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Editors

What is Contemporary Art? Issue Two

What is contemporary art? First, and most obviously: why is this question *not* asked? That is to say, why do we simply leave it to hover in the shadow of attempts at critical summation in the grand tradition of twentieth-century artistic movements? The contemporary delineates its border invisibly: no one is proud to be "contemporary," and no one is ashamed. Indeed, the question of where artistic movements have gone seems embedded in this question, if only because "the contemporary" has become a single hegemonic "ism" that absorbs all proposals for others. When there are no longer any artistic movements, it seems that we are all working under the auspices of this singular ism that is deliberately (and literally) not one at all...

Widespread usage of the term "contemporary" seems so self-evident that to further demand a definition of "contemporary art" may be taken as an anachronistic exercise in cataloguing or self-definition. At the same time, it is no coincidence that this is usually the tenor of such large, elusive questions: it is precisely through their apparent self-evidence that they cease to be problematic and begin to exert their influence in hidden ways; and their paradox, their *unanswerability* begins to constitute a condition of its own, a place where people work.

So it is with the contemporary: a term we know well enough through its use as a de facto standard by museums, which denote their currency through an apparently modest temporal signifier: to be contemporary is to be savvy, reactive, dynamic, aware, timely, in constant motion, aware of fashion. The term has clearly replaced the use of "modern" to describe the art of the day. With this shift, out go the grand narratives and ideals of modernism, replaced by a default, soft consensus on the immanence of the present, the empiricism of *now*, of what we have directly in front of us, and what they have in front of them over there. But in its application as a de facto standard this watery signifier has through accumulation nevertheless assumed such a scale that it certainly *must* mean something.

If we pursue it further, however, and try to pin it down, it repeatedly escapes our grasp through a set of evasive maneuvers. And perhaps we can say that the ism that is simultaneously *not* is its *evasive maneuver number one*: the summation that does not admit to being critical or projective (in the grand tradition of modernist ideological voices), to denoting an inside and an outside, a potential project, but that is simultaneously *there*, saying nothing. So why the extra qualifier? Why insert an extra word into "museum of art"? Like any evasive maneuver, this one works by producing a split: between the term's de facto usage, which momentarily holds your attention by suggesting the obvious parallel with the "current," with its promise of flexibility and dynamism, while simultaneously building a museum collection along very specific parameters—masking ideology. To follow the self-evidence of the question at hand, we could note the

morphological Frank Gehry walls of a spectacular contemporary museum to be in fact made of concrete and steel—their suggestion of formless flexibility, their celebration of the informal, is frozen in some of the heaviest, most expensive, and burdensome institutional public sculpture around. The contemporary suggests movement, yet it does not itself budge.

This contemporary museum is acutely aware of other contemporary museums in other places. It is a node in a network of similar structures, and there is a huge amount of movement between them. *Evasive maneuver number two* could be the one that shifts your focus to a presumably de-centered field of work: a field of contemporary art that stretches across boundaries, a multi-local field drawing from local practices and embedded local knowledge, the vitality and immanence of many histories in constant simultaneous translation. This is perhaps the contemporary's most redeeming trait, and we certainly do not miss the old power centers and master narratives.

In many ways, this is an evasive maneuver worth making. And we can even avoid the conservative critique that this horizontal movement cheapens what it encounters, reducing it to spectacle. Certainly the quantity of work placed on display can become an issue, but networks now spread much wider than ever before—much has been made available, and it is up to you to sort through it. The contemporary as a cacophonic mess gives us enormous hope.

But let's not underestimate how the contemporary art system can atomize with some degree of cohesiveness. True, many peripheries have been mobilized not as peripheries, but as centers in their own right. But, seen from the so-called peripheries and centers alike, does this system really learn, or does it merely engage with its many territories by installing the monolithic prospect of hyperspectacle? If we are indeed aware that something is lost and something is gained in any process of translation, are we as certain that the regime of visibility installed by contemporary art functions by placing various local vernaculars into contact with each other on their own terms (as it promises to do), or is it something like the international biennial circuit, asserting its own language distinct from center and periphery alike?

In this way, the contemporary starts to reveal itself to be something like a glass ceiling, an invisible barrier that seals us together precisely by its very invisibility. We acknowledge one another, individual artists, certain cities, social scenes, a few collective tendencies that seem to arrive more as common interests than social projections, but nothing attains critical mass under any umbrella beyond "the contemporary." It's not so different from how we understand capitalism to work, through one-to-one relationships that are seemingly too small-scale to be complicit with anything, masking the hidden ultimatum of an innocuous protocol—if we begin to discern its shape, either it shifts, or we become obsolete: *uncontemporary*. But then perhaps that would not be such a bad thing...

—Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle

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

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Hal Foster

Contemporary Extracts

On this occasion I will simply quote from several of the responses I received to a questionnaire—subsequently published in *October* magazine—about "contemporary art." First, my questions:

The category of "contemporary art" is not a new one. What is new is the sense that, in its very heterogeneity, much present practice seems to float free of historical determination, conceptual definition, and critical judgment. Such paradigms as "the neo-avant-garde" and "postmodernism," which once oriented some art and theory, have run into the sand, and, arguably, no models of much explanatory reach or intellectual force have risen in their stead. At the same time, perhaps paradoxically, "contemporary art" has become an institutional object in its own right: in the academic world there are professorships and programs, and in the museum world departments and institutions, all devoted to the subject, and most tend to treat it as apart not only from prewar practice but from most postwar practice as well.

Is this floating-free real or imagined? A merely local perception? A simple effect of the end-of-grand-narratives? If it is real, how can we specify some of its principal causes, that is, beyond general reference to "the market" and "globalization"? Or is it indeed a direct outcome of a neoliberal economy, one that, moreover, is now in crisis? What are some of its salient consequences for artists, critics, curators, and historians—for their formation and their practice alike? Are there collateral effects in other fields of art history? Are there instructive analogies to be drawn from the situation in other arts and disciplines? Finally, are there benefits to this apparent lightness of being?[1]

As you can see, the questions are directed at critics and curators based in North America and Western Europe; I hope they do not appear too provincial as a result. I have arranged the extracts with an eye to connections that exist between them. My purpose here is simply to suggest the state of the debate on "the contemporary" in my part of the world today.

First from Grant Kester, a historian of contemporary art, based in southern California:

> The problem of "the contemporary" is rooted in a tension that emerged when Western art history was first formalized as a discipline. The generation of European historians that helped establish the discipline in the mid-nineteenth century found itself confronted by a vast range of new and unfamiliar artifacts that were circulating throughout Europe as a result of colonial expansion into Africa, Asia, and the Americas, as well as early archaeological excavations in Italy and Greece. Historians and philosophers raised the question of how contemporary viewers could transcend the differences that existed between

themselves and very different cultures whose works of art they admired—cultures whose shared meanings were inaccessible to them due to distances of time or space.

Then from James Elkins, a meta-theorist of art history, based in Chicago:

From the perspectives of "world art history" and its critics today, "the contemporary" would appear to be either exempted from the discipline of art history, because of its position outside or before art histories, or exemplary of the discipline, because of its newfound universality (i.e., by definition "the contemporary" exists everywhere).

Next from Miwon Kwon, a contemporary art critic and historian based in Los Angeles:

Contemporary art history sits at a crossroads in the uneven organization of the subfields that comprise the discipline of art history. Within most university art history departments, one group of subfields covering Western developments is organized chronologically, as periods (i.e., from Ancient to Modern, with Medieval and Renaissance in between). Another group of subfields that covers non-Western developments is identified geographically, as culturally discrete units even if they encompass an entire continent (i.e., African, Chinese, Latin American, etc.) The category of contemporary art history, while institutionally situated as coming *after* the Modern, following the temporal axis of Western art history as the most recent period (starting in 1945 or 1960 depending on how a department divides up faculty workload or intellectual territory), is also the space in which the contemporaneity of histories from around the world must be confronted simultaneously as a disjunctive yet continuous intellectual horizon, integral to the understanding of the present (as a whole). Contemporary art history, in other words, marks both a temporal bracketing and a spatial encompassing, a site of a deep tension between very different formations of knowledge and traditions, and thus a challenging pressure point for the field of art history in general.

For instance, what is the status of contemporary Chinese art history? What is the time frame for such a history? How closely should it be linked to Chinese art, cultural, or political history? How coordinated should it be with Western art history or aesthetic discourse? Is contemporary Chinese art history a subfield of contemporary art history? Or are they comparable categories, with the presumption that the unnamed territory of contemporary art history is Western/American?

Then from Joshua Shannon, a historian of postwar art, from the mid-Atlantic area near Washington, D.C.:

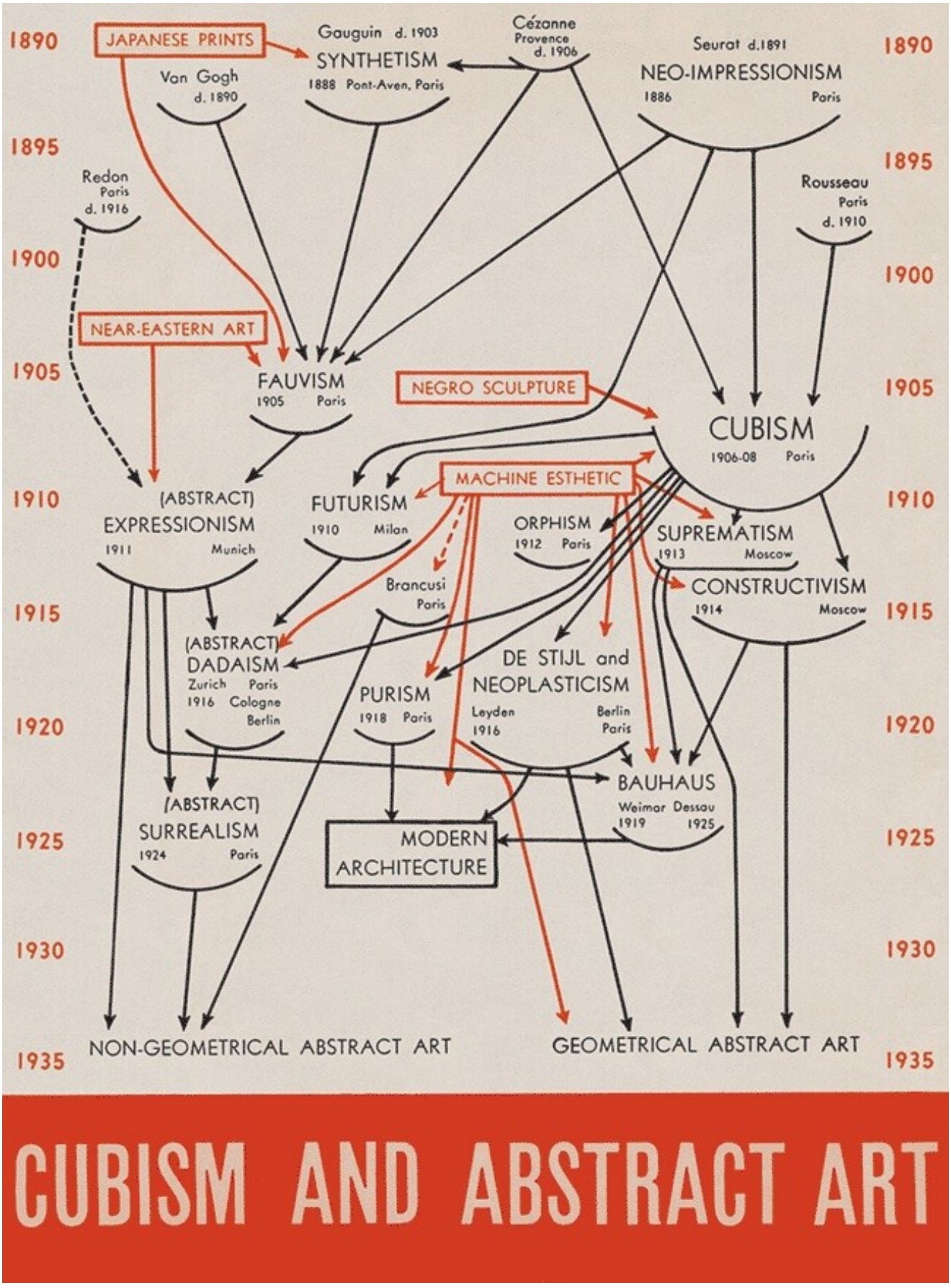
In the last twenty-five years, the academic study of contemporary art has grown from a fringe of art history to the fastest-developing field in the discipline. It is not so long ago that dissertations on living artists were all but prohibited, while statistics published this year by the College Art Association confirm that job searches in contemporary art history now outnumber those in any other specialization, with almost twice as many positions in the field, for example, as in Renaissance and Baroque combined. We might wonder whether a discipline too long afraid of the present has now become besotted with it.

Next from Richard Meyer, a theorist of "the contemporary," based in Los Angeles:

Recently, I have put to my "contemporary" students several questions that are at once straightforward and aggressive. Why are you studying art history if what you really want is to write about the current moment? Where are the archival and research materials on which you will draw—in the files of a commercial gallery, in a drawer in the artist's studio, in the works of art themselves, in a series of interviews that you intend to conduct with the artist, in a theoretical paradigm that you plan to apply to the work, or in an ideological critique of the current moment? What distinguishes your practice as a contemporary art historian from that of an art critic? And how does the history of art matter to the works you plan to write about and to the scholarly contribution you hope to make?

Then from Pamela Lee, a scholar on postwar art, based in San Francisco:

Call it "the moving target syndrome." At what point does a stack of press releases turn into something like a proper reception history? How do you write about a contemporary artist whose work shifts radically in mid-stream? And what does one do when the topics that seemed so pressing and so critical just a few



Alfred Barr's Evolution of Abstract Art diagram, 1936.

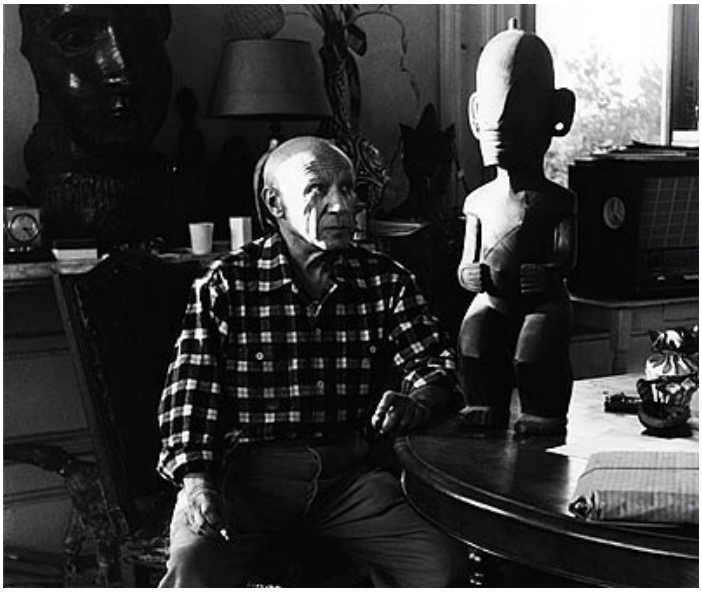
short art-world seasons back lose that sense of urgency? There is, then, a paradoxical way we might characterize the problem: contemporary art history is premature because it is always in a perpetual state of becoming, one that alternates endlessly between novelty and critical (as well as commercial) exhaustion.

Next from Mark Godfrey, a young curator of contemporary art at Tate Modern in London:

> If it is correct that no "paradigms" have emerged in the place of those such as "the neo-avant-garde" and "postmodernism," then one should first look precisely to the success of those discourses to understand why. The critical discourse of postmodernism caused most historians and critics to distrust any overarching and monolithic model that would account for what is most compelling about contemporary art. At the same time, following the impact of postcolonial theory and a simple widening of our horizons, American and European art historians and curators have become far more attentive to contemporary art as it emerges across the world. Most acknowledge that serious art is being made in China, Latin America, South Africa, and so on, but few have the opportunities to see what is being made. With this situation, who would presume to name a new paradigm? A new name would assume a totalizing explanatory power and be akin to a hubristic, neocolonial move. One also begins to distrust the presumptions of the previous paradigms. How useful are the terms "neo-avant-garde" or "postmodernism" when we think about the art that emerged in centers away from North America and Western Europe where modernism and the avant-garde signified quite differently?

Then from Terry Smith, an Australian art historian with special expertise on the contemporary, based in Pittsburgh:

> How has the current world-picture changed since the aftermath of the Second World War led to the reconstruction of an idea of Europe, since decolonization opened up Africa and Asia, with China and India emerging to superpower status but others cycling downwards, since the era of revolution versus dictatorship in South America led first to the imposition of neoliberal economic regimes and then to a continent-wide swing towards populist socialism? As the system built on First-, Second-, Third-, and Fourth-world divisions imploded, what new arrangements of power came into being? Now that the post-1989 juggernaut of one hyperpower,



Picasso with his collection.

> unchecked neoliberalism, historical self-realization, and the global distribution of ever-expanding production and consumption tips over the precipice, what lies in the abyss it has created? Above all, how do we, in these circumstances, connect the dots between world-picturing and place-making, the two essential parameters of our being?

Next from Alex Alberro, a Canadian historian of postwar art, based in New York:

> The contemporary is witnessing the emergence of a new technological imaginary following upon the unexpected and unregulated global expansion of the new communication and information technologies of the Internet. For one thing, technological art objects have increasingly come to replace tangible ones in art galleries and museums, which have seen an upsurge in high-tech hybrids of all kinds, from digital photography, to film and video installations, to computer and other new-media art. The "white cube" has begun to be replaced by the "black box," and the small-screen film or video monitor by the large-scale wall projection. For another thing, the image has come to replace the object as the central concern of artistic production and analysis. In the academy, the rise of visual studies in this period is symptomatic of the new preeminence of the image. Furthermore, the imaginary of this shift from analog to digital has had a number of unpredictable effects. One of the most striking of these is the proliferation of artworks that employ fiction and animation to narrate facts, as if to say that today the real must be fictionalized in order to

be thought, that the real is so mind-boggling that it is easier to comprehend by analogy.

