# 1 AUTONOMY, ANTAGONISM, AND THE AESTHETIC

## FROM TEXT TO ACTION

Augustine writes in the *Confessions*, "What is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is: if someone asks me, I no longer know."[1] Here Augustine suggests that the moment that passes between posing a question and receiving a reply is marked by both risk and possibility: the risk of doubt and uncertainty, and the possibility of an opening out to the other. Paul Ricoeur, in *From Text to Action*, uses Augustine's quote to illustrate a familiar poststructuralist parable, as our "confused, formless . . . [and] mute temporal experience" inevitably succumbs to the instrumentalizing grasp of narrative discourse.[2] However, this passage carries another, equally subversive, message. Knowledge is reliable, safe, and certain as long as it is held in mono-logical isolation and synchronic arrest. As soon as it becomes mobilized and communicable, this certainty slips away and truth is negotiated in the gap between self and other, through an unfolding, dialogical exchange.

The Russian Constructivist El Lissitzky reiterated Augustine's famous query in the early twentieth century: "When someone would ask me what 'Art' is, then in that moment I do not know

what it is. But when I'm not being asked, then I know what it is."[3] Lissitzky's paraphrase neatly conflates two of the central tenets of the modern avant-garde. First, avant-garde art constitutes a form of critical insight; its task is to transgress existing categories of thought, action, and creativity (beginning with the definition of art itself), to constantly challenge fixed boundaries and identities. And second, the formation of an artistic subjectivity capable of such insight requires a process of withdrawal and defensive interiorization. The uncertainty that the artist experiences in responding to an interlocutor is presented as a barrier and a constraint, while the certitude of his own, internal, definition of art is a necessary precondition for creative practice. It is precisely in *not* attempting to define or fix the meaning of art for the Other that the artist is freed to act with the greatest creativity, even as his own self-understanding provides an infallible compass. It's symptomatic that even in the midst of a Constructivist movement notoriously hostile to traditional notions of self-expression, we encounter this conflation of the task of modern art (the generation of counter-normative insight) and the experience of subjective individuation (the isolation of the artistic personality in a sequestered zone of autonomous self-reflection). For Lissitzky, the artist requires mono-logical clarity, needs to "know" what art is, precisely because he is challenging bourgeois tradition, popular opinion, or other forms of collective or cumulative knowledge, which are understood as intrinsically compromised. Armed with this wisdom, incubated within the far recesses of the self, the artist creates physical manifestations, works of art, designed to variously provoke, reveal, expose, and transgress.[4]

At the same moment, Lissitzky was acutely conscious of the new demands placed on artistic subjectivity by the Constructivist movement and the necessary contradiction between the imperative to subvert conventional knowledge, on the one hand, and the use of conventional forms of authorship to produce this subversion, on the other. "What is needed is a cooperative," he wrote in a letter to Jan Tschichold in 1925. "But there is still too much subjectivist leaven in us, since every attempt fails." Writing seven years later, Lissitzky reflected on the impact of the avant-garde assault on conventional artistic production: "We fought against 'art,' we spat on its 'altar'—and we got what we wanted. Now, of course, we need no new art monasteries and sacred groves, but, even flying through a storm as we are, we would like to be able to achieve a little more concentration



and to carry our offspring to term."[5] This ambivalent relationship between individual and collectivity identity, between the work of art as experiential process and final product, is symptomatic. It isn't a question of privileging one term over the other, the collective over authorial sovereignty, or self-expression over the constraints of popular culture, but rather of recognizing the interplay of these ostensibly divided terms as a key nexus of creative action.

The tension between artistic and normative models of subjectivity was central to the development of modernist art over the past century, and continues to inform contemporary art practice and criticism.[6] The persistence of this dynamic is understandable. It was set in place initially by the overt hostility that greeted modernism's earliest outriders (the Romantic painters, the Realists, the Barbizon school, Der Blaüe Reiter, etc.) as they did battle with the still resonant forces of the salon and the academy. Withdrawal into the fortified enclave of the group or movement, and doughty faith in the integrity of one's personal vision against the grain of an art establishment mired in neoclassical repetition, were necessary for survival. The risk of significant ostracism and hostility has long ago subsided, but the *Weltbild* remains, a residue of modernism's initial struggle for legitimacy, internalized now by young artists at the earliest stages of their careers.

There is, of course, much at stake in the effort to preserve a cultural space that allows for critical reflection. Despite its many positive contributions, the impact of modernity on human subjectivity has also been profoundly damaging: the violence of industrial production, the brutal means/end rationality of the market, divisive class structures, the displacement or outright destruction of indigenous cultures, and oppressive forms of political totalitarianism have all diminished our understanding of what it is to be human. The history of modern art can be viewed, in large measure, as an ongoing struggle to develop a compensatory cultural response to the destructive and dehumanizing effects of modernity, whether this is done through the agency of a well-crafted object, paintings of bucolic Polynesians, or the therapeutic disruption of the viewer's perception. The artistic personality itself is perhaps the most symptomatic expression of this struggle. It exists as an explicit rebuke to the complacency, compartmentalization, and depersonalization imposed by the contemporary social order. Modern art has come to function as a privileged site of reflection

on the forces of modernism—a quasi-autonomous space of commentary and engagement, whose critical optic has been made possible precisely by art's gradual displacement from its previously integral cultural role within premodern society. Now occupying the margins of society (in terms of broader cultural relevance if not its status as a signifier of class hierarchy), it exists at a critical remove, allowing the artist the distance necessary to recognize the flaws and limitations of modern life and consciousness, and to reveal those constraints to the viewer.

The modern artist's attack on society and societal norms has most often been mobilized through a critique of representation (or, more recently, "signification"). It was the way in which society chose to image itself, the fawning idealization of wealth in Baroque painting, the sentimentalization of bourgeois privilege in the nineteenth-century salon, and later an entire mass cultural apparatus predicated on illusion and manipulation, that provided the axis of attack for the modern avant-garde. In response, artists deployed a range of counter-representational strategies (the disruption of academic conventions governing the use of color, facture, and composition; the turn toward abstraction; and eventually a full-scale attack on the very principle of mimesis in visual art), calling attention to the mythifying powers of the conventional image and holding open space for a more complex aesthetic experience, capable of catalyzing self-reflection rather than Pavlovian consumption. The result was a modernist discourse centered on the theatrical struggle between good and evil images, and defined by heroic acts of exposure and revelation against the nefarious forces of duplicity and reification. Artists would wage war on the instrumentalizing powers of representation on behalf of the chaotic integrity of lived experience. This remained, of course, a deeply and self-consciously ethical tendency: a battle for the heart and mind of the modern subject. It sought to produce viewers more sensitive to the singularity and difference of the world around them, and less reliant on simplistic or reductive systems of meaning in trying to comprehend that world.

These two characteristics—the inviolable autonomy of the individual practitioner and a mode of ethico-representational engagement—remain an article of faith in even the most ostensibly participatory or interactive works of contemporary art. Consider curator Lars Bang Larsen's account of Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset's *Cruising Pavilion* (1998), a cube-



shaped space designed to facilitate public sex in Denmark's Marselisborg Forest:

> In a way, queer space is being queered; the codes and routines that hold it together as a cultural arrangement are worn thin. This is in keeping with a process that implicitly questions what can be particularly "gay" about any representation, when gay culture has gained relative access to the mainstream. . . . To find yourself in Elmgreen and Dragset's displaced ambiences is to feel the pull of your identity, whether you are straight or gay. . . . Space is fucked up because function is fucked up. "What are you about?" the work seems to ask. "What does your desire hang on to?" On the one hand, there is the suggestion of a fading "we" that refers to the loneliness of violently separate identities: on the other hand, the sense of a failure to condense things into a representational logic that can speak for the coherence and relevance of group identity.[7]

Larsen's talk of "codes" and "representational logic" is symptomatic. Confronted with a site whose inhabitants are already engaged in the creative deconstruction of conventional systems of meaning (subverting the public park into a space for proscribed forms of "private" sexual interaction), the artist's only conceivable option is to engage in a *further* act of deconstruction such that (ostensibly "mainstream") queer desire itself is problematized, interrogated, and challenged. Visitors to Elmgreen and Dragset's "fucked up" space are in familiar avant-garde territory. Larsen's description echoes Ad Reinhardt's famous cartoon of the philistine viewer chiding the abstract painting ("What does this represent?") only to have the painting spring to life, jab its anthropomorphic finger in the viewer's face, and demand in turn: "What do *you* represent?" The artist is responsible for arranging and administering an experience of therapeutic dislocation directed specifically at the representational matrix of identity, but it's a dislocation that remains strangely abstract. It's unclear whether gay (or straight) Danes need lessons in queer representation or identity politics or help in finding spots for public sexual encounters, but this question is really beside the point. The function of this project, in Larsen's view, is less to engage the actual inhabitants of Marselisborg Forest than to constitute an ideal formal manifestation within which engagement could, hypothetically, take place. It is an architectural symbol of this dislocation, a con-

ceptual provocation that gains its aesthetic resonance from the juxtaposition of sterile minimalist form and the physical actuality of queer sex (the structure is replete with glory holes) (see Plate 1).

The works that I'll be discussing here challenge this paradigm in a number of ways. Most importantly, the various social interactions that unfold around a given project, rather than being ancillary to, or collapsed into, the *a priori* formal structure or design of a physical object (Elmgreen and Dragset's *Pavilion*, for example), are openly and often independently thematized as a locus for aesthetic practice. I'll be tracing a shift from an aesthetic discourse centered primarily on questions of visual signification to one concerned with the generative experience of collective interaction.

## 2 — PARK FICTION, ALA PLASTICA, AND DIALOGUE

We believe that the interesting and relevant art projects at the moment are developing new ways of cooperation and always build platforms of communication and exchange with others as well. We would go so far as to say, that this is a change of paradigm and that these collaborative qualities signify a new kind of avant-garde.

CHRISTOPH SCHÄFER, PARK FICTION

This experimental engagement with new forms of collectivity and agency is evident in Park Fiction's work in Hamburg, Germany, where they reinvented the process of participatory urban planning as an imaginative game.[8] The speculative quality of this work is literally embodied in their name (the "fiction" of a park), and in the audacity necessary to imagine a public park in place of the high-rise apartment and office buildings that were being proposed by the city's development community. Rather than simply protest and critique the process of gentrification that was beginning to unfold around Hamburg's waterfront (an area with a diverse, working-class population), Park Fiction organized a "parallel planning process" that began with the creation of alternative platforms for exchange among the area's existing residents ("musicians, priests, a headmistress, a cook, café-owners, bar-men, a psychologist, squatters, artists and interventionist residents"[9]). The element of fantasy is apparent in the proposals already completed for the park, including the Teagarden Island, which features artificial palm trees and is surrounded by an elegant forty-meter-long bench from Barcelona, an Open Air Solarium, and a Flying Carpet



(a wave-shaped lawn area surrounded by a mosaic inspired by the Alhambra). Park Fiction combines this whimsical spirit with a well-developed tactical sensibility and a sophisticated grasp of the realpolitik involved in challenging powerful economic interests. They were able to build on a tradition of organized political resistance in the area around Hamburg's harbor that extends back to the occupation of the Hafenstraße (Harbor Street) neighborhood during the 1980s, when local residents took control of several city blocks and effectively halted the city's efforts at eviction. The residents of the Hafenstraße employed street theater, pirate radio, mural painting, and other cultural practices during the occupation to challenge the police, gain media attention, and encourage a sense of solidarity and cohesion within the embattled neighborhood. Park Fiction member Christoph Schäfer describes the leverage this history provided in the process of bringing the park into existence:

> The location for the park is directly at the river. It's a very expensive, highly symbolic place, where power likes to represent itself. . . . To claim this space as a public park designed by the residents really meant to challenge power—it's not an alternative corner or a social sandbox the parents can afford to give away. The resistance could only be overcome by a very broad and clever network in the community, by a new set of tactics, trickery, seduction and stubbornness and an unspoken threat lingering in the background of all this: that a militant situation might again develop that would be costly, and bad for the city's image, and deter investment in the whole neighborhood.[10]

It was necessary for Park Fiction to develop a close rapport with activist groups and organizations in the neighborhood. As Schäfer describes it, they only collaborated with institutions that had local "credibility." These included a community center, which was known for providing free and anonymous legal services, as well as a school that had supported the Hafenstraße squatters during the 1980s.

While operating in a very different cultural context, the work of the Argentinian collective Ala Plastica parallels that of Park Fiction in many ways. Their *AA Project*, located in the Rio de la Plata basin near Buenos Aires, mobilized new modes of collective action and creativity in order to challenge the political and economic interests behind large-scale development in the region. The construction of a massive transportation sys-

tem (the Zárate-Brazo Largo rail complex) over the last two decades has exacerbated flooding and damaged the fishing and tourist economies in the delta, leading to high levels of unemployment and deteriorating social services. Ala Plastica initiated the *AA Project* with a process of spatial and cognitive mapping, developed in collaboration with the area's residents, along with a bioregional study of the Rio de la Plata and Parana delta. This mapping procedure was combined with various exercises designed to recover and collect local knowledge about the region. Ala Plastica sought to actualize the insights of the area's residents into the social and environmental costs of the rail complex and the proposed Punta Lara Colonia bridge. In order to challenge the institutional authority and "techno-political" mindset of the corporate and governmental agencies responsible for these projects, Ala Plastica worked with the area's residents to articulate their own visions for the region through the creation of communications platforms and networks for mutual cooperation. They helped design emergency housing modules for use during periods of flooding and provided communications training and infrastructure, with a particular focus on women. Building on a tradition of willow cultivation that dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, the *AA Project* identified new uses for willows and encouraged the emergence of local economies based on willow production. Throughout the *AA Project*, Ala Plastica worked closely with local activist groups and NGOs, including the Producers Cooperative of the Coast of Berisso and the Health and Plants Network of Argentina.

The *AA Project* was inspired by an earlier work, *Emergent Species* (1995), which involved research into the capacity of reeds and other aquatic plants to absorb pollution. In the process, Ala Plastica's members came to identify a significant correspondence between the structure of reed-bed propagation and a creative practice that links diverse particularities via a non-hierarchical network:

> We planned a project represented by the metaphor of rhizomatic expansion and emergence, alluding to the behavior of these plants and to the emergent character of ideas and creative practices. The connection of remnants within one another generated a practically indescribable warp of intercommunication deriving into innumerable actions that developed and increased through *reciprocity*: dealing with social and environmental problems; exploring both non-institutional and inter-cultural models while working with the community and on the social sphere; interacting, exchanging experiences and knowledge with producers of culture and crops, of art and craftwork, of ideas and objects.[11]

We find a similar commitment to collaborative modes of creativity in the hand pump sites and children's temples produced by the Dialogue collective in conjunction with Adivasi tribal and peasant communities in central India over the past eight years (the Adivasi are India's indigenous population and have long suffered from economic and social discrimination). Access to clean water is a complex, and politically contentious, issue in rural India. As corporations penetrate farther into the countryside in pursuit of cheap labor, they put increasing pressure on natural resources to support their production facilities: in many cases either contaminating or privatizing local water supplies.[12] As a result, the Adivasi communities in the Bastar region where Dialogue has been working are engaged in struggles over land and water access, while also grappling with the impact of economic and cultural modernization. As Dialogue member Navjot Altaf writes, "What interested me most was the hybridism of the cultures [in Bastar]; contradictions and identity crises which are multiple and interrelated."[13] This macropolitical dimension is paralleled by a set of cultural traditions around water collection that place the greatest burden on young women and girls. Altaf and Dialogue began working in the villages around Kondagaon in Bastar with the simple goal of creating more efficient pump sites, using ergonomic designs that would ease the physical burden of collecting and transporting water. They developed the sites through a series of collaborative workshops that brought together Adivasi craftspeople, village residents, teachers, college students, hawkers, and other volunteers in the creation of quasi-sculptural constructions that surround the pumps. The constructions are practical (they include niches that allow water carriers to rest their vessels as they lift them to their shoulders), while also incorporating symbols and forms associated with local cultural and spiritual traditions. In the process of developing the pump sites, Dialogue's members came to realize their importance as gathering points for women and children—one of the few spaces in which they could meet and interact socially. This led in turn to the development of Children's Temples (Pilla Gudi) that could function as centers for activity and exchange among young people in the village.

Altaf views the collaborative interactions among artists and village residents, and between Adivasi and non-Adivasi, that occur in these projects as decisive. As she writes, "For us, organizing the workshops required to design and construct the pumps and Pilla Gudi is as important as creating the sites themselves. It encourages a communication network among artists from different cultures and disciplines, both within the area and outside, and with and among the young." These cross-cultural exchanges, Altaf notes, "lead the young to think about different ways of knowing and modes of working, enabling them to draw nourishment and sustenance from difference and similarities." The process of designing and constructing the pump sites and temples, the interactions of artisans, young people, and visitors, has encouraged a critical renegotiation of Adivasi identity. This renegotiation is particularly crucial in contemporary India, due to the rise of a right-wing fundamentalist movement over the past decade that has actively repressed non-Hindu cultures (like that of the Adivasi). At the same time, the mainstream educational system in India attempts to "neutralize" cultural difference, according to Altaf, through a policy of "Unity in Diversity" that minimizes the specific histories of the Adivasi and the Dalit (or "untouchables").[14]

I'll examine the projects of Park Fiction, Ala Plastica, Dialogue, and other groups more closely in the following two chapters of this book. In each case, the artists take on a strategic relationship to political collectivities currently in formation. Their projects begin with an opening out to their collaborators, which I have written about elsewhere in terms of a dialogical aesthetic.[15] The effect of collaborative art practice is to frame this exchange (spatially, institutionally, procedurally), setting it sufficiently apart from quotidian social interaction to encourage a degree of self-reflection, and calling attention to the exchange itself as creative praxis. A particular experience of openness is encouraged as participants are implicated in an exchange that is not wholly subsumable to conventional, pragmatic demands, but is consciously marked as a form of artistic practice. In fact, it is in part the lack of categorical fixity around art that makes this openness possible. The distancing from the protocols and assumptions of normative social exchange created by aesthetic framing reduces our dependence on default behaviors, expectations, and modes of being, encouraging a more performative and experimental attitude toward the work of identity. Despite their differences the projects of Park Fiction, Ala Plastica, and Dialogue reflect a calling out to these experiences: a desire to work through them in a tentative, experimental, but nonetheless rigorous, manner.



## RELATIONAL ANTAGONISM — 3

> The artwork is . . . no longer presented to be consumed within a "monumental" time frame and open for a universal public; rather it elapses within a factual time, for an audience *summoned* by the artist.
>
> NICHOLAS BOURRIAUD, *RELATIONAL AESTHETICS*

How do we account for the recent proliferation of art practices concerned with the creation or facilitation of new social networks and new modalities of social interaction? Nicholas Bourriaud, co-director of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, has argued that we are witnessing the transition to a "relational" aesthetic in contemporary art, defined by "meetings, encounters, events [and] various types of collaboration between people." And critic Claire Bishop, writing in *Artforum*, goes so far as to claim that "politically-engaged" collaborative art practice constitutes today's "avant-garde."[16] Bourriaud's analysis, or at least his nomenclature, has gained the most traction in the art world. By now the general contours of his argument (first floated in his eponymous 1998 book) are well established. We live in a "society of the spectacle," in which even social relations are reified ("The social bond has turned into a standardized artifact").[17] In response, a cadre of artists, beginning in the 1990s, developed a new approach to art involving the staging of "micro utopias," or "micro communities" of human interaction. These "convivial, user-friendly artistic projects," including "meetings, encounters, events, [and] various types of collaboration between people," provided a "rich loam for social interaction."[18] The "tangible models of sociability" enacted in these relational projects promise to overcome the reification of social relationships. In the process, these artists also sought to reorient artistic practice away from technical expertise or object production and toward processes of intersubjective exchange.

On the one hand, Bourriaud offers a fairly straightforward rearticulation of conventional avant-garde discourse, in which the instrumentalizing attitude formerly understood as a potential result of exposure to mass culture has now colonized the most intimate modes and pathways

of human interaction. No longer able to destabilize these effects through a kind of formal/representational "reverse engineering" (i.e., by creating objects and images that challenge, deform, or complicate the reductive visual codes of mass culture), artists must now engage them on the terrain of social interaction itself. It is not entirely clear why the "social bond" should be any more reified now than it was twenty, fifty, or even a hundred years ago. Rather, this claim seems to reproduce the epochal consciousness that is typical of the modernist project, in which art's ameliorative function is in some way demanded or called into existence by the exigencies of a singular historical moment defined by an experience of loss or lack. Thus, images used to be less manipulative or superficial, social interactions used to be more holistic, or society as a whole used to be less driven by greed and self-interest, and it is the artist's job to evoke or reclaim this lost, utopic experience. Bourriaud also describes relational practice as an epiphenomenal expression of the shift from industrial forms of labor to a service economy. If the artist under industrial production had the "job" of creating complex or well-crafted objects as an antidote to mass-produced dreck, then the "postindustrial" artist must now create alternative models of sociality to challenge the instrumentalizing of human social interaction characteristic of a postindustrial economic system. Although this explanation possesses a certain symmetrical elegance, it seems problematic to transpose economic transformations (which have, after all, been developing for fifty years or more) so neatly onto shifts in contemporary art practice. Further, this postulate relies on the highly questionable assertion (much beloved by advocates of the "immaterial labor" thesis) that the most symptomatic transformations in the contemporary economy are all centered in the realm of service-based labor or intellectual production.[19] While Bourriaud's writing is compelling, it is also highly schematic. Further, he provides few substantive readings of specific projects. As a result, it is difficult to determine what, precisely, constitutes the aesthetic content of a given relational work. At the same time, he has captured something that is undeniably central to a recent generation of artists: a concern with social and collective interaction. As he writes, "Today, after two centuries of struggle for singularity and against group impulses . . . we must [reintroduce] the idea of plurality [and invent] new ways of being together, forms of interaction that go beyond the inevitability of the families, ghettos of technological user-friendliness, and collective institutions."[20]



Drawing on the work of Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, Bourriaud contends that relational art practices challenge the "territorialization" of conventional identity with a "plural, polyphonic" understanding of the subject. "Subjectivity can only be defined," Bourriaud writes, "by the presence of a second subjectivity. It does not form a 'territory' except on the basis of the other territories it comes across; . . . it is modeled . . . on the principle of otherness."[21] This profession of faith in the verities of the "plural" and decentered subject is by now routine, if not *de rigueur*, in art criticism. It exists in some tension, however, with Bourriaud's rather strenuous efforts to establish clear boundaries between the "new ways of being together" that he has privileged in his own curatorial work (by artists such as Pierre Huyghe, Liam Gillick, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Christine Hill) and an abject Other, embodied in traditions of performance art and socially engaged collaborative practice that extend back to the 1960s. From the work of Conrad Atkinson, Grupo de Artistas Argentinos de Vanguardia, David Harding, and Helen and Newton Harrison, through Suzanne Lacy, Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson, Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge, Group Material, and Welfare State, and up to groups such as Ala Plastica, Huit Facettes Interaction, Grupo Etcetera, Platform, Littoral, Park Fiction, Ultra Red, and many others, we find a diverse range of artists and collectives working in collaboration with environmentalists, AIDS activists, trade unions, anti-globalization protestors, and many others. This tradition is not only absent from Bourriaud's account, it is openly disparaged as naive and even reactionary. "Any stance that is 'directly' critical of society," as Bourriaud writes, "is futile." Bourriaud offers an ominous description of socially engaged art practice marching in lock-step conformity with a vaguely Stalinist political program ("It is clear that the age of the New Man, future-oriented manifestos, and calls for a better world all ready to be walked into and lived in is well and truly over").[22]

