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**Artistic practices & democratic politics:
towards the markers of uncertainty from counter-hegemonic
positions to plural hegemonies**

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Artistic Practices & Democratic Politics: Towards the Markers of Uncertainty

From Counter-Hegemonic Positions to Plural Hegemonies

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University
of Westminster for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ДАП: «Ну, интеллектуалы - это не в качестве обзывания, а в качестве некоей такой социокультурной службы, миссии. Это такое специальное существо. Знаете, как собаки, натасканные на наркотики. Интеллектуал натаскан на критику мифов, дискурсов, языков всяких при желаемой такой его собственной незадействованности ни в какой идеологической утопии. Он собственно критик, и у него очень нелегкая судьба, потому что, видите, действительно, у него такое незавидное существование.»

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Abstract

Can artistic and cultural practices play a critical role in societies in which criticisms are reflexively absorbed and immobilised by the prevailing hegemony? And, if yes, what kind of political order can they aspire to, given the ‘post-utopian’ nature of the human condition? How do we approach the tortuous question of the destiny of both the project of modern democracy and that of aesthetic modernity? There is no agreement on this issue. We are told that there is no alternative to the existing liberal democracy and capitalist pluralism without risking yet another dystopia – the dilemma that in the artistic realm is sometimes articulated as the opposition between modernism and postmodernism. What might progressive art look like in such times when the ideas of progress and modernity are viewed with great suspicion?

The most popular positions concerning artistic and cultural practices’ critical dimension revolve around the idea that with the post-Fordist transformation and the bankruptcy of the Left, the paradigm of power has really changed. This is reflected in the radical character of contemporary artistic practices, which desperately struggle to constitute subject at the expense of themselves. However, the question is: can these practices be both radical and democratic? This depends on our understanding of emancipatory politics, the nature of aesthetics and post-Fordist transformation.

We will examine the different approaches to these subjects influenced by the Frankfurt school and post-Operaist theories to argue that neither Theodor Adorno’s and Max Horkeimer’s analyses based on the Fordist model, nor Antonio Negri’s and Paolo Virno’s post-Fordist appropriation of the significance of art in the new forms of production provide a useful framework with which to grasp the nature of the changes and challenges that face our society. Such novel ideas as ‘immaterial labour’ and ‘spontaneous communism’ or exodus and ‘communism of capital’, despite their new vocabulary, are a dangerous inversion of the Frankfurt school’s idealism and inability to grasp that social reality is hegemonically constructed

through the practices of articulation that temporarily and incompletely ‘fix’ the meaning of social institutions.

Neither politics nor post-Fordism should be considered through the matrix of culture, but in terms of hegemony. What is at issue is to grasp the nature of the democratic and aesthetical paradoxes and envisage how the two could be applied to contribute to progressive changes in power relations. Judgements must be made – we have to be able to distinguish between who belongs to *demos* and who does not; however, how we judge, which is the subject of aesthetic critique, is at the core of democratic artistic-political practice.

One way in which artistic practices can be critical is a counter-hegemonic intervention that acts against the position of supremacy of any hegemonic order and shows that any fullness exists because there are gaps, but judges this lack in a way that resists the totalisation of the sensible. However, perhaps the way to weaken the centre is not just to expose its flaws, but to pluralise hegemonies. In this way, the idea to pluralise modernism in the era of globalisation could help us to redefine modern democracy in the post-political era and outline the positive vision of the ‘hegemonic trap’.

Could the evolution of artistic-political practice be envisaged as the radicalisation of ‘oppositional identities’, which undermine the hegemonic forms of subject articulation into compository or shimmering identities, making such supremacy impossible? Can art become a symbol of emptying ‘democracy’ and thus construct many ‘democracies’, answering our tortuous question by producing plural answers?

The Plan of the Work

In the following we look first at the most influential conceptions of what constitutes the political element in contemporary art to understand what is at issue. Attending to a number of questions raised by theories such as ‘Relational Aesthetics’, ‘Immaterial Labour’, ‘Artistic Machine’ or ‘The Art of Over-Identification’, we will argue that, despite their new vocabulary, their ideas correspond to the same old scenario that, to be politically effective, artistic practices must produce entirely new models of functioning. As discussed in the first chapter, artistic practices pay little attention to the aesthetic transformation of the selected materials; rather, they concentrate on the transformation of the practice of art as such, which is envisaged as a critical intervention in itself. This art is seen as radical because it engages in different ways of doing art – i.e. direct action, publicity stunts and creating ‘transversal alliances’. While artists are often radical in their actions, they are often reactionary in their thinking. Considered as an action, this kind of art is viewed as political in itself, overlooking the fact that its ‘social trajectory’ corresponds more to what Luc Boltanski terms a ‘new spirit of capitalism’ rather than new politics. It is perceived that since artistic practices are no longer about an object, they are radical and hence automatically democratic. Meanwhile, art, which constantly needs to go beyond itself by overcoming, linking and blurring disciplines, spheres and individuals, tends to represent social reality in a consensual way, since this reality is envisaged through the mediated interactivity of the ‘united self’. It could be said that the political goal of artistic practices that view themselves as political could be envisaged as a peculiar attempt to constitute the subject at the expense of itself. We will take issue with such an approach, aiming to show that its real meaning is not a construction of new subjectivity, but a retreat from it. The fact that ‘political art’ has such a peculiar self-understanding corresponds to how politics are envisaged today. Politics are no longer about a radical transformation of existing social order, but about individual radicalisation.

Second, we look at conceptions of radical politics – the way in which the view of politics as a self-conscious, sensuous and rational activity and the corresponding

central role assigned to the artistic practices, of which the Frankfurt school is one of the most important examples, has led to its being associated with the disdain for the system, the state, a party, a commonality, thereby reducing politics to police. Even the beauty of art was said to be reactionary, since the truly beautiful is not, as Herbert Marcuse argues, a bourgeois displacement of hope, but corresponds to the individualistic 'pleasure principle'. To think politically, the Frankfurt school tells us, is to think personally and to undermine the 'soul-destroying' mass society, where all choices were taken away by an all-inclusive 'administered universe' of capitalism. Although Jacques Rancière finds the discourse of capitalism's supremacy reactionary itself, he nevertheless views politics as a matter of the 'theatrical and artificial sphere', the one capable of producing the maximum distance from the existing social reality. Hence, instead of liberating a political moment from the social enrooting, we tend to reject and withdraw from the social order rather than transforming it. For Chantal Mouffe, however, radical politics always means the engagement with the existing social, since subjects are constructed through hegemonic practices and are never the manifestations of a deeper objectivity. Power, from this point of view, should not be envisaged as domination but as a transformative capacity. Power is constructed and could be reconstructed. While true democracy cannot be realised, the possibility of democratic politics lies within the complexity of power relations: the tension between logics of liberty and equality, between an individual and the demos. The task for democratic politics is to show the traces of exclusion and reconstruct the relations of power in a more progressive way, and not to take refuge in formulating a paradigm that would assign everything to its place. The problem of democracy is not a problem of an individual choice or belief, but the problem of the possibility of the construction of collective identities in a way that envisages exclusion in an agonistic form.

If we accept that society is hegemonically constructed, then the Frankfurt school's critique of inauthenticity and the conformist domination of a society appear to be counter-productive. Such a critique could be understood as liberal, but certainly not democratic. This, what Boltanski called an 'artistic critique,' led to the further

depoliticisation represented by the new speculative Leftism that no longer perceives capitalism as a problem but rather as a new biopolitical paradigm, which demands the radically new conception of political and cultural spheres. What is at issue here is not resistance to the ‘system,’ but placing it in question as a whole.

Third, we seek to show that this post-modern conception of politics, based on the belief that the ‘artistic critique’ has either succeeded or failed, forecloses the possibility of artistic practices contributing to an emancipatory project. Here we look at some of the key transformative ideas of the post-Operaist thinkers such as Paolo Virno and Antonio Negri to argue that the post-Fordist transformation should be understood in terms of hegemony rather than culture. We will argue that what we are dealing with today is not a ‘creative communism’ or ‘communism of capital,’ but a form of political articulation of a society in which, through the central role of ‘self-production’, social relations appear as a mere extension of capital and not in their political dimension. The production of subjectivity today is more important than ever and artists have to engage with this terrain in order to re-articulate the given social order where both politics and aesthetics seem to become redundant. However, envisaging what artistic critical intervention means requires not only an adequate grasp of what a ‘democratic paradox’ and a political understanding of the nature of the post-Fordist transition mean, but also a different approach to aesthetics. There is an aesthetical paradox – the questioning of the aesthetical judgment that reveals, through the ongoing practice of art, a conceptual impossibility of judgment *per se*.

Henceforth we investigate different conceptions of aesthetics. Many today contend that art theory and practice no longer needs aesthetics, since the ethical significance of aesthetic judgments pertaining to nature has disappeared. Boris Groys, for example, argues that the true autonomy of art can only be guaranteed by the absence of aesthetic judgments. We will take issue with such a view, suggesting instead that, following Jacques Rancière and Dmitry Prigov, aesthetics is not a tool for conveying ideas, not the value to be assigned, but the fundamental disagreement with existing values, according to which the sensible is distributed. Thus, aesthetic critique is

better understood not in terms of a judgement *per se*, but in terms of how these judgements are performed. The aesthetic critique of judgement is the judgement enacted aesthetically and the one that challenges the latter itself. For Nietzsche, at the core of criticality lies an ability to suspend judgement. For Rancière, this ability is what constitutes the aesthetic agreement on the disagreement – the necessary limitation, fragmentation and conceptual impossibility of any universal agreement. Exposing its own inability to reveal all, it suggests that societal systems and relations are also lacking essence.

Fifth, we look at the way in which Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar practises art as the regime of visibility, which reminds us that the present society is always lacking something. Taking into account Jacques Rancière's understanding of aesthetics and Chantal Mouffe's vision of democratic politics, Jaar's works unravel the tension between two paradoxes – democratic and aesthetic; on the one hand his intervention demonstrates that there is always something missing, hidden and unsaid, and on the other hand the artist's 'inability to show everything' we want to see reminds us that not only is any unity based on cracks, but that the paradoxical aesthetic critique of the judgement cannot compensate for the lack of unity. Jaar's works give voices to many individuals who are hidden from view in the neo-liberal hegemonic order. However, they do it in a way that not only opposes the totalising images of society but also the totalisation of the sensible. In this way, the condition of lack is what is shared by both the social and the aesthetic regimes. Democratic politics are about making the traces of power and exclusion visible and critical artistic practices can create spaces that question the dominant hegemony; however, they challenge it in a way that, through the aesthetic paradox, resists all determinisms.

We will look at the conception of critical art envisaged by the Dutch thinker Pascal Gielen, who is concerned with the preservation of art's own dynamics, freedom and autonomy to argue that today, in a post-political age, instead of slowing and narrowing artistic practices to their own sub-systems, alternative to the post-Fordist

model, artists need to intervene more and in both the art world and the social. For Jaar, what is at issue is not art *per se*, but the artist, who always emerges as a political figure, the product and the producer of a society. Intervening in both the social and aesthetical realms, Jaar's work is not the expression of a circumscribed meaning, but a subject-formation instrument.

We conceive of the works of Alfredo Jaar as a counter-hegemonic intervention. However, the question is: can the void of meaning become an opening? While thinking – starting with ‘inability’, ‘incapacity’, ‘intolerability’ and lack – is a powerful tool with which to approach society in a critical way, can there be a different approach to weakening ‘unity’? Can there be a positive expression of the hegemonic trap? Perhaps the way to weaken the centre is not just to expose its flaws, but to pluralise hegemonies. Thus our sixth chapter turns to the tortuous question of the destiny of both the project of modern democracy and aesthetic modernity. We are told that there is no alternative to the actual liberal democracy and capitalist pluralism, the dilemma that in the artistic realm is articulated as the opposition between modernism and postmodernism. Is this the case?

Here we look at Nicolas Bourriaud's recent book *The Radicant*, where he proposes a ‘strategic cultural form’ in which, through multiplicity, impurity becomes positive. Dismissing both modernism and the concepts born of the Enlightenment philosophy, such as emancipation, resistance or alienation, and postmodernism, a pluralist logic presupposed by the market, Bourriaud presents the concept of altermodernity, the first truly worldwide culture, which neither corresponds to the modernist politics nor is dictated by postmodernist market logic. With helpful insights from Okwui Enwezor, we argue that the project of altermodernity could be understood as the idea of pluralising modernism. By emphasising the transitory, unstable essence of modernism, what could also be institutionalised is the arbitrary and contingent nature of institutions and systems. Thus we will argue that the idea of pluralising modernism in the era of globalisation helps us to redefine modern democracy in the post-political era.

The altermodern conception addresses the destiny of the ‘modern democracy’, suggesting its ‘off-centre’ positioning. Perhaps, to be ‘modern’, after all, could mean not making one single sense of our fleeting world but to make many senses, many worlds – to broaden the space of the possible, preventing, through wandering, any possible ‘ends’ to what art might mean, to what ‘democracy’ should look like. We will attempt to evolve Chantal Mouffe’s idea of ‘oppositional identities’, which act against the position of supremacy of any hegemonic order into compository or shimmering identities, the ones that make such supremacy impossible. Could we envisage artistic-political fusion as practices that mobilise effects in ways that run not against the dominant forms of subject articulations, but pluralising them in such a way that the identity of one would change the identity of the other?

Chapter One

Anti-Political 'Politics' of 'Political Art'

Recently, there has been a very enthusiastic return to the subject of 'art and politics' and advocacy for 'political art', which is a rather counterproductive term since it implies that either artistic practices can be free of politics or they are automatically critical. However, what this term really refers to is new ways of doing art – a radical action such as creating 'transversal alliances', direct action, event staging, publicity stunts, protest and many other forms of interaction and collaboration. The 'political' element in this kind of art is evaluated according to the effectiveness of the artistic actions. In fact, the suppression of its value as a sign in favour of its value as an action is considered intrinsically 'political'. Dwelling on the examples of artistic practices that claim to constitute the political element in contemporary art - from 'Relational Aesthetics' proposed by a French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud to 'Art of Over-Identification' theorised by the Dutch art collective BAVO – it becomes clear that this art no longer attempts to criticise anything; instead, its line of enquiry or attack is directed towards radically new ways of subjection and forms of life. Such a faith in art as the basis for new politics or ethics, which would promise the coherence of the whole, is almost exclusively influenced by the theories of the Italian autonomists, such as the notion of multitude and a renewed understanding of the potentiality of contemporary art as a radical social agent, in which artistic actions and capacities themselves are perceived as able to prompt cultural and social change in the forms of projecting collective intelligence and collective powers. Meanwhile, it seems that the only way to create radically new ways of subjection is to divorce from an idea of the artwork and aesthetics as much as possible. Hence the politically-minded artist today is a peculiar idealist – he attempts to define the subject at the expense of itself. While artists are often radical in their action, they are reactionary in their thinking. The choice of socially compelling themes, sites and models is understood as a critical intervention in itself, with no attention being paid to the aesthetic transformation of the selected materials. A generalised intellectual demeanour obscures the manner in

which a political concern could be implanted into an aesthetic and to a wider social context. However, what is interesting is not just the inconsistencies between ‘political’ art’s critical ambitions and its realisation, but the fundamental rupture that runs through intellectual or socially-oriented artistic practices – art is conceived as social criticism or politics while it evaporates as art. A Dutch thinker and art critic Camiel van Winkel, for example, speaks about this rupture as the ‘demystified’ artistic practice when today an artwork exists without an artist or the artist without an artwork. According to Winkel, these ‘post-artistic’ practices, which consist of imitating non-artistic activities, manifest the end of the artist’s function as a ‘political’ model.¹

However, ‘post-artistic practices’ are full of ‘politics’, but their politics do not necessarily take an emancipatory direction – laden with democratic connotations, they instead stabilise and in some cases institutionalise our sense of disconnection and social atomisation. Today we are living in consensual times when not only great revolutionary projects tend to vanish, but also the forms of political conflicts themselves. In this vacuum of the political, the artists and the actors of the art turn their attention to the reality of contradictions and conflicts. The new revolution would not come but, meanwhile, newly motivated ‘political art’ acts as a form of compensation for the injustices, inequalities and lack of solidarity in post-political society, and in this way serves as a stabilising factor in social life otherwise demanding for political solutions. The artistic practices discussed in this chapter are no longer about an artwork; this art needs other people’s presence, which leads to a consensual representation of other people’s reality through mediated interactivity of the ‘united self.’ The fact that ‘political art’ has such a peculiar self-understanding corresponds to how the political is envisaged today. Politics are no longer about a radical transformation of the existing state of affairs, but multiplications of individual claims and interpretations. Art’s departure from self-referential object to relational practice or ‘transversal alliances’ presents us with a

¹ Camiel van Winkel, *De Mythe van het Kunstenaarschap*, Fids BKVB, Amsterdam, 2007. The review of this book was published in OPEN, Nai Publishers, SKOR, 2008, No. 14 by Jordine Sijdel.

reading of the world that is based on re-evaluated judgment according to specific situations rather than making a judgment.

There are, however, other approaches to the implications of ‘political art.’ For Jacques Rancière, for example, who defends the specificity of art, there is a stark political choice in art rather than an issue of what ‘political art’ can do today. In Rancière’s view, the notion of *politicality* in art is connected to the establishment of scenes of a dissensus. While, for Rancière, there is no such thing as ‘apolitical’ artistic practices, some practices produce scenes of dissensus in the sense that they acknowledge that, whatever they do, they cannot fulfil or illuminate the ‘gaps’ in the blindness of the social order, but only expose them. Instead of following a path of knowing, of supporting a particular political or aesthetic theory, Rancière suggests that the distribution of the visible itself is part of the configuration of domination, so there is little point in attempting to create a radical new subjectivity. Instead, Rancière contends that the critical task of art today is to render the arts visible, the aesthetic revelation of ‘one world hidden beneath another’.²

This chapter explores recent theories of artistic practices, which envisage themselves in terms of a ‘new political project,’ and exposes their underlying inconsistencies. In the midst of art’s ‘busy resignation’ from its aesthetic dimension, we tend to go with Rancière and look for the ‘hidden’ and ‘unsaid’ in what constitutes the given subjectivity rather than constructing an entirely new one. What Rancière suggests is to transform the way we look at the given world rather than rejecting and looking beyond it; and the role of aesthetics, of this paradoxical regime for the identification of art, is especially crucial in addressing contemporary politics and its discontents.

² Rancière, Jacques, ‘Problems and Transformations of Critical Art’, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, Polity, 2010: 51

Relational Aesthetics as a Stabilising Factor

One of the recent attempts to envisage art not as ‘heavenly artefacts’ but as the engine of new art-relations beyond the closure of traditional modernist objecthood, visibility and individualism has been undertaken by French thinker, art critic and former co-director of Palais de Tokyo in Paris Nicholas Bourriaud, who devised the term ‘Relational Aesthetics’³. Bourriaud champions art that understands itself as production of new social bonds. These artworks are concerned with the relations with or between the spectators, such as cooking soup for the viewers, creating environments for a genial talk or directly chatting with the audience. This art is ‘learning to inhabit the world in a better way’. Bourriaud states, ‘Contemporary art is definitely developing a political project when it endeavours to move into the relational realm by turning it into an issue’.⁴ That said, Bourriaud has been an effective advocate for the contemporary tendency to emphasise process, performativity, openness, social contexts and links, transitivity and the production of dialogue. Relational art attempts to construct its own territory of relations, a new form of social bond – unconnected to capitalist society or any conventional understanding of politics.

If the goal of art is social liberation, then there are three main problems with Bourriaud’s approach that I would like to touch upon here. The first one corresponds to the way in which Relational Aesthetics supposedly contribute to a more democratic society by humanising global capitalist relations. The second issue concerns relational art’s position of non-relation to existing social struggles and movements. The third problem relates to Bourriaud’s proposal to neutralise and reduce aesthetic experience to the level of interactivity and the spectator’s transformation into an active agent.

³ Nicolas Bourriaud, French art critic, former co-director of Palais de Tokyo contemporary art centre in Paris. Bourriaud coined the term "Relational Aesthetics", which he outlined in a text for the catalogue of the exhibition "Traffic" shown at the CAPC Bordeaux in 1996.

⁴ Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*, Les presses du reel, 2002: 17

The purpose of Bourriaud's theory is to address how art can move beyond current capitalism and construct its own 'political' territory. In his view, there are two main features that characterised Relational Art's struggle with the dominant social order: immateriality and establishing a relation. Bourriaud writes, 'The contemporary artwork's form is spreading out from its material form: it is a linking element, a principle of dynamic agglutination'.⁵ Regarding a *relation*, it is understood as an everlasting sequence of 'relational space-time elements', a network of artist-viewer subject positions: 'the artwork is no longer an end point but a simple moment in an infinite chain of contributions'.⁶ Relational Art seeks to put things in motion rather than consolidate any possible positions. That is why its core notions are connectivity, flexibility, adaptability, mobility and openness, through which this sort of art hopes to escape a given framework and imposed view. The problem is, however, that Post-Fordist capitalism operates precisely on this terrain of mobility, interconnectedness, relationality and linkage.

In their *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello point out the emergence of a new paradigm of social order, which they identify as the third spirit of capitalism. While the first and the second spirits were built on the industrial model, whereby proprietors were seen as the main holders of modern values such as family, state and wealth, the third spirit transforms the definition of value. Boltanski and Chiapello meticulously explain a shift from the value of objects, work and people (efficiency and professionalism) to the value of relations. They state that capitalism, which is characterised by an endless and abstract accumulation process and wage earning, inevitably produces aggravation and exclusion, because neither executives nor workers can be satisfied with the financial abstract or practical reasoning, so they ask for *meaning*. Following the socialist movements of the sixties and seventies, capitalism searched how to create new working conditions that satisfy artistic and social critics of the state apparatus as the main force of domination and oppression, longing for autonomy and flexibility. The third stage of capitalism –

⁵ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les presses du reel, 200: 21

⁶ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Postproduction*, Lukas & Sternberg, New York, 2005: 20

connectionist capitalism – rejects hierarchy, planning and discipline, and embraces mobility and flexibility. Words such as openness, teamwork, dynamics and mobilisation, and networking have become the new motto of Human Resources departments. Previously linked to the product, value now integrates the relation and its effects. Boltanski and Chiapello write,

‘Whereas, in a commercial world, the product is separated from persons and stabilised by conventions or standards guaranteeing its quality – this, in particular, is the role of brands – in a connectionist world the product, which circulates with difficulty when separated from persons, is transformed by the relation’.⁷

While in the trade world the transaction does not modify the product quality or the suppliers and consumers down the chain, ‘[i]n a connectionist world, by contrast, links are useful and enriching when they have the power to change the beings who enter into relations’.⁸ The opportunity to produce links or mobility thus becomes a source of profit. At this point oppression is easy and natural: ‘these who do not move around (or move less) contribute to the formation of the value added of those who do (more)’.⁹

This reveals how the *Relational Aesthetic* is part of the transformation shift from the second spirit of capitalism to the third, by focusing on and installing a relationship as the main value. The figure of the artist has become the exact model for a new leadership – an operator, strong at networking, mobile and flexible. The consequence is that promoting network and its values such as connectivity, flexibility, mobility and openness now emerges as promoting the core ideology of the third capitalism, which *Relational Aesthetic* claims it is improving. This is a ‘trend’ that perfectly matches the taste of cognitive capitalism, expanding in the same direction and at exactly the same speed.

⁷ Boltanski Luc, Chiapello, Eve, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Verso, 2005: 130-131

⁸ *Ibid.*: 131

⁹ *Ibid.*: 362

Throughout his book *Relational Aesthetics*, Bourriaud does not discuss relational art practices' connection or any relevance to ongoing social struggles and political processes. For Bourriaud, the inter-human relations and the invention of alternative models of sociability are enough to emancipate our perception, since, he argues, the '...emancipation of individuals is no longer an issue in our post-industrial society.' According to Bourriaud, relational art's politics consist of not playing any 'power game' any longer, of ignoring any claims or standpoints: 'The aura of contemporary art is a free association'.¹⁰ Bourriaud writes,

'Today, after two centuries of struggle for singularity and against group impulses, we must bring in a new synthesis which, alone, will be able to save us from the regressive fantasy that is around. Reintroducing the idea of plurality, for contemporary culture, hailing from modernity, means inventing ways of being together, forms of interaction that go beyond the inevitability of families, ghettos of technological user-friendliness, and collective institutions on offer. We can only extend modernity to advantage by going beyond the struggles it has bequeathed us'.¹¹

What is problematic here is that contemporary culture is already plural. The modernist dream of artistic autonomy has in fact been realised, since without the postmodernist pluralist market and its reflexivity, there would be no possibility for the cultural diversity we witness. In fact, this diversity is thoroughly dependant on developments in capitalist production. While modernism pressed for clarity, for a strict definition of roles and aims, with the pluralistic market-driven art world, disciplines are already inter-connected, there are no stable territories, which drives us to accept the given situation as 'the end of history'. However, while the plurality of the market should not be considered in the negative light, the social plurality is not automatically progressive. The idea that there could be radically new forms of interaction and living together beyond, as Bourriaud argues, existing institutions,

¹⁰ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les presses du reel, 2002: 61

¹¹ *Ibid.*: 60

seems to repeat the Utopian impulses of a total reorganisation of a society. Furthermore, it seems that, in Bourriaud's view, the alternative models of sociability are what constitute new type of art after modernism and postmodernism. In this way a bizarre inversion occurs: the goal of art is not social liberation but social emancipation would then produce new artistic practices.

Bourriaud insists that a factor of sociability, a founding principle of dialogue is what art should concentrate on today, since we live at the age of

‘...an extraordinary upsurge of social exchanges, greater individual mobility (through the development of networks, roads and telecommunications, and the gradual freeing-up of isolated places, opening-up of attitudes’.¹²

As such, relational aesthetics would reflect the ‘end of history’ common sense of the 1990s, exemplifying neo-liberal strategies for outsourcing innovation and Human Resources in conditions of Post-Fordist production, with its rhetoric of ‘community’, ‘voluntarism’ and the ‘third sector’. However, Bourriaud goes further, positioning relational aesthetics as the successor of the 20th Century avant-gardes, except that relational art is disconnected from society in a positive rather than a negative way. The old avant-garde, Bourriaud argues, was oriented towards conflict and social struggle, while its new version – relational art, relieved from dogmatic radical antagonism – ‘is concerned with negotiations, bonds and co-existences’. The new relational avant-gardes, claims Bourriaud, ‘...are not naïve or cynical enough to go about things as if the radical and universalist Utopia were still on the agenda’.¹³

Thus, relational art does not have any macro-historical aim of real-world beyond-capitalist relations: it simply settles for the experience of gallery simulations, denying the necessity of any grounds or links to current movements and struggles.

¹² Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les presses du reel, 2002: 14

¹³ *Ibid.*: 70

Relational art is about human relations, born out of art exchanges, insists Bourriaud, not social relations. He states,

‘It does not involve those corporate phenomena which too often act as a disguise for the most die-hard forms of conservatism (in this day and age, feminism, anti-racism and environmentalism all operate too frequently as lobbies playing the power game by enabling it never to have to call itself into question in a structural way).’¹⁴

As much as he can, Bourriaud attempts to dissociate relational art from taking any sides, making any judgements or statements, or taking part in any political processes. Bourriaud insists that Relational Aesthetics is a *theory of form* rather than a *theory of art*, and it does not imply the statement of an origin and a destination. This ‘form’ must therefore be flexible, open to dialogue and exchange.

Bourriaud argues that this ‘relative immateriality’ is a sign of a priority given by artists to time in relation to space. ‘They [artists] display and explore the process that leads to objects and meanings’¹⁵, writes Bourriaud. While it is ambiguous what form relational art consists of, it is more problematic to address what possible meanings it might lead to. Answering this question, Bourriaud quotes Tiravanija, who, in turn, quotes Wittgenstein: ‘Don’t look for the meaning, look for the use.’ While Wittgenstein emphasised the role of the context in defining the content, Bourriaud implements this standpoint rather literally. For Bourriaud the politics of use imply the elusiveness of the content itself, which, in his words, ‘may be inserted into different programs and used for multiple scenarios’.¹⁶ In this way, the politics of use serve as a rather anti-Wittgenstein standpoint, as it proclaims the power of content over context. Bourriaud writes, ‘The artwork is no longer an end point but a simple moment in an infinite chain of contributions’.¹⁷ Relational art sets up situations in

¹⁴ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les presses du reel, 2002: 61

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 54

¹⁶ *Ibid.*: 19-20

¹⁷ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Postproduction*, Lukas & Sternberg, New York, 2005: 20

which audiences form temporal communities, ‘a momentary grouping of participating viewers’.

Explaining who the recipients of relational art are, Bourriaud uses the words ‘audience’ and ‘public’ interchangeably, emphasising that it is ‘the public that is taken into account more and more’¹⁸ because the audiences nowadays are longing for action and not viewing. However, Rosalyn Deutsche has repeatedly called for a distinction between ‘public’ and ‘audiences’. In her view, gathering together and doing things does not contribute to the creation of a public. In her seminar *Making Public* at the Tate Modern in London (March 2005), she stated that the ‘audience is a consumer while the public is always a debating public. It comes into existence through a feedback on the work and the contest of the audiences between themselves’¹⁹. Moreover, the role of the artist is to provoke the debate, that is to say, to initiate the ‘publicness’. In Deutsche’s view, artists never deal with the public; they deal with audiences, who, in turn, can be transformed into the public. Deutsche also points out that what characterises the public and public spaces are gaps and discontinuities rather than an ongoing dialogue. It seems that Bourriaud does not have much of a problem with making generalisations about the body in a public space; for him audiences are the public, although he admits its illusory nature. Addressing this problem, Bourriaud writes, ‘The artists seek interlocutors: since the public remains a rather unreal entity, they include the interlocutor in the production process’.²⁰ However, who exactly are these interlocutors? They are a limited circle of artists and curators who direct the process of meaning construction in one way or another.

The consumers of relational art are the cultural elite of the dominant classes, not marginalised communities. In general, Bourriaud’s audiences do not overlap with the people actively attempting to generate pressure for social change. Meanwhile,

¹⁸ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les presses du reel, 2002: 61

¹⁹ Deutsche, Rosalyn, “Making Public” seminar, Tate Modern, London, March 2005, <http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/>

²⁰ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les presses du reel, 2002: 61

the real processes of social experimentation are taking place elsewhere. The politically silent site where non-capitalist relations are modelled today is not the gallery-based relational art project; it is activity affinity group and the popular assemblies, activist camps, mass mobilisations that articulate it with larger social movements and emergent struggles. Here the effective collaboration between artists and social movements is possible, but not in the neutralising mediating way proposed by Bourriaud, where disruptive energies are managed within tolerable limits: the social separations, stratifications and self-selections of the art system enact a liberalisation – that is, a de-radicalisation of social demands for change.

In his recent book *The Nightmare of Participation*, Markus Miessen pointed out how the insistence on ‘participating viewers’ not only erodes democratic potential but also prevents it from emerging in the first place. ‘Not everybody should be asked to be included in the decision-making process...’, argues Miessen. The author perceives Bourriaud’s ‘aura of free association’ as ‘a minimisation of social offence’, which is ultimately concerned with ‘the establishment and maintenance of social harmony’.²¹ Thus, Miessen’s concern is that a ‘relational practice’ ‘...introduces a world in need of an optimistic and critical rendering of situational truths as opposed to moral truism’.²² Such new protocols attempt to understand and deal with processes of uncertainty in a counter-productive way: it ‘...challenges society’s obedience to conventions and institutions that defy the very creation of [art] or architecture with their illusion of controlled virtue’.²³

The third aspect of Bourriaud’s vision of politicality in relational art, which we wish to address here, is his understanding of the role of aesthetics and aesthetic experience. Aesthetics, argues Bourriaud, is an idea that sets humankind apart from other animal species. ‘In the end of the day’, he writes, ‘burying the dead, laughter, and suicide are just the corollaries of a deep-seated hunch, the hunch that life is an

²¹ Miessen, Markus, *The Nightmare of Participation*, Sternberg Press, 2010: 49

²² *Ibid.*: 65

²³ *Ibid.*: 64

aesthetic, ritualised, shaped form'.²⁴ Specifying the nature of relational aesthetics, Bourriaud argues that, far from being a judgment of any sort, this aesthetic of sociability is a much more effective ritual that separates us from animals and liberates us as social beings by allowing us to connect easily: 'Does this work permit me to enter into dialogue. Could I exist, and how, in the space it defines?'²⁵ This question, Bourriaud claims, does not refer to the aesthetic vision of art, but to a simply human vision and forms.

For example, an individual's relation with music or painting can stimulate a totally new process of perception and sensibility. Such a position, however, would challenge Bourriaud's take on the current social order. According to the critic, there is nothing wrong with the existing society; no new perception is required, only 'little services' designed to repair 'the cracks in the social bond'.²⁶ It is precisely this 'human touch', not aesthetic that, according to Bourriaud, makes Relational Art politically relevant. What it offers is the idea of an art relationship with the premise that equality could be established through a 'micro-community' and 'chances for everyone to exist'; all voices to count during encounters with art.

In our view, the very fact that this kind of art claims to be 'politically' relevant and even 'democratic', manifests the peculiar way in which democratic politics are understood today. Based on Bourriaud's central 'political' question of 'What can art do to humanise capitalism?', what is evident is that capitalist reality is accepted as an undeniable fact of life. What is also problematic is Bourriaud's understanding of capitalism as 'a problem of an object'. It is intriguing how objects can be dismissed as purely capitalist in their nature. While how an object is 'related' to is important, and this form of relationship is not necessarily always inclusive, the objects themselves are hardly responsible for the nature of social relationships that determine their value. It is exchange values, the social relations that determine the functioning and use value of objects. Jacques Rancière points out the 'clever' way in

²⁴ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les presses du reel, 2002: 107

²⁵ *Ibid.*: 109

²⁶ *Ibid.*: 36

which Bourriaud avoids responding to an excess of commodities and signs by addressing the ‘lack of bonds’. He states,

‘Relational art thereby aims no longer to create objects, but situations and encounters. In so doing, however, it relies on a simplistic opposition between objects and situations, effecting a short-circuit where the point is to carry out a transformation of these problematic spaces that once contrasted conceptual art with art objects/commodities’.²⁷

Instead of contrasting objects and situations, Bourriaud could have compared social relations with relations as commodities, but what Bourriaud has in mind is the possibility of a single genuine relationship with the world, which corresponds to Anthony Giddens’ understanding of democratic political trajectory as ‘pure relationship’, ‘i.e. a relationship into which one enters and remains for its own sake because of the rewards that associating with others brings’.²⁸ Relational art – where collaboration and communication are regarded as a *good* in itself and ‘people meeting people’, in Tiravanija's words, is an end in itself – is a perfect visualisation of Giddens’ ‘politics of trust’. Giddens explains,

‘Globalisation, reflexivity and de-traditionalisation creates “dialogical spaces” that must in some way be filled. These are spaces which can be engaged dialogically, invoking mechanisms of active trust...’²⁹

Although these spaces are described by Giddens as ‘dialogical,’ they are in fact spaces of void, exclusion and resistance to the very globalisation and reflexivity. Relational Aesthetics is exactly what can turn these gaps into a ‘dialogical’ space by providing *everyone* (marginalised and excluded) with tools to adapt to the current

²⁷ Rancière, Jacques, ‘Problems and Transformations of Critical Art’, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, Polity, 2010: 56

²⁸ Giddens, Anthony quoted by Mouffe, Chantal, *On the Political*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005: 47

²⁹ *Ibid.*

situation by promoting flexibility, connectivity, adaptability, fluidity, responsibility and trust.

To conclude our analysis of relations art as a ‘political project’, what could be said is that Bourriaud’s theory is a very good description of a problem rather than a solution to it. Networking culture is based on consensus and relational art unwillingly popularises it. Far from being democratic, it shuts down the space for politics by imposing the idea of all-inclusive ‘art co-existence’, which would assure the coherence of the whole and provide a solid basis for new politics. We are not given any opportunity to voice our ideas; we are merely being asked for consent. Choosing between ‘inhuman’ capitalism and a ‘pure relationship’, in this play of oppositions, the very possibility of a specific conflict disappears. Meanwhile, relational art is indeed ‘political’, but in a very different way to how Bourriaud envisages it. The term ‘political art’ also suggests that artistic practices should return to politics, implying that they are neutralised by the capitalist framework, while the fact that art plays such a strategic role in the imaginary reproduction of capitalism indicates that it has reached the height of its politicisation.

When Art Does Not Do Art

Another version of what ‘political art’ might look like today is suggested by Paris-based writer and art critic Stephen Wright, who argues that, to make collaboration between artists and activists fruitful,

‘...we need an almost pre-modern understanding of art, breaking with the institutionalised trinity author-work-public; an understanding that grasps art in terms of its specific means and not its specific ends’.³⁰

³⁰ Wright, Stephen, ‘The Delicate Essence of Artistic Collaboration’, *Third Text*, 2004, http://danm.ucsc.edu/~lkelly/wiki_docs/ThirdText/713998320_content.pdf

Wright proposes that, instead of offering Bourriaud's relational services to people who never asked for them or drug them into unwanted interaction, artists ought to re-direct their skills to where they are really needed. Wright argues that

'The intellectually and aesthetically impoverished practices broadly known, thanks to Nicolas Bourriaud, as "relational aesthetics", are a case in point: artists make forays into the outside world, 'propose' usually very contrived services to people who never asked for them ... then expropriate as the material for their work whatever minimal labour they have managed to extract from these more or less unwitting participants (whom they sometimes have the gall to describe as 'co-authors'). In so doing, they end up reproducing within the symbolic economy of art the sort of class-based relations of expropriation that Marx saw at work in the general economy: on the one hand, those who hold the symbolic capital (the artists), and on the other, those whose labour (such as it is) is used to foster the accumulation of more capital. And this is precisely what is usually passed off as "collaboration" – making cynical mockery of the term – not just by such artists as Rirkrit Tiravanija, Maurizio Cattelan and all those whose names figure in all the almanacs of relational aesthetics, but by countless others besides'.³¹

Instead, Wright suggests that art should open up 'a space within the symbolic economy of art to other practices' without an aim to create an artwork, but rather through working alongside the others and helping them to use what Wright calls 'artistic competence'. He writes,

'Art, in short, is the chief obstacle to artistic collaboration. The point is rather to put their artistic knowledge at the disposal of a collective project, without forsaking their own autonomy; to find a way to compound complementary skills, one partner's inabilities complementing the abilities of the other.'³²

³¹ Wright, Stephen, 'The Delicate Essence of Artistic Collaboration', *Third Text*, 2004, http://danm.ucsc.edu/~lkelley/wiki_docs/ThirdText/713998320_content.pdf

³² *Ibid.*

Wright then provides some examples of fruitful artistic collaborations; one of them, 'Universal Embassy', a situation whereby in January 2001 a group of "illegals" – sans-papiers fighting for legal immigration status – occupied the abandoned building of the Somalian embassy in Brussels to meet their urgent need for accommodation.

This property of a vanishing state was soon to become the 'Universal Embassy'. The Embassy's inhabitants reject the abstract idea of a 'world citizen'. 'A hypothetical world citizen status is a useless abstraction. Planetary belonging is not a status, it is a factual reality', says their Declaration.

'The activities of the Universal Embassy are neither limited to individual support or social work nor to the carrying out of direct protest actions, or the formulation of programmatic demands (based on the models of activism or representation of political interests). The Universal Embassy does not represent anything; rather, it is just "becoming" what it is – people who desire to articulate their experiences to create a new language – 'the language of a people to come'.³³

Wright argues that artistic skills and visibility are here put at the disposal of a collective project, thinking together with the people of Universal Embassy without claiming an 'artwork' or the credits of an artist. The artists living in the Embassy do not envisage what they do in terms of a 'project', 'event' or a 'representation'. Rather, they insist on the inseparable link between form and content, producing 'a new language' together, without controlling the process. In Wright's view, Universal Embassy is a great example of how artists could assist in the public production of meaning rather than meaningless consumption. In other words, here, according to Wright, the 'real', productive collaboration between artists and activists could be seen. Artists here do not envisage their contribution in terms of artwork or 'ends,' but in terms of its specific benefits to a particular project or 'means'. Then these artists are just designers, working to a brief.

³³ Wright, Stephen, 'The Delicate Essence of Artistic Collaboration', *Third Text*, 2004, http://danm.ucsc.edu/~lkelly/wiki_docs/ThirdText/713998320_content.pdf

Since 1990 there has been an unprecedented rise in collaborative and community-based forms of artistic practices. It is not just Bourriaud or Wright who champion the collaborative model, whether it is a staged or ‘real’ one, as an important means by which artists participate in the mediation of new social and political meanings. For example, the British critic Suzi Gablik³⁴ (1995) argues against the conventional models of aesthetic appreciation and outlines a new ‘political’ concept of ‘connective aesthetics’. The American academic Grant Kester³⁵ (2004) continued the examination into the artistic experiments with emphatic models of communication and proposed that this emergent approach should be considered a form of ‘dialogical’ art that manifests a new way of being political. The Swedish curator Maria Lindt³⁶ (2007) viewed the ‘collaborative turn’ as an extension of traditional affinities of artists with political activists and minority groups and thus a new wave of politicisation through art. While the prominence of collaborative artistic practices is now unmistakable, the status of its aesthetic value and its social effects is very much in dispute. In particular, there is considerable unease over the similarity between collaborative strategies in art and post-Fordist ideology, which promotes networking and creative consumption.³⁷

Florian Schneider, a filmmaker and writer based in Munich, questions the merits of collaboration in general and points out the specific role of ‘collaborative techniques’ in today’s insecure world, which helps to erase the terms such as ‘together’, ‘common aims’ with a dynamic ‘working together’, ‘common

³⁴ Gablik, Suzi, *The Reenchantment of Art*, Thames & Hudson, 1995

³⁵ Kester, Grant, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, University of California Press, 2004

³⁶ Billing, Johanna, Lindt, Maria, Nilsson, Lars (ed), *Taking the Matter into Common Hands: On Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices*, Black Dog Publishing, 2007

³⁷ In the minds of those who want free access to works there is a breakdown in the distinction between producers and consumers. They claim that the act of consumption is creative, too. They are not just taking the works; they are re-working them in a creative way. Candice Breitz's installation/performance ‘Working Class Hero’ at the White Cube in August 2007 had Lennon fans singing ‘Imagine’: ‘the idea is to shift the focus away from those people who are usually perceived as creators, so as to give some room, some space, to those people who absorb cultural products’, <http://libcom.org/library/copyright-declining-authority-private-property-james-heartfield>]

interests'. In his article 'The Dark Side of the Multitude', he states that

'As a pejorative term, collaboration stands for willingly assisting an enemy of one's country and especially an occupying force or a malevolent power. It means to work together with an agency or instrumentality with which one is not immediately connected'.³⁸

In contrast to cooperation, points out Schneider, collaboration is often driven by complex realities such as an increased efficiency of collective identification, pure self-interest, lack of autonomy etc. rather than romantic notions of commonality.

Collaboration, argues Schneider, has no external goal; it is, as Derrida points out in a different context, 'friendship without friends', it creates co-dependence and insecurity. He states, 'This is revealed in Post-Fordist production, 'affect industries' as well as networking environments in general. People have to work together in settings where their efficiency, performance and labour power cannot be singled out and measured on its own, but in each case refers to the specific work of somebody else'.³⁹ This, claims Schneider, reveals the other, 'darker' face of immaterial labour that is hidden behind the rhetoric of cooperation, networking and mobility. He writes,

'The nettings of voluntarism, enthusiasm, creativity, ever-increasing self-doubt and desperation are temporary, fluid and appear in multiple forms, but refer to a permanent state of insecurity and precariousness that becomes a blueprint for widespread forms of occupation and employment with the rest of society'.⁴⁰

Collaboration represents 'friends in need', and the need always overrides the 'friendship,' since it exhorts individuals not to share knowledge, meanwhile

³⁸ Florian Schneider, 'The Dark Site of the Multitude', in: theory kit (<http://kit.kein.org/node/1>)

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

telling them to reach a compromise so that a ‘collaborative unit’ is preserved. It is collaboration that is often an obstacle to any productive activity. Schneider points out,

‘Teamwork often fails because of the banal fact that the internalised models of cooperation are characterised by the opposite of sharing knowledge: in order to pursue a career, one has to hide the relevant information from others. On the other hand, it also refers to the fact that joining forces in a group or team increases the likelihood of failure much more than the likelihood of success. Awkward group dynamics, harmful externalities, bad management practices are responsible for the rest’.⁴¹

Thus, following Schneider, Wright’s proposal to shift the position of the artist as a producer to the artist as a mere collaborator and remove the ‘otherworldliness’ of the artwork as an obstacle to productive activity leads to an increasingly consensual representation of other people’s reality through mediated interactivity of the ‘united Self’.

It is interesting that Wright invites artists to collaborate with activists and not existing institutions or political parties. According to Wright, this sort of collaboration would be clear-cut propaganda. Instead, artists should join so-called alternative groups or individuals in order to do their own things, to invent their own language, to fulfil their own organisational capacities; in short, to make each other feel secure – ‘friends in need’ – the purpose of such a collaboration then is not to identify with mutual aim but to identify with each other. A collaborative agent, points out Schneider, always acts as ‘an escape agent’. He writes, ‘Against the background of a post-modern control society collaborations are all about exchanging knowledge secretly and apart from borders’.

⁴¹ Florian Schneider, ‘The Dark Site of the Multitude’, in: theory kit (<http://kit.kein.org/node/1>)

To imagine art as a monolithic and pure essence of, for example, a nation, or a particular social or political movement seems nowadays an old-fashioned manner of thinking; meanwhile, the political significance of the nation-state or an increasing influence of right-wing parties remains an untranslatable and determining force. Wright argues that ‘artistic aptitudes and perceptual *habitus*... can be fruitfully combined with other competencies specific to other realms of human activity;’ however, these realms of activity must be limited only to activist practices. Why, for example, can ‘means’-oriented art not collaborate with the police or a political party? Why do activist artists not wish to combine their competencies with existing struggles and institutions?

Today, it is artistic competencies that play a central role in the post-Fordist networked economy and order. As Eve Chiapello and others have shown, what were formerly art-specific competencies such as autonomy, flexibility, inventiveness, mobility, creativity and refusal of hierarchy are now used precisely in terms of ‘means’ and not ‘ends’. This, however, does not mean that we should mirror this process in terms of activist practices. What would be the point for artistic models and practices to mimic the network strategy of capitalism itself? Why would the use of competencies in the framework of social activism be more attractive than its use in post-Fordism? How can we distinguish between two similar ‘usages’ of competencies?

Instead of using art’s competencies on the ‘alternative’ terrain, we must engage with the existing situation. An alternative usage of competencies alone, ‘when, in Wright’s words, it quits the artworld for the normative realm of political activism and collaboration’, would not challenge the hegemony of post-Fordism. Following Chantal Mouffe, ‘...oppositional consciousness requires political articulation’⁴² in the sense that we must actively engage with existing power structures in order to dis-

⁴² Mouffe, Chantal writes, ‘It is also missed, albeit in a different way, by the theorists of the multitude who believe that its oppositional consciousness does not require political articulation’, in ‘Democratic Politics in the Age of Post-Fordism’, *Open*, NAI Publishers, SKOR, 2009, issue 16 ‘The Art Biennial as a Global Phenomenon’: 39

articulate and re-articulate the current framework of identifications. Such a position then requires a hegemonic approach, which Wright seems to lack. Instead, he insists on ‘real’ collaboration, which would then highlight the ‘true’ political potentials of art. He states,

‘The business world, however, has been swift to catch on to its own interest in breaking down art into an aggregate of skills, which can then be profitably instrumentalised. What I am trying to suggest is that in order to avoid the performative pitfalls of art conventions on the one hand, and of co-optation by capital on the other – in order, that is, to bring about conditions that will make collaboration “fruitful and necessary” – we need an almost pre-modern understanding of art, breaking with the institutionalised trinity author-work-public; an understanding that grasps art in terms of its specific means and not its specific ends’.⁴³

The problem is not that art has been hijacked by the business world, making it necessary to create an absolutely new ‘usage’ of artistic competencies. There is no such thing as ‘free collaborative action’ outside the hegemonic structures; other forms of collaborations must take place within the process of where the current identification happens. However, such a view requires a hegemonic approach.

Wright, meanwhile, prefers Dewey’s conception of democratic politics as a ‘creative democracy’, according to which ‘...democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associative life. It is the very idea of community life’. Following Dewey, Wright argues that emancipatory potential is incarnated in uniting individuals to solve specific problems. He states,

‘Autonomy, after all, is about free and democratic will formation: and Dewey is unconvinced that real collaboration can take place in the absence of pre-political collaboration. Because, for Dewey, the political sphere is a cognitive tool by means

⁴³ Wright, Stephen, ‘The Delicate Essence of Artistic Collaboration’, *Third Text*, 2004, http://danm.ucsc.edu/~lkelly/wiki_docs/ThirdText/713998320_content.pdf

of which society endeavours experimentally to explore, deal with, and resolve problems specific to the coordination of social action.’⁴⁴

Following Dewey, Wright calls for changing the status of aesthetics to mere ‘competencies’ or skills. What Wright wants from the arts is to bridge the gap between the capitalistic use of competencies and artistic (from art and activism) use of competencies, thus opening the way to ‘unite individuals in solving common problems’. However, when the two become totally equivalent, what kind of ‘commonality’ would be possible? Perhaps, if Wright really wants to challenge the power of the Post-Fordist use of artistic competencies, it is necessary not to mimic this situation, not to transfer this strategy into the relationship between art and social activism, but to concentrate on its pitfalls, contradictions and shortcomings. It is worthwhile to consider how this hybridity as trope of postmodern aesthetics and conception of politics is already linked to a late-capitalistic logic of utilisation. This art, which does not do art, is yet another fascinating, new, efficient and mobile structure, which entirely fits into the Post-Fordist paradigm of permanent flexibility, innovation and transformation.

NGO Art – Art of Consensus

Responding to Bourriaud and Wright’s theorisations of political art as artistic practices, which tend to ‘solve problems’ through participation or collaboration, a Dutch artistic collective, a collaboration of artists, architects and philosophers BAVO, points out that the ‘politics’ of art ‘not doing art’ but directly improving society – what BAVO calls NGO art – refers to the strength of the current consensus, which is ready not only to sacrifice art but also political activism itself in order to keep going. BAVO states,

⁴⁴ Wright, Stephen, ‘The Delicate Essence of Artistic Collaboration’, *Third Text*, 2004, http://danm.ucsc.edu/~lkelley/wiki_docs/ThirdText/713998320_content.pdf

‘A hallmark of this form of engaged art is its no-nonsense attitude, its realism: if you are not striving for immediate improvements...you have no right as an artist to produce great art. It is precisely this compulsion to achieve immediate results that prevents NGO artists from contesting the crisis in which the public now finds itself in a more fundamental way, and condemns them to political neutrality in order to realise their actions. Because they suppress any political critique in order to achieve their actions, these actions can be easily co-opted by the system as a sign that things are not bad in the world after all’.⁴⁵

Indeed, the philosophy of consensus dominates the most ‘politically’-minded artistic groups and activities. For example, nomadic Manifesta⁴⁶, an artistic collaboration set up to deal with Europe and the issues of European identity via art politically, promotes itself exclusively as a ‘radical political branch’ of contemporary art. Comparing it with other Biennials, Hedwig Fijen, director of the Manifesta International Foundation of Amsterdam and President of the Manifesta 2007 committee, says that

‘The process of installation in the territory has always been important, even more so than the final presentation. This led to a flexible structure and therefore a radical change...’⁴⁷

The latest Manifesta 7, which took place in the summer-autumn 2008 in Trentino-South Tyrol, was supposed to ‘culturally relaunch’ this territory, to improve the visibility of two poor Italian provinces in terms of their cultural and business potentials. Alessandro Franceschini, architect and researcher at the Università degli Studi in Trento and a Manifesta member, explains:

⁴⁵ BAVO, ‘How Much Politics Can Art Take?’, *Open*, NAI Publishers, SKOR, 2008, issue 14 ‘Art as a Public Issue’: 109-111

⁴⁶ Manifesta is the only international biennial of contemporary art with a nomadic character; it has so far been hosted by the cities of Rotterdam (1996), Luxembourg (1998), Ljubljana (2000), Frankfurt (2002) and San Sebastian (2004). Manifesta is based on a concept that aims for the constant re- definition of its role towards European cultural and political issues, and is focused on the question of European identity.

