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Introduction: Poetics vs. Aesthetics

The main topic of the essays that are included in this book is art. In the period of modernity—the period in which we still live—any discourse on art is almost automatically subsumed under the general notion of aesthetics. Since Kant's *Critique of Judgment* in 1790, it became extremely difficult for anyone writing about art to escape the great tradition of aesthetic reflection—and escape being judged according to the criteria and expectations formed by this tradition. This is precisely the task that I pursue in these essays: to write on art in a non-aesthetic way. This does not mean that I want to develop something like an "anti-aesthetics," because every anti-aesthetics is obviously merely a more specific form of aesthetics. Rather, my essays avoid the aesthetic attitude altogether, in all its variations. Instead, they are written from another perspective: that of poetics. But before trying to characterize this other perspective in more detail, I would like to explain why I tend to avoid the traditional aesthetic attitude.

The aesthetic attitude is the spectator's attitude. As a philosophical tradition and university discipline, aesthetics relates to art and reflects on art from the perspective of the spectator, of the consumer of art—who demands from art the so-called aesthetic experience. At least since Kant, we know that the aesthetic experience can be an experience of beauty or of the sublime. It can be an experience of sensual pleasure. But it can also be an "anti-aesthetic" experience of displeasure, of frustration provoked by an artwork that lacks all the qualities that "affirmative" aesthetics expects it to have. It can be an experience of a utopian vision that leads humankind out of its present condition to a new society in which beauty reigns; or, in somewhat different terms, it can redistribute the sensible in a

way that refigures the spectator's field of vision by showing certain things and giving access to certain voices that were earlier concealed or obscured. But it can also demonstrate the impossibility of providing positive aesthetic experiences in the midst of a society based on oppression and exploitation—on a total commercialization and commodification of art that, from the beginning, undermines the possibility of a utopian perspective. As we know, both of these seemingly contradictory aesthetic experiences can provide equal aesthetic enjoyment. However, in order to experience aesthetic enjoyment of any kind, the spectator must be aesthetically educated, and this education necessarily reflects the social and cultural milieus into which the spectator was born and in which he or she lives. In other words, the aesthetic attitude presupposes the subordination of art production to art consumption—and thus the subordination of art theory to sociology.

Indeed, from an aesthetic point of view, the artist is a supplier of aesthetic experiences, including those produced with the intention of frustrating or modifying the viewer's aesthetic sensibility. The subject of the aesthetic attitude is a master, while the artist is a servant. Of course, as Hegel demonstrates, the servant can, and does, manipulate the master, but the servant nonetheless remains the servant. And this situation changed little when the artist came to serve the greater public rather than the regime of patronage represented by the church or traditional autocratic powers. At that time the artist was obliged to present the "contents"—the subjects, motives, narratives, and so forth—that were dictated by religious faith or the interests of the political power. Today, the artist is required to deal with topics of public interest. Today's democratic public wants to find in art the representations

of the issues, topics, political controversies, and social aspirations that move this public in its everyday life. The politicization of art is often seen as the antidote to a purely aesthetic attitude that allegedly requires art to be merely beautiful. But in fact, this politicization of art can be easily combined with its aestheticization—insofar as both are seen from the perspective of the spectator, of the consumer. Clement Greenberg remarked that an artist is free and capable of demonstrating his or her mastery and taste precisely when the content of the artwork is prescribed to the artist by an external authority. Being liberated from the question of what to do, the artist can then concentrate on the purely formal side of art, on the question of how to do it—that is, how to do it in such a way that its contents become attractive and appealing (or unattractive and repulsive) to the aesthetic sensibility of the public. If the politicization of art is thus interpreted as making certain political attitudes attractive (or unattractive) to the public, as is usually the case, the politicization of art comes to be completely subjected to the aesthetic attitude. And in the end the goal becomes to package political contents in an aesthetically attractive form. But, of course, through an act of real political engagement the aesthetic form loses its relevance—and can be discarded in the name of direct political practice. Here art functions as a political advertisement that becomes superfluous when it achieves its goal.

This is only one of many examples of how the aesthetic attitude becomes problematic when applied to the arts. And in fact, the aesthetic attitude does not need art, and it functions much better without it. It is often said that all the wonders of art pale in comparison to the wonders of nature. In terms of aesthetic experience, no work of art can

stand comparison to even an average beautiful sunset. And, of course, the sublime side of nature and politics can be fully experienced only by witnessing a real natural catastrophe, revolution, or war—not by reading a novel or looking at a picture. In fact, this was the shared opinion of Kant and the Romantic poets and artists that launched the first influential aesthetic discourses: the real world is the legitimate object of the aesthetic attitude (as well as of scientific and ethical attitudes)—not art. According to Kant, art can become a legitimate object of aesthetic contemplation only if it is created by a genius—understood as a human embodiment of natural force. Professional art can only serve as a means of education in notions of taste and aesthetic judgment. After this education is completed, art can be, as Wittgenstein's ladder, thrown away—to confront the subject with the aesthetic experience of life itself. Seen from the aesthetic perspective, art reveals itself as something that can, and should be, overcome. All things can be seen from an aesthetic perspective; all things can serve as sources of aesthetic experience and become objects of aesthetic judgment. From the perspective of aesthetics, art has no privileged position. Rather, art comes between the subject of the aesthetic attitude and the world. A grown person has no need for art's aesthetic tutelage, and can simply rely on one's own sensibility and taste. Aesthetic discourse, when used to legitimize art, effectively serves to undermine it.

But then how do we explain the dominance of aesthetic discourse throughout the period of modernity? The main reason for that is statistical: as aesthetic reflection on art began and was later developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the artists were in the minority, and the

spectators were in the majority. The question of why one should make art seemed irrelevant, as artists simply made art to earn a living. And this was a sufficient explanation for the existence of art. The real question concerned why other people should look at art. And the answer to this was: art would form their taste and develop their aesthetic sensibility—art as a schooling of the gaze and the other senses. The division between artists and spectators seemed clear-cut and socially established: spectators were the subjects of aesthetic attitude, and artworks produced by artists were objects of aesthetic contemplation. But at least since the beginning of the twentieth century this simple dichotomy began to collapse. And the essays that follow describe different aspects of this change. Among these changes was the emergence and rapid development of visual media that, throughout the twentieth century, transformed a vast number of people into objects of surveillance, attention, and contemplation to a degree that was unthinkable at any other period of human history. At the same time, these visual media became the new agora for an international public, and, especially, for political discussions.

The political discussions that took place in the ancient Greek agora presupposed the immediate living presence and visibility of the participants. Today, each person must establish his or her own image in the context of visual media. And it is not only in the popular virtual world of Second Life that one creates a virtual "avatar" as an artificial double with which to communicate and act. The "first life" of contemporary media functions in the same way. Anyone who wants to go public, to begin to act in today's international political agora must create an individualized public persona—and this is not only relevant to political and cultural elites. The relatively

easy access to digital photo and video cameras combined with the global distribution platform of the internet has altered the traditional statistical relationship between image producers and image consumers. Today, more people are interested in image production than image contemplation.

Under these new conditions, the aesthetic attitude obviously looses its former relevance in society. According to Kant, aesthetic contemplation was a disinterested one, for its subject was not concerned with the existence of the object of contemplation. In fact, as has been mentioned, the aesthetic attitude not only accepts the non-existence of its object, but, if this object is an artwork, it actually presupposes its eventual disappearance. However, the producer of one's own individualized public persona is obviously interested in its existence—and in its ability to further substitute this producer's "natural," biological body. Today, it is not only professional artists, but all of us who must learn to live in a state of media exposure by producing artificial personas, doubles, or avatars with a double purpose—to situate ourselves in visual media and conceal our biological bodies from the media's gaze. It is clear that such a public persona cannot be the work of unconscious, quasi-natural forces in the human being—like in the case of Kantian genius. Rather, it has to do with certain technical and political decisions for which their subject can be made ethically and politically responsible. The political dimension of art thus precedes its production. The politics of art has to do less with its impact on the spectator than with the decisions that lead to its emergence in the first place.

This means that contemporary art should be analyzed not in terms of aesthetics, but rather in terms of poetics. Not from the perspective of the art

consumer, but from that of the art producer. In fact there is a much longer tradition of understanding art as poiesis or techné than as aisthesis or in terms of hermeneutics. The shift from a poetic, technical understanding of art to aesthetic or hermeneutical analysis was relatively recent, and it is now time to reverse this change in perspective. In fact, this reversal was already started by the historical avant-garde—by artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, Hugo Ball, or Marcel Duchamp, who created media narratives in which they acted as public personas using press articles, teaching, writing, performance, and image production at the same level of relevance. Being seen and judged from an aesthetic perspective, their work was mostly interpreted as an artistic reaction to the Industrial Revolution and the political turmoil of the time. Of course, this interpretation is legitimate; however, it seems even more legitimate to see their artistic practice as a radical turn from aesthetics to poetics—more specifically to autopoetics, to the production of one's own public self.

Obviously, these artists did not seek to please the public, to satisfy its aesthetic desires. But neither did the avant-garde artists want to shock the public, to produce displeasing images of the sublime. In our culture, the notion of shock is connected primarily to images of violence and sexuality. But neither Malevich's *Black Square* (1915), Hugo Ball's sound poems, or Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema* (1926) presented violence or sexuality in any explicit way. These avant-garde artists also did not break any taboos, as there never was a taboo forbidding squares or monotonously rotating disks. And they did not surprise because squares and disks are unsurprising. Instead, they demonstrated the minimal conditions for producing an effect

of visibility—on an almost zero-level of form and meaning. Their works are visible embodiments of nothingness, or, equally, of pure subjectivity. And in this sense they are purely autopoetic works, granting visible form to a subjectivity that has been emptied out, purified of any specific content. The avant-garde thematization of nothingness and negativity is therefore not a sign of its "nihilism," or a protest against the "nullification" of life under the conditions of industrial capitalism. They are simply signs of a new start—of an artistic metanoia that leads the artist from an interest in the external world to the autopoetic construction of his or her own self.

Today, this autopoetic practice can be easily interpreted as a kind of commercial image production, as brand development or trendsetting. There is no doubt that any public persona is also a commodity, and that every gesture towards going public serves the interests of numerous profiteurs and potential shareholders. And it is also clear that the avant-garde artists themselves became such commercial brands long ago. Following this line of argument, it becomes easy to perceive any autopoetic gesture as a gesture of self-commodification—and to then launch a critique of autopoetic practice as a cover operation designed to conceal the protagonist's social ambitions and lust for profit. But while this critique appears persuasive at first glance, another question arises. What purpose does this critique itself serve?

There is no doubt that in the context of a contemporary civilization more or less completely dominated by the market, everything can be interpreted as an effect of market forces in one way or another. For this reason, the value of such an interpretation is null, for an explanation of everything

remains unable to explain anything in particular. While autopoesis can be used—and is used—as a means of self-commodification, the search for private interests behind every public persona means to project the actual realities of capitalism and the art market beyond their historical borders. Art was made before the emergence of capitalism and the art market, and will be made after they disappear. Art was also made during the modern era in places that were not capitalist and had no art market, such as the socialist countries. This is to say that every act of making art stays in a tradition that is not totally defined by the art market—and, accordingly, cannot by explained exclusively in terms of a critique of the market and of capitalist art institutions.

Here, a further question arises concerning the value of sociological analysis in art theory in general. Sociological analysis considers any concrete art as emerging out of a certain concrete present or past social context—and as manifesting this context. But this understanding of art has never truly accepted the modern turn from mimetic to non-mimetic, constructivist art. Sociological analysis still sees art as the reflection of a certain pre-given reality—namely, of the "real" social milieu in which this art is produced and distributed. However, art cannot be completely explained as a manifestation of "real" cultural and social milieus, because the milieus in which artworks emerge and circulate are also artificial. They consist of artistically created public personas—which, accordingly, are themselves artistic creations.

"Real" societies consist of real, living people. And, accordingly, the subjects of an aesthetic attitude must also be real, living people capable of having real, living aesthetic experiences. Indeed, it is in this sense that the aesthetic attitude culminates

In the sociological understanding of art. But if one looks at art from the poetic, technical, authorial position, the situation changes drastically, because, as we all know, the author is always already dead—or at least absent. As an image producer, one operates in a media space in which there is no clear difference between living and dead—because living and dead alike are represented by equally artificial personas. For example, artworks produced by living artists and artworks produced by dead artists routinely share the same museum spaces—and the museum is historically the first artificially constructed context for art. The same can be said about the internet as a space that also does not clearly differentiate between living and dead. On the other hand, artists often reject the society of their living contemporaries, as well as the acceptance of museum or media systems, preferring instead to project their personas into the imaginary world of the yet unborn. And it is in this sense that the art milieu represents an expanded notion of society, because it includes not only the living, but also the dead—as well as the unborn. And that is the actual reason for all the inadequacies in the sociological analysis of art: sociology is a science of the living, with an instinctive preference for the living over the dead. On the contrary, however, art constitutes a modern way to overcome this preference by establishing equality between the living and the dead.

The Obligation to Self-Design

Design, as we know it today, is a twentieth-century phenomenon. Admittedly, concern for the appearance of things is not new. All cultures have been concerned with making clothes, everyday objects, interiors of various spaces, whether sacred spaces, spaces of power, or private spaces, "beautiful and impressive."

The history of the applied arts is indeed long. Yet modern design emerged precisely from the revolt against the tradition of the applied arts. Even more so than the transition from traditional art to modernist art, the transition from the traditional applied arts to modern design marked a break with tradition, a radical paradigm shift. This paradigm shift is, however, usually overlooked. The function of design has often enough been described using the old metaphysical opposition between appearance and essence. Design, in this view, is responsible only for the appearance of things, and thus it seems predestined to conceal the essence of things, to deceive the viewer's understanding of the true nature of reality. Thus design has been repeatedly interpreted as an epiphany of the omnipresent market, of exchange value, of fetishism of the commodity, of the society of the spectacle—as the creation of a seductive surface behind which things themselves not only become invisible, but disappear entirely.

Modern design, as it emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, internalized this critique aimed at the traditional applied arts and set itself the task of revealing the hidden essence of things rather than designing their surfaces. Avant-garde design sought to eliminate and purify all that had accumulated on the surface of things through the practice of the applied arts over centuries in order to expose the true, undesigned nature of things.

Modern design thus did not see its task as creating the surface, but rather as eliminating it—as negative design, antidesign. Genuine modern design is reductionist; it does not add, it subtracts. It is no longer about simply designing individual things to be offered to the gaze of viewers and consumers in order to seduce them. Rather, design seeks to shape the gaze of viewers in such a way that they become capable of discovering things themselves. A central feature of the paradigm shift from traditional applied arts to modern design was just this extension of the will to design from the world of things to that of human beings themselves—understood as one thing among many. The rise of modern design is profoundly linked to the project of redesigning the old man into the New Man. This project, which emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century and is often dismissed today as utopian, has never really been abandoned de facto. In a modified, commercialized form, this project continues to have an effect, and its initial utopian potential has been updated repeatedly. The design of things that present themselves to the gaze of the viewing subject is critical to an understanding of design. The ultimate form of design is, however, the design of the subject. The problems of design are only adequately addressed if the subject is asked how it wants to manifest itself, what form it wants to give itself, and how it wants to present itself to the gaze of the Other.

This question was first raised with appropriate acuity in the early twentieth century—after Nietzsche diagnosed God's death. As long as God was alive, the design of the soul was more important to people than the design of the body. The human body, along with its environment, was understood from the perspective of faith as an outer shell that

conceals the soul. God was thought to be the only viewer of the soul. To him the ethically correct, righteous soul was supposed to look beautiful—that is, simple, transparent, well constructed, proportional, and not disfigured by any vices or marked by any worldly passion. It is often overlooked that in the Christian tradition ethics has always been subordinated to aesthetics—that is, to the design of the soul. Ethical rules, like the rules of spiritual asceticism—of spiritual exercises, spiritual training—serve above all the objective of designing the soul in such a way that it would be acceptable in God's eyes, so that He would allow it into paradise. The design of one's own soul under God's gaze is a persistent theme of theological treatises, and its rules can be visualized with the help of medieval depictions of the soul waiting for the Last Judgment. The design of the soul, which was destined for God's eyes, was clearly distinct from the worldly applied arts: whereas the applied arts sought richness of materials, complex ornamentation, and outward radiance, the design of the soul focused on the essential, the plain, the natural, the reduced, and even the ascetic. The revolution in design that took place at the start of the twentieth century can best be characterized as the application of the rules for the design of the soul to the design of worldly objects.

The death of God signified the disappearance of the viewer of the soul, for whom its design was practiced for centuries. Thus the site of the design of the soul shifted. The soul became the sum of the relationships into which the human body in the world entered. Previously, the body was the prison of the soul; now the soul became the clothing of the body—its social, political, and aesthetic appearance. Suddenly the only possible manifestation of

the soul became the look of the clothes in which human beings appeared, the everyday things with which they surrounded themselves, the spaces they inhabited. With the death of God, design became the medium of the soul, the revelation of the subject hidden inside the human body. Thus design took on an ethical dimension it had not had previously. In design, ethics became aesthetics; it became form. Where religion once was, design has emerged. The modern subject now has a new obligation: the obligation to self-design, an aesthetic presentation as ethical subject. The ethically motivated polemic against design, launched repeatedly over the course of the twentieth century and formulated in ethical and political terms, can only be understood on the basis of this new definition of design; such a polemic would be entirely incongruous if directed at the traditional applied arts. Adolf Loos' famous essay "Ornament and Crime" is an early example of this turn.

From the outset, Loos postulated in his essay a unity between the aesthetic and the ethical. Loos condemned every decoration, every ornament, as a sign of depravity, of vices. Loos judged a person's appearance, to the extent it represented a consciously designed exterior, to be an immediate expression of his or her ethical stance. For example, he believed he had demonstrated that only criminals, primitives, heathens, or degenerates ornament themselves by tattooing their skin. Ornament was thus an expression either of amorality or of crime: "The Papuan covers his skin with tattoos, his boat, his oars, in short everything he can lay his hands on. He is no criminal. The modern person who tattoos himself is either a criminal or a degenerate."[1] Particularly striking in this quotation is the fact that Loos makes no distinction between

tattooing one's own skin and decorating a boat or an oar. Just as the modern human being is expected to present him or herself to the gaze of the Other as an honest, plain, unornamented, "undesigned" object, so should all the other things with which this person has to deal be presented as honest, plain, unornamented, undesigned things. