*, but also because it has published quite a few papers on the subject of the Soviet avant-garde and its relationship to design. After all, it was the constructivists themselves who looked for a greater correspondence between material forms and the processes that give rise to those forms.

Proust's Grandmother

In truth, what came to light at that moment wasn't the Soviet avant-garde, but rather a scene from *In Search of Lost Time*. It's a paragraph near the beginning of the first part of the first volume. The narrator, still a boy, has managed to convince Françoise, the maid, to bring a note to his mother requesting her presence (under false pretenses). This whim irritates the mother. Nevertheless, she agrees to a goodnight kiss and to read from a Georges Sand book that his grandmother had given to him on his birthday. He goes on to describe what he calls "grandmother's art of making presents":

> The truth was that she could never permit herself to buy anything from which no intellectual profit was to be derived, above all the profit which fine things afford us by teaching us to seek our pleasures elsewhere than in the barren satisfaction of worldly wealth. Even when she had to make someone a present of the kind called "useful," when she had to give an armchair or some table-silver or a walking-stick, she would choose antiques, as though their long desuetude had effaced from them any semblance of utility and fitted them rather to instruct us in the lives of the men of other days than to serve the common requirements of our own. She would have liked me to have in my room photographs of ancient buildings or of beautiful places. But at the moment of buying them, and for all that the subject of the picture had an aesthetic value, she would find that vulgarity and utility had too prominent a part in them, through the mechanical nature of their reproduction by photography. She attempted by a subterfuge, if not to eliminate altogether this commercial banality, at least to minimise it, to supplant it to a certain extent with what was art still, to introduce, as it were several "thicknesses" of art: instead of photographs of Chartres Cathedral, of the Fountains of Saint-Cloud, or of Vesuvius, she would inquire of Swann whether some great painter had not depicted them, and preferred to give me photographs of "Chartres Cathedral" after Corot, of the "Fountains of Saint-Cloud" after Hubert Robert, and of "Vesuvius" after Turner, which were a stage higher in the scale of art. But although the photographer had been prevented from reproducing directly these masterpieces or beauties of nature, and had there been replaced by a great artist, he resumed his odious position when it came to reproducing the artist's interpretation. Accordingly, having to reckon again with vulgarity, my grandmother would endeavour to postpone the moment of contact still further. She would ask Swann if the picture had not been engraved, preferring, when possible, old engravings with some interest of association apart from themselves, such, for example, as show us a masterpiece in a state in which we can no longer see it today (like Morghen's print of Leonardo's "Last Supper" before its defacement). It must be admitted that the results of this method of interpreting the art of making presents were not always happy. The idea which I formed of Venice, from a drawing by Titian which is supposed to have the lagoon in the background, was certainly far less accurate than what I should have derived from ordinary photographs. We could no longer keep count in the family (when my great-aunt wanted to draw up an indictment of my grandmother) of all the armchairs she had presented to married couples, young and old, which on a first attempt to sit down upon them had at once collapsed beneath the weight of their recipients. But my grandmother would have thought it sordid to concern herself too closely with the solidity of any piece of furniture in which could still be discerned a flourish, a smile, a brave conceit of the past. And even what in such pieces answered a material need, since it did so in a manner to which we are no longer accustomed, charmed her like those old forms of speech in which we can still see traces of a metaphor whose fine point has been worn away by the rough usage of our modern tongue. As it happened, the pastoral novels of George Sand which she was giving me for my birthday were regular lumber-rooms full of expressions that have fallen out of use and become quaint and picturesque, and are now only to be found in country dialects. And my grandmother had bought them in preference to other books, as she would more readily have taken a house with a Gothic dovecot or some other such piece of antiquity as will exert a benign influence on the mind by giving it a hankering for impossible journeys through the realms of time.[3]

Grandmother wanted to make evident that there was a time and a distance between that object and her grandson. Photography, she surely felt, could give him the pernicious illusion of immediacy; the illusion that nothing stands between the image and the thing. Grandmother's concerns are in fact my hypothesis. The photographs are reproduced in black and white in order to remind the reader of a distance between himself or herself and the work being reproduced—a distance that one knows is there, but which is occasionally masked using



reproductions.

Parenthesis

Retrospectively, I also think about a work by John Baldessari: *The Best Way to Do Art*. The work reproduces a photograph of a Boeing 747 airplane. The caption under the photograph reads:

> A young artist in art school used to worship the paintings of Cézanne. He looked at and studied all the books he could find on Cézanne and copied all of the reproductions of Cézanne's work he found in the books. He visited a museum and for the first time saw a real Cézanne painting. He hated it. It was nothing like the Cézannes he had studied in books. From that time on, he made all of his paintings the sizes of paintings reproduced in books and he painted them in black and white. He also printed captions and explanations on the paintings as in books. Often he just used words. And one day he realized that very few people went to art galleries and museums but many people looked at books and magazines as he did and they got them through the mail as he did. Moral: It's difficult to put a painting in a mailbox.[4]

The distance Grandmother tried to make evident between the object (Chartres Cathedral, for example) and her grandson is the same distance that separates Baldessari's young artist and the paintings of Cézanne. But that's not all: there is a distance between the two examples, a distance that reveals itself in the changing relationships with photographs between the late nineteenth-century child and Baldessari's young art student.

It is precisely in this interplay of various distances that I find solid reasoning for the journal's image policy, even with regard to Rodchenko's monochrome paintings. With its black-and-white reproductions, the journal is using what appears to be a technical limitation, an anachronism, to expose a distance between a critical text and the work of art it portrays. But this distance is not identified to reveal a limitation in writing, but rather to make it clear that this distance will always be insurmountable in the end. Nevertheless, this insurmountable distance should be taken as a starting point. A luscious and flawless color reproduction may give the illusion that there is no distance, and that, I contend, is the reason why the editors

decided to publish only black-and-white reproductions in the journal.

II.

Writing about art is a struggle with the void of distance. Of distances, to be precise: the distance between the work and the text; the distance between the artist and the writer (a critic, an art historian, and so forth); and the distance between the text and the reader. Although one can say that this void is true for all writing, in the case of art it goes both ways. There is a gap separating the text from the work and there is a distance separating the reader from the text. But art writing sees itself as if it were just a way of transmitting the work, as if the experience of writing—the struggle with the void of distance—were subordinate to the experience of the work.

For some time, art writing has served to preserve the artwork's originality—in its most literal sense, in its proximity to the origin. While we know that a work of art has no single unequivocal origin, the myth of the artist as its sole author continues to be the cornerstone of the institutional apparatus of art. Museums, critics, art history, even popular ideas on art (to say nothing of the art market and the art industry) are almost always geared towards preserving that originality, that mythical origin. "What was the artist's intent?" "What did she mean?" These questions are asked of almost any work, as if the artist's experience were the only horizon available for interpretation. I emphasize the word "only," as the main demand of any discourse on art is for it to address these questions. Art writing, then, would seem to have a clear role: to bridge the distance separating the work from the reader. That is the benevolent—humanist—conception of art writing: that it bring the viewer closer to the work. But if that distance is ultimately insurmountable, this task cannot be fulfilled. And so art writing is condemned to being a sterile and futile task.

This perspective relies on the notion that art writing is purely mimetic: if the interpretative horizon is to preserve some mythical originality of the work—namely, the artist's intent—then the text must articulate in words what the artist did. The words must imitate the work itself, becoming a translation of sorts. Like a mirror, words would reflect what the artist meant to say, his true intention—and the closer the text to that intention, the truer the text becomes, the better the mirror. Understood this way, a critical text simply hashes out the contours of whatever the artist was trying to say, as if writing were a poor substitute for the experience of art. And in the process, this text, this writer renounces the experience of writing. At this point it might be useful to remember Baldessari's piece. The young artist copied not only the reproductions—in black and white—of Cézanne's paintings, but also the captions and other accompanying text.

The marked separation between the act of writing and the act of reading is partly responsible for art writing being an imitative form—someone reading an article or essay about a work of art is doubly removed from the work. The text would be the shadow of a shadow. This is implicit in this way of understanding art criticism and also explains why the critic is so often described as a passive figure, lacking in experience—a frustrated artist, weak and haggard, condemned to living in a world of shadows. As Baudelaire wrote:

> You can see a drawing of Gavarni showing a painter bending over his canvas; behind him is a solemn, dried-up-looking gentleman, stiff, with a white tie, and holding in his hand the newspaper with its serial story. "If art is noble, criticism is holy." "Who said that?" "Criticism did!" If the artist so easily plays the fine role, it is because the critic resembles all the critics who come a dime a dozen. In terms of ways and means drawn from the works themselves, the public and the artist have nothing to learn from this. Such matters are studied in the studio, and the public is perturbed only over the result.[5]

The artist indeed plays the finest role, as Baudelaire rightly asserts, because the critic has allowed himself to be caught up in "ways and means drawn from the works themselves." In other words, their writing seeks only to imitate, to be mimetic. The critic described by Baudelaire does not take advantage of his own experience, even as a writer, neglecting even what his own act of writing could bring into consideration. What lies beneath this is the myth—which is very much alive—that critical writing is fundamentally devoid of experience, stripped of the intoxicating experience of creation. When Baudelaire announces the need for a biased and enthusiastic critic, what he is really looking for is a critic rife with experience.

An Essay by Agamben

In an essay titled "Infancy and History," Giorgio Agamben points out two things which are relevant here. Firstly: in the modern age there has been an absolute inversion in the role of the imagination and its relation to the act of knowing. "For antiquity," Agamben writes, "the imagination, which is now expunged from knowledge as 'unreal,' was the supreme medium of knowledge."[6] Imagination is no longer "the intermediary between the senses and the intellect, enabling, in fantasy, the union between the sensible form and the potential intellect."[7] And secondly: the exile of the imagination also implies an exile of desire. That is to say, the modern concept of science is lacking in both desire and imagination. As Agamben writes, "Indeed, the phantasm, which is the true source of desire ('phantasia ea est, quae totum parit

Paul Cézanne. Le Mont Sainte-Victoire. Oil on canvas, 27 1/2 x 35 1/4 in., 1902–04. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

desiderium') is also—as mediator between man and object—the condition for the attainability of the object of desire and therefore, ultimately, for desire's satisfaction."[8] This latter instance seeks to achieve what Duchamp notoriously wanted, namely "to grasp things with the mind the way the penis is grasped by the vagina": the phantasm appears through writing.[9]

The critical act contains two forms of experience. One is obvious, and has to do with the experience of being in the presence of a work of art. The second is related to the first one: it is the experience of writing. The act of writing allows for a different sort of relationship with the work, one that does not have to be mimetic. In fact, it is here that the demands of a mimetic language become counter-productive. This is precisely what Baudelaire criticized: a way of writing devoid of imagination and desire, to use Agamben's words. "Critics who come a dime a dozen" are those who don't develop a means of writing *around* the works of art. In other words, they instrumentalize language, a neutral informative tone being the clearest symptom of this. That mimetic exigency is ingrained in the notion of what a theoretical discipline must be, and is a direct consequence of the exile of imagination, as Agamben puts it.

A critical text can affect its object of study. That is why art criticism, history, and theory must acknowledge a complicated relationship with art. To an even greater degree than much experimental scientific research, these disciplines can, and often do, transform the object of their study, even just by looking at it. Nevertheless, all the academic, institutional, and bureaucratic protocols surrounding art writing pretend that this is not the case.

And this problem, which would seem to be a purely theoretical one, is expressed in the statutes of artistic investigation within academic institutions, in the nearly schizophrenic separation between theoretical and applied courses in art.

III.

And what if art writing is understood as an exercise? In Western culture the possibility of learning through exercise has been gradually lost over time, whereas exercise was one of the fundamental means of understanding something throughout all of antiquity. Art is, perhaps, the last holdout of exercise in contemporary life. One of the important consequences of art education at the university level is that it forces us to keep a form of exercise-based learning available—which, deep down, is a form of learning based on experience.

To understand the act of writing about art as an exercise does not imply that writing should abandon the rigor of established academic norms. But the notion of exercise adds another layer, another level of depth that brings with it a necessary reflection on the channels through which criticism circulates. This is why the journal's editorial decision, as I have repeated, is so important: critical content is not articulated uniquely through words—its design can also articulate a critical position, and in this particular case it is the design that opens the distance between work and text.

An (Artistic) Example

Shortly before becoming an artist, Vito Acconci published a journal of poetry called *0 to 9* together with Bernadette Mayer. The title refers to a series of drawings by Jasper Johns that are themselves called *0 through 9*. In the drawings, Johns superimposed these numbers on top of each other. A manual process. The journal was printed by mimeograph. Acconci typed all the stencils himself and found the simple act of sitting down and typing away to be pleasurable, so much so that he began transcribing other texts that he liked—texts, diaries, and travel notes by Flaubert, obscure nineteenth-century poems—simply for the pleasure of doing so. The transcription became an exercise, and was a continuation of the manner in which he had begun to write poetry: translating twelve verses by Aeschylus, which were protracted to fill fifteen pages, with the "translation" of each verse occupying nearly an entire page. The interesting thing is that making the journal became an exercise in and of itself, and that exercise became a vehicle that returns to poetry.

Understood as an exercise, writing fosters understanding through the experience of writing. This type of writing is not only a source of information, but is also a means of transformation.

Another (Non-artistic) Example

In Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, a teacher during the Age of Enlightenment named Joseph Jacotot has an intellectual adventure, a revelation if you will. It all began when he taught French to a group of Dutch students. As he did not himself know Dutch, Jacotot distributed a bilingual edition of François Fénelon's novel *The Adventures of Telemachus* to the students, and instructed them to learn the French text by way of the Dutch translation. "How surprised he was to discover," wrote Rancière, "that the students, left to themselves, handled this difficult step as well as many French could have done!" This gets Jacotot thinking:

> He had given no explanation to his "students" on the first elements of the language. He had not explained spelling or conjugations to them. They had looked for the French words that corresponded to words they knew and the reasons for their grammatical endings by themselves. They had learned to put them together to make, in turn, French sentences by themselves: sentences whose spelling and grammar became more and more exact as they progressed through the book; but, above all, sentences of writers and not of school children. Were the schoolmaster's explications therefore superfluous? Or, if they weren't, to whom and for what were they useful?[10]

"But [they were], above all, sentences of writers and not of schoolchildren" is a phrase that perfectly synthesizes the thesis with which this text must conclude. And it is this: understood as an exercise that reclaims the role of imagination in the act of knowing, criticism is a creative process in itself. Its medium is language, as well as all the mediations that occur within it, the variety of media through which language flows. One could say, therefore, that criticism is a productive act. In other words, a transformation of reality. Again, according to Rancière:

> In the act of speaking, man doesn't transmit his knowledge, he makes poetry; he translates and invites others to do the same. He communicates as an artisan: as a person who handles words like tools. Man communicates with man through the works of his hands just as through the words of his speech: [Citing Jacotot] "When man acts on matter, the body's adventures become the story of the mind's adventures."[...] He communicates as a poet: as a being who believes his thought communicable, his emotions sharable.[...] The artisan must speak about his works in order to be emancipated; the student must speak about the art he wants to learn. [Again citing Jacotot] "Speaking about human works is the way to know human art."[11]

X

Translated from the Spanish by Ezra Fitz.