⁴⁷ Interview with Hedwig Fijen, ‘Next Stop Trentino-South Tyrol’, *Work Art in Progress*, Manifesta 7 Special, Trento, Spring 2008, Issue 22: 27

‘It seems that having this event in the region is one to be exploited well – if not exactly as an investment in the future, then certainly as a bridge to the world. In this sense Manifesta 7 is growing and fulfils political, institutional, local and cultural expectations as well as those simply of administrative opportunity’.⁴⁸

In answering the question of what Manifesta represents for Trentino-South Tyrol, Margherita Cogo, Cultural Minister of the Autonomous Province of Trento, says:

‘Manifesta represents a great opportunity for the two provinces, a chance to culturally re-launch our territory... Culture and art, in particular, is an extraordinary instrument for reinforcing ties between the provinces...’⁴⁹

I find it interesting that reflections concerning Manifesta 7, which was published in *Work: Art in Progress* magazine, consist of interviews with numerous ‘directors’, ‘public relations officers’, ‘ministers’ and ‘curators’ and only one actual artist. The questions of ‘what it is that Manifesta is set to address and why such a location has been chosen’ are met with abstract theorisations about the ‘usefulness’ of the event and ‘the willingness to actively participate’. Antonio Lampis, director of the Department of Italian Culture and the Autonomous Province of Bolzano insists, ‘You need to look after the public. It should be imperative in museums and institutions for the sake of the public to have activities which promote contemporary art’.⁵⁰ Words such ‘promote’, ‘long-term profit’ or ‘careers’ are widely used in Manifesta’s 7 materials, which seem to be odd given the radical ‘political’ orientation of the Biennale.

Apart from the desire to ‘install’ in the territory and ‘promote’ it together with the contemporary art, Manifesta’s 7 ‘political’ ambitions seem to be rather vague. In our view, Hedwig Fijen summarises these potentials well. He says,

⁴⁸ ‘The Manifesta Venture Vox Pops in a Territory and Waits’, interview with Alessandro Franceschini: 29

⁴⁹ ‘The Manifesta Venture Vox Pops in a Territory and Waits’: interview with Margherita Cogo

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*: interview with Antonio Lampis: 35

‘I think that Manifesta could become a Non-Governmental Organisation as well as in interdisciplinary institutions open to politics, science, environmental and cultural changes...but in general like to think that only of Manifesta is able to maintain its experimental nature and therefore evolve based on historical and sociological developments of the European identity, will it have the right to exist’.⁵¹

So-called ‘NGO’ art has recently become the central framework, through which ‘radical’ artistic groups avoid political issues. BAVO argues,

‘Unlike traditional activism, these artists are not interested in initiating long-term political processes in which “the impossible is demanded” and of which no one knows whether they will ultimately produce a concrete improvements for the social group in question. NGO art in fact is characterised by a denial of politics: it concerns itself, above everything else, with the practical feasibility of a given action. If the motto of humanitarian organisations is “first the victims, then politic”, the motto of these artists is “no politics please, only the victims”. These artists deliberately avoid confrontations with authorities or investors, because this could compromise their ability to obtain the permits or funding they need to implement their actions’.⁵²

It seems that the Manifesta 7 committee not only avoids confrontations with authorities, it actively seeks and relies on their approval and collaboration. Instead of addressing, as it declares, the issues of European identity – what this identity is and how can it be formed, challenged and sustained, Manifesta ‘installs’ itself in the territory of Trentino-South Tyrol, ‘promotes’ contemporary art in general and help

⁵¹ Interview with Hedwig Fijen, ‘Next Stop Trentino-South Tyrol’, *Work Art in Progress*, Manifesta 7 Special, Trento, Spring 2008, Issue 22: 27

⁵² BAVO, ‘How Much Politics Can Art Take?’, *Open*, NAI Publishers, SKOR, 2008, issue 14 ‘Art as a Public Issue’: 110-111

locals to feel ‘Europeans’ in the sense of belonging to the fashionable and profitable art world of Manifesta’s projects and well-connected curators. Apart from ‘small but real’ improvements in Trentino-South Tyrol people’s life – a local architect gets a job or the Biennale’s participants get to improve their ‘careers’ – the ‘political’ intervention stops here. Concerning the issue of European identity, it is ‘contemporary art that brings it’, promotes and uses – given, as Hedwig Fijen says, ‘will it have the right to exist’.⁵³

BAVO concludes,

‘A hallmark of this form of engaged art is its no-nonsense attitude, its realism: if you are not striving for immediate improvements...you have no right as an artist to produce great art. It is precisely this compulsion to achieve immediate results that prevents NGO artists from contesting the crisis in which the public now finds itself in a more fundamental way, and condemns them to political neutrality in order to realise their actions. Because they suppress any political critique in order to achieve their actions, these actions can be easily co-opted by the system as a sign that things are not bad in the world after all’.⁵⁴

Over-Identification as Dis-Identification

While BAVO’s criticism towards NGO’s art is valid and timely, the alternative the group suggests seems to take for granted that art, certainly, could reach political goals if the correct strategy is located. In contrast with ‘no-nonsense attitude’, BAVO argues for ‘more-nonsense’ such as their latest proposal of ‘the art of over-identification’, which adopts the opponent’s point of view and strategically over-identifies with this position in order to subvert it from within. For example, Martijn Engelbregt has distributed pseudo-governmental inquiries, asking people in Amsterdam to report illegal residents. This project entitled ‘Regoned’ (short for

⁵³ Interview with Hedwig Fijen, ‘Next Stop Trentino-South Tyrol’, *Work Art in Progress*, Manifesta 7 Special, Trento, Spring 2008, Issue 22: 27

⁵⁴ BAVO, ‘How Much Politics Can Art Take?’, *Open*, NAI Publishers, SKOR, 2008, issue 14 ‘Art as a Public Issue’: 109-111

Registratie Orgaan Nederland) caused confusion and outrage. People not only fail to recognise this project as art, they pointed out the repetition of the Nazi propaganda against Jewish people at the times of the Second World War. Supposing the strategy of exposing the flawed nature of the opponent's view through over-identification is actually works, the question is how this actually might challenge the existing order? The necessity to first identify with the position in order to over-identify with it and the question of individual's capacity to present oneself in a reverse – to its 'true' ideological position, points out at the simplistic understanding of social reality – that there is 'wrong' and 'right' or 'true' and 'false'. BAVO argues that over-identification is a progressive tendency in contemporary art.

'...in which artists, faced with a world that is more than ever ruled by a calculating cynicism, strategically give up their will to resist, capitulate to the status quo and apply the latter's rules even more consistently and scupopiously than the rest of society'.⁵⁵

What has to be abandoned is such an understanding of two-sided reality and a possibility of such a modernist move of radical negation or elevation. Public outrage is not enough to re-politicise citizens or make people think in a different way. There are could be many artistic activist strategies but the belief that there must be the one, which is destined to fulfil one immutable function is no less counter-productive than the NGO type of art BAVO scrutinises.

No Politics, No Art – Just a Machine

There are no short of approaches looking for a miracle recipe – the one that would finally ensure the affinity between art and politics. Some thinkers believe that what is needed is both: self-suppression of politics and of art as a separate practice. Such a double act would identify itself with the elaboration of new forms of life represented

⁵⁵ BAVO (eds.), *Cultural Activism Today. The Art of Over-Identification*, Episode Publishers, Rotterdam, 2007: 6

by a philosophy elaborated in a bid to assimilate biopolitics to the movement of the multitudes supposedly breaking open the shackles of *Empire*.

For Austrian philosopher and art critic Gerald Raunig, political art is the merger of art and activism, which forms a new terrain of transversality that neither belongs exclusively to the artistic field nor to the political field. Today, according to Raunig, in the context of the global protest movements, the old division between art and politics has become redundant and what must be encouraged is the refusal to participate in the old prescriptions of how artists relate to marketplace and authority and instead creation of radical new methods of engagement.

Raunig's book *Art and Revolution* presents an alternative art's history of the 'long twentieth century' as the bridge between the Paris Commune, the October Revolution and the counter-globalisation protest in Genoa in 2001 and the Situationist International, Russian activism movement represented by Sergei Eisenstein and Tretyakov, Viennese Actionism and, the most recent, activist artistic practices such as PublixTheatreCaravan. According to Raunig, there is a revolutionary process, which is capable of enacting political change without taking the power. Following Antonio Negri, for Raunig, a revolution is a heterogeneous, machinic assemblage of three separate components: resistance, insurrection and constituent power. Taking the leads from Negri's argument that the Italian factory workers' refusal of waged labour and exodus from the working place took labour processes outside the factory walls and produced new forms of political organisation, Raunig contends that resistance and constituent power are tied since every move against the power is simultaneously a 'movement of power-to' that 'creates the sort of relations which are desired'.

Raunig considers the Paris Commune as a historic example that allows one to think of alternative paths to the Leninist revolutionary project as creation of a new society only after ascending to power. Instead, Raunig argues that the absorption of all autonomous forces of the revolutionary process could be prevented by a movement

‘across the middle’, ‘...a transversal concatenation of art machines and revolutionary machines in which both overlap, not to incorporate one another, but rather to enter into a concrete exchange relationship for a limited time’.⁵⁶ Raunig takes the concept of a ‘machine’ from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and suggests it should be understood not as a technical device and apparatus but a social composition and concatenation. It is an arrangement of technical, bodily, intellectual and social components which subverts the opposition between man and machine, organism and mechanism, individual and community. In considering the function of art in this concatenation, Raunig first analyses the case of Gustave Courbet in the days of the Commune. While painters such as Pissarro, Monet, Seizanne and others fled Paris, Courbet remained in the city, joined the uprising and became a member of the Council of the Commune. In the aftermath of the revolt, Courbet was put on trial and eventually died in exile. In his ‘Authentic Account’ before the court, Courbet styled himself ‘as a peace-maker and preserver of art treasures’. According to Raunig, the situation with Courbet indicates that art and revolution failed to concatenate transversally in the Paris Commune. In Courbet’s progression from art to revolution and back to art, the prototype of the bourgeois artist that clings to the abstract universalism and eternal value of art in order to save himself from prosecution is simply restored after dramatic events. Thus, Raunig argues, ‘...the Courbet model embodies the model in which there can be no systematic overlapping of the revolutionary machine and the art machine’.⁵⁷ However, this failed concatenation, according to Raunig, does not mean that the merger of art and politics is impossible; rather the conditions of possibility were not mature at that time. Thus, Raunig turns to what in his view was a more successful attempt of art to directly intervene in politics – the case of the Leftist Front of the Arts (LEF) in revolutionary Russia. Focusing on the collaboration between Sergey Eisenstein and Sergey Tretyakov in creating an ‘eccentric theatre’ based on a ‘montage of attractions’ aimed to transform the audiences’ emotions into extreme tensions. The ‘Theatre of

⁵⁶ Raunig, Gerald, *Art and Revolution Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century*, Semiotext(e) Active Agents, The MIT Press, 2007: 18

⁵⁷ Raunig, Gerald, *Art and Revolution Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century*, Semiotext(e) Active Agents, The MIT Press, 2007: 18:112

Attractions' practiced and theorised by Eisenstein and Tretyakov around 1923 involved aggressive and physical moments of theatre, the effects of which were intended to disrupt the mechanism of illusion and empathy associated with the traditional theatre. To counter the totality of the subject matter they mounted and 'molecularised' the piece as piecework of single circus-like attractions. Eisenstein and Tretyakov's collaboration also produced further two shows, 'Do You Hear, Moscow?' (1923) and 'Gas Masks' (1924) where performances were organised in gas works at Kursk train station. Raunig claims that 'the theatrical treatment of the self-organised and collective action was intended to examine what the future of labour could look like...' and '...specifically attempted to provide an impulse for trying out new modes of subjectivation'.⁵⁸ Hence, in Raunig's view, LEF's activity was radically different from a regular propaganda machine. Raunig claims that 'Tretyakov's micropolitics' created a laboratory 'waiting for concatenation' and were substantially external to 'Stalinist molar apparatus'.

Yet, Tretyakov's own account of LEF's activity points out that there was hardly any 'concrete exchange relationship' between what Raunig calls art and revolutionary machines, not even for a limited time, as Raunig claims. According to Tretyakov, the experiments with 'attractions', which were aimed at showing that the audience, actors, the sounds are nothing other than pure elements, were increasingly ending with fistfights causing an impressive chaos not only in the theatre but also on the streets of Moscow afterwards. Tretyakov states, '...after [performances] they [crowds] moved through the streets, breaking shop windows and shouting songs.'⁵⁹ Soon the Proletkult has decided that experiments gone too far, the theatre was closed and artists were asked to produce more calculated strategy. Tretyakov has complied with Proletkult's new memo to promote specific audiences, which were more homogeneous in terms of class. This new strategy has reached its climax in 1924

⁵⁸ Raunig, Gerald, *A Thousand Machines*, Semiotext(e), Intervention Series 5, 2010: 52-53

⁵⁹ Sergey Tretyakov is quoted in Ростозкий Б. *Драматург-агитатор Сергей Третьяков. Слышишь Москва?! Противогазы. Рычи, Китай!* М.: Искусство, 1966: 207-240, Rostozkiy, Boris, *Playwright- agitator Sergey Tretyakov: Hear Moscow? Masks. Roar, China!*, Moscow, Art Publishing, 1966

when the third and final theatre cooperation between Eisenstein and Tretyakov took place. In February 1924 the theatre people left again, but this time not to go ‘into the streets’, but instead into the gigantic hall of the Moscow gas works at the Kursk train station, where they agitated a specific audience, carefully selected from the workers in this plant with their new play ‘Gas Masks’. Not only the content, but also the location intended to guarantee a success: an audience this time consisted solely of workers. Wearing gas masks, the actors operated alongside the gigantic apparatuses of the plant on the scaffolding. Their intention was to blur the difference between the workers and the actors, thus, directly integrating art into life and vice versa. However, workers perceived the performance as an insult to their situation and complained to the authorities, demanding to halt theatre’s intervention to the working environment of the gas factory. Tretyakov writes, ‘However, soon it became evident that we were disturbing their work. They put up with us for four performances and then demanded that we leave.’⁶⁰

If Tretyakov’s performances were different from the propaganda activities, it was not because it offered an alternative ‘models of subjectivation’ but because masses in general failed to identify with pseudo-abstractive activities of Proletkult, which did not create, as Raunig suggests, ‘the sort of relations that are desired’. Raunig claims that ‘...rapprochement of art and revolution fails’ because

‘Artistic activism and activist art are not only directly persecuted by repressive state apparatuses...they are also marginalised by structural conservatisms in historiography and the art world’.⁶¹

However, what he fails to recognise is that it was the people and not the Soviet authorities, which rejected Proletkult’s experiments as insulting and simply arrogant. Furthermore, Tretyakov seems to be exclusively interested in ‘the dissolution of art and life’ in the sense that he was aiming at transforming art and not

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Raunig, Gerald, *Art and Revolution Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century*, Semiotext(e) Active Agents, The MIT Press, 2007: 19

the masses. He admits that that the real life surroundings were incompatible with the artistic illusion: ‘These surroundings overwhelmed the artwork, making it seem absurd and useless. Reality has won over art’.⁶² Hence, Proletkult’s activities could be understood as a definition of this problematic connection between the revolutionary movement and art rather than a proof that it exists. While Lenin’s ‘Draft Resolution on Proletarian Culture’ rejected Proletkult ‘... in the most resolute manner, as theoretically unsound and practically harmful, all attempts to invent one’s own particular brand of culture, to remain isolated in self-contained organisations ...’⁶³, the latter was self-contained and self-interested, it hardly worked as a part of a ‘revolutionary machine’ or overlapped it, even temporarily.

Considering historic relations between artists and political regimes, Raunig seems to select only these groups, which engage in political theatre and street actions while the visual and the plastic arts remain outside of the picture. Indeed, he hardly discusses the aesthetic sphere in its concrete historic development or aesthetics per se. In fact, this subject is entirely substituted with a dialogue with the Italian post-Marxists workerist theories of immaterial labour and the French post-structuralism of Deleuze and Guattari. What Raunig seems to implement from Deleuze and Guattari is the insistence on creation and not judgement. As Deleuze states, ‘What expert judgment, in art, could ever bear on the work to come? Judging prevents the emergence of any new model of existence’.⁶⁴ Following Deleuze, Raunig rejects ‘old’ categories of art such as aesthetic critique or judgment, authorship, aura, work of art etc and prefers to borrow new concepts of how artistic practice could be understood exclusively from political theory rather than aesthetic one. We must, he claims, suspend aesthetic judgments and concentrate on re-composition and invention. Raunig’s understanding of political artistic practice only as a fusion of art

⁶² Sergey Tretyakov is quoted in Ростозкий Б. *Драматург-агитатор Сергей Третьяков. Слышишь Москва?! Противогазы. Рычи, Китай!* М.: Искусство, 1966: 207-240, Rostozkiy, Boris, *Playwright- agitator Sergey Tretyakov: Hear Moscow? Masks. Roar, China!*, Moscow, Art Publishing, 1966

⁶³ Lenin, Vladimir, ‘On Proletarian Culture’, *Lenin on Literature and Art*, Moscow, 1967: 188-189

⁶⁴ Deleuze, Gilles, ‘To Have Done with Judgment’, in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, London & New York, Verso, 1998: 135

and activism, is informed by Hardt and Negri's faith that with the emergence of the multitude – the creative, pluralistic subject whose constitutive power new empire simultaneously creates, requisitions and repress; a new understanding of political subject altogether is required. Therefore, what is also required is a new understanding of art, not through aesthetics but through blurring any boundaries between artistic and political action. In the past, Raunig claims, this transversality has failed because state apparatuses repressed art machines or because the latter was later absorbed or institutionalised. Today, however, following Hardt and Negri, 'the regulative and repressive empire, which itself has no positive reality at all, reacts to the multitude, is impelled by the resistance of the multitude. Resistance places itself, so to speak, before its object, becomes 'prior to power'.⁶⁵ Since, according to Raunig, 'it is not clear who or what could be the object of resistance in a global setting, how or where opposition could be defined',⁶⁶ then what makes sense is to follow *Empire's* strategy:

'If the mechanisms of power function without a centre and without central control, then it will simply be necessary to attack power from every place, from every local context'.⁶⁷

Thus, Raunig accepts Hardt and Negri's theoretical precondition for micropolitical practices as the only basis from which art can finally realise its revolutionary potentials. However, dwelling on Raunig's considerations, it becomes clear that he is hardly interested in the realm of art. For him, multitude represents a new revolutionary subject and artistic activism is a possible objective of this new political formation. Through transversalisation of the artistic and the political field, multitude can produce entirely new forms of subjectivity as 'collective forms and

⁶⁵ Raunig, Gerald, *Art and Revolution Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century*, Semiotext(e) Active Agents, The MIT Press, 2007: 53

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*: 54

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*: 54

models of becoming, which resist – at least for a time – reterritorialisation and structuralisation’.⁶⁸

It is interesting that while activist art is supposed to attack power from any place, from any context, when it comes to concrete examples, some places seem to deserve the activist’s attention more than others. In fact, these are always places, which are to do with activist art’s relationship with authorities. For example, Raunig describes the function of the artistic collective *PublixTheatreCaravan* as ‘...precisely this machine that sets out to oppose the violence of the state apparatus, the order of representation’. Dwelling on *PublixTheatreCaravan*’s activities, the artistic group which, according to Raunig, ‘acts along a line of flight’ and ‘travels unknown paths’, we can see that all these activities circle around well known paths such as borders, refugees camps, protests around G8 summits, in short, they always are aimed at dramatising and disrupting zones of control or authority – almost if they need the apparatus to prosecute them in order to prove that they exist. Thus, when the Italian police kept members of the group in custody for four weeks following Caravan’s participation in protests around the G8 summit in Genoa, 2009, it was considered an ultimate victory of micropolitics through its ‘failure’. Raunig speaks, in a similar manner, about attempts to criminalise and repress micropolitical elements such as the case of the Critical Art Ensemble and Steve Kurtz in the USA or the exhibition ‘Caution, Religion’ at the Sakharov Centre in Moscow. What unites all these cases, including *PublixTheatreCaravan*, is that their nature is offensive, yet, neutral towards the existing institutions. In other words, pursuing their ‘lines of flight’, such practices do not engage with institutions but only require them as a basis for their ‘instituent’ possibilities. Raunig explains,

‘...instituent practice as a process and concatenation of instituent events means an absolute concept beyond the opposite of institution: it does not oppose the institution but it does flee from institutionalisation and structuralisation’.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*: 66

What follows is that without ‘mechanisms of power’ art activism would hardly exist, meanwhile, activist insists that what is at stake is to ‘attack power from everywhere’. If resistance places itself ‘prior to power’, as Raunig argues, then, why the activist is so afraid of a proper engagement with institutions? According to Jacques Rancière, this takes place because theoreticians such as Raunig believe that we now live in a new biopolitical paradigm, creative and productive beyond the measure of politics or capital. Rancière reflects,

‘They tend to regard artistic action as a new political activism, specifically because of the fact that we live in a new phase of capitalism, in which material and immaterial production, knowledge, communication and artistic action merge into one and the same process of the actualisation of a collective intelligence... Naturally that does not mean that the artistic practice has become a political practice, as some theoreticians think’⁷⁰.

Meanwhile, Raunig insists that what is at stake is not substituting political action with artistic practices but creating zones of *indistinguishability* between the two. For Raunig, such a trajectory implies that having arrived at the age of ‘political maturity’, when in the context of the global protest movements, ‘artistic-political practices finally seem to have left behind the dichotomy between art and activism’, the state of transversality could now be achieved and the ‘desired relations’ finally created. Activist strategies of the avant-garde have failed since artists were merely preoccupied with aesthetic questions and also repressed by state apparatuses. Today, according to Raunig, we are dealing with an entirely new scenario: ‘The activists hardly seek their own success in the arts field, nor they striving for special

⁶⁹ Raunig, Gerald, ‘Instituting and Distributing. On the Relationship Between Politics and Police Following Rancière as a Development of the Problem of Distribution with Deleuze’, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1007/raunig/en>

⁷⁰ Rancière, Jacques in conversation with Christian Holler, ‘Entsorgung der Demokratie’, *Springerin*, March 2007: 23

distinction'.⁷¹ This is not, however, how Ranceiere envisages the current rise of art activism. There is nothing 'final' about this phenomenon. According to Racniere, the fusion of art and politics is desired not because it represents a new type of politics but because the latter is lacking. He states,

'But the paradox of our present is perhaps that this art, uncertain of its politics, is increasingly encouraged to intervene due to the lack of politics in the proper sense. Indeed, it seems if the time of consensus, with its shrinking public space and effacing of political inventiveness, has given to artists and their mini-demonstrations, their collections of objects and traces, their *dispositifs* of interaction, their in situ or other provocations, a substitutive political function'.⁷²

While Raunig insist that these *dispositifs* can reshape political spaces through self-suppression of both: politics and art, Rancière seems to think that such practices are often content with merely parodying them. Indeed, if we look closely at Raunig's preferred examples such as activities of *PublixTheatreCaravan* or the exhibition 'Caution, Religion' at the Sakharov Centre in Moscow, what stands out is that these activities attempt to destabilise the already given framework whether is it a context of a border or religious fundamentalism. These activities are always 'against' something and by irritating and dramatising what exists, they reinforce the given. For example, what do *PublixTheatreCaravan's* activists do when they wear orange overalls and UN uniforms, stopping cars and distributing no-border passports and pamphlets among the drivers crossing between the Hungarian and Croatian border posts? According to Raunig, this creates 'the no-man's-land against the absolute borders of the national state'. Perhaps, instead of talking from the superior position of artistic 'understanding' and 'appropriating' reality, instead of presenting an 'artistic opposite' of what exists, they could have attempted to allow something else to speak: to show the link, for example, between the violence of the border and the happiness of belonging, of having a passport and ability to cross borders. The

⁷¹ Raunig, Gerald, 'A War-Machine Against Empire: On the Precarious Nomadism of the PublixTheatreCaravan', <http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/0902/raunig/en>

⁷² Rancière, Jacques, 'Problems and Transformations of Critical Art', *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, Polity, 2010: 60

question is, how artistic actions of *PublixTheatreCaravan* are critically different from that of authorities? What new understanding of the situation does it actually bring?

Of course, this is not to denounce all activist art practices as ineffective and 'constituent' merely of itself. Certainly, Raunig is correct in stating that the artistic strategies of *Yomango*, the net culture hoaxes by groups such as *Yes Men* or *RTMark* seek to thwart the 'common sense' in the distribution of the sensible. These practices are indeed an effective parody of the consensus. However, this effectiveness does not locate in the zone of indistinguishability between political and artistic practices but through juxtaposing, contradicting elements which belong to the current common sense with the very same elements being appropriated and interpreted though artistic means. When *Yes Men* presents a fake website of the World Trade Organisation and then appears as its representatives making people realise the hoax, artists cross border between life and art, they change the status between art and non-art and thus introduce a new way of seeing the common world through their appropriation. What is at stake here is to cross this border and not to dissolve it completely. Furthermore, the satire strategy is becoming increasingly ineffective precisely because of what Raunig describes as a situation of non-clarity of who or what represents the object of resistance in a global setting. Rancière points out that the dimension of humour or parody has become the strategic way in which commodities are presented. He states,

'...advertising now increasingly used to play on the undecidability between a product's use-value and its value as a sign – and image-support. In their [artistic activist practices] passage from the critical to the ludic register, these procedures of delegitimisation have almost become indiscernible from those spun by the powers that be and the media or by the forms of presentation specific to commodities'.⁷³

⁷³ Rancière, Jacques, 'Problems and Transformations of Critical Art', *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, Polity, 2010: 54

What Rancière suggests is that artists can play on this undecidability only through exposing it rather than reinforcing.⁷⁴ However, to be able to clarify the difference between value of the sign and its use-value as a product or a situation, one needs to return to the dimension of aesthetics, to reserve spaces belonging to art. Contrary to Raunig, who argues that undecidability plays in favour of artistic activism, Rancière contends that the political task of art today locates in rendering visible the arts, the aesthetic revealing of ‘one world hidden beneath another’.⁷⁵

The way to denounce the dominant consensus for Rancière is to reveal more contradictions, more inconsistencies behind it. For example, Rancière argues, when Krzysztof Wodiczko’s projections of homeless onto American monuments point to the exclusion of the poor from the public vision or Hans Haacke’s sticking small plaques into museum works suggests their nature as objects of speculations; in this way, ‘...the politics founded on the play of exchanges and displacements between the art worlds and that of non-art’.⁷⁶ One should not replace the aesthetic dimension with the activist scenario but rather actively appropriate the given world through the radical difference and strangeness of an aesthetic object, an aesthetic approach to the common world one. ‘Political’ art for Rancière does not start from borrowing from the political theory, insofar plausible it seems, but borrowing from the connections between specific aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics. Rancière writes,

‘The difficulty of critical art does not reside in its having to negotiate the relationship between politics and art. It resides in having to negotiate the relationship between two aesthetic logics that, insofar as they belong to the very logic of the aesthetic regime, exist independently of it’.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ As a contrast, when Alan Sokal hoaxed the journal *Social Text* with ‘Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity’, he was angrily denounced by many post-structuralists. Judith Butler, for example, has argued that humour is conservative

⁷⁵ Rancière, Jacques, ‘Problems and Transformations of Critical Art’, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, Polity, 2010: 51

⁷⁶ Rancière, Jacques, ‘Problems and Transformations of Critical Art’, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, Polity, 2010: 51

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*: 46

Rancière is speaking about a third voice, which can come forward when art contrasts, crosses borders and changes of aesthetics' status between what belongs to art and what does not. When art works 'politically', it never follows a particular political theory or an aesthetic theory exclusively but rather becomes involved in a double critique – of existing images of the given and self-images of art as mechanisms which supposed to construct an entirely different reality. Dissensus, for Rancière, does not mean distributing the sensible in a radically new way or interrupting such a distribution – rather, it is about opening every situation 'from the inside, reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification'.⁷⁸ This is where Rancière and Raunig seem to disagree.

Dissensus: Politics or Police?

In his interpretation of the 'distribution of the sensible', Raunig follows Deleuze's understanding of 'distributing' not as establishment of a new arrangement but as a process of 'distributing themselves in space', which is radically open. Taking his lead from Deleuze's take on 'nomadic distribution', Raunig states,

'In this type of distribution there is no law, no authority; the movement of the arrangement takes place as principally open, unlimited, covering a space as large as possible. The place itself is taken here neither as empty, waiting to be filled, nor as full but previously divided, but rather as a 'space of scope'.⁷⁹

This is not how Rancière envisages a space. For him, there is no other reality 'concealed behind apparatuses' or market, only 'the unity of the given and the obviousness of the visible'.⁸⁰ This 'visible', however, is not associated exclusively with the 'police' as the given distribution of the sensible as Raunig argues. He reflects on Rancière's understanding of dissensus as follows,

⁷⁸ Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London New York, 2009: 49

⁷⁹ Raunig, Gerald, 'Instituting and Distributing. On the Relationship Between Politics and Police Following Rancière as a Development of the Problem of Distribution with Deleuze', <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1007/raunig/en>

⁸⁰ Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London New York, 2009: 49

‘The event that introduces this unrest into the police distribution of the sensible is dissensus. Rancière does not consider dissensus at all simply as an opposition or deviation in content, but rather specifically as disobedience towards the distribution of the sensible...the revolt against the form of police, the usurpation of equality’.⁸¹

For Rancière, however, dissensus does not mean thwarting the principles of the police or establishing new sensibilities, which cannot be ‘policed’ as they are always in a process of instituting and never institutionalised. Rancière’s statement ‘Move along! There is nothing to see here’⁸² represents what he calls the ‘police order’, the term, which, however, does not directly refer to the police but rather to institutions, social positions, modes of communication, images and ways of speaking and showing – all operations, that generate what Rancière calls ‘the given’. Dissensus for Rancière involves ‘...understanding that the distribution of the visible itself is part of the configuration of domination and subjection’.⁸³ This is linked to this idea of the ‘distribution of the sensible’ – one what it does and does not do, and about what one is included and excluded from the field of vision. Contrary to Raunig, who believes that the ‘new events of instituting’ in the space barred by the police but otherwise open, Rancière does not envisage the possibility of grasping an entirely new way of subjection free of the ‘police’. It is not that people are deliberately kept in the dark, but the ‘order’ is blind, what constitutes its ‘common sense’ would never allow all points of view, or otherwise there would be no order. What is at stake here is not interrupting the ‘police order’ – what is allowed to see and what is not but, most importantly, to question how we see things – to dismiss the opposition between looking and acting.

⁸¹ Raunig, Gerald, ‘Instituting and Distributing. On the Relationship Between Politics and Police Following Rancière as a Development of the Problem of Distribution with Deleuze’, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1007/raunig/en>

⁸² Rancière’s *Aux bords du politique*, quoted in Hallward, Peter, ‘Staging Equility: Ranceire’s Theatrocracy and the Limits of Anarchic Equility’, in *Jacques Rancière, History, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. Rockhill, Gabriel, Watts, Philip, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2009: 147

⁸³ Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London New York, 2009:

Rancière suggests that looking ‘at places or questions that are not supposed to be your place or your questions’ creates space that weakens ‘...the bonds that enclose spectacles within a form of visibility ... within the machine that makes the “state of things” seem evident, unquestionable.’⁸⁴ Looking where one is not supposed to look does not imply showing true horrors and suffering, what Rancière calls ‘the intolerable image’. However powerful the ‘intolerable’ image is, it never acts on its own but always belongs to a particular system of visibility. Rancière states,

‘The image is pronounced unsuitable for criticising reality because it pertains to the same regime of visibility as that reality, which turns displays its aspect of brilliant appearance and its other side of sordid truth, constituting a single spectacle’.⁸⁵

What is at stake here is the regime of visibility itself, which does not anticipate effects of the images. What is needed are different politics of the sensible based on the resistance of the visible where the ‘intolerable’ image does not constitute the other side of the spectacle. Rancière says,

‘The shift from the intolerable in the image to the intolerability of the image has found itself at the heart of the tensions affecting political art’.⁸⁶

According to Rancière’s understanding of dissensus, activist artistic practices would belong to the same regime of visibility since they operate in the given framework, they are too ‘content focused’. Raunig finds it plausible that art activists neither wish to do art, nor politics and thus there is no specific content captured in their operations. Raunig states,

‘Counter to the pejorative identification of the works by artists who understand their practice of expression on social and political topics as political art, which Rancière

⁸⁴ Rancière, Jacques in conversation with Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey, ‘Art of the Possible’, *Artforum*, March 2007, on-line

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_7_45/ai_n24354911/?tag=content;coll

⁸⁵ Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London New York, 2009:83

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*: 84

declares as unpolitical, because of their focus on content, it must be objected that this argument not only concerns the rare case of post-Stalinist propaganda artists, but also these who regard their art as counter-formation, as a means of distributing marginalised messages...What Rancière overlooks in these cases is that a message that is impossible in a certain context can shift the *partage du sensible* like the examples in his political philosophy of dissensus. A similar case is Rancière's schematic representation, which throws not only Bauhaus and Beuys into the same pot of reproach...but also the whole spectrum of post-revolutionary Russian avant-gardes along with Guy Debord and even Negri and Hard as well'.⁸⁷

However, how post-Operaist agenda for mass mobility as a 'counter-empire', as microphysics of resistance is different to post-Stalinist propaganda? Whether what is at stake is about a construction of a proletarian culture or a cultural 'proletarian', these strategies remain firm beliefs that one way or another, things can be radically different, that, as Raunig, argues, if something is 'suppressed' or sacrificed, for example, 'art suppressing itself as a separate practice', then entirely 'new forms of live' would be elaborated. To be the activist is to know already what are you fighting for and this certainty is what Rancière is questioning. Instead of following a path of knowing, of supporting a particular political or aesthetic theory, Rancière suggests that the distribution of the visible itself is part of the configuration of domination. It is from this point of view that Rancière understands what critical art does. While, for Rancière, there is no such thing as 'unpolitical' artistic practices, some practices produce scenes of dissensus in the sense that they acknowledge that whatever they do, they cannot fulfil or illuminate the 'gaps' in the blindness of the social order.

Critical art for Rancière is not about building awareness of the mechanisms of domination with the goal to turn spectators into conscious or unconscious agents of world transformation – rather it is about being aware that artistic practices are also part of the distribution of the sensible and thus part of the police as well. As we have

⁸⁷ Raunig, Gerald, 'Instituting and Distributing. On the Relationship Between Politics and Police Following Rancière as a Development of the Problem of Distribution with Deleuze', <http://eipep.net/transversal/1007/raunig/en>

already argues in the first chapter, aesthetics itself has its own politics of tension between the logic of art becoming life and the logic of art becoming involved in politics on the express condition of not having anything to do with it. The difficult moment of critical art resides in the negotiation between these two aesthetic logics. Rancière argues,

‘Critical art has to negotiate between the tension which pushes art towards “life” as well as that which, conversely, sets aesthetic sensoriality apart from the other forms of sensory experience’.⁸⁸

According to Rancière, the political question in contemporary art could be grasped through the metamorphoses of the ‘third’ way, the politics founded on the play of displacements between the art world and that of non-art and not by following a new biopolitical paradigm, creative and productive beyond the measure of politics and art. There is no other space or ‘life form’ to be attained beyond power relations, beyond the distribution of the sensible. Rancière writes, ‘What Deleuze calls the logic of sensation is much more a theatre of de-figuration, where figures are wrenched from the space of representation and reconfigured in a different space’.⁸⁹ What should be discouraged is not art as means of representation and not political practice but the dream of purity, that only through particular type of political or particular forms of artistic practices, entirely new subjectivity would emerge.

For Rancière, such a great influence of Italian autonomists on how political identification of art is envisaged manifests the repetition of old universality, of the idea that only today, the final break through is possible or desirable. What is at stake is not to search for what political art might look like or what it can achieve but rather, there is a stark political choice in art: it can either keep supporting a new reactionary mysticism of artistic multitude and new forms of life or to move towards

⁸⁸ Rancière, Jacques, ‘Problems and Transformations of Critical Art’, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, Polity, 2010: 46

⁸⁹ Rancière, Jacques, *The Future of the Image*, Verso, London, New York, 2009: 77

radical democracy, the trajectory, which exposed flawed societal systems rather than ‘restoring social bonds’ or imposing ‘non-hierarchical organising’.

According to Rancière, the very idea of micropolitical artistic practices as fusion of art and politics beyond recognition implies ‘the matching of sense with sense’ and this is what consensus means: the accord made between a sensory regime of presentation of things and a mode of interpretation of their meaning. Rancière writes,

‘The consensus says that there is but a single reality whose signs must be depleted, that there is a single space, which reserving the right to redraw its borders; that one unique time exists, while allowing itself to multiply its figures. All this goes to show that we are merely being asked for consent’.⁹⁰

Instead, critical art work towards dissensus. This dissensus does not mean a mere interruption of the police or continuous instituent practices without institutionalisation but establishment of different regimes of visibility where the relationships are suspended rather than created, where action is halted rather than enabled, where the narrative, which the given regime of visibility is unfolding, freezes in the aesthetic break.

Rancière speaks about the pensive nature of the image, the state, which he associates with the political dimension in all forms of artistic practices. The pensiveness corresponds to a change of status in the relationship between through and art, action and image. Rancière argues that the pensive image or a third way of thinking about the aesthetic break implies

⁹⁰ Rancière, Jacques, *Chronicles of Consensual Times*, Continuum, 2010: ix

‘...not the abolition of the image in direct presence, but its emancipation from the unifying logic of action; it is not a rapture in the relationship between the intelligible and the sensible, but a new status of the figure’.⁹¹

What is interrupted here is the relation between expression and narration. What is thwarted is the very logic of action, of any conclusion or finality and not the police or the sensible. Critical art emerges to suspend the action, to suspend the knowing and not to duplicate, improve or erase it.

Rather than suppressing the mediating object in favour of any social or political immediacy, Rancière is convinced that there should be a critical third term which both parts – politics and aesthetics refer to and interpret. The distance that this imposes is not an evil that should be abolished or sacrificed, since it is the precondition of any transformation.

Conclusion

Having discussed the contemporary models of artistic practices, which claim to be politically relevant, what seems to be at stake is an ongoing confusion what politics are about. For despite their decidedly engaged political agenda, artists and critics apparently consider regular politics no longer capable of being a significant factor for any form of positive social change or emancipation. On the one hand, artists and cultural producers attempt to express an aesthetic and ethical imperative with the goal of fuelling new subjectivity under what they perceive as entirely new geopolitical and social conditions, however, on the other hand, this sense of urgency and passion to be ‘political’ seems to be reactive to conditions of contemporary capitalist framework. By throwing off a prevailing subjectivity and offering new modalities of experience that are based on radically new ways of practicing art rooted in the here and now, many politically motivated artistic practices fuel what Boltanski and Chiapello calls the third spirit of capitalism and thus assist in the

⁹¹ Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London New York, 2009: 121

sense of disconnection and further social atomisation. At the times when forms of political conflicts and visions are said to be outdated, when they are no longer stable territories or disciplines, artists attempt to manoeuvre through this field of uncertainty through new ways of doing art – creating ‘transversal alliances’ or imitating other social practices – they are radical in their actions but not thinking. Attempting to divorce itself as further as possible from the capitalistic world but at the same time lacking an external world as an object of its criticism, art seems to turn against itself. This dynamic tends to reduce the tensions between art and non-art and thus contribute to the consensual rather than critical subjectivity. Emphasising the ethical, social or moral values that have been lost by traditional politics or by other ethical authorities in society, in this way such art, as it were, sets the seal upon status as a substitute and, wasting its critical potential, is transformed into the role of a surrogate.

Our next chapter examines different conceptions of emancipatory politics, which are reflected in the prevailing understanding of art’s politicality. What we have inherited from the Frankfurt school’s legacy is as a widespread disdain for universalism, liberty, modernity, social change and the longing for utopia. Far from a celebration of political and social achievements of liberal democracy, modernity is seen to lead to the unprecedented victory of capitalism, a pathological distrust of political and politicians and environmental catastrophe. For many radicals today, the preferred option is to seek ways in which to retreat from the ‘deadlock’ of modern day life. Artistic practices have in many ways become a convenient path of abundance and deconstruction. The effectiveness of artistic activities is measured by the radicality of their actions; however, what is at issue is the very question: what does it mean to be radical? Can artistic practices be radical and democratic at the same time?

Chapter Two

Conceptions of Emancipatory Politics: Radical or Democratic?

In his *The German Ideology, Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, Thesis on Feurbach* (1845) and elsewhere, Marx argued against the idealism of contemporary thought in 1840s Germany and insisted that the criticism of religion needed to be replaced by the criticism of politics – by political activism and social change based on the emerging proletariat. To be sure, the idea that there must be a privileged agent or *modus operandi* capable of transforming a given social order must be abandoned; Marx's insistence on politics instead of religion remains a potent thought. Today, the claim of many radical and left-wing thinkers is that capitalism developed far too much and far too fast and therefore, as Habermas complains, for example, 'one can no longer coax an unredeemed promise from the production-centred capitalist project'. Such a fatalistic tone penetrates the work of the Frankfurt school's members, such as Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse or Jurgen Habermas. Based on the premise that late capitalism devised an all-inclusive 'administered universe', a political order purged of the objective possibility of choice, society could no longer be trusted to form any progressive relations; therefore, as these thinkers argue, the hope lies within self-conscious activity and reflection, instead of in the exercise of human agency, and individuals can find the relief in a metaphysical and more transcendent experience found in an aesthetic ideal, as Adorno maintains; the aesthetic-erotic rebellion, as Marcuse argues; or Habermasian faculty of the language aimed at mutual understanding. It is a common belief today that in a society dominated by global capitalism and the media, individuals lack the capacity for autonomous action, and that the democratic promise of the Enlightenment cannot be realised.

The Enlightenment ideal of autonomy implies the right of everyone to pursue their destiny according to their beliefs – this represents the foundation for choice, moral and political decision making and political action. Immanuel Kant claimed that the 'enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity,' where the

latter is understood as ‘the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another’.⁹² According to Kant, this immaturity was self-imposed and its ‘cause [lay] not in lack of understanding but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another’⁹³. Following the motto of the Enlightenment – ‘*Sapere Aude*’ or ‘*Dare to Know*’ – Kant challenged individuals to use their understanding. The Enlightenment ideal of individual autonomy, which insists that society must recognise the independence of each individual, offers people the promise of choices, but it is precisely because some individuals have taken this ideal seriously that they successfully challenged repressive institutions and power structures that sought to thwart their dimension. Even though human actions often result in unpredictable outcomes, some of which could be disastrous, the choice between the ‘ideal’ and ‘actions’ is a false dilemma. According to Adorno, for example, because there is no choice, we must keep an ideal alive as represented in his aesthetic theory; meanwhile, it is because there is an ideal that individuals can act upon it. In Kant’s view, people fail to change their circumstances not because they lack an understanding of their condition, but because they do not dare take action. The problem therefore is not the fallible nature of human agency, but the pessimism towards the impossibility of the ideal. This ideal, according to Kant, is not there to be realised, but to keep individuals acting and challenging their current condition.

Political theorist Chantal Mouffe’s approach embraces ideas of the Enlightenment – it defends its promise of individuals’ liberty to fulfil their human capacities and aspirations – but in a different way: without the pessimism towards the impossibility of ideals. In fact, the ‘self-refuting ideal’ of democratic politics liberates individuals from the paralysis of the Frankfurt school’s individualism and rationalism. Mouffe maintains that there is ‘the level of the political’, which concerns the ontological horizon, ‘the symbolic ordering of social relations and is much more than a mere ‘form of government’’. This political form of society does not include its possible articulation with an economic system such as capitalism. Everything is political,

⁹² Kant, Immanuel (1784) ‘An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?’, <http://eserver.org/philosophy/kant/what-is-enlightenment.txt>

⁹³ *Ibid.*

including capitalist relations. There is no 'system', no objective world outside subjectivity. To envisage how we can transform our existing conditions is to grasp what is at stake in democratic politics and not to reveal the 'true reality'.

This chapter examines understandings of the nature of democratic politics found in the work of the Frankfurt school's members since they were pivotal in the relationship between cultural and political modernism and other approaches, notably those of Jacques Rancière and Chantal Mouffe. Shall we view politics as a self-conscious activity and or as a practice? Shall we reduce politics to an activity confined within strictly assigned boundaries whether it is conceived, in Adornian vision, as an apolitical artist practising some sort of universal and neutral aesthetic ideal or, in Habermas's view, as a speaking individual aiming to reach a mutual understanding? Shall we understand politics in terms of the philosophy of consciousness or a theory of language?

Different conceptions of what emancipatory politics entail lead to a very different treatment of the question regarding the political role of art and culture. Today, art discourse is characterised by both: idealistic and rational assertions of artistic practice's independence of material and political life. Instead of passionate engagement with the existing conditions, it reduces artistic practice to a completely different type of practice – social liaison and help. So-called 'political art' today does not wish to intervene in the social, but appears to wish to create it in the first place. Such a self-image corresponds to the flawed way in which politics are envisaged today and, in many ways, the legacy of the Frankfurt school has contributed to the current predicament.

Adorno & Horkheimer: A Great Despair

Many believe that Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's account in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which focuses on the capitalist appropriation of high art through its mass reproduction and hence neutralisation of cultural critique, today has become a

description of a given reality. A hallmark of the Frankfurt school was its overriding concern with the cultural sphere, which was no longer capable of disclosing its own contradictions and make a mark of alienation appear in the deceptive appearance of reconciliation. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the autonomy of aesthetic experience and its heterogeneity with respect to all other forms of experience contrasts with the faked community of sense. The political act of art is to save the heterogeneous sensible that is the heart of the autonomy of art and its power of emancipation. The social function of art consists of having no function, Adorno declares. However, this subversive and transcendent character of culture has been eradicated through its integration into the capitalist system. Cultural entities have become standardised, the profit motive has been transferred onto cultural forms and cultural products have become ‘a species of commodity...marketable and interchangeable like an industrial product’.⁹⁴ To ensure its own reproduction, the culture industry produces forms compatible with the capitalist system, thereby transforming art and culture into powerful tools of mass deception. In the final draft of the *Dialectic*, Adorno and Horkheimer replaced the term ‘mass culture’ with ‘culture industry’ to denounce any idea that popular culture was something that ‘arises spontaneously from the masses themselves’.⁹⁵ Adorno maintains that the outcome of this transformation was that ‘conformity has replaced consciousness’. The capacity to think and act autonomously was destroyed. Adorno writes,

‘The total effect of the culture industry is one of anti-enlightenment, [which] becomes mass deception and is turned into a means of fettering consciousness. It impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and consciously decide for themselves. These, however, would be the precondition for a democratic society...’⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Adorno, Theodor and Horkheimer, Max, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Cumming, John, New York: Continuum, 1972: 158.

⁹⁵ Adorno, Theodor, ‘Culture Industry Reconsidered’, trans. Rabinach, Anson, *New German Critique* 6, Fall 1975: 12.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*: 19

Thus, in Adorno view, democracy corresponds to individuals' consciousness and the capacity to judge. It appears that the problem for Adorno does not lie with the culture industry or capitalism *per se*, but in the fact that individuals have become a part of the masses. The problem then is not the mass industry but the masses.

Certainly, some of Adorno's most remarkable analysis – for example, his discussion of Schoenberg in the 'Philosophy of Modern Music' – documents his assertion that the greatest modern art, even the most apparently anti-political, in fact holds up a mirror to the 'total system' of late capitalism. Yet the fate of modernism in consumer society itself, what was once an oppositional and anti-social phenomenon in the early years of the century, later become the dominant style of commodity production and demanding reproduction of itself. Furthermore, as Peter Burger demonstrated in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*⁹⁷, what made art autonomous was the fact that the artist could produce works for the autonomous market rather than for the prince or the cleric. And market here does not solely imply the mechanism of exchange (buying and selling), but the whole public sphere where artworks could be produced, discussed or distributed. Autonomy is thus a necessary part of the market construction as a network of individuals. It appears that what Adorno is really concerned with is not art or art's autonomy, but the fact that anyone could practice what Adorno holds as an ideal of a spontaneous, authentic and creative individual. In fact, throughout their work, Adorno and Horkheimer mourn 'the fallen nature of modern man'. This fall of the individual corresponds to the rise of the masses. In a subsequent discussion Horkheimer speaks of his concern over 'the shift of subjectivity from the individual to the collectivity', reducing an individual to a mere member of the deceived masses, who think and act as if they were capable of it. The real enemy of Adorno and Horkheimer is not capitalism, but the people who seek not to change the world, but to keep it the same. This is evident in Adorno's discussion with his contemporaries. Dwelling on Adorno's responses to Brecht's conception of political theatre, Bloch's call for 'utopian thinking' or Lukacs's

⁹⁷ Burger, Peter, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987.

defence of ‘critical realism’, it is where we can witness the political character of Adorno’s assessment and where his political idioms become more nuanced and concrete. In a nutshell, Adorno’s response to any attempts to envisage what kind of artistic practices could be the most productive intervention into the existing state of affairs is that it is ‘idealistic, philistine and ideological’.

Georg Lukacs was concerned with defending the titles of realism in the post-capitalist societies of the East. In contrast with its ‘classical’ or ‘critical’ siblings, Lukacs’s ‘socialist realism’ was grounded in a ‘concrete socialist perspective’ and constructed ‘from the inside’, socially and ideologically. Silenced in his country (Hungary), subject to attacks and increasing vehemence, Lukacs insisted on ‘non-rejection’ of socialism as an historic possibility and maintaining ‘social realism’ as a ‘naturalists’ transcription of the actual state of society, which he saw as a valuable element in the culture of the workers’ states. Meanwhile, Adorno, contemptuous of the optimism prescribed by Soviet orthodoxy, accused Lukacs of having ‘mental chains’ and an inability to distance himself from ideological systems, producing artworks identical to the reality they attempt to interfere with. Adorno writes,

‘Lukacs still behaves like a Cultural Commissar...indifferent to the philosophical question of whether the concrete meaning of a work of art is in fact identical with the mere ‘reflection of objective reality...’⁹⁸

Why would Adorno, who saw capitalist development as the sole cause of the lack of any political choice action, attack Lukacs’s attempts to formulate an alternative theory of political art in non-capitalist societies? It appears that the problem does not lie within a different understanding of the role of art – in both cases art is seen as a privileged means of assessing historical reality or capitalism itself – but within a different vision of politics. Examining Adorno’s assessment of Lukacs’s ‘socialist realism’, it becomes clear that the real disagreement lies in a different understanding

⁹⁸ Adorno, Theodor, ‘Reconciliation Under Duress’ (Response to Lukacs), in *Aesthetics and Politics*, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, Georg Lukacs, Verso, London, New York, 2007: 167-168.

of the role of human agency. The question Lukacs asks is ‘What is Man?’, pointing out that ‘...artistic reality cannot be separated from the context in which they are created’. While for a modernist, Lukacs argues, ‘man means the individual who has always existed, who is essentially solitary, asocial and – ontologically – incapable of entering into relationships with other human beings’, Lukacs insists that men are capable of changing their relationships and ‘...the intellectual and emotional values placed on those relationships change accordingly...at any specific time one human relationship may be progressive and another reactionary’.⁹⁹ Meanwhile, for Adorno, ‘...the procedures of socialist realism...are simply the ideological transfiguration of the prevailing unsatisfactory state of affairs’.¹⁰⁰ It appears that what Adorno does not trust is not a society corrupted by capitalism, but man’s ability to form any progressive type of relationships. Therefore Adorno is convinced that it is an aesthetic ideal of the appropriation of the objective world by the subject in accordance with the ‘laws’ of aesthetic form that should take ‘authority’ out of the hands of people, because they cannot be trusted. At first, such a proposition appears to be democratic, since, like science, it takes the certainty out of priests, kings or governments and puts it out into a suspended realm, open to be reflected upon, tested and questioned. However, Adorno’s fundamental categories of aesthetic ‘truth’ remain so opaque and unassailable – ‘autonomous art’, the ‘laws’ and ‘logic’ of artistic form, ‘essences’ – that they close off any further discussion. It seems that what Adorno and Lukacs’ discussion reveals is that they are attempting to fix in the artistic realm a problem, that is in the political realm: the closure of possibilities. There seems no good reason why artistic practices should ‘fix’ the problems of politics, or, indeed, why artistic work cannot proceed while wider society is in difficulties.