Doug Aitken, Sleepwalkers, 2007.

Then from Tim Griffin, editor-in-chief of *Artforum*, based in New York:

> The potential irony of contemporary art is that by signaling its stand apart, this art actually articulates itself as another niche within the broader cultural context—as just one more interest among so many others. Such a development is paradoxical in its implications. It becomes increasingly important for art to assert its own distinctiveness in order to exist—often by reinscribing itself within its various histories, projecting previous eras' interpretive models onto present circumstances—at the same time that such an assertion makes art resemble current mass culture all the more.

Next from Yates McKee, a young activist/critic based in the Midwest:

> The multiple institutionalizations of contemporary art entail new modes of affiliation, possibility, and complicity for artistic and critical activity. Without disavowing the urgency of macro-systemic analysis, assessing these entanglements is a matter of close, site-specific reading rather than blanket celebration or denunciation. This means refusing to reduce contemporary art to a flavor-of-the-month novelty either as peddled by art-market boosters, on the one hand, or as preemptively dismissed by guardians of art-historical authority on the basis of melancholic—and often hypocritically self-exculpating—narratives of "the cultural logic of late capitalism," on the other. Following the example of curator and critic Okwui Enwezor, the increasingly transnational scope of contemporary art in discursive, institutional, and economic terms needs to be recognized as a productive intellectual challenge to entrenched artistic, critical, and historical traditions, requiring the latter two to engage artistic practice in light of the ongoing contradictions of what Enwezor has called the "postcolonial constellation."

Then from T. J. Demos, a historian of contemporary art, based in London:

> One risk is to fall victim to the ultimately patronizing multicultural "respect" for difference that disavows any criticality whatsoever. The latter potentially disguises a neocolonial relation to the Other, as Slavoj Zižek argues, for whom multiculturalism may disclose "a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism, a 'racism with a distance'—it 'respects' the Other's identity, conceiving the Other as a self-enclosed 'authentic' community towards which he, the multiculturalist, maintains a distance rendered possible by his privileged universal position."[2]

Adolf Hitler presents Hermann Goering with The Falconer, 1880, a painting by the nineteenth century Austrian academic painter Hans Makart. Hitler bought the painting legitimately from art dealer Karl Haberstock.

Next from Kelly Baum, a young curator of contemporary art at my home institution, Princeton University:

> What if art's heterogeneity signals possibility instead

> of dysfunction? What if heterogeneity is art's pursuit instead of its affliction? What if, in its very heterogeneity, art were to productively engage current socio-political conditions—conditions that are reducible to neither neo-liberalism nor globalization?
>
> I think what we are seeing today is art miming its context. I think we are witnessing art performing "agonism," "disaggregation," and "particularization." Heterogeneity isn't just contemporary art's condition, in other words; it is its subject as well.

Finally from Rachel Haidu, a young historian of postwar art, based in upstate New York:

> Why—other than for the narcissistic pleasures related to knowing—do we want a relationship to history? Your questions frame the relevance of history to our critical relationships to art, but what about those desires, fantasies, and displacements of which criticism is made? Certainly they are wedged into our criticism of art's relation to history. When art forces us to examine them in specific and productive ways, we are lucky: otherwise, what is the point of asking art (let alone the institutionalization of art) to find historical complexity or weight? For the sake of weight alone? To reassure us of our relations to a history without which we would feel . . . guilty? Irrelevant?

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1
Hal Foster for the Editors, "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary,'" *October* 130 (Fall 2009): 3.

2
Slavoj Zižek, "Multiculturalism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism," *New Left Review* 225 (Sept/Oct 1997): 44.

Cuauhtémoc Medina

Contemp(t)orary: Eleven Theses

1.

It would appear that the notion of "the contemporary" is irredeemably vain and empty; in fact, we would not be entirely mistaken in suspecting "contemporary art" to be a concept that became central to art as a result of the need to find a replacement, rather than as a matter of legitimate theorizing. For above all, "contemporary" is the term that stands to mark the death of "modern." This vague descriptor of aesthetic currency became customary precisely when the critique of "the modern" (its mapping, specification, historicizing, and dismantling) exiled it to the dustbin of history. At that point, when current art lost the word that had provided it with a programmatic stance, chronological proximity became relevant—even if it did not indicate anything of substance. To be sure, "contemporary" fails to carry even a glimmer of the utopian expectation—of change and possible alternatives—encompassed by "the new."

2.

Nothing would seem to so eloquently suggest the lack of substance in "contemporary art" than the facility with which it lends itself to practical adjustments. Museums, academic institutions, auction houses, and texts tend to circumvent the need to categorize recent artistic production by declaring the "contemporariness" of certain holdings or discourses on the basis of a chronological convention: the MOCA in Los Angeles takes into account everything made "after" 1940; the contemporary holdings of Tate Modern in London were all created sometime after 1965; Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz's sourcebook *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art* takes 1945 as its starting point. In other contexts—particularly on the periphery—the horizon of contemporaneity tends to be narrower, usually defined as appearing in the early 1990s and associated with the rise of the postcolonial debate, the collapse of the Euro-American monopoly over the narrative of modernism, or the end of the Cold War. In any case, "contemporary art" appears to be based on the multiple significance of an "after."

3.

However, as is usually the case with chronological categories, this neutrality may soon unfold into a noun with a certain substance. As with "the modern," it would not be hard to imagine "the contemporary" one day becoming oxymoronically fixed, specified, and dated as the signifier of a particular shift in the dialectics of culture. There are at least two senses in which the contemporariness of artistic culture involves a poignant turn. There is the blatant immediacy of the relationship between a contemporary practice and its host society, and then there is its integration into a critical apparatus.

Never since the advent of historical relativism at the end of the eighteenth century has the art of the day had a less contentious social reception. Claims concerning the esoteric nature of contemporary art in the West mostly derive from the density of theoretical discourse on the topic—discourse that actually operates on the basis of practices that involve a certain level of general legibility. It may well be that one of the main characteristics of contemporary art is to always demand, at least, a double reception: first as part of general culture, and later as an attempt at sophisticated theoretical recuperation. Nonetheless, the fact that contemporary practices are linked to a hypertrophy of discourse that tries to mobilize them against the grain of their social currency is itself an indication of the extent to which contemporary art is an integrated culture that makes use of widely available referents, involving poetic operations that are closely linked to the historical sensibility of the day. It is the interlocking of extreme popularity and the rarefaction of criticism and theory that define this phenomenon. "Contemporary art" is, therefore, a form of aristocratic populism—a dialogical structure in which extreme subtlety and the utmost simplicity collide, forcing individuals of varying class, ethnic, and ideological affiliations—which might have otherwise kept them separated—to smell each other in artistic structures.

Reclaim the Streets Movement, Demonstration in Trafalgar Square, 1997. Graffiti on the National Gallery of Art. Courtesy the author.

4.

The ideal of modern beauty that Stendhal articulated in 1823 as "the art of presenting to the peoples . . . works which, in view of the present-day state of their customs and beliefs, afford them the utmost possible pleasure," has finally been attained.[1] As a consequence, a temporal rift between radical aesthetics and social mores no longer exists today. The question of the death of the avant-garde ought to be reformulated to account for this institutionalization of the contemporary. As we all know, the schism between the project of modern subjectivity and the modern bourgeois subject was defined in historical terms as consisting of advances, regressions, re-enactments, futurities, and anachronism, and summarized in the politics of the avant-garde, with all the militaristic implications of the term. More than the death of the avant-garde as a project of cultural subversion—always a ridiculous argument coming from the mouth of the establishment; such radicalism is sure to re-emerge in one disguise or another every time a poetic-political challenge to the *nomos* and *episteme* of dominant society becomes necessary—the shock of the postmodern involved the realization that "the new" could no longer be considered foreign to a subjectivity constantly bombarded by media and burning with the desire for consumption.

In any case, the temporal dislocation characteristic of both modernism and the avant-garde—the way the art of the day constantly defied the notion of a synchronic present (not limited to the chronological trope of the *avant*, which encompasses any number of other historical folds, from the theme of primitivism to the negotiations with obsolescence and the ruin, the refusal of the chronology of industrial labor, and so forth)—seems to have finally found some closure. In a compelling and scary form, modern capitalist society finally has an art that aligns with the audience, with the social elites that finance it, and with the academic industry that serves as its fellow traveler. In this sense art has become literally *contemporary*, thanks to its exorcism of aesthetic alienation and the growing integration of art into culture. When, by the millions, the masses vote with their feet to attend contemporary art museums, and when a number of cultural industries grow up around the former citadel of negativity, fine art is replaced by something that already occupies an intermediary region between elite entertainment and mass culture. And its signature is precisely the frenzy of "the contemporary": the fact that art fairs, biennales, symposia, magazines, and new blockbuster shows and museums constitute evidence of art's absorption into that which is merely *present*—not better, not worse, not hopeful, but a perverted instance of *the given*.

5.

In this way, the main cultural function of art institutions and ceremonies in relation to global capitalism today is to instantiate the pandemic of contemporariness as a mythological scheme occurring (and recurring) each time we instigate this "program." After all, the art world has surpassed other, more anachronistic auratic devices (the cult of the artist, of nationality or creativity) as the profane global religion for making "the contemporary" manifest. The hunger to be part of the global art calendar has more to do with the hope of keeping up with the frenzy of time than with any actual aesthetic pursuit or interest.

"Perhaps it will be the task of an artist as detached from aesthetic preoccupations, and as intent on the energetic as Marcel Duchamp, to reconcile art and the people." —Guillaume Apollinaire, Méditations esthétiques — Les Peintres cubistes. Photo by the author at MAM, São Paulo, 2006.

Mallarmé's dictum that "one must be absolutely modern" has become a duty to stay up-to-date. But given the lack of historical occasions which could represent an opportunity to experience the core of our era—pivotal revolutionary moments of significant social change or upheaval—a participation in the eternal renewal of the contemporary might not be completely misguided, for it at least invokes a longing for the specter of an enthusiasm that asks for more than just the newest technological gadget.

6.

But, once again, the devil of contemporaneousness does its deed: whereas the system of modern art was territorialized in a centrifugal structure of centers and peripheries around modernity's historical monopoly in the liberal-capitalist enclave of the North Atlantic, we now face a regime of international generalization transmitting the pandemic of the contemporary to the last recesses of the earth. In fact, the main reason for the craze surrounding the contemporary art market in recent years (and for its not having immediately collapsed after the plunge of global capitalism) has been the market's lateral extension: bourgeoises who would previously buy work within their local art circuits became part of a new private jet set of global elites consuming the same brand of artistic products, ensuring spiraling sales and the celebration of an age in which endless "editions" allow artworks to be disseminated throughout an extended geography. In turn, each enclave of these globalized elites drives the development of a contemporary art infrastructure in their own city, using a standard mixture of global art references and local "emergent" schools. Contemporary art is defined by a new global social context in which disenfranchised wealthy individuals (who have abdicated their roles as industrial and commerce managers to the bureaucracy of CEOs) seek a certain civic identity through aesthetic "philanthropy." In this fashion they interact with a new social economy of services performed by artists, critics, and curators—services with symbolic capital that rests on an ability to trade in a semblance of "the contemporary." Contemporary art thus becomes the social structure defined by the dialectic between the new private jet set and a *jet proletariat*.

7.

This new machinery of the dialectic between the global elites of financial capitalism and the nomadic agents of global culture would be easy to dismiss as critically meaningless were it not for the way "the contemporary" also stands for the leveling of the temporal perception of cultural geography and of a certain political orientation. Particularly for those who come from the so-called periphery (the South and the former socialist world), "the contemporary" still carries a certain utopian ring. For indeed, notwithstanding the cunning imbalances of power that prevail in the art world, the mere fact of intervening in the matrix of contemporary culture constitutes a major political and historical conquest. The global art circus of biennales, fairs, and global art museums has forced an end to the use of a metaphor that understood geography in terms of historical succession—it is no longer possible to rely upon the belatedness of the South in presuming that artistic culture goes from the center to the periphery. Although it probably does not seem so extraordinary now, the voicing of the need to represent the periphery in the global art circuits was, to a great extent, a claim to the right to participate in producing "the contemporary." And while the critical consequences of the policies of inclusion are less central to the agenda of the South than the critique of stereotypes, the activation of social memory, and the pursuit of different kinds of cultural agency, it remains the case that "contemporary art" marks the stage at which different geographies and localities are finally considered within the same network of questions and strategies. Art becomes "contemporary" in the strong sense when it refers to the progressive obsolescence of narratives that concentrated cultural innovation so completely in colonial and imperial metropolises as to finally identify modernism with what we ought to properly describe as "NATO art."

8.

This is not to say that such a process of inclusion is free from its own deformities: in many instances, a peculiar neurosis provoked by the stereotyping of ethnic, regional, or national authenticity and the pressures to

Javier Tellez, One flew over the void, 2005. Public action consisting in having a canon man cross the Mexican-American Border.

accommodate art from the periphery into a subsidiary category of metropolitan referents produces so-called "alternative modernism" or "global conceptualism." Nonetheless, the inclusion of the South in the narratives of "the contemporary" has already disrupted the genealogies of the present, such as the simplified concept of the "post-conceptual" that arose in the late 1980s to describe an apparent commonality between the radical artistic revolutions of the 1960s and the advanced art of its day. In its various historical and geographical settings, "contemporary art" claims a circularity between 1968, conceptualism, Brazilian Neo-Concretism or the French *Nouvelle Vague,* and recent works trapped in perpetual historical mirroring. In this sense, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, "contemporary art" appears as the figure of a revolution in standstill, awaiting the moment of resolution.

Teatro Ojo, "Forget 1968 ... but never its style." Public street interventions, October 2008, Mexico City.

9.

Complicated as this may be, however, it does not blur the radical significance of the cultural transformation that took place in artistic practice in the years after 1960. One crucial element of "contemporary art" is the embrace of a certain "unified field" in the concept of art. Beyond the de-definition of specific media, skills, and disciplines, there is some radical value in the fact that "the arts" seem to have merged into a single multifarious and nomadic kind of practice that forbids any attempt at specification beyond the micro-narratives that each artist or cultural movement produces along the way. If "contemporary art" refers to the confluence of a general field of activities, actions, tactics, and interventions falling under the umbrella of a single poetic matrix and within a single temporality, it is because they occupy the ruins of the "visual arts." In this sense, "contemporary art" carries forward the lines of experimentation and revolt found in all kinds of disciplines and arts that were brought "back to order" after 1970, forced to reconstitute their tradition.

"Contemporary art" then becomes the sanctuary of repressed experimentation and the questioning of subjectivity that was effectively contained in any number of arts, discourses, and social structures following the collapse of the twentieth century's revolutionary projects. I suspect that the circularity of our current cultural narratives will only be broken once we stop experiencing contemporary culture as the *déjà vu* of a revolution that never entirely took place.

10.

By the same token, it is no coincidence that the institutions, media, and cultural structures of the contemporary art world have become the last refuge of political and intellectual radicalism. As various intellectual traditions of the left appear to be losing ground in political arenas and social discourses, and despite the way art is entwined with the social structures of capitalism, contemporary art circuits are some of the only remaining spaces in which leftist thought still circulates as public discourse. In a world where academic circuits have ossified and become increasingly isolated, and where the classical modern role of the public intellectual dwindles before the cataclysmic power of media networks and the balkanization of political opinion, it should come as no surprise that contemporary art has (momentarily) become something like the refuge of modern radicalism. If we should question the ethical significance of participating in contemporary art circuits, this sole fact ought to vindicate us. Just as the broken lineages of experimental music, cinema, and literature finally found themselves in the formless and undefined poetic space of contemporary art in general, we should not be shocked to find the cultural sector—apparently most compromised by the celebration of capitalism—functioning as the vicarious public sphere in which trends such as deconstruction, postcolonial critique, post-Marxism, social activism, and psychoanalytic theory are grounded. It would seem that, just as the art object poses a continuous mystery—a space of resistance and reflection leading towards enlightenment—so do the institutions and power structures of contemporary art also function as the critical self-consciousness of capitalist hypermodernity.

11.

However, given the negative relationship of art to its own time, one would suspect the current radicalization of art and the constant politicization of its practice to be dangerous symptoms. Just as modern art rescued forms of practice, sensibility, and skills that were crushed by the industrial system, so does contemporary art seem to have the task of protecting cultural critique and social radicalism from the banality of the present. Unlike theorists who lament the apparent co-opting of radicalism

Thomas Hirschorn, Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?, book-object, ca. 78.5 x 48.5 x 6,5 cm, 110 (+ 10) signed and numbered copies, Berlin, 2005.

and critique by the official sphere of art, we would need to consider the possibility that our task may consist, in large part, of protecting utopia—seen as the necessary collusion of the past with what lies ahead—from its demise at the hands of the ideology of present time. This is, to be sure, an uncomfortable inheritance. At the end of the day, it involves the memory of failure and a necessary infatuation with the powers of history. I do not know a better way to describe such a genealogy than by offering a quotation from the Dada artist and historian Hans Richter, who summarized the experience of Dada as that of "the vacuum created by the sudden arrival of freedom and the possibilities *it seemed* to offer."[2] And it may well be that contemporary art's ethical imperative is to deal with the ambivalence of the experience of emancipation. If art has indeed become the sanctuary of revolutionary thought, it is because it deals with the memory of a number of ambiguous interruptions. With this, we hopefully find an advantage to the constant collision of perfume and theory that we experience in contemporary art events around the world.

X

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1
Stendhal, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Georges Eudes (Paris: Larrive, 1954), 16:27, quoted in Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* , 2nd ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), 4.

2
Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1997), 136.