Bernardo Ortiz Campo (Bogotá, 1972) is an artist and writer. He studied at Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá (BFA) and Universidad del Valle, Cali (MA Philosophy). He was editorial curator for the 7 Bienal do Mercosul that took place in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2009, teaches at the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, and is a permanent member of the advisory board at Lugar A Dudas in Cali, Colombia. Recent projects *Valdez Magazine* (co-editor, featured in Documenta 11, Kassel 2007) and "41 Salón Nacional de Artistas" in Cali (co-curator).

1
Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson, "About October." *October* 1 (Spring 1976), 5.

2
Maria Gough, "Tarabukin, Spengler, and the Art of Production," *October* 93 (Summer 2000), 86.

3
Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time* , vol. 1, *Swann's Way*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library / Random House, 1998), 53–55.

4
Lucy R. Lippard, ed., *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

5
Charles Baudelaire, "What Is the Use of Criticism?" in *Flowers of Evil and Other Works* , ed. and trans. Wallace Fowlie (New York: Bantam Books, 1964), 155.

6
Giorgio Agamben, "Infancy and History: An Essay on the Destruction of Experience," in *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience* , trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993), 24.

7
Ibid.

8
Ibid., 25.

9
Duchamp said this in September 1956 to Lawrence D. Steefel, Jr., who was writing his dissertation on *The Large Glass* for Princeton University. See Lawrence D. Steefel, Jr., *The Position of Duchamp's Glass in the Development of His Art* (New York: Garland, 1977), 312.

10
Jacques Rancière., *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* , trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 3–4.

11
Ibid., 64–65.

Adam Kleinman

Tempus Edax Rerum?

> Politicians, ugly buildings, and whores all get respectable if they last long enough.
>
> —Noah Cross in Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*

In the most banal sense, something that stands the "test of time" is simply an object that has endured. This could be as simple as a matter of fact. Take the Parthenon, which has stood the "test of time" to the extent that it still quite literally stands in its original place, not only because of its material durability, but also because it was not *torn down* (though of course it did suffer an explosion). And though its repurposing—from temple to church, to mosque, to armory, to storage dump, to museum—could be an argument for its adaptability, its ultimate use as an icon points to something greater. Namely, that the Parthenon never stopped meaning something to someone—it gained a kind of historic and thus political and social worth, with images of the building and its decay often used as propaganda in support of Greek independence and Philhellenism just as they are used today to promote tourism.

But for the sake of argument, let's assume that the Parthenon *was* demolished several centuries ago after suffering a period of neglect following the explosion. If this had happened, the building would *not* have stood the "test of time." The Parthenon *would* have stopped meaning something to someone, and as a result, its status as an icon would have been discarded. It is through this counterfactual that we can appreciate the full rhetorical power of the expression "standing the test of time"; when an object ceases to be present, to be in demand, then it no longer merits preservation or life. But since the object of our inquiry is an ancient artifact to which we have considerable hindsight, any proclamation of its existence would seem to be rather meaningless and self-evident—and yet it is still uttered. Following from the idea that the "test of time" has more to do with public interest, we can say that it is really a test of social history, a form of *idealized* history wherein various activities can be classified as exemplars or ideals.

Of course, history in general is just a collection of episodic observations and inferences; however, the *act of historicizing* is a means of classifying these events according to some kind of order, in such a way that the historian is actually thinking with history, not about it. Nevertheless, an agenda must fit into some greater logic for it to gain acceptance—as Karl Marx reminds us that men make their own history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing.[1] To invert this phrase, it stands to reason that although men cannot choose their circumstances, their judgments and readings of these circumstances inscribe what is to be persevered, and

A drawing from the 1700s depicting the bombing of the Parthenon by Francesco Morosini in 1687. The picture shows the minaret as it stood in the SW corner.

hence make history. Herein an ethical position starts to emerge, as an event's inscription in accepted or established patterns creates its moral worth. So in this sense, the Parthenon not only "stands" in the physical sense, but *stands in* as a symbol of underlying uniformity in human culture through its continued use and popularity. The Parthenon *stands in* as deserving prolonged existence, prolonged life. So with this in mind, let's return to the idea of a contemporary product being able to either stand or fail the "test of time."

Since contemporary objects are by definition still emerging, it would be difficult to say that they have stood the "test of time"; however, this doesn't prevent many arbiters from predicting that they will or they won't. Although a critic may be acting on "intuition," any predictions in this vein would need to be referred to an ideal index of taste against which the object will need to

stand —quite literally, if that object is acquired by a collection. Likewise, to say that it will not last would be to relegate that object to having little worth. As the object's mortality, so to speak, is at stake, this is no small claim. However, beyond this, there is an even greater claim at stake.

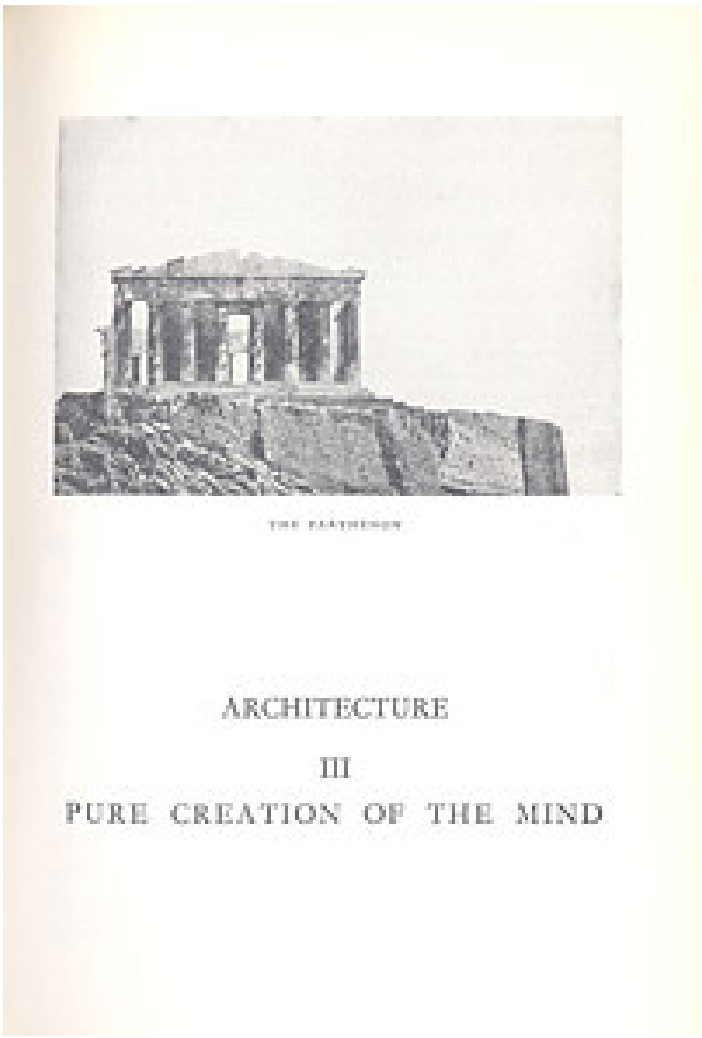


Fig.6 From Le Corbusier's Towards a New Architecture.

Consider that the object itself is a *standing-in* for a society, a school of thought, or the culture that produced it, and represents that specific history against an ideal of that which is worth preserving. In elevating an object to this plane, one simultaneously elevates the people or organizations around that object, preserving them with it. Conversely, to dismiss something as a fad, for being of fleeting interest, is to downgrade not only that object, but also those who find it to be of interest. This substitution of object for class allows for a form of denigration without conscience, as the object of derision is abstracted and disembodied—of course, this also holds for the inverse as well. In other words, saying that something will or will not last is a guiltless attempt at spin, an attempt to sway public opinion and win favor. And here it might be important to draw a provisional distinction between value and worth, in this case letting "value" denote an object's commercial influence, and letting "worth" denote that object's potential cultural or intellectual "importance." This division is of particular import today, as objects of fancy—that is to say, fads—are by definition highly sought after and expensive, whereas obscurities and objects on the fringe are often cheap—unless they can be turned into a rarity or a specialty item to be collected. In order to reassert some measure of dominance, to separate the elite from the parvenu, arbiters need to establish some abstract notion of worth and worthiness by which to place themselves outside this system of market justification. In this new industry of arbitration, "craft," "relevance," and "utility" are summoned as rationales with which to be in accord. The key fallacy in deferring to these rationales comes in neglecting how they have been variously assessed historically. In this sense, to invoke "craft," "relevance," and "utility" without historical grounding would be to prematurely apply some form of rational choice theory to human interaction. In any case, the validation of duration is often asked of even the newest of things—but why?

One possible reason is that through the act of qualifying something as a representative of an order, the object and that order must not only conform, but must also confirm each other in suit. That is to say, this form of agreement produces an apparatus, which validates selfsameness and eschews deviation as an externality. In this setup, once something is deemed important due to the fact that it has persevered, this fact trumps all other aesthetic theories or value judgments, which are external to that order by definition. In other words, something that has persevered and remains popular becomes beyond reproach, beyond criticism. George Orwell sums up this specific context in his attack on Leo Tolstoy, an attack aimed at Tolstoy's own polemic against Shakespeare as a terrible and immoral dramatist propped up only by the "epidemic suggestion" of a few German scholars:

> In reality there is no kind of evidence or argument by which one can show that Shakespeare, or any other writer, is "good." Nor is there any way of definitely proving that—for instance—Warwick Beeping is "bad." Ultimately there is no test of literary merit except survival, which is itself an index to majority opinion. Artistic theories such as Tolstoy's are quite worthless, because they not only start out with arbitrary assumptions, but depend on vague terms ("sincere," "important" and so forth) which can be interpreted in any way one chooses.[2]

And here, with Orwell, we are exposed to a "crisis of criticism": no matter how strong an argument might be for or against a work of art, the fact of a work of art's

Bernard Tschumi, Advertisement for Architecture, 1977.

popularity, and the continuity of this popularity, supersedes any and all claims of substance. That is not to say that criticism has no import, but rather that its only import may be found in its ability to sway public opinion—which is in any event only secondary to sustained acceptance. This could be one of the ways in which men write history; however, this mode is still bound to the exigencies of chance, contingency, and context, which is to say that there is no super-agency to guarantee outcomes. One possible way to reject this system would be to quite literally break it, attacking the object's physical substance itself. Here though, instead of literary criticism, we would have the violence of iconoclasm. On the other hand, if it were possible to break time, then the idea of an object standing up to time's test would be much more complex.

In "What is the Contemporary?" the philosopher Giorgio Agamben delineates a position similar to this: the true contemporary is able to occupy a position against the grain of his or her time, a position constituting a vantage point that allows for an investigation into how those accepted topics came to be commonly regarded.[3] This state, which he calls "being out of joint," lends itself to revelations concerning the "nature" of the epoch we find ourselves in. One of the ways to achieve this position is by looking back at precedents—other philosophers, writers, artists, and so on—who through their own distance from our time, as well as their own times, can act as a lens through which to view the world around us, and, in a sense, speak to us. Beyond proving perseverance, this setup encourages an ethic, because the act of preservation is a way to self-reflexively contemplate our own place. If this holds true, this self-reflection provides the "meaning something to someone" that would constitute the reason for an object to continue existing.

As intimated above, something that stands against or tests time, while also being able to stand with us in time, is an object that becomes, in a sense, not only contemporary, but also immortal. Take for instance the first book known to exist, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, wherein the great King finds his ultimate glory not in achieving actual immortality but in attempting to do so, in the story created and, most importantly, recorded. However, instead of proposing cultural production to be a way of creating postmortem longevity for the author, let's suppose that an object's developing character as it is shaped by various generations creates a form of empathy, one that is not only emotive, but rational.

In closing, I would like to leave you with an image of the gardens at Koke-dera, or "Moss Temple," in Kyoto, Japan. Although moss is a common element in landscape design, it is often used sparingly to promote a sense of softness, set dialectically against hard and cold elements such as stones. This was probably the case here; however, over time, and due to the monastery's inability to maintain the garden, moss began to overrun and ultimately blanket the area. Instead of rehabilitating the garden to its original state, the monks found pleasure in this more primitive landscape and continued allowing the moss to grow. Now, instead of simple visual delight, this test of time—the centuries needed to grow this moss—presents a kind of evocative temporal compression. More than mere nostalgia, this compression acts as a trigger not unlike Marcel Proust's involuntary memories, wherein recollection of the past surfaces without conscious effort. Like in Proust, these feelings lead to a reflection of oneself in relation to nature's inevitable cycles of growth and decay, producing the clarity of selflessness.

Saiho-Ji Garden, Kyoto.

X

Adam Kleinman is the curator at Lower Manhattan Cultural Council in New York City and writes a column for Texte Zur Kunst entitled “New York Letters.”

1
Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Co., 1907), 5.

2
George Orwell, "Lear, Tolstoy, and the Fool" (1947), in *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters* , vol. 4, *In Front of Your Nose, 1945–1950* , ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Boston: David R. Godine, Inc., 2000), 290.

3
Giorgio Agamben, "What Is the Contemporary," in *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays* , trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009).

Elisabeth Lebovici

The Death of the Audience: A Conversation with Pierre Bal-Blanc

Elisabeth Lebovici: I would like to begin with the title of the exhibition you curated at the Secession in Vienna in summer 2009, as it was what first enticed me to conduct this conversation with you: "The Death of the Audience." I sense that such a title is in line with much recent research by artists and theoreticians, for instance Hito Steyerl's essay in the June 2009 issue of *e-flux journal*, "Is a Museum a Factory?"[1] At the end of her essay, she mentions the viewer's loss of sovereignty in the cinematic machine of the contemporary museum-as-factory; as if the sovereign gaze of the beholder should also be submitted to the division of labor, losing its unity and mastery:

> 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.

Would you say that the multiple and unified, absent subject designated in the article is similar to the one implied in "The Death of the Audience"?

Pierre Bal-Blanc: Let's look at the invitation card for the exhibition, which assumes the character of a funeral invitation: "The Death of the Audience," with a specific date and time: "2.7.2009. 19 Uhr." The audience is invited to its own funeral. The card thus participates in a ritual, as redefined by Anna Halprin's movement patterns (*Ceremony of Us*, 1969) or Michel Journiac's *Messe pour un corps* (1969): it performs the audience. But this wasn't our original title for the exhibition—it came about through the course of the curatorial process. The original working title for the show was "The Professional Outsider." By using this paradoxical expression, I wished to allude to such self-defining notions of the artist as the "spy" for Gianni Pettena or the "Incidental Person" for John Latham, who are both featured in the show. These notions echo strategies in recent history that cut into institutional practices, movements, or artistic "parties," strategies that position the artist through specific cognitive means. These artists stand at a distance, they do not intersect with attempts to define oneself as anti-, alter-, or neo-modern; they relate to the idea of being outside and also in-between. To me, relying on these processes and positions was a way of mirroring the rupture that founded Secession at the turn of the twentieth century, but through a marginal and yet positive notion of another rupture in the last quarter of the twentieth century, as well as to maybe

further consider the question of what a rupture could be today . . .

Nicola L., The Secession Evolution Rug, 2009, performance. Courtesy the artist.

EL: Why ask such a question using the notion of "rupture"? It has such a long history in modernism—I remember being taught an avant-garde history of the twentieth century through Gaston Bachelard's concept of a " *coupure épistémologique*" (epistemological break), a concept associated with discontinuity in the history of science, but used in the arts to characterize the succession of practices and movements. "The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence," as Clement Greenberg put it.[2] Until this notion fell apart in the postindustrial world. So why "rupture"? And why an exhibition?

PBB: First, let's say that the show is an answer to an invitation extended by the Secession's board of artists. I was asked to re-read the history of 1960–1980s art through the Secession, both as a building and a manifesto, a site and an act of insurrection and insubordination against institutional or academic conventions. So the idea was to reactivate the processes of professional marginals such as David Lamelas, Franz Ehhard Walther, Sanja Iveković, Cornelius Cardew, Josef Dabernig, Michel Journiac, Jiří Kovanda, Nicola L., Edward Krasinski, or Bernard Bazile. Indeed, these are all artists who were for the most part left out of the dominant history, and whose work involved a practice of the everyday and a reflection on shared common space, from the intimate to the monumental, albeit in very different ways.

Take André du Colombier for instance, a French artist who is even less well-known than those named above, an incredible character who embodied a kind of late version of Dada from the '60s to the '80s, but with a very precise and concentrated radicality. He constantly worked with common people, less showing work than *giving* it, a bit like a neighborhood poet, exchanging a piece of work for a pack of cigarettes, generally using the thread of the rumor, the web of the conversation. He used to call up artists or museum curators and make a work from the conversation. Colombier managed to represent a way of

being marginal, of staying on the border of exhibitions even while being well-known by the whole art scene.

EL: He makes me think of Stuart Sherman, who is also being revisited by contemporary critics and artists almost ten years after his death in 2001. During the 1970s—and here I defer to Bérénice Reynaud's remarkable insights in *October*—he worked as a kind of theatrical miniaturist, manipulating objects that could fit in a suitcase, contrary to other, grand-scale dramaturgies.[3] He was concerned with the transformation of ordinary objects (boxes and blocks, toys and neckties), with stop-action kineticism and visual puns, which he would set in motion on sidewalk corners and city streets during lunch breaks, stretching out a tablecloth and rapidly manipulating the objects in his suitcase with no resolution or punchline. "He would do his work anywhere for almost nothing for an audience of nobody," as his heir Mark Bradford has said.[4] Quickness was his motto, and in his plays and films as well he would "condense" classic texts and writers (Chekov, Brecht, Strindberg) into pieces of no more than a few minutes, recreating Hamlet and presenting a five-minute Faust with a blink-of-an-eye approach that contrasted that of many other recognized experimental artists.

Goran Trbuljak, Untitled, (1970 until now), The total number of persons who have attended the openings of all my individual exhibitions (those who have attended more than one opening have been counted once), 2004. Courtesy Galerie Gregor Podnar, Berlin-Ljubljana.

PBB: In being effectively marginalized or in allowing themselves to be marginalized by the art market or art institutions, these artists, from Rasheed Araeen to Goran Trbuljak, have each given priority to a form of art as a critical, concrete, daily practice, which in turn has even further aggravated their "offness" vis-à-vis the art scene. This is another reason for conducting this exhibition project less as a museum show than as an attempt to acknowledge the particulars of this way of situating oneself professionally; for instance in making connections between the show and outside projects, which are indeed quite emblematic: the journal *Third Text* for Rasheed Araeen, who sees it as both a continuation and a theoretical basis for his artistic projects; Anna Halprin's workshops at Mountain Home Studio in Kentfield, California; Grzegorz Kowalski's role as an educator at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warszawa; or Carlo Quartucci and Carla Tatò with Teatr'Arteria in Rome. They all agreed for these projects to become part of the show itself. I'm thinking also of the incredible Isidoro Valcárcel Medina, a Spanish artist who has been very influential for the current generation, from Santiago Sierra to Dora Garcia. He's totally retired from the professional world of art, and we decided to present a part of his conceptual practice translated into several architectural plans, such as his *Museum of the Ruin*, the detailed map of a building constructed with self-degrading materials, destined for entropy and disappearance.

EL: Isn't there a long list of, as you call them, professional marginals connected to every local art scene, appearing in globalized art exhibitions as something like normal exceptions, another oxymoron for an art world always searching for the limits of what can be explored and marketed?

PBB: That's the whole point of selecting artists for a show. To me, an exhibition means to exclude. Some say that an exhibition is about selecting, about inclusion, but not for me. This principle has enabled me to reassemble the pieces of a history that is not a canonical one. In doing that, I've attempted to place our reading of the present into question, as well as our capacity to conceive what our present is made of; like conceptual art, which has edified its legend or its original moment without acknowledging what happened, for instance, at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella in Buenos Aires, although this experimental space was active in the 1960s and adopted dematerialized practices following the input of Robert Jacoby, Eduardo Costa, Raul Escari, David Lamelas, Roberto Plate, Alfredo Rodriguez Arias, Margarita Paksa, and so forth, and was indeed known by figures such as Lucy Lippard, who visited there in 1968. To account for the present is of course to rethink its genealogy. I have therefore applied the exclusion process to artists who represent avant-garde movements from the 1960s to the 1980s, focusing instead on those who deviated from these movements, as did David Lamelas (with regard to conceptual art), Emilio Prini (to Arte Povera), Rasheed Araeen (to minimalism), Franz Erhard Walter (to performance), Robert Breer or David Medalla (to kinetic art), Gianni Pettena (to Architettura Radicale), Anna Halprin (to postmodern dance), Nicola L. (to feminist art)—those who, voluntarily or not, strayed from the movements through which they would otherwise have defined themselves as professional artists.

I wished to collect all these energies in a single exhibition, a positive exhibition in a place like the Secession that is

Franz Erhard Walther, Zwei Schreitbahnen, gegenüber. 5 Segmente, 3 Segmente., 1975. Courtesy the artist

also emblematic of the modernist ideology. Isn't the building of the Secession the archetypal White Cube, the first definition of exhibition as environment rather than just paintings on a wall? It could be interesting to watch how this building behaved in its relationship to another critical moment, that of the destabilization of hierarchies and redistribution of roles after modernism.

Secession, the exhibition-making machine, is indeed permanently structured as a grid: orthogonality is the rule. From the first room on, with Rasheed Araeen, Sanja Iveković, and Robert Breer, I introduced many pieces dealing with self-generating compositions and that play with chance, as was often the tendency during the 1960s with John Cage and so forth. But I excluded Cage and took Cornelius Cardew, because the latter was one of the first Europeans not only to grasp the new American aesthetics of Cage or Morton Feldman but to also grasp its social and political implications. Cardew did not want to dictate how the score should be played and was thus uninterested in laying down any rules that might inhibit the performers' individual interpretations, as in the Scratch Orchestra, which he founded in 1969 with an interest in including "regular" people in the practice of making music. In the 1970s, he would later became engaged in a radical reconsideration of all his work up to that time and adopt a Marxist-Leninist position, embracing the potential of the new opportunities offered by political militancy.[5]

EL: With Cardew's constant repositioning of property in music, we are quite easily led to the notion of the "death of the author" as announced by Roland Barthes in the same period. But as we know, the author is less threatened around this time, and what is called into question may be something closer to the "author function" described by Michel Foucault.[6] After the crisis of the spectacle (Deleuze and Guattari, Guy Debord), after feminism has called for a gendered questioning of spectatorship and postcolonialism to unveil the power relations of those positions, the "death of the spectator"

arrives as a kind of mirror stage of the authorial. Would we do better to talk about an "audience function"? And if the beholder's function is assumed by a certain type of visual production, defined by institutional uses and practices that can be historicized, why should we then content ourselves with references from the 1970s in order to understand today's spectacle? Hasn't the spectacle changed in the globalized world as part of the worldwide development of the branding of institutions and of the machineries of Biennials and international exhibitions?

PBB: This is why the primary title of "The Professional Outsider" seemed overly reductive, too self-reflexive. The exhibition needed a title more suitable to the challenge of the artists' works, one that would hold the social implications seen in the transformations of the 1960s. Furthermore, what constitutes the main vector of the 1970s more than (in a continuation of Marcel Duchamp) a redistribution of reception? When Barthes writes about "la mort de l'auteur," it means that the reader is implicated, that the spectator as passive instrument must die and become something else: participant or, as Rancière proposes, "emancipated."[7] Either way, the roles change. To speak about the death of the audience is also to ask whether the death of the author ever occurred.

EL: That's an important question, the one of failure, especially relating to the post-'68 years. Don't you think there is also a vast feeling of delusion associated with the 1970s, a decade "well furnished with historical disappointments and unfinished conflicts," as Adrian Rifkin has written (about Cardew, in fact), or a feeling that can challenge the melancholy we experience concerning this decade? And how can a show embody these particular feelings or values?

PBB: By showing processes, not finished objects. Processes involve the notion of open form, not self-sufficiency and fulfillment. It's as simple as a glass of pure water, renewed every day to be drunk (or not), as in Július Koller's *Glass Clean Water (Idea-Object)* from 1964, or being invited by Rasheed Araeen to dismantle the structure of *Vienna Thirtysix: Zero to Infinity* (1968/2009) and rearrange the elements into new formations. By allowing it to be constantly transformed, the work challenges the idea of art as a fixed object of contemplation. Robert Breer proposes a wall that slowly moves, producing renewed spaces for the works and new articulations for the exhibition, through its lateral shift from one side of the room to the other (*Moving Wall*, 2009). Scraps of paper on the floor, to be picked up and read or not, thrown away or taken away, together form the statement on the state of racism in Austria (Sanja Iveković, *40 Pages of ENAR Report on Racism in Austria*, 2009). All these works are articulated on the basis of the author having no more power than the audience, and where those two positions are disenfranchised and equalized with regard to the ordinary eye. And the works can always be unmade—something that I tried to experiment with in another show, "Reversibility," which I curated for the Frieze Art Fair Gallery in 2008.[8]

EL: Could we make a detour to know more about this experiment?

PBB: I had asked the artists to "de-create" their works—to together choose one or more of their existing productions and agree on how and when these works should return to the material world (for material assemblages) or the common language (for conceptual works). The artists were also asked to sign a disclaimer that would waive their rights as authors and grant their galleries the right to sell the materials without changing the initial price tag of the works themselves. This would also invert the legibility of their working process—but nobody accepted the proposition! The artists all wanted to keep the work "alive." Still, I think this is one of the main questions at stake. To Duchamp, who wrote in 1913: "Can one make works that are not 'of art'?" I would like, with "The Death of the Audience" or "Reversibility," to respond and further ask: "Can one make art that is not a work?" In the commercial environment in which artworks are identified only through their price tags—through their materialistic value (even if dematerialized)—one should resituate and reposition the processes being engaged. This means to reappropriate use value, which is not considered by consumer society to be a value suitable to art. I wish to reposition these questions by directing them to the audience, the beholder, the spectator, and through what Nietzsche termed "gregarity." This is what I'm into with "The Death of the Audience": gregarity. With "Reversibility," it is more about de-creation as de-divinization.

Terre Thaemlitz, (Concert for Cornelius Cardew) Meditation on Wage Labor and the Death of the Album.

EL: So for you, showing the "continuous project altered daily" of the "art without work," which is your horizon,

Gianni Pettena, Paper/Midwestern Ocean, 1971/2009, Performance. Courtesy the artist.

produces or reflects a function for a viewer who isn't fetishistic and wouldn't be obsessed with exchange value. How do you do that?

PBB: What interests me is the phenomenon of transgression, which defines itself as permanent renewal. There is no stability in transgression—one always has to re-transgress, and this is contained in the artistic process. This is how I can admire, for example, the agency in Bernard Bazile's rather violent gesture of 1989, opening the can of *Merda d'artista* by Piero Manzoni. Bazile's work is a kind of frontispiece in the foyer at the center of the Secession: rather than doing it himself, instead delegating the act to African hands, he also denounces a petit-bourgeois norm of a White artist. With this work Bazile had anticipated the rupture represented by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the advent of globalization, questioning at the same time the taboo of the inviolability of the work of art. Here, one touches on the status of an artwork, but this is not once and forever: this act must be continued, pursued, and contradicted in order to negate a single fixed state and status for the work. The pieces in the show participate in that process of displaying the anarchy of human impulses. For instance there's the *Portrait of Marie Antoinette* by Franz Xaver Wagenschön, featured in the first room, which offers a kind of historical perspective by means of a story that isn't the main narrative. And indeed, this portrait of Marie Antoinette playing an instrument is, in its regular museum room, a mere prop amongst the collection of musical instruments that surround the painting. The choice to show Marie Antoinette is also linked to Bernard Bazile's piece done in Vienna for Museum in Progress in 1992. In this portrait, Marie Antoinette is still in Austria, figured as a sweet teenager in her baroque attire: her appearance will be transformed, passing the frontier into France, according to the new French neoclassical look. Marie-Antoinette thus represents the passing not only of one look or fashion to another, but also of a style, or rather a mimetic stance. She is painted looking straight at an audience, playing an

unknown score: but we all know it by now, it is the one that goes through the Revolution, from monarchy to anarchy, then to republic, later to restoration, a "sweet and violent" narrative. The important thing, here, is to pursue the labor of transgression permanently.

EL: In a way, the show is the opposite of the participatory impulses associated with the art of the 1960s, with kinetic works for instance, or with relational aesthetics in the 1990s, which may be—why not?—the continuation of this participatory movement, a movement also adapted to the enlightened developments of a bourgeois, Western, capitalist culture. But there is a dream of passivity in your proposal; if the walls can slide towards you, why should you move?

PBB: Yes, and that position is counterbalanced: I like those leaps towards passivity, but when they are succeeded by activity. It's a rhythm, everything is in that rhythm. Interactivity is like industrial domination, a falsely active activity. Like Zižek, so do I prefer its uncanny double, the term "interpassivity."[9] On the one hand, we have the emancipated spectatorship of Rancière; on the other there is Zižek's interpassivity, a situation in which the object itself takes from you and enjoys for you. And for me there is also Pierre Klossowski, who unites these two theories in his analysis of perversion and transgression.

EL: Pierre Klossowski, whose large drawings you have also exhibited, seems to be a main reference for you in all your previous shows. What have his poetic and philosophic essays brought to you?

PBB: First I want to "de-gentrify" (" *désambourgeoiser*") Klossowski, to take him out of his intellectual ghetto, in a kind of inverse way compared to other artists in the show, whom I have tended to import into the art scene, and who have by and large been marginalized with respect to the intellectual frameworks. What Klossowski produces is a praxis, a relation between practical and theoretical means. *La monnaie vivante* (The Living Currency) is a fundamental book of the 1970s, a missing link for the whole of the twentieth century and especially for French theory, from Bataille to Baudrillard, Lacan to Foucault and Deleuze.[10] All have read him and make it clear that they have done so. Curiously, it hasn't been translated into English. I have since 2005 been running an ongoing project devoted to this text, also called "La monnaie vivante."[11]

The book's introduction posits very simply the initial perversion as the first manifestation in a human being of the distinction between reproductive instincts and voluptuous emotion. This first perversion distinguishes human from mechanism, and will later be found to be the definition of human thought. Then, ideology appropriates perversion as "false or foul thinking"—the industrial and capitalist system, in organizing the production processes towards specific and policed ends, closes them down in the same gesture as it expels everything that overruns for being perverse. For example, a tool is used for doing only one thing. It is perverse to exceed, to overrun. This is the limitation at the foundation of the capitalist division of labor. Thus the drive behind the "open form" or the "open work" becomes to explode and dismiss these limits, to multiply possibility. These practices, so typical of the 1970s, work to invert or reverse the industrial system, which borders on perversion, instrumentalizing it. One can also go back to Charles Fourier, as I did at CAC Brétigny with "The Phalanstère Project," who tried to offer a theory of impulses be distributed in another organism, taking into account their necessary variety, hence the subject of this show.[12] For instance, Nicola L. explodes the conventional use of furniture with her *Femme Commode* (1969), which is not only a chest of drawers, but constitutes another articulation that "inverts" a feminist position by treating alienation as its ultimate fantasy . . .

It interests me to locate—as many artists do—places or sites capable of performing transgression, de-creation, and inversion. "Inversion" is also an important word for homosexuals, as in Havelock Ellis' *Sexual inversion*.[13] "Les invertis/Inverts" is also the working title of one of my future shows on contemporary artistic practice. So a lot of personal feelings come back to inform your own work as you find them reflected in artistic or creative processes that explode a conditioned reality. I'm thinking for instance of the *Cluster* works by John Latham, a "Deleuzian" artist who inverts the value of reading by showing only links and energies: his conglomerated books hanging from above are like balls of energy. I'm referring also to the system Edward Krasiński worked out: a blue line inscribed in the space of a relief painting that continues into the space of the audience—the remaining space, if you like—and acts like a line of tension between two environments.

EL: So let's go back to the primary question. Why an exhibition? What does it mean for you?

PBB: That's an important question for me, because it constitutes a specific field of knowledge with precise rules that respond to the question of how to situate a discourse in space—of course, also in duration, but first in space. I know that time has become a fashionable subject for shows nowadays, but when David Lamelas is asked how he envisages time (since he was involved in his "Time as Activity" projects in the 1970s), he always responded by saying that time doesn't exist for him, that he lives in space. Time is a measure, and space offers a kind of direct perception that reaches the body and all senses. I do not wish to develop a thesis that will be more interesting in a text or a catalogue; I invest everything in the show itself, primarily in the space. I could characterize this situation as the concept of the "third work," in which the operation of selecting two different works from two distinct artists produces a third, ephemeral and immaterial; the third work generated by two others, in relation, in duality, or in distortion and disavowal . . .

Exhibition view: Robert Breer, Franz Xaver Wagenschön, Valcárcel Medina, Sanja Iveković.

EL: A vastly popular field now in art history, which has taken over from the history of contemporary practices, is the history of exhibitions. Which exhibitions would be historical references for you?

PBB: Offhand, rather than exhibitions per se, I think of artistic acts shown in public—not only autonomous works, but works that include the modalities of their enactment. I'm thinking about Michael Asher relocating Jean-Antoine Houdon's statue of George Washington from the main entrance of the Art Institute in Chicago to an eighteenth-century gallery inside of the museum. For me, this is a fundamental act that has always been a guide, this violent displacement of a sculpture, removed from its pedestal and placed in a room, positioning it within a network of stylistic connections rather than as a political emblem.

EL: You usually like to be polemical. Indeed, even in the press release for "The Death of the Audience," you placed your show in line with the 2009 Istanbul Biennial and against the Venice Biennale, the Biennale in Lyon, or the Tate Triennial: neither "Making Worlds," nor "the Spectacle of the Everyday," nor "Altermodern"...

PBB: It's not out of disrespect, but about challenging a figure of the artist that seems too academic to me: as exception and exceptional, the one who brings solutions. I'm very suspicious about that type of proposal and am wondering lately whether the curator isn't instrumentalizing this artistic figure to position him or herself first, but under the guise of serving the artist. Of course it's a bit too easy to hide behind the domination and exploitation of artists in authoritarian events such as biennials, but at the same time we can clearly see that the figure of the artist-hero is no longer current, but is rather a historicist view that tries to cling to the branches of the avant-garde. Similarly, in the context of the over-institutionalized Tate Triennial, "Altermodern" works like a parody of the work of the great critics of the twentieth century, up to Pierre Restany or Germano Celant, trying to create a movement. It's still about trying to create a party, a power position, an adhesion, contrary even to how artists themselves work. Rather than oversimplify the role of the artist, it might make more sense to look outside this figure to a form of organization to be presented or prolonged, one in which the community is involved, where not only the artist but the audience provides a disseminated, deterritorialized experience for the exhibition.

Maybe art and exhibition processes are not much more than a protest march, like those that Bazile experienced and documented since the 1990s, a continuous anarchy of impulses: “NON! NON! NON!” “OUI! OUI! OUI!”

X

An extended version of this interview will be published in the Secession catalogue *The Death of the Audience* in spring 2010.

Pierre Bal-Blanc is curator and director of the Centre d’art contemporain de Brétigny.

Elisabeth Lebovici is a writer based in Paris.

1
Hito Steyerl, "Is a Museum a Factory?" *e-flux journal*, no.7 (June 2009).

2
Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *Arts Yearbook 4* (1961): 103-108.

3
Bérénice Reynaud, "Stuart Sherman: Object Ritual," trans. Thomas Repensek, *October* 8 (Sp ring 1979): 58-74.

4
See https://web.archive.org/web/20100226114019/https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/stuart-sherman-729461.html .

5
See https://web.archive.org/web/20100210012158/cacbretigny.com/inhalt/Cardew_Fenetre.html .

6
See Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?," trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* . (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 124-127.

7
See Jacques Rancière, "The Emancipated Spectator," *Artforum* (March 2007): 271-80.

8
See https://web.archive.org/web/20100210012456/cacbretigny.com/inhalt/REVERSIBILITE.html .

9
Slavoj Zižek, "The Interpassive Subject: Lacan Turns a Prayer Wheel," in *How to Read Lacan* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 23.

10
Pierre Klossowski, *La monnaie vivante* (Paris: E. Losfeld, 1970).

11
See https://web.archive.org/web/20090514043431/http://cacbretigny.com/inhalt/LA_MONNAIEVIVANTE.html .

12
See https://web.archive.org/web/20161124190222/http://www.cacbretigny.com/inhalt/ENCEMOMENT2.html .

13
See Havelock Ellis, *Sexual inversion* (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Co., 1901).

Sven Lütticken

Art and Thingness, Part I: Breton's Ball and Duchamp's Carrot

In modern art, the increasing resemblance of art objects to everyday objects raised the threat of eroding of any real difference between works of art and other things. Barnett Newman railed against both Duchamp's readymades and "Bauhaus screwdriver designers" who were elevated to the ranks of artists by the Museum of Modern Art's doctrine of "Good Design." [1] The danger for art was the same in both cases: the dissolving of the dividing line between works of art and everyday objects. Just as ancient art proper should never be confused with the craft of "women basket weavers," modern art should never be confused with a screwdriver or urinal. [2] In the 1960s, Clement Greenberg would also worry that a blank sheet of paper or a table would become readable as art, that the boundary between artworks and "arbitrary objects" was eroding. [3] While not evincing any Modernist anxieties about readymades, Paul Chan's recent assertion that "a work of art is both more and less than a thing" shows renewed concerns regarding such an assimilation—in a context marked, until quite recently, by an unprecedented market boom in which works of art seemed to be situated in a continuum of luxury goods spanning from Prada bags to luxury yachts. [4]

But what does it mean to say that an artwork is both more and less than a thing? The notion of the thing is prominent in contemporary theory, and one might say that the thing has emerged as something that is *both more and less than an object.* In W. J. T. Mitchell's words:

> "Things" are no longer passively waiting for a concept, theory, or sovereign subject to arrange them in ordered ranks of objecthood. "The Thing" rears its head—a rough beast or sci-fi monster, a repressed returnee, an obdurate materiality, a stumbling block, and an object lesson. [5]

Rather than building a wall between art and thingness, the work of art should be analyzed as just such a sci-fi monster. If objects are named and categorized, part of a system of objects, thingness is resistant to such ordered objecthood. If we grant that a work of art is both more and less than other types of things, this should not be regarded as an incentive to exacerbate and fetishize those differences, but rather as a point of departure for analyzing the complex interrelationships of artworks with these other things—and for examining certain works of art as problematizing and transforming this very relationship. [6]

A prominent proponent of the thing in recent theory is Bruno Latour, who has taken it upon himself to reveal "the terrible flaws of dualism," which marked modernity. [7] The hubristic project of modernity was based on the dichotomy of society and nature, of subject and object; this enables the modern "work of purification," the triumph of the subject and the relegation of nature and of non-moderns to the abyss of thought. Underneath this

Installation view of the "Good Design" exhibition at MoMA, 1951–1952.

purifying dichotomy, however, there is a disavowed continuity of networks, of hybrids; modern binary, "critical" thinking exists by virtue of the denial of this continuity, this world of "quasi-objects" and "quasi-subjects"—that which is "between and below the two poles" of object and subject. [8] "Moderns do differ from premoderns by this single trait: they refuse to conceptualize quasi-objects as such. In their eyes, hybrids present the horror that must be avoided at all costs by a ceaseless, even maniacal purification." [9]

Like all good caricatures, Latour's portrayal of modernity presents some traits in sharp, even exaggerated clarity. And like many good and bad caricatures, it is one-sided and self-serving. If we look carefully at modern theory and (art) practice, it should be obvious that there have been a number of significant attempts to go beyond a static dichotomy of subject and object. Reexamining such moments can be of extreme interest—not in order to create some kind of oneiric ancestral line leading up to present concerns, but in order to sound out the limitations as well as the unfulfilled potential of various practices. Working though the contradictions of, for instance, the Duchampian readymade can help focus current debates—turning such a historical phenomenon into an anachronistic intervention in the present.

The rejection of the readymade by critics and artists such as Greenberg and Newman was shaped by a fear of the collapse of categories, the fear of identity, of the work of art becoming just another "arbitrary" object. In addition to such critiques, which we may label conservative, the 1960s saw the emergence of a second strand of anti-Duchampian discourse. Its proponents were artists including Dan Graham, Robert Smithson, and Daniel Buren, and an important point that their different criticisms had in common was that Duchamp's own practice was itself conservative in that it merely seemed to confirm and exploit the existing art-world structures and their power of definition.[10] Apparently working on the assumption that Duchamp's work was fully accounted for by the then-emerging institutional theory of art, these artists felt that Duchamp merely used the institution(s) of art to redefine objects as artworks, thus multiplying their aura, their fetishistic allure, and their value. As Robert Smithson put it, "there is no viable dialectic in Duchamp because he is only trading on the alienated object and bestowing on this object a kind of mystification." [11]

Such remarks were no doubt made in view of Duchamp's own commodification of his readymades in the 1960s, with the Schwartz editions, and of the proliferation of Neo-Dada and Nouveau Réalisme objects, accumulations, and assemblages. This type of art object was tailor-made for the dismal science called the institutional theory of art, which it helped spawn, and which statements by artists such as Buren and Smithson parallel. However, if we look beyond the horizon of the 1960s reception of Duchamp, at the repercussions of the readymade among the Surrealists around 1930 in particular, things become rather more complicated and interesting.

Hegel saw modern art as bifurcating into on the one hand a "realist" tendency that would show the surface of objects in minute "objectivity," and on the other a "spiritual" tendency that would place all the emphasis on the subject. [12] For the Surrealists, Duchamp's readymades became crucial at the moment when the question of the relation between subject and object, between spirit and matter, became an overriding concern: when they placed their activities "in the service of the revolution," entering into a difficult relationship with the party that claimed to represent and enact dialectical materialism, and which eyed the Surrealists' idealist focus on dreams and visions more than a little suspiciously. The Surrealists set out to prove that their approach in fact complemented orthodox Marxism, in that Surrealism, "within the framework of dialectical materialism, is the only method that accounts for the real links between the world and thought."[13] If dialectical materialism can cause bricks to be laid, then surely this relationship was of primary importance. [14]

One of the issues of *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* contained a montage of textual fragments on Hegel and Marx, which contrasted the lackluster number of Hegel's works available in French with the blockbuster sales of Hegel's complete works in the Soviet Union, informing us that "the five year plan is founded on dialectics." [15] In the middle of a page is a line drawing of Hegel's death mask; Spirit has become plaster. If the facts about the prices and sales of Hegel's works seem to fit into Aragon's quite linear remarks on spirit influencing things in the world, the death mask complicates things. As an outmoded relic of the nineteenth century, it is a Surrealist object par excellence, but it is hardly operative in the contemporary world—unless one instrumentalizes it for the purpose of some Stalinist personality cult.

Drawing of Hegel's death mask from Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution.

To some extent, the Surrealist art of the object represented an appropriation, a *détournement* of Duchamp's project. Surrealist objects were supposed to provide shocks, to give the viewer a jolt, which sets them apart from Duchamp's more "disinterested" montages of existing objects and new thoughts. What the Surrealists saw very clearly, however, is that the Duchampian readymade was, in David Joselit's words, "a paradoxical object locked in a perpetual oscillation between its status as a thing and its status as a sign." [16] The bottle rack—sometimes called *Hedgehog*—inscribed with Duchamp's signature becomes its own double, a visual pun combining Duchamp's favorite "ism," eroticism (the phallic protrusions), with references to his arcane geometric and n-dimensional concerns. [17] Outwardly, the object remains the same, yet it is dislodged, integrated into the web of signification spun in Duchamp's notes.

When André Breton's estate was auctioned off, one of the items for sale was a semiotic object par excellence: a fortune teller's crystal ball that had been used in 1933 to illustrate Breton's text "Le Message automatique." [18] In his 1925 "Lettre aux voyantes," Breton had addressed the fortune-tellers, or "seers," who had been marginalized by modern science:

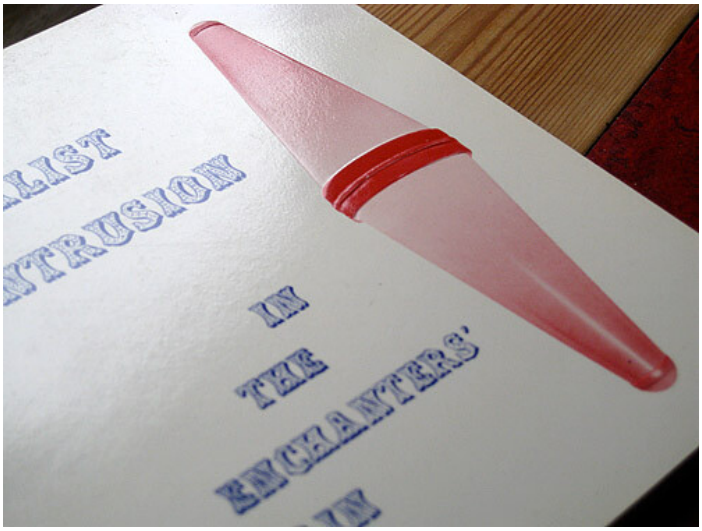
> Mesdames, today my mind is wholly on your disgrace. I know that you no longer dare to use your voice, no longer deign to use your all-powerful authority except within the woeful "legal" limits. I can see in my mind's eye the houses you live in, on the fourth floor, in districts more or less remote from the cities. [19]

Breton pleads with the "ladies" that it is time for them to give up their passivity and reclaim their proper role. The crystal ball, smaller than one would expect on the basis of cartoons and comic strips, speaks of the same ambiguity between exalted visions and the banality of *banlieue* fortune-telling. An exemplary visual object or object-sign, the crystal ball was at the same time a materialization of desire and a dematerialization of the object; a proper Surrealist thing.