Bourriaud's caricature, which collapses all activist art into the condition of 1930s socialist realism, fails to convey the complexity and diversity of socially engaged art practice over the last several decades. Even Bourriaud's critics share this almost visceral distaste for socially engaged art. Writing in *Artforum*, Bishop imposes a similarly rigid boundary between "aesthetic" projects ("provocative," "uncomfortable," and "multilayered") and activist works ("predictable," "benevolent," and "ineffectual"). In a critique of Bourriaud published in *October*, Bishop feels compelled

to reassure her readers: "I'm not suggesting that relational art works need to develop a greater social conscious—by making pin-board works about international terrorism, for example, or giving free curries to refugees."[23] For Bishop, art can become legitimately "political" only indirectly, by exposing the limits and contradictions of political discourse itself (the exclusions implicit in democratic consensus, e.g.) from the quasi-detached perspective of the artist. This is also the basis for Thomas Hirschhorn's anxious assertion that he is *not* a "political artist," but rather an artist who "makes art politically."[24] In this view, artists who choose to work in alliance with specific collectives, social movements, or political struggles, will, inevitably, be consigned to decorating floats for the annual May Day parade. Without the detachment and autonomy of conventional art to insulate them, they are doomed to "represent," in the most naive and facile manner possible, a given political issue or constituency.

This detachment is necessary because art is constantly in danger of being subsumed to the condition of consumer culture, propaganda, or "entertainment" (cultural forms predicated on immersion rather than a recondite critical distance). Instead of seducing the viewer, the artist's task is to hold him at arm's length, inculcating a skeptical distance (defined in terms of opacity, estrangement, confusion, or ironic distanciation) that parallels the insight provided by critical theory into the contingency of social and political meaning. The maintenance of this distance (literally embodied in projects such as Santiago Sierra's *Wall Enclosing a Space*, for the Spanish Pavilion of the 2003 Venice Biennale, in which only those carrying Spanish passports were allowed to enter the gallery) requires that the artist retain complete control over the form and structure of the work. Relational practice is thus characterized by a tension between two movements. One runs along a continuum from the specular to the haptic (the desire to literalize social interaction in nonvirtual space), and the other runs along a continuum from the work as a preconceived entity to the work as improvisational and situationally responsive. In order to preserve the legitimacy of relational practice as a hereditary expression of avant-garde art, it is necessary for critics like Bourriaud and Bishop to privilege the first movement over the second. It is for this reason, I would suggest, that a number of Bourriaud's relational projects retain an essentially textual status, in which social exchange is choreographed as an a priori event for the consumption of an audience "summoned" by the artist.[25] In addition to naturalizing deconstructive interpretation as the only appropriate metric for aesthetic experience, this approach places the artist in a position of adjudicatory oversight, unveiling or revealing the contingency of systems of meaning that the viewer would otherwise submit to without thinking. The viewer, in short, can't be trusted.[26] Hence the deep suspicion which both Bourriaud and Bishop hold for art practices which surrender some autonomy to collaborators and which involve the artist directly in the (implicitly compromised) machinations of political resistance.

On one level, this persistent discomfort with activist art is typical of post–Cold War intellectuals embarrassed by work that evokes leftist ideals. Precisely what makes relational artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, Thomas Hirschhorn, Pierre Huyghe, and Jens Hanning "new," in this view, is their attempt to redefine collectivity and intersubjective exchange outside of existing, and implicitly retrograde, political referents (the extent to which their projects actually accomplish a significant remodeling of collectivity is open to question). The modest gestures employed by Bourriaud's artists (offering to do someone's washing up, paying a fortune teller, hiring models, etc.) run no risk of being appropriated to dangerous *grand recits* that will, inevitably, be revealed as reactionary and compromised.[27] It would seem to be relatively uncontroversial to locate the relational projects embraced by Bourriaud (or Bishop) on a continuum with socially engaged projects that employ processes of collaborative interaction. However, for both of these writers activist work triggers a kind of sacrificial response—as if to even acknowledge this work as "art" somehow threatens the legitimacy of the practices that they do support.[28] In her *Artforum* essay Bishop dismisses activist art *en masse* as "politically correct," "Platonic," and even "Christian." A reductive version of engaged or activist art ("free curries for refugees") thus functions as a necessary foil, representing the abject, unsophisticated Other to the complex "aesthetic" works of which she approves.[29]

We can gain a more balanced perspective on recent collaborative art practices (and their critical interlocutors) if we locate them in a broader historical context relative to the traditions of the modern avant-garde. As I suggested above, the core function of art changes dramatically in the modern period. By the early nineteenth century art began to abandon its traditional function of transmitting and idealizing dominant forms of social or political power (as in medieval concepts of theophany, sacral or courtly

art, or the flattering depictions of aristocratic leisure in the canvases of Boucher or Watteau), and instead took on the role of disrupting or destabilizing them. We can already detect this shift in Goya's famous portrait of *Charles IV with his Family* (1798) ("the corner baker and his wife after they have won the lottery," as Theophile Gautier described it). This thinly veiled criticism of monarchical power would have been almost unimaginable a generation before. It tells us much about the very different nature of bourgeois power, which was, at its earliest stage, defined by a capacity for self-reflection, often displaced into the institution of art. During the nineteenth century, provocation and critique would rapidly move from being an occasional or incidental aspect of art to its primary orientation, with the emergence of a series of avant-garde movements that sought, each in its own way, to challenge or destabilize normative bourgeois values. It is important to recall the remarkable consistency of avant-garde rhetoric across a broad range of otherwise disparate movements and tendencies. Of particular importance here was the notion of the artist as a provocateur, challenging modernity from a position of cultural exteriority that was typically leveraged via identification with an "other" identified either spatially (via a geographic displacement, to rural France, North Africa, the Middle East, Japan, etc.) or temporally (through the evocation of a past moment of cultural harmony or authenticity, as in the preRaphaelite's fetishization of the Italian primitives).

This agonistic posture changes art's self-understanding, its ontology, if you will, as well as the kinds of knowledge that it produces. First, modern art begins to define itself in opposition to, or as the negation of, certain characteristics identified with the dominant culture. Initially, genuine or authentic art was defined as the antithesis of the academic painting of the salon (which embodied dominant values through its allegiance to fixed representational protocols derived from classical models). Where academic art was labored and formulaic, authentic art would be spontaneous and improvisational. The decline of the academy and the growing influence of consumer culture during the early- to mid-twentieth century opened up a new axis of differentiation, as avant-garde art was defined against the grain of a rising wave of mass culture and propaganda that threatened to overwhelm it. By the post–Second World War period contemporary art was sufficiently institutionalized and capitalized that its survival was no longer at stake. The previously externalized threat represented by kitsch was internalized in anxieties about the proliferation of rogue tendencies within contemporary art itself.[30] In this process, particular modes of art practice (installation, performance, activist work) which failed to foreground their own media specificity with sufficient rigor became supplemental replacements for the faded mass cultural Other. The result is an aesthetic discourse based on notions of purity and contamination in which it is necessary to maintain a rigid segregation between corrupt and authentic practices. This approach lends itself to a hygienic attitude on the part of the critic, who must defend art from contamination: a fear that art will lose its specific identity if it becomes too permeable to other, impure, areas of culture.

As I've described it, modern art's self-definition unfolds via a modulating series of foils. The specific identity of the individual terms is less important than the kind of attitude art takes up relative to them as a whole. In each case there is an instrumentalizing relationship to the material, against which art is defined. This material, be it salon painting, kitsch, propaganda, or performance art, is reduced to a (reified) vehicle for the achievement of authentic art's own self-reflection (all mass culture is vulgar kitsch; all political discourse is propaganda; all performance art is merely theatrical). "Progress" in art is defined by this ongoing movement, as art's meaning becomes fixed, then finds itself called into question, only to eventually reassert its identity as art. As I've already suggested, the very capacity of art to attend reflexively to its own enabling conditions becomes its content, and it can only exercise this capacity by periodically identifying, and purging itself of, the "non-art" material it has accumulated in the process of reenergizing itself through contact with other cultural forms.

The second feature of this agonistic model involves the way in which the work of art produces meaning for an audience. Here, negation is produced in the artwork's relationship to the viewer via what I've described as an "orthopedic" aesthetic (in which the viewer's implicitly flawed modes of cognition or perception will be adjusted or improved via exposure to the work of art). The appropriate response to the work of art is no longer veneration or obeisance, but discomfort, rupture, or an uncanny derangement of the senses. These provocations can also perform an affirmative function, reinforcing a particular sense of identity among art world viewers (as liberal minded risktakers). Or they are consumed rhetorically, as the viewer identifies, in a self congratulatory manner, with the subject posi-

tion of the artist rather than the hapless implied viewer. In fact, one comes to the space of art prepared for precisely this sort of provocation; disruption is, in a way, expected and even savored. This coincides with a textual model of art production, based in part on the rapprochement between neoconceptual art strategies and post-structuralist theory in the 1990s. Here the work of art functions as a hermeneutic device intended to destabilize fixed oppositions via some form of embodied conceptual provocation. Importantly, the work, whether it's a painting, installation, or event, is conceived by the artist beforehand and subsequently set in place before the viewer.

This approach is based on a principle of repetition; the work of art essentially replicates a vision or an idea generated by the artist and then presented to the viewer. While there is certainly an interactive dimension to even the most opaque or static art work, the "interaction" involved in textual production is understood primarily in terms of either contemplative decoding or somatic disruption. Artistic production in this mode is both teleological (resolved in the creation of a final, formally-delimited object, text, or event) and mimetic (the work of art functions as the physical manifestation of an idea first developed in the artist's imagination). The textual paradigm is defined by a spatial concept of agency, in which compositional and receptive roles are fixed. It thus forecloses the possibility that creative insight might be generated through less proprietary forms of compositional agency. That is, rather than viewing agency as the unique property of specific individuals, seeing it instead as fluid and transpositional over the course of a given creative action.

## 4 — THE RISK OF DIVERSITY

> Nature in her physical creation points the way we have to take in the moral. Not until the strife of elemental forces in the lower organisms has been assuaged does she turn to the nobler creation of physical man. In the same way, the strife of elements in moral man, the conflict of blind impulses, has first to be appeased, and crude antagonisms first have ceased within him, before we can take the risk of promoting diversity.
>
> FRIEDRICH SCHILLER, *ON THE AESTHETIC EDUCATION OF MAN*

We are witnessing today a certain disenchantment with the existing parameters of avant-garde art and an attempt to rearticulate the specificity of the aesthetic in relationship to both the viewer and to other cultural and political practices. Collectives such as Dialogue, Park Fiction, Ala Plastica, Huit Facettes Interaction in Senegal, and NICA (Networking and Initiatives for Culture and the Arts) in Myanmar, among many others, are engaged in a more or less conscious effort to renegotiate the condition of art's autonomy, and to shape a new paradigm. In place of an either/or mentality, which defines art through antithetical negation (art is not-activism, not-ethnography, not-popular culture), we encounter a relation of reciprocal elucidation relative to other fields of political and cultural action. And in place of a textual paradigm we discover practices centered on immersive interaction and a referential orientation to specific sites of social production. I would argue that some of the most challenging new collaborative art projects are located on a continuum with forms of cultural activism, rather than being defined in hard-and-fast opposition to them. Far from viewing this sort of categorical slippage as something to be feared, I believe it is both productive and inevitable given the period of transition through which we are living. It is, in fact, a persistent characteristic of modern art created during moments of historical crisis and change (Dadaism and Constructivism in the wake of the First World War and the Russian Revolution, the profusion of new movements and practices that emerged out of the political turmoil of the 1960s and '70s, etc.). Is Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* an example of architecture, sculpture, or public art *avant la lettre*? What about John Heartfield's montages for *AIZ*? Are they art, graphic design, or experimental photojournalism?