Hans Ulrich Obrist

Manifestos for the Future

> Of whom and of what are we contemporaries? What does it mean to be contemporary?
> —Giorgio Agamben[1]

According to common-sense understanding, defining what we mean by the "contemporary" in art presents few problems: anything being produced in the present is always contemporary, and by the same token all art must necessarily have been contemporary at the time of its production and/or initial reception. This much is clear. It is also clear, however, that the phrase "contemporary art" has special currency today, as a commonplace of the media and of society in general. If "contemporary art" has largely replaced "modern art" in the public consciousness, then it is no doubt due in part to the term's apparent simplicity, its self-evidence. Trouble-free outside the art world, the "contemporary" is twice as useful on the inside. For one, it appears to be a purely temporal marker, simply denoting the "now," purged of critical or ideological presupposition. It appears not to require any lengthy unraveling, of the kind that Baudelaire, for example, felt to be required of the "modern," whose sense of "the ephemeral, the contingent" linked an orientation towards the future to a break with traditional values, and in particular to a break with a cyclical conception of time.[2]

In his discussion of the word "revolution," Göran Therborn has recently provided us with a striking indication of how this very shift from a cyclical conception of time to one of linearity and teleology took place in European thought:

> Take the word "revolution," for example. As a pre-modern concept it pointed backwards, "rolling back," or to recurrent cyclical motions, as in Copernicus's *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*, or in the French Enlightenment *Encyclopédie*, in which the main entry refers to clocks and clock-making. Only after 1789 did "revolution" become a door to the future...[3]

Ever since the *querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* at the end of the seventeenth century, the modern has been placed in explicit opposition to some other force, whether temporal or ideological. From the start, the modern was advocated, defended, set forth as a position among others. The contemporary, on the other hand, presents itself as something of a default category or a catch-all. Yet its success may not be altogether accidental; and if it is, it may nonetheless be entirely appropriate, if for somewhat more complex reasons. It may be precisely as a catch-all that it befits today's field of artistic production more than ever, where—perhaps as a consequence of our collective

disorientation—we have come to suspect modernity to be our antiquity; where the "Age of Manifestos" has long become the subject of our nostalgia—or not? Could there be a future for manifestos?

A "contemporary" manifesto could perhaps be perceived as a naıvely optimistic call for collective action, as we live in a time that is more atomized and has far fewer cohesive artistic movements. And yet there seems to be an urgent desire for a radical change that may allow us to propose a new situation, to name the beginning of the next possibility rather than just look backwards. In October 2008 this question was addressed in depth at "Manifesto Marathon," a two-day "futurological congress" we organized in the Serpentine Gallery Pavilion in Kensington Garden, London.[4]

With regard to the manifesto—and its current absence—as a piece of printed matter, Zak Kyes (who designed the book for Manifesto Marathon) on this occasion said:

> The printed form of manifestos has always been inseparable from their radical agendas, which engage the act of publication and dissemination as sites for debate and exchange rather than mere documentation. For this reason, it is prescient to revisit the clarity and articulation—or, in many cases, willful obfuscation—of published manifestos today, a time which is defined by a panoply of publications as voluminous as they are homogenous. . . . For one thing is certain: without some kind of a manifesto, we cannot write alternatives that are more than vague utopias; without a manifesto, we cannot conceive the future.[5]

In his book *Utopistics*, looking at historical choices of the twenty-first century, the American sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein explored what could possibly be better—not perfect, but better—societies within the constraints of reality.[6] As a mode of deployment, the manifesto requires an opposition for it to create such a rupture. We travel through dreams that were betrayed to a world system far surpassing the limits of the nineteenth-century paradigm of liberal capitalism.

After all, the manifesto is a fundamentally transdisciplinary device, a history that is addressed in Martin Puchner's recent publication, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes*.[7] He breaks the history of manifestos down into three phases: first, the emergence of the manifesto as a recognizable political genre in the mid-nineteenth century (*The Communist Manifesto*, 1848); second, the creation of avant-garde movements through the explosion of art manifestos in the early twentieth century (*Manifesto of Futurism*, 1909); and third, the rivalry between the socialist manifesto and the avant-garde manifesto from the 1910s to the late 1960s. Fifty years later, it could be said that this rivalry has faded, along with the political opposition that fueled it. In the beginning, the art manifesto did not merely register art's political ambitions; it changed the very nature of the artwork itself. "The result is ... an art forged in the image of the manifesto: aggressive rather than introverted; screaming rather than reticent; collective rather than individual."[8] This has traditionally been the case for manifestos in the arts; however, it could be said that the twenty-first century art manifesto appears to be more introverted than aggressive, more reticent than screaming, and more individual than collective.

The striking commonality between artistic and political manifestos is their intention to trigger a collective rupture, and—like almost all manifestos in the past, which took the form of a group statement—assume the voice of some collective "we." At the "Manifesto Marathon" event the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm observed this to be the case with all political manifestos he could think of: "They always speak in the plural and aim to win supporters (also in the plural)."[9] Genuine groups of people, sometimes rallying around a person or a periodical, however short-lived, are conscious of what they are against and what they think they have in common—a history, Hobsbawm acknowledges, embedded in the last century. What now? Hobsbawm continued:

> Of course, the trouble about any writings about the future: it is unknowable. We know what we don't like about the present and why, which is why all manifestos are best at denunciation. As for the future, we only have the certainty that what we do will have unintended consequences.[10]

Echoing Hobsbawm, Tino Sehgal suggested a receptiveness to such unintended consequences to be a characteristic of the twenty-first century:

> I thought the twenty-first century would be, hopefully, more like a dialogue, more like conversation, and maybe that in itself is a kind of manifestation or whatever. I am very careful in even using that word. I just think the twentieth century was so sure of itself, and I hope that the twenty-first century will be less sure. And part of that is to listen to what other people say and to enter into a dialogue, to not stand up and immediately declare one's intent.[11]

But as Tom McCarthy pointed out on the same occasion, the certainty of the manifesto still lends it a certain charm:

> What interests me about the manifesto is that it's a defunct format. It belongs to the early twentieth century and its atmosphere of political and aesthetic upheaval. The bombast and aggression, the half-apocalyptic, half-utopian thrust, the earnestness—all the manifesto's rhetorical devices seem anachronistic now. For that very reason it's compelling, in the way a broken bicycle wheel was for Duchamp. Things that don't work have great potential.[12]

And yet, it is the "unbuilt" or unfulfilled nature of the future that drives manifestos, and we can perhaps find some semblance of their utopian thrust and social imagination in projects that were for one reason or another unrealized. For every planned project that is carried out, hundreds of other proposals by artists, architects, designers, scientists, and other practitioners around the world stay unrealized and invisible to the public. Unlike unrealized architectural models and projects submitted for competitions, which are frequently published and discussed, public endeavors in the visual arts that are planned but not carried out ordinarily remain unnoticed or little known.

I see unrealized projects as the most important unreported stories in the art world. As Henri Bergson showed, actual realization is only one possibility surrounded by many others that merit close attention.[13] There are many amazing unrealized projects out there, forgotten projects, misunderstood projects, lost projects, desk-drawer projects, realizable projects, poetic-utopian dream constructs, unrealizable projects, partially realized projects, censored projects, and so on. It seems urgent to remember certain roads not taken, and—in an active and dynamic, rather than nostalgic or melancholic way—transform some of them into propositions or possibilities for the future.

And here one encounters a paradox in the contemporary, just as the historicizing of modernism has itself been paradoxical: how can the ephemeral, the contingent, and the future be things of the past? For within the art world nowadays, the term "contemporary" does indeed most often assume a periodizing function, and such temporal markers always imply a before and an after. It is in this way that the "contemporary" presupposes more than it initially declares, and begins to approach a more specialized usage, one that may require nothing more than its repeated use within the ranks of the art world for its meaning to be apparent. But, with this repeated use, "contemporary art" loses its semblance of simplicity and begins to demand its own "before." Of course, attempts to pinpoint a decisive historical break between the modernist and the contemporary are mostly stillborn and will lead to nothing but interminable wrangling. To give just one example, "the turn of the 1960s" will never do, just as the central claim of Fred Kaplan's fascinating recent account of the year 1959—"the year everything changed," as he puts it—should likewise be taken with a pinch of salt.[14]

What is it that makes the "contemporary" maybe worth rescuing from the charges I have outlined—of equivocation, default legitimacy, or just plain bad common sense? It may be what is perhaps most clearly seen in its use as a noun: the word "contemporary" implies a relation; one is a contemporary of another. The word "contemporary" is traceable to the Medieval Latin word, "contemporarius," whose constituent parts "con" ("with") and "temporarius" ("of time") similarly point towards a relational meaning: "with/in time." What is suggested here then, and what Baudelaire's "modern" seems to disregard, is a plurality of temporalities across space, a plurality of experiences and pathways through modernity that continues to this day, and on a truly global scale.

The French historian Fernand Braudel describes how in the *longue durée* (long duration) there can be seismic shifts, like that which occurred in the sixteenth century as the center of power shifted from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic.[15] We are now living through a period in which the center of gravity is transferring to new worlds. The second half of the twentieth century was very much a time of the "Westkunst," to use the title of Kasper König and Laszlo Glozer's groundbreaking exhibition.[16] The early twenty-first century is witnessing the emergence of a multiplicity of new centers, above all in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, Seoul, Tokyo, Mumbai, Delhi, Beirut, Tehran, and Cairo, to give a few examples. Since the 1990s, exhibitions have contributed considerably to this new cartography of art.

One great potential of the exhibition is to be a catalyst for different layers of input in the city. The multiplication of these events can be seen positively in terms of the multiplication of centers. The quest for the absolute center that dominated most of the twentieth century has opened up to include a plurality of centers in the twenty-first, and biennales are making an important contribution to this. They can also form a bridge between the local and the global. By definition, a bridge has two ends, and as the artist Huang Yong Ping recently pointed out: "Normally we think a person should have only one standpoint, but when you become a bridge you have to have two."[17] This bridge is always dangerous, but for Huang Yong Ping the notion of the bridge creates the possibility of opening up something new. The "contemporary" is thus spatiotemporal through and through.

In January–December 1993 as part of Museum in Progress, Alighiero e Boetti made a variation of his work *Cieli ad alta quota* in which six versions of the watercolor drawings were published in Austrian Airlines' in-flight magazine *Sky Lines*.[18] In addition, airline passengers could ask stewards for the same works in the form of jigsaw puzzles, which were the same size as the folding tables in the airplane. The six details of *Cieli ad alta quota*, which showed a certain number of airplanes flying within

Manifesto futurista
della
Lussuria

RISPOSTA ai giornalisti dementi che mutilano le frasi per render ridicola l'Idea;
alle donne che possono quello che ho osato dire;
a coloro pei quali la Lussuria non è ancora altro che peccato;
a tutti coloro che nella Lussuria raggiungono solo il Vizio, come nell'Orgoglio raggiungono solo la Vanità.

La Lussuria, concepita fuor di ogni concetto morale e come elemento essenziale del dinamismo della vita, è una forza.

Per una razza forte, la lussuria non è, già che non lo sia l'orgoglio, un peccato capitale. Come l'orgoglio, la lussuria è una virtù incitatrice, un focolare al quale si alimentano le energie.

La Lussuria è l'espressione di un essere proiettato al di là di sè stesso; è la gioia dolorosa d'una carne compiuta, il dolore gaudioso di uno sbocciare; è l'unione carnale, quali si siano i segreti che uniscono gli esseri; è la sintesi sensoria e sensuale di un essere per la maggior liberazione del proprio spirito; è la comunione d'una particella dell'umanità con tutta la sensualità della terra; è il brivido plastico di una particella della terra.

La Lussuria è la ricerca carnale dell'ignoto, come la Cerebralità ne è la ricerca spirituale. La Lussuria è il gesto di creare, ed è la Creazione.

La carne crea come lo spirito crea. La loro creazione di fronte all'Universo è uguale. L'una non è superiore all'altra, e la creazione spirituale dipende dalla creazione carnale.

Noi abbiamo un corpo e una spirito. Restringere l'uno per moltiplicare l'altro è una prova di debolezza e un errore. Un essere forte deve realizzare tutte le sue possibilità carnali e spirituali. La Lussuria è pei conquistatori un tributo che loro è dovuto. Dopo una battaglia nella quale sono morti degli uomini, **è normale che i vincitori, selezionati dalla guerra, giungano fino allo stupro, nel paese conquistato, per ricreare della vita.**

Dopo le battaglie, i soldati amano le voluttà, in cui si smaltano, per rinnovarsi, le loro energie incessantemente esaltanti. L'eroe moderno, eroe di quotidiani domani, ha lo stesso desiderio e lo stesso piacere. L'artista, questo grande maschio universale, ha

Title page of Valentine de Saint-Point's "Futurist Manifesto of Lust" (1913). Private Collection of Peter Wille.

in a specific area in various directions, always implies the potential for expansion; continuing beyond the frame at both high and low altitudes. Destinations connect and interweave to form networks of lines along which meaning is created though the variety of possibilities for the migration of forms.

The impossibility of capturing form in Boetti's *Cieli ad alta quota* takes us to Giorgio Agamben's "What Is the Contemporary?" which shows the one who belongs to his or her own time to be the one who does not coincide perfectly with it—to capture one's moment is to be able to perceive in the darkness of the present this light which tries to join us and cannot: "the contemporary is the person who perceives the darkness of his time as something that concerns him, as something that never ceases to engage him."[19]

Defining contemporaneity as precisely "that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism," he goes on to describe this contemporary figure as the one who is not blinded by the lights of his or her time or century: "The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness."[20] Agamben takes us to astrophysics to explain the darkness in the sky to be the light that travels to us at full speed, but which cannot reach us, as the galaxies from which it originates recede faster than the speed of light. To discern the potentialities that constantly escape the definition of the present is to understand the contemporary moment.

Jean Rouch often told me about the immense courage required in order to be contemporary, to engage in the difficult negotiation between the past and the future. Like Agamben, he spoke of a means of accessing the present moment through some form of archaeology. Both Rouch and Agamben agree that being contemporary means to return to a present we have never been to, to resist the homogenization of time through ruptures and discontinuities. Agamben concludes:

> This means that the contemporary is not only the one who, perceiving the darkness of the present, grasps a light that can never reach its destiny; he is also the one who, dividing and interpolating time, is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation with other times. He is able to read history in unforeseen ways, to "cite it" according to a necessity that does not arise in any way from his will, but from an exigency to which he cannot not respond. It is as if this invisible light that is the darkness of the present cast its shadow on the past, so that the past, touched by this shadow, acquired the ability to respond to the darkness of the now.[21]

Hans Ulrich Obrist is a Swiss curator and art critic. In 1993, he founded the Museum Robert Walser and began to run the Migrateurs program at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris where he served as a curator for contemporary art. In 1996 he co-curated Manifesta 1, the first edition of the roving European biennial of contemporary art. He presently serves as the Co-Director, Exhibitions and Programmes and Director of International Projects at the Serpentine Gallery in London.

1
Giorgio Agamben, "What Is the Contemporary?" in *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays* , trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2009), 53.

2
Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* , 2nd ed., trans. and ed. Johnathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), 13.

3
Göran Therborn, *From Marxism to Post-Marxism?* (London: Verso, 2008), 129.

4
Taking place on October 18 and 19, 2008, "Manifesto Marathon: Manifestos for the 21st Century" was the third in the Serpentine Gallery's series of marathon events, and addressed the question of how to develop manifestos at a time when fewer artists work in formal groups and there are significantly fewer artistic movements than in the past century. Hans Ulrich Obrist invented the interview marathon concept in Stuttgart in 2005 as an experimental kind of public event that bridges panel discussion, exhibition, and performance. In 2006 the concept evolved as Rem Koolhaas joined Obrist in interviewing over seventy people in a twenty-four hour marathon that took place in the Serpentine Gallery's summer pavilion, co-designed by Koolhaas and structural designer Cecil Balmond. The pavilion was one of an ongoing series of annual architecture commissions conceived by Serpentine director Julia Peyton-Jones. The 2006 marathon was followed by the Experiment Marathon with Olafur Eliasson in 2007, the 2008 Manifesto Marathon, and, last but not least, the Poetry Marathon in 2009. In December 2009 Obrist and Koolhaas engaged the rapidly growing city of Shenzhen with "Shenzhen Marathon: The Chinese Thinking."

5
Zak Kyes at "Manifesto Marathon," October 18, 2008.

6
Immanuel Wallerstein, *Utopistics: Or, Historical Choices of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: The New Press, 1998).

7
Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton University Press, 2006).

8
Ibid., 6.

9
Eric Hobsbawm, at "Manifesto Marathon," October 19, 2008.

10
Ibid.

11
Tino Sehgal, at "Manifesto Marathon," October 19, 2008.

12
Tom McCarthy, at "Manifesto Marathon," October 18, 2008.

13
See Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (New York: Dover, 1998 [1911]).

14
See Fred Kaplan, *1959: The Year Everything Changed* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2009).

15
See Fernand Braudel, *The Medite rranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* , vol. 2, trans. Siân Reynolds (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

16
"Westkunst," Museen der Stadt Köln, Cologne, West Germany, May 30–August 16, 1981.

17
Huang Yong Ping in conversation with Rohini Malik and Gavin Jantjes, trans. Hou Hanru, Fondation Cartier, Paris, March 8, 1997, https://web.archive.org/web/20101017121206/http://www.londonfoodfilmfiesta.co.uk/Artmai~1/Ping.htm .

18
The Exhibition "Cieli ad alta quota" was curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist for Museum in Progress and Austrian Airlines. See http://www.mip.at/.

19
Agamben, 45.

20
Ibid., 41, 44.

21
Ibid., 53.

Raqs Media Collective

Now and Elsewhere

The Problem and the Provocation

We would like to begin by taking a sentence from the formulation of the problem that set the ball rolling for this lecture series. In speaking of the "hesitation in developing any kind of comprehensive strategy" for understanding precisely what it is that we call contemporary art today (in the wake of the last twenty years of contemporary art activity), the introduction to the series speaks of its having "assumed a fully mature form—and yet it still somehow refuses to be historicized as such."[1]

Simultaneously an assertion and a reticence to name one's place in time, it is this equivocation that we would really like to discuss.

The Old Man and the Wind: Joris Ivens' Film

At the very beginning of Joris Ivens and Marceline Loridan's film *Une histoire de vent* (A Tale of the Wind), we see a frail Joris Ivens sitting in a chair on a sand dune in the Gobi Desert, on the border between China and Mongolia, waiting for the arrival of a sandstorm.

Elsewhere in the film, an old woman—a wind shaman—talks about waiting for the wind.