Antagonisms were not ‘overcome as they call it’ in the states of the Eastern bloc, asserts Adorno, no alternative to be found in the present, and concludes, ‘Only those

⁹⁹ Lukacs, Georg, *Healthy Art, or Sick*, Geburstag, Berlin, 1955: 243.

¹⁰⁰ Adorno, Theodor, ‘Reconciliation Under Duress’ (Response to Lukacs), in *Aesthetics and Politics*, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, Georg Lukacs, Verso, London, New York, 2007: 193.

thoughts are true which fail to understand themselves'¹⁰¹. In this case, it is not just emancipatory politics that are meaningless, but *all* politics – no debate is necessary.

Adorno's fatalism could be seen in his dialogue with Ernst Bloch on the subject of utopia. 'Whatever utopia is', Adorno argued,

'...whatever can be imagined as utopia, this is the transformation of totality. And the imagination of such a transformation of totality is basically very different in all the so-called utopian accomplishments – which, incidentally, are all really like you say: very modest, very narrow. It seems to me that what people have lost subjectively in regard to consciousness is very simply the capability to imagine the totality as something that could be completely different'.¹⁰²

Bloch countered. The word 'utopia' had indeed been discredited, he noted, but utopian thinking had not. He pointed to other levels of the mind that were less structured by Western capital. We can still think utopia, suggested Bloch. However, Adorno saw the only possibility to reside in the notion of an unfettered life 'freed from death'. All at once the discussion of utopia expanded, it became ancient. Adorno declared that there could be no picture, no thought of utopia cast in a positive manner.

What Adorno appears to advocate is not a pessimistic theory of culture and an elitist artistic space as a Marxist defence of modernism, but a theory of a distinctively modernist ideology, according to which to grasp the monolithic historical reality of ideological domination politics can only be comprehended in terms of a more transcendent alternative that found its leverage outside of the world as it currently is. In other words, unable to deal with reality, politics as a concept would only enter into a conflict with the latter and experience it as 'suffering'.

¹⁰¹ Adorno, Theodor, *Minima Moralia*, Verso, 2005, quoted in *Ibid.*: 183.

¹⁰² Adorno's response to Bloch (1964) is quoted in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop, Whitechapel Gallery, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2006: 184.

Politics, Adorno continues, even though ‘supposedly progressive’, belong to the system and therefore ‘true’ political intervention would not be intervening but rather showing the impossibility of such a task. Adorno writes,

‘The feigning of a true politics here and now, the freezing of historical relations which nowhere seem ready to melt, oblige the mind to go where it need not degrade itself. Today every phenomenon of culture, even if a model of integrity, is liable to be suffocated in the cultivation of kitsch. Yet paradoxically in the same epoch it is to works of art that has fallen the burden of wordlessly asserting what is barred to politics. Sartre himself has expressed this truth in a passage, which does credit to his honesty. This is not a time for political art, but politics has migrated into autonomous art, and nowhere more than where it seems to be politically dead’.¹⁰³

For Adorno, there could be no real emancipation but only a metaphysical experience, which begins in the negative redemptive moment of a turning against life. Within this moment, the possibility of a different mode of relating to objects could emerge. What Adorno envisages as emancipation is a form of cognition and a state of society, which could allow a non-dominating relationship between subject and object. He writes,

‘Reconciliation would release the non-identical, would rid it of coercion, including spiritualised coercion; it would open the road to the multiplicity of different things and strip dialectics of its power over them’.¹⁰⁴

Since the subject, in Adorno’s view, can never understand the object, the subject has to direct his attention toward the particular - ‘change succeeds only in the

¹⁰³ Adorno, Theodor, ‘Commitment’ (Response to Brecht), in *Aesthetics and Politics*, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, Georg Lukacs, Verso, London, New York, 2007: 216.

¹⁰⁴ Adorno, Theodor, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, Routledge, London and New York, 1966: 18.

smallest things. Where the scale is large, death dominates'¹⁰⁵ – this change corresponds to the relation of the subject with his or her self – retreating into a life of mind and inner freedom, which only a few are capable of having. Adorno writes, 'Whoever wants to change things apparently do so only by making this impotence itself and his own impotence as well into a factor of what he does'.¹⁰⁶ Since understanding is itself always incomplete, our efforts to change society must be informed by an appreciation of our own impotence. There is a hint in the Dialectic that the possible reconceptualisation of politics might follow from reconciliation with nature as a new 'non-dominating' relationship with oneself and others. An example of such politics could be found in the contemporary 'green movement'. Like Adorno's hostility towards cultural mass production, 'green activists' are hostile to mass consumption. Similarly to Adorno's view on the impotence of humans, they seek the threat of nature to compensate for the lack of the political will and decision. Supposedly progressive environmental politics perceive people as the problem and not the solution. People are not to be trusted – what we have in common is only Earth.

Such politics is not the 'politics of despair', as commonly described, but of the contempt for ordinary people, for the masses and thus for the political action itself.

'A Great Refusal'

Another member of the Frankfurt school, the 'father' of the New Left, Herbert Marcuse, in contrast with his colleagues, favours the realm of action – a protest, alternative forms of living and a counterculture would provide a radical subjectivity necessary to change the world entirely. While for Adorno 'death dominates', for

¹⁰⁵ Adorno, Theodor, 'Schubert' (1928) in *Moments Musicaux: Neuedruckte Aufsätze, 1928 bis 1926*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1964: 26, quoted in *Critical Theory and Political Possibilities*, Alway, Joan, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, London, 1995: 67.

¹⁰⁶ Adorno, Theodor, 'Education for Autonomy', interview with Hellmut Becker, *Telos* 56, Summer 1983: 110, quoted in *Critical Theory and Political Possibilities*, Alway, Joan, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, London, 1995: 67.

Marcuse, the relentless rebellion and action rescues humanity from the clutches of capitalism.

In 1964 Marcuse published a major study of advanced industrial society, *One-Dimension Man*, in which he theorises the development of new forms of social control through the creation of consumer and conformist needs that integrated individuals into the existing system, producing a 'society without opposition'. For Marcuse, there could be no meaningful strategy for social change unless individuals themselves are liberated from capitalist consciousness and acquire 'radical subjectivity'. Explicitly renouncing any reformism or piecemeal change, Marcuse envisages the seeds of an alternative subjectivity in the most exploited and persecuted outsiders. He states,

'They exist outside the democratic process; their life is the most immediate and the most real need for ending intolerable conditions and institutions. Thus their opposition is revolutionary even if their consciousness is not. Their opposition hits the system from without and is therefore not deflected by the system; it is an elementary force which violates the rules of the game and, in doing so, reveals it as a rigged game'.¹⁰⁷

Marcuse's emphasis on humans as the centre of the universe, not just as subjects but simultaneously as the objects of liberation, led Marcuse to suggest that there is a biological basis for freedom. Humans, according to Marcuse, have an instinctive need to be free. The radical subversion of values can never be the mere byproducts of new social movements and institutions:

'It must have its roots in the men and women who build the new institutions...Socialism, as a qualitatively different way of life, would not only use the productive forces for the reduction of alienated labour...but also for making life

¹⁰⁷ Marcuse, Herbert, *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Routledge, Introduction by Douglas Kellner, London, 2002: 256-7.

an end in itself...In this context, the liberation of women would indeed appear as...the revolutionary function of the female in the reconstruction of society'.¹⁰⁸

Therefore, the possibility of social change lies not in the ripening of objective conditions, but in a radical restructuring of human psychology. Marcuse attempts to locate the kind of psychic structure that would characterise a 'free' man and found it in communities in which the 'Pleasure Principle' is the principle that organises society. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud argued that individuals must internalise mechanisms to repress our instinctive desires and needs and that the superego develops methods of repression that allow the normality of urban life. Marcuse, however, went further, claiming that the superego has become so great a constraint on the ego in mass society (in which the 'father' is replaced by institutions as the dominating force) that this new personality structure makes individuals impose far more repression on themselves than is actually needed for civilisation to exist. Hence he concludes that

'The economic and political incorporation of the individuals into the hierarchical system of labour is accompanied by an instinctual process in which human objects of domination reproduce their own repression. The revolt against the primal father eliminated an individual person who could be (and was) replaced by other persons; but when the domination of the father has expanded into the domination of society, no such replacement seems possible and the guilt becomes fatal'.¹⁰⁹

Any departures from mainstream society, which search for your inner self and follow the 'Pleasure Principle', represent the way out of what Marcuse calls 'the mutilated consciousness of individuals in consumer society'.¹¹⁰ Personal becomes political. From now on, counter-culture, drugs and 'free love' becomes a celebration of transformative politics. Indeed, Marcuse saw in sexual, sensual, moral liberation

¹⁰⁸ Marcuse, Herbert, *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Routledge, Introduction by Douglas Kellner, London, 2002: 256-7.

¹⁰⁹ Marcuse, Herbert, *Eros and Civilization*, Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1966: 91.

¹¹⁰ Marcuse, Herbert, 'Ecology and Revolution' in *The New Left and the 1960s, Collected Papers*, vol. 4, ed. Kellner, Douglas, Routledge, London and New York, 2005: 176.

and the use of mind-altering drugs ‘the rediscovery within themselves of the instinctual basis of freedom...needs that are the ‘absolute negation’ of the current order’.¹¹¹ Looking back at her experiences in Paris in 1968, Julia Kristeva emphasises the sexual aspect of new personal politics:

‘Group sex, hashish, etc. were experienced as a revolt against bourgeois morality and family values...striking savagely at the heart of the traditional conception of love’ and ‘...1968 was a worldwide movement that contributed to an unprecedented reordering of private life’.¹¹²

Marcuse’s emphasis on the individual revolt and self-transformation has also contributed to a new understanding of art’s revolutionary potential as a means of self-expression and self-construction. For example, the correspondence between Lygia Clark and Helio Oiticica (1968-69) is supportive of Marcuse’s view that the experience of creative self-transformation is in itself revolutionary. Dwelling on the importance of self-expression instead of illustrating, Oiticica writes to Lygia,

‘As Marcuse would say, it [artistic expression] liberates the Eros that is repressed by repressive activities: the relax in participation is a non-repressive activity, which confuses and liberates truly unpredictable forces, and in this, I believe, you base yourself in your own experience, which is also highly revolutionary...’¹¹³

In other letters Oiticica, following Marcuse’s proposal of a ‘biological society that would be unrepressed and based upon a direct chain of communication’,¹¹⁴ suggests that Lygia Clark’s art practice could be considered a creation of ‘all-encompassing biological entity’, which can lead to a truly ‘open communication’ between individuals. Thus, for Marcuse there is a biological need for freedom, which expresses itself most effectively through artistic channels.

¹¹¹ Marcuse, Herbert, *An Essay on Liberation*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1969: 43

¹¹² Kristeva, Julia, *Revolt She Said*, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 2002: 18.

¹¹³ Correspondence between Lygia Clark and Helio Oiticica (1968-69), reprinted in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop, Whitechapel Gallery, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2006: 113.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*: 115.

Marcuse has long admired bohemian and counter-cultural refusals to conform and the avant-garde that rejected bourgeois society. He borrows his term the 'Great Refusal' from Andre Breton to advocate alternative cultural forms and behaviour as new oppositional politics. Having insisted on the radical potential of art linked to the utopian dimension, Marcuse points out the difficulty of realising 'an aesthetic society', '...the most utopian, the most radical possibility of liberation today'.¹¹⁵ He states,

'In the affluent society, art is an interesting phenomenon. On the one hand, it rejects and accuses the established society; on the other hand, it is offered and sold on the market. There is not a single artistic style, however avant-garde, that does not sell. This means that the function of art is problematic, to say the least. There has been talk of the end of art, and there really is among the artists a feeling that art today has no function. There are museums, concerts, paintings in the homes of the rich, but art no longer has a function. So it wants to become an essential part of reality, to change reality'.¹¹⁶

According to Marcuse, once we shed the idea of affirmative culture and practice art as an autonomous domain of private, personal and inner experience, the emancipatory values of art would be released into the world and reveal the oppressive character of material life in affluent society.

The construction of a truly free society for Marcuse presupposes a type of man with a different sensitivity and consciousness: a 'new' man who would speak a different language and follow different impulses. This new sensibility would reject all dominant values. An aesthetic dimension is especially emphasised in this concept; however, these aesthetics must be recovered from beauty as an ideological construction the norms of which varied historically and across cultures. Marcuse

¹¹⁵ Marcuse, Herbert, 'Liberation from the Affluent Society', in *The Dialectics of Liberation*, ed. Cooper, D., Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968: 185

¹¹⁶ Marcuse, Herbert's interview 'Marcuse Defines His New Left Line' (1968), in *The New Left and the 1960s*, ed. Kellner, Douglas, Routledge, London and New York, 2005: 113.

argues that bourgeois art, by purveying beauty as a displacement of hope, enables established society to reduce unrest and proposes a different understanding of what beautiful might look like if it is to contribute to a ‘non-repressive order’. Marcuse speaks of ‘the erotic quality of the Beautiful’ and states that ‘...as pertaining to the domain of Eros, the Beautiful represents the pleasure principle’. Imagination and memory for Marcuse are similarly linked to this aesthetic-erotic fantasy, which speaks ‘the language of the pleasure principle, of freedom from repression, of uninhibited desire and gratification’.¹¹⁷ While for Marcuse the idea of beauty in a work of art is reactionary, the subversive ‘beautiful’ corresponds to the need for sensual gratification that paves the way for the new consciousness.

Art critic Dave Hickey was among the first of many who, in the early 1990s, started to argue that aesthetics must be recovered from the reactionary standards of beauty. Following Marcuse, Hickey defines beauty as the visual pleasure located in the affect of images. Discussing the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, Hickey argues that it was threatening to conservatives because it made gay subcultural practices appear beautiful, which meant that they were somehow ‘good’. This, Hickey argues, suggests that the beautiful is linked to the ‘good’.¹¹⁸ More recently, critics such as Elaine Scarry and Arthur Danto argued that works of art that possess beauty generate a sense of good, wellbeing or usefulness. Danto famously proclaimed the ‘end of art’ insofar as aesthetics itself has been made to accord with everyday life.¹¹⁹ Scarry went even further, declaring beauty as the condition of possibility of ethics.¹²⁰ What is beautiful has become something morally good or useful. In fact, Marcuse himself connected the idea of the beautiful not just with Eros, but also with the use and everyday living. In his latest paper ‘Society as a Work of Art’, he develops the idea that if technology and art are traditionally separated as the beautiful and useful, the divide can be collapsed – as between work and play – allowing ‘...a possible

¹¹⁷ Marcuse, Herbert, ‘Society as a Work of Art’ in *The New Left and the 1960s*, ed. Kellner, Douglas, Routledge, London and New York, 2005: 112

¹¹⁸ Hickey, Dave, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty*, Art Issues Press, US, 1993

¹¹⁹ Danto, Arthur, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton University Press, 1998

¹²⁰ Scarry, Elaine, *On Beauty: and Being Just*, Princeton University Press, 1999

artistic formation of the life world'.¹²¹ This form would be the form of freedom, a practice of living, '...which free people in a free society are able to provide for themselves'.¹²² The definition of the beautiful dissolves into a free formation of raw materials – according to the pleasure principle and the definition of art – into free living. Indeed, Marcuse states that 'For art itself can never become political without destroying itself...'¹²³

If anything or anyone is to become political, according to Marcuse, it must radically alter its own status, it must go 'inwards': the most radical act is an essentially private exploration of oneself. The development of the needs and consciousness that create the subjective conditions for radical social change is no longer related to economic conditions or political structures. Instead of the working class, Marcuse puts his hopes on student activists, hippies, the counterculture and youth in general. This new revolutionary subject expands both the rebellion against the system and visions of a better society beyond the economic and political. It is 'sexual, moral, intellectual and political rebellion all in one...it is total, directed against the system as a whole'¹²⁴; creating needs that capitalist society would not be able to satisfy. For Marcuse, the vital need for revolution encompasses aesthetic-erotic sensibilities, which lead to very different forms of radical politics: the politics of individual transformation directed inward. Marcuse writes, 'There is no free society without silence, without the internal and external space of solitude in which individual freedom can develop'.¹²⁵

Today the general condemnation of mass consumer society along with the emphasis on personal commitment or awareness of problems rather than attempts to engage

¹²¹ Marcuse, Herbert, 'Society as a Work of Art' in *The New Left and the 1960s*, ed. Kellner, Douglas, Routledge, London and New York, 2005: 127.

¹²² *Ibid.*: 129

¹²³ Marcuse, Herbert is quoted in Merrifield, Andrew, *Henri Lefebvre: A Critical Introduction*, Routledge, 2006: 26.

¹²⁴ Marcuse, Herbert, 'Question of Revolution', *New Left Review*, 45, September-October 1967: 6-7.

¹²⁵ Interview with Marcuse, 'Marcuse defends his New Left Line', *New York Times Magazine*, October, 1968, in *Herbert Marcuse: The New Left and the 1960s*, ed. Douglas Kellner, Routledge, London and New York, 2005: 117.

politically with society become a norm. According to Marcuse, advanced capitalism promotes gratification and fulfilment, thereby creating ‘transcendent’ needs for freedom, individuality and self-determination that are subversive to the ‘system’. It is ironic that today the desire for authenticity is increasingly experienced not through the prism of autonomy, but of isolation. As art critic John Kelsey points out, ‘...the more individual we make ourselves, the more alike we become...’ so that, becoming slaves to authenticity, we have to ‘get smaller, weirder, and more monstrous’.¹²⁶ Meanwhile, no ‘transcendent’ needs have emerged. As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe argue, ‘But this “consumer society” has not led to the end of ideology, as Daniel Bell announced, nor to the creation of a one-dimensional man, as Marcuse feared’.¹²⁷ Different struggles and movements do keep emerging and the lesson we can learn from Marcuse is that they should not be overlooked by focusing, as Marcuse did, on alternative forms of living or thinking. Politics do not belong to or start with the inner human structure or ‘journey inwards,’ but develop through articulation with other struggles and demands. Individualistically oriented struggles – struggles for their own sake as a form of personal empowerment – reduce political energies to the registration of opinions and the transmission of feelings. It is not that the individual must be sacrificed, but that political association cannot be limited to a particular agent or social relation. While Marcuse’s analysis of an advanced capitalist society’s ability to ‘buy off’ opposition and discontent remains compelling, the problem, perhaps, lies within the latter – understanding that opposition in terms of ‘the unity of moral-sexual and political rebellion’ did not take us very far. In fact, such an understanding has contributed to the common perception of politics as a protest linked to the development of revolutionary consciousness as a natural precondition for radical change. Therefore we tend to agree with Erich Fromm, who argued that

‘Marcuse is not even concerned with politics; for if one is not concerned with steps between the present and future, one does not deal with politics, radical or otherwise.

¹²⁶ Kelsey, John, *Rich Texts: Selected Writing for Art*, Sternberg Press, 2010: 126.

¹²⁷ Laclau, Ernesto and Mouffe, Chantal, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, London, New York, 2001: 161.

Marcuse is essentially an example of an alienated intellectual, who presents his personal despair as a theory of radicalism'.¹²⁸

Professor David Chandler of the The Centre for the Study of Democracy in London, points out the narcissistic character of what is understood by politics today. He writes,

'Rather than political engagement with the world, it seems that radical political activism today is a form of social disengagement – expressed in the anti-war marcher's slogan of "Not in My Name", or the assumption that wearing a plastic bracelet or setting up an internet blog diary is the same as engaging in a political debate. In fact, it seems that political activism is a practice which isolates individuals who think that demonstrating a personal commitment or awareness of the problem is preferable to engaging with other people who are often dismissed as uncaring or brainwashed by consumerism'.¹²⁹

Marcuse, for this matter, has contributed to the fact that as long as the appeal of politics is an individualistic one, these kinds of 'radical' politics are doomed to fail.

Habermas: A 'Good Life' Through Language

We will now turn to the most contemporary member of the Frankfurt School, leading German Leftist social theorist Jurgen Habermas, whose theory of deliberative democracy has become today's common sense. Like his predecessors, Habermas perceives the capitalist economy and modern state as the dark side of modernity. However, the way out of this darkness, for Habermas, lies not within the theory of consciousness, but within a theory of language, which expresses the universal.

¹²⁸ Fromm, Erich, *The Revolution of Hope*, New York: Bantam, 1968: 8-9.

¹²⁹ Chandler, David, 'Questioning Global Political Activism', *What is Radical Politics Today?*, ed. Pugh, Jonathan, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009: 79.

According to Habermas, the domination of the ‘system’ over ‘lifeworld’, which he refers to as the ‘colonisation of the lifeworld,’ threatens the positive accomplishments of modernity and creates pathologies in otherwise essential and natural processes of ‘lifeworld’ reproduction. The threshold between ‘normal’ mediation and pathological colonisation is crossed when domains of action that rely on the medium of communicative action – the transmission of culture, social integration, socialisation of individuals – become commercialised and bureaucratised. The ‘system’ penetrates deeper and deeper into areas in which action is coordinated by communication. Habermas argues, ‘...the subsystems of the economy and the state become more and more complex as a consequence of capitalist growth, and penetrate ever deeper into the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld’¹³⁰. Habermas then argues that as the state increasingly intervenes in the economy to manage the dysfunctional effects of the capitalist process, it keeps class conflict latent by neutralising and normalising the roles of employee and citizens. State intervention safeguards capitalist accumulation, which, in turn, makes possible ‘mass compensation’, which is ‘distributed accordingly to implicitly agreed upon criteria, in ritualised confrontations, and channelled into the roles of consumer and client in such a way that the structures of alienated labour and alienated political participation develop no explosive power’.¹³¹ As an empirical example and measure of the colonisation process, Habermas looks at the explosion of legal regulations governing social life, what he calls the ‘juridification of communicatively structured areas of action’.¹³² Today, he argues, what begun as a means by which the state protected rights and freedoms has become a means by which those freedoms and rights are rendered meaningless.

Dwelling on the modern state’s ‘mismanagement’ of dysfunctional capitalism, Habermas concludes that the ‘struggle’ is over. He states,

¹³⁰ Habermas, Jurgen, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, Boston: Beacon, 1987: 367.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*: 350-51.

¹³² *Ibid.*: 356.

‘Today, with its dysfunctional side effects, we are more aware of the dangers; we now experience the inexorable development of productive forces and the global expansion of western civilisation more as threats. One can no longer coax an unredeemed promise from the production-centred capitalist project’.¹³³

A question, however, arises: if the capitalist project is so overwhelmingly powerful, why does Habermas hold the state responsible for conspiring and spreading a global capitalist network, thus preventing the explosive nature of ‘lifeworld’? Perhaps, if the national state is capable of playing such a role, the capitalist expansion is not so fatal, since it is far more dependent on national states than Habermas is willing to acknowledge. However, Habermas is not interested in the idea of using this dependency to undermine the capitalist project or to proceed with an alternative version of globalisation. Rather, he believes that there is an inner mechanism, something inherent to the ‘lifeworld’ that keeps pathologies from becoming fatal.

According to Habermas, in such a pathological situation, ‘lifeworld’ cannot intervene but only defend their humanity in dialogue with each other. He argues further that the formation and activities of ‘autonomous public spheres’ can only arise out of this ‘lifeworld’ through ‘...intelligent self-restraint that is needed to sensitise the self-steering mechanisms of the state and the economy...’¹³⁴

This ‘autonomous public sphere’ for Habermas is the way out of the darkness of the capitalist domination safeguarded by the modern state. His theory of the communicative action locates the emancipatory thrust within the primary medium of interaction – language. At the centre of Habermas’s political thought is a shift from

¹³³ Habermas, Jurgen, ‘Popular Sovereignty as Procedure’, in Bohman, J. and Rehg, W. (eds) *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997: 37.

¹³⁴ Habermas, Jurgen, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987: 365.

Marx's paradigm of production to a paradigm of communication – from the philosophy of consciousness to a theory of language. Habermas writes,

'What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: language. Through its structure, autonomy and responsibility are posited for us. Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus'.¹³⁵

In *The Theory of Communicative Action* Habermas points out that what is liberating in communicative action

'is not the relation of a solitary subject to something in the objective world that can be represented or manipulated, but the intersubjective relation that speaking and acting subjects take up when they come to an understanding with one another about something'.¹³⁶

According to Habermas, the use of language in its 'original mode' is oriented towards reaching understanding and expresses the intention of the good life. The claims to truth and normative rightness are discursively redeemable: a problematic truth may become the subject of theoretical discourse, while the 'rightness' or 'appropriateness' of a speech act may become the subject of a practical discourse that addresses the validity of the underlying norm. The discursive redeemability of these validity claims forms, according to Habermas, the rational foundation of communication. He asserts:

'The idea of rational speech...is the first found not in the general structures of discourse, but in the fundamental structures of linguistic action...Anyone who acts with an orientation towards reaching an understanding, since he unavoidably raises truth and rightness claims, must have implicitly recognised that this action points to

¹³⁵ Habermas, Jürgen, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro, Boston: Beacon, 1979: 314.

¹³⁶ Habermas, Jürgen, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, Boston: Beacon, 1987: 392.

argumentation as the only way of counting consensual action in case naïvely raised and factually organised validity claims become problematic. As soon as we make explicit the meaning of discursively redeemable validity claims, we become aware that we must presuppose the possibility of argumentation already in consensual action'.¹³⁷

The communicative action is crucial because there is something to be communicated: language expresses the universal, the idea of a good life, which, as a conception, already exists and has a substance of its own. There is already an essence – for Habermas the presence of rules and structure in the language indicates this.

In Habermas's model, the use value of a message depends on its orientation. A sender communicates with the intention to be understood, and any acceptance or rejection of the message depends on this understanding. However, as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello point out in the *New Spirit of Capitalism*, in the connexionist world, 'product...circulates with difficulty when separated from persons' and 'is transformed by the relation'.¹³⁸ It is communication that makes a product authentic and therefore desirable. In communicative capitalism, a message does not need to be understood but only to be repeated, reproduced, forwarded. Boltanski and Chiapello write, 'The transmission of information plays a key role in establishing the link in all those sectors where the value added is cognitive in kind...The relationship alters the information each of the partners possesses concerning the other, and thereby change the image of the other. It is an unfolding process of this kind that people refer to when they speak of earning (or losing) someone's trust – something that consequently opens or shuts off access to resources (the use of goods or services, credit reputations)'.¹³⁹ Hence communication in communicative capitalism is not, as Habermas argues, oriented towards reaching a mutual understanding, but mutual

¹³⁷ Habermas, Jurgen 'Zwei Bemerkungen zum praktischen Diskurs,' quoted in McCarty, Thomas, *The Critical Theory of Jurgen Habermas*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978: 323-24.

¹³⁸ Boltanski, Luc and Chiapello, Eve, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Verso, London, New York, 2005: 131.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

benefit. This also demonstrates that there are no essences or ‘original mode’ attached to the faculty of language, but rather that its meaning changes with contexts. In fact, what Habermas perceives as the liberating aspect of the intersubjective relation serves as an alienating mechanism in communicative capitalism. Habermasian intersubjectivity does not bring people together but, on the contrary, atomises them. As Boltanski and Chiapello point out, the reference to intersubjectivity as *en masse* communication is associated with removing borders, centres or any fixed points and constituent entities through the relations they enter individually. The volatility of the individual, who no longer belongs to groups, institutions, organisations, is then stabilised by the network. Boltanski and Chiapello write, ‘To describe the network is to observe and report these operations of reduction which, in the open state of interconnections, create relative irreversibility’.¹⁴⁰ There is no ‘discursive redeemability of these validity claims forms’, as Habermas argues, but a discursive reduction of any claims. In communicative capitalism, discourse is not used to redeem the ‘claims to truth;’ rather, claims are dependent on the relation. Boltanski and Chiapello clarify,

‘...the seemingly most stable properties of individuals – for example, sex or profession – are themselves signs subject to interpretation in interaction. Rather than treating them as substantial properties...it is in interactions, where they are subject to interpretation, that these qualities are invested with meanings; and meanings, depending on the relation as they do, vary as we pass from one relation to another’.¹⁴¹

What follows is that Habermas’s ‘ideal form’ of communicative action, in which the universalisation of interests does not descend from on high but emerges from the free, frank discussion between particular claims, is ideal for the reproduction of communicative capitalism, which Habermas perceives as a pathological threat. It is ironic that while Habermas’s predecessors’ critique was directed at inauthenticity as

¹⁴⁰ Boltanski, Luc and Chiapello, Eve, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Verso, London, New York, 2005: 145.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*: 147

the massification and standardisation of individuals, he, in fact, justifies capitalism's response to the intense demand for differentiation and demassification as internalising authenticity. Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse condemned the consensual levelling, the conformity, and the destruction of any difference, while Habermas welcomes it. His insistence on the 'original mode' of language that expresses the intention of the good life support what Boltanski and Chiapello describe as: 'In a network world, the question of authenticity can no longer be formally posed...' They continue,

'In a connexionist world, loyalty to the self looks like inflexibility; resistance to others seems like a refusal to make connections; truth defined by the identity between a representation and an original is regarded as a failure to understand the infinite variability of the beings who circulate in the network, and change every time they enter into relations with different beings, so that none of their manifestations can be taken as a point of origin with which other expressions can be compared'.¹⁴²

Insofar as the Frankfurt school's members' analysis asserts the impossibility of a revolutionary transformation of society, there is still a sense of hope that something could be attained because there is an object to be strived for, Habermas's theory of 'communicative action' destroys any such hope: problems and potential solutions are removed in advance through legitimate, democratic channels. Emancipatory politics becomes not a matter of gaining control over the object world, but of communicating claims and interpretations with the goal of achieving a mutual understanding of the objective world. As capitalism has managed to internalise the quest for authenticity, Habermas internalises hope that things could be otherwise. What is crucial to Habermas's account of universalisation is the idea that normative claims to validity, which already exist, are actually debated. Since it occupies the space between facticity and validity, Habermas's theory of deliberative democracy presents ideals and aspirations as always already present possibilities. Such an

¹⁴² Boltanski, Luc and Chiapello, Eve, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Verso, London, New York, 2005: 451.

approach brings any ideas of utopia inside, eliminating it as an external space of hope.

With Habermas's emphasis on constitutional forms on the one side, and the corresponding alliance between liberal and deliberative democrats on the other, we have a contemporary theory of democracy that finds justification elements in real-life practices. Rather than providing reconstruction and transformation of everyday practices and institutions, the theory of deliberative democracy uses these practices to justify the validity of deliberative procedures. To this extent, such a theory, which circulates between validity and procedures, presents democracy as adequate to its notion. It appears that the problem lies within the notion.

It also appears that what is problematic is not the 'nature' of Habermas's 'lifeworld' or capitalism, but the nature of his understanding of the subject, which is defined by language and aimed at mutual understanding. According to Habermas, human actors are partners in dialogue; therefore, transforming and enlarging the sphere of discursive action would entail understanding. Habermas's image of a better society is one defined by the requirements of communicative rationality where the self-reflective and cooperative competencies of actors are the most privileged. This conception of politics is no longer informed by or oriented to agents or aim: both are now derived from communicative action. Emancipation here is achieved not through taking power and struggle, but through a cooperative process in which means and ends become one and the same. The goal of such emancipatory politics is a deliberative process. Decisions are envisaged through procedures. When deliberation only circulates around the decision as a justification of itself, people never have to accept responsibility for it, much as the democratic theorist does not need to accept responsibility for a political outcome. The issue of democratic politics becomes the process and keeping the process open to a future it has already imagined in terms of itself. Meanwhile, individuals who disagree with a particular claim are perceived as unable to understand, and therefore not human.

In *The Democratic Paradox*, Chantal Mouffe fights Habermas's conception of a better society as inclusive non-restraint public sphere of rational argumentation. She deploys Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's conception of 'language games' to demonstrate that there is no meaning outside the 'language game'. Wittgenstein argues that the boundaries, which shape the meaning, are built over time as the members of the social group who share the language game in question engage in imperfectly repetitive usages. There could be no 'ideal speech situation', and a language game for Wittgenstein does not represent anything but '...a means of representation ... something with which comparison is made'. Thus, language does not posit any 'structure, autonomy and responsibility,' as Habermas argues. According to Wittgenstein, we do not just communicate through language. Most importantly, language communicates to us through an aesthetic overlay or performativity, what Wittgenstein calls 'a picture'.¹⁴³ Wittgenstein says, 'We speak, we utter words, and only later get a sense of their life'.¹⁴⁴ Language is somewhat a vessel – we get a sense of what we are and what we are saying through the particular context in which the language is used.

In contrast with Habermas, for Wittgenstein, it is expression that organises experience and gives it its form and structure. However, expression is not just words, it is both: words and actions – the uses of these words. Thus, Mouffe writes, 'There is nothing...in the nature of language that could serve as a basis for justifying to all possible audiences the superiority of liberal democracy'.¹⁴⁵

For Wittgenstein, '...in order to have agreement in opinions, there must be first agreement in forms of life',¹⁴⁶ which are not rules and procedures created out of principles. Any belief is a form of life, which implies that consensus can never be reached, since there are ontological obstacles to rational perspectives such as 'ideal speech' situation or 'original mode'. Mouffe writes,

¹⁴³ That is why Wittgenstein repeatedly says, 'Don't look for a meaning, look for use'.

¹⁴⁴ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd edition, New York: Macmillan, 1985, sec. 115

¹⁴⁵ Mouffe, Chantal, *The Democratic Paradox*, Verso, London New York, 2005: 65.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*: 97

‘Indeed, the free and unconditional public deliberation of all on matters of common concern is a conceptual impossibility, since the particular forms of life which are presented as its “impediments” are its very condition of possibility’.¹⁴⁷

No communication takes place in the absence of forms of life.

Mouffe locates the failure of Habermas’s political theory and his predecessors in their understanding of the subject as a holder of original qualities and rights and a rational agent. She states, ‘In all cases, they are abstracted from social and power relations, language, culture and the whole set of practices that make agency possible’.¹⁴⁸ This abstraction has certainly contributed to a negativity and pessimism regarding modernity and the Enlightenment ideal of autonomy. However, the most important aspect, in our view, of the Frankfurt school’s theorising is its attitude towards the masses. Believing that the ‘Culture Industry’ absorbs and nullifies any oppositional forces, the Frankfurt school presented a general disdain of universalism and modernity as radical politics. A desire to put distance against the imaginary masses and their cultural tastes defines today’s radicalism. For many radicals today, the preferred option is to seek ways in which to withdraw from the ‘alienation’ of modern life via aesthetical-ethical retreats or organising life around ethical consumption habits. Such assumptions about the objective destructiveness of ordinary people inform much of the environmentalist and anti-globalisation movement’s agenda as well. The ‘soul-destroying’ mass society must be lectured, helped or ignored. The apparent ‘blindness’ of ordinary people needs to be combated by high-minded artists and intellectuals who are battling to save the planet from the rapacious domination of modernity and mass society. Democratic politics become the struggles against forms of collective identities such as the state or a consumer society.

¹⁴⁷ Mouffe, Chantal, *The Democratic Paradox*, Verso, London New York, 2005: 98

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*: 95

What the Frankfurt school has perceived as a solution – the retreat into self-conscious activity or rational judgment – is today a description of a problem. Paraphrasing Marx, what is needed is the criticism of politics and not capitalism or a mass society. As Ernesto Laclau argues, ‘While the task of political philosophy traditionally has been to reduce politics to police, truly political thought and practice would consist in liberating the political moment from its enthrallment to policed societal frameworks’.¹⁴⁹

While the Frankfurt school has presented the ordinary masses as the problem, French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s view of politics corresponds to the notion of the ‘people’ as an ultimately political category.

Rancière’s Disagreement as Politics

Regarding the issue of contemporary capitalism and politics, French philosopher Jacques Rancière is refreshingly different. Rancière points out the reactionary character of the persistent desire among artists and critics to escape the logic of the market and to become autonomous. He writes, ‘The critique of the market today has become a morose reassessment that, contrary to its stated aims, serves to forestall the emancipation of minds and practices. And it ends up sounding not dissimilar to reactionary discourse. These critics of the market call for subversion only to declare it impossible and to abandon all hope for emancipation. For me, the fundamental question is...how to produce forms for the presentation of objects, forms for the organisation of spaces that thwart expectations. The main enemy of artistic creativity as well as of political creativity is consensus – that is, inscription within the given roles, possibilities and competences’.¹⁵⁰

According to Rancière, the problem of modern democracy is not capitalism but the logic of consensus, which divides people by making some parts invisible in order to

¹⁴⁹ Laclau, Ernesto, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, London New York, 2007: 245

¹⁵⁰ An interview with Jacques Rancière, ‘Art of the Possible’, Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey, *Artforum*, March 2007: 258.

claim consensus. On the other hand, by determining the roles, rules and relationships of reaching consensus, it claims itself as the result of deliberation in which each part of society is represented. Rancière describes this situation as post-democracy: ‘The government practice and conceptual legitimisation of a democracy after the demos, a democracy that has eliminated the appearance, miscount, and the dispute of the people and is thereby reducible to the sole interplay of state mechanisms and combinations of social energies and interests’.¹⁵¹ As the political decisions are identified with the totality of the community, the space for staging dissensus is taken away. This means that no part that has no part can claim recognition, because it is already assumed as recognised. Politics thus are made invisible.

Instead, true politics concern the ‘uncountable’ that disrupts the very principle of counting and makes possible the emergence of the political. Rancière writes, ‘There is politics – and not just domination – because there is a wrong count of the parts of the whole’. Rancière argues that political conflict differs from any conflicts of interests; what is at stake is the principle of countability as such. For example, his understanding of a class points out that what is at stake is not the sociological nature of people’s identity, but a particular determination caused by exclusion. He writes,

‘The proletariat are neither manual workers nor the labour classes. They are the class of the uncounted that only exists in the very declaration in which they are counted as those of no account. The name proletarian defines neither a set of properties...that would be shared equally by a multitude of individuals nor a collective body, embodying a principle of which those individuals would be members...’Proletarian” subjectification defines a subject of wrong’.¹⁵²

He further states, ‘Politics occurs by reason of a single universal that takes the specific shape of wrong. Wrong institutes a singular universal, a polemical universal, by tying the presentation of equality, as the part of those who have no part, to the

¹⁵¹ Rancière, Jaques, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Rose, Julie, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999: 102.

¹⁵² Rancière, Jaques, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Rose, Julie, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999: 38.

conflict between parts of society'.¹⁵³ According to Rancière, politics are rare and only occur when a disturbance is caused by a group demanding a 'recount' – the disagreement. What is important to Rancière is the legitimacy of this countability and not who is counted. He argues that the emergence of the demos brakes any division between those who are deemed able and those who are not. Thus what is at stake in politics is the disruption of the unequal order by assuming the principle of equality. From this disagreement emerges a conflict event, and this is what politics means for Rancière.

Hence what is essential in Rancière's understanding of politics is the very principle of 'countability' as the 'people'. Placing 'demos' at the centre of politics prevents any social order from crystallising into a totality of society. The presence of the 'class of the uncounted' ruins established hierarchies. However, what appears to be missing is the very question of how the 'uncounted' will constitute themselves and re-order the existing order. As fascism demonstrates, the 'uncounted' do not necessarily constitute themselves around a progressive identity. This politics might not be emancipatory, but the opposite. Because Rancière is interested in the very legitimacy of this countability and not in who is going to be counted and how it might develop, he concentrates on the issue of how to make disagreements visible, how to stage dissensus. In his view, political action no longer needs to be informed by a detailed understanding of how the contemporary world works and how exploitation operates. 'We already know this', says Rancière; everyone has always understood the way they are exploited or oppressed. Unlike Chantal Mouffe, who aims to channel democratic politics in a certain way, Rancière's understanding of politics begins with the axiological principle of equality, which implies the constant disruption of the unequal order.

Rancière argues,

¹⁵³ Rancière, Jaques, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Rose, Julie, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999: 38.

‘Nothing is political in itself for the political only happens by means of a principle that does not belong to it: equality. The status of this “principle” needs to be specified. Equality is not a given that politics then presses into service, an essence embodied in the law or a goal politics sets itself the task of attaining. It is a mere assumption that needs to be discerned within the practices implementing it...’¹⁵⁴

Rancière’s equality is not a process of a fairer distribution of social roles and material outcomes, but of the temporal interruption of any such distribution. He writes,

‘Equality is not a goal that governments and societies could succeed in reaching. To pose equality as a goal is to hand it over to the pedagogues of progress, who widen endlessly the distance they promise they will abolish. Equality is a presupposition, an initial axiom – it is nothing’.¹⁵⁵

Such an understanding of equality, independent of social mediation, leads Rancière to envisage political activity as a suspension of all forms of authority or authorisation. His view of governance allows for a kind of permanent contestation without any responsibility for actual decisions. ‘Democracy’ for Rancière is not a form of government or a state of affairs, but a break in the existing order by a group of people who are not considered to be equal. Hence ‘democracy’ can only be ‘sporadic’. By connecting ‘democracy’ with sporadic activities, Rancière turns away from the channels of existing practices, institutions and discourses, and thus from the possibility of reinvesting in a democratic politics. For him, politics are always rare, new and spontaneous.

It appears that the problem here is that Rancière confuses political equality with aesthetic equality. For Rancière, the literary and visual equality of ‘aesthetic regime’ has something liberating about it, since it escapes brute political determination.

¹⁵⁴ Rancière, Jaques, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Rose, Julie, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999: 33.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*: 33

Rancière points out that everyone can think and speak and thus can subvert the given meaning. The idea that ‘everyone thinks’ means that people actually think in the absence of any necessary link between who they are, the roles they play or the places they occupy: they think through the freedom of their own self-disassociation. Therefore, thinking is more a matter of improvisation than one of decision, direction or deduction. Every thought has its stage, every political subject is first and foremost ‘a sort of local and provisional theatrical configuration’. The artistic equalisation of literature and painting in the ‘aesthetic regime of arts’ for Rancière serves as the direct model for political disagreement. Aesthetic regime produces ‘a different type of equality’ abstracted from social roles and places. Using art as a base category, Rancière maintains that politics always flow out of the theatrical disagreement rather than a rational agreement. In emphasising the affective qualities of disagreement, however, Rancière appears to go too far. The ultimate equality of the ‘people’ is achieved through the establishment of a ‘grey zone’ of indistinction between who belongs to demos and who does not.

Since there cannot be any equality within a given order or political process, but only as the ultra-radical elimination of the excluded, of any hierarchies of values or roles and ‘false’ identities, then, the more distant and artificial this interruption in relation to the police (existing institutions and practices), the more political it is, since it achieves ultimate equality. Rancière continues, ‘For me, politics is the constitution of a theatrical and artificial sphere’¹⁵⁶ where ‘a political subject is a type of theatrical being, temporary and localised’¹⁵⁷. Subjects invite themselves to play at the ‘king’s table’ but they do not represent themselves directly; instead, they do so from under a mask or from the point of view of a stage that they construct in a particular situation. A good actor is one who manages to distance his identity fully from the persona that

¹⁵⁶ Interview with Rancière for the French journal *Dissonance*, 2005, translated by Citton, Yves, ‘Political Agency and the Ambivalence of the Sensible’, *Jacques Rancière, History, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. Rockhill, Gabriel, Watts, Philip, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2009: 130.

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Rancière for the French journal *Dissonance*, 2005, translated by Citton, Yves, ‘Political Agency and the Ambivalence of the Sensible’, *Jacques Rancière, History, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. Rockhill, Gabriel, Watts, Philip, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2009: 130.

he plays. Therefore, for Rancière, progressive politics are those that manage to place a gap between the speaking ‘we’ and ‘the people’ in whose name this ‘we’ purports to speak. This ‘double think’ is what, in Rancière’s view, distinguishes ‘rare political performance’ from a trivial popular spectacle. While the latter presupposes an authorised stage and a passive, watching audience, theatrical politics is a matter of

‘...performing or playing, in the theatrical sense of the word, the gap between a place where the *demos* exists and a place where it does not . . . Politics consists in playing or acting out this relationship, which means first setting it up as theatre, inventing the argument, in the double logical and dramatic sense of the term, connecting the unconnected.¹⁵⁸

Before it is a matter of institutions, legal procedures or organisations, politics is a matter of building a stage and sustaining a ‘political performance’.

Just as actors play another identity rather than their own identity, political actors must blur the gap between who belongs to *demos* and who does not. The matter of politics is not to explain how certain people were made invisible or establishing a line of demarcation between who is entitled to equal rights and who is not, but to demonstrate that the very distinction between *demos* and non-*demos* is flawed, that there is no foundation for some to rule others. The objective for politics, then, is to perform this ‘gap between a place where the *demos* exists and a place where it does not’. The political ‘stage’ is identified by Rancière with a paradoxical scene where discourses are staged in their difference. He insists on the emancipatory breakthrough that sets a new stage for the political by giving a new visibility to the discourses and the bodies that were barred from public expression. Based on a Brechtian emphasis on the reciprocity of perspectives between theater and politics, which allows one to understand how political agents can distance themselves from their own representations in history and instead produce new ones, Rancière argues

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Rancière for the French journal *Dissonance*, 2005, translated by Citton, Yves, ‘Political Agency and the Ambivalence of the Sensible’, *Jacques Rancière, History, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. Rockhill, Gabriel, Watts, Philip, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2009: 130.

that every theatrical act is performed *by* but not *for* the people. He states, ‘Politics has no ‘proper’ space nor does it possess any ‘natural’ subjects...Political demonstrations are thus always of the moment and their subjects are always precarious and provisional’.¹⁵⁹ This is why Rancière’s politics cannot be accounted for in terms of antagonisms, interests or communication.

Rancière’s theatrical sphere is directly political and therefore cannot be used by any party, movement, etc. An artistic Collective BAVO explains the implications of Rancière’s understanding of democratic politics as a ‘grey zone’ or the ‘zone of indistinction of artistic practices and life’. BAVO states,

‘On the one hand, it is difficult for the politicians involved to ‘aestheticise away’ the accusations expressed by the artist, dismiss them as “merely art”, as the opinion of just one eccentric artist: the political accusations are too direct for this. On the other hand, it denies politicians the opportunity to defuse the indictment in the usual way, with familiar political arguments: it is too artistic for that. This third way prevents the confrontation with the artist becoming a home match for the political establishment’.¹⁶⁰

Rancière’s thinking or imagining politics does not flow from or through to the political forums. Theatrical concepts can energise politics but, for example, the anti-globalisation movement did not need the ‘play’ of the multitude to protest against the G8. Even though politics today has turned into policy or management, it does not mean that antagonism and division can be avoided through the conceptualisation of politics as the ‘stage’.

Hence Mouffe’s emphasis on the unavoidability of antagonism and division – and therefore of the constitutive role of the political that marks the intensity of a relation

¹⁵⁹ Rancière, Jacques, *Aux bords du politique*, quoted by Hallward, Peter, ‘Staging Equality: Rancière’s Theatrocracy and the Limits of Anarchic Equality’, in *Jacques Rancière History, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. Rockhill, Gabriel, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2009: 149.

¹⁶⁰ BAVO, ‘How Much Politics Can Art Take?’, *OPEN* 14, 2009, also available online: <http://www.bavo.biz/texts/view/210?CAKEPHP=a42a456a7c3ccc9ef905f555efefe4b4>

– indicates a weak point in Rancière’s discussion of politics and his analysis of post-politics. While both Rancière and Mouffe share an emphasis on disagreement and its affective qualities as a constitutive aspect of democratic politics, for Mouffe, democratic equality ‘requires the possibility of distinguishing who belongs to the demos and who is exterior to it; for that reason it cannot exist without the necessary correlate of inequality’.¹⁶¹ By constantly challenging the relations of inclusion-exclusion implied by the political constitution of the ‘people’, the liberal discourse of universal human rights plays an important role in keeping the democratic contestation alive. On the other side, it is only thanks to the democratic logic of equivalence that frontiers can be created and demos established, without which there could be no real exercise of rights.

We will now turn to Chantal Mouffe’s understanding of democratic politics, which defends the Enlightenment’s promise of individuals’ liberty to fulfil their human capacities and aspirations. In contrast with the Frankfurt school’s pessimistic view of politics as an individual revolt against ‘mass society’, Mouffe points out that the democratic conception of equality is directly related to the political constitution of people. However, this is not the equality that Rancière has in mind. While the Frankfurt school privileges the ideas of liberty characterised by the individualist and rationalist approach and Rancière insists on assuming a radical equality as the disruption of the unequal order, Mouffe effectively reconfigures the dilemma of incompatibility between liberty and equality, between an individual and demos into a different vision of politics where the tension between the two becomes constitutive of democracy.

¹⁶¹ Mouffe, Chantal, *The Democratic Paradox*, Verso, London, New York, 2000: 39.

‘Back to Hegemonic Struggle’

There is no blueprint or privileged agent who could transform a given reality. Mouffe states, ‘There is no unique privileged position from which a uniform continuity of effects will follow, concluding the transformation of society as a whole’.¹⁶² The subject is not understood in terms of self-conscious activity, its relation to the object or subject’s relation to each other with the goal of achieving mutual understanding about objective world, but as a hegemonic subject. There is no objective world outside subjectivity. The subject is constituted through its relation to other subject-positions. Any given social order depends on hegemonic articulation in conditions of contingency. For Mouffe, there could be no politics without hegemony. There are two key concepts in Mouffe’s conceptualisation of politics: *antagonism* and *hegemony*. The dimension of the political marks the intensity and unavoidability of antagonism and division and corresponds to the lack of any final solution. Mouffe writes, ‘Every order is the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices’.¹⁶³ These practices of articulation through which subjects and a given society are constructed are ‘hegemonic’ practices. A society is not dominated by any single unitary and positive logic – there is no central point of a hegemonic formation – but always emerge from a ‘surplus of meaning’ resulting from a displacement, through a confrontation with other antagonistic practices. Mouffe writes,

‘What is at a given moment accepted as the “natural order”, jointly with the common sense that accompanies it, is the result of sedimented hegemonic practices, it is never the manifestation of a deeper objectivity exterior to the practices that bring it into being’.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Laclau, Ernesto and Mouffe, Chantal, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, London, New York, 2001: 169.

¹⁶³ Mouffe, Chantal, ‘Critique as Counter-Hegemonic Intervention’,

<http://eipcp.net/transversal/0808/mouffe/en>

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

The given order is fixed through ‘nodal points’:

‘As far as politics is concerned, this means the need to envisage it in terms of a hegemonic struggle between conflicting hegemonic projects attempting to incarnate the universal and to define the symbolic parameters of social life. Hegemony is obtained through the construction of nodal points, which discursively fix the meaning of institutions and social practices and articulate the “common sense” through which a given conception of reality is established.’¹⁶⁵

However, there are always ‘elements’ that are not fixed and thus any hegemonic order can be disarticulated.