The last major Surrealist exhibition, "Surrealist Intrusion in the Enchanters' Domain," which took place in New York in 1960, was also the last collaboration between Duchamp and Breton (after almost forty years, it would lead to a mutual estrangement that lasted until Breton's death). Breton's decision to structure the exhibition using a list of mythical "enchanters" sits oddly with Duchamp's Nouveau Réalisme–style environment, with its toy trains, clock, and real chickens. The catalogue features another Duchampian contribution: an embossed reproduction of the electrical sign, a double red cone called a *carotte*, that identified French tobacconist's shops. [20] As a "virtual" readymade that does not actually exist as a three-dimensional object, this relief, existing in between two and three dimensions, has obvious connections with Duchamp's n-dimensional speculations. In the context of the early 1960s, it also seems to acknowledge that the readymade has become its own image, that capitalism has turned itself into a forest of signs. The tobacconist's sign makes the crystal ball look like old hat.

In the postwar decades, the old three-dimensional tobacconist's cones were being replaced by graphic, two dimensional versions; this transformation suggests that Duchamp here opted for an object that was fast becoming obsolete, but which allowed him to play with dimensions in a more interesting way than the new version. For the most part, of course, Duchamp's readymades refrain from a Surrealist flirt with the obsolete, with outmoded commodities, with the debris of Walter Benjamin's Second-Empire Paris, with the refuse of modernity's myths; neither, of course, do the readymades constitute montages in the manner of Dali's lobster-telephone. Once could see an impetus at work in many surrealist objects

André Breton's crystal ball from the auction catalog André Breton. 42, rue Fontaine, 2003.



Duchamp's cover for the "Surrealist Intrusion in the Enchanters' Domain" catalogue.

that, in a less extreme and overt way than Greenberg or Newman, aims at establishing and emphasizing differences—at distinguishing these objects from "arbitrary objects" by imbuing them with signs of the psyche, of subjectivity. While many Surrealist objects emphasize that they "function symbolically," the readymades do not.

In this, ironically, they foreshadow in their own way the future of the commodity, in an archaic guise: they announce the profusion of goods that are bought for their coded distinctiveness in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In the 1970s this becoming-sign of the object would lead Jean Baudrillard to diagnose fundamental changes in capitalism by supplementing the categories of use value and exchange value with his concept of sign value. Referencing Bauhaus furniture, with its "functionalism" that has become style, become sign, Baudrillard effectively theorized an economy in which the circulation of sign value *creates* exchange value, in which commodity fetishism stops being an illusion and becomes a reality. [21] While Baudrillard noted that exchange value is based on "equivalence" and sign value on "difference," the latter is at the service of the former: the difference between Brand A and Brand B is expressed in prices that are subject to the law of exchange, hence of equivalence. This triumph of fetishism—of commodity fetishism as *an active agent*—results in object-signs that suppress most traces of their history, of their trajectories. Their lives seem to be lived in a realm of pure semiosis. Are the readymades and the Surrealist objects they helped spawn not just as crucial to this development as Bauhaus furniture—or Bauhaus screwdrivers? [22]

David Joselit has equated the readymade's "oscillation between its status as a thing and its status as a sign" with the fundamental tension between material commodities and immaterial networks in the modern economy.[23] However, the readymade-as-sign is primarily part of a *network of signification* created by Duchamp's other objects and texts; in this sense, the readymade is indeed the model for the branded commodity and for "actually existing fetishism." The consumption of the pre-existing object by the artist and its use for the production of new value is presented as a purely semiotic operation, and the readymade's trajectory in different economical networks is obscured. In a roundabout way, we seem to have arrived back at the point of departure—at a rejection of the readymade as mystifying and complicit in an ever-intensifying process of commodification. Were the Surrealists then entirely deluded in regarding Duchamp's readymades as object lessons in "thingifying" desires in ways that radically differed from alienating commodity-objects?

In a letter to Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno described the latter's notion of the dialectical image in terms that seem to emphasize Benjamin's indebtedness to Surrealism: Adorno stated that "if the use value of things dies," these alienated and hollowed-out objects can come to be charged with new subjectivity. While the things become "images" of subjective intentions, this does not erase their thingness: dialectical images remain montages, constellations of alienated things and meaning. [24] Adorno neither attempts to eradicate the object nor does he recoil from the horror of the hybrid; the ruined object, charged with new subjective intentions means, becomes precisely a *quasi-subject,* one that offers a glimpse of a world beyond the *false objectivity* constituted by the quasi-natural "necessities" ruling industrial production. This point needs to be remembered now that we are surrounded by industrialized versions of such quasi-subjects, in which coded difference creates a kind of generic subjectivity that amounts to a thin layer of paint glossing over the substratum of false objectivity. How can one go beyond the limitations of the readymade *and* retain the project of making things, quasi-objects, that point beyond the limitations of the contemporary commodity?

To be sure, it can be argued that any readymade object will unavoidably be marked by an infra-thin difference in relation to its allotted place in the codified order of objects. In its obtuse materialism, it is always potentially a thing, which is to say: a ruin. In her photographic series *Detitled* (2000), Barbara Visser saves modern design icons precisely by showing them in a ruined state (in *different* ruined states, each with its specificities). And is it not the task of critics and art historians to bring out the work of art's potential, the ways in which it resists complete assimilation into the order of things? If we answer this in the affirmative, we should also ask ourselves whether such an exercise cannot also, at some point, become an exercise in self-delusion. Even if we try to help the neo-readymade by deconstructing it, bringing its complexities and contradictions to the fore, such

Barbara Visser, Detitled (EAARS20001205/FT/S/bw), 2000.

operations leave intact the structural limitations of the logic of readymade, as brought out by its decades-long, crushing success.

Like Duchamp's and the Surrealists' practices, Adorno's remark is limited by its focus on giving new meaning to existing objects—on producing meaning, and ultimately value, by consuming objects. Of course, such immaterial labor is itself dependent on specific social and economical circumstances and structures, but these remain largely implicit with Duchamp, and even more so with the Surrealists. For all the productive and viable elements in the dialectic of object and subject that marks their mutant commodities, it remains rather abstract and idealist. If one wants to go beyond the exploration of the semiotic system and explore the readymade's place in a socio-economical network, such a project—whether in critical writing or in artistic practice—necessarily explodes the logic of the readymade.

Now that the social and ecological consequences of an economy that mystifies production have come home to haunt us, the limitations of the readymade when it comes to intervening in the system of objects are painfully clear. At the same time, the legacy of Soviet Productivism, which has often been obscured for decades by the dominance of the type of "Good Design" discourse exemplified by MoMA, takes on a renewed importance.

→ *Continued in "Art and Thingness, Part Two: Thingification" in issue 15.*

Sven Lütticken teaches art history at VU University Amsterdam. Sternberg Press recently published his book *Idols of the Market: Modern Iconoclasm and the Fundamentalist Spectacle*.
http://svenlutticken.blogspot.com

X

1
See Barnett Newman, "Open Letter to William A.M. Burden, President of the Museum of Modern Art" (1953) and "Remarks at the Fourth Annual Woodstock Arts Conference" (1952), in *Selected Writings and Interviews,* ed. John O'Neill (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 38, 245.

2
Barnett Newman, "The Ideographic Picture" (1947), in Newman, 108.

3
Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1960) and "Recentness of Sculpture" (1967), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism* , vol.4, *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969* , ed. John O'Brian (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 85–93, 250–256. In "Modernist Painting," Greenberg was still confident that the limits of painting "can be pushed back indefinitely before a picture stops being a picture and turns into an arbitrary object" (90), but "Recentness of Sculpture" is marked by concern that just this was by then happening. See also Thierry De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1996), 199–279.

4
Paul Chan, "What Art Is and Where It Belongs," *e-flux journal*, no. 10 (November 2009), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61356/what-art-is-and-where-it-belongs/ . The text was written for *The R eturn of Religion and Other Myths: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art* , eds. Maria Hlavajova, Sven Lütticken, and Jill Winder (Utrecht: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst; Rotterdam: post editions, 2009), 56–70.

5
W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 112.

6
This text continues a line of inquiry from the third chapter ("Attending to Things") of my book *Idols of the Market: Modern Iconoclasm and the Fundamentalist Spectacle* (Berlin and New York: Sternberg, 2009).

7
Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* , trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 54.

8
Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern,* 51–55.

9
Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern,* 112.

10
Obviously, this summary does not do justice to the specific characteristic of, and differences between, these artists' critiques of Duchamp. For Buren, see for instance the essay "Standpoints" (1971), in *Five Texts* (New York: John Weber Gallery; London: Jack Wendler Gallery, 1973); and for Graham the later "My Works for Magazine Pages: 'A History of Conceptual Art'" (1985), in *Two-Way Mirror Power: Selected Writings by Dan Graham on His Art* , ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); for Smithson see following note.

11
"Robert Smithson on Duchamp. Interview with Moira Roth" (1973), in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* , ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1996), 310.

12
See Hegel on "the dissolution of romantic art" (by which he refers to Christian, post-Antique art): G. W. F. Hegel, *Werke*, vol. 14, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* II, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 239.

13
"Que le surréalisme, dans le cadre du matérialisme dialectique, soit la seule méthode qui rende comte des rapports réels du monde et de la pensée, je le crois plus que jamais, moi ai vu la dialectique matérialiste entasser des pierres, et parce que j' ai vu les hommes transformer la monde avec la dialectique matérialiste." Louis Aragon, "Le Surréalisme et le devenir révolutionnaire," *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* , no.3 (December 1931): 4.

14
Aragon, 4. On this period of Surrealism and the privileged role it accorded to objects, see also Steven Harris, *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics, and the Psyche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

15
"Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831)," *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* , no.3 (De cember 1931): 1.

16
David Joselit, *Feedback: Television Against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2007), 51.

17
See Craig *Adcock*, *Marcel Duchamp's Notes from the "Large Glass": An N-Dimensional Analysis* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), 159; and Herbert Modlerings, "Objects of Modern Skepticism," in *The Definitely Unfinished Marcel Duchamp* , ed. Thierry De Duve (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 255–257.

18
See André Breton, "Le Message automatique," *Minotaure* 1 (1993), no. 3–4, 55.

19
André Breton, "A Letter to Seers" (1925), in *Manifestoes of Surrealism* , trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 199. See also André Breton, "Le Message automatique," in *Minotaure*, no. 3/4 (December 1933): 55.

20
See part 3 of Rhonda Roland Shearer, "Marcel Duchamp: A Readymade Case for Collecting Objects of Our Cultural Heritage along with Works of Art," *toutfait* 1, no. 3 (2000; 2005), https://web.archive.org/web/20100226005317/https://www.toutfait.com/online_journal_details.php?postid=1090 .

21
Jean Baudrillard, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

22
Baudrillard already notes the strong connection between Bauhaus design and Surrealist objects, considering them two sides of the same coin (240–241).

23
Joselit, 51.

24
"Indem an den Dingen ihr Gebrauchswert abstirbt, werden die entfremdeten ausgehölt und ziehen als Chiffern Bedeutungen herbei. Ihrer bemächtigt sich Subjektivität, indem sie Intentionen on Wunsch und Angst in sie einlegt. Daduch das die abgeschiedenen Dinge als Bilder der subjektiven Intention einstehen, präsentieren diese sich als unvergangene und ewige. Dialektische Bilder sind Konstellationen zwischen entfremdeten Dingen und eingehender Bedeutung [...])." Theodor W. Adorno, supplement to a letter to Walter Benjamin, August 5, 1935, in *Adorno/Benjamin Briefwechsel 1928-1940* , ed. Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), 151–152.

Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez

Innovative Forms of Archives, Part One: Exhibitions, Events, Books, Museums, and Lia Perjovschi's Contemporary Art Archive

Increasing interest in organizing, structuring, documenting, and revealing the art history of the former Eastern Bloc is in large part attributable to artists who have participated actively in changing orders and elements within the visible, sayable, and thinkable, as Jacques Rancière's definition of political art has it.[1] Although heterogeneous in terms of formal proposals, the artistic projects that will be dealt with in this coming series have in common discursive aspects or forms of presentation that may be said to constitute "innovative forms of archives." Such a phrase is at the same time deliberately ironic, as the notion of scientific or creative innovation is necessarily followed by the well-known support structures of presentation (exhibitions, events, and so on), within whose regimes and formats the Rancièrian redistribution of the sensible takes place. On the other hand, the projects discussed here do not only represent the strategy of self-historicization—one of the main correctives performed within an Eastern European institutional critique—but also contribute to the development of methods of artistic research and to theoretical endeavors imagining what, if anything, a shared history of European contemporary art might be.

Though an archive typically conjures up images of bookshelves, endless rows of boxes, folders, maps, and documents that sit waiting for scholars to discover and reactivate them, the term has a more flexible application within the context of critical writing. Sue Breakell has described an archive as:

> a set of traces of actions, the records left by a life—drawing, writing, interacting with society on personal and formal levels. In an archive, the [single document] would ideally be part of a larger body of papers including correspondence, diaries, photographs—all of which can shed light on each other.[2]

The specific cases that will help us understand the objectives and mechanisms of archiving—not only in the former Eastern Bloc but also in the Middle East and in South America—typically employ the notion of the archive as a form, and find in this undertaking an argument for declaring the museum and the archive to be synonymous.[3]

Since the late 1980s, diverse motivations have inspired various forms of archives to emerge, such as Lia Perjovschi's *Contemporary Art Archive / Center for Art Analysis*; IRWIN's *East Art Map*; Tamás St. Auby's *Portable Intelligence Increase Museum*; Vyacheslav Akhunov's miniature reproductions of all his works in his installation, *1 m2*; Walid Raad's *A History of Modern and Contemporary Arab Art*; and various authorless projects originating in Southeastern Europe.[4] Of particular interest in this regard is the project *Museum of American Art* in

Lia Perjovschi, Mind Map Subject (detail), 1999–2006, 100 x 137 cm.