Buffeted as we are by winds that blow from so many directions with such intensity, this image of an old man in a chair waiting for a storm is a metaphor for a possible response to the question "What is contemporaneity?"

It takes stubbornness, obstinacy, to face a storm, and yet also a desire not to be blown away by it. If Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, celebrated in Benjamin's evocation of the angel of history, with its head caught in turning between the storm of the future and the debris of the present, were ever in need of a more recent annotation, then old man Ivens in his chair, waiting for the wind, would do very nicely.

It is tempting to think of this dual obstinacy—to face the storm and not be blown away—as an acute reticence that is at the same time a refusal to either run away from or be carried away by the strong winds of history, of time itself.

We could see this "reticence," this "refusal to historicize," as a form of escape from the tyranny of the clock and the calendar—instruments to measure time, and to measure our ability to keep time, to keep to the demands of the time allotted to us by history, our contemporaneity. Any reflection on contemporaneity cannot avoid simultaneously being a consideration of time, and of our relation to it.

On Time

Time girds the earth tight. Day after day, astride minutes and seconds, the hours ride as they must, relentlessly. In the struggle to keep pace with clocks, we are now always and everywhere in a state of jet lag, always catching up with ourselves and with others, slightly short of breath, slightly short of time.

The soft insidious panic of time ticking away in our heads is syncopated by accelerated heartbeat of our everyday lives. Circadian rhythms (times to rise and times to sleep, times for work and times for leisure, times for sunlight and times for stars) get muddled as millions of faces find themselves lit by timeless fluorescence that trades night for day. Sleep is besieged by wakefulness, hunger is fed by stimulation, and moments of dreaming and lucid alertness are eroded with the knowledge of intimate terrors and distant wars.

When possible, escape is up a hatch and down a corridor between and occasionally beyond longitudes, to places where the hours chime epiphanies. *Escape* is a resonant word in the vocabulary of clockmaking. It gives us another word— *escapement*.

Joris Ivens and Marceline Loridan, Une histoire de vent (A Tale of the Wind), 1988.

Escapement

Escapement is a horological or clockmaking term.[2] It denotes the mechanism in mechanical watches and clocks that governs the regular motion of the hands through a "catch and release" device that both releases and restrains the levers that move the hands for hours, minutes, and seconds. Like the catch and release of the valves of the heart that allow blood to flow between its chambers, setting the basic rhythm of life, the escapement of a watch regulates our sense of the flow of time. The continued pulsation of our hearts and the ticking of clocks denote our freedom from an eternal present. Each heartbeat, each passing second marks the here and now, promises the future, and recalls the resonance of the last heartbeat. Our heart tells us that we live in time.

The history of clockmaking saw a definite turn when devices for understanding time shifted away from the fluid principles of ancient Chinese water and incense clocks—for which time was a continuum, thus making it more difficult to surgically separate past and present, then and now—to clocks whose ticking seconds rendered a conceptual barricade between each unit, its predecessor and its follower. This is what makes *now* seem so alien to *then*. Paradoxically, it opens out another zone of discomfort. Different places share the same time because of the accident of longitude. Thus clocks in London and Lagos (with adjustments made for daylight savings) show the same time. And yet, the experience of "now" in London and Lagos may not feel the same at all.

An escape from—or, one might say, a full-on willingness to confront—this vexation might be found by taking a stance in which one is comfortable with the fact that we exist at the intersection of different latitudes and longitudes, and that being located on this grid, we are in some sense phatically in touch with other times, other places. In a syncopated sort of way, we are "contemporaneous" with other times and spaces.

Actress Helen singing "My Name is Chin Chin Choo" in Howrah Bridge (1958) directed by Shakti Samanta.

My Name is Chin Chin Choo

In *Howrah Bridge*, a Hindi film-noir thriller from 1958 set in a cosmopolitan Calcutta (which, in its shadowy grandeur resembled the Shanghai of the jazz age), a young dancer, the half-Burmese, half-Baghdadi-Jewish star and vamp of vintage Hindi film, Helen, plays a Chinese bar dancer. And in the song "My Name is Chin Chin Choo,"

a big band jazz, kitsch orientalist, and sailor-costumed musical extravaganza, she expresses a contemporaneity that is as hard to pin down as it is to avoid being seduced by.

The lyrics weave in the Arabian Nights, Aladdin, and Sinbad; the singer invokes the bustle of Singapore and the arch trendiness of Shanghai; the music blasts a Chicago big band sound; the sailor-suited male backup dancers suddenly break into Cossack knee-bends. Times and spaces, cities and entire cultural histories—real or imagined—collide and whirl in heady counterpoint. Yesterday's dance of contemporaneity has us all caught up in its Shanghai–Calcutta–Delhi–Bombay–Singapore turbulence. We are all called Chin Chin Choo. Hello, mister, how do you do?

Contemporaneity

Contemporaneity, the sensation of being in a time together, is an ancient enigma of a feeling. It is the tug we feel when our time pulls at us. But sometimes one has the sense of a paradoxically asynchronous contemporaneity—the strange tug of more than one time and place—as if an accumulation or thickening of our attachments to different times and spaces were manifesting itself in the form of some unique geological oddity, a richly striated cross section of a rock, sometimes sharp, sometimes blurred, marked by the passage of many epochs.

Now and Elsewhere

The problem of determining the question of contemporaneity hinges on how we orient ourselves in relation to a cluster of occasionally cascading, sometimes overlapping, partly concentric, and often conflictual temporal parameters—on how urgent, how leisurely, or even how lethargic we are prepared to be in response to a spectrum of possible answers.

Consider the experience of being continually surprised by the surface and texture of the night sky when looking through telescopes of widely differing magnifications. Thinking about "which contemporaneity" to probe is not very different from making decisions about how deep into the universe we would like to cast the line of our query.

A telescope powerful enough to aid us in discerning the shapes and extent of craters on the moon will reveal a very different image of the universe than one that unravels the rings of Saturn, or one that can bring us the light of a distant star. The universe looks different, depending on the questions we ask of the stars.

Contemporaneity, too, looks different depending on the queries we put to time. If, as Zhou Enlai famously remarked, it is still too early to tell what impact the French Revolution has had on human history, then our sense of contemporaneity distends to embrace everything from 1789 onwards. If, on the other hand, we are more interested in sensing how things have changed since the Internet came into our lives, then even 1990 can seem a long way away. So can it seem as if it were only recently that the printing press and movable type made mechanical reproduction of words and images possible on a mass scale. One could argue that time changed once and for all when the universal regime of Greenwich Mean Time imposed a sense of an arbitrarily encoded universal time for the first time in human history, enabling everyone to calculate for themselves "when," as in how many hours ahead or behind they were in relation to everyone at every other longitude. This birthed a new time, a new sense of being together in one accounting of time. One could also argue that, after Hiroshima made it possible to imagine that humanity as we know it could auto-destruct, every successive year began to feel as long as a hundred years, or as an epoch, since it could perhaps be our last. This means that, contrary to our commonplace understanding of our "time" as being "sped up," we could actually think of our time as being caught in the long "winding down," the "long decline." It all depends, really, on what question we are asking.

And so Marcel Duchamp can still seem surprisingly contemporary, and Net art oddly dated. The moon landing, whose fortieth anniversary we have recently seen, brought a future of space travel hurtlingly close to the realities of 1969. Today, the excitement surrounding men on the moon has already acquired the patina of nostalgia, and the future it held out as a promise seems oddly dated. Then again, this could change suddenly if China and India were to embark in earnest on a second-wave Cold War space race to the moon. Our realities advance into and recede from contemporaneity like the tides, throwing strange flotsam and jetsam onto the shore to be found by beachcombers with a fetish for signs from different times. The question then becomes not one of "periodizing" contemporaneity, or of erecting a neat white picket fence around it; rather, it becomes one of finding shortcuts, trapdoors, antechambers, and secret passages between now and elsewhere, or perhaps elsewhen. Time folds, and it doesn't fold neatly—our sense of "when" we are is a function of which fold we are sliding into, or climbing out of.

A keen awareness of contemporaneity cannot but dissolve the illusion that some things, people, places, and practices are more "now" than others. Seen this way, contemporaneity provokes a sense of the simultaneity of different modes of living and doing things without a prior commitment to any one as being necessarily more true to our times. Any attempt to design structures, whether permanent or provisional, that might express or contain contemporaneity would be incomplete if it were not (also) attentive to realities that are either not explicit or manifest

or that linger as specters. An openness and generosity toward realities that may be, or seem to be, in hibernation, dormant, or still in formation, can only help such structures to be more pertinent and reflective. A contemporaneity that is not curious about how it might be surprised is not worth our time.

Tagore in China

In a strange and serendipitous echo from the past, we find Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali poet and artist who in some sense epitomized the writing of different Asian modernities in the twentieth century, saying something quite similar exactly eighty-five years ago in Shanghai, at the beginning of what was to prove to be a highly contested and controversial tour of China.

The poet [and here, all we need to do is to substitute "artist" for "poet"]'s mission is to attract the voice which is yet inaudible in the air; to inspire faith in a dream which is unfulfilled; to bring the earliest tidings of the unborn flower to a skeptic world.[3]

Tagore's plea operates in three distinct temporal registers: the "as yet inaudible" in the future, the "unfulfilled dream" in the past, and the fragility of the unborn flower in the skeptic world of the present. In each of these, the artist's work, for Tagore, is to safeguard and to take custody of—and responsibility for—that which is out of joint with its time, indeed with all time.

On Forgetting

As time passes and we grow more into the contemporary, the reasons for remembering other times grow, while the ability to recall them weakens. Memory straddles this paradox. We could say that the ethics of memory have something to do with the urgent negotiation between having to remember (which sometimes includes the obligation to mourn), and the requirement to move on (which sometimes includes the need to forget). Both are necessary, and each is notionally contingent on the abdication of the other, but life is not led by the easy rhythm of regularly alternating episodes of memory and forgetting, canceling each other out in a neat equation that resolves itself and attains equilibrium.

Forgetting: the true vanity of contemporaneity. Amnesia: a state of forgetfulness unaware of both itself and its own deficiency. True amnesia includes forgetting that one has forgotten all that has been forgotten. It is possible to assume that one remembers everything and still be an amnesiac. This is because aspects of the forgotten may no longer occupy even the verge of memory. They may leave no lingering aftertaste or hovering anticipation of something naggingly amiss. The amnesiac is in solitary confinement, guarded by his own clones, yet secluded especially from himself.

Typically, forms of belonging and solidarity that rely on the categorical exclusion of a notional other to cement their constitutive bonds are instances of amnesia. They are premised on the forgetting of the many contrarian striations running against the grain of the moment and its privileged solidarity. On particularly bad days, which may or may not have to do with lunar cycles, as one looks into a mirror and is unable to recognize one's own image, the hatred of the other rises like a tidal bore. Those unfaithful patches of self are then rendered as so much negative space, like holes in a mirror. Instead of being full to the brim with traces of the other, each of them is seen as a void, a wound in the self.

This void where the self-authenticated self lies shadowed and unable to recognize itself is attributed to the contagious corrosiveness of the other. The forgetting of the emptying-out of the self by its own rage forms the ground from which amnesia assaults the world. In trying to assert who we are, we forget, most of all, who we are. And then we forget the forgetting.

Kowloon Walled City and its Memory

> Nowhere, unless perhaps in dreams, can the phenomenon of the boundary be experienced in a more originary way than in cities.
> —Walter Benjamin[4]

A few months ago we spent some time in Hong Kong, learning what it means to live in a city that distills its contemporaneity into a refined amnesia. We were interested in particular by what happened to the walled city of Kowloon and its memory.

Kowloon Walled City and its disappearance from the urban fabric of Hong Kong can be read as a parable of contemporary amnesia. The Walled City was once a diplomatic anomaly between China and the British Empire that functioned as a long-standing autonomous zone, a site of temporary near-permanence, an exclave within an enclave.

Kowloon Walled City is not just a border in space; it also marks a border in time—a temporary suspension of linear time by which the visitor agrees to the terms of a compact laid out by the current shape of the territory, a walled compound where a delicate game between memory and amnesia can be played out, apparently till eternity. This is the frontier where reality begins to cross over into an image.

Visiting the "Memorial Park" that stands on the former site

of the Kowloon Walled City today is an uncanny experience. As with all "theme parks," walking in this enclosure is like walking in a picture postcard spread over hectares rather than inches. The constructed, spacious serenity of the park, its careful gestures to the tumult of the walled city by means of models, oral-history capsules, artifacts, replicas, and remains intend to provoke in the visitor some of the frisson in the fact that he or she is standing at what was once both condemned as an urban dystopia of crime, vice, and insanitation, and hailed as an anarchist utopia. The neighborhood itself may have disappeared, but its footprint in popular culture can be discerned in the simulacral sites of action sequences in cyberpunk science fiction, gangster and horror films, manga, and multi-user computer games.

The walled city had approximately thirty thousand people living in one-hundredth of a square mile, which amounts roughly to an average population-per-unit-area density ratio of 3.3 million people to a square mile. This makes it the densest inhabited unit of space in world history.

If we think of this space as a repository of memories, it would be the most haunted place on earth.

Why do such spaces—sometimes crowded, sometimes empty (but apparently crowded with ghosts)—appear in a manner that is almost viral, such that the trope of empty, but haunted streets, set in the near future of global cities, begins to show the first signs of a cinematic epidemic of our times? Will we remember the cinema of the early twenty-first century as the first intimation of the global collapse of urban space under its own weight?

Or is this imaginary appearance of a haunting, suicidal metropolis more of an inoculation than a symptom, an early shoring-up of the defenses of citizens against their own obsolescence? How can we remember, or even represent, an inoculation that could be an obituary just as much as it could be a premonition or a warning?

The surrealist poet Louis Aragon, speaking of the disappearing neighborhoods of Paris as the city morphed into twentieth-century modernity, once wrote that

it is only today, when the pickaxe menaces them, that they have at last become the true sanctuaries of the cult of the ephemeral . . . Places that were incomprehensible yesterday, and that tomorrow will never know.[5]

What happens when someone from within these spaces that were "incomprehensible yesterday and that tomorrow will never know" decides to make themselves known? How does their account of the space square with its more legendary reportage?

> I recall the Walled City as one big playground, especially the rooftops, where me and my friends would run and jump from one building to the next, developing strong calf muscles, a high tolerance of pain, and control of our fear, and our feet. The rooftops were our domain, shared only with the jets that passed overhead almost within reach of our outstretched arms as they roared down the final approach to Kai Tak Airport. Among the tangle of TV antennae we hid our kid-valuable things, toys and things we didn't want our parents to know about because, well, most of them were stolen or bought with money we earned putting together stuff in the little one-room "factories" that were all over the Walled City—if our parents knew we had money, they'd have taken it. We were good at hiding things, and ourselves.
> —Chiu Kin Fung[6]

Disappearance and Representation: Haunting the Record

What does disappearance do to the telling of that which has disappeared? How do we speak to, of, and for the presence of absences in our lives, our cities?

Ackbar Abbas, in his book *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, meditates at length on disappearance, cities, and images:

> A space of disappearance challenges historical representation in a special way, in that it is difficult to describe precisely because it can adapt so easily to any description. It is a space that engenders images so quickly that it becomes *nondescript* . . . we can think about a nondescript space as that strange thing: an ordinary, everyday space that has somehow lost its usual system of interconnectedness, a deregulated space. Such a space defeats description not because it is illegible and none of the categories fit, but because it is hyperlegible and all the categories seem to fit, whether they are the categories of social sciences, cultural criticism, or of fiction. Any description then that tries to capture the features of the city will have to be, to some extent at least, stretched between fact and fiction . . . If this is the case, then there can be no single-minded pursuit of the signs that finishes with a systematic reading of the city, only a compendium of *indices of disappearance* (like the nondescript) that takes into account the city's errancy and that addresses the city through its heterogeneity and parapraxis.[7]

A parapraxis is a kind of Freudian slip, an involuntary disclosure of something that would ordinarily be repressed. It could be a joke, an anomaly, a revealing slip-up, a haunting.

What does it mean to "haunt the record"? When does a presence or a trace become so deeply etched into a surface that it merits a claim to durability simply for being so difficult to repress, resolve, deal with, and put away? The endurance of multiple claims to land and other scarce material resources often rests on the apparent impossibility of arranging a palimpsest of signatures and other inscriptions rendered illegible by accumulation over a long time, and across many generations. In a sense, this is why the contingent and temporary character of the Kowloon Walled City endured for as long as it did. There is of course the delicate irony of the fact that the protection offered by its juridical anomaly with regard to sovereignty—a constitutional Freudian slip with consequences—was erased the moment Hong Kong reverted to China. The autonomy of being a wedge of China in the middle of Hong Kong became moot the moment Hong Kong was restored to Chinese sovereignty. Resolving the question of Hong Kong's status automatically resolved all doubts and ambivalences with regard to claims over the custody and inhabitation of Kowloon Walled City.

A Chinese Sense of Time: Neither Permanence nor Impermanence

It is appropriate to end with a quotation from a Chinese text from the fourth century of the Common Era, a Madhyamika Mahayana Buddhist text, *The Treatise of Seng Zhao*.

> When the Sutras say that things pass, they say so with a measure of reservation, for they wish to contradict people's belief in permanence.

(And here we would gesture in the direction of the assumption that this contemporaneity is destined to be permanent; after all, this too shall pass).

> And when the sutras say that things are lost, they say so with a mental reservation in order to express disapproval of what people understand by "passing."

(And here we would gesture in the direction of the assumption that this contemporaneity is destined to oblivion; after all, something from this too shall remain).

> Their wording may be contradictory, but not their aim. It follows that with the sages: permanence has not the meaning of the staying behind, while the wheel of time, or Karma, moves on. Impermanence has not the meaning of outpassing the wheel. People who seek in vain ancient events in our time conclude that things are impermanent. We, who seek in vain present events in ancient times, see that things are permanent. Therefore, Buddha, Liberation, He, it, appears at the proper moment, but has no fixed place in time.[8]

What more can we say of contemporaneity? It appears at the proper moment, but has no fixed place in time. In that spirit, let us not arrogate solely to ourselves the pleasures and the perils of all that is to be gained and lost in living and working, as we do, in these interesting times.

X

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

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Martha Rosler

Take the Money and Run? Can Political and Socio-critical Art "Survive"?

Just a few months before the real estate market brought down much of the world economy, taking the art market with it, I was asked to respond to the question whether "political and socio-critical art" can survive in an overheated market environment. Two years on, this may be a good moment to revisit the parameters of such work (now that the fascination with large-scale, bravura, high wow-factor work, primarily in painting and sculpture, has cooled—if only temporarily).

Categories of criticality have evolved over time, but their taxonomic history is short. The naming process is itself frequently a method of recuperation, importing expressions of critique into the system being criticized, freezing into academic formulas things that were put together off the cuff. In considering the long history of artistic production in human societies, the question of "political" or "critical" art seems almost bizarre; how shall we characterize the ancient Greek plays, for example? Why did Plato wish to ban music and poetry from his Republic? What was to be understood from English nursery rhymes, which we now see as benign jingles? A strange look in the eye of a character in a Renaissance scene? A portrait of a duke with a vacant expression? A popular print with a caricature of the king? The buzz around works of art is surely less now than when art was not competing with other forms of representation and with a wide array of public narratives; calling some art "political" reveals the role of particular forms of thematic enunciation.[1] Art, we may now hear, is meant to speak past particular understandings or narratives, and all the more so across national borders or creedal lines. Criticality that manifests as a subtle thread in iconographic details is unlikely to be apprehended by wide audiences across national borders. The veiled criticality of art under repressive regimes, generally manifesting as allegory or symbolism, needs no explanation for those who share that repression, but audiences outside that policed universe will need a study guide. In either case, it is not the general audience but the educated castes and professional artists or writers who are most attuned to such hermeneutics. I expand a bit on this below. But attending to the present moment, the following question from an intelligent young scenester may be taken as a tongue-in-cheek provocation rooted in the zeitgeist, reminding us that political and socio-critical art is at best a niche production:

> We were talking about whether choosing to be an artist means aspiring to serve the rich. . . . that seems to be the dominating economic model for artists in this country. The most visible artists are very good at serving the rich. . . . the ones who go to Cologne to do business seem to do the best. . . . She told me this is where Europe's richest people go . . . .

Let us pause to think about how art first became

characterized by a critical dimension. The history of such work is often presented in a fragmented, distorted fashion; art that exhibits an imperfect allegiance to the ideological structures of social elites has often been poorly received.[2] Stepping outside the ambit of patronage or received opinion without losing one's livelihood or, in extreme situations, one's life, became possible for painters and sculptors only a couple of hundred years ago, as the old political order crumbled under the changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution, and direct patronage and commissions from the Church and aristocrats declined.[3]

Members of the ascendant new class, the bourgeoisie, as they gained economic and political advantage over previous elites, also sought to adopt their elevated cultural pursuits; but these new adherents were more likely to be customers than patrons.[4] Artists working in a variety of media and cultural registers, from high to low, expressed positions on the political ferment of the early Industrial Revolution. One might find European artists exhibiting robust support for revolutionary ideals or displaying identification with provincial localism, with the peasantry or with the urban working classes, especially using fairly ephemeral forms (such as the low-cost prints available in great numbers); smiling bourgeois subjects were depicted as disporting and bettering themselves while decked out in the newest brushstrokes and modes of visual representation. New forms of subjectivity and sensibility were defined and addressed in different modalities (the nineteenth century saw the development of popular novels, mass-market newspapers, popular prints, theater, and art), even as censorship, sometimes with severe penalties for transgression, was sporadically imposed from above.

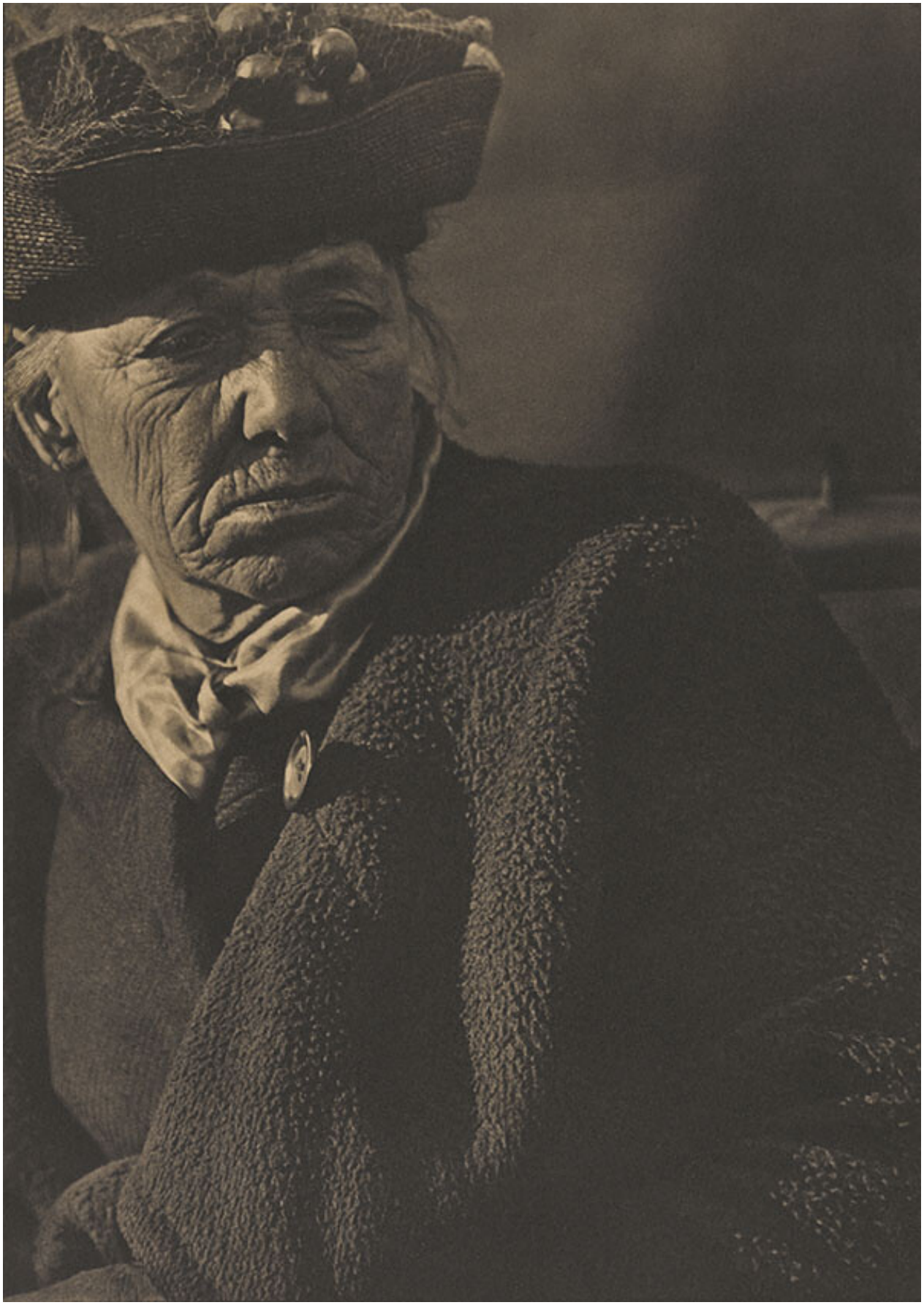
The development of these mass audiences compelled certain artists to separate themselves from mass taste, as Pierre Bourdieu has suggested,[5] or to waffle across the line. Artistic autonomy, framed as a form of insurgency, came to be identified by a military term, the *avant-garde*, or its derivative, the vanguard.[6] In times of revanchism and repression, of course, artists assert independence from political ideologies and political masters through ambiguous or allegorical structures—critique by indirection. Even manifestoes for the freeing of the poetical Imagination, a potent element of the burgeoning Romantic movements, might be traced to the transformations within entrenched ideology and of sensibility itself as an attribute of the "cultivated" person. The expectation that "advanced" or vanguard art would be autonomous—independent of direct ideological ties to patrons—created a predisposition toward the privileging of its formal qualities. Drawing on the traditions of Romanticism, it also underlined its insistence on subjects both more personal and more universal—but rooted in the experiential world, not in churchly dogmas of salvation.[7] The poetic imagination was posited as a form of knowing that vied with materialist, rationalist, and "scientific" epistemologies—one superior, moreover, in negotiating the utopian reconception and reorganization of human life.[8] The Impressionist painters, advancing the professionalization of art beyond the bounds of simple craft, developed stylistic approaches based on interpretations of advanced optical theory, while other routes to inspiration, such as psychotropic drugs, remained common enough.Artistic avant-gardes even at their most formal retained a utopian horizon that kept their work from being simply exercises in decor and arrangement; disengagement from recognizable narratives, in fact, was critical in advancing the claims of art to speak of higher things from its own vantage point or, more specifically, from the original and unique point of view of individual, named producers. Following John Fekete, we may interpret the positive reception of extreme aestheticism or "art for art's sake" as a panicked late-nineteenth-century bourgeois response to a largely imaginary siege from the political left.[9] But even such aestheticism, in its demand for absolute disengagement, offered a possible opening to an implied political critique, through the abstract, Hegel-derived, social negativity that was later a central element of the Frankfurt School, as exemplified by Adorno's insistence, against Brecht and Walter Benjamin, that art in order to be appropriately negative must remain autonomous, above partisan political struggles.

The turn of the twentieth century, a time of prodigious industrialization and capital formation, witnessed population flows from the impoverished European countryside to sites of production and inspired millenarian conceits that impelled artists and social critics of every stripe to imagine the future. We may as well call this modernism. And we might observe, briefly, that modernism (inextricably linked, needless to say, to modernity) incorporates technological optimism and its belief in progress, while antimodernism sees the narrative of technological change as a tale of broad civilizational decline, and thus tends toward a romantic view of nature.

Art history allows that in revolutionary Russia many artists mobilized their skills to work toward the socially transformative goals of socialist revolution, adopting new art forms (film) and adapting older ones (theater, poetry, popular fiction, and traditional crafts such as sewing and china decorating, but in mechanized production), while others outside the Soviet Union expressed solidarity with worldwide revolution. In the United States and Europe, in perhaps a less lauded—though increasingly documented—history, there were proletarian and communist painters, writers, philosophers, poets, photographers . . .

Photographic modernism in the United States (stemming largely from Paul Strand, but with something of a trailing English legacy), married a documentary impulse to formal innovation. It inevitably strayed into the territory of Soviet and German photographic innovators, many of whom had utopian socialist or communist allegiances, although few of the American photographic modernists aside from

Vittore Carpaccio, Two Venetian Ladies, c. 1490. Oil on panel. Photo: DeAgostini/Getty Images



Paul Strand, Portrait—New York, 1916. Platinum print.

Strand shared these political viewpoints. Pro-ruralist sentiments were transformed from backward-looking, romantic, pastoral longing to a focus on labor (perhaps with a different sort of romanticism) and on workers' milieux, both urban and rural.[10]

The turn of the century brought developments in photography and printing (such as the new photolithographic printing technology of 1890 and the new small cameras, notably the Leica in 1924) that gave birth to photojournalism and facilitated political agitation. The "social documentary" impulse is not, of course, traceable to technology, and other camera technologies, although more cumbersome, were also employed.[11] Many photographers were eager to use photographs to inform and mobilize political movements—primarily by publishing their work in the form of journal and newspaper articles and photo essays. In the early part of the century, until the end of the 1930s, photography was used to reveal the processes of State behind closed doors (Erich Salomon); to offer public exposés of urban poverty and degradation (Lewis Hine, Paul Strand; German photographers like Alfred Eisenstaedt or Felix Mann who were working for the popular photo press); to provide a dispassionate visual "anatomization" of social structure (August Sander's interpretation of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or New Objectivity); to serve as a call to arms, both literally (the newly possible war photography, such as that by Robert Capa, Gerda Taro, David Seymour) and figuratively (the activist photo and newsreel groups in various countries, such as the Workers Film and Photo leagues in various U.S. cities); and to support government reforms (in the United States, Roosevelt's Farm Security Administration). Photography, for these and other reasons, is generally excluded from standard art histories, which thoroughly skews the question of political commitment or critique.[12] In the contemporary moment, however, the history of photography is far more respectable, since photography has become a favored contemporary commodity and needs a historical tail (which itself constitutes a new market); but the proscription of politically engaged topicality is still widespread.[13]

European-style avant-gardism made a fairly late appearance in the United States, but its formally inscribed social critique offered, approximately from the 1930s through the late 1940s, an updated, legible version of the antimaterialist, and eventually anticonsumerist, critique previously offered by turn-of-the-twentieth-century antimodernism. Modernism is, inter alia, a conversation about progress, the prospects of utopia, and the fear, doubt, and horror over its costs, especially as seen from the vantage point of the members of the intellectual class. One strand of modernism led to Futurism's catastrophic worship of the machine and war (and eventually to political fascism) but also to utopian urbanism and International Style architecture.[14]

Modernism notoriously exhibited a kind of ambiguity or existential angst—typical problems of intellectuals, one

Erich Salomon, Haya Conference, 1930.

imagines, whose identification, if any, with workers, peasants, and proletarianized farm workers is maintained almost wholly by sheer force of conviction in the midst of a very different way of life—perhaps linked experientially by related, though very different, forms of alienation. Such hesitancy, suspicion, or indifference is a fair approximation of independence—albeit "blessedly" well-behaved in not screaming for revolution—but modernism, as suggested earlier, was suffused with a belief in the transformative power of (high) art. What do (most) modern intellectual elites do if not distance themselves from power and express suspicion, sometimes bordering on despair, of the entire sphere of life and mass cultural production (the ideological apparatuses, to borrow a term from Althusser)?[15]

Enlightenment beliefs in the transformative power of culture, having recovered from disillusionment with the French Revolution, which had led to the Terror, were again shattered by the monstrosity of trench warfare and aerial bombing in the First World War (as with the millenarianism of the present century, that of the turn of the twentieth century was smashed by war). Utopian hopes for human progress were revived along with the left-leaning universalism of interwar Europe but were soon to be ground under by the Second World War. The successive "extra-institutional" European avant-garde movements that had challenged dominant culture and industrial exploitation between the wars, notably Dada and Surrealism, with their very different routes to resisting social domination and bourgeois aestheticism, had dissipated before the war began. Such dynamic gestures and outbursts are perhaps unsustainable as long-term movements, but they have had continued resonance in modern moments of criticality.

The moment was brief: the double-barreled shotgun of popular recognition and financial success brought

Abstract Expressionism low. Any art that depends on critical distance from social elites—but especially an art associated rhetorically with transcendence, which presupposes, one should think, a search for authenticity and the expectations of approaching it—has trouble defending itself from charges of capitulation to the prejudices of a clientele. For Abstract Expressionism, with its necessary trappings of authenticity, grand success was untenable. Suddenly well capitalized, as well as lionized, as a high-class export by sophisticated government internationalists, and increasingly "appreciated" by mass-culture outlets, the Abstract Expressionist enclave, a bohemian mixture of native-born and émigré artists, fizzled into irrelevance, with many of its participants prematurely dead.

Abstract Expressionism, like all modernist high culture, was understood to be a critical art, yet it appeared, against the backdrop of ebullient democratic/consumer culture, as detached from the concerns of the everyday. How can there be poetry after Auschwitz, or, indeed, *pace* Adorno, after television? Bohemia itself (that semi-artistic, semi-intellectual subculture, voluntarily impoverished, disaffected, and anti-bourgeois) could not long survive the changed conditions of cultural production and, indeed, the pattern of daily life in the postwar West. Peter Bürger's canonical thesis on the failure of the European avant-gardes in prewar Europe has exercised a powerful grip on subsequent narratives of the always-already-dead avant-gardes.[16] As I have written elsewhere, expressionism, Dada, and Surrealism were intended to reach beyond the art world to disrupt conventional social reality and thereby become instruments of liberation. As Bürger suggests, the avant-garde intended to replace individualized production with a more collectivized and anonymous practice and simultaneously to evade the individualized address and restricted reception of art.[17] The art world was not destroyed as a consequence—far from it: as Bürger notes, the art world, in a maneuver that has become familiar, swelled to encompass the avant-gardes, and their techniques of shock and transgression were absorbed as the production of the new.[18] *Anti-art* became *Art*, to use the terms set in opposition by Allan Kaprow in the early 1970s, in his (similarly canonical) articles in *ArtNews* and *Art in America* on "the education of the un-artist."[19]

In the United States, at least, after the war the search for authenticity was reinterpreted as a search for privatized, personal self-realization, and there was general impatience with aestheticism and the sublime. By the end of the 1950s, dissatisfaction with life in McCarthyist, "conformist" America—in segregated, male-dominated America—rose from a whisper, cloistered in little magazines and journals, to a hubbub. More was demanded of criticality—and a lot less.