Since there is no objective, transcendental or rational ground on which to reconcile or overcome differences, antagonism remains the everlasting presence and challenge to politics. The non-existence of a foundation leaves us groundless in dealing with political disagreements. In order to address this problem, Mouffe provides a framework with which to understand how political conflicts are constituted. According to her, they emerge from the irreconcilable confrontation between two logics: liberalism and democracy. In *The Democratic Paradox*, Mouffe examines Carl Schmitt’s critique of liberal democracy in order to understand the components of the paradox. According to Schmitt, there is an insuperable opposition between liberal individualism with its moral discourse centred on the individual and the democratic ideal, which aims to create identity based on homogeneity. He argues that in order to assign sovereignty to the people, democracy requires the determination of who belongs to ‘the people’ and thus necessitates a distinction between friend and enemy. Therefore the democratic political community rejects pluralism and liberal democracy is therefore destined to fail due to the insurmountable opposition between the individual and the demos. Mouffe criticises Schmitt on the grounds that, while he admits the political constitution of the people as democratic, in his discussion of pluralism he maintains that political identities are

¹⁶⁵ Mouffe, Chantal, ‘Critique as Counter-Hegemonic Intervention’, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0808/mouffe/en>

pre-constituted. However, Mouffe emphasises the constitutive opposition that liberalism and democracy entail. By constantly challenging the relations of inclusion-exclusion, the liberal discourse of universal human rights plays a vital role in keeping the democratic contestation alive. In liberal democracy, the paradox that neither liberty nor equality can be completely realised provides ‘the condition of possibility for a pluralist form of human coexistence’.¹⁶⁶ Instead of providing an understanding of politics in which either liberty or equality is eliminated, Mouffe considers the network of relations and identities that this opposition produces.

Examining the relationships between power and legitimacy, Mouffe brings forward the role of power in the constitutive paradox of liberalism and democracy. On the one hand, power is legitimate because it is recognised as such; on the other hand, in principle, it is contingent, since there is no foundation on which to provide a permanent legitimacy. This paradoxical situation creates the tension between the logic of ‘politics’ and ‘the political’. Mouffe states,

‘By “the political” I refer to the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations, antagonism that can take many forms to emerge in different types of social relations. “Politics” on the other side indicates the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organise human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual’.¹⁶⁷

Therefore we should not understand ‘politics’ as a kind of truth or ideology, but as a logic that comes out from the possibilities to organise society in another way and that is not necessarily automatically emancipatory. While the political refers to the dimension of antagonism, politics refers to the hegemonic nature of any social order in the sense that it reveals that any society is hegemonically constructed – there are practices and institutions that conceal the original acts of their political institution and instead are taken for granted. Any ‘natural’ order or ‘common sense’

¹⁶⁶ Mouffe, Chantal, *The Democratic Paradox*, Verso, London, New York, 2000: 11.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*: 101

is the result of hegemonic practices and not a manifestation of any ‘deeper’ objectivity.

This opposition between ‘the political’ and ‘politics’ creates antagonistic relations between those who wish to create unity in one way and those who want to create it in a different way. This is the opposition between ‘us and them’. The question then for democratic politics is not how to eliminate exclusion, but to construct them as an ‘adversary’ rather than as the enemy. Mouffe writes,

‘This is the real meaning of liberal-democratic tolerance, which does not entail condoning ideas that we oppose or being indifferent to standpoints that we disagree with, but treating those who defend them as legitimate opponents. This category of the “adversary” does not eliminate antagonism, though, and it should be distinguished from the liberal notion of the competitor with which it is sometimes identified’.¹⁶⁸

This is the way in which the antagonistic relationship is transformed into agonism. To make the contrast, agonistic opposition is processed on the common ground of ‘shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy’.¹⁶⁹ Accordingly, the purpose of the opposition is not to bring them to a rational resolution of the conflict, but ‘...to make room for dissent and to foster the institutions in which it can be manifested...’¹⁷⁰ If this common ground for contestation is not established, ‘...the danger that this democratic confrontation will be replaced by a confrontation among other forms of collective identification, as is the case with identity politics’.¹⁷¹ With regard to this proposition, Mouffe aims to revive democratic politics by centering its concern on equality. She states, ‘What a left-wing project today requires is to envisage this struggle for equality that has always been at the core of social democracy in a way that takes account of the

¹⁶⁸ Mouffe, Chantal, *The Democratic Paradox*, Verso, London, New York, 2000: 102.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*: 102

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*: 105

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*: 104

multiplicity of social relations in which inequality needs to be challenged'.¹⁷² According to Mouffe, the project of the plural and radical democracy demands liberty and equality for all, but there is no 'simple equality' that makes all people equal to each other in all areas, 'it does not consist in an identity of possession', so what is at stake is to envisage '...the struggles against inequality in a way that deepens pluralism instead of stifling individual freedom'. While we can agree on the importance of 'liberty and equality for all', what should be contested is 'the way they should be implemented, with the different configurations of power relations that this implies'.¹⁷³ This is what informs democratic politics – the disagreement within an 'agonistic' pluralist democratic framework. It is a legitimate conflict between 'adversaries' around different positions and alternatives on the basis of left/right distinction.

Such a view differs from rationalistic, individualistic or other positions in today's political theory. Rancière, for example, argues that politics is an event that takes place only through the assumption of equality. He states, 'The open set of practices driven by the assumption of equality between any and every speaking being and by the concern to test this equality.'¹⁷⁴ According to Rancière, when the social inequality becomes obvious, the political rule is challenged. Thus, the political disagreement concerns the conflict rather than its outcome. The assumption of equality does not process according to a particular understanding of politics; the converse is true: it constitutes political subjectivities and understanding *after* the event takes place. For Mouffe, however, 'the political' should not be reduced to the 'dimensions of antagonism' or understood either as a systematic opposition or the free public deliberation. Claiming their ultimate equality, the 'uncounted' might construct their collective identities in a non-progressive way while 'agonistic pluralism' is aimed at transforming antagonism into agonism. Democratic politics acknowledges that equality cannot be entirely realised due to power relations that

¹⁷² Mouffe, Chantal, *The Democratic Paradox*, Verso, London, New York, 2000: 123

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*: 113.

¹⁷⁴ Rancière, Jaques, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Rose, Julie, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999: 30.

constitute the social; its constitutive aspect is revived through the struggle for equality.

Capitalism, Culture, Politics

An agonistic understanding of democratic politics acknowledges the contingent character of the politico-economic articulations, which determine the specificity of social order at a given moment. Since society is always hegemonically constructed, there is little point in resigning to the idea that there is an overwhelming force such as the capitalist economic system, which has robbed individuals of their consciousness and transformed art and culture into a powerful tool of mass deception. It is insisting on the exclusivity of artistic and cultural practices as a somewhat privileged site of the true identity of the subject that led to a type of identity politics, which were then re-articulated into the present form of 'common sense'. If Adorno was alive today, he could have asserted that it is not 'conformity that has replaced consciousness' but the diversity and insistence on the self-assertion. Today consumerism is no longer about conformity but differences as we will demonstrate in the next chapter. The problem then is not consciousness, but politics. The subversive character of culture has not been eradicated by the economic necessities but welcomed and appropriated.

While modern liberal democracy is a site of confrontation between projects attempting different incarnations of the universal, capitalism has become a universal excuse for not forming collective political identities. There are no 'people', only individuals who are now, as many believe, are finally have been transformed into passive affects of the capitalist framework.

Mouffe reminds us that it is important to separate the ideas of modern liberal democracy from capitalism. Leaving aside its possible articulations with an economic system, it is a political form of society, which concerns the symbolic ordering of social relations, and results from the tension between two different

logics: the liberal conception of equality and the democratic one. Even though the capitalist domination is to be overcome, this does not mean that the perfect social order would be finally realised. As Laclau and Mouffe explain,

‘Every project for radical democracy necessarily includes, as we have said, the socialist dimension – that is to say, the abolition of capitalist relations of production; but it rejects the idea that from this abolition there necessarily follows the elimination of the other inequalities’.¹⁷⁵

Society would never be fully liberated, since it exists due to the power relations and the consequent exclusion that these relations entail. The task for democratic politics is to show the traces of exclusion and not taking refuge in formulating a paradigm that would assign everything to its place. Capitalism, language and culture are not closed systems, but parts of hegemonic articulation.

Conclusion

If we accept that society is hegemonically constructed, then the Frankfurt school’s critique of inauthenticity and the conformist domination of a society that destroys any differences appear to be counter-productive. In the years around 1968, this form of denunciation of mass society enjoyed unprecedented public success. The critique of the ‘consumer society’ brought out on to the streets the contempt of a world given over to an order, mass production, standardised opinion. Any form of organisation – political such as the state or economical such as democratic capitalism – is seen as people being deprived of their free consciousness, capable of knowing its own desires. Politics become reduced to the proliferation of differences. An entire generation was teaching itself how to make creative, strategic use of the difference, to withdraw from ‘systems’ and calling for an experimental re-appropriation of everyday life.

¹⁷⁵ Laclau, Ernesto and Mouffe, Chantal, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Verso, 2001: 192.

Following the Frankfurt school, Left-wing politics begun to be associated with disdain for the 'system;' instead of viewing differences as conditions of possibility of establishing unity and thus affecting change, individuals were invited to take solace in creative realm. Hopes were placed into anything: art, language, sex, but not 'the people'. Furthermore, since the Frankfurt school extended the analysis of domination to the sphere of culture, arguing that capitalist despotism works through cultural mechanisms, culture has ceased to be perceived as a broader public good, but something one must preserve and exercise as the self-authority principle.

In more recent years, the collapse of the Left, the working-class as a distinct social force and the emergence of post-Fordist capitalism could also be said to confirm the Frankfurt School's thesis of the impossibility of social transformation. And yet, in many ways, the political response to such recent social developments seems to draw the Frankfurt school's verdicts in quite a disturbing way.

The contemporary political framework can perhaps be defined as a general disdain for universalism, liberty, modernity and social change. Far from a celebration of political and social achievements of liberal democracy, modernity is seen to lead to the unprecedented victory of capitalism, a pathological distrust of political and politicians and environmental catastrophe. For many radicals today, the preferred option is to seek ways in which to retreat from the 'alienation' of modern day life via aesthetical-ethical retreats or organising life around ethical consumption habits. Above all else, a desire to put some distance against the imaginary masses and their cultural tastes constitutes and defines 'radicalism' today. Ordinary people are presented as destructive and unable to organise themselves in a progressive way – this could only lead to fascism. That is why Habermas, for example, had to come up with the thesis that the communicative actions as a site of an inter-subjective agreement can save humanity from a tendency to self-destruct. It is the Frankfurt School's claim to be far-left that has enabled such destructive ideas to gain considerable purchase amongst the radical intelligentsia since the 1960s. And it is that radical intelligentsia that has presented ordinary people as an objective

‘problem’ to be controlled and monitored. Even Rancière, who recovers the notion of the ‘people’ as the protagonist of politics, concludes that the ‘disagreement’ can only take a disruptive and temporary character. To be Left always meant to be on the side of the people against the powers that be. Today, to be Left means to refuse, to despair, to condemn, to be radical, to be different.

Thus, the reproduction of differences for commercial ends became easier since there was no ‘people’, no other alternative projected. In the absence of collective politics, capitalist logic internalised the intense demand for differentiation and demassification, and post-Fordism’s appetite for self-directed activity was not a coincidence. Thus our next chapter examines the transformation of capitalism to the post-Fordist model of production, which had particular consequences for the artistic field. Shall we envisage this transformation in terms of culture? Should we accept that what we are dealing with is a radically new biopolitical model, which already includes both politics and aesthetics and therefore does not require either a political action or an aesthetical practice? Or shall we come in terms with the hegemonic nature of any transformation, and thus argue for the renewal, albeit in the way that is most productive given the current conditions, of the hegemonic struggle?

Chapter Three

Transformation of Capitalism – Post-Operaist Approach or Hegemonic Approach?

It is not just politics that has been transformed. There was another transformation, from the Fordist to post-Fordist mode of production, which had particular consequences for artistic and cultural self-understanding and production. Semiotic production today is at the core of capitalism's valorisation technique. What follows is that artistic practices can play a strategic role in undermining this new capitalist imaginary. However, the common belief regarding the new condition still refers to Adorno and Horkheimer's accounts that with the growth of the global culture industry, we cannot really defend the cultural sphere, since today subjectivity itself is embedded in the processes of capitalism. Paolo Virno, for example, accepts that 'their [Adorno and Horkheimer] diagnosis of culture industry as undeveloped capitalism...is a description of a given reality...'¹⁷⁶ In this context, the cultural sphere as an autonomous space of resistance or criticism is no longer sustainable as such and instead we should concentrate on the inventive production of radical public spheres outside current institutions. According to Virno, capitalist production has become 'virtuosic' and productive labour becomes indistinguishable from artistic production. Therefore we should understand post-Fordism through the matrix of culture. Two other Italian post-Operaist members, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, theorise post-Fordism as the victory of the multitude and of immaterial labour over the process of capital accumulation. Instead of culture being subjugated to the demands of capitalist production, the creative and cognitive power of labour has transformed capitalism into a matter of activity rather than a commodity. The emergence of the immaterial, cognitive and affective labour, they contend, manifest the fact that capital has responded to the workers' desires and struggles. According to Negri, the transformation from the Fordist mass of workers to a post-Fordist multitude of single workers opens up the possibility of, as Marx once predicted, 'the development of all human powers as such...not as measured on a pre-determined

¹⁷⁶ Virno, Paolo, 'The Dismasure of Art. An Interview with Paolo Virno', 'A Precarious Existence Vulnerability in the Public Domain', *Open*, Nai Publishers, SKOR, 2009, No.17

yardstick'.¹⁷⁷ The central conflict of the era of immaterial labour, according to the Italian Autonomist movement's thinkers, is over the possibility of universal access to knowledge and culture, which would eventually override capital's appropriation and construct a new type of social relations whereby, as Negri asserts, 'Value will be determined only by humanity's own continuous innovation and creation'.¹⁷⁸

Despite some differences between the Italian Autonomist movement's thinkers, which we will address, they nevertheless reassert Marx's view that labour produces its own political and resistant forms within the process of capital accumulation. Furthermore, it is capital's attempt to overcome this resistance that fuels its continuous and creative expansion. There are, however, different approaches to the subject of post-Fordist transformation and the role of culture and artistic critique. Andre Gorz (1923-2007), for example, has a sombre view of the emergence of so-called immaterial labour.

In his recently translated book *The Immaterial (L'immatériel, 2003)*, Gorz argues that the immaterial dimension that sells material commodities functions as 'self-production'. He critiques the spread of economic rationality to activities that value redesign, the giving of self and the transmission of meaning. Incorporated into the exchange economy, these activities are corrupted and autonomy is replaced by egoistic calculation and the pursuit of private rewards. Rather than assisting in a free and spontaneous development of cognitive and affective labour power, it appeals to the imagination and desire of each private and not all individuals. Each person can escape the common condition by becoming the 'happy privileged individual,' occupying a fantasy world. For Gorz, the immaterial dimension corresponds to the 'antisocial socialisation'. It is this excess of socialisation that puts a block on

¹⁷⁷ Marx, Carl, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Harmondsworth: Penguin in association with *New Left Review*, 1973: 488

¹⁷⁸ Negri, Antonio and Hardt, Michael, *Empire*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000: 356

individual autonomy. ‘People must become enterprises for themselves’¹⁷⁹, living commodities, and this is where the central conflict is staged.

According to Gorz, post-Fordism neither reflects the success of the worker struggles nor manifests their failure, since it is not a matter of economy or labour. This questions Hardt and Negri’s Marxist view that labour generates its own political forces. Furthermore, Gorz considers the state of cognitive capitalism to be the crisis of capitalism, not in the sense that the latter is coming to its logical end but that its instability, incoherence and the narrowness of its social base contains different possibilities of developing in opposing directions. Gorz states, ‘It isn’t a capitalism in crisis – it is the crisis of capitalism, which is shaking society to its roots’.¹⁸⁰ The possible alternative, Gorz argues, depends on a possibility of articulating and motivating individuals to challenge ‘self-production’ and ‘value fundamentalism’ in favour of the modern ideal of the autonomous or ‘sovereign’ subject.

The position of David Harvey also challenges Hardt and Negri’s belief that the workers have finally managed to remove ‘a pre-determined yardstick’ and are now on the way to realising the full potential of their human power. According to Harvey, there was a neo-liberal counter-revolution on the back of a free-market revolution. Neo-liberalism, presented as a permanent solution to the instability of capitalism, in fact, has been built on over-accumulation and dangerously uneven development across the world. Since the 1990s, there has been massive financialisation – the expansion of capital way beyond the functionality of trade and investment. According to Harvey, this neo-liberal move was, and remains, a political project with the ultimate aim of reasserting the power of the capitalist project over the refusal of the capitalist work discipline. For most workers, the post-Fordist economic restructuring brought with it lower pay, far longer work hours, weaker unions and no safety. An emphasis on cognitive as opposed to manual labour permitted a few to be productive: one has either to succeed or fail miserably. There

¹⁷⁹ Gorz, Andre, *The Immaterial Knowledge, Value and Capital*, (2003) trans. Turner, Chris, Seagull Books, London New York Calcutta, 2010

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*: 107

is a little grey area in between for which neo-liberalism takes no responsibility. Workers lost, Harvey argues. Instead of gaining liberty, we are all now living in a precarious world where the value of labour is irrelevant.

Hence Chantal Mouffe suggests that the post-Fordist transformation, with its centrality on the production of subjectivity suitable for capitalist reproduction, should not be considered in terms of culture, labour or economy as a particular signifier that can possibly affect all other positions. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Laclau and Mouffe argue that any universal economic explanation of society is merely a fetish. According to them, if economic relations really do determine subjectivity, what follows is that the economy has to be ‘defined independently of any specific type of society; and the conditions of existence of the economy must also be defined separately from any concrete social relation’.¹⁸¹ The same would apply to the fetish of culture as the political agency that determines all other elements. Therefore, instead of one political agency, there is hegemony – ‘social agents lack any essence’ – a discursive construction that articulates a social ‘text’ that consist of different, multiple and conflicting positions in a particular direction. It is not labour, even immaterial with its general intellect, culture, or, for that matter, the artistic critique, that are responsible for the transformation to post-Fordism, but a process of rearticulating existing discourses in the direction favoured by capitalists. Capitalism is not a totality, and the construction of a different social order depends on counter-hegemonic intervention to rearticulate the current state of post-Fordism into a different configuration compatible with democratic politics, as discussed in the previous chapter. Thus the artistic intervention into the public sphere, which under the post-Fordist capitalism increasingly looks like an extension of capital, is more important than ever. What is at issue is not to withdraw into creativity or abandon artistic practices, believing that either immaterial labour would lead to the collapse of capitalism or that the cultural sphere is no longer capable of being a space of

¹⁸¹ Laclau, Ernesto, Mouffe, Chantal, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, 2001: 98

resistance and criticism, but actively to engage with the current semiotic terrain of capitalism in order to construct different forms of identification. It is the artist today who can play a particularly effective role in undermining the myth that, with the arrival of post-Fordism, everything will change or nothing will ever change.

‘Spontaneous Communism’

Hardt and Negri understand the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism as a positive change that has been brought by capitalism’s surrender to the human powers of workers. Following Mario Tronti’s ‘The Strategy of Refusal’ – where he warned against concentrating too much on the power of capital, paying more attention instead to workers as a class for itself rather than a class against capital – Hardt and Negri developed this thesis further in their *Empire*, claiming that it was the workers’ constant resistance that forced capitalism to make a leap into the post-Fordist era of immaterial labour and general intellect. Similar to Tronti’s argument that it is always capital that ‘seeks to use the worker’s antagonistic will-to-struggle as a motor for its own development’¹⁸², Hardt and Negri asserted that capitalism is always reactive, since it is the proletariat that ‘actually invents the social and productive forms that capital will be forced to adopt in the future’.¹⁸³ Thus, as a consequence of the workers’ struggles, capitalist production has been forced to move towards the ‘general intellect,’ whereby the products are no longer material objects, but new social (interpersonal) relations themselves. Hardt and Negri state, ‘What the multitude produces is not just goods or services; the multitude also and most importantly produces cooperation, communication, forms of life, and social relationships’¹⁸⁴. The factory is no longer at the centre of value production; instead, putting the whole of society to work creates the value. Thus, according to Hardt and Negri, instead of an industrial working class, today we can speak of the ‘multitude’ – all the ‘people’ who work in services, in nursing, in linguistic relations; ‘people’

¹⁸² Tronti, Mario, ‘The Strategy of Refusal’, *Italy: Autonomia. Post-Political Politics*, New York: Semiotext(e). ed. Sylvere Lotringer and Christian Marazzi, 1980: 28-35

¹⁸³ Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio, *Empire*, New York: Harvard University Press, 2000: 268

¹⁸⁴ Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio, *Multitude*, New York: The Penguin Press, 2004: 45

who work in the cultural field, in short – all the ‘people’ who are put to work to create profit. The character of this labour is increasingly immaterial in two aspects: the process of value creation has an intellectual, networking, inventive and scientific base. The second aspect is that, compared to the industrial working class, where a worker made his or her particular contribution to the creation of value, today this value is produced *en masse*. This does not mean that the realm of material labour is vanishing – people still work in factories, in sweatshops, on the streets or inside homes – we still work materially. However, the emphasis in value-creation is put on a more open network of brainpower and inter-relations instead of focusing on a relationship to the means of production.

For Hardt and Negri, it is the new mass labour power or the ‘multitude’ as the ‘general intellect’ that can be thought of as new commons rather than a particular social class or as the ‘people’ confined to a single nation. They write, ‘The virtuality of world space constitutes the first determination of the movements of the multitude...[which] must achieve a global citizenship. The multitude’s resistance to bondage – the struggle against the slavery of belonging to a nation, an identity, and a people, and thus the desertion from sovereignty and the limits it places on subjectivity – is entirely possible’.¹⁸⁵ Hardt and Negri describe multitude as neither one nor many. They maintain that the multitude ‘...violates all such numerical distinctions. It is both one and many’, and such a configuration allegedly threatens all the principles of order. It is this lack of any connection between one and many, between the various groups and struggles, that defines the multitude and makes it a new powerful agent. This lack of connection is described by Hardt and Negri as ‘incommunicability’. They state, ‘This paradox of incommunicability makes it extremely difficult to grasp and express the new power posed by the struggles that have emerged’. Thus, Hardt and Negri’s multitude is partly framed as an abstract heuristic device: ‘[it] has a strange double temporality: always-already and not-yet...’, however, most importantly, multitude is also a normative project. They argue, ‘The proletariat is not what it used to be’ therefore ‘Multitude needs a

¹⁸⁵ Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio., *Empire*, New York: Harvard University Press, 2001: 361-2

political project to bring it into existence'. The task, then, is to discover a new form of global agency. Since, according to Hardt and Negri, it is the immaterial labour, the labour, that is involved in the production of the informational, communicative and cultural content of the commodity that is now central to capital's survival, the latter could be envisaged as the new vanguard of the productive forces. More recently, in their *Multitude* (2004), Hardt and Negri have attempted to clarify their position on immaterial labour:

'When we claim that immaterial labour is tending towards the hegemonic position we are not saying that most of the workers in the world today are producing primarily immaterial goods. The labour involved in all immaterial production, we should emphasise, remains material – it involves our bodies and brains as all labour does. What is immaterial is its product'.¹⁸⁶

Therefore, the hegemony of immaterial labour is embodied in the ability to create new type of products that do not divide but unite and mobilise the most universal aspects of human beings, such as intellect, senses, language, emotions etc.

Hence for Hardt and Negri 'multitude' is the virtual political subject, but it has a wide-open potential represented by the self-organising and self-constituting capacities of 'immaterial labour'. Such a position invites people to 're-appropriate' the productive energies that they were already put into operation through their salaried or freelance cooperation, and asserts that the self-organising multitude should be capable of directly producing the immanent forms of exchange, of governing its own production, thereby superseding the sterile and divisive forms of coordination that structure and rule the world market. In other words, the process of accelerating and reinforcing exclusive identities and homogeneous groups could be the starting point for a new kind of emancipation. The idea is to use networks just as capital does. The force of this movement is really in this networking method: a

¹⁸⁶ Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, New York: Penguin, 2004:109

multitude, a spontaneous and unpredictable movement – not, for example, a political party or an institution. Hardt and Negri are convinced that

‘...certainly, there must be a moment when re-appropriation and self-organisation reach a threshold and configure a real event. This is when the political is really affirmed – when the genesis is complete and self-valorization, the cooperative convergence of subjects, and the proletarian management of production become a constituent power.... The only event that we are still awaiting is the construction, or rather the insurgence, of a powerful organization’¹⁸⁷.

In his recent article ‘Production and Distribution of the Common’, Michael Hardt envisages the generalisation of immaterial labour not as a precondition for an event when creative excesses will supposedly break through the capitalist form of life, but as an ongoing process of de-capitalisation. According to Hardt, today we are no longer required to struggle against capitalist domination, since the latter does not operate in terms of commodities and therefore does not imply exclusions and inequalities, as we know it. Hardt writes, ‘If I use an automobile or a house you are prevented from using it, but my using an idea or an image does not imply any such exclusion.’¹⁸⁸ Therefore, what is at stake today is to produce more ‘ideas,’ so to speak, which would exceed the hegemonic character of objects or ‘goods’.

Hardt states,

‘Even though capital continues to impose instrumentality, immaterial products are not exhausted in their use. The effects created in a service relationship, for example, or the images and ideas created in an advertising campaign always exceed the instrumental goal capital sets for them. Furthermore, such production is characterised by language and speech, which Arendt identifies as central to the political.’¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Hardt, Michael, Negri, Antonio, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2001: 411

¹⁸⁸ Hardt, Michael, ‘Production and Distribution of the Common’, *Open* 2009, NO, 16, the Netherlands: 25

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*: 26

Therefore, Hardt states, ‘...the talents and skills generated and employed in biopolitical economic production tend to be the same as those required for political action. This claim has a great significance for the possibilities of democratic participation...’¹⁹⁰

According to Hardt, this biopolitical model already includes both politics and aesthetics, and the main objective is not to struggle against capitalism, but to speed it up: to participate, distribute and create more. The capitalist form of life today is already political because of the economic centrality of the arts, which makes capitalist production an entirely different game – a game without rules, so to speak. Hardt writes,

‘If, as I claimed earlier, the skills and talents required for biopolitical economic production also apply to political action and the creative capacities of artistic practice are the same needed for economic production, then it is similarly true, to complete my set of three parallel relations, that increasingly today abilities developed in artistic practice are those required for political action.’¹⁹¹

The implications of Hardt’s understanding of the post-Fordist model as a biopolitical paradigm ruled not by economics but by the distribution and connection of human beings are that there is no need for political articulation or aesthetic reflection as separate practices, since both are already included in the biopolitical economy. Hence, instead of struggling against capitalism, we should embrace it, thus allowing cognitive and linguistic patterns or ‘general intellect’, through cooperation with others, to transcend capitalism from within. In other words, the emphasis should be put on the creation and exercise of the common, since art and labour have already merged into one sphere. Art is a living labour, which can now

¹⁹⁰ Hardt, Michael, ‘Production and Distribution of the Common’, *Open* 2009, N0, 16, the Netherlands: 25-26

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*: 28

‘...become the flesh of the world’.¹⁹² This enables Negri to redefine the nature of artistic production and rewrite the history of art according to a specific mode of production and labour character.

Art is Multitude?

In his *Art & Multitude*, Negri argues that today, when art and labour both become abstract, ‘...the desire for artistic expression presents itself in all places’.¹⁹³ This means that art has become a living labour, but it can only achieve beauty when the signs and language through which it expresses itself turn into a community. Artistic experience and production are always related to the modes of transformation of labour. Dwelling on the historic periodisation of art, Negri makes the case that any particular artistic style or expression always expresses a new condition of labour. For example, Impressionism for him corresponds to a deepening of the division and specialisation of labour, the abstraction period represents the ‘scientific’ conception of labour organisation, ‘and here we are today into a new period: the constituent phase of the socialised worker, of cognitive labour power’¹⁹⁴ and therefore we witness an unprecedented rise and multiplicity of all artistic experiences and ways of producing art. Negri writes,

‘Now, precisely at a time when labour power is cognitive, the desire for artistic expression presents itself in all places; when the mass of workers transforms itself into a multitude of singular workers, the artistic act invests the forms of life, and these forms of life become the flesh of the world’.¹⁹⁵

We should from now on consider art as a living free labour and therefore an invention of singularity and objects. However, these expressive acts can only achieve beauty when the signs and language it uses to express itself turn themselves

¹⁹² Negri, Antonio, *Art & Multitude*, ‘Metamorphoses Art and Immaterial Labour’, Polity Press, 2011: 114

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*: 106

¹⁹⁵ Negri, Antonio, *Art & Multitude*, Polity Press, 2011: 114

into a community. Negri states, ‘The common, which has developed in artistic forms, must now be incarnated in a collective decision, in a common government’.¹⁹⁶

What Negri appears to suggest is that art as artistic and cultural practices are no longer needed, since they have finally realised themselves into ‘the flesh of the world’ through the immaterialisation of labour. Furthermore, instead of separate spheres such as art or culture, economy or publics, we should view the world in terms of the ‘common’. This ‘common’, for Negri, would manifest itself as a different model of Kantian sublime: ‘The common as ethical sublime, the common as aesthetical sublime’.¹⁹⁷ Negri writes, ‘The beautiful is not the act of imagining, but an imagination that has become action. Art, in this sense, is multitude’.¹⁹⁸ Thus, Negri’s reference to Kant’s doctrine of the beautiful manifests not the idea of a happy community to come, but the entirety of living labour beyond any community, ‘...because the experience of the common expresses precisely, against any illusion of community, forms of life which are rich and free’.¹⁹⁹

Thus, Hardt and Negri appear to incorporate Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of history as articulated in the two volumes of *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, as a congealing and regimentation of ‘desiring-production’ – a concept combining the features of Freudian drives and Marxist labour into the modern neurotic and repressed individual. The essence of the problem lies, according to Deleuze and Guattari, within the misrecognition of a creative process, which drives the social, instead emphasising the forces of production, which are envisaged as the transformation of a process into a concrete object, thus overlooking the latter. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, every mode of social production faces the perennial dilemma of how to code or regulate the flows of desiring production, how to contain the creative energies that underlie any social formation in a structured and controlled form. Therefore the real task of a revolutionary consists of grasping a creative

¹⁹⁶ Negri, Antonio, *Art & Multitude*, Polity Press, 2011:122

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*: 123

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*: xii

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*: 122

process, what Deleuze calls the ‘virtual’, which underlies every constructed object and subject. This process cannot take a particular direction, it cannot be envisaged as a theory; instead, it can be only actualised through the interaction of the ‘senses’, which do not derive from existing social structures. What is at issue here is not to become trapped in any political or social theory (someone else’s desire must not be blocked by Deleuze’s one and vice versa), but to escape the ‘structure of situations’ by engaging with the ‘virtual’ realm. However, unlike Hardt and Negri, Deleuze and Guattari assert that capitalism is creative in itself. Following Marx, Deleuze welcomes capitalism’s destruction of traditional social hierarchies as liberating, but inveighs against its subordination of all values to the aims of the market. Similarly to the schizophrenic, capitalism can insert itself anywhere and everywhere as a decoder and scrambler. Hence what is at issue is to destroy the ‘code’ entirely. The virtuality of countless, non-coordinated and conflict-free mutually co-producing impulses of desire, described by Deleuze and Guattari as ‘smooth space,’ can penetrate the ‘stratified’ or coded form of organisation of language, body and subjectivity. When this subjective flow of desire or a ‘smooth’ space enters the ‘stratified’ one, the social structure itself becomes movable and mutable. It would become, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, an ‘assemblage’ of lines of decoding, of ‘re-territorialisation’ and ‘de-territorialisation’ – an immanent connection between structures belonging to ‘smooth’ and ‘coded’ spaces at the same time. Thus the place of the state with its ‘stratified’ space should be taken by, in Guattari’s words, a ‘multitude of goals that are within the immediate reach of the most different social contexts’.²⁰⁰ In short, the goal is to keep away from any consolidation of power, to keep moving, ‘smoothing out’ the ‘stratified’ space, to produce a world in which the rule of the game does not exist, since the latter is constantly unfolding.

For Deleuze and Guattari it is the art scene, not labour, that actually remains the realm of central speculation in terms of the actualisation of the flows of desire. The concept of immaterial labour would be too closely related to the conditions of production and not schizophrenic enough for Deleuze and Guattari. However,

²⁰⁰ Guattari, Felix, *Mikro-Politic des Wunsches*, Berlin, 1977: 13

despite the differences, Hardt, Negri, Deleuze and Guattari appear to share the vitalist view of the world whereby life itself becomes an active force of the thought and hence of emancipation. This view is a repetition, albeit with a different vocabulary, of Marx's idea of communism as an aesthetic state modeled in artwork. Marx's recovery of living labour from capital as dead one reinforces Schiller's conception of the beautiful as a living, active form as opposed to the 'dead' form of 'modern man'. Furthermore, is this not Marx's argument against Hegel, that he takes one kind of human labour – intellectual labour – and makes the mistake of thinking that it stands for all labour, so that the idea becomes the independent subject. Statistically, the case could not be more clear – creative labour is a small part of the total labour of society and not a 'universal class' at all.

Therefore, according to Hardt and Negri, we can theorise immaterial labour and general intellect as a creative communism – just follow your desires and your dreams will come true. Another post-Operaist thinker, Paolo Virno, however, prefers to see post-Fordism as a 'communism of capital' rather than a spontaneous one.

'Communism of Capital'

In his *A Grammar of the Multitude* Virno argues that this new 'life form' has more features derived from capitalism than from labour. While for Hardt and Negri capitalism can only be reactive since it is the proletariat that 'actually invents the social and productive forms that capital will be forced to adopt in the future',²⁰¹ Virno argues that Post-Fordism was an answer to workers' failed struggle against wage labour. He writes,

'Well, I believe that during the 1960s and 1970s there was, in the West, a defeated revolution – the first revolution aimed not against poverty and backwardness, but specifically against the means of capitalistic production, thus, against the Ford assembly-line and wage labour. Post-Fordism, the hybrid forms of life

²⁰¹ Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio, *Empire*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000: 268

characteristics of the contemporary multitude, is the answer to this defeated revolution. Dismissing both Keynesianism and socialist work ethic, post-Fordist capitalism puts forth in its own way typical demands of communism: abolition of work, dissolution of the State, etc. Post-Fordism is the communism of capital'.²⁰²

Virno argues that the social struggles of the 1960s and 1970s have expressed non-socialist demands such as refusal of work, abolition of the State, taste for differences and emphasis on the individual, and thus capital has come up with its own solution: as the *Operai* (workerists) stood up against the reduction of life to work, Post-Fordism has made life and work interchangeable. The surplus value in cognitive capitalism is no longer extracted from labour materialised in a product, but locates itself in the discrepancy between paid and unpaid work – ‘the idle’ time of the mind, which keeps enriching the fruits of immaterial labour. Virno states that ‘This means that the capitalistic initiative orchestrates for its own benefit precisely those material and cultural conditions which would guarantee a calm version of realism for the potential communist’.²⁰³

While Hardt and Negri understand the multitude as the constitutive agent of today’s global, post-territorial world, Paolo Virno’s theorising of the multitude reflects instead the crisis of the traditional state form in terms of the plurality and incommensurability of political experiences – that is, the lack of political engagement and critique. Virno’s take on the multitude is far from considering it a virtue, as the progress made by productive forces, considering it instead a new problematic way of being where it is impossible to say where collective experience ends and the individual begins. Hence Virno’s understanding of the multitude is far from the celebratory tone of Hardt and Negri. Virno shows that the communication networks, increased connectivity and cooperative virtuosity needed for post-Fordist production have some potential, but behind the back, as it were, of capitalists’ and not workers’ power.

²⁰² Virno, Paolo, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, 2004: 111

²⁰³ *Ibid.*: 110

Disappointed with the multitude as a revolutionary subject, Virno puts his hopes within its 'grammar'. Of particular interest here is Virno's reflection on the 'virtuosity' of post-industrial labour. His argument is that post-Fordist capitalism relies on forms of labour that are not orientated primarily to producing a product, but rather to producing cooperation and organisation based on social and linguistic faculties. The contention here is that this reorientation of labour dissolves the traditional separation of labour from political action. The virtuoso artist is the model for this transformation insofar as he focuses on performance and the social space it produces, rather than a separable product. Labour, intellectual activity and political action, according to Virno, are now merged into one inter-connected ethical space of infinite publicity without a public sphere. Virno states, '...when production is no longer in any way the specific locus of the formation of identity, ...it projects itself into every aspect of experience, subsuming linguistic differences, ethical propensities and the nuances of subjectivity'.²⁰⁴ What follows is that language, communication, criticism, debates and contestations are not antidotes or weapons against this new condition but are themselves part of the 'field of conflict'.

Virno's radical thesis consists of suggesting that symbolic or political acts of resistance are not a matter of individual or collective action and choice, but rather a model of being, a 'form of life' of the multitude, which is already political. Therefore, the existing power structures should be ignored and instead we should concentrate on the inventive production of radical public spheres outside current institutions, which eventually could be linked in a single global public sphere in which the multitude can share its desires and aims. Virno's *exit* would involve not a withdrawal into inactivity or passivity, but an intensification of creative activities and self-organising practices outside the existing power structures.

In his recent article 'Three Remarks Regarding the Multitude's Subjectivity and its Aesthetic Component', Virno focuses precisely on the role of the aesthetic

²⁰⁴ Virno, Paolo, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, 2004: 108

dimension, which he calls *aesthesis*, in the multitude's subjectivity. In Virno's view, it is essential to analyse this dimension

'...not because it is concerning a single and specific sector of production (that is concerned with the commodification of the intellect), but because it provides an universal model, that is to say it concerns even the work in a car factory or a steel mill'.²⁰⁵

According to Virno, the artistic communicative model now plays the role that has traditionally been played by the means of production. While in the age of the factory, work and workers are silent, today, as labour is situated outside the machinery, it must keep communicating. Virno states, 'I am convinced that the multitude's subjectivities as well as the precondition of contemporary artistic activity comprises a metabolism of the productive role of spoken language or rather a search for an uniqueness that does not reject repetition but finds its chances precisely in this latter'.²⁰⁶

According to Virno, activities that are not based on the creation of new products or objects but on the discovery and interpretation of existing things through the process of repetition of performances provides a new political model. When Virno says that 'everything has become performative', he is stating precisely that the linguistic-virtuoso qualities of artist and labour coincide today. A condition of repetition permits the process of the product's objectification into an 'end product' without a 'finishing' product; that is to say, this virtuosic form of labour demands a space that is structured precisely as the public or political sphere. Virno writes, 'The distinguishing characteristic of the contemporary metropolis isn't the criss-cross of jargons, but the complete identity of material production and linguistic communication. This identity explains and causes this criss-cross'.²⁰⁷ This new identity, or what Virno calls the "'communicative body' of the multitude, implies not

²⁰⁵ Virno, Paolo, 'Three Remarks Regarding the Multitude's Subjectivity and Its Aesthetic Component', in Birnbaum, Daniel and Graw, Isabelle, *Under Pressure Pictures, Subjects, and the New Spirit of Capitalism*, Sternberg Press, Institut fur Kunstkritik Frankfurt am Main, 2008: 35

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*: 32

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*: 34

only the centrality of linguistic communication but also, most importantly, its radically new quality of having a unitary sensual composition. At the core of the multitude's navigation through the 'unspeakable metropolis' is what Virno calls 'second-order sensualism' – 'a sensualism concerning acoustic, visual, and tactile perceptions that mark a final point, a final result of a theoretical, hypothetical, calculating, technical, sophisticated practice'.²⁰⁸ We can see that Virno's view corresponds to an understanding of an aesthetic state that is not reduced to the knowledge or production of objects, and is rather free and self-determining. Virno's focus on productivity without product ostensibly reintroduces the separation of subjectivity from objectivity that the idea of *absolute art* was introduced to resolve. Indeed, there is a certain subjective idealism to Virno's investment in the 'general intellect' or language as a medium divorced from the medium of producing products. Yet Virno is convinced that this aesthetic component corresponds to the idea of a new type of critique that exists outside or apart from its objects – that of capitalist products – and might eventually overturn capitalism.

Despite their differences, Hardt, Negri and Virno consider post-Fordism a new paradigm where traditional approaches to capitalism, labour and culture are no longer valid. The rise of the general intellect and performative labour dissolved the former structures of exploitation and alienation. What is at issue, they say, is the biopolitical model of social being where power is located in the reproduction of forms of life. There is no longer the traditional cultural sphere, since subjectivity itself, as Virno emphasises, is embedded in the processes of creative capitalism.

This paradigm corresponds to what Luc Boltanski describes as a shift of the Left, which used to identify itself with the critique of capitalist exploitation and alienation, to a position of approval. In his article 'The Present Left and the Longing for Revolution', Boltanski argues that '...the longing for total revolution becomes displaced from the domain of the production of material goods to that of the reproduction of human beings'.²⁰⁹ Consequently, the new social movements, in Boltanski's view, are concerned with the regulation of human life, which in the

²⁰⁸ Virno, Paolo, 'Three Remarks Regarding the Multitude's Subjectivity and Its Aesthetic Component', in Birnbaum, Daniel and Graw, Isabelle, *Under Pressure Pictures, Subjects, and the New Spirit of Capitalism*, Sternberg Press, Institut fur Kunstkritik Frankfurt am Main, 2008: 36

²⁰⁹ Boltanski, Luc, 'The Present Left and the Longing for Revolution', in Birnbaum, Daniel and Graw, Isabelle, *Under Pressure Pictures, Subjects, and the New Spirit of Capitalism*, Sternberg Press, Institut fur Kunstkritik Frankfurt am Main, 2008: 64

current condition is taken for granted. He states, ‘They demand the existing rights to be respected and, although in rather discreet terms, the recognition of new rights – often presented as derivatives of human rights – but do not put the existing institutions as a whole in question’.²¹⁰ Such demands, Boltanski argues, are no longer in opposition to capitalism, but rather in agreement with it. He writes, ‘...there is a left which aspires to total revolution but on a different terrain, that of the generation and the reproduction of human beings and of kinship relations; this is a Left that is no longer anti-capitalist’.²¹¹ Furthermore, this is a Left that is also anti-cultural in the sense that, despite their differences, Negri and Virno do not believe that artistic practices can play a particular role in intervening in the social. For them, culture is either already won – art is multitude – or has become completely redundant.

‘Production of the Self’

In his recently published book *The Immaterial (L'immatériel, 2003)*, Gorz deals with the causes and consequences of the emergence of a globalised neo-liberal post-Fordist system of cognitive capitalism. Responding to the crisis of the Fordist regime when the enormous production facilities did not have enough buyers, capitalists understood that while needs are limited by nature, their desires are not. Gorz writes, ‘To expand these desires, all that was needed was to get rid of the idea that an individual’s purchases corresponded to practical needs and rational considerations. It was unconscious and irrational motivations that had to be appealed to – fantasies and unavowed desires’.²¹² This is how the immaterial dimension came about. It is not that labour has become immaterial – but ‘the heart of value-creation is immaterial work’²¹³ or, as Gorz prefers to put it, ‘immaterial dimension’, which sells material products and services.

This move was accompanied by the transformation of work. Gorz writes, ‘The production process can now no longer be mistaken for a ‘labour process’; rather, the

²¹⁰ Boltanski, Luc, ‘The Present Left and the Longing for Revolution’, in Birnbaum, Daniel and Graw, Isabelle, *Under Pressure Pictures, Subjects, and the New Spirit of Capitalism*, Sternberg Press, Institut für Kunstkritik Frankfurt am Main, 2008: 65

²¹¹ *Ibid.*: 64

²¹² Gorz, Andre, *The Immaterial Knowledge, Value and Capital*, (2003) trans. Turner, Chris, Seagull Books, London New York Calcutta, 2010: 78

²¹³ *Ibid.*: 9

‘work’ has become ‘to produce oneself’. Post-Fordist workers have to come to work with all their cultural and social baggage and skills – what Gorz calls a ‘vernacular’ knowledge, since an individual cannot produce himself on his own. Gorz states, ‘The production of self does not happen out of nothing. It takes place on the basis of a shared culture transmitted by primary socialisation and common forms of experiential knowledge’²¹⁴. What was at issue was to turn this knowledge into ‘personal subjects’.

Negri, for example, argues that value today is produced en masse, and thus immaterial labour has the ability to create new types of products that do not divide but unite and mobilise the most universal aspects of human beings such as intellect, senses, language, emotions etc. According to Gorz, value is produced by taking from what belongs to all and personalising it in such a way as to make it appeal not to everyone collectively, but to each private individual. Gorz writes,

‘The advertising industry constantly fulfilled a dual economic and political function by appealing not to imagination and desires of all, but to the imagination and desire of each as a private person. It does not promise potential buyers an improvement in their shared condition. It promises, rather, that each person can escape the common condition by becoming the “happy privileged individual” who is able to buy herself some new, scarce, improved, distinctive item’.²¹⁵

Contrary to Hardt and Negri, who view immaterial labour as the opening of new forms of sociability and unity of intellect and senses, Gorz understands it as ‘an antisocial socialization’ that promotes the pursuit of individual solutions to collective problems and a shared condition.

Rather than envisaging post-Fordism as spontaneous communism, Gorz thinks about it in terms of the paradigm of prostitution. Workers who sell their imaginations and personalities cannot be paid the ‘market rate,’ since what they offer is beyond comparison and evaluation. The most valued forms of knowledge in the cognitive economy cannot be systematically taught, but are the product of a rich lifestyle and culture. As Gorz has argued in his earlier work, *Critique of Economic Reason* (1989), the purchasing of sexual services is the purest form of a master-servant

²¹⁴ Gorz, Andre, *The Immaterial Knowledge, Value and Capital*, (2003) trans. Turner, Chris, Seagull Books, London New York Calcutta, 2010: 12

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 80

relationship, which is becoming ubiquitous in post-Fordist capitalist society. The physical nature of the sexual device always makes the simulation of personal involvement. The enjoyment cannot be sold to anyone else without giving of herself into the bargain. The conventional argument that prostitution is exploitative, Gorz argues, misses the point. It is not that prostitutes are paid less than the value of what they give, but that they give something that cannot be paid for, since it is already observed. A better payment cannot therefore settle the 'account,' but only cheapen and mystify what is already a relationship of servility.²¹⁶

Thus, applied to the paradigm of immaterial labour, this giving of oneself and the transmission of meaning mystifies the relations of servility between the capitalist and the so-called immaterial worker, not radically changing it, as Negri argues, in favour of open, radically new forms of life. Instead, Gorz maintains, capitalists incorporate cultural forms of life in order to make them suitable to the monetary exchange-value.

In fact, Gorz considers the emergence of post-Fordism as capital's move to eliminate its dependency on living labour. Rather than a response to the more materialist challenge posed by mainstream labour unions in search of expanded social benefits, shorter hours and higher wages, capitalists have started to transform knowledge into immaterial capital. What has really become immaterial, Gorz says, is not labour, but capital. Gorz writes, 'The major part of profits is achieved on the basis of the intangible dimension of commodities. Their 'materialisation' becomes secondary from the economic point of view'.²¹⁷ For example, individuals take up various investments or insurance policies because symbolically they represent the 'good life' – attributes that are advertised through artistic devices. In cognitive capitalism, its main productive source – knowledge – is the outcome of the unpaid collective activity of a 'self-production' or 'production of subjectivity'. 'It is', Gorz writes,

'...to a large extent, "general intelligence", shared culture, lived and lived practical knowledge. It has no exchange value, which means that it can, in theory, be shared at will, as anyone and everyone sees fit, at no charge, particularly on the Internet'.²¹⁸

²¹⁶ Gorz, Andre, *Critique of Economic Reason* (1989), Verso, 2011

²¹⁷ Gorz, Andre, *The Immaterial Knowledge, Value and Capital*, (2003) trans. Turner, Chris, Seagull Books, London New York Calcutta, 2010: 57

²¹⁸ Gorz, Andre, *The Immaterial Knowledge, Value and Capital*, (2003) trans. Turner, Chris, Seagull Books, London New York Calcutta, 2010: 52-53

However, while capitalists cannot appropriate natural riches and common goods, they can create artificial barriers such as rights of access. Gorz writes, ‘Control of access is, we shall see, a preferential form for the conversion of immaterial wealth into capital’.²¹⁹ For example, brands function precisely through restricting immaterial or symbolic capital to a monopoly. Gorz states, ‘It appropriates cultural life, first, by using artistic works to promote brands and then, reversing the procedure, by putting commercial brand names on presentations of art works’.²²⁰ The brand name always claims to be the symbol of excellence and the source knowledge, but ‘...it has its source in the monopoly of knowledge, in the exclusiveness of the qualities which that knowledge confers on the commodity that embody it...’²²¹

A true knowledge economy, Gorz argues, would be an economy based on zero-cost exchange and pooled resources, where the knowledge would be treated as a common property. To exploit knowledge and turn it into capital, the capitalist enterprise must privatise it and ensure its scarcity with all manner of private licences and copyrights. However, this transformation to a post-Fordist knowledge economy in which profits extracted through ‘the production of self’ does not, according to Gorz, lead either to a ‘spontaneous communism’ or to the end of humanity and culture. In fact, Gorz argues, today capitalism generates a crisis that is shaking society to its roots. The new form of wealth creation is almost impossible to measure in monetary terms and, as a consequence, traditional notions of economics have begun to crumble. Gorz writes,

‘Formalized knowledge opens up the prospect, then, of the economy evolving towards affluence, which means also an economy in which production, requiring less and less immediate labour, distributes fewer and fewer means of payment. The exchange-value of products tends to diminish and to lead, sooner or later, to a decrease in the monetary value of total wealth produced, alongside a decrease in the volume of profits’.²²²

²¹⁹ Gorz, Andre, *The Immaterial Knowledge, Value and Capital*, (2003) trans. Turner, Chris, Seagull Books, London New York Calcutta, 2010: 39

²²⁰ *Ibid.*: 84

²²¹ *Ibid.*: 70

²²² *Ibid.*: 54

Meanwhile, capitalism can function only if there are spheres of activity free from capitalist logic, but in this knowledge economy this other space and the immaterial production are indistinguishable, and capitalism therefore begins to look suspicious.

Gorz writes, 'Experimentation with other ways of life and other social relations in the interstices of a society that is falling apart attacks the control capital experts on mind and bodies and delegitimizes it. The constraints and values of capitalist society are no longer perceived as natural, and this liberated the powers of imagination'.²²³

What follows is that post-Fordist capitalism should be considered as causing crisis in all areas – from economy to culture – rather than being a matrix of culture or economic necessities. Gorz maintains that the stakes in the conflict are not cultural – or even economic, for that matter – but rather '...mask some profoundly political issues'.²²⁴

The Neo-liberal Political Project

That is why David Harvey prefers to speak of the post-Fordist economic restructuring in terms of the neo-liberal political project, the ultimate aim of which was to reassert the power of capital over the refusal of the capitalist work discipline and ethics. 'Fordist' assembly lines and 'brick and mortar' factories were replaced with de-spatialised networks of 'just-in-time' manufacturing that responded quickly to an ever-shifting world market for goods and services. Heavy manufacturing was shifted to lower-cost places. This transformation was in fact a neo-liberal counter-revolution on the back of a free-market revolution. Resistance to market discipline was becoming widespread in the 1960s and 1970s, and not just among university students. In the United States, for example, unauthorised wildcat strikes reached a post-war high between 1962 and 1973, and work refusals among public service employees grew nine-fold. According to the American 'Social History Project', such confrontations were linked with a growing democratic spirit that not only inspired a counter-culture, but also 'surged through the nation's factories'.²²⁵ As Harvey

²²³ Gorz, Andre, *The Immaterial Knowledge, Value and Capital*, (2003) trans. Turner, Chris, Seagull Books, London New York Calcutta, 2010: 128

²²⁴ *Ibid.*: 128

²²⁵ American Social History Project, *Who Built America? Working People and The Nation's Economy, Politics, Culture and Society*, Volume 2, 'From the Gilded Age to the Present', CUNY: City University of New York, 1992: 597

argues, New York in the late 1970s represents the first application of Milton Friedman's ultra-free-market or neo-liberal policies. Its long-term agenda redirected public resources away from social services into the private business sector while effectively draining support from housing activists and other community-based groups.²²⁶ According to Harvey, New York's restructuring was a test-drive for a 'neo-liberal' answer to post-war economic problems, over-accumulation of capital, falling profits, competition from emerging markets around the globe and, most importantly, the doubting of a capitalist structure and discipline. From now on, the interests of capital and of the nation states must dovetail. Markets must become free, since, connected to the state, they were challenged. Capitalist elites have managed to 'emancipate' themselves from political power and global corporations became independent of labour, class and politics.