The principle of aesthetic autonomy constitutes a central point of tension in this work. Within the modern tradition, it has, of course, never been a question of an absolute distance or separation "between" the aesthetic and the social or political. The political always operates through an aesthetic modality, and even the most strident claim of *art pour la art* poetic freedom is political at its core. Rather, it is the tension between these sites, their points of overlap, corroboration, and resistance, which have been most productive. Art may perceive itself as existing at some remove or distance from the social, but it also, always, imagines that it retains a causal or reflective relationship *with* the social world (whether as a reservoir for forms of affect and identity that are under assault in the modern life world, as a therapeutic reprieve, or a symbolic embodiment of what could be). What remains of art, in the wake of a century and a half

of avant-garde experimentation, if not the very concept of an autonomy or distance that enables a (critical) perspective on, and relation to, the existing social order? But for this distance, this autonomy, to retain its value, it must be recalibrated, it must respond to a specific social context and the particular ways in which art is mobilized during a given historical moment. Fluctuations within the field of aesthetic legitimacy are a necessary part of this process. The elasticity of the category "art" in response to changing historical conditions, the opening out and the closing down, the varying centripetal and centrifugal movements as art periodically encompasses and then expels other political and cultural modes is part of its very function within modernity.

On the one hand this autonomy is necessary in order to achieve an adjudicatory distance from dominant cultural, social, and political values (already here we are collapsing any distinction between "dominant" values that are imposed on a given social system and those values that evolve consensually). At the same time, autonomy implies a relationship of segregation or exclusion. It is this second connotation that fuels hygienic criticism: the defensive fear of affiliations or interconnections with contaminated or impure realms (and the corollary assumption that all forms of cultural production within modernity, aside from the arts, are complicit with, or symptomatic of, a repressive social order). The persistence of this fear among critics, curators, and artists is understandable. An antagonistic relationship to the viewer and a defensive relationship to other domains of cultural practice are written into the very DNA of modernist art.

We can gain a deeper understanding of the complex function of aesthetic autonomy in contemporary art if we examine its initial historical articulation. As Martha Woodmansee suggests in her revealing study of German aesthetic philosophy, the development of a concept of aesthetic autonomy is closely identified with the emergence of the modern literary market. Woodmansee analyzes the impact of rising literacy rates in Germany during the mid-1700s. The new "reading craze" (*Lesewut*) that swept Germany at that time led to a dramatic increase in the number of authors, publishers, bookstores, and libraries. As a result the comfortable intimacy that the first generation of *Aufklärer* writers enjoyed with their aristocratic patrons was rudely disturbed. Rather than flocking to the edifying works of Lessing, Hölderlin, and von Kleist, the new reading public displayed a seemingly inexhaustible appetite for ghost stories and romances. Friedrich



Schiller lamented the flood of "mindless, tasteless, and pernicious novels, dramatized stories, so-called journals for the ladies and the like" that were destroying the taste of the German reading public.[31] As a result of the fragmenting impact of modernity, the public is now bifurcated between those few who possess sufficient humanity to comprehend and take pleasure in complex art, and the untutored masses, which remain insensitive to it.[32] Further, any attempt to reach these mass readers in a familiar or colloquial language is doomed to failure, as their own perceptions, their own cultural responses to modernity, can only ever be failed and compromised.[33]

Confronted with a new mode of literary production devoted to entertainment rather than improvement, and alarmed by the declining prestige of serious literature, authors such as Schiller and Karl Philipp Moritz promulgated a radical new definition of art; a "remapping" as Woodmansee describes it, in which art, unique among all forms of human culture, is understood to have a wholly immanent value.[34] "The first, essential condition for the perfection of a poem," Schiller observes, "is that it possess an absolute intrinsic value that is entirely independent of the powers of comprehension of its readers."[35] If their poems, plays, and novels failed to capture the interest of newly literate Germans, then the problem rested with the readers themselves, who were too dependent on the simple pleasures of sensation and spectacle to meet the challenge posed by advanced literature. "The rabble seek only diversion," Moritz complains, and beautiful works of art are "passed by with indifference."[36] In fact, the public's lack of interest in, or outright resistance to, one's work became a badge of honor, a guarantee of its aesthetic integrity ("War," as Schiller claims, "is the only possible relationship to the public").[37]

But revulsion at the cultural enfranchisement brought about by literacy and the literary market is only one of the forces driving the initial articulation of an autonomous aesthetic. Woodmansee reveals a surprising, and heretofore unrecognized, affiliation with the discourse of German Pietism. The connection is explicit in the writing of Moritz, whose 1785 essay, "An Attempt to Unite All the Fine Arts and Sciences under the Concept of That Which is Complete in Itself," published five years before Kant's third *Critique*, describes the ideal work of art as a "self-sufficient totality" produced for its own sake.[38] Moreover, for the work to remain pure and authentic, it must be produced from an entirely disinterested perspective; the artist must disavow any benefit or fame that might accrue as a result

of its creation. As Moritz writes, "If the thought of approval is your main consideration, and if your work is of value to you only insofar as it brings you fame, then you are working in a self-interested manner: the focal point of the work will fall outside the work: you are not creating it for its own sake. . . . You are only seeking to 'dazzle the rabble.'"[39]

As Woodmansee notes, this insistence on art's necessary detachment from the praxis of life departs dramatically from the long history of Western aesthetics, in which art was understood to have a functional role within society (to educate, or indoctrinate, the viewer, to reproduce or disclose the natural world, and so on). While there is no significant precedent for this view in the European philosophical tradition, it replicates almost exactly the discourse of German Pietist theology, which exerted a powerful influence on Moritz's generation. As Moritz himself described it, Pietist doctrine "posited . . . absolute self-sufficiency, or freedom from dependence upon anything external to [god] Himself, as a necessary condition of the pure perfection of the Deity." Pietist teachings, according to Moritz, demanded "total abandonment of the self and entry upon a blissful state of nothingness, with that complete extermination of all so-called self-ness or self-love, and a totally disinterested love of God, in which not the merest spark of self-love may mingle, if it is to be pure." We are, in short, "enjoined to love God disinterestedly," not as a "source of private gain."[40] This same attitude is "transported, almost verbatim," according to Woodmansee, into Moritz's concept of art. The "aesthetic attitude" provides a "pleasant forgetfulness of ourselves. . . . We seem to lose ourselves in the beautiful object, and precisely this loss, this forgetfulness of ourselves, is the highest degree of pure and disinterested pleasure which beauty grants us."[41]

The discourse of aesthetic autonomy operates through a form of "displaced theology," preserving a residual metaphysical element in the fantasy of an entirely pure self-transcendence and the work of art as a substitute for god's absolute self-sufficiency and freedom from external determination. It's not simply the theological principle of disinterest that is retained, but also a set of assumptions about the viewer or reader. Woodmansee's research helps us recognize the essentially religious character of the division between the artist and the "vulgar masses" evident in early aesthetic philosophy (as well as the subsequent evolution of modernist art theory). In the writings of Schiller, Moritz, and others, we encounter an adjudicatory apparatus that positions the philistine viewer (the "rabble" who are incapable of properly appreciating advanced art) as impious or immoral (slaves to the easy seductions of romance novels), and art as the instrument of their salvation. The artist, possessing a god-like ability to transcend the debilitating influence of banal popular literature and an increasingly materialist society, is able to ameliorate the blinkered ignorance of the multitudes through the process of "aesthetic education."

This underlying pessimism about the capacity of the viewer or reader is an article of faith in the tradition of modernist aesthetics, evident in Schiller's seminal *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794). Written in the aftermath of the French Revolution, Schiller's book is in large measure a meditation on the impossibility of progressive political change. As demonstrated by the recent "events" in France, man has not yet developed the moral character necessary to overcome his animal nature. As a result, the moment that the iron hand of political domination is lifted, he descends into lawlessness and violence. Of course it isn't man *qua* man Schiller is evoking here, but rather the "lower and more numerous classes," who are possessed by "crude, lawless instincts."[42] "We must continue to regard every attempt at political reform as untimely," Schiller writes, "and every hope based upon it as chimerical, as long as the split within man is not healed."[43] The split is between the "cultivated classes," possessed by a cold, calculating rationality, and the violent, impulsive lower orders, lacking in self-discipline and reason. The state can't impose a reconciliation of these two opposed forces via external compulsion. Rather, it requires a subtler reprogramming, a form of experience that reaches us through our senses and feelings, providing a point of mediation between the rational and the sensual. It requires, in short, an aesthetic education that will simultaneously bring compassion to the cultivated classes and self-discipline to the lower orders.[44]

The *Letters* exhibit all the conventional features of modern aesthetic autonomy. They are less discrete terms than serial moments in an unfolding, syllogistic chain, each leading inexorably to the next. First, we have the postulation of a singular moment of historical decline or degradation (the new "reign of material needs").[45] Second, we encounter a profound skepticism regarding the ability of the people (with the exception, of course, of the poet or artist) to transcend these constraints, and the presumption

that any form of conventional social or political action will founder on the shoals of an undeveloped human nature. And, finally, we have the contention that the solution to this impasse involves a fundamental reconfiguration of the human spirit, which can only be provided by aesthetic experience. It requires, more specifically, an encounter with a work of art that is radically autonomous. In order to produce this transformation, the work of art must refer to nothing but itself and make no concession to the knowledge, experience, or interest of the reader or viewer. Sufficiently insulated from the exigencies of daily life, the work of art will provide a quasi-religious experience of undetermined freedom (in the virtual realm of aesthetic play), training us to act more responsibly in the "real" world of daily life. "The psyche of the listener or spectator must remain completely free and inviolate," Schiller insists. "It must go forth from the magic circle of the artist pure and perfect as it came from the hands of the Creator."[46] The lack of determination or predication by external forces is essential to the operation of an autonomous aesthetic, producing in the viewer or reader a kind of therapeutic regression. Man must "momentarily be free of all determination," Schiller writes, returning "to that negative state of complete absence of determination in which he found himself before anything at all had made an impression upon his senses."[47]

The work of art trains us for social interactions that we aren't yet prepared for in real life. Actual social or political change is deferred to an indefinite and idealized future, when the aesthetic will have finally completed its civilizing mission. It's not simply the belief that artistic experience is in some essential ways distinct from political experience, but the more extreme proposition that any form of political action is premature until humanity allows itself to be guided by aesthetic principles.[48] The political becomes the second negational axis along which art defines and differentiates itself (paralleling the institutions of the market system). The realm of political action is always characterized by compromise and failed ideals. Schiller thus instantiates one of the central logical contradictions of modern aesthetics: art has no purpose and possesses an entirely "intrinsic" value, yet art is also the sole experiential mode capable of reversing the deleterious effects of modernity.[49]





> In contemplating a beautiful object . . . I roll the purpose back into the object itself: I regard it as something that finds completion not in me but in itself and thus constitutes a whole in itself and gives me pleasure for its own sake.
>
> FRIEDRICH SCHILLER, *ON THE AESTHETIC EDUCATION OF MAN*

> In poetry we are no longer referred back to the world, neither to the world as shelter nor to the world as goal. . . . This means primarily that words, having the initiative, are not obliged to serve to designate anything or give voice to anyone, but that they have their ends in themselves.
>
> MAURICE BLANCHOT, *THE SPACE OF LITERATURE*

The *Aesthetic Education* provided a template that has been followed by subsequent critics and theorists with remarkable devotion, as each element is retained and rearticulated. We might consider the parallel with Clement Greenberg's notion of formal "movement" in the development of avant-garde art in the post–Second World War period (as the sublimated expression of a currently unrealizable political movement). For Greenberg, and many American artists during the early years of the Cold War, substantive political change was blocked by the impasse between a tarnished communism and a reviled capitalist consumer culture.[50] As a result, the only option available was retreat into the protected enclave of the canvas, where the artist could preserve the freedom necessary for unconstrained aesthetic play. Schiller's aesthetic finds a more contemporary expression in the dilemma of French intellectuals and artists in the late 1960s. Here the impossibility of positive political change (embodied in the perceived failure of May '68) legitimated a withdrawal into a zone of subversive textual play and *écriture*. Each of these cultural moments proceeds via a conservational displacement or deferral of political critique into a more abstract critique of epistemology *per se*, evident in Greenberg's attack on representational art and Roland Barthes's attack on conventional forms of signification.

Peter Starr, in his illuminating intellectual history of May '68, identifies a "logic of failed revolt" that informed the thinking of the generation of French theorists who rose to international prominence during the 1970s. Starr traces this logic through the writings of Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Hélène Cixous, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel

Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Claude Lefort, and others.[51] Their work is situated on the cusp between a more formally coherent structuralist movement (associated with the anthropological research of Claude Lévi-Strauss and the influence of Saussure's linguistics), and the diverse range of post-structuralist approaches and methodologies that grew out of this movement. In the writings of Deleuze, Guattari, Foucault, and others, the events of May '68 were accorded an epochal significance, signaling a fundamental rupture in the nature of political life in France, with implications for industrialized societies around the world. For Alain Badiou, May '68 was a "truth event" that shattered the existing parameters of the political. For Michel de Certeau "the revolutionary speech of May '68 . . . puts language on trial and calls for a global revision of our cultural system," and for Félix Guattari the "earthquake" of May '68 "presented problems that affected society as a whole."[52] The cultural and political staging of May '68, as Starr notes, centered on the perceived alignment between the forces of order and the counterposed forces of change or revolution (embodied in the main labor union—the Confédération Générale du Travail, or CGT, and in the French Communist Party, or PCF). In the political narratives of the post-structuralist generation the PCF and CGT, rather than constituting a real or substantive locus of resistance, were "pseudo-rivals" whose function was to maintain the illusion of an oppositional movement in French politics. Their conflicts with the French state or private sector were little more than stage-managed spectacle.[53]

The underlying lesson of May '68 was based on the twin principles of "specular doubling" and "structural repetition," in which all attempts to challenge entrenched power end up inadvertently reproducing it. In Starr's account, each principle "begins with the uncovering of a pseudo-opposition between the principles or structures of the established social order and an oppositional force whose action is found to be deeply complicitous with those principles or structures (repeating them and/or being recuperated by them)." The "back to back dismissal" of these terms provides the "pretext for articulating a 'Third Way'" that is "neither the Gaullist establishment nor its communist pseudo rivals in the PCF and CGT, but May's 'authentic' revolutionism."[54] The third way constitutes a new form of oppositional intelligence that would abjure the mechanisms of the state, the party, or the union, assuming an entirely new counterinstitutional form. As Claude Lefort writes:



> It is against this system that the *enragés* strike a decisive blow. Not only do they know that nothing is to be expected from Power, nor from those parties and unions that feign to combat it, but who, were they compelled to take power, would do so only to make it serve new interests. . . . There is no need to look elsewhere for the grounds of their success. . . . They are cut loose from the old constraints . . . They create a new space. Or better, they hollow out a non-place where the possible is reborn.[55]

The third way was embodied by the student protestors who refused to "take" power and instead engaged in a series of exemplary gestures in the streets of Paris, seeking to spread the spirit of the revolution through sheer contagion rather than conventional forms of political organization and action. Here we rediscover the autonomy of the aesthetic: of a political expression that remains gloriously free, and insulated, from the contaminating influence of existing power structures, and of an "education" that communicates itself to us through a consensual enthusiasm beyond words or doctrine. But the very refusal to organize, to coordinate, and to negotiate created a further impasse. In order to actually initiate change, it was necessary to accept some level of engagement with extant institutions and policies and to translate across conflicting discursive modes, but this required, in turn, abandoning the liberating purity of the poetic gesture. "If one undertakes direct political action," Starr writes, "then the logics of specular doubling and structural repetition apply, but if one refuses such action, as the student revolutionaries had tended to do, then one's revolt will at best be hopelessly marginal, at worst, a reinforcement of institutional power."[56] The result was a compulsive effort to continually remain "outside" the circle of compromised legitimacy, leading to a *mise en abyme* trumping of exteriority and an almost paranoid fear of assimilation and co option. "We push our refusal to the point of refusing to be assimilated into the political groups that claim to refuse what we refuse," as the Student Writers Action Committee wrote in a statement on May 20th.[57]

It was necessary, then, to identify yet another "third way," another mode of action that could preserve the requisite revolutionary spirit without risking the inevitable compromise that would result from direct involvement with the mechanisms of social or political change. The solution was a tactical withdrawal into the protected field of the text. The novel, the poem, the film, the work of art, and theory itself would become the

site for a process of "subtle" or "discrete" subversion.[58] The revolutionary would decamp to the institutional margins of political life—the university, the gallery, and the publishing house—to create a heterotopic space of experimentation.[59] As Starr describes it, the revolutionary impasse, or "double bind" (compromised engagement or surrender), had the effect of "displacing the political field toward the cultural in general and toward specifically transgressive forms of writing in particular."[60] Political change here and now is impossible because existing society is saturated by repressive forms of knowledge at the most basic level of human consciousness. Language itself polices and regulates our desires. As Roland Barthes famously claimed in his Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France, "Language is neither reactionary nor progressive; it is quite simply fascist, for fascism does not prevent speech, it compels speech. . . . Once uttered, even in the subject's deepest privacy, speech enters the service of power."[61]

Here we find echoes of Schiller's skepticism and one of the key linkages between the post-structuralist theoretical tradition and early modern aesthetic philosophy: political action or change here-and-now is *intrinsically* futile. Existing systems of power and resistance to power are so corrupt, so inhumane, so irredeemably compromised, that one must reject any accommodation with, or proximity to, them. The only possible way to move forward and to retain the purity and integrity of the revolutionary message, is to work indirectly, via the insulating protection of ancillary, quasi-autonomous, institutions (the arts, higher education), to develop covert, subversive "interventions" in the cultural sphere, which will reproduce the contagion logic of the street action at the level of the individual reader, viewer, or student.

May '68 failed because existing modes of human consciousness and political agency were simply incapable of sustaining an authentic revolutionary impulse. Until we disrupt the fascism of language, until we purge the human psyche itself, all attempts at political change in the "real" world will remain ineffectual, and even destructive. "If the world could not be changed," as François Dosse observed of the intellectual aftermath of May '68, "the self could be."[62] Just as Schiller and Moritz insisted that a proper aesthetic education could only come about through exposure to a work of art that remained radically autonomous, resisting all forms of external determination, Barthes will call for forms of writing that refuse the utilitarian demands of conventional signification: "To write can no longer designate



an operation of recording, of observing, of representing, of 'painting'." The very playfulness of the signifier, "unimpoverished by any constraint of representation," will model for the reader a new, non-instrumentalizing consciousness.[63] "We" can't yet be trusted with the freedom that would result from a total revolution. Instead we must practice this freedom in the virtual space of the text or artwork, supervised by the poet or artist. Like Schiller's ideal aesthetic subject, "momentarily free of all determination," Barthes's reader is "a man without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that someone who holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted."[64]

As Barthes describes it in his influential essay "The Death of the Author," writing as a creative, politically transformative act can only occur through the absolute freeing of the text from any external determination or referential function. Even the attribution of meaning to the author constitutes an intolerable violation of the text's aesthetic freedom: "Once an action is recounted, for intransitive ends, and no longer in order to act directly upon reality—that is, finally external to any function but the very exercise of the symbol—this disjunction occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death, writing begins."[65] Barthes's "Inaugural Lecture" signals the crucial shift that followed May '68:

> For those of us, who are neither knights of faith nor supermen, the only remaining alternative is . . . to cheat with language, to cheat language. This salutary trickery, this evasion, this grand imposture, which allows us to understand language outside the bounds of power, in the splendor of a permanent revolution of language, I for one call literature.[66]

Barthes attaches an almost mystical significance to the gesture of dissolving or disrupting the signifying process ("Writing ceaselessly posits meaning but always in order to evaporate it"). Thus, literature "liberates an activity which we might call counter-theological, properly revolutionary, for to refuse to arrest meaning is finally to refuse God and his hypostases, reason, science, the law."[67] Barthes's counter-theological attitude retains a displaced theological element, as Woodmansee might describe it, in the notion of a rigorously purified zone of autonomous aesthetic experimentation. The writer's hand "detached from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription, traces a field without origin—or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, that is, the very thing which cease-

lessly questions any origin." The experience of aesthetic "bliss," according to Barthes, is decisively "asocial . . . it is the abrupt loss of sociality, and yet there follows no recurrence to the subject (subjectivity), the person, solitude, *everything* is lost, integrally."[68] The process of creation allows the artist or intellectual to do *something*, to take some action, however nominal or symbolic, while remaining protected from the compromises entailed by more direct political engagement.[69]

The collapsing together of the entirety of religion, law, science, and reason into a single, monolithic expression of man's inherently instrumentalizing nature is symptomatic. The shibboleth of reason can only be defeated by a full-scale assault on any and all forms of coherent meaning—narrative writing, historical continuity, collective identity, and conscious agency—waged through the daunting weapons of experimental literature and New Wave cinema. Fascism will, finally, be undone by Robbe-Grillet novels and Godard films. Barthes's concept of textual *jouissance* carries with it the characteristic contradiction of modern aesthetic autonomy, evoking a monadic art practice that occupies a position of radical exteriority ("outside the bounds of power"), while able to act back on the world with the most uncompromising ethical authority. This contradiction is anticipated by Schiller's contradictory concept of a *Spieltreib*: precisely a play *drive* that is simultaneously free and yet driven or oriented toward an ethical telos. The tension between an open-ended aesthetic experience and the conative energy of a play drive is reiterated at a second level in the concept of an aesthetic encounter that claims to liberate or empower the reader precisely by subjecting him or her to a shattering ontic dislocation. The frustrated militance of the street protest is displaced and transposed to a symbolic aggression enacted against the viewer or reader, who stands simultaneously for the forces of rationalist reaction and their benumbed victims, in need of both a punishing attack and a cathartic awakening. Thus, Maurice Blanchot, a central figure for the post-structuralist tradition, celebrates the violent "combat" that occurs between the writer and the reader.[70] For Lyotard, language and linguistic communication can only ever be a field of battle, populated by "opponents" engaged in a series of strategic "moves" and "countermoves" intended to advance their position relative to the "balance of power." For Lyotard's interlocutors, utterance is mere "ammunition" in the endless game of "agonistic" conflict.[71] As Alain Badiou writes, "All art, and all thought, is ruined when we accept this permission to consume, to communicate and to enjoy. We should become the pitiless censors of ourselves."[72] While for Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, a "radical" democratic politics can only ever emerge through an "antagonistic" rupture that "escapes . . . language, since language only exists as an attempt to fix that which antagonism subverts."[73]

Signification was only the first in a series of systems implicated in the purging and purification of cultural discourse and human consciousness. The basic linguistic operation of signification, the linking of a given sign with a given, referential, object, was simply the *ur-form* of a much broader and more insidious system of consensual meaning that ran like a fault line through Western modes of thought and being. Just as the relationship between signifier and signified implies a sort of linguistic agreement (the shared assumption that this word or image "stands for" a given idea), any social formation that depends on the interdependence, reliance, or predication of one subject on another became suspect, whether in the guise of a family, a community, a union, a party, civil society, or the state. The concept of friendship itself was shown by Derrida to be irredeemably compromised by its dependence on an Othered "enemy" whose difference provides the necessary ground for the recognition of a convivial amity.[74] The revolution will begin, then, not with collective experience, but with a single "dissident" subject—the monadic individual whose consciousness must first be wiped clean of the contaminating influence of conventional modes of signification and identity ("*Everything* is lost," as Barthes writes). "What has emerged in our postwar culture," Julia Kristeva wrote, "are singular forms of speech and *jouissance*." The poet and the intellectual will "give voice to the singularity of unconsciousness, desires, needs. Call into play the identities and/or languages of the individual and the group. Become the analyst of the impossibility of social cohesion."[75] The "impossibility" of social cohesion will become a *leitmotif* of post-structuralist thought. It is precisely when we come together (in collective forms of action and identity) that we are most at risk of succumbing to our instrumentalizing nature.

The ethical/epistemological couplet of the singularity and the collective is paralleled by a second, temporal, discourse that presents "revolution" (rather than more gradual change or reform) as the only acceptable paradigm for political transformation. Duration is irreconcilably tinged by its associations with narrative and teleology. Therefore, meaningful change can only occur through an absolute rupture of historical conti-

nuity: a single moment that breaks radically with its syntagmatic precedent.[76] The "event" of revolutionary change, like the aesthetic object itself, must be pure, autonomous, and non-referential, owing nothing to the existing distribution of social and political forces. Only this sort of revolution can hope to outpace our tendency to revert to reifying patterns of thought and action when working collectively. It does so by tapping into a reservoir of pre-symbolic, and intrinsically non-instrumentalizing, desire. The apparent contradiction of an open-ended aesthetic encounter that is simultaneously capable of orienting us toward an ethically correct form of self-reflection is resolved by the fortuitous discovery of an immanent and non-instrumentalizing force or *Pulsion*.[77] Since conventional subjectivity itself is inherently debased, this tendency must be "discovered" at an almost biological, or bodily, level. Rather than being forced into the proper mode of being through external coercion or determination, it's simply a matter of freeing a liberatory impulse already buried *within* us, at our ontic core, beneath the accumulated detritus of *cogito*, language, and Western metaphysics. The gradual accretion of these personal epiphanies, little May '68s of the mind, will prepare us for the revolution yet to come.

The ethical normalization of desire as an intrinsically non-instrumentalizing somatic force is an article of faith in the post-structuralist tradition, evident in the utopian language of bodily "sensations" and libidinal "intensities" in Lyotard and Deleuze, as well as the signal value assigned to the play of difference and the signifier, or the quasi-erotic *jouissance* of the "writerly" text by Derrida and Barthes. Desire constitutes a natural state of non-aggression and primal sociality that preexists our very identity as discrete subjects. Like the utopian sociality of the traditional aesthetic *sensus communis*, desire reassures us that we are, at the most basic level of our existence, predisposed toward heterogeneity and pleasurable co-existence. We need only free ourselves of the baleful influence of language, culture, and history to re-actualize the Edenic experience of being-as-becoming. The possibility that our immanent desire might, in fact, be grasping, violent, or self-interested is overcome by the simple expedient of insisting that the only proper desire occurs prior to individuation, before there is even a "self" to be interested. Yet the moment that a coherent self does evolve out of this inchoate but benign field of energy, what is to prevent the consequent emergence of a violent and defensive subjectivity? If a possessive relationship to the world, and to other subjects, is part of the very constitution of a volitional self, how are we to proceed? Precisely by subjecting that "self" to a process of compulsory decentering and dislocation. The cognitive subject, as both the symptom and the cause of the Western metaphysical sickness, must be pulverized, demolished, and rendered pure. The various modes of sensory provocation, semantic ambiguity, and cognitive disruption enshrined in the avant-garde tradition will return us, momentarily, therapeutically, to a pre-symbolic state of null subjectivity; reconnecting us with the utopic energies of desire and pre-differentiated existence.

The concept of rupture outlined above entails a kind of ontic scorched-earth policy; the self as it currently exists (specifically, the centered, self-identical Cartesian version that one typically encounters in post-structuralist literature) is beyond redemption. This requires, in turn, a strategic disavowal of the specific situational practices and experiential realities of individual human agents. This disavowal is rooted in the Structuralist tradition, which postulated an overarching system that limits, constrains, and determines individual agency. The systems of language (Saussure), myth (Lévi-Strauss), the unconscious (Lacan), ideology (Althusser), and discourse (Foucault) are entirely autonomous: impervious to the reciprocal actions of conscious subjects. In each case, we see an effort to distill out the underlying structure of a given system of meaning as an object of knowledge, precisely by discarding the practical experience of its participating subjects (individual utterance/speech acts, volitional action, the experience of historical continuity, referential forms of meaning, etc.) as naive, complicit, or unsuitable for proper theoretical reflection (cf. Schiller's reader, benumbed by romance novels). "Man" is no more than an "effect" of language or discourse, a "rift" in the Order of Things, a "desiring machine," with no conscious agency.[78]

Individual utterance, action, or ideation can only ever be treated as a symptom of some deeper structuring logic. "Reality" as it is experienced and lived is constantly set aside, bracketed, and critiqued in order to disclose the deeper truth created by a previously hidden structure that organizes our actions and our very consciousness behind our backs. As Pierre Nora, Foucault's editor at Gallimard, wrote: "When men speak they say things they are not necessarily responsible for, and end up doing things they did not necessarily want to do . . . forces they are not conscious of course through them and dominate them."[79] The result is a kind of in-

verted image of aesthetic autonomy, in which the individual is wholly and completely determined, even as the structure itself appears entirely closed and self-referential. As I've noted above, post-structuralist thought will wrestle with this contradiction by restoring some nominal agency to the subject through a de-individuated notion of desire or bodily conatus (a key term which I will return to in chapter 2).[80] The result, evident in contemporary art theory, is a neo-romantic discourse that attributes various intrinsically utopian or liberatory powers to the body, desire, sensation, and so on. However, the problem of agency and collective experience isn't resolved in this manner, merely deferred. In each case, the problem begins with the reliance on a reductive model of the volitional self and agency and its predicable antithesis: an equally reductive, de-centered, a-rational self. The hapless modern subject is either controlled by a *Matrix*-like system of external domination, with no hope of independent action, or exposed to a relentless program of destabilization, violent confrontation, and therapeutic de-centering.

The only exception to this unremittingly mechanistic picture of human behavior is the theorist, writer, or artist; the single agent who retains some power beyond inchoate desire or bodily sensation, some autonomy relative to structures of meaning, and some capacity to act back on the world in a coherent and expressive manner.[81] The central intellectual task assigned to this felicitous agent is the search for hidden structures and their subsequent revelation. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offers a useful interpretation of the rhetoric of exposure and revelation in her analysis of the "paranoid consensus" that has come to dominate contemporary critical theory informed by structuralism, psychoanalysis, and Marxism. Based in part on the historical identification of critical theory with the act of revealing the (structural) determinants that pattern our perception of reality, the paranoid approach obsessively repeats the gesture of "unveiling hidden violence" to a benumbed or disbelieving world.[82] As enabling and necessary as it is to probe beneath the surface of appearance and to identify unacknowledged forms of power, the paranoid approach, in Sedgwick's view, attributes an almost mystical agency to the act of revelation in and of itself. As she writes:

> The paranoid trust in exposure seemingly depends . . . on an infinite reservoir of naiveté in those who make up the audience for these unveilings. What is the basis for assuming that it will surprise or disturb, never mind motivate, anyone to learn that a given social manifestation is artificial, self-contradictory, imitative, phantasmatic or even violent?[83]

As Sedgwick notes, the normalization of paranoid knowing as a model for creative and intellectual practice among writers, theorists, and, I might add, artists, has entailed "a certain disarticulation, disavowal, and misrecognition of other ways of knowing, ways less oriented around suspicion."[84] Sedgwick juxtaposes paranoid knowing (in which "exposure in and of itself is assigned a crucial operative power") with reparative knowing, which is driven by the desire to ameliorate or give pleasure. As she argues, this reparative attitude is intolerable to the paranoid, who views any attempt to work productively within a given system of meaning as unforgivably naive and complicit, a belief authorized by the paranoid's "contemptuous assumption that the one thing lacking for global revolution, explosion of gender roles, or whatever, is people's (that is, other people's) having the painful effects of their oppression, poverty or deludedness sufficiently exacerbated to make the pain conscious (as if otherwise it wouldn't have been) and intolerable."[85] Traditional theology discovers signs of divinity in the world, like the image of the Virgin Mary miraculously preserved in a grilled cheese sandwich, precisely because they are already present in the cognitive apparatus of the faithful. The counter-theology of the post-structuralist tradition seeks to root out signs of complicity and fatal coherence with the same zealous predisposition.[86]

## ART THEORY AND THE POST-STRUCTURALIST CANON — 6

> This ultimate, Utopic, generation is *by far* the most revolutionary one the system has ever produced.
>
> ANGELO QUATTROCCHI AND TOM NAIRN, *THE BEGINNING OF THE END*

While there are obvious differences among the key figures associated with post-structuralist theory, the broader assimilation of their work within the humanities and social sciences has led, perhaps inevitably, to a certain homogenization. Four decades after Derrida's influential 1966 appearance at the Johns Hopkins Humanities Center, we can identify a recognizable "post-structuralist" discourse that has attained a canonical status in the

academic systems of Europe, the United States, and Latin America.[87] Over the preceding pages I've attempted to sketch out the broad contours of this discourse. The assumptive world of post-structuralist thought is defined by several key characteristics. Chief among these are a series of tactical inversions directed at the traditions of Western metaphysics and subjectivity. These include the privileging of dissensus over consensus, rupture and immediacy over continuity and duration, and distance over proximity, intimacy, or integration. Other significant features include an extreme skepticism about organized political action and a hyper-vigilance regarding the dangers of co-option and compromise entailed by such action, the ethical normalization of desire and somatic or sensual experience, and the recoding of political transformation into a form of ontic disruption directed at any coherent system of belief, agency, or identity. It is the task of the artist or intellectual, in particular, to supervise this process through the composition of axiomatic texts (writing, poetry, film, objects, events, etc.) that seek to destabilize the viewer or reader through an essentially individual hermeneutic engagement. The artist's relationship to the viewer or reader is necessarily distanced and custodial. And the viewer or reader, in turn, can only ever be acted *upon* by the artist or work of art.

While this tradition has been profoundly generative, it also carries with it certain limitations and lacunae that are all the more debilitating because of its canonical authority. As I noted in the introduction, what would have been identified twenty years ago as a distinct "post-structuralist" strand within the larger field of critical theory has been so successfully assimilated that it's now largely synonymous with critical theory *per se*. The generation of thinkers who stormed the Sorbonne is now taught with near catechistic devotion at the most privileged institutions of higher learning in the United States, Latin America, and Europe.[88] Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze, and, more recently, Agamben, Nancy, Levinas, Rancière, and Badiou, are ubiquitous not only in the academy but also, perhaps especially, in the art world, their names regularly invoked in catalog essays, artist's statements, reviews, course reading lists, and dissertations. Today post-structuralism constitutes a kind of globalized theoretical *lingua franca* in the arts and humanities.

While critics such as Jack Burnham and others began referencing sources in structuralism and semiotics (Lévi-Strauss, Saussure, Greimas, etc.) in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the initial rapprochement between



contemporary art and post-structuralist theory occurred during the late '70s and early 1980s, when the works of Derrida, Baudrillard, Lacan, and Barthes were first widely available in English.[89] The key term here, imported from semiotics, was "signification," which was mobilized in debates around photography and film. The photographic image (which stood at the time as the *ur-form* of realist ideology) was relentlessly deconstructed, its contingency revealed, its framing conventions exposed, in numerous works by Sarah Charlesworth, Silvia Kolbowski, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman, and their various followers.

Semiotics allowed for the initial consolidation of a textual paradigm in art practice and criticism, as a body of theory designed to reveal the contingency of *linguistic* meaning was transposed into discussions of visual art. This was a decisive shift, leading to the concept of the work of art as a subversive text that would denaturalize photographic truth and thereby trigger a cascading series of insights into the contingency of all forms of coherent meaning (with a particular focus on the construction of gender and sexuality). Postmodern art criticism promulgated a hermeneutic system, based on the act of "reading" the image, which was largely drawn from the canon of structuralist and post-structuralist literary theory.[90] Postmodern techniques of image appropriation would simultaneously undermine the artist's status as the "author" of photographic meaning, and the referentiality of the photograph itself. Following the line of aesthetic autonomy established by Barthes, the role of the appropriated image isn't to "stand for" something in the world, but precisely to break free from the demands of representation and reveal the contingency of the signifying process itself. The artist retains his or her characteristic autonomy at the margins of the dominant culture as a Virgil-like figure laying bare the apparatus of photographic meaning to viewers wandering stupefied through the "forest of signs."

By the early 1990s the discourse of art theory began to expand from a concern with signification in the cinematic or photographic image to a concern with the more general signifying processes at work in the constitution of individual, collective, and even geopolitical identity. At the same time, the largely gallery-bound work of the 1980s (Cindy Sherman's Cibachrome prints, the photographs of Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine) gave way to a more ephemeral, public, performative approach associated with the international biennial and Kunsthalle circuit (e.g., the work of

Elmgreen and Dragset, Superflex, Tiravanija, Hirschhorn, Liam Gillick, Pierre Huyghe, Carsten Holler, Christine Hill, Jens Haaning, Ben Kinmont, Philippe Parreno, N-55, etc.). It is largely from this body of work that Bourriaud's "relational aesthetics" artists are drawn. Its practitioners are primarily, though not entirely, European, in part because many European nations still provide economic support (in the form of stipends, bursaries, or fellowships) for younger artists and art students. In addition, European cultural institutions devoted to contemporary art enjoy much more generous levels of state funding than comparable institutions in the United States and elsewhere. The result is a quasi-formal system of public patronage that frees younger artists from the demands of the art market and commodity production and has opened space for an ephemeral, performance-based mode of practice.[91]

The rhetoric of disclosure and revelation remained central in this work, and the artist emerged as a nomadic agent of deconstruction, wandering from site to site to expose the contingency of meaning (Francis Alÿs and Christian Philipp Müller are emblematic).[92] During the 1990s, art practice was reinvented as a kind of potted cultural studies in which one selects a particular social, cultural, or representational system in order to "expose" or "deconstruct" the various ideological errors and complicities committed by its members. One could pick examples almost at random from the pages of *Frieze*, *Flash Art*, *Artforum*, or *Parkeet*. In *Chantier Barbès-Rochechouart* (1994) Pierre Huyghe erected billboards featuring re-staged photographs of workers at Parisian construction sites, ostensibly "deconstructing . . . the false promises of the advertising industry."[93] Phil Collins's installation *They Shoot Horses* (2004), which features extended video footage of Palestinian teenagers dancing to Western pop songs, exposes the ignorance of the "typical western viewer" who would otherwise be "condemned" to viewing young Arabs as "victims or . . . fundamentalists."[94]

Not surprisingly, post-structuralist thought has been a significant source of inspiration for this generation of artists. References to Deleuze, Derrida, Levinas, Agamben, Nancy, and Rancière (among others) are *de rigueur* in the critical staging of biennial-based work. Bourriaud, as I noted above, is particularly enamored of Guattari's notion of plural subjectivities, while *Documenta* 12 (2007) based its curatorial mission in part on the adumbration of Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life" by contemporary artists. The Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn has been especially



conspicuous in calling attention to the role that critical theory plays in his work, patterning entire installations and projects around the proper names of his favorite thinkers (these include *Deleuze Monument* in 2000, *Bataille Monument* in 2004, and *24 Hour Foucault Project* in 2006). Recent projects such as *Utopia, Utopia = One World, One War, One Army, One Dress* (2006) literalize a textual paradigm, as Hirschhorn actually includes fragments of theoretical texts contributed by his frequent collaborator Marcus Steinweg. Steinweg writes in a poetic, quasi-philosophical mode that involves the incantatory repetition of key post-structuralist tropes (the oppressive nature of collective identity, the privileging of rupture and transgression, etc.). Here is a typical passage from "WORDPLAY" (written for the *Utopia, Utopia* installation), in which Steinweg, elaborating on Nietzsche's concept of a "Hyperborean" subject, rehearses the standard post-structuralist opposition between a transgressive, uncanny singularity and the universal, logocentric "we community":

> We Hyperboreans also means: we, the community of those who are without community, without we-community. We solitary ones. We singularities. We who touch the limits of the Logos that represents the principle of the Western we-community. We who have fallen out of the we-cosmos. We who have separated from the universality of a transcendental community, from the habitable zone of transcendental we-subjectivity. We homeless ones. We arctic natures. We monsters who are in contact with the limits of what is familiar, habitual and habitable . . .[95]

Steinweg returns us, yet again, to Kristeva's subversive intellectual, diagnosing the "impossibility of social cohesion." Communal or collective interaction can only ever be compromised, totalizing, and dangerous. The very act of participation, according to architects Markus Miessen and Shumon Basar, is tantamount to "war."[96] "Any form of participation is already a form of conflict," they contend, echoing Lyotard's assertions about language as a field of battle. The lone architect must assume the role of an "uninvited irritant" "forcing" his or her way into "other fields of knowledge" and "deliberately instigating conflicts" rather than "doing good" (that most abject of goals). The architect becomes the fiercest critic of transcendence, even as he or she claims a position that is radically external to all institutional, disciplinary, and epistemological boundaries.

As these examples suggest, by the 1990s, art practice and critical theory

existed in an increasingly interdependent and even circular relationship: artists read, recited, and invoked the same theoretical sources as their critics—sources which were called upon, in turn, by the critics analyzing their work. Post-structuralist theory was disseminated in large measure through the art world and through university art history, literature, and cultural studies programs, rather than philosophy departments (where the philosophical premises and interpretations on which this theory is based might have been subject to more informed scrutiny). Relatively few art world commentators had the scholarly background necessary to engage with this work at a substantive philosophical level (to challenge, e.g., Deleuze's interpretation of Spinoza, Derrida's reading of Kant, or Rancière's account of Schiller). This led to the programmatic version of post-structuralist theory we frequently encounter in artists' statements and art criticism and theory. Post-structuralism, for many in the art world, is less a tradition that is actively engaged *with* than a system of thought that one subscribes *to*. The result is an often liturgical relationship to theory, and a related tendency to simply invoke theoretical precepts as axioms and then apply them to practice in an illustrative manner.[97]

We encounter in contemporary art discourse a set of assumptions about the expressive autonomy of the artist, the hermeneutic function of the artwork, the cognitive capacities of the viewer, and the relationship of art practice to broader social and political movements that have been heavily influenced by post-structuralist critical theory and the longer history of modernist aesthetics I've outlined in this chapter. The resulting model of art practice is characterized by a reductive model of human agency (and a problematic displacement of agency to pre-subjective "desire"), a tendency toward simplistic ethico-epistemological oppositions (coherence vs. incoherence, rupture vs. continuity, singularity vs. collectivity, dissensus vs. consensus, etc.), and a corresponding inability to grasp the tactical specificity of given sites of practice and modes of collective identity, or to work productively in the space "between" these oppositional categories. There is, in addition, a tendency to endow the artist with a singular capacity for transcendence (Miessen's "uninvited irritant"), thereby eliding his or her material specificity or situational accountability.

Finally, there is the problematic projection of a violent or disruptive conatus onto the viewer, as the aggression necessary to sustain certain forms of political action (demonstrations, street protests, etc.) is displaced onto the hermeneutic relationship between the audience and the work of art (via the post–May '68 "textualization" of politics). This displacement is sanctioned in turn by the assumption that more direct forms of political engagement are either futile or premature. "Nothing is possible without a far-reaching ecological transformation of subjectivities, without an awareness of the various forms of founding interdependence of subjectivity," as Bourriaud writes.[98] As a result, antagonism is de-specified, with no sense of its tactical relevance (are there points within a given project, e.g., during which dissensus is counterproductive, or ironic detachment simply alienates the artist from his or her collaborators?). By maintaining such an absolute division between the sequestered realm of art practice (textualized, detached, authorially-regulated) and social or political engagement (which is always at risk of compromise), this tradition has foreclosed the possibility that social interaction or political engagement *itself* might transform subjectivity or produce its own forms of insight. Instead, we must endlessly prepare our subjectivities for political action through a deferred aesthetic reeducation. A relational antagonism (to the viewer, to all other discursive modes, disciplines, and systems of knowledge) becomes self-justifying and is folded into the very identity of the producing artist as a reminder of a broader political transformation that is currently unrealizable but may one day come to pass.

For all of these reasons, activist and socially engaged art practices pose a particular challenge for many contemporary critics. As I noted earlier in this chapter, Bourriaud relies on a dated caricature of activist art (as coextensive with the worst traditions of agitprop) to legitimize the work he endorses. Thus, relational artists such as Carsten Höller, Philippe Parreno, and Pierre Huyghe are not, according to Bourriaud, "naïve or cynical enough to 'go about things as if' the radical and universalist utopia were still on the agenda."[99] Bishop, one of the more thoughtful critics of relational and activist art, nonetheless reverts to a similar dynamic. Activist art sacrifices its aesthetic credibility on the "altar of social change," Bishop warns, while authentic art (Lars von Trier, Phil Collins, Santiago Sierra) "fulfills the promise" of Schiller's aesthetic.[100] As the reference to Schiller suggests, we have come full circle, back to the long tradition of aesthetic autonomy. Bishop borrows this reference in turn from Jacques Rancière (a former student of Althusser), whose influential book *The Politics of Aesthetics* takes Schiller as a central point of reference.[101]

Rancière reiterates Schiller's skepticism regarding the fate of political action unguided by aesthetic sensibility. The French Revolution failed, as Rancière describes it, "because the revolutionary power had played the traditional part of the Understanding—meaning the state—imposing its law to the matter of sensations—meaning the masses."