Its fetishized concerns fallen by the wayside, Abstract Expressionism was superseded by Pop art, which—unlike its predecessor—stepped onto the world stage as a commercially viable mode of artistic endeavor, unburdened by the need to be anything but flamboyantly inauthentic, eschewing nature for human-made (or, more properly, corporate) "second nature." Pop, as figured in the brilliant persona of Andy Warhol—the Michael Jackson of the 1960s—gained adulation from the masses by appearing to flatter them while spurning them. For buyers of Campbell Soup trash cans, posters of Marilyn or Jackie multiples, and banana decals, no insult was apprehended nor criticism taken, just as the absurdist costumes of Britain's mods and rockers, or even, later, the clothing fetishes of punks or hip-hop artists, or of surfers or teen skateboarders, were soon enough taken as cool fashion cues by many adult observers—even those far from the capitals of fashion, in small towns and suburban malls.[20]

The 1960s were a robust moment, if not of outspoken criticality in art, then of artists' unrest, while the culture at large, especially the "civil rights / youth culture / counterculture / antiwar movement," was more than restive, attempting to re-envision and remake the cultural and political landscape. Whether they abjured or expressed the critical attitudes that were still powerfully dominant in intellectual culture, artists were chafing against what they perceived as a lack of autonomy, made plain by the grip of the market, the tightening noose of success (though still nothing in comparison to the powerful market forces and institutional professionalization at work in the current art world). In the face of institutional and market ebullience, the 1960s saw several forms of revolt by artists against commodification, including deflationary tactics against glorification. One may argue about each of these efforts, but they nevertheless asserted artistic autonomy from dealers, museums, and markets, rather than, say, producing fungible items in a signature brand of object production. So-called "dematerialization": the production of low-priced, often self-distributed multiples; collaborations with scientists (a continued insistence on the experimentalism of unfettered artistic imagination); the development of multimedia or intermedia and other ephemeral forms such as smoke art or performances that defied documentation; dance based on ordinary movements; the intrusion or foregrounding of language, violating a foundational modernist taboo, and even the displacement of the image by words in Wittgensteinian language games and conceptual art; the use of mass-market photography; sculpture made of industrial elements; earth art; architectural deconstructions and fascinations; the adoption of cheap video formats; ecological explorations; and, quite prominently, feminists' overarching critique . . . all these resisted the special material valuation of the work of art above all other elements of culture, while simultaneously disregarding its critical voice and the ability of artists to think rationally without the aid of interpreters. These market-resistant forms (which were also of course casting aside the genre boundaries of Greenbergian high modernism), an evasive

relation to commodity and professionalization (careers), carried forward the questioning of craft. The insistence on seeing culture (and, perhaps more widely, human civilization) as primarily characterized by rational choice—see under conceptualism—challenged isolated genius as an essential characteristic of artists and furthered the (imaginary) alignment with workers in other fields. These were not arts of profoundly direct criticality of the social order.

An exception is art world feminism, which, beginning in the late 1960s, as part of a larger, vigorously critical and political movement, offered an overt critique of the received wisdom about the characteristics of art and artists and helped mount ultimately successful challenges to the reigning paradigm by which artists were ranked and interpretation controlled. Feminism's far-reaching critique was quite effective in forcing all institutions, whether involved in education, publicity, or exhibition, to rethink *what* and *who* an artist is and might be, what materials art might be made of, and what art *meant* (whether that occurred by way of overt signification or through meaning sedimented into formal expectations), replacing this with far broader, more heterodox, and dynamic categories. Whether feminist work took the form of trenchant social observation or re-envisioned formal approaches such as pattern painting, no one failed to understand critiques posed by works still seen as embedded in their social matrix (thus rekindling, however temporarily, a wider apprehension of coded "subtexts" in even non-narrative work).

Still from Guy Debord, In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni, 1978.

Another exception to the prevailing reactive gambits in 1960s art was presented by two largely Paris-based neo-Dada, neo-Surrealist avant-garde movements, Lettrism and the Situationist International (SI), both of which mounted direct critiques of domination in everyday life. The SI eventually split, in good measure over whether to cease all participation in the art world, with founding member Guy Debord, a filmmaker and writer, among those who chose to abandon that milieu.[21] Naturally, this group of rejectionists is the SI group whose appreciation in the art world was revived in the 1980s following a fresh look at Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967). The book proposes to explain, in an elegant series of numbered statements or propositions, how the commodity form has evolved into a spectacular world picture; in the postwar world, domination of the labor force (most of the world's people) by capitalist and state capitalist societies is maintained by the constant construction and maintenance of an essentially false picture of the world retailed by all forms of media, but particularly by movies, television, and the like. The spectacle, he is at pains to explain, is a relationship among people, not among images, thus offering a materialist, Marxist interpretation. Interest in Debord was symptomatic of the general trend toward a new theoretical preoccupation with (in particular) media theory, in post-Beaux Arts, post-Bauhaus, postmodern art education in the United States beginning in the late 1970s. The new art academicism nurtured criticality in art and other forms of theory-driven production, since artists were being officially trained to teach art as a source of income to fund their production rather than simply to find markets.[22]

There had been a general presumption among postwar government elites and their organs (including the Ford Foundation) that nurturing "creativity" in whatever form was good for the national brand; predispositions toward original research in science and technology and art unencumbered by prescribed messages were potent symbols of American freedom (of thought, of choice . . .), further troubling artists' rather frantic dance of disengagement from market and ideological mechanisms throughout the sixties. In the United States in the late 1960s, President Johnson's Great Society included an expansive vision of public support for the arts. In addition to direct grants to institutions, to critics, and to artists, nonprofit, artist-initiated galleries and related venues received Federal money. This led to a great expansion of the seemingly uncapitalizable arts like performance, and video, whose main audience was other artists. Throughout the 1970s, the ideological apparatuses of media, museum, and commercial gallery were deployed in attempts to limit artists' autonomy, bring them back inside the institutions, and recapitalize art.[23] A small Euro-American group of dealers, at the end of the decade, successfully imposed a new market discipline by instituting a new regime of very large, highly salable neo-expressionist painting, just as Reaganism set out to cripple, if not destroy, public support for art. Art educators began slowly adopting the idea that they could sell their departments and schools as effective in helping their students find gallery representation by producing a fresh new line of work. The slow decline of "theoretical culture"—in art school, at least—had begun.

The Right-Republican assault on relatively autonomous

symbolic expression that began in the mid-1980s and extended into the 1990s became known as the "culture wars"; it continues, although with far less prominent attacks on art than on other forms of cultural expression.[24] Right-wing elites managed to stigmatize and to restrict public funding of certain types of art. Efforts to brand some work as "communist," meaning politically engaged or subversive of public order, no longer worked by the 1980s. Instead, U.S. censorship campaigns have mostly taken the form of moral panics meant to mobilize authoritarian-minded religious fundamentalists in the service of destroying the narrative and the reality of the liberal welfare state, of "community," echoing the "degenerate art" smear campaigns of the Nazis. Collectors and some collecting institutions perceived the *éclat* of such work—which thematized mostly sex and sexual inequality (in what came to be called "identity politics") as opposed to, say, questions of labor and governance, which were the targets in earlier periods of cultural combat—as a plus, with notoriety no impediment to fortune.[25] The most vilified artists in question have not suffered in the marketplace; on the contrary. But most public exhibiting institutions felt stung and reacted accordingly—by shunning criticality, since their funding and museum employment were tied to public funding. Subsequent generations of artists, divining that "difficult" content might restrict their entry into the success cycle, have engaged in self-censorship. Somewhat perversely, the public success of the censorship campaigns stems partly from the myth of a classless, unitary culture: the pretense that in the United States, art and culture belong to all and that very little specific knowledge or education is, or should be, necessary for understanding art. But legibility itself is generally a matter of education, which addresses a relatively small audience already equipped with appropriate tools of decipherment, as I have claimed throughout the present work and elsewhere.

But there is another dimension to this struggle over symbolic capital. The art world has expanded enormously over the past few decades and unified to a great degree, although there are still local markets. This market is "global" in scope and occupied with questions very far from whether its artistic practices are political or critical. But thirty years of theory-driven art production and critical reception—which brought part of the discursive matrix of art inside the academy, where it was both shielded from and could appear to be un-implicated in the market, thereby providing a cover for direct advocacy—helped produce artists whose practices were themselves swimming in a sea of criticality and apparently anti-commodity forms.[26] The term "political art" reappeared after art world commentators used it to ghettoize work in the 1970s, with some hoping to grant such work a modicum of respectability while others wielded it dismissively, but for the most part its valence was drifting toward positive. Even better were other, better-behaved forms of "criticality," such as the nicely bureaucratic-sounding "institutional critique" and the slightly more ominous "interventionism." I will leave it to others to explore the nuances of these (certainly meaningful) distinctions, remarking only that the former posits a location within the very institutions that artists were attempting to outwit in the 1960/70s, whereas the latter posits its opposite, a motion outside the institution—but also staged from within. These, then, are not abandonments of art world participation but acceptance that these institutions are the proper—perhaps the only—platform for artists.[27] A further sign of such institutionality is the emergence of a curatorial subgenre called "new institutionalism" (borrowing a term from a wholly unrelated branch of sociology) that encompasses the work of sympathetic young curators wishing to make these "engaged" practices intramural.

This suggests a broad consensus that the art world, as it expands, is a special kind of sub-universe (or parallel universe) of discourses and practices whose walls may seem transparent but which floats in a sea of larger cultures. That may be the means of coming to terms with the overtaking of high-cultural meaning by mass culture and its structures of celebrity, which had sent 1960s artists into panic. Perhaps artists are now self-described art workers, but they also hope to be privileged members within their particular sphere of culture, actually "working"—like financial speculators—relatively little, while depending on brain power and salesmanship to score big gains. Seen in this context, categories like political art, critical art, institutional critique, and interventionism are ways of slicing and dicing the offspring of art under the broad rubric of conceptualism—some approaches favor analyses and symbolic "interventions" into the institutions in question, others more externalized, publicly visible actions.

Perhaps a more general consideration of the nature of work itself and of education is in order. I have suggested that we are witnessing the abandonment of the model of

art education as a search for meaning (and of the liberal model of higher education in general) in favor of what has come to be called the success model . . . "Down with critical studies!" Many observers have commented on the changing characteristics of the international work force, with especial attention to the "new flexible personality," an ideal worker type for a life without job security, one who is able to construct a marketable personality and to persuade employers of one's adaptability to the changing needs of the job market. Commentators like Brian Holmes (many of them based in Europe) have noted the applicability of this model to art and intellectuals.[28] Bill Readings, until his death a Canadian professor of comparative literature at the Université de Montréal, in his posthumously published book, *The University in Ruins* (1997), observes that universities are no longer "guardians of the national culture" but effectively empty institutions that sell an abstract notion of excellence.[29] The university, Readings writes, is "an autonomous bureaucratic corporation" aimed at educating for "economic management" rather than "cultural conflict." The Anglo-American urban geographer David Harvey, reviewing Readings' book in the *Atlantic Monthly*, noted that the modern university "no longer cares about values, specific ideologies, or even such mundane matters as learning how to think. It is simply a market for the production, exchange, and consumption of useful information—useful, that is, to corporations, governments, and their prospective employees."[30] In considering the "production of subjectivity" in this context, Readings writes—citing the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben—that it is no longer a matter of either shop-floor obedience or managerial rationality but rather the much touted "flexibility," "personal responsibility," "communication skills," and other similarly "abstract images of affliction."[31]

Agamben has provocatively argued that most of the world's educated classes are now part of the new planetary petite bourgeoisie, which has dissolved all social classes, displacing or joining the old petite bourgeoisie and the urban proletariat and inheriting their economic vulnerability. In this end to recognizable national culture, Agamben sees a confrontation with death out of which a new self-definition may be born—or not. Another Italian philosopher, Paolo Virno, is also concerned with the character of the new global workforce in the present post-Fordist moment, but his position takes a different tack in works like *The Grammar of the Multitude,* a slim book based on his lectures.[32]

> The affinity between a pianist and a waiter, which Marx had foreseen, finds an unexpected confirmation in the epoch in which all wage labor has something in common with the "performing artist." The salient traits of post-Fordist experience (servile virtuosity, exploitation of the very faculty of language, unfailing relation to the "presence of others," etc.) postulate, as a form of conflictual retaliation, nothing less than a radically new form of democracy.[33]

Virno argues that the new forms of globalized "flexible labor" allow for the creation of new forms of democracy. The long-established dyads of public/private and collective/individual no longer have meaning, and collectivity is enacted in other ways. The multitude and immaterial labor produce subjects who occupy "a middle region between 'individual and collective'" and so have the possibility of engineering a different relationship to society, state, and capital. It is tempting to assign the new forms of communication to this work of the creation of "a radically new form of democracy."

Let us tease out of these accounts of the nature of modern labor—in an era in which business types (like Richard Florida) describe the desired work force, typically urban residents, as "creatives"—some observations about artists-in-training: art students have by now learned to focus not on an object-centered brand signature so much as on a personality-centered one. The cultivation of this personality is evidently seen by some anxious school administrators—feeling pressure to define "art" less by the adherence of an artist's practice to a highly restricted discourse and more in the terms used for other cultural objects—as hindered by critical studies and only to be found behind a wall of craft. (*Craft* here is not to be understood in the medieval sense, as bound up in guild organization and the protection of knowledge that thereby holds down the number of practitioners, but as reinserted into the context of individualized, bravura production—commodity production in particular.) Class and study time give way to studio preparation and exposure to a train of invited, and paid, reviewers/critics (with the former smacking of boot camp, and the latter sending up whiffs of corruption).

It might be assumed that we art world denizens, too, have become neoliberals, finding validation only within the commodity-driven system of galleries, museums, foundations, and magazines, and in effect competing across borders (though some of us are equipped with advantages apart from our artistic talents), a position evoked at the start of this essay in the question posed by an artist in his twenties concerning whether it is standard practice for ambitious artists to seek to sell themselves to the rich in overseas venues.

But now consider the art world as a community—in Benedict Anderson's terms, an imagined community—of the most powerful kind, a postnational one kept in ever-closer contact by emerging systems of publicity and communication alongside other, more traditional print journals, publicity releases, and informal organs (although it does not quite achieve imaginary nationhood, which is Anderson's true concern).[34]

The international art world (I am treating it here as a system) is entering into the globalizing moment of "flexible accumulation"—a term preferred by some on the left to "(economic) postmodernism" as a historical periodization. After hesitating over the new global image game (in which the main competition is mass culture), the art world has responded by developing several systems for regularizing standards and markets. Let me now take a minute to look at this newly evolving system itself.[35]

The art world had an earlier moment of internationalization, especially in the interwar period, in which International Style architecture, design, and art helped unify the look of elite cultural products and the built environment of cities around the globe. Emergent nationalisms modified this only somewhat, but International Style lost favor in the latter half of the twentieth century. In recent times, under the new "global" imperative, three systemic developments have raised art world visibility and power. First, localities have sought to capitalize on their art world holdings by commissioning buildings designed by celebrity architects. But high-profile architecture is a minor, small-scale maneuver, attracting tourists, to be sure, but functioning primarily as a symbolic assertion that that particular urban locale is serious about being viewed as a "player" in the world economic system. The Bilbao effect is not always as powerful as hoped. The era of blockbuster shows—invented in the 1970s to draw in crowds, some say by the recently deceased Thomas P. F. Hoving in his tenure at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art—may be drawing to a close, saving museums from ever-rising expenditures on collateral costs such as insurance; it is the container more than the contents that is the attractant.

More important have been the two other temporary but recurrent, processual developments. First came the hypostatizing biennials of the 1990s. Their frantic proliferation has elicited derision, but these international exhibitions were a necessary moment in the integration of the art system, allowing local institutional players to put in their chips. The biennials have served to insert an urban locale, often of some national significance, into the international circuit, offering a new physical site attracting art and art world members, however temporarily. That the local audience is educated about new international style imperatives is a secondary effect to the elevation of the local venue itself to what might crudely be termed "world class" status; for the biennials to be truly effective, the important audience must arrive from elsewhere. The biennial model provides not only a physical circuit but also a regime of production and normalization. In "peripheral" venues it is not untypical for artists chosen to represent the local culture to have moved to artist enclaves in fully "metropolitan," "first world" cities (London, New York, Berlin, Paris—regarded as portals to the global art market/system), before returning to their countries of origin to be "discovered." The airplane allows a continued relationship with the homeland; expatriation can be prolonged, punctuated by time back home. This condition, of course, defines migrant and itinerant labor of all varieties under current conditions, as it follows the flow of capital."[36]

Resistanbul protesters demonstrating on September 5, 2009.

I recently received a lengthy, manifesto-style e-mail, part of an "open letter to the Istanbul Biennial," that illustrates the critique of biennials with pretensions to political art (characteristic also of the past three iterations of documenta—a "pentennial" or "quinquennial" if you will, rather than a biennial—in Kassel, Germany).[37] It is signed by a group calling itself the Resistanbul Commissariat of Culture:

> We have to stop pretending that the popularity of politically engaged art within the museums and markets over the last few years has anything to do with really changing the world. We have to stop pretending that taking risks in the space of art, pushing boundaries of form, and disobeying the conventions of culture, making art about politics makes any difference. We have to stop pretending that art is a free space, autonomous from webs of capital and power. . . .
>
> We have long understood that the Istanbul Biennial aims at being one of the most politically engaged transnational art events. . . . This year the Biennial is quoting comrade Brecht, dropping notions such as neoliberal hegemony, and riding high against global capitalism. We kindly appreciate the stance but we recognize that art should have never existed as a separate category from life. Therefore we are writing you to stop collaborating with arms dealers. . . .
>
> The curators wonder whether Brecht's question "What Keeps Mankind Alive" is equally urgent today for us

> living under the neoliberal hegemony. We add the question: "What Keeps Mankind Not-Alive?" We acknowledge the urgency in these times when we do not have the right to work, we do not get free healthcare and education, our right to our cities, our squares, and streets are taken by corporations, our land, our seeds and water are stolen, we are driven into precarity and a life without security, when we are killed crossing their borders and left alone to live an uncertain future with their potential crises. But we fight. And we resist in the streets not in corporate spaces reserved for tolerated institutional critique so as to help them clear their conscience. We fought when they wanted to kick us out of our neighborhoods .....

The message goes on to list specific struggles in Turkey for housing, safety, job protections, and so on, which space limitations constrain me to omit.[38] I was interested in the implied return of the accusation that sociocritical/political work is boring and negative, addressed further in this e-mail:

> The curators also point out that one of the crucial questions of this Biennial is "how to 'set pleasure free,' how to regain revolutionary role of enjoyment." We set pleasure free in the streets, in our streets. We were in Prague, Hong Kong, Athens, Seattle, Heilegendamm [*sic*], Genoa, Chiapas and Oaxaca, Washington, Gaza and Istanbul![39] Revolutionary role of enjoyment is out there and we cherish it everywhere because we need to survive and we know that we are changing the world with our words, with our acts, with our laughter. And our life itself is the source of all sorts of pleasure.

The Resistanbul Commissariat of Culture message ends as follows:

> Join the resistance and the insurgence of imagination! Evacuate corporate spaces, liberate your works. Let's prepare works and visuals (poster, sticker, stencil etc.) for the streets of the resistance days. Let's produce together, not within the white cube, but in the streets and squares during the resistance week! Creativity belongs to each and every one of us and can't be sponsored.
>
> Long live global insurrection!

This "open letter" underlines the criticism to which biennials or any highly visible exhibitions open themselves when they purport to take on political themes, even if participants and visitors are unlikely to receive such e-mailed messages.[40] As the letter implies, dissent and dissidence that fall short of insurrection and unruliness are quite regularly incorporated into exhibitions, as they are into institutions such as universities in liberal societies; patronizing attitudes, along the lines of "Isn't she pretty when she's angry!" are effective—even President Bush smilingly called protesters' shouts a proof of the robustness of "our" freedom of speech while they were being hustled out of the hall where he was speaking. But I suggest that the undeniable criticisms expressed by Resistanbul do not, finally, invalidate the efforts of institutional reform, however provisional. All movements against an institutional consensus are dynamic, and provisional. (And see below.)

Accusations of purely symbolic display, of hypocrisy, are easily evaded by turning to, finally, the third method of global discipline, the art fair, for fairs make no promises other than sales and parties; there is no shortage of appeals to pleasure. There has been a notable increase in the number and locations of art fairs in a short period, reflecting the art world's rapid monetization; art investors, patrons, and clientele have shaken off the need for internal processes of quality control in favor of speeded-up multiplication of financial and prestige value. Some important fairs have set up satellite branches elsewhere.[41] Other important fairs are satellites that outshine their original venues and have gone from the periphery of the art world's vetting circuit to center stage. At art fairs, artworks are scrutinized for financial-portfolio suitability, while off-site fun (parties and dinners), fabulousness (conspicuous consumption), and non-art shopping are the selling points for the best-attended fairs—those in Miami, New York, and London (and of course the original, Basel). Dealers pay quite a lot to participate, however, and the success of the fair as a business venture depends on the dealers' ability to make decent sales and thus to want to return in subsequent years.

No discursive matrix is required for successful investments by municipal and national hosts in this market. Yet art fairs have delicately tried to pull a blanket of respectability over the naked profit motive, by installing a smattering of curated exhibitions among the dealers' booths and hosting on-site conferences with invited intellectual luminaries. But perhaps one should say that discursive matrices are *always* required, even if they take the form of books and magazines in publishers' fair booths; but intellectuals talking in rooms and halls and stalking the floor—and being interviewed—can't hurt.

Predictions about the road to artistic success in this scene are easy to make, because ultimately shoppers are in for a quick fix (those Russians!) and increasingly are unwilling to spend quality time in galleries learning about artists and their work: after all, why bother? The art content of these

Jesse Jones, The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahogany, 2009. video still.

containers and markets should thus avoid being excessively arcane and hard to grasp, love, and own; and to store or lend. Many can literally be carried out under a collector's arm. The work should be painting, if possible, for so many reasons, ranging from the symbolic artisanal value of the handmade to the continuity with traditional art historical discourse and the avoidance of overly particularistic political partisanship except if highly idiosyncratic or expressionist. The look of solemnity will trump depth and incisive commentary every time; this goes for any form, including museum-friendly video installations, film, animation, computer installations, and salable performance props (and conceptualism-lite). Young artists (read: recent art-school graduates) are a powerful attraction for buyers banking on rising prices.

Art Basel Miami. Photo: Bill Wisser.

The self-described Resistanbul Commissariat writes of "the popularity of politically engaged art within the museums and markets"—well, perhaps. The art world core of cognoscenti who validate work on the basis of criteria that set it apart from a broad audience may favor art with a critical edge, though not perhaps for the very best reasons. Work engaged with real-world issues or exhibiting other forms of criticality may offer a certain satisfaction and flatters the viewer, provided it does not too baldly implicate the class or subject position of the viewer. Criticality can take many forms, including highly abstract ones (what I have called "critique in general," which often, by implicating large swathes of the world or of humankind, tends to let everyone off the hook), and can execute many artful dodges. Art history's genealogical dimension often leads to the acceptance of "politico-critical" work from past eras, and even of some contemporary work descended from this, which cannot help but underscore its exchange value. Simply put, to some connoisseurs and collectors, and possibly one or two museum collections, criticality is a stringently attractive brand. Advising collectors or museums to acquire critical work can have a certain sadistic attraction, directed both toward the artist and the work and toward the advisee/collector.

A final common feature of this new global art is a readily graspable multiculturalism that creates a sort of United Nations of global voices on the menu of art production. Multiculturalism, born as an effort to bring *difference* out of the negative column into the positive with regard to qualities of citizens, long ago became also a bureaucratic tool for social control, attempting to render difference cosmetic. Difference was long ago pegged as a marketing tool in constructing taste classes; in a business book of the 1980s on global taste, the apparently universal desire for jeans and pizza (and later, Mexican food) was the signal example: the marketable is different but not *too* different. In this context, there is indeed a certain bias toward global corporate internationalism—that is, neoliberalism—but that of course has nothing to do with whether "content providers" identify as politically left, right, independent, or not at all. Political opinions, when they are manifested, can become mannerist tropes.

But often the function of biennials and contemporary art is also to make a geopolitical situation visible to the audience, which means that art continues to have a mapping and even critical function in regard to geopolitical realities. Artists have the capacity to condense, anatomize, and represent symbolically complex social and historical processes. In the context of internationalism, this is perhaps where political or critical art may have its best chance of being seen and actually understood, for the critique embodied in a work is not necessarily a critique of the actual locale in which one stands (if it describes a specific site, it may be a site "elsewhere"). Here I ought provisionally to suspend my criticism of "critique in general." I am additionally willing to suspend my critique of work that might be classed under the rubric "long ago or far away," which in such a context may also have useful educational and historical functions—never forgetting, nonetheless, the vulnerability to charges such as those made by the Resistanbul group.

"Down with critical studies," I wrote above, and the present has indeed been seen as a post-critical moment, as any market-driven moment must be . . . but criticality seems to be a modern phoenix: even before the market froze over, there had never been a greater demand on the part of young art students for an entrée into critical studies and concomitantly for an understanding of predecessors and traditions of critical and agitational work. I speculate that this is because they are chafing under the command to succeed, on market terms, and therefore to quit experimenting for the sake of pleasure or indefinable aims. Young people, as the hoary cliché has it, often have idealistic responses to received orthodoxy about humanity and wish to repair the world, while some artists too have direct experience of poverty and social negativity and may wish to elevate others—a matter of social justice. Young artists perennially reinvent the idea of collaborative projects, which are the norm in the rest of the world of work and community and only artificially discouraged, for the sake of artistic entrepreneurism and "signature control," in the art-market world.[42]

I return to the question posed above, "whether choosing to be an artist means aspiring to serve the rich . . ." Time was when art school admonished students not to think this way, but how long can the success academy hang on while galleries are not to be had? (Perhaps the answer is that scarcity only increases desperation; the great pyramid of struggling artists underpinning the few at the pinnacle simply broadens at the base.) Nevertheless, artists are stubborn. The "Resistanbul" writers tell us they "resist in the streets not in corporate spaces reserved for tolerated institutional critique," as some artists do in order to "help them clear their conscience." For sure. There are always artworks, or art "actions," that are situated outside the art world or that "cross-list" themselves in and outside the golden ghettos. I am still not persuaded that we need to choose. There is so far no end to art that adopts a critical stance—although perhaps not always in the market and success machine itself, where it is always in danger of being seriously rewritten, often in a process that *just takes time.* It is this gap between the work's production and its absorption and neutralization that allows for its proper reading and ability to speak to present conditions.[43] It is not the market alone, after all, with its hordes of hucksters and advisers, and bitter critics, that determines meaning and resonance: there is also the community of artists and the potential counterpublics they implicate.

X

This essay began as a talk at the Shanghai Contemporary Art Fair in September of 2009, on the symposium's assigned topic, "What is Contemporary Art?"—a perfectly impossible question, in my opinion (although I could imagine beginning, perhaps, by asking, "What makes contemporary art contemporary?"). Nevertheless, talk I did. My efforts in converting that talk, developed for a non-U.S. audience, with unknown understandings of my art world, into the present essay have led me to produce what strikes me as a work written by a committee of one—me—writing at various times and for various readers. I long ago decided to take to heart Brecht's ego-puncturing suggestion—to recruit my own writing in the service of talking with other audiences, entering other universes of discourses, to cannibalize it if need be.

There are lines of argument in this essay that I have made use of at earlier conferences (one of which lent it the title "Take the Money and Run"), and there are other self-quotations or paraphrases. I also found myself reformulating some things I have written before, returning to the lineage and development of artistic autonomy, commitment, alienation, and resistance, and to the shape and conditions of artistic reception and education.

I thank Alan Gilbert, Stephen Squibb, and Stephen Wright for their excellent readerly help and insights as I tried to impose clarity, coherence, and some degree of historical adequacy on the work.

Martha Rosler is an artist who works with multiple media, including photography, sculpture, video, and installation. Her interests are centered on the public sphere and landscapes of everyday life—actual and virtual—especially as they affect women. Related projects focus on housing, on the one hand, and systems of transportation, on the other. She has long produced works on war and the "national security climate," connecting everyday experiences at home with the conduct of war abroad. Other works, from bus tours to sculptural recreations of architectural details, are excavations of history.

1
To belabor the point: if medieval viewers read the symbolic meaning of a painted lily in a work with a Biblical theme, it was because iconographic codes were constantly relayed, while religious stories were relatively few. In certain late-nineteenth-century English or French genre paintings, as social histories of the period recount, a disheveled-looking peasant girl with flowing locks and a jug from which water pours unchecked would be widely understood to signify the sexual profligacy and availability of attractive female Others. Art has meanwhile freed itself from the specifics of stories (especially of history painting), becoming more and more abstract and formal in its emphases and thus finally able to appeal to a different universality: not that of the universal Church but of an equally imaginary universal culture (ultimately bourgeois culture, but not in its mass forms) and philosophy.

2
I am confining my attention to Western art history. It is helpful to remember that the relatively young discipline of art history was developed as an aid to connoisseurship and collection and thus can be seen as *au fond* a system of authentication.

3
By this I do not intend to ignore the many complicating factors, among them the incommensurability of texts and images, nor to assert that art, in producing images to illustrate and interpret prescribed narratives, can remotely be considered to have followed a clear-cut doctrinal line without interposing idiosyncratic, critical, subversive, or partisan messages, but the gaps between ideas, interpretations, and execution do not constitute a nameable trend.

4
What has come to be known as the "middle class" (or classes), if this needs clarification, comprised those whose livelihoods derived from ownership of businesses and industries; they were situated in the class structure between the landed aristocracy which was losing political power, and the peasants, artisans, and newly developing urban working class.

5
French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is the most prominent theorist of symbolic capital and the production and circulation of symbolic goods; I am looking at "The Market of Symbolic Goods," in *The Field of Cultural Production* , ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) . This article, a bit fixed in its categories, sketches out the structural logic of separation.

6
The first application of the term to art is contested, some dating it as late as the Salon des Refusés of 1863.

7
Forms, rather than being empty shapes, carry centuries of Platonic baggage, most clearly seen in architecture; formal innovation in twentieth-century high modernism, based on both Kant and Hegel, was interpreted as a search for another human dimension.

8
In his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), the poet and theorist Samuel Taylor Coleridge famously distinguished between Fancy and Imagination.

9
John Fekete, *The Critical Twilight: Explorations in the Ideology of Anglo-American Literary Theory from Eliot to McLuhan* (New York: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1977). Especially in Europe but also in the United States, financial panics, proletarian organizing, and political unrest characterized the latter half of the nineteenth century.

10
Modernism in the other arts has a similar trajectory without, perhaps, the direct legacy or influence of Sovietism or workers' movements.

11
The codification of social observation in the nineteenth century that included the birth of sociology and anthropology also spurred as-yet amateur efforts to record social difference and eventually to document social inequality. Before the development of the Leica, which uses movie film, other small, portable cameras included the Ermanox, which had a large lens but required small glass plates for its negatives; it was used, for example, by the muckraking lawyer Erich Salomon.

12
For example with regard to the blurred line between photography and commercial applications, from home photos to photojournalism (photography for hire), a practice too close to us in time to allow for a reasoned comparison with the long, indeed ancient, history of commissioned paintings and sculptures.

13
There is generally some tiny space allotted to one or two documentarians, above all for those addressing dire conditions in the global periphery.

14
Modernist linguistic experiments are beyond my scope here.

15
This is to overlook the role of that major part of the intellectual class directly engaged in formulating the ideological messages of ruling elites. For one historical perspective on the never-ending debate over the role of intellectuals vis-à-vis class and culture, not to mention the nation-state, see Julien Benda's 1927 book *La Trahison des Clercs* (*The Betrayal of the Intellectuals*; literally: "The Treason of the Learned"), once widely read but now almost quaint.

16
See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), a work that has greatly influenced other critics—in the United States, notably Benjamin Buchloh. On Bürger's thesis, I wrote, in "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment" (1983), that he had described the activity of the avant-garde as the self-criticism of art as an institution, turning against both "the distribution apparatus on which the work of art depends and the status of art in bourgeois society as defined by the concept of autonomy." I further quoted Bürger: "the intention of the avant-gardists may be defined as the attempt to direct toward the practical the aesthetic experience (which rebels against the praxis of life) that Aestheticism developed. What most strongly conflicts with the means-end rationality of bourgeois society is to become life's organizing principle."

17
Ibid., 53.

18
Ibid., 53–54.

19
Allan Kaprow, "The Education of the Un-Artist, Part I," *Art News*, February 1971; "The Education of the Un-Artist, Part II," *Art News*, May 1972; "The Education of the Un-Artist, Part III," *Art in America*, January 1974.

20
Nevertheless, in pop-related subcultures, from punk to heavy metal to their offshoots in skateboarding culture, authenticity is a dimension with great meaning, a necessary demand of any tight-knit group.

21
Debord was also a member, with Isidore Isou, of the Lettrists, which he similarly abandoned.

22
Thus the insistence of some university art departments that they were fine arts departments and did not wish to offer, say, graphic arts or other commercial programs and courses (a battle generally lost).

23
Again channeling Althusser.

24
The "culture wars" are embedded in a broader attempt to delegitimize and demonize social identities, mores, and behaviors whose public expression was associated with the social movements of the 1960s, especially in relation to questions of difference.

25
This is not the place to argue the importance of the new social movements of the 1960s and beyond, beyond my passing attention to feminism, above; rather, here I am simply pointing to the ability of art institutions and the market to strip work of its resonance. As is easily observable, the term "political art" is reserved for work that is seen to dwell on analysis or critique of the state, wage labor, economic relations, and so on, with relations to sexuality and sex work always excepted.

26
Recall my earlier remarks about both the academicization of art education and the function of art history, a function now also parceled out to art reviewing/criticism.

27
A favorite slogan of the period was "There is no outside."

Another, more popularly recognizable slogan might be "Think different," a slogan that attempts to harness images of powerful leaders of social movements or "pioneers" of scientific revolutions for the service of commodity branding, thus suggesting motion "outside the box" while attempting never to leave it. See the above remarks on Bürger and the theory of the avant-garde.

28
See Brian Holmes, "The Flexible Personality: For a New Cultural Critique" (2001), http://web.archive.org/web/20100218035629/http://theadventure.be/node/253 , or at http://www.16beavergroup.org/pdf/fp.pdf , and numerous other sites; Holmes added a brief forward to its publication at eipcp (european institute for progressive cultural policies), http://web.archive.org/web/20090301000835/http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/1106/holmes/en .

29
Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997). The relative invisibility of Readings' book seems traceable to his sudden death just before the book was released, making him unavailable for book tours and comment.

30
David Harvey, "University, Inc.," review of *The University in Ruins*, by Bill Readings," *The Atlantic* (October 1998). Available online at http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/98oct/ruins.htm . Nothing could be more indicative of the post-Fordist conditions of intellectual labor and the readying of workers for the knowledge industry than the struggle over the U.S.' premier public university, the University of California system, the birthplace of the "multiversity" as envisioned by Clark Kerr in the development of the UC Master Plan at the start of the 1960s. State public universities, it should be recalled, were instituted to produce homegrown professional elites; but remarkably enough, as the bellwether California system was undergoing covert and overt privatization and being squeezed mightily by the state government's near insolvency, the system's president blithely opined that higher education is a twentieth-century issue, whereas people today are more interested in health care, and humorously likened the university to a cemetery (Deborah Solomon, "Big Man on Campus: Questions for Mark Yudoff, *New York Times Magazine* , September 24, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/27/magazine/27fob-q4-t.html?ref=magazine). The plan for the California system seems to be to reduce the number of California residents attending in favor of out-of-staters and international students, whose tuition costs are much higher. For further comparison, it seems that California now spends more than any other state on incarceration but is forty-eighth in its expenditure on education.

31
Readings, *The University in Ruins*, 50.

32
Paulo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* , trans. Isabella Bertoletti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (Cambridge, Mass.: Semiotext(e), 2003), also available online at http://www.e-flux.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Pages-from-VIRNO_A_Grammar_of_the_Multitude_pages7%E2%80%9318.pdf . I have imported this discussion of Virno's work from an online essay of mine on left-leaning political blogs in the United States.

33
Ibid, 66–67.

34
See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983).

35
Here I will not take up the question of museums' curatorial responses to this moment of crisis in respect to their definition and role in the twenty-first century. I can only observe that some elite museums have apparently identified a need to offer a more high-end set of experiences, in order to set them apart from the rest of our burgeoning, highly corporatized "experience economy." At present the main thrust of that effort to regain primacy seems to center on the elevation of the most under-commodified form, performance art, the form best positioned to provide museum-goers with embodied and nonnarrative experiences (and so far decidedly removed from the world of the everyday or of "politics" but situated firmly in the realm of the aesthetic).

36
Since writing this, I have read Chin-Tao Wu's "Biennials Without Borders?"—in *New Left Review* 57 (May/June 2009): 107–115—which has excellent graphs and analyses supporting similar points. Wu analyzes the particular pattern of selection of artists from countries on the global "peripheries."

37
The 11th Istanbul Biennial ran from September through November, 2009, under the curatorship of a Zagreb-based collective known as What, How, and for Whom (WHW), whose members are Ivet Curlin, Ana Dević, Nataša Ilić, and Sabina Sabolović. Formed in 1999, the group has run the city-owned Gallery Nova since 2003. The title of this biennial, drawn from a song by Bertolt Brecht, is "What Keeps Mankind Alive?"