According to Harvey, neo-liberalism, presented as a permanent solution to the instability of capitalism, has in fact been built on over-accumulation and dangerously uneven development across the world. Since the 1990s, there has been massive financialisation – the expansion of capital way beyond the functionality of trade and investment. For most workers, the post-Fordist economic restructuring brought with it lower pay, far longer work hours, weaker unions and no safety. With emphasis on cognitive as opposed to manual labour, a few were allowed to be productive: one has either to succeed or fail miserably. Hence Harvey maintains that neo-liberalism does not serve a practical function in actually pursuing strategies of 'accumulations by dispossession'.²²⁷ It is mainly, he argues, 'a benevolent mask full of wonderful-sounding words like freedom, liberty, choice, and rights, to hide the grim realities of the restoration of reconstitution of naked class power'.²²⁸

However, many individuals who did not necessarily belong to the so-called upper or middle classes have in fact become wealthy and powerful under neo-liberalism, which, rather than being, as Harvey, argues, 'a benevolent mask', does indeed provide freedom, liberty, choice and rights, but according to its own interpretation.

The ongoing debate and confusion regarding what actually constitutes the core of post-Fordist transformation – culture, labour, capital, technology or a class theory – manifests the fact that contemporary capitalism cannot be reduced to a single, self-

²²⁶ Harvey, David, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, 2005

²²⁷ *Ibid.*: 159-163

²²⁸ *Ibid.*: 119

defining mechanism, and that it would be more productive to understand capitalism as a complex process in which cultural, economic, political and other determinations, which all have their own logic, come together as the determination of the phenomenon as a whole. Under the condition of globalisation, the potential space for such a determination becomes wider and more sophisticated. Ernesto Laclau writes that

‘...the coherence of capitalism as a social formation cannot be derived from the mere logical analysis of the contradictions implicit in the commodity form, for the social affectivity of capitalism depends on its relation to a heterogeneous outside that it can control through unstable power relations, but which cannot be derived from its own endogenous logic.’²²⁹

The answer to the capitalist ‘problem,’ then, is power relations. If capitalist determination is not self-determined, then it consists of an overdetermination of heterogeneous elements – hegemony. For that reason, a Gramscian ‘war of position’ exists in society. In fact, Boltanski refers to this ongoing hegemonic struggle when he speaks of the relationship between capitalism and critiques.

Dwelling on the relationship between capitalism and the Left, which he identifies with critiques – the critique of exploitation, or ‘social critique’, developed traditionally by the worker's movement, and the critique of alienation, or ‘artistic critique’ – Boltanski argues that capitalism and critiques mutually require each other in two different aspects: on the one hand, the revolutionary tendency of capitalism depends on its ability to integrate different critiques in order to adapt models of production to changing historical conditions. Boltanski writes,

‘As we demonstrated in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, whole sections of artistic critique of capitalism were integrated into the management rhetoric. This rhetoric, itself denouncing Taylorism and standardization, in the 1980s recognized the validity of the producers’ aspirations for autonomy and creativity, and the

²²⁹ Laclau Ernesto, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, London, New York, 2007: 235-236

justification of the consumers' hope to find goods and services on the market that are both of a higher quality and more unique'.²³⁰

On the other hand, Boltanski maintains, the political Left itself depends on the very models of production that are at the same time the targets of its social criticism.

According to Boltanski, capitalism on its own is an absurd system in which capitalists are chained to endless processes; however, capitalist accumulation and networks always manage to mobilise even those who are hostile to its practices. This happens, in Boltanski's view, because capitalism is constantly justified. He states, 'We shall call the spirit of capitalism the ideology that justifies the engagement in capitalism...It is precisely because it is the object of critique that capitalism is led to being justified. In the absence of critique, justification would be needless'.²³¹

What Boltanski shows is that capitalism is responsive to critiques; however, a possibility of change depends on widening the horizon of these critiques beyond just the 'anti-capitalist' dimension. The way to challenge capitalism does not lie in narrowing or withholding critiques, but widening and deepening them in all directions.

Back to the Hegemonic Struggle

Chantal Mouffe argues that the transition from the Fordist to the post-Fordist regime is better understood in terms of hegemony: it is not culture or economy that is the matrix of post-Fordism, but the rearticulation of some demands in a way that neutralises their critical potentials. Potentials are always there, but their realisation depends on the re-articulation of critiques. Following Boltanski and Chiapello, who have demonstrated how the demands for autonomy, authenticity and flexibility of

²³⁰ Boltanski, Luc, 'The Present Left and the Longing for Revolution', in Birnbaum, Daniel and Graw, Isabelle, *Under Pressure Pictures, Subjects, and the New Spirit of Capitalism*, Sternberg Press, Institut fur Kunstkritik Frankfurt am Main, 2008: 66

²³¹ Boltanski, Luc, 'The Present Left and the Longing for Revolution', in Birnbaum, Daniel and Graw, Isabelle, *Under Pressure Pictures, Subjects, and the New Spirit of Capitalism*, Sternberg Press, Institut fur Kunstkritik Frankfurt am Main, 2008: 58

what they call an ‘artistic critique’ were implemented in the development of the post-Fordist conditions, Mouffe argues that this transition was a Gramscian ‘passive revolution’ when challenging the existing structure demands was re-articulated into the institutional framework. People wanted to be free and authentic and this is what they achieved. It is only that their open demands for a different life were not substantiated by any institutional change, and therefore the previous hegemonic structure absorbed and modified it in a way it could understand and use it.

Mouffe writes, ‘My problem with Operaist and post-Operaist views is that...they tend to see this transition as if it was exclusively moved by one single logic, the workers’ resistances to the process of exploitation forcing the capitalists to reorganise the process of production, and to move to the post-Fordist era of immaterial labour’.²³² Instead, Mouffe argues, capital has also played a creative and constructive role in this process. What is at issue is that the demands for autonomy of the 1960s movements were rearticulated in a new configuration suitable for capitalist logic. Mouffe writes, ‘Nowadays artistic and cultural production play a central role in the process of capital valorisation and it has become an important element of capitalist productivity’.²³³

It was an ‘artistic critique’ that was not articulated together with other demands, and then was easily re-articulated in the way that suited capitalism. In fact, this ‘artistic critique’ has become the next logic, the heart of capitalism, which otherwise lacks any meaning. Capitalism has become ‘art-friendly’ not because human creativity has won, but because the uniqueness of the goods, achieved through what Gorz calls an ‘immaterial dimension,’ could make everyone authentic. It is not that all sorts of artistic practices are welcomed by post-Fordism, but only that these ideas and concepts can be transformed in the mechanism of branding and the production of uniqueness. The financialised era of sign production has moved art from the margins to the central position. Many artists today have adopted concepts such as networking or niche marketing from business. In the era of ‘self-production’, other artistic activities that do not stem from the commercial culture also appear as an extension of capital.

²³² Mouffe, Chantal, ‘Democratic Politics in the Age of Post-Fordism’, *Open*, Nai Publishers, SKOR, 2009, No.16: 36

²³³ Mouffe, Chantal, ‘Cultural Workers as Organic Intellectuals’, *The Artist as Public Intellectual?*, Schlebrugge.Editor, Akademie der Bildenden Künste Wien, 2011: 154

The production of subjectivity today is more important than ever. Therefore, we must engage with this terrain. However, this engagement cannot be considered in terms of exodus as constructing some future space for advanced, open and autonomous forms of life outside existing institutions, but as the disarticulation and re-articulation of existing practices and discourses. Mouffe states, 'The strategy of exodus, based on ontology of immanence, supposes the possibility of a redemptive leap into a society, beyond politics and sovereignty, where the multitude would be able to immediately rule itself and act in concert without the need of law or the state and where antagonism would have disappeared. The hegemonic strategy, in contrast, recognises that antagonism is irreducible and that as a consequence social objectivity can never be fully constituted and that, as a consequence, a fully inclusive consensus and an absolute democracy are never available'.²³⁴

Mouffe points out that the post-Operaist conception of the multitude as a new privileged agent repeats the one of Marx's proletariat, only the problem – capitalism – is now envisaged as a solution: the idea is that individuals should follow their desires and create more, thus their 'life' form would prevail over the 'dead labour' of capital. However, Mouffe reminds us that 'There is no unique privileged position from which a uniform continuity of effects will follow, concluding with the transformation of society as a whole'.²³⁵ What follows is that labour or the relations of production are not the only site for the emergence of antagonisms; all institutions, systems and discourses are the surfaces where antagonisms and social protests emerge. Social agents lack any essence. If there is such a thing as political agency, it must take place within a social 'text' that consists of different, differing, multiple and conflicting social positions. No privileged signifier such as the economy or class structure could possibly affect all of these positions, because capitalism is not a totality but a 'text' with a multiplicity of interpretive possibilities that generate temporal moments of subjectivity. Mouffe states,

'Every order is the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices. Society is not to be seen as the unfolding logic exterior to itself, whatever the source of this logic could be: forces of production, development of the Spirit, laws of history, etc. The frontier between the social and the political is essentially unstable

²³⁴ Mouffe, Chantal, 'Critique a Counter-Hegemonic Intervention', <http://eicpcp.net/transversal/0808/mouffe/en>

²³⁵ *Ibid.*: 169

and requires constant displacements and renegotiations between social agents'.²³⁶

Instead of a 'unified discourse', Mouffe invites us to concentrate on 'the de-centering', on maximum autonomisation of the different discourses, and not their linking and connectivity. She states,

'As far as politics is concerned, this means the need to envisage it in terms of a hegemonic struggle between conflicting hegemonic projects attempting to incarnate the universal and to define the symbolic parameters of social life. Hegemony is obtained through the construction of nodal points, which discursively fix the meaning of institutions and social practices and articulate the "common sense" through which a given conception of reality is established.'²³⁷

It is these 'nodal points' of power, the fixed sites of discourses and practices, that need to be questioned and re-articulated, not general terms such as 'capitalism' or 'culture'. According to the hegemonic approach, it is the political that has a central structuring role, since social agents lack essence and their identities are not predetermined. Mouffe writes, 'What is at stake in the transformation of political identities is not a rationalist appeal to the true interests of the subject but the inscription of the social agent in practices that will mobilize its effects in a way that disarticulates the framework in which the dominant process of identification is taking place, so as to bring about other forms of identifications'.²³⁸

Post-Fordism: Consequences and New Strategies

Coming from the hegemonic perspective, we can now understand the post-Fordist consequences for artistic practices in a different way to that of Negri or Virno, and outline the possible critical trajectory.

The aesthetic strategies of counter-culture that the Frankfurt school has thought of as emancipatory in themselves are now used to promote the production of desires: self-production and self-exploitation. This happens because disarticulated elements of the critique of the 'consumer society' that supposedly deprives individuals of their true consciousness were later re-articulated through the post-Fordist transition. While

²³⁶ Mouffe, Chantal, 'Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces', *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, vol.1, no. 2, Summer 2007, available at www.artandresearch.org.uk

²³⁷ *Ibid.*.

²³⁸ Mouffe, Chantal, 'Cultural Workers as Organic Intellectuals', *The Artist as Public Intellectual?*, Schlebrugge, Editor, Akademie der Bildenden Künste Wien, 2011: 158

capital has restored its challenged legitimacy through hegemonic appropriation, it had corrosive effects on artists and art institutions. Today, artistic activity appears as a mere extension of capital, which led many thinkers to conclude that the cultural sphere is no longer sustainable or, on the contrary, that it is everywhere. Therefore individuals practice art in such a way that it is either socially minded – divorced from aesthetic and therefore preserved as art from capitalism – or they think that just to be creative is enough on its own – any artistic action is intrinsically political. Benjamin Buchloh, for example, branded the return of figuration in the 1980s as a politically regressive slip, and British critic John Walker went further and implicated artistic producers in the right-wing shift, stating that ‘some curators who had supported political art in the 1970s welcomed a resurgence of traditional art forms’²³⁹ and that the 1981 Royal Academy’s exhibition in London entitled *New Spirit of Painting* was an all-male affair that treated the feminist art movement as if it had never happened. The artistic history and medium were replaced with an interpretive artistic vocabulary based on social history, cultural identity and a value to a specific community. Gregory Sholette argues that the rise of socially aware artistic practices corresponded to the lack of authority such as the status of the state, culture etc. He writes,

‘Indeed, it is impossible to imagine this level of social hacking taking place prior to the collapse of the Keynesian paradigm of an administered society whose intellectual and artistic banalities Adorno resolutely railed against. Prior to the rise of post-Fordist enterprise culture the notion of a broader public good was drilled into the population from birth to old age. Today every individual is in a constant state of warfare with every other individual. Only a radically failed society could give birth to fantasies of triumphant communality such as relational aesthetics or to the hyperbolic pragmatism of self-organised mock-institutions. It might also be giving birth, circumstances permitting, to a new conception of the political party or even the state’.²⁴⁰

However, it was not art or artistic practices that caused the post-Fordist transformation. The defeat of the Left and re-articulation of the artistic critique in the way that suited capital is what led to a condition in which it seems that there is no longer any space for art to intervene critically. Meanwhile, this space can always be

²³⁹ Walker, John, *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970s Britain*, I.B. Tauris, 2002: 255

²⁴⁰ Sholette, Gregory, *Dark Matter*, Pluto Press, 2011: 154

constructed of art to engage with social reality hegemonically. The artist emerges as a social figure, as both the product of society and the agent of political interests. From this point of view, the status of object, the status of the 'artwork,' is not the expression of a circumscribed meaning, but a tool to construct subject.

Artistic practices need to resume their cultural authority instead of providing the mock institutions to which Sholette refers. The current imaginary can be undermined only if artists act in both places: they are visible as art and present in the art world and at the same time intervene in the multiplicity of social spaces. Instead of promoting a total creativity in the style of the immaterial labour or the case of political activism where art is no longer aesthetically visible, what is needed is a new understanding of artistic production where subject and object are perceived as meaning written into actions. Art here is envisaged as a model of thinking about the world, it is not a claim about reality but also an act of changing this reality. To be able to act as what Gramsci once articulated as 'organic intellectual' – meaning that the intellectual action follows the historically created and not individually endowed connection and reflection of the individual to the group – one must come to terms with a hegemonic structure of any social order, but also grasp the specificity of artistic visibility, since it plays such a strategic role in the reproduction of capitalism. What has changed is not the paradigm of power, but the way subjectivity is produced today through 'self-production' and by invoking various desires.

The post-Fordist transformation allows us to understand that any critique could be successfully neutralised if it does not become meaningful through institutional conditions and infused into the popular identities. There are many artists who are desperately trying to oppose the given imaginary environment, but they find it difficult to do so. Partly this happens because many artists still perceive artistic practice as a problem of an individual reflection and judgement – and this is the legacy of the Frankfurt school, which has attempted to fix the problem of the political in the aesthetic realm – but this situation also reflects on the way our understanding and perception of culture has changed as a result of artistic practices having coincided with capitalism on the terrain of production of unique goods and uniqueness. For the Russian thinker and artist Dmitriy Prigov (1934-2007) an immanent criticality begins in the constant awareness of the local cultural context and its limits. In the era of global capitalism, this awareness becomes increasingly problematic and thus increasingly artificial. As Prigov notes, 'People simply cannot

comprehend what kind of political and cultural situation they are in'.²⁴¹ Since the objective structures of society are no longer clearly distinguishable, the aesthetic dimension as a 'space' between the latter and the individual tends to vanish. As a result, what we are dealing with is not a radically new human being or subjectivity, but 'a completely alien conception of arts and culture' that must be scrutinised. Prigov writes, 'Culture and arts would presuppose a completely new framework, where elements would be brought together in a different way. The artist in this new situation could look like a 'flying machine'...and this is what we must question'.²⁴² According to Prigov, at times of 'over-communication', the value of the word is lost. He states, 'for example, the verbal zone used to be the one where all values and systems were formulated. In contemporary capitalism the radical literature, poetry has become completely redundant. The zone of influence and actuality has moved from the verbal to the visual. Verbalism does not have the necessary speed, form (inclusiveness) and methodology, which are needed at the age of over-communication. If in the recent past the process of identification with particular social group/classes consisted of the quotation of authors, today the identification is about quotations from TV series or advertisement or singing the latest hits'.²⁴³ In a similar way, Prigov contends, the value of the visual in times of extra-visibility is also becoming redundant, and this is what artists can fight with their 'permanent presence' so that '...the aesthetic dimension does not appear to be a mere reflection of the capital's powers'.²⁴⁴

Conclusion

We should approach post-Fordist transformation neither optimistically, as the victory of the immaterial labour and general intellect, nor pessimistically where there is no longer any space for artistic practices to provide critique, but hegemonically. Envisaged from the hegemonic point of view, the new forms of production relying heavily on semiotic techniques to produce desirable models of subjectivity, open up a new battleground for emancipatory politics and artistic practices can make a valuable contribution through intervening in this terrain with aim to show that there is a political dimension in social relations, which today

²⁴¹ Prigov, Dmitry, 'I, the Monument...', lecture at Moscow Humanitarian Club, 18 June 2007, *Vzglyad (Outlook) Business Newspaper*, 27 August, 2007

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

appear as capital's extensions. The strategic importance of artistic techniques is not a solution or a problem standing in the way of transforming given social order but a form in which the strategic intervention should take place in a multiplicity of social spaces. Instead of Shelley's hope that the artists are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind or, for that matter, Stalin's engineers of the human soul, what is at stake is to question the myth of art as a specific world capable of being taken over or, on the contrary, to overcome given social order.

Envisaging what artistic critical intervention means requires not only an adequate grasp of what democratic politics entail and a political understanding of the nature of post-Fordist transition but also a different approach to aesthetics. There is a democratic paradox and there is also an aesthetical paradox – the questioning of the aesthetical judgment that reveals, through the ongoing practice of art, a conceptual void of judgment *per se*.

Chapter Four

Aesthetical Paradox

To be able to approach current hegemony politically, artistic practices should not only address the complex nature of the construction of political identities, but also regain the specificity of art, the necessity of an aesthetical judgment that produces controversy and dissent. The transformation of politics and capitalism has resulted in the current situation, characterised, on one side, as the triumph of aestheticism, and art's tendency to abandon the realm of aesthetical judgments on the other. Many today contend that art theory and practice no longer needs aesthetics, since the ethical significance of aesthetic judgments pertaining to nature has disappeared. However, we have never judged nature, and prior to what Jacques Rancière refers to as the modern 'aesthetic regime' of art, there was also no 'critique' of art. Following a long history of various aesthetic regimes' identification with politics, what Boris Groys defines as a 'commandeering of politics by a will to art', it is believed that there must be no shared aesthetic attitude as a utopian supposition of a human universality. Rather, art today should appeal to everybody, there should be a 'democracy of aesthetical experiences'. We must therefore, as Deleuze says, 'have done with judgement'.²⁴⁵ However, why and how do we judge aesthetical objects? What does an aesthetical judgement mean? Do we have to have to choose between aesthetics without art or art without aesthetics? Aesthetics do not need art – there is little point in judging nature or beauty – but what is at issue in the aesthetical judgement is the aesthetic critique of the latter, which does not judge but rather demonstrates the structural impossibility of any judgements. Today, indeed, aesthetic beauty has triumphed, invading everything; meanwhile, aesthetic critique is missing, since it is not a judgement about something aesthetic – nature, for example – it means judgement, which is aesthetically enacted.

²⁴⁵ Deleuze, Gilles, 'To Have Done with Judgment', *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1997: 126-135

We will begin our discussion of aesthetic critique with Yves Michaud's account of 'aesthetics without art,' followed by Boris Groys' consideration of the current situation as a progressive 'art atheism', where the true autonomy of art can only be guaranteed by the absence of aesthetic judgments. Groys suggests that the only way out of both postmodernist malaise and aesthetical – 'beautiful and impressive' – spaces of power, is to 'design ourselves'. We will then turn to Jacques Rancière, who connects the idea of a *sensus communis* with the egalitarian disagreement with the partition of the sensible. Rancière explores the paradoxical nature of aesthetic judgement to suggest that the artwork is not a judgement, but rather an actualisation of a structural impossibility of any judgements. The essence of artistic critique lies not within drawing a distinction of value but within a paradoxical practice of questioning the judgement *per se*. Thus, Rancière's vision of aesthetics corresponds to 'scenes of dissensus'²⁴⁶ – an understanding of aesthetics that reorganise the sensible, which neither proposes the existence of 'a reality concealed behind apparatuses' or market, nor a 'single regime of presentation and interpretation,' but rather a sensible one that demonstrates, through the practice of its judgements on art, how one can judge in general.

Rancière argues that what is needed today is a shift in approach to aesthetics, the one that aims to uncouple its relation to politics and economics, between the spectators and artists. Aesthetical experience for Rancière is the experience of a break, a disconnection from one sensory world to the other. Similarly to Rancière, Russian thinker Dmitriy Prigov views aesthetics as a 'third eye' through which the 'power of the gaze can disrupt the gaze of the power'. Rancière and Prigov both maintain that there is a fundamental connection between aesthetical critique and emancipatory logic. According to them, artistic practices need to broaden aesthetical strategies. The beautiful is not the reactionary and impressive, but the impossible. Aesthetics for them challenge both individualistic and rational perspectives of the social reality, since aesthetic critique runs deeper than any social fluctuations and show, through the artistic performance of the judgment, that societal systems, relations and subjects

²⁴⁶ Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London New York, 2009: 48

lack any essence, and that the only agreement we can have is the aesthetical ‘agreement’, which exposes and constructed of the flawed nature of any agreements.

Aesthetics Without Art?

French Professor of Philosophy Yves Michaud argues that in a globalised society of consumerism, art is demanded like any other product and aesthetic beauty has triumphed, invading everything. We consume beauty; there is a huge demand for it and hence for artists, but art appears to dissolve, becoming the ‘air we breathe’ – our aesthetic atmosphere. In his book *Art in a Gaseous State (L’art à l’état gazeux. Essai sur le triomphe de l’esthétique, 2003)*, Michaud argues that air-soluble works are reduced to single aesthetic experience, which makes everyone an ultimate spectator. This aesthetic experience is the only thing that remains when one neglects the stage object in favour of its mode of reception. What is true for the arts is also true for the *mise en scène*, which is made up of objects that are even more fragile and that disappear as time goes by: the works, Michaud writes, ‘no longer aim to represent nor to signify. They do not refer to anything beyond themselves: they no longer symbolise. They no longer even count as objects made sacred but aim to directly produce intense or specific experiences’.²⁴⁷ We are then in a paradoxical situation facing, or rather inside, the work: it is material, sensitive and physical; meanwhile what really matters is no longer this materiality, but an experience. In this way, the work seems to *dematerialise* itself, it becomes virtual and thus prevents us from being able to distinguish its properties or significations. Michaud states, ‘this aura, this halo, this perfume, this gas whatever you want to call it, expresses through fashion the identity of the time’.²⁴⁸ Michaud speaks of the ‘new regime of attention which privileges scanning over reading and deciphering of meanings. The image is fluid and mobile, less a spectacle or a datum than an element of a chain of

²⁴⁷ Yves Michaud. *L’art à l’état gazeux. Essai sur le triomphe de l’esthétique*. Paris, Stock, 2003: 100, translated by Patrice Pavis, ‘Dramatic Criticism Faced with *Mise En Scene*’, *Obscena*, 1 August, 2009, available online:

http://www.revistaobscena.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=98%3Aessay&catid=13%3Aarticles&Itemid=159&lang=en

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*.

action'.²⁴⁹ Having cut itself loose from the referential sequence of which it was a part, the image is 'free' to be harnessed in any direction.

For Michaud, contemporary art represents aesthetics without art – that is, without making any aesthetic judgments. All criteria, according to Michaud, have evaporated: '...The judgment involved in aesthetic appreciation is identified with a judgment based on criteria and norms recognized by a particular community, and, potentially, by the whole of humanity. The triumph of 'anything goes' thus marks the end of aesthetics and even of art itself'.²⁵⁰ 'Beauty rules;' meanwhile, the world is not becoming a more beautiful place. Aesthetics won through the trivialisation of beauty, by shaping the status of the 'works of art' as 'precious and rare', invested with aura and magic qualities. Michaud states, 'The 'aesthetic' is cultivated, diffused and consumed in a world emptied of the works of art'.²⁵¹ It is jumpers in a shop that are as beautiful as the works of art, which, according to Michaud, have become, in the present hedonistic environment, yet another brand²⁵², universally accessible as a result of the process of mass production and mass quest for authenticity. There seems to be a growing tendency of demanding that cultural institutions appeal to a broad public not only to earn revenue, but also to satisfy all needs for art. Art should not be 'elitist,' but pluralistic – it should be free from a tyranny of an aesthetical judgment about what art looks like. Since the statement 'this is art' presupposes an aesthetical judgment without making one, art schools today prefer to be called 'visual culture departments,' and instead of the word 'art', the phrase 'cultural practice' is often used.

²⁴⁹ Yves Michaud. *L'art à l'état gazeux. Essai sur le triomphe de l'esthétique*. Paris, Stock, 2003: 100, translated by Patrice Pavis, 'Dramatic Criticism Faced with Mise En Scene', *Obscena*, 1 August, 2009: 9

²⁵⁰ Michaud, Yves, *L'art à l'état gazeux*, Paris, Stock. 2003: 9, trans. Bauman, Zygmunt, 'Culture and Management', *Parallax*, 2004, vol. 10, np. 2, 63-72

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*.

²⁵² In 1999 Maurizio Cattelan, the 'enfant terrible' of the art world, organised a fictitious 6th *Caribbean Biennial of Contemporary Art* in the bare form of a tourist package for selected individuals.

Dwelling on Michaud's reflections regarding the 'gaseous state of art' where 'a great seriousness in the aesthetic attitude' has been replaced by 'hedonism, spectacle and emotions', it appears that he is making two main points: the first is that various products and discourses have a very strong aesthetic impact, which actually emphasises how crucial, compared to all sorts of values, aesthetics are; and the second one is that the excess of this 'aesthetical perfume' manifests the 'death of a certain form of art'. He states, 'from this point onwards we must imagine that we are dealing with non-objective aesthetics, with experiences. There is, therefore, no transmission of ideas, but only of experiences, of ways to feel, of breaths of sensations, of emotions'. Michaud points out the 'loneliness of the artist' in the aesthetical world, the artist who seeks a direct relationship with the market, audiences or nature, 'skipping the mediation of the critic'.²⁵³

While in designer capitalism it has become imperative to put aesthetical strategies to use – marketing employs the surface aesthetics of the avant-garde or conceptual art to imbue brands with an egalitarian feel – these aesthetical values are not necessarily about art. For example, for Kant, pure aesthetic judgements are never about art, but about nature. What seems to be at issue here is the assumed connection between art and aesthetics when art is understood as a system, characterised by a particular aesthetical strategy, which should maintain a separate sphere of 'free play' outside of ideology or market. There is an implication that art must have its own aesthetics, where image cannot be 'harnessed in any direction,' but must contain a particular meaning. However, is there such a thing as a 'free image'? Who or what decides on its freedom?

Michaud appears to be nostalgic about the unity of art and aesthetics that are often seen as being interchangeable, with 'aesthetics' generally bearing the weight of criticism and judgment. Aesthetics, Michaud argues, should belong to art. In fact, we make aesthetical judgments every day and these values represent 'aesthetics of

²⁵³ Puglisi, Luigi's interview with Michaud, Yves, 'Evaporating Theory', *Architectural Design*, Volume 79, Issue 1, January 2009

politics’ as the symbolic order aestheticised in a particular way. While today many activities share aesthetical features, they still lack essential aesthetic qualities. For example, Ruth Lorand, an academic, critic and the author of *Aesthetic Theory, a Theory of Order, Beauty and Art* (2000), points out that the difference between aesthetics and an aesthetic point of view resembles the difference between gossip and a fictional story. While gossip focuses on the individual, its beginning is random and so is its ending – it has no general bearing; a fictional story always has some general bearing or insight that extends beyond the particular case. Thus, while gossip has many aesthetic features, it does not possess any aesthetics, in the sense that it does not create beauty as a type of order that provides a new understanding of materials taken from experience. For Lorand, aesthetics are always about beauty, in the sense that it has an internal necessity that provides new insights, while everyday aesthetics – whether TV or fashion – belong to another world, which has different objectives. In fact, Lorand argues, aesthetics are not about objectives, but about beauty, and the latter is always unpredictable, since it involves a new twist, a new understanding of a given situation.²⁵⁴ While, as Michaud says, ‘aesthetic beauty has triumphed invading everything...we consume beauty’, the latter does not belong to aesthetics, since this ‘beauty’ is predictable – anything with some aesthetic features such as uniqueness or novelty is considered beautiful – but beauty is not unique; on the contrary, it must have some general bearing.

Kant saw a glimmer of hope in the fact that all human beings are inclined to see beauty in nature and, while he knew that the one universal constant in human history remains war, Kant maintained that we cannot renounce the mere idea of humans being endowed with *sensus communis* without renouncing our own humanity, and that judgements about beauty are the terrain where we automatically make this postulate. When one makes an aesthetic judgement such as ‘this rose is beautiful’, what is at issue here is making a claim that my feelings are shareable by all. According to Kant, what is concerned in an aesthetic judgement is neither the rose’s beauty nor the feelings it produces, but the agreement, the community of sense as the

²⁵⁴ Lorand, Ruth, *Aesthetic Theory, a Theory of Order, Beauty and Art*, Routledge, 2000

anticipated, imagined reality of people to come and share the idea that they are able to live in peace with each other precisely because there is no such thing as *sensus communis*. The latter does not exist and therefore must be constructed.

For Kant, pure aesthetic judgements are never about art, but about nature, and some theorists contend that art today no longer needs aesthetics, because contemporary art is no longer concerned with the representation of nature. However, while the ethical dimension of aesthetic judgements corresponding to nature has become irrelevant, it was regained by being transferred to the realm of art. The pairing of art and aesthetics has become a primary model for aesthetic theory, and this is where the problem appears to lie. While the subject of aesthetics is not necessarily art, the latter must be about aesthetics, since it involves the judgment of what is beautiful. Hence, today's aesthetics cannot really 'triumph over its own object' as Michaud argues; art is not its object - aesthetics are the object of art, of what is beautiful.

What Michaud perceives as 'the end of autonomy of art' and as aesthetics 'cutting lose from the referential sequence of which it was a part' so that 'the image is 'free' to be harnessed in any direction', could be considered in a different light, depending on our understanding on aesthetics and its connection to artistic practices. Perhaps what has ended is not art's autonomy, which it never had, but the exclusive interchangeability of art and aesthetics. Michaud's considerations invite us to rethink this relationship and to ask: do we have to choose between art and aesthetics? What is aesthetics and how the beautiful is decided?

Kant teaches us that we have to attach a value to the word 'art' other than an economic or political one – to make an aesthetic judgement, to draw a line between the things we deem worthy of the name of beauty. However, can these judgments still be made or shall we abandon the idea of the beautiful and celebrate art without aesthetics? Can stories still be told given that there is so much 'gossip'?

Many think that art today no longer needs aesthetics because contemporary art is no longer concerned with representations, but with direct interaction with reality. When the art world seems totally privatised by the market and the spectacle is everywhere, many think that we can no longer speak of disinterested contemplation but rather, as distinguished theoretician Boris Groys suggests, of self-design, of self-positioning in the aesthetic field. We must, Groys contends, ‘design ourselves,’ and this is the only way out of the postmodernist malaise and out of aesthetical – ‘beautiful and impressive’ – spaces of power.

Art Without Aesthetics?

What Michaud describes as ‘aesthetics without art’, Boris Groys envisages as a progressive ‘art atheism’, where the true autonomy of art can only be guaranteed by the absence of aesthetic judgments. In his recent book *Art Power*, Boris Groys examines modern and contemporary art according to its political or, as Groys describes it, ‘ideological’ function. From the outset, Groys makes a rough division of modern art as a commodity created under market conditions, and art as a tool of political propaganda, which he exclusively connects with art produced under totalitarian regimes such as the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Groys writes, ‘By contrast [to the art under the market conditions], the power of an ideology is ultimately the power of a vision. And this means that by serving any political or religious ideology an artist ultimately serves art.’²⁵⁵ Dwelling on Futurism as the aesthetics of Fascism or Russian avant-garde as the Stalinist aesthetics²⁵⁶, Groys connects the notion of aesthetics exclusively with the project of aesthetisation of the political, which inevitably transforms ‘the mausoleum into museum’²⁵⁷ and vice versa. He states,

²⁵⁵ Groys, Boris, *Art Power*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, 2008: 8

²⁵⁶ Boris Groys’ *The Total Art of Stalinism* could be read as a project that explores the relationship between aesthetic ideology and totalitarianism.

²⁵⁷ Referring to Groys, Boris, *Utopia I Obmen* (Exchange) where Groys reflects on the spectacular teleology of Lenin’s mausoleum, which combines the conceptual conclusion of a literal messianism with the representational rigour of the most accurate visual identity, which ‘turned the mausoleum into museum’, *Utopia I Obmen* (Exchange), Znak, Moskva, 1993: 64

‘For the functioning of the art system is based on certain aesthetic value judgements, on certain criteria of choice, rules of inclusion and exclusion, and the like. All these value judgements, criteria, and rules are, of course, not autonomous. Rather, they reflect the dominant social conventions and power structures. We can safely say: there is no such thing as a purely aesthetic, art-immanent, autonomous value system that could regulate the art world in its entirety.’²⁵⁸

Aesthetics, to this extent, are understood here as a power of vision or aesthetical power that cannot rise beyond a particular ideology. Groys continues, ‘In the best case art could be used merely for designing, for aestheticizing the already existent oppositional, emancipatory political movements – that is, it could be at best merely a supplement to politics. This seems to me to be the crucial question: does art hold any power on its own, or it is only able to decorate external powers – whether these powers of oppression or liberation?’²⁵⁹

Having being challenged with two, according to Groys, possible scenarios of either aesthetisation of the social, where aesthetic norms are generated by the market or aesthetisation of the political, where aesthetic judgements merely reflect the existing hegemony, Groys suggests that the only strategy that can guarantee the total autonomy of art is the absence of any immanent, purely aesthetic judgements. Groys writes, ‘The territory of art is organised around the lack or, rather, the rejection of any aesthetic judgement. Thus the autonomy of art implies not an autonomous hierarchy of taste – but abolishing every such hierarchy and establishing the regime of equal aesthetic rights for all artworks’.²⁶⁰ This regime means the presupposition that all visual forms and media on the aesthetic level are equal and there is no aesthetical censorship or aesthetical values that could lead to a statement such as ‘this is art’. Today, according to Groys, art functions in the gap between the ‘formal equality of all images’ while, in fact, there is a *de facto* inequality caused by the contemporary mass media producing far more effective and extensive images than

²⁵⁸ Groys, Boris, *Art Power*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, 2008: 13

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*: 14

the art system. Groys writes, 'We are constantly fed images... of all kinds, at a level of production with which the artist...cannot compete'.²⁶¹ Therefore, Groys contends, it is essential to support the museums and art institutions so that mass media images can be critically compared to artistic visions, pointing out that contemporary aesthetic taste is not the only one and that there is a fundamental aesthetic equality of all images. Groys writes, 'By criticising the socially, culturally, politically or economically imposed hierarchies of values, art affirms aesthetic equality as a guarantee of its true autonomy'.²⁶²

While it is vital to keep museums to resist the commercially minded flow of images, it seems that artistic critique can do better than just sustaining the balance between all images. The problem here is that Groy's understanding of equality is rather passive. For him, equality is about recognition. Politics and art are connected, according to Groys, in the aspect of struggling to be accepted as socially legitimate. Rather than questioning the whole system of social legitimacy and creating your own way of looking at things, artistic practices, in terms of their aesthetical values, should strive to be equally accepted – to demonstrate, in other words, that no particular image, whether it is a masterpiece as 'the ultimate visualization of the abstract ideas of truth and beauty' or contemporary provocation and authentic mass media visual range, in fact, can pretend to have a stronger impact or greater influence – no particular image can stand on its own right. Having achieved such a balance, for Groys, the art system would then project aesthetic equality in a political way, revealing the equality of all subject matters or indifference regarding models of expression or looking at something. First, the political equality that Groys has in mind rather resembles an idea of democracy as a system of indifference where one vote is equal to another. Secondly, the equality of aesthetics in the way it destroys the hierarchical system of art does not directly correspond with the idea of political equality, which also cannot be understood as a general level; are politics based on equality in the sense that people attempt to find a middle ground, a general human

²⁶¹ Groys, Boris, *Art Power*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, 2008: 18

²⁶² *Ibid.*: 16

predisposition for doing politics? Equality, art or politics can exist separately; there is no necessary connection between them.

While we will return to the subject of equality in terms of its implications for aesthetics when we consider Jacques Rancière's view of aesthetics and its connection to politics, what could be said is that the proposed 'regime of equal aesthetic rights' seems to manifest a passive, indifferent model, reducing both equality and aesthetics to some normative frames, ideas of exchange or hierarchical systems. The museum can stand in opposition to the images produced by the global media, to produce its own pattern of subjectivisation and not, as Groys suggests, to manifest indifference to all visual forms.

Considering Groys' conceptualisation of 'equal aesthetic rights', it seems that his emphasis on equality stems from his negative understanding of aesthetics as superficial values imposed by economical or political regimes – it is always 'the effect of pressure exercised by external forces and powers'.²⁶³ Aesthetics, for Groys, are about censorship and authority; they stand in the way of the emancipatory 'struggle for inclusion' reflecting on 'social, political or economical inequalities'.²⁶⁴ What such an understanding of aesthetics leads to is that to realise 'art's power on its own', the art system should aim to dissolve power relations, as they are represented in the factual inequality of all images. In other words, we should abandon our understanding of art as an aesthetical regime, as the dictatorship of taste and judgement and, instead, look at it as the system that is responsible for maintaining equality.

'Obligation to Self-Design'

Such a proposition does not seek to dismantle aesthetics in general, but only certain value judgments associated with artistic practices. Aesthetics have already,

²⁶³ Groys, Boris, *Art Power*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, 2008: 14

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*: 15

according to Groys, become a matter of self-design in the aesthetic field – we no longer delegate our aesthetic decisions to others, but make them ourselves and thus we make ourselves. In his recent publication *The Obligation to Self-Design*, Groys argues that ‘design took on an ethical dimension it had not had previously. In design, ethics become aesthetics; it become form’.²⁶⁵ Considering the common understanding of design interpreted as an epiphany of the society of the spectacle, Groys contends that ‘the ultimate form of design is, however, the design of the subject’.²⁶⁶ With the disappearance of the idea of God, the site of the design of the soul has shifted to the human body. While in the past the body was considered to be the prison of the soul, now the latter is the ‘clothing’ of the body, its aesthetic appearance. This aesthetical design ultimately manifests the subject’s political and social views. Groys writes, ‘By designing one’s self and one’s environment in a certain way, one declares one’s faith in certain values, attitudes, programs and ideologies’. Modern design, Groys claims, has transformed the whole of social space into an art space, in which individuals are at the same time artists and works of art. For example, Groys argues, the current debate over headscarves manifests the political nature of design. If *Prada* or any other brands were to design headscarves, distinguishing between the latter as a political symbol and fashion would be impossible. Under the regime of modern design, it is the visual positioning of politicians that constitutes their politics. Hence, Groys writes, ‘the public is by no means wrong to judge its politicians according to their appearance...to their aesthetic creed, and not according to the content they support’.²⁶⁷ When design has become total, we can no longer speak of Kantian ‘disinterested contemplation’, an aesthetical contemplation superior to a practical attitude, but of self-positioning in the aesthetic field. Groys quotes Beuys’ iconic statement that everyone has the right to be an artist and concludes that today this right becomes an obligation: the obligation to design ourselves as ‘an aesthetic presentation as ethical subject’.

²⁶⁵ Groys, Boris, ‘The Obligation to Self-Design’, *E-Flux*, www.e-flux.com/journal/view/6

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Hence, Groys' thinking navigates out of the aesthetical – 'beautiful and impressive' spaces of power' as he puts it. When the art system no longer represents aesthetical values but equalises all values, Groys argues, people no longer need to look at the 'master pieces'; instead, they will become the latter themselves. Following this proposed liberation of art from the obligation to produce better images than the rest of the world, people then are obliged to 'design themselves'. Design, as a synthesis of ethics and aesthetics, then will save us from all inequalities – aesthetical and political. To be fair to Groys, his thinking corresponds to the description of how things are today rather than reflecting on some kind of wishful or utopian trajectories. It is not that Groys is against critical aesthetics, but because aesthetics in general have acquired a 'bad name', being associated with the various political regimes, Groys prefers to think instead of 'equal aesthetic rights' as if there was a straightforward connection between art and politics. However, there is never a clear-cut or static connection, but a complex articulation between different discourses. Neither art nor politics can achieve an ultimate equality. Ignoring the continuous and unavoidable interpretations between the processes of inclusion and exclusion leads Groys to reject the possibility of any critical aesthetics today. However, this thinking only insists that there is a direct connection between politics and aesthetics. Any critical gestures and heroic revolutionary moments are equally incapable of exorcising the forces of institutionalisation and even banalisation. Sooner or later, a co-optation of a radical act occurs, and transformative orientation then needs to be re-directed, as the frontiers of antagonism have been displaced to a new position. Any struggle can only be impure, ongoing and unpredictable. In this way, aesthetical judgements are also impure – they reflect ongoing and conflicting interpretations of what art is about. There is no 'truly political art' – all art participates in supporting or questioning any given hegemonic order, so it has its own politics. There is the 'politics of aesthetics'.

Rancière's Aesthetical Cut

In contrast with the two previously outlined views, Jacques Rancière suggests that the current predicament – described by Michaud as ‘an aesthetic vapour’ where ‘advertising is more effective than art’ and by Groys, who proposes ‘self-design’, ‘an aesthetical presentation as ethical subject’ as the way to avoid the tyranny of aesthetical judgements, which he exclusively connects with the ‘power of vision’ or ideological power – is, in fact, a false dilemma. It is impossible for artistic practices not to be political. It is also unproductive to condemn the market – ‘you need money to do art’, says Rancière. Rather, Rancière argues that what is needed is a shift in the approach to aesthetics, the one that aims to uncouple its relation to politics and economics. There are ‘...no fatal mechanisms transforming reality into image’, no ‘lost community to be restored,’ but ‘simply scenes of dissensus’²⁶⁸ – an understanding of aesthetics that reorganises the sensible and that proposes neither the existence of ‘a reality concealed behind apparatuses’ or market nor a ‘single regime of presentation and interpretation,’ but rather a sensible one that aims to open every situation ‘from the inside, reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification’.²⁶⁹ Aesthetical experience for Rancière is the experience of a break, a disconnection from one sensory world to another, which ‘defines different capacities and incapacities, different forms of tolerance and intolerance’.²⁷⁰

There is, Rancière insists, apart from all other figures of authority, an authority of the image. This authority cracks ‘the unity of the given and the obviousness of the visible’.²⁷¹ Thus, a different understanding of aesthetics leads to a different understanding of emancipation, where the latter does not imply grasping a total process of subjection or denying it, but rather the capacity of anyone to be involved in scenes of dissensus.

²⁶⁸ Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London New York, 2009: 48

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*: 49

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

In his *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Jacques Rancière rethinks the relationship between art and politics outside the models established by the Marxist tradition and the Frankfurt School. Reclaiming aesthetics from the narrow confines to which it is often reduced, Rancière reveals its intrinsic link to politics by analysing what they both have in common: the delimitation of the visible and the invisible, the thinkable and the unthinkable, the possible and impossible. According to Rancière, art is not political, by virtue of the fact that it communicates and fulfils the social and political into issues. It is not political enough to shape the invisible forms to visibility. Art should not occupy the space left by politics; instead art should ‘reshape it, at the risk of testing the limits of its own politics’.²⁷² In fact, there is a ‘politics of the aesthetics’, Rancière says.

He states, in contrast with Groys, that ‘Aesthetics should not be understood as the perverse commandeering of politics by a will to art, by a consideration of the people qua work of art...[they] can be understood in a Kantian sense – re-examined perhaps by Foucault – as the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise’.²⁷³ Rancière speaks of aesthetics in two ways: in its broad sense, he refers to it as a kind of order, a regime, which focuses on *le partage du sensible*, variously translated as the distribution, partition, division or sharing of the sensible that reveals the contingency of the entire perceptual and conceptual order in which such arrangements are embedded, determining a mode of articulation between forms of action, production, perception and thought. He states,

‘I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common...a distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts’.²⁷⁴

²⁷² Rancière, Jacques, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, London: Continuum, 2004: 16

²⁷³ *Ibid.*: 13

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*: 12

Following Kant, for Rancière, a *sensus communis* is a community of sense. The idea of the beautiful for Kant implies the glimpse of hope that at least all human beings agree that nature is beautiful. This human and ethical significance of aesthetic judgments pertaining to nature has been almost exclusively transferred to the domain of art. However, for Rancière, an aesthetic revolution happened long ago, such that the discord between matter and that to which is opposed, between the sensible and the thought, imagination and the understanding, is a rupture always already at the heart of aesthetic experience, including that of the beautiful, and not just in the experience of the sublime. Any agreement between form and matter, between understanding and imagination, is inherently a disagreement; consensus is a shared dissensus.

While aesthetical judgements are not automatically about art, when it comes to artistic practices, they are aesthetic judgements that create forms of visibility that disclose artistic practices, the place they occupy, what they ‘do’ or ‘make’ from the standpoint of what is common to the community. Here Rancière begins to reflect on aesthetics as ‘a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts: a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility...’²⁷⁵

According to Rancière, aesthetics is not a reference term for art as a whole, but rather for a particular regime of artistic practice, a regime in which ‘the field of experience, severed from its traditional reference points, is therefore open for new restructuring through the ‘free play’ of aestheticization’.²⁷⁶ This free play is one that reveals the contingency of a particular partition of the sensible by constructing another one, based not upon the hierarchy of the current partition, but upon certain ‘equalities;’ for example, for the equal aesthetic worthiness of all subjects, activities, and objects. For example, one of Rancière’s favourite examples is the subject of *Madame Bovary*, where the adultery of a bourgeois woman is considered as

²⁷⁵ Rancière, Jacques, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, London: Continuum, 2004: 10

²⁷⁶ Rancière, Jacques, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. Steven Corcoran, Continuum, 2010: 17

aesthetically worthy of treatment as the exploits of a heroic character. An aesthetic practice, then, like politics, is a dissensus from a given partition of the sensible. Rancière states, ‘Art and politics each define a form of dissensus, a dissensual re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible’.²⁷⁷ Thus, aesthetics challenge a particular partition of the sensible, but in a different way to politics.

The difference between politics and aesthetics lies in the character of the dissensual movements they produce. While the aesthetic movement of politics, according to Rancière, consists of the creation of a ‘we’ that disrupts the distribution of social parts, the political character of aesthetics, by contrast, ‘does not give a collective voice to the anonymous. Instead, it re-frames the world of common experience as the world of a shared impersonal experience. In this way, it aids to help create the fabric of a common experience in which new modes of constructing common objects and new possibilities of subjective enunciation may be developed’.²⁷⁸

The sensible is partitioned into various regimes and therefore delimits forms of inclusion and exclusion in a community. Immediate aesthetic practices (aesthetics in the sense of ‘art’) both establish and contest the ways in which a given society distributes the ‘conditions of possibility’ for what can and what cannot be sensed, felt and spoken about. However, this ‘distribution of the sensible’ is only a condition, a way in which the politics of art work, not the goal or politics in itself and for itself. Contrary to Boris Groys, Rancière introduces an interesting reversal:

‘...the arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend to them [...] what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parceling out of the visible and the invisible’.²⁷⁹

Aesthetic politics, for Rancière, always ‘defines itself by a certain recasting

²⁷⁷ Rancière, Jacques, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. Steven Corcoran, Continuum, 2010: 140

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*: 142

²⁷⁹ Rancière, Jaques, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, London: Continuum, 2004: 19

of the distribution of the sensible, a reconfiguration of the given perceptual forms'.²⁸⁰

This particular regime of artistic practices that Rancière refers to distributes what is sensible in ways different to the social realm from which they draw their material, a sensibility at odds with the social and yet common to all. It is this particular partition of the sensible, as Rancière puts it, that makes of art the primary way in which it is possible to intervene in the material world.

What defines the aesthetic, for Rancière, is that everything is material. 'Aesthetic revolution' for Rancière implies 'the idea that everything is material for art, so that art is no longer governed by its subject, by what it speaks of: art can show and speak of everything in the same manner'²⁸¹. Rancière points out that the specific sphere of aesthetic experience has emerged when the boundary separating art's objects from those of other experiences was blurred, making art's objects available to everyone equally – what Rancière calls, borrowing from Schiller, an 'equality of indifference'. Only when "sensible" has become foreign to itself, and made coincident with a 'power of thought outside itself', can the social or the political be thought. What Rancière calls the fictionalising of the real, its acting out social space, the place where beings are 'as if' together, will be a common place safeguarded as the space of art, where its material intervention will begin as a displacement foreign from the matter to which it addresses itself everywhere and all the time. The political partition is made apparent by the materiality of art, which 'foreign' to itself, exceeds or falls short of the social matter from which it originates itself. What is visible is aesthetical, not social. At the same time, the aesthetic regime, according to Rancière, welcomes any material whatsoever into the field of art. Thus, in aesthetics, there is no particular border that separates art from life, but art is not the same thing as life either, and this is its paradox.

'Being Together Apart'

²⁸⁰ Rancière, Jaques, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, London: Continuum, 2004: 63

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*:

In Rancière's view, the aesthetic regime is constituted by paradoxes, and the project of art in this regime is to navigate these paradoxes without reducing one side of the paradox to the other. In his latest book *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière states from the outset that 'Many contemporary artists no longer set out to create works of art. Instead, they want to get out of the museum and induce alterations in the space of every-day life, generating new forms of relations'.²⁸² The challenge confronting contemporary artists, then, is how to keep alive the dissensus of art without simply reducing it to the reality from which it dissents or claiming that reality is nothing other than art.

One of *The Emancipated Spectator's* chapters, 'Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community' begins with a reflection on a line 'Apart, we are together' from 'The White Water Lily' poem by Mallarmé. The paradox of the poet's decision to preserve the mystery of the lady and the secret of their 'being together' inviolate, by silently leaving without being seen, invites Rancière to reflect on the challenges of contemporary art's self-image and the possibility of creating a 'new political people'. Living in times, Rancière notes, when artists do not care for water lilies, it is precisely here that the issue of being together apart acquires a new dimension. Considering the French artistic collective *Urban Encampment's* project 'I and Us', which is dedicated to the construction of a place of solitude, an 'aesthetic place', Rancière says, there is something in common between Mallarmé's poem and the contemporary committed art that attempts to create new forms of community in 'bad' Parisian suburbs. The construction of 'empty places' seems to be equally required in the poor suburbs as it is in the case of the poet's taste for loneliness. What these cases have in common, Rancière argues, is that the connection between the solitude of the artwork and community is a matter of 'transformed sensation'. Rancière explains, 'What the artist does is to weave together a new sensory fabric by wresting percepts and affects from the perceptions and affections that make up the

²⁸² Rancière, Jacques, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, London: Continuum, 2004: 53

fabric of ordinary experience'.²⁸³ The construction of the solitary place aims to create new forms of community. Rancière states, 'The paradoxical relationship between the apart' and the 'together' is also a paradoxical relation between the present and the future. The artwork is the people to come and it is the monument of its expectation, the monument of its absence. The artistic 'dissensual community' has a double body: it is a combination of means for producing an effect out of itself: creating a new community between human beings, a new political people... To the extent that it is a dissensual community, an aesthetic community is a community structured by disconnection'.²⁸⁴

Understanding what is at issue in this disconnection, Rancière argues, is vital to interpreting what 'aesthetics' and the 'politics of aesthetics' imply. Dwelling on the canonical interpretations of aesthetics in terms of 'being together apart' – from the modernist view, which connects the work of art's 'being apart' with the 'being together' of a future community to the postmodernist position, which makes 'being apart' a mere illusion aimed at rejecting the real laws of humans being together – Rancière contends that none of these interpretations identifies what aesthetic disconnection or break means. Aesthetic break for Rancière means a shift from a given sensible world, from a 'sensation' that is common to a different 'sensation' that occurs under the condition of an original effect, which suspends any direct relationship between cause and effect. The aesthetic effect initially is an effect of dis-identification. Rancière writes, 'What occurs are processes of dissociation: a break in a relationship between sense and sense – between what is seen and what is thought, what is thought and what is felt'.²⁸⁵ Aesthetic break is not a break with the regime of representation, but the rupture of the harmony that ensures correspondence between the texture of the work and its efficacy. Rancière states, 'Aesthetic efficacy' means a paradoxical kind of efficacy that is produced by the very rupturing of any determinate link between cause and effect'.²⁸⁶ Such rupture, Rancière argues,

²⁸³ Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London New York, 2009: 56

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*: 59

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*: 75

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*: 63

could be witnessed, for example, in the Greek masterpiece *Belvedere Torso*. Why, asks Rancière, is the body of a crippled and beheaded statue with no face to express any feelings, no arms or legs to command any action, understood as the supreme expression of liberty and beauty? It is because the very paradigm of classical beauty encapsulates the collapse of the logic of representation. Beauty has nothing to express. The whole logic of this regime is overturned by the powers of disconnection of the statue. While it starts with the very idea of perfection, and this is what Kant conceptualised as ‘the beautiful’ – an object of universal appreciation ‘apart from any concept’ – it then loses its destination, substituting for ‘...the work that realizes the law of the medium or the law of pure sensation’.²⁸⁷ Hence, Rancière states, ‘The Torso may have been mutilated for entirely incidental reasons. But what is not incidental, what marks a historical watershed, is the identification between the product of that mutilation and the perfection of art’.²⁸⁸ What characterises the aesthetic regime of art is not the Deleuzian ‘pure sensation’ or the modernist idea of ‘truth to the medium,’ but the set of transformations that creates the work of art the ‘as if’ it had a different texture to the sensations of everyday experience, reinventing its shape. Rancière explains, ‘The aesthetic effect is in fact a relationship between two ‘separations’. The aesthetic sensorium is the sensorium marked by that loss of destination’.²⁸⁹ What is lost is one sensible world but what is gained is the suspension of any direct relationship between cause and effect, which provokes a rapture in the ways of seeing and examining the causes of this sensory oddity. This is where, according to Rancière, ‘“as if” of aesthetic experience meets the “as if” in the realm of social emancipation.’

Rancière writes,

‘Aesthetic experience has a political effect to the extent that the loss of destination it presupposes disrupts the way in which bodies fit their functions and destinations. What it produces is not rhetorical persuasion about what must be done. Nor is it the

²⁸⁷ Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London New York, 2009: 66

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*: 66

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*: 70

framing of a collective body. It is a multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world they live in and the way in which they are “equipped” to adapt to it. It is a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible’.²⁹⁰

This aesthetic experience, at the core of which is the aesthetic break, does not create a ‘private paradise;’ rather, it shows that such a thing is impossible, since the works are disconnected from any specific community, destination: there is no boundary separating the elements of art from those of everyday life. That is why the aesthetic effect cannot identify with the happy dream of a community united by the contemplation of eternal beauty but, rather, with the tension between the ‘being apart’ of the artwork and the ‘being together’ of a new community. This tension, this specific mediation is what Rancière envisages at the core of the critical model of artistic practices. Unfortunately, he argues, many contemporary artists think that no mediation is needed, that the work could be the direct presentation of a different form of community and new social bonds. They still believe in the ‘critique of the spectacle’ and the idea that art should provide us with much more than the latter, that it is supposed to ‘unite people’, that ‘aesthetic disconnection’ should be overcome. For instance, Rancière considers the works of a Cuban artist, Rene Francisco, as a typical example of the current tendency to replace critical mediation with direct anticipation of ‘being together’ in ‘being apart’. Exploring the poor suburbs of Havana, Francisco selected an old woman to refurbish her home. His final work shows a cloth screen printed with the image of the women, hung in such a way that it appears to be looking at the ‘real’ screen of the monitor where the video showed the group of artists working as plumbers and painters in the woman’s home. Speaking about many ‘extra-artistic’ outcomes, activities and strategies of contemporary art, which aim at directly framing new senses of and in community, Rancière suggests that the constant anticipating of the effect, when art is practiced in the place of some other social cause, manifest a world where new forms of domination make equality

²⁹⁰ Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London New York, 2009: 72

disappear even from the organisation of the sensible landscape.

On Equality

Having mentioned equality, it is important to clarify how Rancière understands equality. Contrary to Groys, for Rancière equality is not political in itself, and only can generate politics when it is present in the specific form of a particular case of dissensus. Rancière writes, ‘I do not set down equality as a kind of transcendental governing every sphere of activity, and thus art in particular.’²⁹¹ While the aesthetic regime of art implements certain equality as negation of the hierarchical system of the fine arts, this equality is not equivalent to political equality. There is an equality of ‘the communicated’, of all subject matters, but this is not what Rancière holds as equality of ‘communicators’ and their capacities for being involved in the organisation of the sensible. Rancière states, ‘It is the capacity of anonymous people, the capacity that makes everyone equal to everyone else’.²⁹²

According to Groys’ understanding, equality corresponds to the egalitarian system of indifference between all images – that is to say, what is at issue here is the ‘communicated’. However, for Rancière, the term involves the equal capacities of the ‘communicators’. Groys wants artistic practices to resist the mass media claim of confronting spectators with different and authentic images; meanwhile, for Rancière equality does not concern differences between images, but spectators’ capacities ‘...exercised by an unpredictable interplay of associations and dissociations’.²⁹³ Rancière does not draw the line between spectators and actors in the way Groys does. Rancière says, ‘...viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions. The spectator also acts...observes, selects, compares, interprets’.²⁹⁴ Being a spectator is not a passive condition; there is no need to transform them into actors: every spectator is already an actor of her or his

²⁹¹ Rancière, Jaques, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, London: Continuum, 2004: 52

²⁹² Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London New York, 2009:17

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*: 13

relationship with the distribution of the sensible. Rancière states,

‘Democratic individuals want equality. But the equality they want is that which obtains between the seller and the buyer of a commodity. Consequently, what they want is the triumph of the market in all human relations. And the more enamored they are of equality, the more passionately they help bring about that triumph’.²⁹⁵

Today there are too many thoughts and images, too many stimuli; and the critique of ‘consumer society’ took the form of solicitude for people incapable of mastering this complexity. ‘In other words’, Rancière writes, ‘the capacity to reinvent lives was transformed into an inability to judge situations’.²⁹⁶ It is presumed that there are incapacities of people to become aware of their condition hidden behind the images. Rancière continues, ‘In effect, the procedures of social critique have as their goal treating the incapable: those who do not know how to see, who do not understand the meaning of what they see, who do not know how to transform acquired knowledge into activist energy’.²⁹⁷ The call to ‘design ourselves’ is also about incapacities: to see, to feel, to be a spectator or an artist. However, for Rancière, there are no ‘doctors’ and ‘patients’ to begin with. Instead of starting with equality of images and trying to reach for equality of spectators, Rancière invites us to start with equality of spectators and equality of ‘dissensus’ as re-distribution of the sensible. He states ‘...there was a lot of concern about how we can educate the people, slowly, progressively: but that was not the point, the idea of starting from inequality to reach quality; it’s impossible because in the very process, you ceaselessly recycle practices of inequality. You must not go towards equality, but must start from equality. Starting from equality does not presuppose that everyone in the world has equal opportunities to learn, to express their capacities. That’s not the point. The point is that you have to start from the minimum equality that is given’²⁹⁸

²⁹⁵ Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London New York, 2009: 38

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*: 47

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁸ Rancière, Jacques in conversation with Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey, ‘Art of the Possible’, *Artforum*, March 2007, online
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_7_45/ai_n24354911/?tag=content;coll

– equality of capacities.

What Groyes seems to aim at is the establishment of a certain balance of power of images, a somewhat ‘harmonious’ relationship between the mass media and art institutions, between an occupation and capacity, image and image, sense and sense. There is no need, Rancière argues, to ‘transform representation into presence, passivity into activity’, to restore the power of some images to an equal footing with others. What is involved in aesthetic experiences is ‘linking what one knows with what one does not know’²⁹⁹ and the effect of such linking cannot be anticipated. At the heart of aesthetics is the break, not a balance. Rancière reminds us that

‘...all forms of art can rework the frame of our perceptions and the dynamism of our affects. They can open up new passages towards new forms of political subjectivation. But none of them can avoid the aesthetic cut that separates outcomes from intentions and precludes any direct path towards an “other side” of words and images’.³⁰⁰

What Rancière teaches us is that there is an equal undertaking by artist and audience that is involved in the distribution of the sensible and it is the aesthetical cut that defines capacities and incapacities, tolerance and intolerance. There is, apart from the spectators or actors, another figure of ‘authority’ that challenges the latter – the figure of the image, which sometimes poses the problem of the ‘common sense’ to which it holds its voice of authority. When the image doubts its voice of authority to show and reveal, it takes us from what is intolerable to the intolerability of the image. Such an image enables the ‘aesthetic cut’ to produce different forms of common sense, new configurations of what can be seen, said and thought. The intolerable image constructs a new “sensible” that resists the visible, and this tension lies at the heart of critical aesthetics.

²⁹⁹ Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London New York, 2009: 22

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*: 82

Critical Aesthetics – Intolerability of the Image

The image is not a mere reproduction of the sensible but a ‘set of relations between the visible and invisible, the visible and speech, the said and the unsaid’.³⁰¹ Therefore an image never acts on its own but ‘belongs to a system of visibility’ that polices a connection between the verbal and the visual. This verbal, this voice is not a manifestation of the invisible but is itself involved in a process of ‘imagining’. Rancière states, ‘It is the voice of a body that transforms one sensible event into another, by striving to make us ‘see’ what it has seen, to make us see what it tells us’.³⁰² This relationship might try to eliminate from it anything that exceeds the illustration of its meaning: ‘The power of the voice opposed to images must be expressed in images. The refusal to speak, and the obedience to the voice that commands, must therefore be made visible’.³⁰³

Asking what makes an image intolerable, Rancière is speaking of images of action, which show us that we are spectators, making us guilty of witnessing the images, for example, of dead children and not doing anything about it. The spectator views the images of pain rather than acting against the powers responsible for it. ‘It is here’, argues Rancière, ‘that the voice which formulates the illusion of guilt assumes its true importance’.³⁰⁴ This voice tells us that we will always remain spectators and that the only way to respond to evil is to act. Rancière writes, ‘The virtue of activity, counter-posed to the evil of the image, is thus absorbed by the authority of the sovereign voice that stigmatizes the false existence which it knows us to be condemned to wallow in’.³⁰⁵ This intolerable image cannot criticise its subject, since, according to Rancière, it belongs to the same regime of visibility. Meanwhile, the real content of the critique of the image could be the ‘assertion of the authority of the voice’ and this is where the shift from the intolerable to the ‘intolerability of the image’ occurs. When it happens, ‘it counter-poses the authority of the voice that

³⁰¹ Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London New York, 2009: 93

³⁰² *Ibid.*: 94

³⁰³ *Ibid.*: 92

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*: 88

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*: 88

alternatively renders one silent and makes one speak. The power of the voice opposed to images must be expressed in images'.³⁰⁶ This image would not be in tune with the functioning system. Instead of illustrating the regime of visibility, it would construct a different system altogether. Rancière explains, 'The problem is not counter-posing words to visible images. It is overturning the dominant logic that makes the visual the lot of multitudes and the verbal [the voice] the privilege of a few'.³⁰⁷

The images of art are not 'truths' but fictions that pose the problem of the common sense to which they hold a voice of authority. Such a transformation from the intolerable in the image to its intolerability is what Rancière places at the heart of the tensions of what he understands as critical aesthetics.

Contrary to Groys' notion of 'recognition', where the aim is to be accepted, to be recognised as 'art' by removing aesthetical judgments, Rancière holds critical aesthetics as the act of non-recognition, questioning to whom the given sensible images belong, even though they are indented to be critical of the reality they represent. With his idea of 'equal aesthetic rights', Groys wants everybody to be capable of producing art, for a system to be inclusive of all images, while Rancière's intolerability of the image is about constructing a relation between the verbal and the visual, between the system and images in the way that disrupts the regime of that connection. What is at issue here is not to include more images in a common sensible space, but to make an image speak for itself. What the politics of aesthetics resists is the anticipation of its effect, and therefore it cannot be part of the system.

Prigov: Power of the Gaze Destroys the Gaze of the Power

This relation between the voice and image, verbal and visual is what Russian artist and critic Dmitry Prigov [1940-2007] places in the centre of his aesthetical

³⁰⁶ Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London New York, 2009: 92

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*: 97

investigation. As Russian art historian Vitaly Patsyukov notices, ‘Prigov turned words into objects’.³⁰⁸ According to Prigov, the problem today is not to get rid of aesthetics, but to make them speak. ‘There is this matter of aesthetics’, says Prigov, and ‘it does not necessarily deal with works of art or with establishing legitimacy of judgments concerning works of art, of what is aesthetically valid at a given time and place. This matter concerns more profound problems of form of relations with the given sensible world, of human behavior of ugly and beautiful, aesthetical or artistic’.³⁰⁹ The common ground shared by the aesthetical regime and the ethical one is the issue of order, of the visible configuration of the given. This configuration is about already verbalised images, images that reflect on words, on voices that call images to materialise their presence. However, the visible phenomena in aesthetics are related to an invisible dimension of meaning, of power, to the process of unsettling the sense of a given meaning, and not about refining it.

For Prigov, although both ethics and aesthetics express order, ethics concern principles that can be discussed separately from the particular cases, while aesthetics does not. Aesthetical order does not have external, *a priori* principles; it develops from the disordered materials. Everything is material and that is why aesthetics can interfere with the sensible world given in structured relations between worlds and images, visual and invisible. Aesthetics for Prigov is an investigation of one’s conditions of perception and understanding, which goes further than any other investigations. Aesthetics is like an order without laws, which can challenge the laws – the particular relation between what is said and shown and how and what is not said and not shown and how.

Prigov says,

‘And art can do with aesthetics what ethics cannot do to politics. Politics cannot go

³⁰⁸ Vitaly Patsyukov is quoted in Prigov’s interview with Artemiy Lebedev, ‘LitCafe: Dmitriy Aleksandrovitch Prigov’, <http://www.tema.ru/rrr/litcafe/prigov>

³⁰⁹ Prigov’s interview with Artemiy Lebedev, ‘LitCafe: Dmitriy Aleksandrovitch Prigov’, <http://www.tema.ru/rrr/litcafe/prigov>

very far, otherwise there would no society – we need rules and norms. Aesthetical investigation, however, can go further without threatening society with collapse. Aesthetics needs ethics because it needs rules to break; meanwhile, it does not create new rules, but rather shows that all rules are flawed, that there always will be something invisible in any regime of visibility'.³¹⁰

Where aesthetics and social emancipation meet is a broken relation between words and objects, between what Prigov calls 'gaze of power' and 'power of gaze',³¹¹ and this is the territory of art. According to Prigov, the artist is here not to represent ideas of democracy and equality, to show the world what is wrong with it, not to help it directly or cure it, but to broaden the limits of aesthetic strategies and thus broaden the territory of the sensible so that more relations can be looked at in a different regime. Art can transfer established distances and scales of relations into a different dimension.

All forms of life for Prigov are aesthetical, but what concerns aesthetical experience is the transformation of the spectator who looks at or sees the image into a 'third eye.' It is not about, paraphrasing Michael Foucault, 'what we see or what looks at us,'³¹² but what lies in between. This transformation corresponds to what Prigov describes as a 'transformation of the artist's mythological image'.³¹³ Perhaps the most recurrent content in Prigov's works is the eye. He places this eye at the centre of the aesthetic faculty, since the latter does not identify with the body it belongs to, but with the object of its contemplation. Prigov takes an eye, symbolically

³¹⁰ Svetlichnaja, Julia, article based on interviews with Dmitry Prigov, 2005-2007 'DAP: Power of Gaze and Gaze of Power', 2010, accepted for publication (Fall 2011) in Moscow Art Magazine, <http://xz.gif.ru/>

³¹¹ Svetlichnaja, Julia, article based on interviews with Dmitry Prigov, 2005-2007 'DAP: Power of Gaze and Gaze of Power', 2010, accepted for publication (Fall 2011) in Moscow Art Magazine, <http://xz.gif.ru/>

³¹² Referring to Foucault's question 'Do we see it or does it see us?' reflecting on the structure of the gaze in 'one of Velasques' paintings where he suggests that 'in a neutral structure of the gaze, the viewer and the object exchange roles constantly', in Foucault, Michael, *Die Ordnung der Dinge*, Frankfurt, 1974: 33

³¹³ Svetlichnaja, Julia, article based on interviews with Dmitry Prigov, 2005-2007 'DAP: Power of Gaze and Gaze of Power', 2010, accepted for publication (Fall 2011) in Moscow Art Magazine, <http://xz.gif.ru/>

interpreted as the 'eye of power', what Orwell refers as 'the big brother,' and broadens the concept of the eye to the concept of the gaze. It is no longer the tool to perceive reality or consider the subject constructed under the influence of other people's looks. In Prigov's works, the eye looks you in the eye and becomes the object of vision, coming in and out of the image. Russian artist Ilja Kabakov describes this fluctuation as 'trio as work of art, author, the viewer – and we can see that in the gaze they shimmer, exchanging the roles between themselves'.³¹⁴ This configuration enters into a conflict with the model of looking, which insists on the singular logic of the gaze at the particular object of vision. The viewer is subjected to the power of the gaze but at the same time the fluctuation of the positions gives the viewer power, which disrupts this gaze. The disappearance and appearance of the eye becomes constitutive of this 'third eye'. This is what Prigov termed 'shimmering aesthetics', which is born of the mutual relation established between the voice of the author and the used material.

We will consider Prigov's works in detail when we discuss his understanding of what 'critical art' attempts to criticise, but for the time being let us touch upon one of Prigov's works, entitled 'Third Eye' (1996-1997), as an image of his understanding of how the power of the gaze can destroy the gaze of power. At the beginning we see the photographic portrait of a face, which then appears again as an enlarged copy and with another pair of eyes on the human face. At this stage, the enlarged portrait is returned to a normal two-eyed face. The connection between the viewer's eye and that of the face in the portrait is problematised by positioning another set of eyes. Who or what is looking at the viewer: the human, the monster or just the eye of the camera? In the image of the directly looking human eye, Prigov recreates the notion of the gaze of power, of this straightforward connection, but as a result of positioning the eye's images as the subject of others' looks, what opens is the logic of multiple looks where the power of this gaze counters the gaze of power.

Thus, for Prigov aesthetics not only challenge a particular partition of the sensible,

³¹⁴ Kabakov, Ilya, *Noma or Moscow' Conceptual Circle*, Hamburg, 1995: 24

but creates other sensible and senses, which cannot be easily partitioned or distributed, something that cannot be included in the gaze of power. It is not just about what is already sensible, but what could be sensed. Aesthetics, then, for Prigov is the model of interaction with the given with unlimited capacities. Sensible is always distributed in a particular way, but aesthetics can point to the limits of this distribution. In some way, Prigov uses the aesthetical to lure the viewer into his 'aesthetical trap,' where instead of clarifying and confirming the relationship between the visual and the verbal, it exposes its flaws and inconsistencies. This 'aesthetical trap' for Prigov is the space where the gaze of power and the power of gaze counter each other, producing a type of subjectivity that is neither purely 'political' nor purely 'aesthetical'.

The Visual Language of Capitalism

Prigov, akin to Rancière, is critical about the recent attacks on aesthetical values as a system of judgements when artistic practices are sought to bring people together or propose 'non-hierarchical' organisation. Such an impulse, according to Prigov, is not dictated by artists' wishes to contribute to society but because their influence on society is waning. In contrast with, for example, the aesthetical system of Stalinism, capitalist aestheticisation has very little to do with aesthetics *per se*. The Soviet ideological culture was a culture of texts, manifestos and slogans. Decorated with ideological symbols, the insignia of political power and influence, the metropolis of Moscow was the center of pompous mass spectacles. This ideology was so strong that it did not require art to produce objects in order to convey political meaning. Rather, Prigov maintains, it was a matter of staging an action that developed on the border between art and life. In other words, politics were not mediated through aesthetics, but through the latter politicised.

Today, Prigov argues, the realm of literature has been made redundant. Nobody reads; individuals identify with TV programmes and not with quotes from particular authors. Following Deleuze and Guattari's argument presented in *Anti-Oedipus* that

‘Writing has never been capitalism’s thing. Capitalism is profoundly illiterate’³¹⁵, Prigov suggests that capitalism needs something that absorbs the verbal, a plastic operation that cannot convey linguistically structured meanings. Because it is illiterate, it needs the language, which cannot speak. Therefore, the language of capitalism is primarily visual. Capitalism is interested in creating more objects rather than mediation. Prigov writes, ‘Capitalism and art correspond because consumers today hope to find goods and services on the market that are both of a higher quality and more unique’.³¹⁶ The images are the objects *par excellence*, since they constantly change. The only good idea in contemporary art is a new idea. This striving for newness, creating their own contexts (following the model of conceptual art, which does not work with texts, but with contexts) in which ideas appear to be new while in fact history often shows that these new ideas are not really new, corresponds to contemporary capitalism’s self-belief that it is an absolutely new stage in history while in fact it is not. These ‘new’ ideas are the ‘new’ perfect commodities, which do not look and act like the latter. The visual language is the new language of capital because constantly changing images do not speak. Rather than putting social relations into words, pausing and reflecting on them, we are no longer required to think about them, only to watch. The production of the artist himself is an important part of the project of ‘objectification’ where images replace words. ‘What is the artist today?’, asks Prigov, and he answers, the ‘Contemporary artist does everything, however, the main factor here is the artist himself. The main event in an artist’s creative life is his projects. Endless numbers of institutions around visual art today are mere structures to legitimize the signature, the essence of artistic spirit of his or her model of communicating’. What is the subject of artistic work? Prigov writes, ‘There is an enormous distance between material objects, human passions, multiplicity of operations, which take place in the virtual zone, which barely retain some traces of reality. It is in this area that the most influential artistic events take

³¹⁵ Deleuze, Gilles, Guattari, Felix, *Anti-Oedipus*, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004: 260

³¹⁶ Prigov, Dmitry, ‘I, the Monument...’, lecture at Moscow Humanitarian Club, 18 June 2007, *Vzglyad (Outlook) Business Newspaper*, 27 August, 2007

place'.³¹⁷ In other words, what is at issue today is not the subject of artistic works, but the artist as the object of speech without speaking himself. According to Prigov, aesthetics are banalised not because we see too many images, but 'because images are commodities, which do not articulate, therefore, they have different objectives from art and they are part of another world, not the one of aesthetics which describes what is ugly and what is beautiful but erasing the difference between the two.'³¹⁸

Conclusion

Following Rancière and Prigov, we can envisage aesthetics in a different way. While the history of aesthetics has often been confined to political regimes or economic necessities, there is another 'authority' – the one of the 'image', which functions differently to politics. What we can learn from Rancière and Prigov is that aesthetics is not a tool for conveying the ideas, not the value to be assigned, but the fundamental disagreement with the possibility of any agreement. Thus aesthetic critique is better understood not in terms of a judgement *per se*, but in terms of how these judgements are performed. Aesthetic critique of judgement is the judgement enacted aesthetically and the one that challenges the latter itself. For Nietzsche, at the core of criticality lies an ability to suspend judgement. For Rancière, this ability is what constitutes the aesthetic agreement on the disagreement – the necessary limitation, fragmentation and a conceptual impossibility of any universal agreement. This aesthetic critique shows, through the praxis of art, how we should judge generally. The aesthetic cut runs deeper than any other social fluctuations and challenges, since it doubts its voice of authority to show and tell. Exposing its own inability to reveal all, it suggests that societal systems and relations are also lacking essence.

The central thrust of *The Emancipated Spectator* is a reassessment of the aesthetical

³¹⁷ Prigov, Dmitry, 'I, the Monument...', lecture at Moscow Humanitarian Club, 18 June 2007, *Vzglyad (Outlook) Business Newspaper*, 27 August, 2007

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*

paradox – an unfolding of a difference between the judgment as an effect of aesthetical force and on the other hand, as a result of rational and individualistically oriented procedures – the aesthetical agency that exists in the absence of any credible political narratives to act as a guarantor of ‘political’ meanings. This is where art’s power lies – in the fact that through performing how we should judge – a renegotiation of subjectivity – there could be a potential renegotiation of a wider social order.

For Chantal Mouffe, there is a democratic paradox, the one in which the ethical forever interrogates the political. It always questions the logic of inclusion/exclusion. This opposition between ‘the political’ and ‘politics’ creates antagonistic relations between those who wish to create unity in one way and those who want to create it in a different way. This is the opposition between ‘us and them’. What is at issue in democratic politics is not to eliminate exclusion, but to construct them as an ‘adversary’ rather than the enemy and this is, as Mouffe states, ‘...the real meaning of liberal-democratic tolerance...’³¹⁹ There is also an aesthetical paradox, where the praxis of aesthetics questions the aesthetical judgment and reveals through the ongoing practice of art a conceptual hopelessness of judgment *per se*.

Following Prigov, the territory where these two paradoxes meet is the space for the formation of a new subjectivity – the one that is neither purely ‘political’ nor purely ‘aesthetical’. The aesthetical can interrogate the ethical, which, in turn, questions the political in a different way. For instance, Groys’ example with designing headscarves in order to erase differences between headscarves being a political symbol of oppression and liberating fashion misses the point. The consumer-motivated command to everyone to wear headscarves does not eliminate antagonism, but masks it. Using the relationship of oppression to sell clothes does not liberate the excluded, but humiliates them. What is at issue is aesthetically to mediate the symbolic power of headscarves in the social or political realm and, by

³¹⁹ Mouffe, Chantal, *The Democratic Paradox*, Verso, London, New York, 2000: 102

transposing it onto the aesthetic realm, to question it from 'inside'. Through showing, for example, that a headscarf or a burka is beautiful, that something is hidden behind its appearance and a given sensibility, might weaken the relationship of the image connection to the social structures. What is at issue here is aesthetically to mediate, to reveal something that contradicts the image's own legitimacy and grounding. For example, Dmitry Prigov's painting of a woman's conversation with her burka indicates that a common sensibility of a burka as an oppressive symbol in fact exceeds itself. An image then becomes intolerable to itself. In contrast to Groys' invitation to design ourselves as 'an aesthetic presentation as ethical subject', critical aesthetics demonstrate that this 'ethical subject' is impossible and that her or his ethics correspond to the regime of questioning in the condition of contingency. There is only ethical subjectivity rather than a 'subject'.

It appears that Groys' position of an 'aesthetical subject' looks for some kind of resolution, a guaranteed way of overcoming existing antagonisms. In its intention for the masses to design themselves, for everyone to be the artist, this position masks a troubling mistrust of the possibility of an intellectual engagement. If we only exhibit political symbols as passive art that evokes a maximum popular response, we will then have a form of democratic aesthetic presentation or discussion. However, the mindless consumption of images and symbols in question do not cause dissensus, but only a consensus in the commercial sphere. After all, as democratic as the market can be, there are limits to what it can inhabit – whilst *Prada* can design headscarves and, perhaps, even stripy inmate pyjamas in the style of Auschwitz or a gas chamber bed, the aesthetical dimension cannot and should not overcome the ethical. Groys' approach appears to champion the view of aesthetics that is beyond the discursive, beyond signification, but art is not some kind of elevated space of immediacy, as Rancière would argue. Rather, what is at issue is that in the absence of any credible political narrative, an artwork presents a condition of possibility through a renegotiation of subjectivity, and does not make it something actual in human experience.

We need political symbols, structures, judgments – the question that is posed through an aesthetic critique refers to how we judge in general. In this way, the praxis of art could be understood as creating one's own path not based on aesthetics as an ideal, but through aesthetics as a way to make sense of an otherwise senseless world. However, what is at issue is to do it in a way that it is not just opposing the totalising images of society, but also the totalisation of the sensible. Hence our next chapter looks at the way in which Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar practises art as the regime of visibility, which reminds us that the present society is always lacking something without filling in the 'gaps'. We will argue that Jaar's interventions are counter-hegemonic in a double sense: first, it engages with nodal moments of power and shows that there is never a full image of reality, positive or negative; second, his work is centred around the 'inability to show everything' in the work of art, thus working against the very system to which the image belongs. Unlike Pascal Gielen, who is concerned with the preservation of art's own dynamics, freedom and autonomy, for Jaar, the artist always emerges as a political figure, the product and the producer of a society. Intervening in both the social and aesthetical realms, Jaar's work is not the expression of a circumscribed meaning but a subject-formation instrument.

Chapter Five
 Critical Art in the Post-Political Era:
 Self-Preservation or Counter-Hegemonic Intervention?

We will now examine different conceptions of how the political role of artistic practices is envisaged in a post-political society. Shall we focus on the preservation of art's autonomy, which, some believe, is the precondition for the possibility of social critique or, thinking in terms of the democratic and aesthetical paradoxes, shall we accept the lack as critique's precondition, which the artwork can never replace or fully show?

The first position, embodied in the works of sociologist Pascal Gielen and, perhaps, the most popular one, follows Paolo Virno's view that in times of post-Fordism, art has dissolved in society like an effervescent tablet in water. Gielen is critical of the globalised art scene, which, he postulates, has become a mere production entity for the new type of economic exploitation. The Dutch thinker disabuses any possibility of art's meaningful political intervention, but only in preserving its own dynamic and autonomy by moving to places of intimacy and slowability. For Gielen, through post-Fordism, art lost its autonomy, which, for him is the precondition for the possibility of social critique. The second position, represented by Alfredo Jaar, contends that artistic intervention is especially crucial at times when images are generally anaesthetised through their constant use by the post-Fordist economic engine and harnessed to maintain the grasp of neoliberalism. Jaar does not believe that the political potentials of art should be considered through the prism of post-Fordism; rather he connects them with the exposure to the flawed nature of any societal systems. Akin to Jacques Rancière's notion of 'the intolerability of the image', which he places at the heart of the tensions affecting political art, and Chantal Mouffe's argument that democratic politics require '...coming to terms with the lack of a final ground and the undecidability which pervades every order...'³²⁰,

³²⁰ Mouffe, Chantal, 'Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces', *Art & Research*, Volume 1, No.2 Summer 2007, <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html>

Jaar envisages critical art as the regime of visibility, which reminds us that the present society, as any other social order, is always lacking something. There is always something missing, hidden or unsaid, and while the artist cannot fulfil these gaps, he certainly can show that they exist.

Jaar's position appears to consolidate around artists' 'inability to show everything', since power is blind to itself and artistic practice can only expose the lacking elements on which the 'fullness' of society is based and also expose the weakness of the artwork as an 'individual' construction. For Jaar, the status of the 'individual art work' is not the expression of a circumscribed meaning, but a subject-formation instrument. The artist here emerges as a political figure, the product and the producer of a society.

'Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude'

In *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude*, Pascal Gielen presents the gloomy picture of the contemporary art world, which cannot escape the new machinery of post-Fordism, the monster of its own creation. Following Hardt's and Negri's claim that immaterial labour began to constitute the hegemony for all forms of production, Gielen draws a parallel between artistic practices and immaterial labour. For him, examples such as Marcel Duchamp manifest the fact that modern art served as a social laboratory for immaterial labour and thus for post-Fordism. Today, Gielen states, '...the social logic of the artistic world has reached the heart of society'.³²¹

Gielen argues that, despite the fact that around 80% of artistic visual works are material objects and museums do have rigid working hours, specialisation and structure, what is important is the immaterial, discursive value, which biennales and art fairs bring. The work of art as the material object, as an image, simply does not matter, since it only functions within the 'rhizomes', 'networks', 'nomadism',

³²¹ Gielen, Pascal, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude Global Art, Memory and Post-Fordism*, Antennae, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2009: 31

‘escape routes’, ‘non-hierarchical forms of organisations’ etc. The emphasis, Gielen says, ‘shifted from displaying material works to immaterial labour’.³²² He writes, ‘Even the museum – certainly if it is a contemporary art museum – has been infected by the biennale virus. Even a museum is displaying post-institutional characteristics, for it too has become a post-Fordian enterprise’.³²³

However, in his analysis of ‘artistic multitude’, Gielen tends to agree with the pessimistic prognosis of Paolo Virno rather than with Hardt and Negri, who assume that an amorphous, elusive and creative multitude creates Empire’s gravediggers. Like Paolo Virno, Gielen believes that it was culture that forced the transition from Fordist to post-Fordist economy and thus made the artist – a good performer of ideas – the pivot of economic vitality. However, attaining the privileged position within the post-Fordist framework, art has become an ideal production unit for a new type of economic exploitation. The contemporary globalised art scene, with its ‘...inability’ and “‘tactical refusal’ to speak out or have meaning”,³²⁴ according to Gielen, ‘...murmurs quietly from the sidelines’³²⁵ while the global neo-liberal market economy takes the ‘blood and flesh’ out of art, stripping it bare of its autonomy. Following Paolo Virno’s view that art has dissolved in society like an effervescent tablet in water and his understanding of political engagement as exodus and creation of a radically new non-state public sphere, Gielen envisages art’s autonomy as the only remaining precondition for social critique and suggests that in order to preserve and re-create its own dynamic and freedom, art needs to go to places of ‘intimacy’ and ‘slowability’. Instead of participating in creative cities or making their work popular with the mass-media, artists, Gielen argues, should ‘think about the world in a personal way and throughout their work’.³²⁶ Thus, criticising

³²² Gielen, Pascal, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude Global Art, Memory and Post-Fordism*, Antennae, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2009: 40

³²³ *Ibid.*: 44

³²⁴ Gielen, Pascal, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude Global Art, Memory and Post-Fordism*, Antennae, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2009: 17

³²⁵ *Ibid.*: 31

³²⁶ Gielen, Pascal and Paul de Bruyne, Gielen, ‘Epilogue/Dialogue Art, Lifelong Learning and Politics’, *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, Nai Publishers, Research Group Arts in Society, Fontys College for the Arts, 2009: 159

contemporary art for the ‘murmuring’, Gielen suggests that the solution lies in withdrawing into art’s own sub-system, where it would somehow be able to speak out and have a meaning.

Gielen speaks little of politics and appears not to seek any political explanation of the post-Fordist situation. Rather, he accepts claims that the economy has become immaterial despite the fact that for most people in the world questions of material security have a priority over questions of personal identity and performing their ideas. According to Gielen, politics and economics have already merged into one post-Fordist framework driven only by economic issues. He states from the outset, ‘First of all, let us be clear: this book is not a plea against liberal or neo-liberal politics. As long as an ideological programme is defended in the political arena, it explicitly admits to being an ideology, which people can be for or against. No good democrat can have anything against that. What is more, let us not forget that both liberalism and neoliberalism prize individual freedom and autonomy very highly. And these are critical values which modern art and artists could hardly survive without’.³²⁷ Rather, Gielen envisages a post-Fordist framework as an ideological vacuum, since ‘...the neoliberalism [as an ideology] has left the political area and, just like Virno’s soluble tablet, had dissolved into society to permeate it.’³²⁸ Instead, what we are dealing with is a different type of ‘non-ideological’ neoliberalism, which really believes that the current situation presents a completely new configuration where market forces and a blind logic of accumulation act as a tsunami we can longer do anything about. Gielen also speaks of globalisation as a phenomenon related to the unstoppable tsunami of free-market capitalism. Thus, the position in which artistic practices find themselves today corresponds to almost an apocalyptic scenario where politics no longer exist, presenting artistic practices as the outpost of meaningful engagement in times of post-Fordism as a new paradigm of power, which organises society directly, without any political mediation. Thus, the ‘political’ question for Gielen is ‘How can art or the artist still have meaning

³²⁷ Gielen, Pascal, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude Global Art, Memory and Post-Fordism*, Antennae, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2009: 2-3

³²⁸ *Ibid.*: 3

within the hegemony of the market economy?’³²⁹

What Gielen overlooks is the political dimension behind the importance of art and creativity in post-Fordist society. As we have discussed in the previous chapters, the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism was dictated by re-articulation of various strategies such as the search for authenticity, flexibility and novelty largely associated with the world of counter-culture, what Boltanski calls an ‘artistic critique’. It is not that ‘art criticism has been absorbed by the capitalist ideology’³³⁰, as Gielen argues, and today post-Fordism ‘accepts [it] with open arms’³³¹; rather, certain strategies have been put to use to stabilise the capitalist framework, which has not changed in its content but only in its form. Post-Fordism is not an artistic phenomenon that has resulted in a purely economical outcome of transforming art into a new exploitative machine. It was a complex hegemonic intervention, and the central position of artistic and cultural practices was not of artists’ choice and making, but of that of capital. Furthermore, politics have not simply evaporated from post-Fordist capitalist society – there are many forms of contemporary politics engaging in different ways of being political such as publicity stunts, direct action, ‘transversal’ alliances, individual protests, etc.; however, most of them are not necessarily progressive. Across the world, political movements and groups adopt religious fundamentalism, racism, xenophobia, environmental elitism or sectarianism. Globalisation was not an abstract overpowering spread of capitalism, but a political transformation driven by the most powerful states in the international system, which produced various institutions such as the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank to deregulate domestic labour and financial markets. Furthermore, despite the new challenges and problematics of globalisation, most people still look to the state, not to the artistic realm, as the last resort for providing economic security and political stability.

³²⁹ Gielen, Pascal, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude Global Art, Memory and Post-Fordism*, Antennae, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2009: 3

³³⁰ *Ibid.*: 2

³³¹ Gielen, Pascal and Paul de Bruyne, Gielen, ‘Epilogue/Dialogue Art, Lifelong Learning and Politics’, *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, Nai Publishers, Research Group Arts in Society, Fontys College for the Arts, 2009: 7

In his recent book co-edited together with Paul De Bruyne *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, Gielen argues that ‘today more than ever before, I think, the decision to make art, and to make a certain kind of art, is an ideological decision precisely because of the central position that both art and creativity have ‘attained’ in our society’.³³² According to Gielen, artists’ choices of areas of participation in the post-Fordist economy can actually mould it. He writes,

‘Modern artists do not represent the world – no mimesis – but present the world through themselves, through Pistoletto’s *Signe Arte* or through De Keersmaecker’s body. When singularity and collectivity join in a work of art, it immediately uncovers the political nature of artworks as well – whether they do or do not explicitly spread a political message. Politics mould coexistence’.³³³

Completely overlooking the issue of contemporary political movements, Gielen compares the realms of art and sport in search of a possible source of political vitality. He contends that while in sport one has to excel by the rules, in arts one has to ‘argue, to legitimize yourself’. He writes, ‘I think this activity is of crucial importance in a democratic society and is in many ways comparable to the concept of ideal politics. After all, public accountability and performative arguing are also central to that concept. That is why sports cannot be a model of democracy, whereas art can’.³³⁴ The way Gielen envisages this legitimisation corresponds almost exclusively to artistic practices slowing and narrowing themselves to their own vision of alternative to the post-Fordism economy as a new political movement.

³³² Gielen, Pascal and Paul de Bruyne, Gielen, ‘Epilogue/Dialogue Art, Lifelong Learning and Politics’, *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, NAI Publishers, Research Group Arts in Society, Fontys College for the Arts, 2009: 160

³³³ Gielen, Pascal and Paul de Bruyne, Gielen, ‘Epilogue/Dialogue Art, Lifelong Learning and Politics’, *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, NAI Publishers, Research Group Arts in Society, Fontys College for the Arts, 2009: 159-160

³³⁴ Gielen, Pascal and Paul de Bruyne, Gielen, ‘Epilogue/Dialogue Art, Lifelong Learning and Politics’, *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, NAI Publishers, Research Group Arts in Society, Fontys College for the Arts, 2009: 163

***Cittadellarte* as a Political Movement of an Alternative Economy**

Gielen's suggestion regarding the political role of art in the age of post-Fordism appears to consist of bringing art into the centre of the economic system not by resisting it but by creating an alternative space for societal praxes inside it in almost a premodern manner. One of Gielen's preferred examples of such new politics is the artistic practice of Michelangelo Pistoletto, who in 1996 launched the *Cittadellarte* organisation that involves an investigation into alternatives to the post-Fordism economic system in which art is placed at the centre of local industry and 'socially sound transformation'. Coming from the point of view that, due to the current economic framework, the autonomy of the artist and of art is shrinking, the goal of *Cittadellarte* is to create its own economy, to be the first company of this kind of economy, which follows the biological system. According to Pistoletto, today's society is lacking direct relations between concrete human values and the abstract value of the financial system; therefore, what is at issue is to restore the balance, which, as a model of such, could be seen in a balanced body of a human being. Following this belief, *Cittadellarte* has created the *Human Values Bank* and the *Third Paradise project*, which consists of reshaping the artificial – technology, art, culture and politics – in order to restore the balance between what Pistoletto calls the 'first paradise,' when life is governed by nature, and the second, manufactured by humans.

According to Pistoletto, what we most need today is conservation. He states, '...I think we have to go back to Fordism, but certainly in a completely different way with respect to the past. What was positive in the Fordist system was the direct relationship between production and consumption – the workers themselves bought the product'.³³⁵ Hence, the question for politics is how to bring production closer to real needs. Pistoletto explains, 'This is why, here at *Cittadellarte*, for instance, our restaurant Cafeteria, uses the zero kilometre concept – keeping production on

³³⁵ Corsten, Maries-Josee, Gielen, Pascal and Coppola, Luigi, 'The Cleverness of Spirituality', an interview with Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, Nai Publishers, Research Group Arts in Society, Fontys College for the Arts, 2009: 62

a short leash by offering food that comes from local producers, and only when it is in season'.³³⁶

Thus, the way Pistoletto perceives art's involvement in the economy lies in escaping the consumer aesthetics and instead looking towards nature. He states, 'We have a lot to learn from the way ancient tribes painted their bodies, danced together ritually, and exchanged a common aesthetic'.³³⁷ This 'common aesthetic' can only be based on this new ethical dimension of following the human body as an example of interconnected but perfectly balanced parts.

According to Gielen, *Cittadellarte*'s type of collaboration, which takes place not between the artists but with a very diverse group of social actors, creates a new type of work of art, which makes real differences in the economy and thus in politics. Gielen states,

'By attempting to bring art into the centre of the economic system and by describing the artist as an actor who has to take his responsibility in this system, *Cittadellarte* wants to break open the contemporary dominant neoliberal capitalist system, not by working against this system, but by creating an open space for artistic contingency inside it'.³³⁸

It appears that Gielen's vision corresponds to the post-Fordist predicament, which strives in the 'open' space of artistic contingency. Insofar as this space is situated within the economic system, it ensures its growth and stability.

Pistolletto's *Cittadellarte* poses itself as something of a translation centre between the art world and other societal subsystems in order to become an alternative economy. Only when this new system, free of post-Fordism, is constructed, when art

³³⁶ Corsten, Maries-Josee, Gielen, Pascal and Coppola, Luigi, 'The Cleverness of Spirituality', an interview with Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, Nai Publishers, Research Group Arts in Society, Fontys College for the Arts, 2009: 62

³³⁷ *Ibid.*: 63

³³⁸ Gielen, Pascal, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude Global Art, Memory and Post-Fordism*, Antennae, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2009: 224

becomes a central company, can all relations be re-constructed under a new artistic economic logic. Pistoletto's work is not social in the sense that it enables interactivity in the existing system, which he believes is flawed and unsustainable, but provides a new system of artistic economy, in which true sociability would be possible – art can only be 'common' when we all share the same ethical framework of a balanced body of a human being.

According to Gielen, artistic practices such as *Cittadellarte*, in which 'An artistic concept is being transformed into a political movement of alternative economies, and vice versa: politics and economics become a work of art'³³⁹ provide the opportunity for a meaningful engagement in times when art's ability and autonomy is severely paralysed by post-Fordist exploitation. What is suggested is that art can rescue its autonomy by becoming an alternative economy.

Why is this realm of an alternative economy, which can be constructed through art, important for Gielen? It appears that the main reason behind it, apart from the vital role that artistic practices play in post-Fordism, lies within Gielen's understanding of what politics are about. Politics for him could only be cultural because the problem with today's 'crypto-ideology' is that it 'denies the distinction between nature and culture'.³⁴⁰ He quotes Pistoletto, whose understanding of democratic politics appears to be shared by Gielen: 'In the universe there is no central point, every heavenly body is the centre. From this standpoint every individual can accept differences of religion, culture, social background and age. Such is democracy. And speaking of democracy, if one is in touch with oneself, one is in touch with the community. If we realize that the universe and the individual are the same thing, we have nothing to fear from the unknown'.³⁴¹

³³⁹ Gielen, Pascal, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude Global Art, Memory and Post-Fordism*, Antennae, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2009: 236

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*: 3

³⁴¹ Corsten, Maries-Josee, Gielen, Pascal and Coppola, Luigi, 'The Cleverness of Spirituality', an interview with Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, Nai Publishers, Research Group Arts in Society, Fontys College for the Arts, 2009: 62

Although Gielen's argument in *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude* does not directly consider the political potential of art – his book focuses on the role of art in the economic phenomenon of post-Fordism, which he understands in terms of a labour model – it suggests that the political trajectory of art today could only be envisaged as escaping the prison of the post-Fordist economy by concentrating on creating alternative structures where art would produce its own social relations. Gielen appears to support Virno's account that critical art could only be considered within the range of possible attitudes towards post-Fordism, which allegedly asks for a radically new conception of politics and political subject. Similarly to Virno, who argues for exodus as mass defection from traditional politics, Gielen believes that it is art that is capable of constituting new forms of politics. He explains, 'The experiment of *Cittadellarte* is part of a broad aim: not to import new energy from the outside world into art but to let art become an integral part of that outside world again, not under the conditions of the industrial world, but under those of the artistic logic. And finally, de-instrumentalise the use of art in society, and enable to exploit its fullest possibilities in each of its domains. This is the target of *Cittadellarte*: to make as many passage points as possible all over the whole of the globe, starting from its heterotopic space, in order to reorder society and transmute its crypto-utopia'.³⁴² Thus, while Virno, due to the post-Fordist paradigm, calls the existence of the state and representational politics into question, Gielen suggests that the idea of art and artists must also be radically altered. Art must become practical again and thus political in the otherwise de-politicised post-Fordist universe.

Hence Gielen's position appears to amount to the refusal and withdrawal from the post-Fordist situation, economic in character and devoid of politics. Art, according to him, was a laboratory of post-Fordism and now it can also become a laboratory for a new type of alternative political economy. What is at issue is to rescue art's autonomy and therefore artists must move to the personal places of 'slowability' and organise sub-systems such as Pistoletto's. To be a political artist, for Gielen, means

³⁴² Gielen, Pascal, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude Global Art, Memory and Post-Fordism*, Antennae, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2009: 235

speaking outside the context. Artistic production for him is already critical and political, what is needed is to ‘de-instrumentalize the use of art in society’,³⁴³ the construction of alternative venues representing the art world, which can then reform the relationships with other societal subsystems according to the artistic logic.

There is, however, another understanding of a ‘post-political’ situation as ‘post-democratic’ moment in the neoliberal order. There are also artists who do not envisage post-Fordism as a unique condition that radically alters the nature of the political order, politics and artistic practices. In fact, these artists do not think that artistic practices are something separate from politics and deserve a special status. One of these artists is Chilean-born architect, filmmaker by profession and artist by vocation Alfredo Jaar. Jaar, unlike Pistoletto, does not believe that either the culture has become the matrix of post-Fordism or that artistic practices should be capable of constructing an isolated space for alternative social praxis. Instead, because of the central role of art in the support of the neo-liberal hegemony, Jaar contends that artistic practice should act in both places: the world of art and intervening directly in the multiplicity of public spaces. For Jaar, because of its privileged position within the post-Fordist logic, art can open possibilities rather than close them down by narrowing and slowing artistic practices to their own field. However, this should not be understood as a way of assigning to the artist the role of the universal historical subject of the post-Fordist age. Rather, artists should resume their public role, but equipped with the understanding of what democratic politics entail and also with view that aesthetics is not a practice of judgments but the judgment performed aesthetically, and the one that challenges any judgment. Jaar’s understanding of the political role of art corresponds to Chantal Mouffe’s understanding of democratic politics as engagement with rather than withdrawal from the existing state of affairs and Jacques Rancière’s notion of the ‘intolerability of the image’, which he places at the heart of the tensions that constitute art’s critical dimension.

³⁴³ Gielen, Pascal, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude Global Art, Memory and Post-Fordism*, Antennae, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2009: 235

‘Life is More Important than Art’

For Alfredo Jaar, the narrative that we construct as a society always conceals the brutality, the horror of the ‘human creation’ as a consequence of the very exercise of power. For Jaar, the increasingly precarious state of global society where people live under the conditions of an uncertain, hostile and indifferent environment reveals just how secure, sure, strong and undoubted the existing power structures are. The post-political condition of precariousness for Jaar is not based on innocence, on leaving behind the old ideological conflicts in order to concentrate on competent management and administration, but on dangerous complicity, against which no other action remains than to recover the courage of our minds and the individual sense of responsibility from which, through figures like Pier Paolo Pasolini and Antonio Gramsci, Jaar takes his inspiration.

Today, when many artists believe that art constitutes a context deserving a special statute, a situation depicted by Ana Maria Risco in the ‘Conversations’ being ‘like people riding on exercise bike: puffing away, but getting nowhere’³⁴⁴, Jaar insists that ‘life is more important than art’ and ‘that’s what makes art important’.

This approach does not sit comfortably with a number of attitudes in the contemporary art scene where, after more than half a century, the subject matter of art remains its own bankruptcy under the capitalist system and its own resignation from aesthetic engagement with real situations and real human experiences, which are often insidiously hidden from public view. Jaar argues, ‘As William Blake said, you have to invent your own system if you do not want to be enslaved by another’s man system. I have no illusions and like Gramsci, I am an intellectual pessimist. But also like him, I have an optimistic will’.³⁴⁵ React to the dire unbalances surrounding us instead of merely replicating them, urges the artist. Jaar’s art is not a self-

³⁴⁴ Ana Maria Risco quoted by Valdes, Adriana, ‘Don’t Think Like an Artist, Think Like a Human Being’, *Alfredo Jaar Santiago de Chile 2006*, Actar, 2007: 57

³⁴⁵ Alfredo Jaar’s interview with Luigi Fassi, *KLAT* Issue 01, Winter 2009-2010, available online www.alfredojaar.net/recentpress

sufficient calling, exploring where the meaning of autonomy and freedom for the artist lies today; nor is it inspired by the avant-garde dream of producing emancipatory effects by desublimating a meaning or destructing a form. The problem of a form as such or the dilemma of its commodification is not Jaar's concern. For him, artistic practice is never about object-making, but about models of thinking through which a new introspection, one that is not based on dormant actuality, anesthetised by hyperinformation of images, could be put forward. Jaar states, '...when we try to represent the world, we actually never succeed because reality cannot be represented. We can only create new realities. These realities are models of thinking the world. These models, the most successful ones, have a life of their own and...affect the way we see the world and the way we live the world. It is difficult. It is an almost impossible task. But I cannot imagine a greater privilege and a greater responsibility than this'.³⁴⁶

'To me, art is either thinking, critical; or it is decoration'³⁴⁷, says Jaar. However, this thinking does not mean that there is any such thing as a place where power is liberated from its own blindness about itself. To think that we can abstract ourselves from the mechanisms of power, its supposed field of action, would be to conceive a realm beyond the forms of political functioning described by Gramsci as 'consensus and coercion'. Meanwhile, critical art means more than just saying what people do not want to hear or showing what they do not want to see. The power of the articulated, in this case, transcends the use of criticism as a direct accusation. Rather, as Jaar argues, in the face of the blindness of power, critical art brings into play a way of visual thinking, which constructs recognition of the blind spots, identifying some of the zones of denial on which our image of the public realm is based. Such spots are always very uncomfortable places.

Today critical art, insists Jaar, is especially crucial since the realm of culture, the

³⁴⁶ Alfredo Jaar's interview with Luigi Fassi, *KLAT* Issue 01, Winter 2009-2010:

³⁴⁷ Alfredo Jaar's radio interview with Romania de la Sotta, Santiago, Chile, 13 June 2005, www.beethovenfm.cl/panoramas/exposiciones/122.act

world of art, which insist on autonomy, in fact, have turned it into a prison. Jaar's work entitled *Infinite Cell*, 2004 (see Appendix, fig. 1) speaks about the isolation of art and its attempt to have a direct influence. Jaar explains, 'The Cell is about the role of culture today. A cell for the world of art... We have created a culture, which is an infinite cell. It's a very negative, very pessimistic work. Sometimes, I think, here you are talking to me, and I'm talking to you, and the result is zero. *Infinite Cell*, in its countless reflections, shows the constraint that curtails every movement of freedom. We can go in and out, enjoying the release but then we look into the mirrors and the reflection of the cell, which represents nothing but the cell's emptiness and this realisation, admits us to the confinement of the cell'.³⁴⁸ The mirrors, which are conventionally used to improve the clarity and visibility, appear here and in a number of Jaar's works to be concealing and obstructing mechanisms, which reflect back not an image but rather the impossibility of reconstructing the image in its entirety. The mirrors carry our own image and the perspectives project the 'panopticum' of the human condition. This is not an imaginary prison, not part of an artist's dream.

Jaar insists that the cell of culture today calls for artists to intervene more, to re-orientate 'dead' images, injecting them with a sense of possible change. Jaar says, 'I take these images that exist in the world and have lost their power because of the way they have been decontextualized, and I create a new context for them, the context of my installation, where hopefully I help them recuperate the original essence that they were meant to say'.³⁴⁹ Making art for Jaar has always consisted of his courage in assuming a position, giving a new context for what exists but is far from our little art world.

That is why Jaar does not create artificial micro-communities or imaginary spaces where individuals can be 'framed' into a beautiful picture; on the contrary, the artist

³⁴⁸ Alfredo Jaar's interview with Luigi Fassi, *KLAT* Issue 01, Winter 2009-2010, available online www.alfredojaar.net/recentpress

³⁴⁹ Alfredo Jaar's radio interview with Romania de la Sotta, Santiago, Chile, 13 June 2005, www.beethovenfm.cl/panoramas/exposiciones/122.act

speaks about his art as a model of ‘unframing’, ‘visibilising’ and ‘recognising’ of what is the blind spot in the other’s field of vision. Jaar states, ‘I am an architect making art, and I use the methodology of the architect, meaning that I react to a certain space and a certain situation. My works are site-specific and react to a given community, a given space or a given situation. So I react not only to a physical space, as most artists do, but I see that space as a social space, as a political space’.³⁵⁰

‘There is Nothing to See’

In the last 20 years Jaar has created some 60 visual interventions into specific situations and communities. These interventions suggest that there is always something more to see, especially in places where one is not supposed to look or ask questions.

Jacques Rancière’s statement ‘Move along! There is nothing to see here’³⁵¹ represents what he calls the ‘police order’. This term, however, does not directly refer to the police but rather to institutions, social positions, modes of communication, images and ways of speaking and showing – all operations that generate what Rancière calls ‘the given’.

According to the ‘police order’, there is always nothing else to see apart from the already established patterns and it is not that people are kept in the dark deliberately but that the order is blind, its ‘common sense’ does not allow the inclusion of all points of view, otherwise there would be no order. Any authorities allow only certain positions within social and institutional hierarchies and any changes are usually only open to certain people within these hierarchies. Disagreement occurs when people start looking where they are not supposed to look, when they see or

³⁵⁰ Alfredo Jaar’s interview with Luigi Fassi, *KLAT* Issue 01, Winter 2009-2010, available online www.alfredojaar.net/recentpress

³⁵¹ Rancière’s *Aux bords du politique*, quoted in Hallward, Peter, ‘Staging Equility: Ranceire’s Theatrocracy and the Limits of Anarchic Equility’, in *Jacques Rancière, History, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. Rockhill, Gabriel, Watts, Philip, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2009: 147

sense ‘the hidden’, suggesting that there is more to the world than the given. In one of his recent interviews Rancière argues that this happened, for example, when workers during the 1830s began to write literature in their spare time while remaining workers. He observes: ‘I think the bourgeoisie felt that there was a danger when the worker entered the world of thought and culture. When workers are only struggling, then they are supposed to be in their world and in their place. But when workers attempt to write verses and try to become writers, philosophers, it means a displacement from their identity as workers. What I was trying to show was that there was no real opposition. I don’t mean that all workers who are attempting to write verses had entered the revolution or anything, but it was a kind of a general movement of people getting out of their condition...What they wanted was to become entirely human, with all the possibilities of a human being and not only having what is possible to do for workers.’³⁵²

What this example shows is that the existing order is not unquestionable, that there are other possibilities and other things to be seen, other ways of looking, thinking and living. In *The Emancipated Spectator* Rancière argues that emancipation ‘begins when we dismiss the opposition between looking and acting and understand that the distribution of the visible itself is part of the configuration of domination and subjection’.³⁵³ This is linked to this idea of the ‘distribution of the sensible’ – what it does and does not do, and about what is included and excluded from the field of vision. Rancière suggests that looking ‘at places or questions that are not supposed to be your place or your questions’ creates spaces that weaken ‘...the bonds that enclose spectacles within a form of visibility ... within the machine that makes the “state of things” seem evident, unquestionable.’³⁵⁴ Looking where one is not supposed to look does not mean showing true horrors and suffering, what Rancière calls ‘the intolerable image’. However powerful the ‘intolerable’ image is, it never

³⁵² Liang, Lawrence, interview with Jacques Rancière’, *Kafila*, 5 February 2009, available online <http://kafila.org/2009/02/12/interview-with-jacques-Rancière/>

³⁵³ Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London New York, 2009

³⁵⁴ Rancière, Jacques in conversation with Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey, ‘Art of the Possible’, *Artforum*, March 2007, online http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_7_45/ai_n24354911/?tag=content:coll

acts on its own but always belongs to a particular system of visibility. Rancière states, ‘The image is pronounced unsuitable for criticizing reality because it pertains to the same regime of visibility as that reality, which by turns displays its aspect of brilliant appearance and its other side of sordid truth, constituting a single spectacle’.³⁵⁵ What is at issue here is the regime of visibility itself, which does not anticipate the effects of the images. What is needed are different politics of the sensible based on the resistance of the visible where the ‘intolerable’ image does not constitute the other side of the spectacle. Rancière says, ‘The shift from the intolerable in the image to the intolerability of the image has found itself at the heart of the tensions affecting political art’.³⁵⁶

The strategies of different visibility are at the heart of Jaar’s artistic practice. According to the artist, seeing without looking is the most disturbing feature of our time. Blinded by the multitude of what Jaar calls ‘decontextualised’ or ‘anesthetised’ images, our jaded eyes are wide shut. By breaking the relationship between the image and its system, Jaar constructs a different regime of visibility where one can look without seeing, where the lack of images creates its own intolerability. *Lament of the Images* (2002, see Appendix, fig. 2) is, in many ways, a condensation of Jaar’s thinking about strategies of visibility. A metaphor for the absence and worthlessness of images, the impossibility to use them to represent the reality that they appear to stand for, *Lament of the Images* also searches for an ethical dimension, which, for Jaar, is always situated at the end of the aesthetics.

Three texts glow upon the wall in the semi-obscure room. The first text tells the story of the two-fold blinding of Nelson Mandela: by the sun reflected on limestone in the mine where he served his sentence and by the daylight in the photograph of his release. The following text describes how millions of images, including the one of Mandela, bought by a Bill Gates company, were buried in a limestone mine. The third text states that the U.S. Defense Department acquired the rights to all satellite

³⁵⁵ Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London New York, 2009:83

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*:84

imagery of the war in Afghanistan. 'There is', it declares, 'nothing left to see'. Still dazzled by glowing texts, the viewer's eyes are drawn towards a dim corridor and the faint glow at the end of it. As one walks through the corridor, the feelings of uncomfortable expectation arise – we want to see what is hidden. However, suddenly, we find ourselves facing a screen of white cold glare, which, instead of revealing, obscures and blinds our vision. It is not that the pictures are missing, or that they are excluded from our field of vision, but that the vision itself is problematic. The idea here is not about the missing images of Kabul's bombardment – Jaar does not try to make 'an invisible visible'. Rather, becoming involved in the narrative, we too, blinded like Mandela, are seeing nothing because there is no image left for us to see. The empty glare makes us imitate what we see and to recognise ourselves in the peering eye. It also forces us to acknowledge the artificial character of all images – they are elusive, inadequate and incomplete. The momentary loss of sight caused by the glare of a stroboscopic light somehow suggests that the 'true' visibility would be impossible to bear, that the only thing revealed here is the suppression and concealment of every record, of every image. While the original scene can never be documented, shown, reconstructed, the 'mental' picture, which we create out of our own experience with this narrative, reveals not just what we think is hidden but also what we do not question – our visual system of perception, which only through the loss of sight allows us to restore the contemporary viewer's jaded eye's ability to look. The lament conveyed by our eyes stands in for the whole 'lament of the images' – images having long since been transformed into 'agents of blindness'. Jaar's question, in our view, concerns not so much the problems of making the 'invisible visible', what is included and what is not, but the problem of: what is visible? Jaar's visible involves a relative non-visibility, when one must look without seeing, constructing a narrative, which does not come from the images but from our experience of this narrative. Only the way we look can change how we see things. While there is always something to see, actually we cannot see anything unless we have this experience; we are involved and we look.

Lament of Images demands a perception that is based on equality rather than on including what is excluded from our field of vision. Jaar does not include the missing pictures of a suffering community to produce a feeling of a shared society where equality is understood as supplying equal visibility and progressively moving from the invisible oppressed to the visibility of guilt, sorrow and final satisfaction of our curiosity and need to identify with the other in order to feel secure and comforted. Why do we want to see these missing pictures? There is no specific strategy of visibility of the oppressed for Jaar because aesthetics for the artist are always about ethics – an ethical dimension of intellectual emancipation, which is the same for the oppressed and the ruling; for rich people and poor people. Here Jaar takes his lead from Gramsci's argument that 'All men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals'³⁵⁷ i.e. all men are thinking actors and 'non-intellectuals do not exist'³⁵⁸. This is an idea of intellectual emancipation, that there is always some point of equality. Gramsci argues that, contrary to the understanding of the role of the traditional intellectuals, 'The problem of creating a new stratum of intellectuals consists therefore in the critical elaboration of the intellectual activity that exists in everyone...' in order to construct a 'foundation of the new conception of the world'.³⁵⁹ This approach resonates with Rancière's understanding of equality. He states, 'In the 1820s there was a lot of concern about how we can educate the people, slowly, progressively: but that was not the point, the idea of starting from inequality to reach quality; it's impossible because in the very process, you ceaselessly recycle practices of inequality. You must not go towards equality, but must start from equality. Starting from equality does not presuppose that everyone in the world has equal opportunities to learn, to express their capacities. That's not the point. The point is that you have to start from the minimum equality that is given'.³⁶⁰

³⁵⁷ Gramsci, Antonio, 'The Problems of History and Culture', *Selection from the Prison Notebooks*, translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 2007: 9

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁰ Rancière, Jacques in conversation with Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey, 'Art of the Possible', *Artforum*, March 2007, online http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_7_45/ai_n24354911/?tag=content;coll

This is where Jaar starts in *Lament of the Image* – from equality of impossibility of any such place where power is liberated from its own blindness about itself, that it is possible to progress from the realm of the oppressed and invisible into the realm of visible and therefore liberated. Your lament, says Jaar, cannot be satisfied; it can only be exchanged with another grief, the one that is common to all. There is no position of superiority: not for the viewers, nor for the artist. Jaar explains, ‘I put these images in your world, but always in a fragmented form, so that my inability to show everything becomes part of the work’.³⁶¹ The installation mingles the themes of captivity, people and images. It stages the paradox of excessive visibility, which, by accumulation, means that we ultimately see nothing. ‘Progressing’ from missing pictures to the loss of sight, one can grasp that we can only move from equality of invisibility to equality of impossibility to see, of experience of the limits of what can be achieved, shown or said. One has to start with equality and not finish with it.

Considering Jaar’s works, there is always something missing, fragmented, silenced, separated, imbalanced or destroyed. In *Real Pictures* (1995, see Appendix, fig. 3) images of the Rwandan genocide in 1994 have been supplanted by their descriptions on the black box; in the *Skoghall Konstall* (2000, Appendix, fig. 4) the wood and paper museum is inaugurated with the Swedish authorities in attendance only to be burned down the next day to illuminate the total absence of art in Skoghall; in *Untitled (Water)*, (1990, Appendix, fig. 5), Jaar shows only fragments of the sea and people – some of the photos that that artist took on the ships used by the immigration authority. The combined use of the seductive tourist advertising format of imagery of the sea, which promises an exotic cruise and projection of a different kind of journey embodied in the images of ‘travelers’ behind the bars, reflects on the political problems of global dimensions: the stability on one side and uncertainty, confinement on the other. The borders are open to goods, but not to people. *Untitled* makes us suspicious of Hard and Negri’s hopes for mass global mobility as a

³⁶¹ Alfredo’s Jaar is quoted in Valdes, Adriana, ‘Don’t Think Like an Artist, Think Like a Human Being’, *Alfredo Jaar Santiago de Chile 2006*, Actar, 2007: 56

‘counter-empire’, as microphysics of resistance. The people behind the bars hardly look like new revolutionaries – they are smiling, they just want to be on this ship, to join in the ‘empire’, to stabilise their displaced lives. Again, Jaar does not address the ‘Other’ as the realm we have to be sympathetic to or identify with, but rather shows the visual imbalance of the picture, which appears to be full and promising but never is. In contrast with the mainstream of contemporary art, which has become a place to define the ‘Other’, Jaar allows it to identify or define the ‘Other’ itself as identities are never pre-given in the first place.

Hence Jaar constrains normal visibility, revealing through the lacking fullness of image the lacking reality. There is never a full image, positive or negative; there is always something missing and the artist cannot fulfill these absences, silences, lack of visibility and inclusion. Jaar not only identifies the zones of denial, but also shows his inability to represent reality in its entirety; as the artist says, ‘his inability to show everything’ is his work of art.

Following Jaar, the role of critical art could be understood as a regime of visibility, which reminds us of a lack, that the present society is always lacking something. The recognition of this lack is the precondition of social critique. An artwork can present itself as a witness, as an image of ‘intolerability’, which stands in opposition to itself and thus to the reality it is supposed to represent. This artwork can never replace the lack of a ‘true’ reality. Jaar’s art is never a solution to this lack but rather an image of it, which is also lacking its representational capacities. Such presentation opens up the lacking present to the future, which can never be the realm of certainty and positivity but only the realm of continuous articulation and therefore of hope.

Thus we can see that Jaar’s artistic practices approach problems in our society in what Chantal Mouffe describes as a ‘political way’. Mouffe writes,

‘To acknowledge the dimension of the political as the ever present possibility of antagonism requires coming to terms with the lack of a final ground and the

undecidability which pervades every order. It requires in other words recognizing the hegemonic nature of every kind of social order and the fact that every society is the product of a series of practices attempting to establishing order in a context of contingency. The political is linked to the acts of hegemonic institution... It is in that sense that it can be called “political” since it is the expression of a particular structure of power relations’.³⁶²

Many today believe that once we abandon the great ‘ideological causes’ and accept that any alternative to the neoliberal hegemony could only be envisaged through use of force or other totalitarian means, then we can really agree that the only alternative left is to improve what is given with its main objective of the regulation of the safety and wellbeing of human life, known as *biopolitics*. In other words, when the basic level of politics is composed of depoliticised and socially objective activities performed by a competent administration and coordination of interests, the only way to introduce passion into this field actively to mobilise the people, is fear of the totalitarian regime, of potential persecution or attack, of excessive control by the State etc. This fear is often embodied in artistic strategies of avoidance, when artists prefer procedures composed of deviations, associations, labyrinths and shortcuts, anything that involves indirect thought processes, as if by deferring the meaning of the artwork by winning over time and space, somehow, this meaning would be more elaborate and less dogmatic or final. For example, British artist Liam Gillick’s artistic language of ‘screens’, ‘scenarios’ or ‘functional utopias’ aims to delay or obscure narration with jumps, pauses, flashbacks and flashforwards against its normal progression. Gillick’s aim is potentially to say more but not articulating anything in particular. Avoiding any images and structures of ‘totality’, the artist’s works, according to Marcus Verhagen, ‘...turn out to be largely paralyzing, as Gillick repeatedly tracks from radical to exploratory positions...Ultimately, Gillick’s

³⁶² Mouffe, Chantal, ‘Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces’, *Art & Research*, Volume 1, No.2 Summer 2007, <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html>

attitude to utopianism is so guarded that there is no telling it apart from a busy, garrulous resignation'.³⁶³

Such an approach, based on fear, whether it is a fear of artwork becoming a commodity or a statement, of articulation of a position, stands in opposition to the hegemonic strategy, which, while not prescriptive, acknowledging a contingent nature of any position, nevertheless enjoins us to adopt a certain 'disposition', an act of disposing; a bestowal or transfer to another of the tendency to disagree that what is given should always be taken. Any social order is already contingent, so there is little point in fearing what it is lacking – the essence, the final ground – meanwhile, because of this, this order is politically structured through power relations that exclude and silence some voices so that society as such can exist.

Public Space as a Memorial – Articulations That Did Not Occur

While you cannot escape power relations, instead of mobilisation through fear, the process that cannot grasp the presence of the lack, the political dimension could be envisaged as mobilisation through lack and therefore the possibility of different articulation instead of the 'given'.

Chantal Mouffe writes,

'While there is no underlying principle of unity, no predetermined centre to this diversity of spaces, there always exist diverse forms of articulation among them and we are not faced with the kind of dispersion envisaged by some postmodernist thinkers. Nor are we dealing with the kind of "smooth" space found in Deleuze and his followers. Public spaces are always striated and hegemonically structured. A given hegemony results from a specific articulation of a diversity of spaces and this

³⁶³ Verhagen, Marcus, 'Conceptual Perspex', *Meaning Liam Gillick*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, 2009: 57

means that the hegemonic struggle also consists in the attempt to create a different form of articulation among public spaces'.³⁶⁴

Evidently, Jaar's approach to a form of articulation compatible with a 'political' dimension is different to that of Liam Gillick or any other artists who avoid taking positions. In contrast to Gillick's objective to obscure and detour the possibility of articulation through his notion of a 'multiple scenarios', Jaar's vision of a public space activates a sense of mourning and warning of articulations that did not take place. For example, one of Jaar's preferred techniques to create public space is through the image of a memorial or a monument (from the concept of *monitus*, which means 'warning') that stands as a substitute for many discourses that did not occur. For example, Jaar's most recent installation, *The Geometry of Conscience* (2010, see Appendix, fig. 6), is the below-ground-level memorial for people who died or disappeared during Pinochet's regime. As the room becomes fully and blindingly lit the viewer finally sees that on each side of hundreds of silhouettes there are mirrors, so the effect is that the wall of faces goes on into infinity. Then the lights are abruptly turned off. The experience of the viewer is of the faces of the victims and survivors literally being burned onto their retina for several long moments. Similarly, Jaar's memorials include earlier works such as *The Cloud* (2000, Appendix, fig. 7), an ephemeral monument in memory of those who lost their lives trying to cross the Mexico-U.S.A. border, where during 45 minutes viewers mourn more than three thousand people and then the balloons are released; or *Lights in the City* (1999, Appendix, fig. 8), where a 'photograph' is taken every time a human being asks for help – a light flashes as if a photograph is being taken and then a red light in the Cupola warns the city of Montreal of a condition that is clearly unacceptable within the context of one of the richest cities in North America: its endless homeless people passing by.

³⁶⁴ Mouffe, Chantal, 'Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces', *Art & Research*, Volume 1, No.2 Summer 2007, <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html>

These memorials are speaking of something of which no one else wants to speak and no one can speak, since these voices were silenced, ignored or not capable of speaking as they were locked into amnesia or passed away. It is the most invisible and unheard who are offered here the opportunity to speak first and it becomes clear that if those people can say something, if the monument can speak, then perhaps the public in turn can also do something too. To envisage a public space as a memorial is to say that history will repeat itself, that bad things will happen again if we continue to forget and to prevent many articulations to be constructed and heard.

When Gillick's 'screens' and 'labyrinths' prevent many articulations from happening by insisting that '...the point of entry into the idea is multiple', and that his work does not lead to '...a moment of consolidation...' ³⁶⁵, Jaar's monuments remind us of dangers of articulations not taking place. Such public spaces do not just denounce the passivity and total silence of society, but also announce a new public voice, constructed out of 'speaking' monuments, which interrupt and barricade this silence. While Gillick describes his position as 'Separate but not marginal', Jaar's position is quite the opposite: taking his lead from that which is considered to be at a lower or outer limit, as of social acceptability, from marginals, people who live on the edge of society, Jaar takes them into the very centre of what society is about: it is because of these who cannot speak that society is so 'pronounced'. Jaar's question, perhaps, is about why, while there are multiple scenarios and multiple articulations, only one always wins – the one that eliminates marginality from the sphere of the public so that a rational consensus can be maintained. This consensus for Jaar is never based on innocence but on dangerous complicity to cover up the lack and to silence or ignore the irresolvable antagonisms that Chantal Mouffe has placed at the center of political life.

Such ethics therefore refuse any transcendence of power and antagonism in the name of something higher, such as humanity; meanwhile also providing a different

³⁶⁵ Lauson, Cliff, 'Separate But Not Marginal. A Conversation with Laim Gillick', *Third Text*, 91, vol. 22, March 2008: 278

solution to the problems of exclusion and lack. Chantal Mouffe has repeatedly pointed out that for agonistic pluralism the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passion from this sphere of the public in order to render a consensus, even a critical one, possible, but to mobilise passions and voices towards democratic designs.

In his public intervention '*Questions Questions*' (2008, Appendix, fig. 9), Jaar's questions about the role of art and culture in politics occupied every single space: from buses, subways, electronic screens, phone booths to websites and posters in resistance to the extraordinary control and oppression of the Italian public spaces by Berlusconi's media and advertising empire and, most importantly, in an attempt to construct a new space for public voices instead of publicity and hope instead of surrender. Jaar explains,

'You can sadly declare that there is no public space in Italy, or almost none. So I decided to create little cracks in the system. I did not know what to expect. I had the fear that people had been completely anesthetized by the Berlusconi system. But reactions were overwhelmingly positive, and we received enormous amounts of answers.... This was the most Gramscian project so far, a clear demonstration of the capacity of art to effect change'.³⁶⁶

Being an architect, 'democratic design' for Jaar does not mean that it is a more functional or useful appropriation of public spaces, but showing that there are never places that impose their law totally; that there are always several ways of occupying it, depending on what sort of world one has in mind. As the public is never asked how and where advertisers should advertise, Jaar does not ask their permission to place the work in strategic spaces. For example, at the Spring Street subway station in New York City, Jaar displayed eighty-one posters of men mining for gold. He then added text reflecting the price of gold from different world markets to the six or seven segments he displayed. As people used the subway, many traveling from

³⁶⁶ Alfredo Jaar's interview with Luigi Fassi, *KLAT* Issue 01, Winter 2009-2010, available online www.alfredojaar.net/recentt press

uptown New York to Wall Street, he wanted to connect the reality of the Amazon workers with the reality of people on Wall Street controlling the price of gold. Jaar offered no explanation or didactic text. He simply replaced the usual advertising images in the subway with other images that exist but are not advertised. In this way Jaar constantly challenges and breaks down capitalist monopolies of the public space, where the public voice is replaced by publicity by the legitimising process of those who have more power and access to speaking in that space at the expense of others.

Such public interventions really question the idea that in contemporary capitalism all life is really framed within the capitalist organisation of time and of life. Of course the possibilities of life are different and the organisation of private and public life is quite different, but it is not as if public space cannot be constructed in different ways. Jaar's positioning of the images clearly contradicts the existing picture of sleek advertising-led reality, making people feel that perhaps the capitalist machine is not eternal. Meanwhile, by showing the 'other side' of the market, men mining for gold, Jaar somehow states that while everything appears to have changed, nothing has changed.

And this is what the idea of emancipation implies. This is not about emancipation from capitalism as such, but rather challenging this widespread belief that life today is fully subsumed by capitalism and that it is the same wherever you go. While post-Fordism capitalism certainly occupies many symbolic parameters of our life, Jaar's work is neither informed by nor aimed at resistance of capitalism *per se*. Jaar's view rather is that the dominant paradigm of overwhelming post-Fordism attests to a rather narrow Western perspective and, even in the West, it does not constitute a single political space with which we should engage or escape from.

Jaar's political dimension in art concerns particular situations, particular discourses and not the context allegedly 'written in stone' by the post-Fordist mode of economy. The current economic regime certainly has a political dimension;

however, this is not the only dimension from which we should approach existing power relations. In fact, Jaar's work appears to be 'immune' to the belief that critical art could only be considered within the range of possible attitudes towards post-Fordism, which allegedly asks for a radically new conception of political and artistic practices. It is still power and not art that constructs social relations. The significance of the role that art plays in a post-Fordist world, according to Jaar, does not consist of the possibility of producing an entirely new set of social relations – such as, for example, the ambition for building so-called creative cities, the global booming of biennales and other arts festivals and artistic ways of life, but in 'unframing' and 're-framing' existing paradigms, engaging with particular moments of power that do not fit within how neoliberalism presents itself as an inevitable, logical and positive fact of life that responds only to logical and natural market forces and thus vouchsafing their optimum effect. Post-Fordist capitalism for Jaar appears to be strong because nearly every political structure supports the same neoliberal perception and hence the need for a dispute based on 'ideology' on political grounds appears to be outdated.

Hence Jaar's attitude towards the capitalist mobilisation of society could be characterised by how Chantal Mouffe describes a political intervention. Mouffe states, 'A properly political intervention is always one that engages with a certain aspect of the existing hegemony in order to disarticulate/re-articulate its constitutive elements. It can never be merely oppositional or conceived as desertion because it aims to re-articulate the situation in a new configuration'.³⁶⁷ In other words, a political intervention does not struggle against or escape from capitalism or any other general terms such as 'poverty', for example, but rather targets certain relations of power in order to produce, in Mouffe's words, 'a relation of equivalence' between various re-articulations of power relations.

³⁶⁷ Mouffe, Chantal, 'Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces', *Art & Research*, Volume 1, No.2 Summer 2007, <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html>

Alfredo Jaar's works remind us that there is no such place where power is liberated from its own blindness about itself. His 'inability to show everything' corresponds to the regime of visibility, which is based on the premise that society is always lacking something. For Jaar, the recognition of this lack is the precondition of social critique and the power of the image lies in disturbing the regime of the connection between what is said, what is given and what is shown, because images for him are not anticipated by their meaning, which we have in mind. While the artwork can never replace the lack of a 'true' reality, it can, if based on the perspective of the lack, present itself as a witness, as an image of 'intolerability' that stands in opposition to itself and thus to the reality it is supposed to represent. This notion of the image standing in opposition to itself also corresponds to what Lacan terms the 'identification with the symptom'. Through Jaar's 'inability to show everything', the artist thematises his own and the work's attachment to the symbolic system. To say that the power is blind and so the image, which attempts to represent its components, is to acknowledge the limits of self-knowledge, of art's capacities and thus to assume our own responsibility for our multiple accommodation of power structures on cognitive and affective levels.

The image is not a representation of a thing or an object; rather, it belongs to its own system of visibility, which accepts that it cannot make everything visible, that there are articulations that did not occur, missing voices, and when there is 'nothing to see', there is always something to look for. Because Jaar's art begins with its inability to show everything, it is capable of cracking open the unity of the given, the apparent harmony between what is articulated and the obviousness of the visible and what cannot be shown. This art shows that all societal systems are flawed and that there is never a full image, positive or negative; there is always something missing and the artist cannot fulfil these absences, silences, lack of visibility and inclusion. Jaar's 'inability to show everything' that society wants to see reminds us that any unity is based on cracks, and ignoring this means repeating history and not the 'end of it'. That is why, perhaps, Jaar's utopia says: keep looking and keep articulating under the worst conditions ever.

Conclusion

There is an increasing need to challenge the dangerous ‘post-political’ order, which, in the absence of any alternatives, silences the centrality of antagonism and prevents passions from assuming a role in the public sphere, only to produce more antagonisms. Chantal Mouffe constantly warns that only by lifting the present ‘post-political’ repression of ignorance can we hope to ‘tame’ potentially destructive antagonisms. There is an ongoing discussion in the art world of whether and how artistic practices can contribute to the re-politicisation and, possibly, to the emergence of a new political field. Today’s mainstream approach appears to be concerned with the post-Fordist condition and disappearance of art’s autonomy due to artistic practices becoming a strategic point of the contemporary economy. This approach assigns art and politics to distinct sub-systems within the overall social system. According to such a view, society consists of separate areas such as politics, economy, culture, law etc. This structuring of society, as Gielen argues in *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude*, is viewed as something that may jeopardise the autonomy of each field. The artist is a practitioner of some sort of universal aesthetical field for Gielen, and therefore he perceives the post-Fordist situation as a threat to art’s autonomy, which he views as the precondition of social critique. Gielen appears to focus on the role of art in the economic phenomenon of post-Fordism, which he understands in terms of a labour model – it suggests that the political trajectory of art today could only be envisaged as escaping the prison of the post-Fordist economy by concentrating on creating alternative structures where art would reproduce social relations under the artistic logic.

In contrast to Gielen’s argument, Alfredo Jaar views artistic practice as a public intervention – for him post-Fordist conditions manifest that today, the artist, as never before, is a particularly vital figure in challenging what is accepted as the ‘common sense’. Corresponding to Jacques Rancière’s notion of ‘the intolerability of the image’, which he places at the heart of the tensions affecting political art and

Chantal Mouffe's argument that democratic politics require '...coming to terms with the lack of a final ground and the undecidability which pervades every order...' ³⁶⁸, Jaar envisages critical art as the regime of visibility, which reminds us that the present society, as any other social order, is always lacking something. There is always something missing, hidden or unsaid, and while the artist cannot fulfill these gaps, he can certainly show that they exist. While the artwork can never replace the lack of a 'true' reality, it can, if based on the perspective of the lack, present itself as a witness, as an image of 'intolerability', which stands in opposition to itself and thus to the reality it is supposed to represent. Jaar's works tend to witness the limits of things, to expose the flawed character of any consensus, which is never based on innocence but on dangerous complicity to cover up the lack and to silence or ignore the irresolvable antagonisms that Chantal Mouffe has placed at the center of political life. The mainstream of contemporary art has become a place to define the 'Other' while Jaar considers art a place where it dissolves.

Jaar's works give voices to many individuals who are hidden from view in the neo-liberal hegemonic order. However, they do it in a way that not only opposes the totalising images of society but also the totalisation of the sensible. In this way, the condition of lack is what is shared by both regimes: the social and the aesthetic one. The regimes prevent each other from closure and this is how the link between artistic practices and political theory could be envisaged. Democratic politics are about making the traces of power and exclusion visible and critical artistic practices can create spaces that question the dominant hegemony; however, they challenge it in a way that, through the aesthetic paradox, resists all determinisms.

While thinking starting with 'inability', 'incapacity', 'intolerability' and lack is a powerful tool with which to approach society in a critical way, there are other approaches that attempt, despite the fact that society is always lacking something and all societal systems are flawed, to construct a collective will, to engage

³⁶⁸ Mouffe, Chantal, 'Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces', *Art & Research*, Volume 1, No.2 Summer 2007, <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html>

positively with the context where works are produced. In other words, can art also act as an optical tool through which ‘fragments’ can be brought together, producing an aesthetic model, different from the political or economic type of globalisation? In his recent book *The Radicant* Nicolas Bourriaud invites us, after the era of the avant-garde, to envisage art as re-editing the existing components of life into alternative possibilities. While Bourriaud seems to agree with Alfredo Jaar that art is not able to rediscover its essence and reboot the world from a single master principle – it can never show ‘everything’ but can expose the lacking elements on which the ‘fullness’ of society is based – he opts for ‘other’ criteria when it comes to envisaging what political possibilities artistic contemporary artistic practices can open and how. What Bourriaud has in mind is not the idea of a ‘negative’ aesthetic experience as a claim about the brutal nature of a social reality, but rather a ‘positive’ vision of a new cultural era where artistic practices do not just resist all kinds of determinism but make the latter impossible.

Chapter Six

Pluralising Modernism

While we conceive of the works of Alfredo Jaar as a counter-hegemonic intervention that aims to act against the position of supremacy of any hegemonic order, could there be other ways to weaken the ‘centre’ in a more positive way? Are we just doomed to proliferate the void of meaning or can this void become a new opening, a beginning, which does not correspond to building a completely new society from scratch but, meanwhile, able to bring changes in power relationships? In this way, the idea to pluralise modernism in the era of globalisation can help us to redefine the project of modern democracy in the post-political era. There is this tortuous question of the destiny of the project of modern democracy, which is intrinsically connected to the question of the ways in which artistic and cultural practices can envisage our present otherwise. We are told that there is no alternative to the actual liberal democracy and capitalist pluralism, the dilemma that in the artistic realm is sometimes articulated as the opposition between modernism and postmodernism. However, if we accept that the alternative is not revolutionary politics, what happens to modernism? How can art make sense of our present in the absence of any credible political narrative – how can it be modern and democratic? Can we pluralise modernism and thus pluralise democracy?

For Rancière, aesthetics does not provide us with a privileged starting point *per se*; rather, we should attempt to reassess the relations between seeing, doing and speaking. Emancipation for him means blurring these boundaries. What he proposes is that contemporary image making is an evolution rather than a revolutionary break from traditional aesthetics. He perceives different distributions of the sensible as opening onto the reason rather than acting against it. Rancière argues that art should not be subordinate to ethics or critical discourse and the tradition of the critical art of doing, generally called “postmodern.” The central argument of the *Emancipated spectator* is a reassessment of aesthetic agency in artworks that exists in the absence of any credible political narrative. Developing Rancière’s understanding, in his latest

work *The Radicant*, Nicolas Bourriaud emphasises ‘the ontological precariousness that is the foundation of contemporary aesthetics’. What Bourriaud argues for when he speaks about the ‘new modernity’ of *altermodernity* is the renewal of modernist aesthetics when the void of meaning becomes an opening, what he calls an ‘editing table’ for making sense of our being in common. This aesthetics invokes taking the precariousness and ungrounding of things as a source of positivity, seeking to take up the modernist ethos of creation from a constitutively inauthentic position. What is at issue is not to reject or accept modernism, but to pluralise it.

Towards the Markers of Uncertainty

As Claude Lefort pointed out, what characterises modernity is the ‘dissolution of the markers of certainty’.³⁶⁹ To be modern is to belong to the present, to have a subjectivity of wandering and contingency inspired by the ‘attitude of modernity’, which Michael Foucault associates with Charles Baudelaire: this attitude respects the present but at the same time has a will to imagine how these realities could be otherwise. Bourriaud explains this attitude: ‘modern art has led to a creative ethics, rebellious to the norm, whose first imperative can be formulated as follows: make your life a work of art’.³⁷⁰ For Bourriaud, as indeed for Rancière, aesthetic is what remains as a positive mark of the modernist model after the dreams of progress and the essentialist vision of humankind destiny have passed away. If the attitude of modernity is to envisage our present otherwise, then Bourriaud’s new line of thinking, which he terms altermodern, conceptualises such an attitude. Within the complex lines of thinking that have made up modernism, there is an aesthetic of working the uncertain and ruptured world in order to create a meaning out of it. While purity and destiny do not longer make any sense for us, this sense can be made out of precariousness and displacements.

³⁶⁹ Lefort, Claude, ‘The Question of Democracy’, *Democracy and Political Theory*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988: 19

³⁷⁰ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Formes de vie: l’art moderne et L’invention de soi*, Paris: Denoel, 2009: 17, translated and quoted by Larson, Michael, ‘Altermodernity and the Ethics of Translation’, *A Journal of Relational Politics*, Vol. 1, 2011, available on-line: <http://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/peninsula/article/view/683/1923>

While postmodernism has rejected totality, manifestations of essentialism have found their way back into the postmodern logic in the form of a proliferation of essences through the ethics of multiculturalism. Dismissing both modernism with its concepts born of Enlightenment philosophy such as emancipation, resistance or alienation and postmodernism, the pluralist logic of which is presupposed by the market, Bourriaud proposes a concept of an ‘altermodernity’, the first truly worldwide culture, which neither corresponds to the modernist politics nor is it dictated by postmodernist market logic. This ‘altermodernity’ could develop a specific imagination in which differences would come into being by creating their own context without subscribing to the capitalist globalisation and, at the same time, reducing or ‘modernising’ cultural and social reality to Western political formats. Opposing all radicalism, Bourriaud suggests thinking along the lines of *radicantism*. He explains,

‘To be radicant means setting one’s roots in motion, staging them in heterogeneous contexts and formats, denying them the power to completely define one’s identity, translating ideas, transcoding images, transplanting behaviors, exchanging rather than imposing’.³⁷¹

What Bourriaud has in mind is not the idea of a ‘negative’ aesthetic experience as a claim about a brutal nature of a social reality, but rather a ‘positive’ vision of a new cultural era where thinking about the visual is free from all kind of determinism. Bourriaud writes, ‘Alter-modernism is that moment when it become possible for us to produce something that made sense starting from an assumed heterochrony...from a view of human history as constituted of multiple temporalities, disdaining a nostalgia for the avant-garde and indeed for any era – a positive vision of chaos and complexity’.³⁷²

³⁷¹ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *The Radicant*, Lulas & Sternberg, New York, 2009: 22

³⁷² Bourriaud, Nicolas, ‘Altermodern’, in *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, London, Tate, 2009: 13

In a contrast to postmodernist relativism, which defines and values artworks solely in the context in which they were created or the cultural origins of the artist, the *radicant* artist is free to travel the world and create works that come as the result of his encounters with the various cultures of the world. While this global aesthetics bears certain similarities to modernist universalism, this is a ‘strategic universalism’ – a renewal of the modernist trajectory after the multiculturally oriented postmodernism on the basis of different ‘modernisms’ – a global and inter-cultural. Bourriaud writes, ‘Translation is the keyword for a new altermodern universalism, which is not based on norms, but on displacements’.³⁷³

What is at issue in Bourriaud’s project is, perhaps, to think about the destiny of the universal, of aesthetic modernism without reducing art to the vehicle of ethical demands or the cipher of a transcendent truth. The question is to discover the current places of contemporary practices – of what we view as art.

What Bourriaud attempts to envisage is how, in times of a globalised world and shifting identities, a new altermodern universalism, based on these displacements and not on norms, could be created. According to Bourriaud, globalisation is discussed from political and economic points of view but almost never from an aesthetic perspective. What is at issue here is the creation of new collective symbols that are based on destabilisation and displacement ideas of origins, cultural roots and centres of production, using ‘global art’ as their ‘starting point’ at the same time. Some critics pointed out that if the displacement of nationalism and ethnicity is issued against globalisation, then artists will have nothing to fall back on as a position of resistance. The question they ask is: what is the difference between globalisation and a new global culture? Bourriaud argues that today art merely follows the contours of globalisation, which is above all economic in character and turns diversity of all forms into the inverted reflection of uniformity. However, Bourriaud points out that ‘within the global art world there is a fracture, for the most

³⁷³ Bourriaud, Nicolas, ‘Altermodernity: Renewed Modernism at the End of Postmodernism’, an interview with Basar, Shumon, available on-line: <http://fuckhesalive.multiply.com/journal/item/166>

part unmentioned, that stems less from cultural difference than from degrees of economic development. The gap that still exists between the center and the periphery does not separate traditional cultures from cultures reformed by modernism, but economic systems at different stages of evolution toward global capitalism'.³⁷⁴ It would be naïve to think, continues Bourriaud, that a contemporary work of art is the natural expression of the culture its author comes from. An alternative to 'art of capitalism' is the affirmation that '...there are no pure cultural habitats, but rather cultural traditions and specifications cut across by this globalization of the economy'.³⁷⁵ The way to reclaim 'global art' from 'art of capitalism' is to abandon multiculturalism and re-read the modernist matrix in the light of artists' specific visual and intellectual environment. Bourriaud states, 'One of the virtual properties of the image is its power of linkage... flags, logos, icons, signs, all produce empathy and sharing, and all generate bonds.'³⁷⁶ Interculturalism, unlike multiculturalism, is a type of linkage that does not operate through an origin as a type of revealer, but as a new 'modern moment based on generalized translation, the form of wandering, an ethics of precariousness and a heterochronic vision of history'.³⁷⁷ It groups together all the local oppositions to the economic globalisation where diversity does not result in totalisation itself. Culture here is envisaged not as a shared value but as a composition of fragments – something like an 'archipelago' – one of Bourriaud's metaphors for the era's stance against determinism, as a particular visuality that empties 'names' and 'symbols' of their original significance.

What Bourriaud points out is that there is no single modernity essentially connected to the development of Western capitalism and imperialism. Contrary to, for example, Frederic Jameson, who envisages modernity as exclusively connected to capitalism with globalisation as the current feature of this modernity's development, Bourriaud argues that the current habitations of contemporary art practice cannot be reduced to locating the different experiences of modernity that constitute the basis of global art

³⁷⁴ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *The Radicant*, Lulas & Sternberg, New York, 2009: 162

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*: 165

³⁷⁶ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002

³⁷⁷ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *The Radicant*, Lulas & Sternberg, New York, 2009: 184

production. The Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has provided helpful insights about the view of time and modernity by pointing out the difficulties of understanding the Indian past through a lens constructed by Hegel and Marx. He argues that such models relegate India to the margins of world history since the ideas of progressive modernity and capitalism did not constitute the core of Indian society. Chakrabarty suggests that we need other understandings of history and time if we are not to perpetuate the dominance of European traditions. He states,

‘The project of provincializing “Europe” cannot therefore be a project of ‘cultural relativism’. It cannot originate from the stance that the reason/science/universals which help define Europe as the modern are simply “culture-specific” and therefore only belong to European cultures. For the point is not that Enlightenment rationalism is always unreasonable in itself but rather a matter of documenting how – through what historical process – its ‘reason’, which was not always self-evident to everyone, has been made to look “obvious” far beyond the ground where it originated’.³⁷⁸

What Chakrabarty points out is that the ‘heterotemporal history of modernity’ shows that modernity is translated into the diverse models of social identity in the local contexts rather than being applied. In his *Provincializing Europe: Post-colonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Chakrabarty argues that there is no universalism in historical experiences but rather a process of ‘provincialising’,³⁷⁹ de-centering the idea of the ‘centre’ and one single modernity. Applying Chakrabarty’s thinking to Bourriaud’s question of the destiny of the aesthetic principle of the universal, influential curator and thinker Okwui Enwezor suggests that the idea of *altermodernity* in contemporary art refers to provincialising contemporary art – to reject the rigid structures of modernity and its ideal of artistic autonomy and instead construct a different, de-centered modernity. Enwezor writes, ‘If there is anything that marks the path of the altermodern, it would be the

³⁷⁸ Chakrabarty, Dipesh, ‘Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for the Indian Pasts?’, *Representations* No. 37, 1992: 20-21

³⁷⁹ Chakrabarty, Dipesh, *Provincializing Europe: Post-colonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, 2007: xvii

provincialities of contemporary art practice today – that is, the degree to which these practices, however globalized they may appear, are also informed by specific epistemological models and aesthetical conditions’.³⁸⁰ In this way, the project of *altermodernity* could be understood as the coming together of various multiple fields of artistic practices that have been disturbed by globalisation and are measured against the single principle of modernity. Enwezor argues that the altermodern project is neither a rejection of modernity and modernism nor its acceptance. He writes,

‘In this way, rather than being the decentring of the universal, or the relocation of the centre of contemporary art, as the notion of the offshore suggests, it becomes instead, the emergence of multiplicity, the breakdown of cultural or locational hierarchies, the absence of a singular locus or a limited number of centers’.³⁸¹

Hence the idea of altermodernity could be understood as a project for the pluralisation of modernism – its universal aspect comes into life from the common lack of a center – meaning is created through various encounters with other modernities.

According to Bourriaud, the altermodern state of mind presupposed going against the grain on both sides: on the one hand against cultural standardisation and on the other against nationalisms and cultural relativism. However, this altermodernism is still a modernism, since the role of contemporary art was always to refuse and question orthodoxies, including modernism itself, but unlike the latter, altermodernism positions itself within the ‘world cultural gaps’ – culture-crossing and linking signs that belong to distant cultural habitats is what is at the centre of contemporary art production. What follows is this understanding of art as dynamic forces that seek out multiple relations and meanings; art is not a universal sign, frozen in time and space.

³⁸⁰ Enwezor, Okwui, ‘Modernity and Postcolonial Ambivalence’, *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, Catalogue, London, Tate Britain, 2009

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*.

Certainly, Bourriaud's and Enwezor's argument strives to deepen and institutionalise the position against any uniform view of artistic practice today and the non-universal nature of modernity itself, and it is through different locales of practices and experiences that we can learn about the contingent character of modernity rather than its universalism. This attitude, the state of mind that comes alive through altermodern artistic practice of linking different fragments, translating, wandering and culture-crossing, is how the ethical thrust of modernism – the will to make sense of contingent fleeting modernity – can be continued. Enwezor captures this ethos rather well:

‘It strikes me that the idea of altermodern, as it deviates from the limits placed on life and subjectivity by the instrumental violence of modernity, cannot be captured by focusing alone on shifts in locales of practice or by strategies of resistance against domination. The altermodern is to be found in the work of art itself; the work of art as a manifestation of pure difference in all social, cultural and political signs it wields to elaborate that difference. It is the space in which to fulfill the radical gesture of refusal and disobedience, not in the formal space, but in the ethical and epistemological sense’.³⁸²

New Modernity or Modernities?

Many critics have argued that altermodernity is just another repetition of the modernist dream and that Bourriaud's idea of ‘mobile identities and meanings’ is reminiscent of post-Fordist ‘flexible identities’. Some critics pointed out that if displacement of nationalism and ethnicity is issued against globalisation, then artists will have nothing to fall back on as a position of resistance. The question they ask is: what is the difference between globalisation and a new global culture? For example, David Cunningham effectively summarises the position, which questions

³⁸² Enwezor, Okwui, ‘Modernity and Postcolonial Ambivalence’, *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, Catalogue, London, Tate Britain, 2009

Bourriaud's '...brandname, for some vaguely identified feature of contemporary artistic culture as a whole'.³⁸³

Cunningham argues that the concept of altermodernism reflects not a 'new modernity' but a tendency to overlook the real issue – 'the internally changing forms of capitalist modernity itself'.³⁸⁴ 'The modern is back in fashion, in the artworld as elsewhere'³⁸⁵, because, according to Cunningham, we constantly need to declare the arrival of whole new epochs to grasp the present, which is escaping, and fleeting away – this is the 'fundamental dynamic of the modern itself'. Cunningham writes, 'For as Marx foresaw, more than a century and a half ago, it is, above all, capitalism's compulsion to 'nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere'³⁸⁶ – powered by the universalization of the exchange value form – that underpins the 'circuits of globalization'; not least, of course, within the contemporary artworld'. However, if the cultural characteristics of our time are economically determined, as Frederic Jameson and other historical materialists argue, then we live in a kind of eternal present. Far from proliferating difference, the capitalist market ensures an ever-lasting homogeneity. Indeed, the capitalist modernity is at large; however, as Bruno Latour's points out, 'the world has never been modern'³⁸⁷ – meaning that there is a much more complex picture of the world – multiple modernities. For Bourriaud, via Chakrabarty, examining various artistic locales, what we can understand about modernity is precisely the lack of its universalism. The purpose of Bourriaud's theory is to discover the current habitations of contemporary art, to challenge the modernist ideal of artistic autonomy and practice, to deconstruct false legitimacies of modernity's supposedly universalising effects, since art's global appearance is not the entire story. It would be naïve to think, argues Bourriaud, that a contemporary work of art is the natural

³⁸³ Cunningham, David, 'Returns of the Modern', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2010: 123, The online version of this article can be found at <http://vcu.sagepub.com>

³⁸⁴ Cunningham, David, 'Returns of the Modern', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2010: 123, The online version of this article can be found at <http://vcu.sagepub.com>

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*: 122

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*: 127

³⁸⁷ Latour, Bruno, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Porter, Catherine, Cambridge, 1993

expression of the culture its author comes from. An alternative to ‘art of capitalism’ is the affirmation that ‘...there are no pure cultural habitats, but rather cultural traditions and specifications cut across by this globalization of the economy’.³⁸⁸ There is no one lineage of contemporary art, and in order to reveal its various trajectories, we need to pluralise modernism. Enwezor argues that

‘Looking for an equivalent of Andy Warhol in Mao’s China is to be seriously blind to the fact that China of the Pop art era had neither a consumer society nor a capitalist structure, two things that were instrumentalised in Warhol’s critique and usage of its images. In that sense, Pop art would be anathema to the revolutionary program – and, one might even claim, to the avant-garde imagination...’³⁸⁹

According to Cunningham, the concept of altermodernity is the same old scenario: ‘Crucially, rather than unpack the problems that were always already attendant on the very idea of a postmodern, the ‘concept’ of the altermodern merely compounds and extends them, insofar as it can only repeat the fundamental conceptual confusions about the nature of the modern as a structure of time – rather than a ‘period’ per se – from which the former notion derived’.³⁹⁰ However, as Bourriaud points out, ‘Postmodern multiculturalism has failed to invent an alternative to modernist universalism, for everywhere it has been applied it has recreated cultural anchorages or ethnic enrootedness’.³⁹¹ Bourriaud’s argument is that the choice between modernism and postmodernism is, in fact, a false dilemma – both are forms of totalisation, symbolic and empirical at the same time. In the style of Rancière, who does not engage with the conceptions of the modern and postmodern but instead has drawn up his schemata of ‘regimes of the sensible’ from which he places the modern period within the aesthetic regime that derive from Schiller and Kant,

³⁸⁸ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *The Radicant*, Lulas & Sternberg, New York, 2009: 165

³⁸⁹ Enwezor, Okwui, ‘Modernity and Postcolonial Ambivalence’, *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, Catalogue, London, Tate Britain, 2009

³⁹⁰ Cunningham, David, ‘Returns of the Modern’, *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2010: 123, The online version of this article can be found at <http://vcu.sagepub.com>

³⁹¹ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *The Radicant*, Lulas & Sternberg, New York, 2009: 34

Bourriaud's question is instead: 'To what are we faithful?'³⁹² Bourriaud points out that the works of, for example, Kazimir Malevich or Marcel Duchamp, are not products of history, nor the results of some socio-political determinisms, but rather they construct history.

The question Bourriaud asks is: how can it be possible to free ourselves of all kinds of 'roots'? Is it possible to envisage individuals who are not dependant on the visual and mental reflexes and programming of the social group we came from, from cultural determinism, from other forms of order? 'Nothing could be less certain', says Bourriaud; however, for him, the issue of radicantism is not a matter of rejecting one's heritage, but the willingness to be 'the tenant of existing forms'.³⁹³ It is not a matter of rejecting one's identity, but of multiplying it, thus weakening its particular grip and, at the same time, possibly, constructing new collective symbols that do not derive from ethnic, national or global capitalist representation. Altermodernity then can be understood as a continuous encounter of 'a multitude of cultural semes and through ongoing translation of singularities'.³⁹⁴ It is not that the old '...modernism is apparently 'reloaded' after postmodernism, as a form of return that is also, all-too familiarly, a new beginning: a reloading of the very 'possibility of producing singularities'...but both trajectories are rejected through pluralizing modernism – there are multiple 'regimes of the sensible', capable of producing their own history. To be altermodern is like having faith without religion. For example, Enwezor points out that 'The position of political Islam is in remarkable accord with the idea of the altermodern'.³⁹⁵

One of Cunningham's main objections is that the 'theoretical hypothesis' behind the artworks functions as '...the alibi for discussing all manner of things...which may

³⁹² Bourriaud, Nicolas, *The Radicant*, Lulas & Sternberg, New York, 2009: 36

³⁹³ *Ibid.*: 56

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*: 39

³⁹⁵ Enwezor, Okwui, 'Modernity and Postcolonial Ambivalence', *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, Catalogue, London, Tate Britain, 2009

not have anything to do with the actual art displayed, or indeed with art in general'. He states,

'In an important sense, the kinds of art-theoretical concerns that *Altermodern* reflects are less focused on the critical potentials of the individual artwork than on various broader networks of cultural translation, communication and exchange internal to the institutional operations of the artworld itself'.³⁹⁶

However, the individuality of the work of art is a problematic in itself, and it cannot escape 'theoretical hypothesis'. Who is the author and producer of Damien Hirst's shark or Ai Weiwei's seeds? In the early modern period, the idea of the fine artist referred to the position of the 'creator'. Historically, the difference between art and craft appears to have been defined by usage: artists, mostly male, created things that were primarily displayed, while craft workers, mostly female, made things that were used. Art was seen as belonging to a higher plane, something unique that only the creator could materialise. Duchamp, for example, has challenged the conception of the creator, which was largely associated with the uniqueness of the artwork. Having drawn a distinction between the work of art and the labour of manufacture, Duchamp has introduced strategies that removed the hand of the artist from the production of the physical object. Since then, contemporary artists have understood that one does not have to make things – one can use existing materials or have a whole factory making things for you, as in the case of Damien Hirst. For example, Chinese artist Ai Weiwei's work, which is mostly made by traditional artisans, raises the 'culture problem' – who decides what is precious and of enduring value to society, and for what reasons? Similarly, following Duchamp's line of thinking, Subodh Gupta (exhibited at *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, London, Tate Britain, 2009) argues that art is about the transformation of everyday objects, signs into different signs. He says that he never creates anything as such, but transforms; that an individual work of art is a conceptual impossibility and that art is instead a manner of thinking in which the artist navigates through the existing cultural stock

³⁹⁶ Cunningham, David, 'Returns of the Modern', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2010: 125, The online version of this article can be found at <http://vcu.sagepub.com>

of signs to displace them. Art for Gupta is an aesthetic of displacement – a matter of translating signs into a different visual experience until another artist re-translates it. According to Gupta, a notion of the individual work of art only matters in terms of ownership of art and not in terms of its position within other practices and discourses in society.

It is not that an individual artwork must be translated into a wider symbolic network or a particular culture into a wider cultural framework of understanding and relating, but rather the altermodern is located in the work of art and not outside it, and this means taking translation as the opening, de-centering of any master narratives. There is no true language, only translation as impossibility of a final, original meaning or a root. For Bourriaud the ethics of translation serves as a model of subjectivity, which does not ‘...seek an ideal state of the self or society. Instead, they organize signs in order to multiply one identity by another’.³⁹⁷

It is not that the new modernity would be based on translation in the manner of the other being accepted and recognised through the act of translating, but that translation here comes as an impossibility of a single language, a unity – there are no roots and therefore, Bourriaud proposes, ‘We must reach the age of translation’.

Translation as the Language

Translation implies adapting the meaning of a proposition, enabling it to pass from one code to another, which presupposes a mastery of both languages and also implies that neither of them is self-evident. Benjamin’s essay ‘The Task of the Translator’ invokes the ideal of translation as a desire for the one true language where translation would be unnecessary. Here, the act of translation appears as a necessity that would be ideally overcome. However, as Benjamin writes, ‘all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages. An instant and final rather than a temporary and

³⁹⁷ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *The Radicant*, Lulas & Sternberg, New York, 2009: 52

provisional solution of this foreignness remains out of the reach of mankind; at any rate, it eludes direct attempt'.³⁹⁸ This conception of relationality is intertwined with the mythology of a 'true' language that would bridge the differences entrenched in the modernist ethos. Meanwhile, considering ontology otherwise – there is no 'pure language' – when we speak, we translate – helps us to grasp what Bourriaud means by translation. From an ontological perspective in which there is no place for a 'proper' origin or an identifying essence open in advance, we open ourselves to a relation involving risk, precariousness and wandering. We become who we are in our translation between ourselves, across borders and into new contexts of cultural and aesthetic constellations. Therefore we take neither ourselves nor the stranger as given. Translation is not a process of recognition of the other – 'where are you come from' – but a constant unfolding on sense, which is otherwise lacking. The identity of the Self is not to be found in an image of the same and nor is the meaning of translation to be found in a pure and objective rendering. The work of translation, like the work of mourning, involves being able to move away from the object of loss. Translation becomes the means of rethinking ethics for an altermodern understanding of subjectivity. As Bourriaud writes, '...to be radican means setting one's roots in motion, staging them in heterogeneous contexts and formats, denying them the power to completely define one's identity, translating ideas, transcoding images, transplanting behaviors, exchanging rather than imposing'.³⁹⁹ In other words, Bourriaud's idea of translation refers to the lack of a centre as such – whether it is a centre or a periphery.

Cunningham appears to support the claim that 'we should move away from analysis of art as merely 'reflective' or 'illustrative' of global processes...towards an analysis of the ways in which cultural practices may inform such processes, and hence help to produce certain 'new and unexpected realities within circuits of globalization,'⁴⁰⁰ but while appealing, he finds such a move still a matter of fiction – too Deleuzian

³⁹⁸ Benjamin, Walter, *Illuminations*, Trans. Zohn, Harry, New York, Schocken Books, 1969: 75

³⁹⁹ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *The Radicant*, Lulas & Sternberg, New York, 2009: 22

⁴⁰⁰ Cunningham, David, 'Returns of the Modern', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2010: 126, The online version of this article can be found at <http://vcu.sagepub.com>

and too vague to form an alternative to the transnational world of the market and art institutions. If altermodern strategy is to become meaningful, Cunningham argues, then ‘it will have to make productive the social contradictions inherent in the formation of any putatively global public space around it.’⁴⁰¹ However, the goal of the altermodern strategy is precisely to disconnect, displace this global public space through the construction of a work of art as ‘pure difference’. What is at issue is not to resist globalisation factually, but through works of art in the ethical sense – the use of fiction as an expression of autonomy can reveal ‘...how precarious our so-called ‘natural context’ is’.⁴⁰²

The most cynical approach to Bourriaud’s proposition, according to Cunningham, would be to view it as something that ‘...at best, compensates for the progressive loss of other sites for ‘positing theories [and] exploring histories’, in particular specifically political forums such as were once sustained by the Left, and, at worst, risks aiding the wider processes of de-politicization at work in advanced capitalist societies today, reducing such theories and histories to so much fodder for art’s own reproduction’.⁴⁰³ Yet the point at issue is not to reduce any theories and histories. According to Chakrabarty, the critique of the ‘grand narratives’ cannot be reductive. The task, rather, is not to ‘relativise’ them but to understand, to ‘open’ the circumstances that have made them indispensable. If Chakrabarty is correct and the notion of modernity cannot account for the time of non-European peoples, then the ‘global’ transformation of the art world specific to the time of contemporaneity also does not make sense. It is through pluralising modernism that we can then understand that there are multiple histories, multiple modernities. Rather than consigning the art of our time to the realm of ‘post-history’, thus emptying it of its historical substance and meaning, Bourriaud suggests that time is not uniform, but what characterises it is its heterochronicity, ‘a vision of human history as constituted

⁴⁰¹ Cunningham, David, ‘Returns of the Modern’, *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2010: 129

⁴⁰² Bourriaud, Nicolas, ‘Altermodernity: Renewed Modernism at the End of Postmodernism’, an interview with Basar, Shumon, available on-line: <http://fuckhesalive.multiply.com/journal/item/166>

⁴⁰³ Cunningham, David, ‘Returns of the Modern’, *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2010: 129, The online version of this article can be found at <http://vcu.sagepub.com>

by multiple temporalities'. The consequence of privileging contemporaneity in this way is that it welcomes a universal time or a non-time. The nature of the modern, then, is not a structure of time, but its absence.

Bourriaud claims that in order to stir up a new imaginary we must free ourselves from concepts such as emancipation, resistance, alienation etc., born out of Enlightenment philosophy; that the question we should ask is not about what social entities must be emancipated, but how to create an 'emancipatory' form. Bourriaud says, 'It is what I call a 'trajectorial form', allowing artists to articulate elements disseminated in time and space. Artists like Pierre Huyghe and Franz Ackermann combine space and time in their works; while Seth Price and Kelly Walker produce signs that have no material support anymore. The place of the artwork is now a journey or a line rather than a unified space. In parallel, have you noticed how the 'past' is now explored by many artists as the last *terra incognita*?'⁴⁰⁴ Altermodern then can be envisaged not as something that belongs to its time, but as something that constructs times and histories in the first place. It appears that the modern moment in contemporary art can be located in its form that protects the precariousness of the world. If anything is modern, it is only what art can deconstruct and then reconstruct for everyday life. By emphasising the transitory, unstable essence of modernism, it can also reveal the arbitrary and contingent nature of institutions and systems. Bourriaud writes,

'If contemporary art is the bearer of a coherent political project, it is surely this: to introduce precariousness into the very heart of the system of representations by means of which the powers that be manage behaviors, to weaken all systems, to endow the most well-established habits with the appearance of exotic rituals'.⁴⁰⁵

According to Bourriaud, such registration of impurity and multiplicity can produce an ethical form of aesthetic inspiration with a truly populist appeal – what we have

⁴⁰⁴ Bourriaud, Nicolas, 'Altermodernity: Renewed Modernism at the End of Postmodernism', an interview with Basar, Shumon

⁴⁰⁵ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *The Radicant*, Lulas & Sternberg, New York, 2009: 99

in common is not a shared goal or a leader, but the lack of origins – it challenges the meta-political fantasy of a harmonious community, and the possibility of a universal order, meanwhile, creates a sense of solidarity based on what Bourriaud calls a ‘strategic cultural form’.

Bourriaud’s idea of ‘strategic universalism’ appears to be concerned not with politics as the sphere of activities and structures, but rather with what Chantal Mouffe describes as a ‘political’ as the very constitutive moment, the ontological horizon of every ordering of social relations. This is the moment that dislocates some established aspects and institutes new ones. The political dimension is something that constitutes ordering and not an entire order. Mouffe writes, ‘The political, for its part, concerns the symbolic ordering of social relations, what Claude Lefort calls the ‘mise en scene’, the ‘mise en forme’ of human coexistence, and this is where lies its aesthetic dimension’.⁴⁰⁶ This type of art that Bourriaud attempts to theorise under the term of altermodern, does not act as ‘politics’ such as artistic activism or, on the contrary, production of distinct sub-systems within the social system, but brings back the political moment as raising the issues of the complex processes of identification and not identity, ordering and not an order. The altermodern trajectory of ordering, which can only be temporal, incomplete and mobile instead of working out an alternative order, corresponds to Chantal Mouffe’s idea about the ‘decentered’ subject – which community would ‘divided’ subjects produce? In Bourriaud’s view this could be a community in which the identity of one would change the identity of the other. Mouffe writes,

‘The regimes of collective identities resulting from this process of articulation are ensembles whose configurations are always something more than the addition of their internal elements. As always in social life, there is a “gestaltic” dimension, which is decisive in understanding the perception and behavior of collective subjects’.⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰⁶ Mouffe, Chantal, ‘Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces’, *Art & Research*, Volume 1, No.2 Summer 2007, <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html>

⁴⁰⁷ Mouffe, Chantal, *The Democratic Paradox*, Verso, London & New York, 2005: 10

The idea of pluralised modernism corresponds to Mouffe's understanding of pluralism not as a fact, but as 'an axiological principle'. This type of deep pluralism celebrates differences without reducing them to homogeneity of any kind. Mouffe elaborates, 'Indeed, I submit that all forms of pluralism that depend on a logic of the social that implies the idea of 'being as presence', and sees 'objectivity' as belonging to the 'things themselves' necessarily lead to the reduction of plurality and to its ultimate negation. This is indeed the case with the main forms of liberal pluralism, which generally start by stressing what they call 'the fact of pluralism', and then go on to find procedures to deal with differences whose objective is actually to make those differences irrelevant and to relegate pluralism to the sphere of the private'.⁴⁰⁸ Was not this the case with postmodernism, when a work of art was explained through the status or origin of the artist, thus leading to the proliferation of ethnic essences instead of modernist abstract ethos?

We can see that in altermodern theory differences are envisaged as the 'condition of possibility' rather than the condition of its possible reconciliation – as Enwezor notes, 'The altermodern is to be found in the work of art itself; the work of art as a manifestation of pure difference in all social, cultural and political signs it wields to elaborate that difference'.⁴⁰⁹ In Enwezor's view, the dynamics of the pluralisation of modernism, which prevents both the closure and the total dissemination of different modernisms, opens original paths and possibilities. The core ideas of modernism and its other various multiple versions contaminate each other and instead of denominating to any stable value or a system, find their legitimacy in this plurality of signs. Artists share the common symbolic space – that of art – but understand and implement it in a multiplicity of ways.

It appears that Bourriaud's and Enwezor's idea to provincialise modernism, or, as we prefer to understand this, to pluralise it in the era of globalisation, corresponds to

⁴⁰⁸ Mouffe, Chantal, *The Democratic Paradox*, Verso, London & New York, 2005: 19

⁴⁰⁹ Enwezor, Okwui, 'Modernity and Postcolonial Ambivalence', *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, Catalogue, London, Tate Britain, 2009

Mouffe's attempt to redefine modern democracy in the post-political era. Mouffe envisages radical and plural democracy as the space of the paradox; as the tension between liberty and democracy, which prevents the full development of both logics. She states, 'Hence the need to relinquish the illusion that a rational consensus could ever be achieved where such a tension would be eliminated, and to realize that pluralist democratic politics consists in pragmatic, precarious and necessary unstable forms of negotiating its constitutive paradox'.⁴¹⁰ Bourriaud's *radicant* strategy, then, as '...setting one's roots in motion, staging them in heterogeneous contexts and formats, denying them the power to completely define one's identity, translating ideas, transcoding images, transplanting behaviors, exchanging rather than imposing',⁴¹¹ can help us to visualise this tension, this multiplicity of ways in which the democratic game can be played.

Mouffe speaks about the Derridean notion of the 'constitutive outside' as something that is not the 'outside' of a concrete content but something that challenges any 'concreteness'. The 'constitutive outside' is '...not a content which would be asserted/negated by another content which would just be its dialectical opposite – which would be the case if we were simply saying that there is no 'us' without a 'them' – but a content which, by showing the radical undecidability of the tension of its constitution, makes its very positivity a function of the symbol of something exceeding it: the possibility/impossibility of positivity as such'.⁴¹²

Applied to the notion of plural modernisms, this could be understood as the trajectorial form that comes as a symbol exceeding its own positivity – the aesthetic principle of the universal as something that constantly exceeds and escapes its own possibility.

'Decentred' Artistic Practice – Decentering Identities

⁴¹⁰ Mouffe, Chantal, *The Democratic Paradox*, Verso, London & New York, 2005: 11

⁴¹¹ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *The Radicant*, Lulas & Sternberg, New York, 2009: 22

⁴¹² Mouffe, Chantal, *The Democratic Paradox*, Verso, London & New York, 2005: 12

What might such a ‘decentred’ artistic practice look like? It would certainly be something that opens possibilities – producing more differences rather than closing them down, narrowing art to some higher, knowledgeable capacity for differentiation. Could we envisage artistic-political fusion as practices that mobilise effects in ways that run not against the dominant forms of subject articulations but pluralising them in such a way that the identity of one would change the identity of the other, so that it would be impossible for them to become totalities?

While Chantal Mouffe speaks of ‘oppositional identities,’⁴¹³ as a result of artistic critical practice, which aim to act against the position of supremacy of any hegemonic order; developing an altermodern ethos, one can speak of artistic practices that construct compository or shimmering identities, the ones that make such supremacy problematic.

In this way we find the works of an American artist Silvia Kolbowski interesting and relevant to the altermodern thinking. The way in which Kolbowski makes art contains elements that perform a kind of resistance to universalisation while, at the same time, not avoiding the language of art. Rather, she uses art to speak, because speaking different languages is impossible in times of globalisation. For example, Kolbowski’s installation ‘Proximity to Power’ (2004) at the Secession (see Appendix, fig. 10) involves more subtle negotiations about what masculine Austrian power looks like. Kolbowski’s critique of this power is the artist’s blindness and confusion about such power’s location. Attempting to navigate through Austrian history, culture and knowledge reached the ‘dead end’. Kolbowski writes,

‘An easy question like “who are the men in power here?” produces no definite answer in Vienna. There is no fixed media power in Austria, a colleague answers, because the major media corporation is owned by a Canadian. The titular head of the Austrian government has no real power, I am told, and museum trustees are not powerful. Austrians and Germans I speak to in Vienna equivocate about the power

⁴¹³ Mouffe, Chantal, ‘Cultural Workers as Organic Intellectuals’, *The Artist as Public Intellectual?*, Schmidt-Wulffen, Stephan, Ed., Publications of the University of Fine Arts Vienna, Vol. 1, 2011: 158

of the Church...I find myself at a loss. I am the provincial and local artist. I can only bring to Vienna an American view of masculine power. The spectator at the Secession has to navigate an inquiry into masculine power that is neither universal nor generic, hence the addition of “American Style” to the title of the project.’⁴¹⁴

Kolbowski plans to translate the language in the three projects to be exhibited in this installation but then she is assured that all visitors speak English. Finally, the artist presents the exhibition with her inability to locate Austrian masculine power – this is a different form of resistance – the one of the unreliable critic, who questions the given subject of criticism by problematising, and dissolving or widening it to the point where neither the artist nor the audience find themselves at home. Kolbowski says, ‘At the symposium, audience members ask angrily why the projects were not translated into German and why the projects were not site-specific to Austria?’⁴¹⁵

Kolbowski speaks of ‘aesthetic voices’ that travel between languages since ‘the repeated attempts to use language to communicate always meet their dissolution’.⁴¹⁶ She situates an artist as ‘blinded by the foreignness of any context’ and all he or she can do is to ‘blind’ the audience. Her art contains the language that resists universalisation but at the same time is recognisable as art.

Another example that, in our view, corresponds to the altermodern pluralising vector, is Jonathan Hernandez and Pablo Sigg’s approach to identities’ fusion. When faced with the femur of their ‘Mexican elephant’ (2010, see Appendix, fig. 11), we encounter an intriguing problem: can there be such a thing as a Mexican elephant, since only African and Asian elephants exist? If this femur belongs to an elephant that lived in captivity in Mexico, it then belongs to a foreign animal or, at most, to a ‘Creole’, one born in Mexico to foreign parents. But since passports are not issued to elephants, nor do they have a nationality, the artists decided to paint the femur with

⁴¹⁴ Kolbowski, Silvia, ‘I am the Provincial and Local Artist’, *The Artist as Public Intellectual?*, Schmidt-Wulffen, Stephan, Ed., Publications of the University of Fine Arts Vienna, Vol. 1, 2011: 48

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*: 48

the colours of the Mexican flag. In this way we have a femoral pachydermal and patriotic identity as false as Magritte's pipe which, as we know, is not a pipe. Is there a Mexican identity? Is there Mexican art? Or are there, in reality, only representations? Hernandez and Sigg ask, 'Why do we invent identities in order to criticize or worship them? What about inventing more of them so that the space in-between is where we are. There is a Mexican elephant. Lets fuse nationality with elephants...' ⁴¹⁷

Pluralising Democracy?

Can art take over the empty location of power, through performing a kind of resistance to universalisation - being a symbol of openness and democracy? Perhaps, altermodernity theory could be the way to think about this question. The answer is that there are many answers – the idea to pluralise modernism could also be linked to many 'democracies'. When we pluralise modernism, perhaps, we can pluralise modern democracies too. Bourriaud elaborates, 'As I was attacked last year by the tenants of decolonization, about the fact that China or Iran were perfectly right to refuse 'western' democracy in the name of their 'specific' way to handle politics, i.e. in the name of their right to defend themselves against a 'colonial' ideology of human rights, I am happy to see that the local people share my views in Lybia, Egypt or Tunisia: dictatorial regimes, wherever they are, are not 'anti-western', they only are an abomination...Why are those populations attracted by such horrible 'western theories' on freedom? A closer look at history would show us that they are not that 'western' after all'. ⁴¹⁸

Democracy is an inter-cultural value, but by showing that there is no single culture but rather decentred locations, what Enwezor calls 'the off-centre', perhaps we can

⁴¹⁷ 'Jonathan Hernandez, *Naturaleza Muerta*' Catalogue, October 2010, Kurimanzutto gallery, Mexico, www.kurimanzutto.com

⁴¹⁸ Bourriaud, Nicolas, 'Eight Questions for Nicolas Bourriaud', interview with Markiewicz, Filip, *Salzinsel* magazine, 19 March, 2011, available on-line at <http://salzinselmagazine.blogspot.com/2011/03/8-questions-for-nicolas-bourriaud.html>

also pluralise ‘democracies’. Enwezor points out the possibility to proceed with the project of modernity when ‘[r]ather, the off-centre is structured by the simultaneous existence of multiple centers. In this way, rather than being the decentering of the universal, or the relocation of the centre of contemporary art, as the notion of the offshore suggests, it becomes, instead, the emergence of multiplicity, the breakdown of cultural or locational hierarchies, the absence of a singular locus or a limited number of centers’.⁴¹⁹

Ernesto Laclau pointed out that ‘There is no future for the Left if it is unable to create expansive universal discourse, constructed out of, not against, the proliferation of particularisms of the last few decades.’⁴²⁰ Certainly, Bourriaud’s line of thinking about altermodernity attempts to give difference a positive status by organising particularities in such a way that it would be impossible for them to become totalities. Attempting to address the destiny of modernity and the aesthetic principle of universal and suggesting that the objective is to create a new way of thinking that can capture the current emergence of plural cultural fields and new structures of their legitimisation that follow from their diverse practices, Bourriaud also addresses the destiny of the ‘modern democracy’, suggesting its ‘off-centre’ positioning. Perhaps, to be ‘modern’, after all, could mean not making one single sense of our fleeting world, but to make many senses, many worlds – to broaden the space of the possible, preventing through wandering, any possible ‘ends’ to what art might mean, to what ‘democracy’ should look like. Perhaps, while there cannot be a single God, there could be many of them according to various understandings – and each of them could be constructed independently of the others.

If, as Enwezor argues, altermodern artistic practices ‘...are measured against the totalising principles of grand modernity’, then the artwork could be measured against the totalising impulses of the ‘individual work of art’. Modern liberal

⁴¹⁹ Enwezor, Okwui, ‘Modernity and Postcolonial Ambivalence’, *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, Catalogue, London, Tate Britain, 2009

⁴²⁰ Laclau, Ernesto, ‘Constructing Universality’, in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, Butler, Judith, Laclau, Ernesto and Žižek, Slavoj, Verso, London & New York, 2000: 306

democracy thus also could be measured against its totalising tendencies. What is at issue is not to reject or accept modernism, but to pluralise it. What follows is that the real issue concerns not rejecting the actual liberal democracy or accepting that there is no alternative beyond capitalist globalisation, but creating a multi-hegemonic world. We need to question the idea that there is only one form of democracy, one form of Enlightenment and artistic practices, because their strategic positioning in the current hegemony can play a decisive role in showing that there are many modern artistic practices. Back to the multi-hegemonic struggle.

Conclusion

How do we envisage the evolution of artistic-political practice today if we accept that neither the revolutionary politics and modernism nor capitalist pluralism and postmodernism provide an adequate framework with which to effect change in existing power relations? The problem today is not that artistic and cultural practices are not political or that political opinions have become the core of the aesthetic judgments. What is really at issue is to envisage how artistic practices, which are inevitably political, can be both radical and democratic. Certainly, the link that we want to establish today, after the era of the avant-garde, depends on our understanding of aesthetics and of democratic politics, which will then help us define what ‘today’ really is since we make sense out of otherwise contingent and meaningless reality by practicing various subject-formation mechanisms, whether it is art, politics, economy, the legal sphere etc.

Despite radical efforts to re-politicise artistic practices, to constitute subject at the expense of itself, the real political significance of contemporary art’s frenzy to become a new form of a political discourse corresponds, in our view, to our unwillingly proactive support and stabilisation of the consumerist post-democracy. What this ‘noise’ really stands for is the ultimate silence – an acceptance of the mute condition in exchange for fantasy, celebratory creativity and ultimate indifference. The current resistance to aesthetic forms should be understood in terms of resistance to think politically. This does not make artistic practices the surrogate of politics, but reduces politics to a surrogate of life forms. Of course this does not apply to all artistic practices, but specifically to those that actively claim its political relevance and status. In fact, a simple display of a beautiful flower in our public spaces without public is more political than endless artistic-political discourses staged in the art sphere. As Gregory Sholette has observed,

‘...only a radically failed society could give birth to fantasies of triumphant communality such as relational aesthetics or to the hyperbolic pragmatism of self-

organised mock-institutions. It might also be giving birth, circumstances permitting, to a new conception of the political party or even the state'.⁴²¹

The subject of 'Art and politics' then is not the name of the topic, but of a problem. Is this not a caricature of something more complex?

Why do we resist thinking politically? Since the Frankfurt school, capitalism has become a universal excuse for not forming collective political identities. In what was perceived as 'one-dimensional' society, deprived of free individual choice, hopes were placed with preserving one's authenticity considered in terms of individual consciousness and reflection enabled through practicing some sort of universal and neutral aesthetic or linguistic ideal. Politics were refused to the 'police' of the systems and democratic politics to resistance, refusal and disdain for this 'systems'. The Frankfurt school was also pivotal in how the relationship between art and politics was envisaged as both belonging to distinct areas (politics, art, the economy etc). The political act of art was seen to save the heterogeneous sensible that is the heart of the autonomy of art and its power of emancipation. The way to act as a critical artist was to reveal the strategies of the 'capitalist system' in order to unveil a 'true consciousness'.

However, the Frankfurt school's critique of inauthenticity and of the conformist domination of a society that destroys any differences was satisfied with the emergence of the post-Fordist model, which, contrary to the Frankfurt school's expectations, did not fully enter into the field of culture, but rather artistic and cultural production has 'entered' into capitalism in a way that suited the latter. Today authenticity is the driving force of modern production based on the constant creation of new desires and fantasies. What follows is that the matrix of culture, perhaps, is not how we should approach the dynamics of changes that our societies went through. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello contend that aesthetic resistance to capitalism 'vindicating an ideal of liberation and of individual autonomy, singularity

⁴²¹ Sholette, Gregory, *Dark Matter*, Pluto Press, 2011: 154

and authenticity'. Whether or not this is truly the legacy of what Herbert Marcuse called 'the Great Refusal', it is difficult to ignore that unorthodox cultural practices are a central metaphor within the orthodoxy of the new economy. However, what Boltanski and Chiapello's analysis allows us to grasp is that the transformation from Fordism to post-Fordism was, in fact, a complex process of rearticulating what they called 'artistic critique' – demands for autonomy and anti-hierarchical organisation into a new configuration where critical elements such as the aesthetic strategies of the counter-culture become the core of what they are supposed to undermine. Therefore, instead of one political agency, there is hegemony – 'social agents lack any essence' – a discursive construction that articulates a social 'text' that consists of different, multiple and conflicting positions in a particular direction. This transformation shows that neither is capitalism a totality, nor is culture a sub-system within the overall social system.

Chantal Mouffe, who has been at the forefront of a 'return to the political', has repeatedly argued that 'Every order is the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices'.⁴²² These practices of articulation through which subjects and a given society are constructed are 'hegemonic' practices. A society is not dominated by any single unitary and positive logic – there is no central point of a hegemonic formation – but always emerges from a 'surplus of meaning' resulting from a displacement through a confrontation with other antagonistic practices. There is no refuge from hegemony and every 'hegemonic practice' would trigger 'counter-hegemonic' responses. The way we envisage the relation between art and politics changes as soon as we focus on the political. Art and politics, then, appear not to be separate subsystems possessing their own autonomy, but parts of the hegemonic construction. If we cannot escape 'the political' – the ontological horizon of every ordering of social relations – then politics cannot promise the realisation of any 'deeper objectivity'. While the political refers to the dimension of antagonism, politics refers to the hegemonic nature of any social order in the sense that it reveals

⁴²² Mouffe, Chantal, 'Critique as Counter-Hegemonic Intervention', <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0808/mouffe/en>

that any society is hegemonically constructed – there are practices and institutions that conceal the original acts of their political institution and instead are taken for granted. Any ‘natural’ order or ‘common sense’ is the result of hegemonic practices and not a manifestation of any ‘deeper’ objectivity.

This opposition between ‘the political’ and ‘politics’ creates antagonistic relations between those who wish to create unity in one way and those who want to create it in a different way. This is the opposition between ‘them and us’. The question, then, for democratic politics is not how to eliminate exclusion, but to construct them as an ‘adversary’ rather than as the enemy. What is at stake in democratic politics is not to realise the perfect social order, but to engage with the existing order with a view to transforming it, extending liberty and equality to maximum relations, to show the traces of exclusion, and not taking refuge in formulating a paradigm that would assign everything to its place. Capitalism, language and culture are not closed systems, but parts of hegemonic articulation.

In this way, the transition from the Fordist to the post-Fordist regime should not be understood in terms of a matrix of culture or economy, but in terms of hegemony. What follows is that artistic and cultural practices’ political role cannot be envisaged pessimistically or optimistically. Both approaches – ‘spontaneous communism’ or ‘communism of capital’ – are counter-productive if we acknowledge the hegemonic nature of the post-Fordist transition.

Chantal Mouffe argues that the transition from the Fordist to the post-Fordist regime is better understood in terms of hegemony: it is not culture or economy that is the matrix of post-Fordism, but the rearticulation of some demands in a way that neutralises their critical potential. Potential is always there, but its realisation depends on the re-articulation of critiques. What is at stake is not to create more or to withdraw and concentrate on preserving art’s presupposed autonomy, but to engage with the current predicament in order to reveal its hegemonic character.

Envisaging what artistic critical intervention could mean today requires not only an adequate grasp of what democratic politics entail and a political understanding of the nature of post-Fordist transition, but also a different approach to aesthetics. There is a democratic paradox and there is also an aesthetical paradox – the questioning of the aesthetical judgment that reveals, through the ongoing practice of art, a conceptual impossibility of judgment *per se*.

While the democratic paradox corresponds to the form in which the ethical forever interrogates the political, questioning the logic of inclusion/exclusion, an aesthetical paradox, which reveals an impossibility of judgment, shows how we can include/exclude or judge in a way that reflects the real meaning of liberal-democratic tolerance. While we have to make judgments, it is their form and not their content that really matters. The territory where these two paradoxes meet is the space for the formation of a new subjectivity – the one that is neither purely ‘political’ nor purely ‘aesthetical’. The aesthetical here interrogates the ethical, which, in turn, questions the political in a different way. There is only ethical subjectivity rather than a ‘subject’.

For instance, Alfredo Jaar’s work is counter-hegemonic, it intervenes in reality but it does not show that ‘society’ is based on articulations that did not take place, that are hidden, missing or unsaid; but at the same time, the artist does not attempt either to fill these ‘gaps’ or to produce a ‘correct version’ without gaps and silences. Following Jaar, the role of critical art could be understood as a regime of visibility, which reminds us of a lack – that the present society is always lacking something. The recognition of this lack is the precondition of social critique. An artwork can present itself as a witness, as an image of ‘intolerability’, which stands in opposition to itself and thus to the reality it is supposed to represent. This artwork can never replace the lack of a ‘true’ reality. Jaar’s art is never a solution to this lack but rather an image of it, which is also lacking its representational capacities. Such presentation opens up the lacking present to the future, which can never be the realm

of certainty and positivity, but only the realm of continuous articulation and therefore of hope.

Jaar's works give voices to many individuals who are hidden from view in the neo-liberal hegemonic order. However, they do it in a way that not only opposes the totalising images of society but also the totalisation of the sensible. In this way, the condition of lack is what is shared by both regimes: the social and the aesthetic one. The regimes prevent each other from closure and this is how the link between artistic practices and political theory could be envisaged. Democratic politics are about making the traces of power and exclusion visible and critical artistic practices can create spaces that show the 'missing' elements, but in such way as to resist the possibility of a 'full picture' – all societal systems are flawed and always will be. Power is blind to itself and any order will be lacking something. From this point of view, the only thing artistic practice can do is not to represent a better order or to criticise the existing one, but to make the relations of 'ordering' problematic in the sense that they no longer appear as a 'common sense' but a 'lack of sense'. If 'democracy' is a self-refuting ideal, then the role of critical artistic practices is not to provide us with any privileged starting point of vision.

The central argument of the *Emancipated spectator* is a reassessment of aesthetic agency in artworks that exists in the absence of any credible political narrative. This aesthetics invokes taking the precariousness and ungrounding of things as a source of positivity, seeking to take up the modernist ethos of creation from a constitutively inauthentic position. When purity and destiny no longer make any sense to us, how can sense be made, and what kind of sense? Perhaps Nicolas Bourriaud's new line of thinking, entitled 'altermodernity,' can help us with theorising how art can become a symbol of the empty location of power. What Bourriaud has in mind is not the idea of a 'negative' aesthetic experience as a claim about the brutal nature of a social reality, but rather a 'positive' vision of a new cultural era in which thinking about the visual is free from all kinds of determinism.

Within the complex lines of thinking that have made up modernism, there is an aesthetic working at the uncertain and ruptured world in order to create a meaning out of it. While purity and destiny do not any longer make sense for us, sense can be made out of precariousness and displacements. It is not that an individual artwork must be translated into a wider symbolic network, or a particular culture into a wider cultural framework of understanding and relating, but rather the altermodern is located in the work of art and not outside it. This means taking translation as the opening, de-centering of any master narratives. There is no true language, only translation - the impossibility of a final, an original, meaning or a root. For Bourriaud the ethics of translation serves as a model of subjectivity, which does not '...seek an ideal state of the self or society. Instead, they organize signs in order to multiply one identity by another'.⁴²³

With helpful insights from Okwui Enwezor, the project of altermodernity could be understood as the idea to pluralise modernism. By emphasizing the transitory, unstable essence of modernism, what also could be institutionalised is the arbitrary and contingent nature of institutions and systems. Thus, the idea to pluralise modernism in the era of globalisation helps us to redefine modern democracy in the post-political era.

Instead of making one single sense of our fleeting world we can make many senses, many worlds – to broaden the space of the possible, preventing through wandering, any possible 'ends' to what art might mean, to what 'democracy' should look like. A new artistic-political fusion could then be envisaged as practices, which mobilize effects in ways that run not against the dominant forms of subject articulations, but by pluralising them, make any such supremacy impossible.

⁴²³ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *The Radicant*, Lulas & Sternberg, New York, 2009: 52

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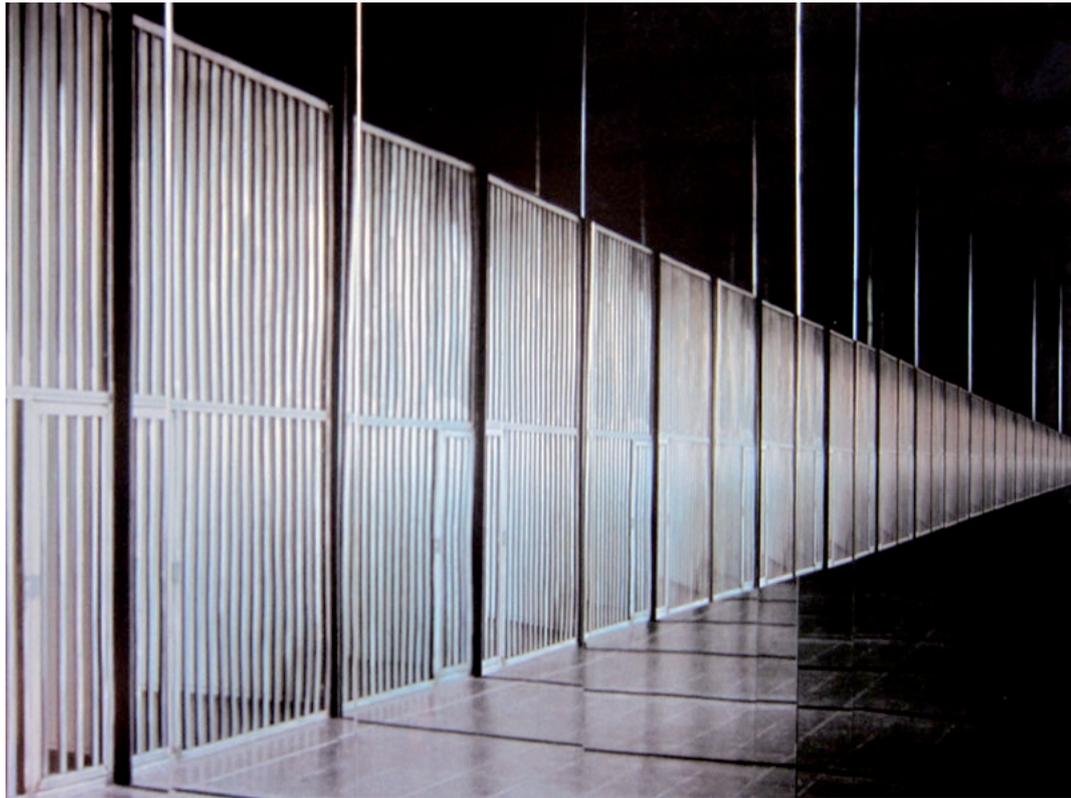


Fig. 1 Infinite Cell, 2004, Alfredo Jaar

<p>Cape Town, South Africa, February 11, 1990. Nelson Mandela is released from prison, after 28 years of brutal treatment by the apartheid regime. The images of his release, broadcast live around the world, show a man squinting into the light as if blinded.</p> <p>More than half of Mandela's sentence was spent on Robben Island, a windswept rock surrounded by the treacherous seas of the Cape of Good Hope. Only seven miles off Cape Town, the island had been used as a maximum security prison for "non-white" men since 1959. Mandela's fellow inmates there included Walter Stultz, Ahmed Kathrada, and Govan Mbeki, the father of current South African President Thabo Mbeki. Mandela later said that Robben Island was "intended to cripple us so that we should never again have the strength and courage to pursue our ideals."</p> <p>In the summer of 1964, Mandela and his fellow inmates in the isolation block were chained together and taken to a limestone quarry in the center of the island, where they were put to work breaking rocks and digging lime. The lime was used to turn the island's roads white. At the end of each day, the black men had themselves turned white with limedust. As they worked, the lime reflected the glare of the sun, blinding the prisoners. Their repeated requests for sunglasses to protect their eyes were denied.</p> <p>There are no photographs that show Nelson Mandela weeping on the day he was released from prison. It is said that the blinding light from the lime had taken away his ability to cry.</p>	<p>Pennsylvania, U.S.A., April 15, 2001. It is reported that one of the largest collections of historical photographs in the world is about to be buried in an old limestone mine forever. The mine, located in a remote area of western Pennsylvania, was turned into a corporate bomb shelter in the 1950s and is now known as the Iron Mountain National Underground Storage site.</p> <p>The Bettmann and United Press International archive, comprising an estimated 17 million images, was purchased in 1995 by Microsoft chairman Bill Gates. Now Gates' private company Corbis will move the images from New York City to the mine and bury them 220 feet below the surface in a subzero, low-humidity storage vault.</p> <p>It is thought that the move will preserve the images, but also make them totally inaccessible. In their place, Gates plans to sell digital scans of the images. In the past six years, 225,000 images, or less than 2 percent of them, have been scanned. At that rate, it would take 453 years to digitize the entire archive.</p> <p>The collection includes images of the Wright Brothers in flight, JFK Jr. saluting his father's coffin, important images from the Vietnam War, and Nelson Mandela in prison.</p> <p>Gates also owns two other photo agencies and has secured the digital reproduction rights to works in many of the world's art museums. At present, Gates owns the rights to show (or bury) an estimated 65 million images.</p>	<p>Kabul, Afghanistan, October 7, 2001. As darkness falls over Kabul, the U.S. launches its first airstrikes against Afghanistan, including carpet bombing from B-52s flying at 40,000 feet, and more than 50 cruise missiles. President Bush describes the attacks as "carefully targeted" to avoid civilian casualties.</p> <p>Just before launching the airstrikes, the U.S. Defense Department purchased exclusive rights to all available satellite images of Afghanistan and neighboring countries. The National Imagery and Mapping Agency, a top-secret Defense Department intelligence unit, entered into an exclusive contract with the private company Space Imaging Inc. to purchase images from their Ikonos satellite.</p> <p>Although it has its own spy satellites that are ten times as powerful as any commercial ones, the Pentagon defended its purchase of the Ikonos images as a business decision that "provided it with excess capacity."</p> <p>The agreement also produced an effective white-out of the operation, preventing western media from seeing the effects of the bombing, and eliminating the possibility of independent verification or refutation of government claims. News organizations in the U.S. and Europe were reduced to using archive images to accompany their reports.</p> <p>The CEO of Space Imaging Inc. said, "They are buying all the imagery that is available." There is nothing left to see.</p>
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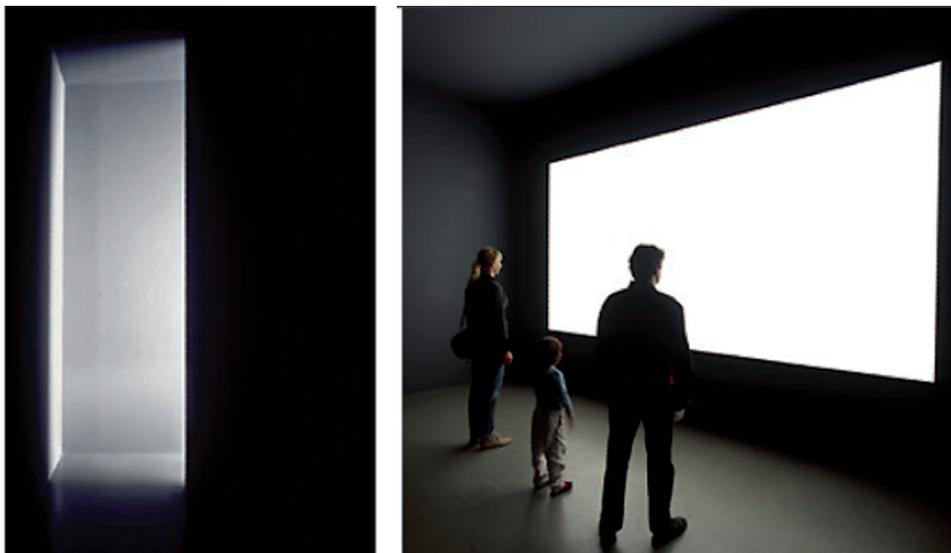


Fig. 2 Lament of the Images, 2002, Alfredo Jaar

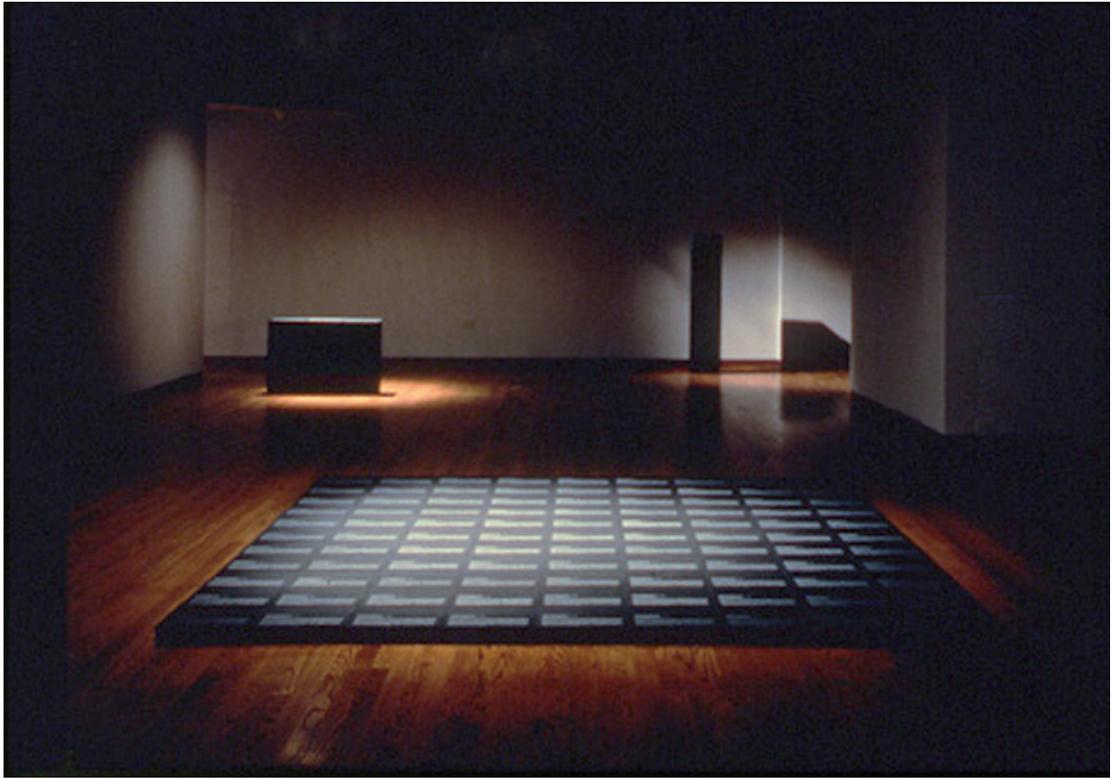


Fig. 3 Real Pictures 1995 Alfredo Jaar



Fig. 4 Skoghall Konstall 2000 Alfredo Jaar



Fig. 5
Untitled (Water)
1990
Alfredo Jaar

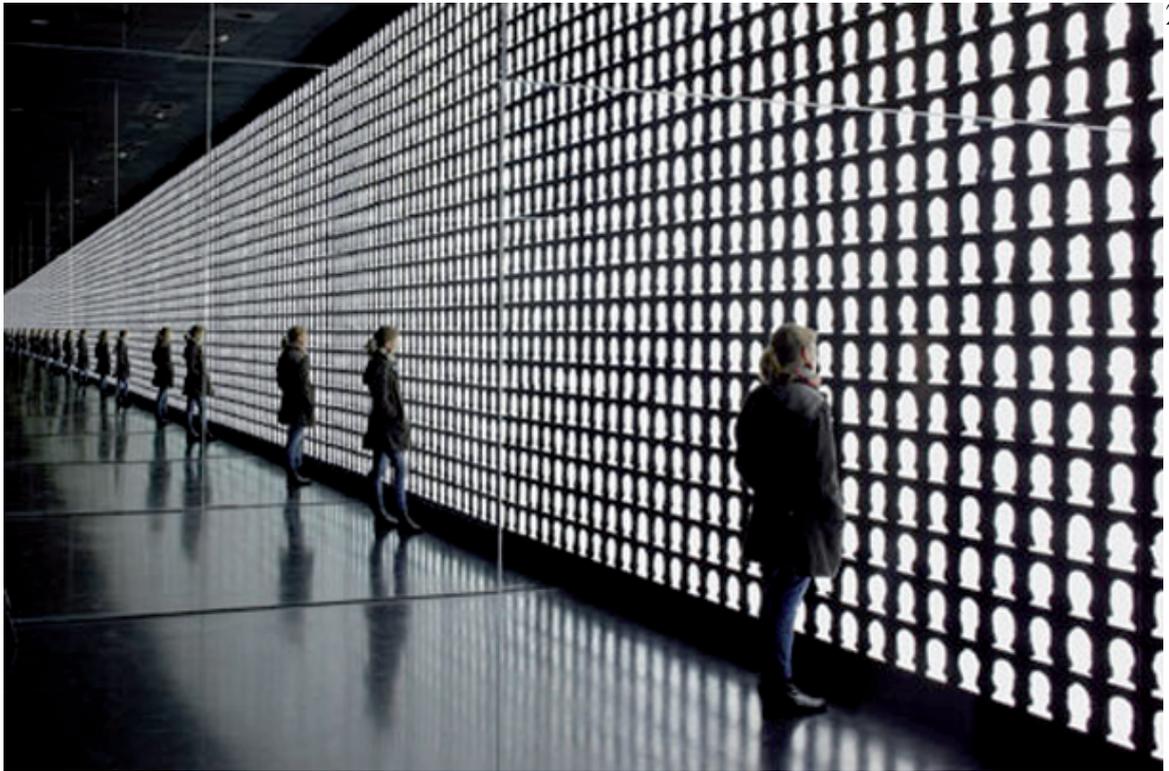


Fig. 6 The Geometry of Conscience 2010 Alfredo Jaar

Fig. 7
The Cloud
2000
Alfredo Jaar





Fig. 8 Lights in the City 1999 Alfredo Jaar

Fig. 9
Questions Questions
2008
Alfredo Jaar

**ALLA RICERCA
DI GRAMSCI
A MILANO**



**CULTURA
DOVE SEI**



**ABBIAMO
DIMENTICATO
LA CULTURA**



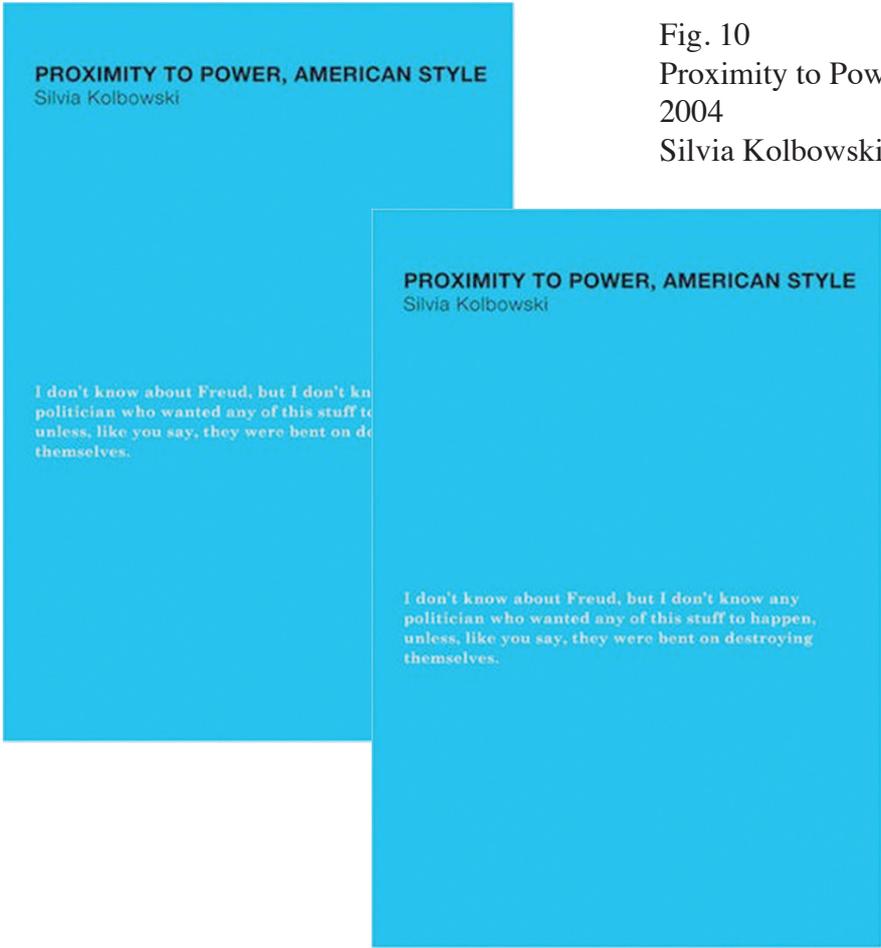


Fig. 10
Proximity to Power
2004
Silvia Kolbowski

Fig. 11
Mexican elephant
2010
Jonathan Hernandez and Pablo Sigg