> By so doing it was still in line with the old partition of the sensible where the culture of the elite had to rule over the wilderness of the common people. The only true revolution would be a revolution overthrowing the power of "active" understanding over "passive" sensibility . . . a revolution of sensory existence itself instead of a revolution in the forms of government.[102]

In order to resuscitate Schiller, Rancière must elide his expressed commitment to cultural elitism, but the underlying point (a revolution of the senses must precede any political revolution) remains intact. Rancière rearticulates the function of traditional aesthetic autonomy as the preservation of "heterogeneous" sensory experience and the "self sufficiency" of the individual subject. The "heterogeneous sensible" manages to elude determination (like Moritz's Pietist grace or anti-Oedipal "desire").[103] At the same time, Rancière claims to introduce a significant inflection of the traditional aesthetic. Rather than insisting on either the absolute autonomy of the aesthetic or its dissolution, he locates the power of the aesthetic in the "play" *between* art and life: a kind of quasi-autonomy. Rancière's formulation effectively restages the "third way" dynamic, relying as it does on two ostensibly opposed views that are revealed as equally compromised (both the museum-burning zealot and the *art pour la art* devotee threaten to destroy the truly revolutionary power of aesthetic "undecideability"). The solution to this "impasse," or antinomy, is not difficult to predict. Rather than withdrawing entirely into passivity and quiescence, the artist will remain engaged by working to subvert the consciousness of individual viewers. As with the logic of structural repetition I've already discussed, Rancière's resolution can only be produced by positing exaggerated or reductive versions of two ostensibly opposed positions. Few if any modernist artists or movements ever advocated a complete withdrawal from the social, or a total dissolution of art's specificity. "Undecideability" or "ambiguity," relative to the realm of politics, are inescapable and self-evident features of modern and contemporary art practice. The intellectual challenge



doesn't lie in yet another reiteration of this familiar claim, but in working through the various ways in which this ambiguity is produced situationally, what effects it has in a given project and at a given site of practice.

Rancière has emerged in recent years as an art world favorite, in part I suspect because his work provides theoretical validation for an already cherished set of beliefs about the "political" function of the artwork. Bishop draws on Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics* to legitimate her appeal to "disruption" and shock as necessary prerequisites for authentic art ("A political work of art . . . transmits meanings in the form of a rupture").[104] In two influential essays published in *October* and *Artforum*, Bishop offers one of the most substantive critical engagements with both activist and relational art practices. All the conventional post-structuralist themes are in evidence. We have the valorization of a "tough, disruptive approach" and agonistic conflict (properly advanced art is patterned around "excruciating situations" and the experience of "grueling duration"), and the corollary reliance on a reductive opposition between a (good) de-centered and a (bad) unified subjectivity.[105] While activist or community-based projects traffic in proscribed forms of "unified" subjectivity and "transcendent human empathy" and are designed to "smooth over awkward situations," the work of artists such as Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirschhorn inculcate a necessary "awkwardness and discomfort." Rather than promoting a reviled "social harmony," their works encourage a "relational antagonism" concerned with "exposing that which is repressed."[106]

In Bishop's account, the disruption and "antagonism" produced by Sierra and Hirschhorn involve various attempts to force privileged art world types to encounter the poor and working class as they slog through the galleries of their favorite biennial. Thus, Hirschhorn chose to locate his *Bataille Monument* "in the middle of a community whose ethnic and economic status did not mark it as a target audience for Documenta" (Bishop's circumlocution for an immigrant, working-class neighborhood in Kassel). By making Documenta's stalwarts take cabs (operated by Turkish drivers) to the *Monument*, Hirschhorn "contrived a curious rapprochement between the influx of tourists and the area's residents," making the "visitors feel like hapless intruders" (a gesture that echoes Sierra's use of retributive exclusion in *Wall Enclosing a Space*). Hirschhorn's work was thus "disruptively thought provoking," according to Bishop, as it "destabilized . . . any notion of community identity" (except, apparently, the "community"

around the *Bataille Monument* itself, whose disconcerting race and class difference provided the *frisson* necessary to "provoke" Documenta's tourists).[107] Bishop describes her experience of a Santiago Sierra project for the 2001 Venice Biennial—in which he provided space in the Arsenal for street vendors to sell their wares—in similar terms. Her discovery of merchants selling knockoff Fendi handbags in a sanctioned art space ("Did they creep in here for a joke?") triggered a cathartic "moment of mutual non-identification," radically disrupting her "sense of identity."[108]

The corrective exposure to race and class Others engineered by Hirschhorn or Sierra generalizes both the viewer (all Documenta visitors are "tourists" whose relationship to a working-class Turkish community is necessarily inauthentic and voyeuristic) and the individuals whose "participation" is choreographed for their benefit (the street vendors function through a logic of simple juxtaposition, providing a spectacle of generic difference against the ground of a privileged art venue). The entire *mise-en-scène* is designed, in Bishop's description, to reiterate the chastising logic of post-structuralist poetics ("destabilizing," "disruptive," etc.). This approach, which might otherwise appear objectifying or ethically suspect, is legitimated by the textual paradigm and by the reflexive privilege accorded to the critique of signification elaborated around the photographic image during the 1980s. Having abandoned the naive assumption that signifiers and referents in the "real" world are necessarily linked, artists can now "appropriate" the human body itself. Liberated from its referential function, the body can be employed with the same tactical precision as any other semantic element toward the deconstruction of particular cultural or social discourses, thus neatly eliding the distinction between an image and a living being. In this view Sierra's work allows for only two possible responses. Either a genuine destabilization, in which viewers are made viscerally aware of their own complicity in an oppressive specular economy, or a critique of the ethical questions raised by the public display of the unemployed or homeless in an art gallery. The latter response can easily enough be dismissed as a defensive reaction formation to the unbearable "provocation" presented by Sierra's work, and thus a further demonstration of its efficacy. In each case, the ethical is collapsed into the a priori epistemological value assigned to disruption and provocation per se.

While socially engaged or community-based projects reaffirm their participant's most problematic assumptions about identity and difference, according to Bishop, authentic art practices (Sierra, Hirschhorn, etc.) "activate" the viewer. However, the decisive point in the reception of this work is not the distinction between an active and a passive viewer, but rather the broader set of assumptions *about* the viewer that are encoded in this activation: the particular form of agency it claims to give the viewer, and the essentially scripted nature of the viewer's presumed response. This is evident in Sierra's *Wall Enclosing a Space* for the Spanish Pavilion at the 2003 Venice Biennale (referenced earlier). If I don't have Spanish passport I'm not allowed in, so large numbers of art world *cognoscenti* from Europe and the United States were denied entry. "The wall polarizes the Biennial spectators on either side of a hypothetical stage," according to curator Rosa Martínez, "and formalizes physical and political tensions evocative of that strange territory of sealed cities and countries defined by contemporary exclusions."[109] The physical experience of having my free passage into the exhibit blocked isn't simply annoying or inconvenient. Rather, it has a pedagogical effect. My desire to see, to know, to consume "Sierra" has been interrupted, and I've learned, by extension, to empathetically identify with those global others who don't possess the geopolitical privilege and freedom of movement that I do. The artist has produced this lesson by momentarily inverting the conventional subject-position of the viewer. As Sierra describes it: "On one side, Spaniards; but not on the other side. . . . This fact is now emphasized and displayed, to prompt one to think of one's belonging."[110]

As with Elmgreen and Dragset's *Pavilion*, the assumptions about the viewer encoded in this work are clearly hypothetical (e.g., that Biennial visitors are blithely ignorant of their own privilege, and that having had their entry to the Sierra exhibit blocked they would necessarily respond with the proper insight and mend their ways, or have their "mindset . . . laid bare," in Sierra's words).[111] Given the vast number of biennial-based works over the past twenty years that have been devoted to discomfiting the viewer, it seems likely that their experience of these provocations is considerably more complex and contradictory, and that they may include elements of pleasure or even self-affirmation. In fact, the work of Sierra and others is as likely to consolidate a particular sense of identity among art world viewers (as tolerant, enlightened, willing to accept risk and challenge) as it is to effect any lasting ontic dislocation. Unfortunately, mainstream critics and curators continue to offer the same credulous accounts

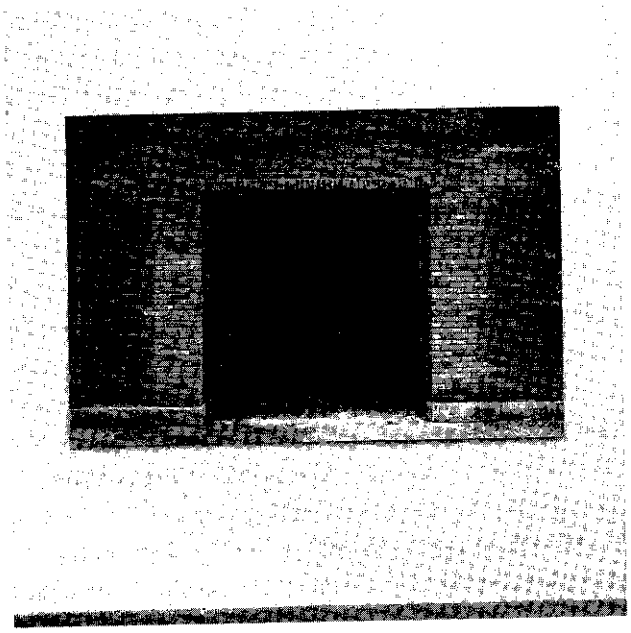

FIGURE 1 Santiago Sierra, *Wall Enclosing a Space, Spanish Pavilion, Venice Biennial, Venice Italy 2003* (2003). Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery, London.

of Sierra "exposing" the operations of power, thus eliding any discussion of the more complex relay of exchanges, assumptions, and experiences his works might catalyze among actual audience members.

The almost reflexive application of a critical discourse based on authorial singularity and the artwork as a prefabricated and essentially specular event or object can prevent a fuller understanding even of those projects produced by artists working under its auspices. Thus, Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument* project also involved an extended collaboration with Turkish-German youth from the neighborhood, who helped him construct a temporary library, snack bar, and television studio (which they used for the duration of the exhibit). This aspect of the project is unremarked in Bishop's account, perhaps because it so closely resembles the retrograde "community-art" tradition. In some cases, the artists themselves seem simultaneously drawn to, and embarrassed by, the collective, participatory dimension of their own work. In writing about his large-scale performance *When Faith Moves Mountains* (a project in which several hundred volunteers worked together to move a sand dune outside Lima, Peru, in 2002), Francis Alÿs avoids any extended discussion of the actual mechanics of the collaborative interaction and negotiation necessary to bring the work into existence, focusing instead on hermeneutic issues around the work's transmission in the art world, or on the symbolism of the performance as a "mythic" image. It was a "*beau geste*, at once futile and heroic, absurd and urgent," according to Alÿs. The Guggenheim describes it as a "powerful allegory, a metaphor for human will." The five hundred collaborators are thus reduced to an undifferentiated collective mass, laboring among clouds of sand as a literal illustration of Alÿs's poetic imagination.[112]

I've spent some time sketching out the broader intellectual history behind current critiques of activist and socially engaged art for two reasons. First, because these critiques raise some relevant and important questions about this work and can help in delineating a more rigorous analysis. And second, because the critiques themselves are symptomatic of certain limitations within current art critical discourse. It is a discourse, as I've argued above, that has achieved near canonical authority in the contemporary art world. While I've attempted to problematize it, my goal isn't to question its legitimacy, but simply to make it visible in the first place as *one* potential framework for the analysis of contemporary art. Several of the collaborative projects that I'll begin discussing in the following chapter challenge this discursive system. They are, by and large, concerned with the generation of insight through durational interaction rather than rupture; they seek to openly problematize the authorial status of the artist, and they often rely on more conciliatory (and less custodial) strategies and relationships (both with their participants and with affiliated movements, disciplines, etc). While they may be implicated in forms of collective action that take up an oppositional or antagonistic relationship to particular sites of power, they differentiate this antagonism from the modes of self-reflexive sociality necessary to create solidarity within a given organizational structure. In short, they challenge the conventional aesthetic autonomy of both the artist and art practice, relative to a given site, context, or constituency. It is this challenge, embodied in practice, which requires a new analytic approach. In the following chapter I'll outline such an approach, centered on a concept of collaborative labor.