Berlin.[5] Their practices have not only to do with the material found in examinations of the various personal and official archives, but also create a visual typology, offering material for further art historical research, while at the same time experimenting with the registers involved in the presentation and interrogation of documents and other archival material whose truth values are taken for granted in the course of aggressive and continuous media pollution; and finally they contribute to prominent discourses in contemporary art today on archeological procedures and the archeological imaginary.[6] Such research might take the form of an artwork, an exhibition format, or a theoretical and art historical opus. In their presentation, they often become museum-like structures exhibiting self-institutionalizing agency, with all the accompanying knowledge produced, assembled, and transmitted to be used as a tool by an imagined or actual audience of specialists or a public. What these artists have in common is thus an adaptation of the profession of an archivist or art historian, thus gathering them under the designation "archival artists." While Hal Foster's description of artists focusing on found images, objects, and texts as making "historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present" would be logical here, it remains inadequate to the scale of these artists' explicit historiographic and political endeavors.[7] However, Foster identifies the main issue that separates artists-as-archivists from artists-as-curators:

> That the museum has been ruined as a coherent system in a public sphere is generally assumed, not triumphally proclaimed or melancholically pondered, and some of these artists suggest other kinds of ordering—within the museum and without. In this respect the orientation of archival art is often more "institutive" than "destructive," more "legislative" than "transgressive."[8]

In the socialist and communist regimes, the official art

apparatchik's interest in and tolerance for experimental art production varied from country to country, thus leading the respective scenes to develop in various directions. Information, documentation, and other printed matter circulated among groups of like-minded critics, writers, and artists, and rarely entered the official art institutions. Meanwhile, artists and directors of experimental art venues continued to collect and compile documentation to the extent of their capabilities. By the end of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, the increasingly liberating atmosphere of what could be called "the early attempts of civil society in a socialist state" went hand in hand with underground creativity, thus giving new life to much of this documentation, as well as a flowering of inter-generational links. In many of his writings, Boris Groys has examined the mechanisms of art collections, museums, or archives in the former Eastern Bloc, describing how the art was created in an ideological context and not within the logic of a market, as was (and still is) the case in the West.[9] Instead of having their work incorporated in Western collections, the artists of the former Eastern Bloc, Groys concludes, have created imaginary or alternative "collection-installations," histories and narrations that fill the entirety of museum spaces. In 2006, Zdenka Badovinac curated an exhibition at the Moderna galerija in Ljubljana that dealt with the artistic-archiving strategies in the former Eastern Bloc called "Interrupted Histories." In the catalogue text, she established an important definition of the artistic process of self-historicization:

> Because the local institutions that should have been systematizing neo-avant-garde art and its tradition either did not exist or were disdainful of such art, the artists themselves were forced to be their own art historians and archivists, a situation that still exists in some places today. Such self-historicization includes the collecting and archiving of documents, whether of one's own art actions, or, in certain spaces, of broader movements, ones that were usually marginalized by local politics and invisible in the international art context.[10]

In the case of the Slovenian group IRWIN, this strategy was not explicitly critical, but existed in the form of a constructive or corrective approach. As Miran Mohar of the IRWIN group said with regard to institutional critique in the West, "how can you criticize something which you actually don't have?"[11] The main motto of Irwin in the 1990s was "construction of one's own context," and consequently the group itself functioned simultaneously as both observer and object of observation. This is the basis upon which we can think about the strategy of self-historicization, the artistic strategy that can furthermore be seen as one of the characteristics of an Eastern European institutional critique.[12]

Several years ago, Ilya Kabakov explained this artistic strategy of self-historicization as "self-description":

> the author would imitate, re-create that very same "outside" perspective of which he was deprived in actual reality. He became simultaneously an author and an observer. Deprived of a genuine viewer, critic, or historian, the author unwittingly became them himself, trying to guess what his works meant "objectively." He attempted to "imagine" that very "History" in which he was functioning and which was "looking" at him. Obviously, this "History" existed only in his imagination and had its own image for each artist.[13]

Similarly, in his most recent book *The Museological Unconscious: Communal (Post)Modernism in Russia,* Victor Tupitsyn asks himself "what is to be done with art that has not realized its 'museological function' in time, even if this is through no fault of its own?"[14] Tupitsyn finds egocentricity driving (Russian) artists' increasing involvement in controlling both the selection of material as well as its interpretation: "they are attempts to reproduce the museological function (and even to replicate its institutional format) at the artists' own expense and on their own terms."[15] Thus the egocentric strategy was activated as an alternative to the institutional mechanisms, to compensate for the lack of institutional support for unofficial artistic practices—a situation we encounter throughout the former Eastern Bloc, but also in the Middle East and South America.

While Tupitsyn's view might be accurate when applied to the aspirations of neo-avant-garde artists, self-historicization is not always simply about egocentricity and paranoid control over one's own body of work, which may otherwise not be properly documented, interpreted, and presented. The projects that will be presented here as case studies share a similar partisan spirit, one which can be conveniently explained using a notion with origins in online Open Access or Open Archives initiatives: self-archiving.[16] Self-archiving involves depositing a free copy of a digital document on the Web in order to allow access to it, with these documents usually being peer-reviewed research papers, conference papers, or theses posted on the website of the author's own institution. Formulating this notion within the broader context of knowledge production in general, self-archiving or innovative forms of archives help to raise questions of inclusion and exclusion, and of the right to think and to participate in restricted knowledge communities. Closely linked to this, and serving to differentiate between the chosen case studies, is an attention to their various fictionalizing or documentary capacities. The ontological status of the source and of the document as indices of authenticity is brought into the

discussion, as will be seen in the cases of the projects of Walid Raad and the "authorless projects," where fictional identities and invented documents playfully disturb canons of knowledge and histories previously considered as solid, unmovable rocks.

also produced exhaustive drawings and texts aimed at compiling all possible information about the Western history of contemporary art, calling her products Subjective Art History.

After the revolution, in the early 1990s, equipped with

Lia Perjovschi: Contemporary Art Archive, 1990–

Starting with her performances in her Bucharest apartment in the 1980s, under one of the most repressive regimes in Europe, Lia Perjovschi's activities created a space of resistance. From body art she switched to researching the body of international art, said husband Dan Perjovschi about the change in her practice. Her curiosity and desire to understand, recuperate, discuss, share, and coach found its way to a general audience. Her installations took the form of open spaces, discussion areas, reading rooms, waiting rooms, meeting rooms. Books, slides, photocopies, files, postcards, printed matter about international as well as Romanian contemporary art began to be organized and assembled in logical order. Lia unstoppable optimism and enthusiasm for the future, Lia and Dan used their studio to found the Contemporary Art Archive, a collection of magazine issues, book publications, and reproductions. By the end of the 1990s the CAA became a valuable database for alternative art initiatives everywhere, a self-supporting archive created outside the state funding network. Besides issuing cheaply designed publications meant to inform and to classify various art movements and tendencies on the basis of their archival material, the CAA organized several exhibitions paired with open discussions or lectures. In 2003 the CAA modified its function and has since operated under the title Center For Art Analysis. Lia describes herself as a "Detective in Art," reading, copying,

cutting, and remixing texts, concepts, and images. As Dan Perjovschi put it, "her Museum in files is not stuck on the shelves and is never closed . . . The knowledge of international art practice that she brought together helped to develop local criticism."

Lia Perjovschi, Plans for a Knowedge Museum, exhibition view.

Lia emphasizes the most important activity an archive can foster: sharing and teaching. While it was practically forbidden to share books, ideas, and information during the communist regime, she understood that a shared idea brings about another idea and that sharing is an essential survival strategy. This was certainly the case when Communism developed formal institutions that were so absurd that people avoided them altogether, replacing them with informal institutions (alternative economies and structures, the black market), strategies that continue to thrive as Post-Communist attempts at building faith through the mimicry of neoliberal models has proven neither promising nor trustworthy.

In the catalogue of the exhibition "Again for Tomorrow," organized by the MA

curatorial students at the Royal College of Art in London and featuring the artists of the Buenos Aires artist cooperative Trama, Claudia Fontes, who founded Trama in 2000, speaks of the survival strategy that stimulates one to build an archive in a context where memory is under constant threat:

> When an archive's latent content is organised and distributed through a network-like structure, a powerful potential is unleashed. Transparency and a willingness to share information gives rise to trust, and trust is known to be the basic condition that keeps any network alive.[17]

Claudia Fontes points to how Perjovschi went from total mistrust to building up a powerful matrix of knowledge to be shared and updated through a process of ongoing

discussions, lectures, exhibitions, and exchanges. Fontes also points to a further comparison with Graciela Carnevale's archive of the Grupo de Arte de Vanguardia de Rosario, started in the late 1960s, finding in both of these examples evidence of resistance in which a notion of archiving becomes a survival strategy, even in very different political (and authoritarian) contexts.

In the past few years, Lia has been working on and exhibiting *Plans for a Knowledge Museum*, an imaginary museum based on files accumulated over her years at the CAA. Characterized by an interdisciplinary approach, this future artist-run museum is dedicated to moving away from the logic of the exhibition-as-spectacle, and towards a learning process of working with an open-structured archive. Installation of these *Plans for a Knowledge Museum* comprises drawings, objects, charts, photos, and color prints. This material is there for viewers to hold and make use of, much like the notion of self-archiving mentioned above. As we will see in the next installment, this attitude of openness also corresponds to the aspirations of IRWIN's ongoing project *East Art Map*.

Lia Perjovschi, Plans for a Knowedge Museum, exhibition view.

X

Continued in issue #16: "Innovative Forms of Archives, Part Two: IRWIN's East Art Map and Tamás St. Auby's Portable Intelligence Increase Museum."

Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez is an independent curator and critic. She has published articles on contemporary and new media art in international exhibition catalogues and art magazines, and is a contributing editor for the online

review *ARTMargins: Contemporary Central and Eastern European Visual Culture* (UC Santa Barbara) and a member of the international editorial board of the magazine *Maska* (Ljubljana). She has curated numerous exhibitions and projects, such as the exhibition for the Transmediale festival (2008, Berlin), and co-curated the project "Société Anonyme" (with Thomas Boutoux and François Piron, 2007–2008, Paris). She completed her master's studies at EHESS, where she is a PhD candidate, and is currently co-directing (with Patricia Falguieres, Elisabeth Lebovici, and Hans Ulrich Obrist) "Something You Should Know," a seminar on artistic and curatorial practices. She works as an associate curator at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. She lives in Paris and Ljubljana.

1
Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* , trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 63.

2
Sue Breakell, "Perspectives: Negotiating the Archive," *Tate Papers* 9 (Spring 2008), https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/09/perspectives-negotiating-the-archive .

3
The many archival approaches coming from South America will be the object of future research but cannot be specifically discussed here. For more about archive as form in contemporary art, see Okwui Enwezor, "Archive Fever: Photography Between History and Monument," in *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* , ed. Okwui Enwezor (New York: International Center of Photography; Göttingen: Steidl, 2008), 14–18.

4
The term "authorless projects" for this very specific assembly of projects and exhibitions is used by Inke Arns, who curated the exhibition "What is Modern Art? (A Group Show)" at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in 2006 and edited together with Walter Benjamin the catalogue *What is Modern Art? Introductory Series to the Modern Art 2* , (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2006).

5
Another important example, which is however omitted from this essay, is Polish conceptual artist Zofia Kulik, who has in several recent projects been arranging and exhibiting the archive of the Laboratory of Action, Documentation, and Promotion—PDDiU. This was an archive managed by the artistic tandem KwieKulik (Zofia Kulik and her then partner in life and art, Przemysław Kwiek) and maintained in their houses. For more on archiving strategies in Zofia Kulik's body of work, see Luiza Nader, "What Do Archives Forget? Memory and Histories, 'From the Archive of Kwiekulik,'" in *Opowiedziane inaczej. A story Differently Told: Tomasz Cieciersk / Jarosaw Kozłowski / Zofia Kulik / Zbigniew Libera i Darek Foks / Aleksandra Polisewicz* (Gdańsk: Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Łaźnia, 2008), 84–122, available at http://kulikzofia.pl/en/archiwum/luiza-nader-o-czym-zapominaja-archiwa-pamiec-i-historie-z-archiwum-kwiekulik/ .

6
See Dieter Roelstraete, "The Way of the Shovel: On the Archeological Imaginary in Art," *e-flux journal* , no. 4 (March 2009), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/04/68582/the-way-of-the-shovel-on-the-archeological-imaginary-in-art/ .

7
Hal Foster: "An Archival Impulse," *October 110* (Fall 2004), p.4.

8
Ibid, 5.

9
See for example Boris Groys, *Logik der Sammlung. Das Ende des musealen Zeitalters* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1997).

10
Zdenka Badovinac, "Interrupted Histories," in *Prekinjene zgodovine / Interrupted Histories* , ed. Zdenka Badovinac et al. (Ljubljana: Museum of Modern Art, 2006), unpaginated.

11
Private interview with Miran Mohar, 2006.

12
See Nataša Petrešin, "Self-historicisation and self-institutionalisation as strategies of the institutional critique in the Eastern Europe," in *Conceptual Artists and the Power of their Art Works for the Present* , ed. Marina Gržinić and Alenka Domjan (Celje: Center for Contemporary Arts, 2007).

13
Ilya Kabakov, "Foreword," in *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s* , ed. Laura J. Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 7–8.

14
Victor Tupitsyn, *The Museological Unconscious: Communal (Post)Modernism in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 230.

15
Ibid, 230.

16
In an e-mail conversation, Sven Spieker, author of an influential book examining the archive as a crucible of twentieth-century art— *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008)—suggested an umbrella-term, "self-archive," for the cases discussed in this very article.

17
Claudia Fontes, "London Calling," in *Again for Tomorrow* (London: Royal College of Art, 2006), 129.

Monika Szewczyk

Negation Notes (while working on an exhibition with Allan Sekula featuring This Ain't China: A Photonovel)

I. The Question of Work

Since the 1970s, a quiet cultural revolution has taken place that has restructured the desires of many people involved in art production, especially in relation to ideas of work and the working class. Increasingly, art production is distanced from the notion of work or the working life of wage earners. Who doesn't want to earn a living performing leisure, for example? But the line is fine between such an attitude and the negation of value for what is performed by a majority of the population. Consider this conclusion to a text concerned with the increasingly difficult exercise of freedom in a world where even (or perhaps especially) idle chatter becomes symbolic capital:

> As the artist who writes unpins and dislocates himself in discourse, he might elaborate scenarios that engage new possibilities of life. The scenario might serve as a concrete mode of subjectification, a means of auto-temporalization that could be taken up by others, folding back onto the work we do, not outside of discourse but pushing discourse to its own outside, producing breaks and flights within the discursive situation in such a way that *work becomes a foreign activity*.[1]

The last phrase (my emphasis) is emblematic of a growing distanciation of art production from the very idea of work, classically understood.[2] It also raises the question of how and why we imagine foreign lands in relation to this work of distanciation (more on this soon).

In the face of the current tendency to understand work elsewhere, offshore, in another country, I'm tempted to bring up the case of Allan Sekula's practice as a whole, and his 1974 photonovel, *This Ain't China*, in particular. This is a work I came to know some ten years ago from books, which is probably why I think of it as a kind of strange fable for adults. And like any good fable, this one haunts me—especially when I try to think about reality and realism.

If, in this day and age, "reality" has become an almost impossibly unstable word—something that can only be invoked as an absolute construct, always relative, contingent, and virtual—this has taken its toll on realism (i.e., the critique of reality, which for so long took on the image of work as its emblem).[3] For what follows, I would like to offer a simpler working definition of realism so as to carve out some space to consider the reality of work and the prescient evocation of distance from China in Sekula's fable. It might sound dogmatic or Marxist or even Maoist, but I'll have to take my chances: let us understand realism as the highlighting of contradictions that govern the world. So I'm working here, working on a hunch: *the general*

avarice towards work in the art world forestalls any possibility of working through these contradictions. As a result, we may be stuck in a loop, enslaved to an idea of *not working* that all too quickly exhausts the real potential of art.

Allan Sekula, Eyes Closed Assembly Line, 2010, backlit transparency. Courtesy of the artist.