38
The full version of the letter can be found online at http://etcistanbul.wordpress.com/2009/09/02/open-letter/ .

39
Important sites of concerted public demonstrations against neoliberal economic organizations and internationally sanctioned state domination and repression.

40
But they may well be offered flyers.

41
The Shanghai Contemporary Art Fair (where this paper was first presented) is an outpost of the Bologna Art Fair.

42
I experience some disquiet in the realization that, as in so much else, the return of the collective has lingering over it not just the workers' councils of council communism (not to mention Freud's primal horde) but the quality circles of Toyota's re-engineering of car production in the 1970s.

43
It is wise not to settle back into the image-symbolic realm; street actions and public engagement are basic requirements of contemporary citizenship. If the interval between the appearance of new forms of resistance and incorporation is growing ever shorter, so is the cycle of invention, and the pool of people involved is manifestly much, much larger.

Jan Verwoert

Standing on the Gates of Hell, My Services Are Found Wanting

Standing on the gates of hell, my services are found wanting. For I cannot give you what you want. What you want from me, here, on the gates of hell, is to open the gates and let you in. But I cannot do that. I don't even see why that service should still be required. Because you have already passed the gates. You are inside. You live in contemporary hell. You inhabit the hell of the contemporary. And now you want me to perform the rite to confirm your passage? And give you reasons for being in there? I'm sorry, I can't. To grant you a license to be where you are does not lie within my powers. Thus powerless I remain, standing on the gates of hell, observing what passes and sharing my observations with you.

Passing the gates of hell, you get everything you ever wanted. And everything you wanted is all you are ever going to get. Nothing more. Just that. Exactly what you wanted. Everything included. In hell. In a world to reflect your desires, a world coated in surfaces that fracture the light and make its reflections play across the skin of all things new in the modern world, the contemporary world: in a world that stays contemporary by rejuvenating itself in cycles of modernization, with each cycle eclipsing the previous one in accordance with the laws of planned obsolescence. To love this world you must forget all the new you got before, before you now became, again, the new you. The modern world has a lot to offer the new you; each cake it serves you is one to have *and* eat, so that always things can be had both ways: a trip to the moon *and* a journey through the unconscious, a holiday on foreign shores *and* a return home to a country you never knew, an innocence sweeter than raffinated sugar *and* a force brute enough to help you "claw yourself into an untouchable place."[1] All resources that the planet and its people provide—all the oil, spices, and metals, the power, sex, and money in the world—are at your disposal to fulfill the promise of transcending material needs through material means that modern culture, rendering itself contemporary over and over again, incessantly renews.

Remaining on the gates of hell, I will promise you none of this. I can only tell you there is *more*. No more of *this*. But much more than you have ever wanted before, or thought you deserved. For this too is modernism, of another, an always uncontemporary kind, a nagging doubt and a mocking voice, speaking softly, close to your ear: "What if there was something *more* to life? Than this? Something altogether different, something both/neither old and/nor new, something that was there for you, if only you had the guts to face it..." This is not my voice speaking. But another voice. I only relate what it says. Since I keep hearing it from where I stand, here, on the gates of hell.

No. 1. Uncontemporaries at the Gates

Standing on the gates of hell, I hear other voices. For I find myself in the company of others. In the company of my contemporaries. What makes them my contemporaries is

their uncontemporary manners, their mannered ways of causing a disturbance at the gates, their insistence to not readily pass through the gates to enter the contemporary, without reservations. What brings us together, then, as uncontemporary contemporaries—or rather, contemporary uncontemporaries—is not a set of shared beliefs, not a joint endeavor, not a project or enterprise, but just this very intuition: that there is no reason to readily enter, but that it might be more wise to stay on the gates and take a good look.

Standing there, I find myself, for instance, in the company of Irit Rogoff, and I am with her when she writes that what makes us contemporaries is the act of looking at the problems of our time together and the realization that we share these problems—and maybe not much more apart from these problems—as we inhabit the condition of contemporaneity together. I agree with her in principle. I would contend, however, that facing today's problems together as contemporaries, does not necessarily mean to "fully inhabit and live out contemporaneity."[2] I would rather say that the very act of facing the contemporary, as contemporaries, dissociates us from it—if only ever so slightly—just enough to get the space to take a look and take the time to have a word with each other. This dissociation is not an act of claiming distance, for there is no distance. How could there be any distance to the contemporary, when, as contemporaries, we live today, we are involved, we are entangled! Still, there is a difference in attitude. We do not enter the contemporary readily. We look at it, think about it, and talk about it. We make art about it. We generate philosophy, that is, to invoke the ghost of Nietzsche, a contemporary art of making *unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*—uncontemporary observations. And we do many other things that demand neither education nor training, things done by all people who hesitate to readily enter (but never hesitate to respond to a distress call from anyone inside) contemporary hell.

Standing on the gates of hell, it is not out of hesitation that we do not readily cross them. Please, don't assume that we are too fickle to make a leap of faith and enter! For this passing requires no leap. The passage through the gates, on the contrary, is a slow process. It is a matter of formalities and technicalities. It is a matter of finding investors, getting permits, and consulting specialists. This is how you enter hell in a contemporary fashion. Nowadays, it takes time, determination, and patience to go to hell. In these matters we can neither consult nor console you. The formalities and technicalities of the gradual passage to hell are not our field of expertise. We don't pass; we leap. With leaps of thought, we jump from one point of view to the other in order to get a good look at the gates from different perspectives. If you want to picture the gathering of uncontemporary contemporaries on the gates, imagine a swarm of frogs, hopping and bopping around on its threshold. Leaps of thought are leaps of faith, almost by definition. For they presuppose and enact faith in the value of thinking, the value of a particular form of thinking: one that has no immediately realizable use value, that does not readily yield tangible results, that does not generate capital, the kind that you find in philosophy, art, and all forms of care. That value is not recognized inside the gates. So anyone who treasures the freedom of leaping like a frog, in terms of thought and faith, might be advised to stay hopping and bopping around on the gates.

No. 2. Facing the Gates

Standing *on* the gates I say, carefully avoiding the word "outside." Because there is no outside. The whole world is contemporary. It continuously makes itself contemporary in waves upon waves of forceful modernization, of enforced modernization. But there is a limit to modernization, a liminal space to which to withdraw and address the contemporary world that modernization creates. This is the liminal space of artistic intellectual modernisms. It opens up on the limits of the contemporary world. Although it is not entirely outside, it is neither entirely inside the hell of the contemporary. It is un-contemporary in that it always borders on the contemporary, without ever becoming one with it. It is on the border. It is on the gates. Quite literally so. Look at Rodin's gates. It is on the gates that the picture of life in hell materializes. Hell may itself be full of pictures. But the picture of hell as a whole can only be found on the doors. It is this picture that artistic intellectual modernisms have produced, time and again, on the face of the gates. The stuff of the face of the gates of hell is the material world that the contemporary uncontemporaries of modernity, artists and intellectuals, inhabit and emerge from.

Auguste Rodin, The Gates of Hell.

Facing the gates of hell, I am amazed by the fact that there

are still people here on the gates, and that somehow there always have been. For it must not be taken for granted that there should be any artists and intellectuals—or anyone else who cared, anyone with a heart and a mind—on the face of the gates, facing the gates. Neither is it a given that there is space on the gates. Such lives and spaces must first of all be created through a shared decision and a shared desire to describe, discuss, and remember the hell of the contemporary. It is through this shared decision and desire that the space of artistic intellectual discussion and remembrance opens up. To open up this space is to take a stance. It is to insist that what happens in hell should be exposed to view on the gates. It should not remain hidden behind closed doors. To insist that things should not remain hidden behind closed doors is to take a stance against the customs that govern life inside the gates of hell, the customs of claiming that nothing ever happened, when something did happen, so that business can quickly be continued, as usual. In defiance of these customs, artists and intellectuals insist that the memory, history, experience, and ramifications of life in hell are to be exposed to the public on the face of the doors. The liminal space on the gates of hell, the liminal space of artistic intellectual modernisms and all social forms of care, therefore, is a public space. The insistence on creating space on the gates is the insistence on there having to be a critical public.

No. 3. Weeping and Laughing

Facing the gates of hell, I now take a look around. I ask myself: Where am I? What place is this? This is not Paris. This is not America. Although it could be. This is another place. A particular place. Always another place. And always a particular place. This is because, throughout the last two centuries, various gates of hell have been built in particular places all around the world. And more gates are currently under construction. All these gates are portals to other gates. For all the gates of hell in the world are connected. They are connected through electrical wires, pipelines, and invisible flows of money. But they are also connected through shared ideas and shared feelings of joy and pain. Sometimes the laughter and weeping of people on one gate can be heard on all other gates too, as if the ones who laugh or weep were just on the other side. Upon hearing the sound, some people on the other gates won't be able to help laughing or weeping as well.

Weeping and laughing on the gates of hell, I sense the passage that connects all gates to be a passage in space and time. It is the passage of modernity. It is one global modernity that links all of the gates. Still, each gate is different. Each gate is a pathway to a different modernity, one of many local modernities, one of many pathways to hell. What is shared from gate to gate through the weeping is the memory of all the disasters of modernity, each different, immeasurable, and beyond comparison, but all modern, all atrociously modern, following the cruel logic of the modern industrialized production of death and injustice. What is also shared through the laughter from gate to gate is the knowledge that the many promises of a better modern world to come were never met, and now seem more like jokes—absurd jokes, serious jokes, jokes that continue to contain a grain of truth. So as we weep today, it is not the end of modernity that we bemoan. Neither do we laugh about it dismissively. This is because the passing of modernity has not concluded. The industrialized production of disaster continues. And promises are still being made.

Weeping and laughing on the gates of hell, I do not feel particularly postmodernist. Postmodernism was neither particularly funny nor sad. We uncontemporary contemporaries, however, are particularly funny and sad. Because we have experienced the fact that history never ended. We have seen the unresolved tensions of modernity erupt in local conflicts, plunging modern countries around the globe back into hell. This is not over. It never was, and it doesn't look like it will end anytime soon. Articulating our contemporary experience, we cannot therefore be anything other than uncontemporary. In our weeping we bemoan the disasters of the past that shape the present in order to try, maybe in vain, to prevent people in the future from repeating them. In our laughter we mock the promises of the past that have become jokes, to be entertained in the present and remind ourselves that, as long as there are still jokes to be made and people to make them, the future cannot possibly be as grim as it sometimes appears. This uncontemporary weeping and laughing, resonating between gates across the space and time of an unfinished modernity, is the weeping and laughter of contemporary art and thought.

Weeping and laughing on the gates of hell, listening and responding to the weeping and laughter of others, I am surprised to find that I quite often understand why they may weep or laugh. But then, often enough, I sadly do not. This is not because I lack information. It is rather because I sometimes simply cannot fathom what meaning means for people on another gate. Being raised on the gates of northern Protestantism, I was led to believe that to make meaning is to make things clear. This is what meaning means and this is how it is made. Everything is to be made clear. Because it can be made clear. This is quite a promise. Not that I would ever want to fully renounce it. It has potential. But by now it also makes me laugh. A lot. And weep quite a bit, too. Because acting under the assumption that this is what meaning means and that this is how it is made, I have severely misunderstood people on other gates. In the meantime, however, I may have learned one or two things by experiencing art and thinking on other gates. It seems that this is what sharing our experiences on the gates could be about: to grasp, through art and thinking, what meaning means and how meaning is made, on each gate and between them.

Sharing experiences on the gates of hell, we *do* then find

ourselves performing some kind of service. We translate what meanings mean and how we experience experience into art and thought. This act of translation is also an act of historical codification. In art and thinking we find the historical codes for understanding what meaning will have meant and how experience will have been experienced. These codes are a key for understanding the joy and pain of life on the gates of hell now, in the past, and for the future. Similarly, these codes offer access to the logic of neurosis that governs life in hell. The logic of neurosis is always contemporary in that it governs our encounters today. It is also always uncontemporary in that the logic of neurosis doubles as the history of joy and pain, laughter and weeping, as it is inscribed in art and thinking. The service that we artists and intellectuals then find ourselves performing on the gates of hell is similar to that of a storyteller telling ghost stories to children. We tell ghost stories to avow the pain and joy of those who cannot find rest, because inside hell their pain and joy is not avowed. We tell the stories of the ghosts of the past to keep those ghosts alive in the present and give them a future in the memory of our children. We are not afraid of ghosts. The only thing we fear is for there to no longer be any ghosts. For if there are no ghosts, then there is no past and no future, and life on the gates of hell would cease to be possible. Without ghosts there would only be hell. So our service consists of the act of praying for ghosts. As we pray, we invent new incantations and learn historical ones from different gates. Standing on the gates of hell, we invoke each other's ghosts and teach each other prayers.

Seance scene of a from the movie Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler (1922) directed by Fritz Lang.

No. 4. Soul

Standing on the gates of hell, having stood here for a while now, I am forced to admit, once more, that no matter how hard I have tried—and God knows I have tried—my services are still found wanting. Not only can I not give you what you want, neither can I (nor will I) give you what you think you deserve. For getting what you think you deserve is just hell. Everybody in the end always gets what they *think they deserve*. And most people have already gotten it. But they don't like to be reminded that they have. This is why hell is hell: People are afraid. The two biggest fears are: 1. To get something that one thought one didn't deserve. 2. To then be forced to admit that one already had what one thought one deserved, and that it was bad. So if you want to charm the people in hell and give them what they want, the service you must provide is to relieve those fears. This is done through a simple trick. It is the secret of the trade of true liars: always only give people what they already have and think they deserve. But give it to them in a guise that allows them to rejoice in the illusion that they received something new, foreign, and exciting. This way you don't scare people by offering more than they think they deserve. And you spare them the truth that they already had it all, and that it was bad, since you make the same old seem fresh, right, and justified. If you can perform this trick, you will be loved. For being the fake you are. But you won't go to hell for that. Even if you think you deserve it and want it badly. Because hell won't take you when the devil finds you out. You'll be kicked right out of hell. And end up out here on the gates with us. Bad luck, buddy. Bad luck. So see you around, later.

Standing on the gates of hell, our services, therefore, are found wanting. For we insist on giving more than anyone thinks they deserve. Don't ask me what "more" means. I don't know. This is the point. This is why we linger and leap around on the gates: To talk about what more means, to talk more, think more, and make more art. For only one thing is certain out on the gates: life in hell won't do. There must be more to life than this. A passage to unknown pleasures and a different state of mind. Or just one less lie. One lie less. Maybe it is that simple: As long as there are still people on the gates invested in the idea that there could be more, and therefore talking, thinking, creating more, there will be more. What for? And for whom? The question is justified. And in line with the faith in there being more than the obvious, it is simply not good enough for the answer to be that it's all just for us, who happen to be invested in this idea. There must be more to this than just that. An uncontemporary proposal that modernist contemporaries have time and again made to gesture towards an answer and offer an alternative to hell on its gates was—not heaven—but the soul, the spirit of a world, or a ghost from a world that transcends the narrow horizon of the contemporary. I concede that this may just be another word for the divine, and therefore just an open gesture towards all that is more than just the given. But I like it for being that. As long as we still, or again, have open gestures to initiate a conversation, an exchange about what more we want, how to find more than what hell has to offer, we will continue talking, thinking, creating, and caring, here on the gates of hell. So my question to you is: What is the soul? What more can the soul be, the contemporary soul, the soul of the contemporary? How can we do things with a bit of soul? And create

contemporary forms of thinking, making art and living together that have some soul? Because that would be much better than anything hell has to offer: thoughts and deeds with some soul. Franco Bifo Berardi writes that soul is the peculiar gravity that makes bodies "fall in with others." So let's leap and hop, eager and happy to see the many ways in which we drop in with others...[3]

Cathy Wilkes, I give you all my money, 2007. Installation view.

No. 5. Happiness

Saying all this while standing on the gates of hell may make you think that I am a romantic. But I am not. Romance belongs to life in hell. Romance is exactly what people think they deserve. Nothing more than romance. Life in hell is fully romanticized. Each and every law that governs life in hell is put in place and held in place by romantic pictures and stories. Facing life in hell, standing on the gates, we see it all to clearly. Life in hell is unromanticizable. Because it is already fully romanticized. The last truly romantic act to perform is to acknowledge that life in hell has become impossible to romanticize, and to move on. To something more than just romance. To the love of the body, the love of the soul, and the love of its many ghosts. This is the ethics of an uncompromising dedication to the peculiar material being of others, encountered on the gates. A full dedication to their, your, our happiness. A happiness of the mind, the body, and the soul—and its ghosts. This is hedonism as radical ethics and philosophy proper. As a philosophy and art that becomes the sounding body for the laughter and weeping of many. A philosophy that creates laughter because it is a joke and consoles the weeping because it is a philosophy of tears, a philosophy in tears. This is an art and philosophy that is deeply romantic only in one respect: that it wants more than romance. Another form of happiness.

Standing on the gates hell, facing the gates of hell, laughing and weeping on the gates of hell, I summon you now, my uncontemporary contemporaries, because you have summoned me to come here, to address you. We summon each other all the time. This is how the public space to summon ourselves is created. The space and time to summon the ghosts, the most laughable and saddest ghosts of art and philosophy. This is not an end in itself. The end of the ceremony of summoning the ghosts of art and philosophy is the creation of the space of the public, the space of remembrance, discussion, laughter, and weeping—on the face of the gates facing the gates. Leaping around like frogs in this space on the gates, we recreate the faith in this space of art and philosophy through our mutual leaps. But this faith, as illusionary as it may seem, is a faith in there being more than just hell. A faith in there perhaps being a body and a soul, and something to share between bodies and souls, something more than we deserve and something more than hell will ever have to offer.

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1
I am indebted to Esperanza Rosales for explaining the U.S. to me using this expression.

2
Irit Rogoff, “Unfolding the Critical” (Berlin Tanzkongress, April 2006). See http://sarma.be/docs/1042 (audio).

3
Franco Bifo Berardi, *The Soul At Work* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 9.