II. The Work in Question

This Ain't China: A Photonovel consists of text, forty-one photographs grouped into nine frames, plus one framed diagram—a geometrically stable but theoretically absurd schema detailing restaurant labor-division and types of customer satisfaction.[4] It was made around the time of the artist's graduation from the fine arts department at the University of California–San Diego (UCSD), where Fred Lonidier taught and Martha Rosler was a fellow student. Lonidier was very interested in the intersection of aesthetic practice, labor activism, and his photographic work, which was often realized and displayed in spaces where labor unions gathered. Sekula's *This Ain't China* was also partly made in a working environment; namely, a fast-food restaurant where the artist was employed for a time, and where conditions were ripe for a strike. There are at least four different types of photographs that appear in the work: candid, black-and-white shots (of cooks at work in the restaurant kitchen and of all the employees goofing around outside); highly composed, full-color, "editorial" photographs (of pizza, hotdogs, burgers, blended fruit drinks, and so on); dimly-lit, contre-jour, budget noir shots (taken partly in some kind of executive office and partly outside a suburban house with a gleaming Cadillac out front—this crime convention is reserved for the boss' environment); and, finally, staged, frontal black-and-white frames of the protagonists (the cook and the waitress, and also Sekula himself) deadpanning bold gestures to the camera in a style that evokes the Brechtian cinema of Jean-Luc Godard. In one shot, the three hold up a sign: CARNIGIE A-440/UNFAIR/TO LOCAL/JT. EX. BD. LOCALS/ *NO CONTRACT.* In another, Sekula brandishes an AK-47 as his comrades stand firm, one pointing to his left, obscuring the portraits of Marx and Lenin on the wall behind them. There is a joy here (shared with Godard) in

piling on the revolutionary clichés. The promise of these lying images is a higher truth.

from Allan Sekula, This Ain't China: A Photonovel, 1974. Courtesy of the artist.

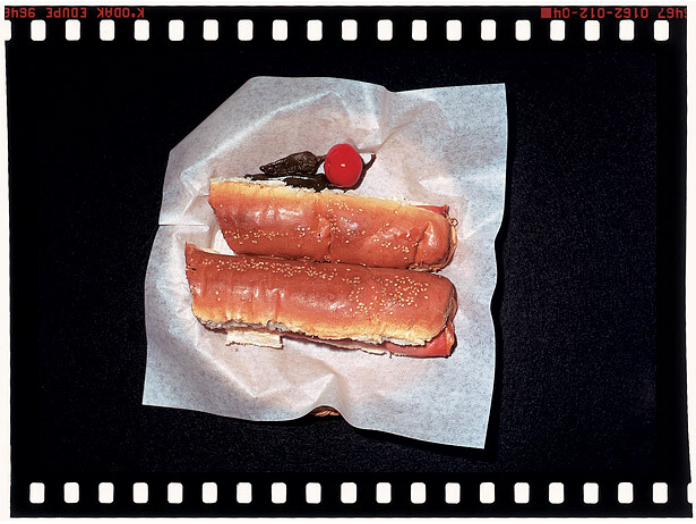
Alongside these images, there is a text in five short chapters—the first opens with the following disclaimer in bold, modern lower case: " **the cook liked to believe that his story pivoted on a parable about the relative merits of fact and fiction in everyday class struggle.**"

Much metanarration follows, as in: " **everyone was satisfied that the first photograph constituted the truth and that the second was a clever piece of propaganda. and from that point on all the photos had a staged look. not because of a moral or aesthetic commitment to fiction but because it was no longer possible to photograph inside the boss's kitchen nor was it possible to work there.**"

But the photonovel also aims for psychological depth. The boss is not a one-dimensional dominator, but a man struggling to reconcile his strict scientific training with the glamour of art; he decides to access the joys of aesthetics through connoisseurship. He makes friends in high places and goes on to start several enterprises, of which the final one is a " **restaurant that seeks a harmony between vivaldi and a staple food of the neapolitan working class. "cheese like carrara marble" was a slogan for his ads on the local classical music station.**"

Each character starts as an archetype and evolves into a vehicle for channeling ideological complexes.

With the introduction of the waitress (who has also studied acting) comes a hilarious—because all too literal—primer on Brecht's notion of the "culinary" in theater: "so this is what brecht meant by culinary opera she thought food and service designed to transport the customer into an



from Allan Sekula, This Ain't China: A Photonovel, 1974. Courtesy of the artist.

imaginary world."

Brecht resisted a theatre that absorbed his audience emotionally because he thought it too easily consumable to allow for critical response, instead developing his strategy of the *Verfremdungseffekt* (the audience's sense of estrangement/alienation from the performers). It is this sense of a higher realism—not of images, but of the performers' and audience's complicity with their creation—that Sekula is after. The conscious effort required of the audience is less about dispelling falsehoods or resolving contradictions than about creating a kind of solidarity in the work of critical viewing.

As a Brechtian enterprise, *This Ain't China* remains under perpetual construction, highlighting mixed motives and ideological confusion. And perhaps its least resolved aspect is the reference to China. After floating without much explanation over the tale of the cook, the boss, the waitress, the other workers, and their photographs, it is taken up in the third chapter. The key passage bears repeating in full:

some of the workers wondered what a brechtian restaurant would be one of the cooks had read a story in the los angeles times about the destruction of "fine chinese cookery" during the cultural revolution. the revolutionary cooks and waiters of peking had reorganized the restaurants to feed working people cheap and nutritious meals banishing the elevated fare that harked back to the rule of the feudal classes and which threatened to become a cultural bulwark of a new class of technocrats and managers. this cook was challenged by the others. this isn't china they said we don't serve elevated fare we serve pretentious fast food. the cook persisted. hadn't they noticed the way well-off left-liberals behaved when dining in a restaurant? a waitress familiar with the university clientele agreed that there was indeed a difference between the intellectuals' words and actions as though one could be a critic in thought alone. but no one was sure how to apply these insights to the present situation.

China, with its new proletarian revolutionary potential. If an equation inherited from the early days of colonial expansion when Europeans searched for the secret of producing the finest ceramics no longer holds, the bigger question that arises is one involving a tendency to project notions of production onto nations. An added twist comes when returning to this work between 2000 and 2010, for this is a period during which the *Times* is more likely to report how the PRC is rapidly becoming the world's top capitalist producer, and quickly point out bad labor practices, the contradiction of Communist Party–led capitalist development, and a host of humanitarian infractions that would never happen *here*. Then again, to say "This Ain't China" anywhere today is to close your eyes to the fact that many of the manufactured goods we encounter *here* are made in China. And this is just the beginning of the signifying spiral to be followed . . .

from Allan Sekula, This Ain't China: A Photonovel, 1974. Courtesy of the artist.

In the way that it is invoked, it remains unclear whether "china" is synonymous with the elevated fare beloved by the bourgeoisie (the use of all lower case in the main text helps us to think of "china" as a common, rather than a proper, noun; in other words, as porcelain); or if Sekula is mainly invoking the country that was then in the midst of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, which lasted from 1966 to 1976 and which, as his fable reports, was achieving the satisfaction of working people so desperately missing from the tale unfolding before our eyes. So do the restaurant workers reading the *Los Angeles Times* not know how to—or do they not *want* to—identify with the Chinese proletariat? Like the cook, I think Sekula was curious about Maoism in those days, but unsure how to apply its insights to the American situation.

The ideological work of Sekula's photonovel is to make the equation China = china strange. Indeed, negating china, with all its bourgeois associations, could mean affirming

Sekula uses the convention (common also to Middle Eastern fables, which often begin with the phrase "There was and there was not . . .") of oscillating between assertion and negation. The chapter subtitles achieve this most economically: " **two / a psychological novel in which the boss invented himself and was in turn invented; three / a political novel in which workers were denied the privilege of psychological treatment; four / a political novel in which workers were allowed the privilege of psychological treatment; five / a psychological novel in which the boss invented the workers.**"

He thus puts in place a play of contradiction that forestalls any notion of positive truth statements (in image or text). The photonovel begins with a negation of China, which puts pressure on every image and word that follows: what we see and read *is not* china/China. The fast food definitely *ain't china* (lower case). But the artist also notes

that he is not filming where he might want to (i.e., in the boss' home) because it is impossible. Negation needs to be read (at least in part) as a form of desire. It is the key to dialectical thinking.

The title phrase asserts an oppositional attitude, one that speaks in the frank slang of the working class. Depending on how you read it, though, it could also uncomfortably approximate the attitude of a redneck Sinophobe. It can be infectious or repelling, or (since the aim is to highlight contradictions) both. Like a Brechtian play, it asks us to negotiate our distance to it rather than assume an empathetic stance. Certain questions remain wide open: Is the strike that is being discussed, even rehearsed, throughout this performative photonovel (the passage on China is followed by an elaborate list of grievances against the boss) meant to be *our* struggle, even as potential? Or is this kind of empathy anathema to the Brechtian schema of *This Ain't China*, and much of Sekula's work? My hunch (and part of my interest in showing the photonovel at e-flux's exhibition space in New York's Chinatown lies in needing to test this hunch) is that the work of this, perhaps Sekula's most ideologically unresolved project, is far from accomplished. If the practice of conjuring and planning a strike brings us closer to the problems of workers, this proximity is also challenged by the fifth chapter's sympathy with the boss, whose "employees did not understand business" and who "paid the same wages as everyone else in the area. he was not a rich man." The lack of resolution comes to a boil in the last line, as the photonovel ends with the warning: " **beware: a workers' defeat has been converted into an artwork.**"

But this cannot really be the last word, as the entire narrative has worked to foster a dialectical impulse, eliciting something to the effect of, "Oh no it ain't!"[5]

from Allan Sekula, This Ain't China: A Photonovel, 1974. Courtesy of the artist.

III. The Bigger Picture

At the time that *This Ain't China* was made, an image of The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was making the rounds throughout the Western world, convincing many left-leaning artists and intellectuals to consider Maoism as a viable alternative to Soviet-style Marxism, which was being progressively discredited as Stalinist atrocities continued to come to light and Soviet tanks rolled into Prague in 1968. China's support for North Vietnam also won it anti-imperialist credentials as the American position became increasingly untenable. In the late 1970s and 1980s, with the increasing availability of information about the famines of Chinese peasants, the humiliation of intellectuals, and the ruthlessness of the Red Guards, Maoism too was discredited. However, the international spread and mutation of Mao Zedong's ideas—precisely in places that are *not* China, but also not the West—cannot be overlooked. It is impossible here to delve into such disparate phenomena as the protracted Naxalite struggle in the Indian state of Bengal or the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela (with its reverberations throughout Latin America); suffice to say that their successes—many on the symbolic front—continued to inspire the leftist political imagination in the West, even after people had become disaffected with regard to China proper. But I do not want to make too much of these cases, which are based mostly on agrarian reform. For in the late 1960s and early 1970s, what was particularly inspiring for the Western culturati about China's proletarian revolution was that it prioritized culture as a site of struggle. Culminating in the protracted Sino-Soviet split, the Cultural Revolution also constituted a revolution within a revolution, promising a fresh start to those dissatisfied with the evolution of socialist imaginaries thus far.

The mystique of Mao Zedong (and Western Maoism's potential influence on the events of May 1968) is signaled already in 1967 by Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise,* a film that features Claude Channes' heady chanson "Mao Mao."[6] The student protagonists, undergoing a self-imposed period of reeducation and self-critique, all quote from Mao's *Little Red Book* and debate correct thinking, contradiction, and the merits of violence in class struggle. *This* certainly ain't China: most of the action takes place inside a big bourgeois flat in Paris and the conditions of the countryside—so valorized by Mao—are represented arch-ironically with glimpses of chickens running near the semi-industrial suburb of Nanterre, the site of early student unrest and rehearsal for May 1968. Yet Godard does present very concrete images and thus something we could call a Western Maoist cultural state-in-formation, which adopts China as the operative chimera. Godard would go on to form the Dziga Vertov Group with Pierre Gorin the next year. This was an experiment in collective production, which yielded some extraordinary experiments in film, and went on to tour the US in 1970 (a tour promoted by Grove Press).

While Godard identified as a Maoist in those days, it is also

Jean Luc-Godard, La Chinoise (1967).

crucial to invoke his relation to Brecht, whose aforementioned *Verfremdungseffekt* the French-Swiss director adapted for cinema—the strategy is used throughout *La Chinoise,* as each of the ultra-cool characters is interviewed by the director, speaking directly into the camera. Not only the breaking of the fourth wall, but also the cool demeanor of the actors recall Roland Barthes' description of Brecht's theatre as: "a phenomenon unknown in the West (perhaps precisely because Brecht had learned it from the East): *a theatre without hysteria.*"[7] Thus, in invoking Brecht, we find further connections to China.

In *Chinese Dreams: Pound, Brecht, Tel Quel*, Eric Hayot crafts a compelling argument (supported by decades of scholarship) for rooting Brecht's groundbreaking dramaturgical development in the director's experience of Chinese theatre in Moscow, amidst Soviet theorists of estrangement like Viktor Shklovsky.[8] Hayot's entire book is remarkable in how it manages to trace the multiple but highly particular Chinas that have appeared in the West as ciphers of desired difference. Studying *Tel Quel*'s "Chinese Thought" issue, published in 1972, Hayot draws on the words of chief editor Phillipe Sollers in concluding: "Chinese Communist thought (and through it, most broadly, China itself) seems to be the resurgent repressed of global capitalism and imperialism."[9] In light of today's oft-reported image of China in the West as a kind of nightmare of capitalist overdevelopment, Sollers' image of China appears as a grand irony. However, the point here is that there is never one true China which operates as a foil to the West, but several, often contradictory ones.

Hayot further situates *Tel Quel*'s dream of China in the context of the broader linguistic turn represented by the journal. Theirs was not the kind of instrumentalizing Orientalism that could more easily be ascribed to an author like Ezra Pound, who (ab)used the teachings of Confucius to develop his fascist ideology. Hayot observes in *Tel Quel*'s sustained attention to Maoist China, but also to ancient Chinese learning, during the early-to-mid 1970s, both a political interest in Maoism and something that activates a linguistic geopolitics: "at some point a certain group of people began to write about the world as though it were a text."[10] Hence (and this seems crucial): "China—the *name alone*—works not simply as a single vision of otherness, but as something like a Borgesian library, full of books with the same name but different texts."[11]

We may be tempted here to consider *This Ain't China* as one of these texts, a work of this transitional time for the global imaginary. As such, Sekula's photonovel could be seen alongside Jörg Immendorff's Maoist pictures, such as *Komm runter, Kollege* (Come Down, Colleague), *Wo stehst du mit deiner Kunst, Kollege?* (Where Do You Stand With Your Art, Colleague?) or *Self-Portrait in the Studio,* all painted in that strangely synchronous year of 1974.[12] I see Immendorff working hard to reconcile his artistic career with the sweeping forces of social transformation. His cartoon-realist painting style is borrowed from the vernacular image of a heroic working class as seen in the emblems (pamphlets, woodcuts, and paintings) of the Chinese Revolution, which were circulating in Maoist bookshops throughout Europe and North America. And yet, even though he is perhaps the most committed Maoist of the German artists, his paintings are as much—if not more—about an individual's struggle to reconcile the proletarian and the artistic life as they are part of the struggle to found a truly working class culture.[13] If The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution offered the promise of culture as the vanguard of revolutionary struggle, it cannot be emphasized enough that this alignment demanded the radical transformation of culture.

There are several more artworks, films, and texts from the 1970s that openly adopt Maoist vernaculars, and it would be difficult for me to enumerate them all here, not because there are so many, but because more work, more research has to be done on the subject. These works do not usually fit easily into the admittedly complex conceptual canon because they take up a form of visuality and a didactic relation to text that seems naıve, especially if when we see them we resist Brecht's radical refusal to distinguish between didacticism and amusement.[14]

However, it is worth noting the work of Canadian artists Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge, because of the depth of their commitment to addressing the big questions of a working-class art. For over three decades, much of their collage/photo- and text-based work has been realized in collaboration with labor unions (many in the car factory town of Oshawa, Ontario), and depicts factory work and life and protest within a visual idiom that often gets dismissed as didactic or crass, but which actually attempts to fuse several important aesthetic lessons. As Allan Sekula recently wrote (of an exemplary project from 1987–1988):

Jörg Immendorff, Wo stehst du mit deiner Kunst, Kollege? (Where do you stand with your art, colleague?), 1973, Acrylic on canvas (diptych). Copyright the artist. Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York and Berlin.

> *Class Work*, like almost all of their projects from the early 1980s onward, is a series of pictures combining studio staging with photomontage. That is to say, it deliberately fuses, or confuses, the space of the page and the space of the stage. This goes back, on one side, to the staging techniques of Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht. On the other side it goes back to fewer of the photomontages of John Heartfield than one might expect.[15]

Sekula's interest in Condé and Beveridge's art dates back to the mid 1970s, when he met the couple while all were living in the culturally shell-shocked New York of the time, shortly before the two moved back to Canada. In the same text, he recalls a work called *It's Still Privileged Art* (1976), which is described as:

> a curious artifact: part confessional in the form of "criticism-self-criticism" as advocated if not actually practiced by a Maoist study group, part feminist consciousness-raising exercise, all presented in a graphic form derived from Chinese pamphlets of the Cultural Revolution period of 1966–1976: text block below the image, two-color printing with dramatically shifting red accents in a field of black-on-white line drawings and type.

But for Sekula, the Maoist look of the work is perhaps not as important as the attempt to depict actual living conditions of workers and artists in solidarity within what he understands as everyday class struggle. As described, *Class Work* involves the depiction of fantasies of Chinese revolutionary life, but these are also rendered as questionable amidst the realities of competition in courting collectors and more general worries about the compatibility of social commitment and artistic practice.

Notable for me is Sekula's observation of a triple negation operative in Condé and Beveridge's work: "of minimalism, of competitive individual authorship in favor of a conjugal collective of two, and of New York as the center of advanced visual art."[16] The big question that arises here is how art, and especially the kind of art that refuses the negation of work, itself proceeds through a negation that multiplies itself. Sekula's "this ain't china"—the phrase alone—should be seen as this kind of multiplying negation. And in this, Sekula departs from Maoist lessons,

Carole Condé + Karl Beveridge, Drawing from booklet It's Still Privileged Art, published by the Art Gallery of Ontario, 1975. Courtesy of the artists.

or at least misreads them productively.

Despite his great emphasis on contradiction (mostly among classes) as an undeniable social fact that necessitates violent revolution, Mao was not a deep dialectician. Slavoj Zižek notes that, in refusing to borrow the notion of a "negation of negation" from Engels' dialectics, Mao committed a great folly, which ultimately led to a return of the repressed: the realization of the most unimpeded capitalism, inside communist China.[17] It is only in negating communism as a negation of capitalism (but then this may have implicated and challenged Mao's own rule), that something new could have been imagined. This observation goes some way toward explaining the ultimate ambivalence about Maoism signaled in *This Ain't China*, and also amidst many artists looking for a way to work on the problems that Maoism identified but failed to solve.

IV. More Work

As Sekula's practice has developed over the years, he has continued to address the problems of aligning his own artistic practice with the general conditions of workers under global capitalism, and in opposition to art's tendency to look the other way. What is notably consistent in his practice is a simultaneous navigation of actual and imaginary geographies. In *Fish Story* and the many works that spin off this study of ports and shipping, the world's seas and oceans serve both as the concrete support of trade *and* as an oceanic allegory of struggle against seemingly insurmountable natural forces—especially the one great leviathan of a force that has been covered up as a product of social will because people continue to be convinced that it is the natural state of things: capitalism. The more recent *Polonia and Other Fables* (2009), photographed inside and outside of Poland (in Chicago), commences with a total dislocation, borrowed from Alfred Jarry, whose spoken preface to the presentation of *Ubu Roi* at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in Paris on December 10, 1896, ends with this note: "As to the action which is about to begin, it takes place in Poland, that is to say, nowhere."[18] Another explosive negation.

This first line reminds me of another—the last spoken in Roman Polanski's noir thriller *Chinatown*, which was also made in 1974. And though I do not want to belabor the comparison, we could say that Polanski's fable is structurally related to Sekula's in that the title (and its geographic subject, Chinatown itself) gets very little play except for one crucial moment. At the very end of the film, after private detective Jake Gittes finally unravels a hidden web of murder, incest, and waste (of thousands of gallons of water during a major draught in the Los Angeles area), he is left damaged and demoralized, but inclined to make one last gesture that might bring all this to light in a more profound way. It is here that his partner turns to him and says: "Forget it, Jake, it's Chinatown." The credits roll, but the negative mystification of Chinatown as the site of all the repressed crimes of Los Angeles has just begun.

Writing all this ahead of an exhibition at the e-flux exhibition space in New York's Chinatown, which will feature Allan Sekula's *This Ain't China: A Photonovel,* I realize that this is an opportunity to see some of these disparate fantasies of China, china, and Chinatown working together, perhaps working in such a way that will also say a lot about how work itself is configured in relation to artistic activity. And I will admit to a level of deep discomfort—the feeling that tends to signal to me that conditions are ripe for a lesson in aesthetics.

One new work presents a particular problem. It is a backlit transparency that will face the street, showing a young Chinese woman in a brightly lit appliance factory, holding a machine part she is helping to manufacture, her eyes closed. I learned that the photograph was taken outside of Guangzhou (a space of exception that—as one of China's special economic zones—both *is* and *is not* China) while Sekula was conducting research for a documentary about working conditions in some of the world's busiest ports entitled *The Forgotten Space* (forthcoming). I wonder if he arrived at this title having heard one too many times, "Forget it, Allan, no one wants to see pictures of real workers . . . Besides, aren't you exploiting these people by taking and showing their pictures?" The problem here lies in the subject relations between artist and worker. These relations seem governed by a radical non-alignment between the artist's ability to see and record and the worker's proverbial blindness—not to mention the race and gender differences. If "wrongs" pile up in Sekula's picture—add to the seemingly unequal subject relations, the fact that we generally reject photos with red eyes or closed eyes—confronting such an image in monumental, back-lit intensity converts the unsightly into an act of

artistic intention. Thus Sekula's work begs the question, "What else is wrong with this picture?"

Ken Lum, Melly Shum Hates Her Job, 1990. Courtesy of the artist.

The work of/with negation, which I think is crucial to artistic practice, continues to adapt in Sekula's work. His strategy is not only to challenge viewers with images of workers and work—thereby negating the denial of workers as valid subjects of aesthetics—but also to bring about a confrontation with those images that form when we close our eyes, forget what we can see, and give ourselves over to the imagination.[19] When I do this, Ken Lum's *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* of 1990 comes to mind—an image I greet each day I go to work (at Witte de With). If Melly's closed-mouth smile partly contradicts the closed eyes of Sekula's photograph, they both assert the strange constant of the Chinese worker as a kind of emblem of the idea of work as a foreign activity. How to show more of this kind of collective dream while also denying it?

Especially because of her calmly closed eyes, the Chinese woman in *Eyes Closed Assembly Line* (2010) looks almost angelic, and thereby tends to transcend her surroundings even as she responds directly to them. Sekula's camera has caught a moment that allows for the brightness of the transparency and the brightness of the fluorescent lights in the factory to work in concert. This strong relation between image and support is aesthetically pleasing. But the woman's closed eyes are an irritation to visual pleasure. And she looks a bit tired and defeated, which returns me to the last line of Sekula's *This Ain't China*: "**beware: a workers' defeat has been converted into an artwork.**" Here I realize that this phrase needs work.

Perhaps it should be: "beware the artwork defeated by the thought that art and work, artists and workers, are foreigners." Perhaps we could consider the Chinese woman with her eyes closed as a comrade: daydreaming of another cultural revolution. On this rare occasion when Sekula presents us with one, very silent image (usually text and other images aid the work of negation), perhaps what comes to the fore as a result is the artist's commitment to developing an aesthetic relation to working life.

X

Monika Szewczyk is a writer and editor based in Berlin and in Rotterdam, where she is the head of publications at Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, and a tutor at the Piet Zwart Institute. She also acts as contributing editor of *A Prior* magazine in Ghent.

1
John Kelsey, "Escape from Discussion Island" in *Meaning Liam Gillick,* ed. Monika Szewczyk et al. (Boston, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 69. Kelsey is a writer, an artist, and one of the agents behind the discursive life form that is Reena Spaulings, as well as the New York–based independent organization, Bernadette Corporation. In creating a virtual life and in running a corporation with anti-corporate claims, he embodies a Deleuzian and Situationist attitude, distinguished by attempts to free up time. That this existence appears to embrace commercial activity (for instance, Bernadette Corporation is active as a commercial gallery in a Lower East Side space and at art fairs), makes it an emblem of sorts of what I observe to be contemporary critical attitudes of (strategic?) affirmation with respect to the capitalist system that such activity nonetheless purports to critique. Liam Gillick (the deliberately unnamed subject of Kelsey's essay) is another interesting case in point, as much of his artistic activity in the past five years has centered around an evolving scenario of a car factory, where workers are left to imagine an existence outside of Fordist notions of work on a production line, for hourly wages. The scenario itself contrives to enact an infinite deferral of the replacement of this space of limbo with measurable production. As I edited Kelsey's essay it made me consider to what extent Gillick's discursive practice is an attempt to align art (which is increasingly seen in galleries established in disused factories) with the reality of factory work.

2
Of course, this is not new; we could recall on the one hand the whole tradition of dandyism (exemplified by artists like Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol); on the other, Hannah Arendt's low estimation of work in her division of the fundamental human activities into labor, work, and action.

3
Here I am thinking of the honored nineteenth-century realist tradition—especially the work of painters like Gustave Courbet, or later painters like Robert Koehler, Winslow Homer, Ford Madox-Brown, and the sculptor Constantin Meunier, the latter two being of particular inspiration for Sekula, as has been discussed by the art historian Hilde van Gelder in several texts, amongst them, "Allan Sekula: The Documenta 12 Project (and Beyond)," *A Prior* 15 (Summer 2007). We could also think of socialist realism, which produces a fiction of happy workers—a highly stigmatized form of representation because it was favored by Stalin and Mao, each of whom failed to make this fiction a reality.

4
It is reprinted from James H. Westbrook's *Your Future in Restaurants and Food Services* (New York: Arco, 1971) .

5
Tempted to single out the photonovel's provocative last phrase in the press release, I receive the following note from Allan: "As for the quotes, I think it should be reduced to the 'truth and fiction in class struggle.' We can leave defeat out of it. When Zhou En Lai was asked his opinion of the French Revolution, he replied 'it is too soon to tell.'"

6
If you're reading this online, have a look: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ecMgcTpmdw . Some of the lyrics are (perhaps badly) translated as: "Vietnam burns and me I spurn Mao Mao / Johnson giggles and me I wiggle Mao Mao / Napalm runs and me I gun Mao Mao / Cities die and me I cry Mao Mao . . ." In 1972, Andy Warhol made a print of the Chinese chairman, as the most famous man of the year.

7
Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* , trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 157.

8
See Eric Hayot, *Chinese Dreams: Pound, Brecht, Tel Quel* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 75–88. The quote from Barthes is taken from Hayot's chapter on Brecht (102). In a section titled "Alienation and Estrangement," Hayot explains a distinction between *Verfremdung* (alienation) and *Befremdung* (strangeness) and argues against the fusion (by scholars such as Renata Berg-Pan, in her 1979 study *Bertolt Brecht and China*) of feelings of strangeness (simply experiencing a different culture) with the feeling of *alienation*. For Brecht, then, alienation (which denies empathy and prevents misinterpretations of the truth mechanisms of theatre) must be produced both by actors and audience. Hayot argues that Brecht's consistent study of Chinese theater and poetry sharpens his critique of authenticity, and in turn refuses the projection of an "authentic" China.

9
Hayot, 121. Sollers characterized the Cultural Revolution as "the battle of a long-repressed *thought,* of mass revolutionary practice now consolidated in the light of day" (cited in Hayot, 118–119). This emphasis on China as the repressed of the West is also traced in Julia Kristeva's contributions to the same issue.

10
Hayot, 123.

11
Hayot, 125.

12
This is the same year that the entire *Tel Quel* group, including Roland Barthes, went to China. Hayot's chapter on the journal opens with a lengthy quote, which we will find out is from Julia Kristeva's *Des Chinoises* (Of Chinese Women). Immendorff's *Komm runter* is likely a nod to Mao's call to urban intellectuals to come down to the countryside for reeducation.

13
The online press release of a recent exhibition of his works from the period at the Michael Werner Gallery in New York (October 9–December 19, 2009) recalls: "In 1970 Jörg Immendorff joined the League Against Imperialism, pledging henceforth to direct his creative endeavors to the service of the German Maoist party. Disillusioned by the outcome of European political events of the late nineteen sixties, and increasingly dissatisfied with his role as an artist, Immendorff sought to produce paintings for and about the working masses."

14
On this point, see Hayot, 60.

15
Allan Sekula, "...The Red Guards Come and Go, Talking of Michelangelo," in *Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge: Class Works* , ed. Bruce Barber (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2008), 45–50. In this text, Sekula cites examples from the Canadian press, especially the writing of the influential conservative critic John Bentley Mays, to illustrate the dismissive tone that has tended to obscure serious attention to Condé and Beveridge's work. As a student, I spent quite some time with these images while doing conservation and archival work at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, on the campus of the University of British Columbia, which has an important collection of Condé and Beveridge's work; and though I cannot say I have resolved my misgivings about Condé and Beveridge's didactic aesthetics, they did make me laugh. And this in turn always called up for me Brecht's anti-romantic dictum: "spasms of the diaphragm generally offer better chances for thought than spasms of the soul." See Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Understanding Brecht* , trans. Anna Bostock (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 100.

16
Sekula, "The Red Guards," 49.

17
See Slavoj Zižek, "Introduction: Mao Tse-Tung: The Marxist Lord of Misrule," in *Mao: On Practice and Contradiction* (London and New York: Verso, 2007), 11–21 (especially).

18
Alfred Jarry, "Preface" to *Ubu Roi*, trans. Beverly Keith and Gershon Legman (Mineola, NY: Dover Press, 2003), 3. On page 9 of this Dover edition, the play's title is *Ubu Roi or The Poles.* It should be noted that on the date Jarry spoke his preface Poland was still partitioned and therefore had no sovereign territory, was indeed nowhere. Sekula's new series weaves images of and text from the Polish community in Chicago with furtive shots inside Poland of the outskirts of areas rendered inaccessible because of secret US military activities, purportedly the transport and torture of unlawful combatants. The quote from *Ubu Roi* was reproduced in vinyl on the wall of the Zacheta Gallery in Warsaw, where *Polonia and Other Fables* is installed for Sekula's eponymous survey, curated for this venue by Karolina Lewandowska.

19
As such, he also ventures to reform his own approach. I am reminded of an image from *This Ain't China,* of the cook with his

eyes almost insanely crossed. Here, the motif of "incorrect vision" already surfaces, but the particular, performative heroism of many of the photographs in *This Ain't China* is not operating in the new transparency. The image departs from the Brechtian complicity of subject, camera, and audience present in Godard's films and Sekula's earlier photography. Sekula's interest in "performance under working conditions" (to paraphrase the title of his Generali Foundation retrospective and the title of an early, never-exhibited video) remains.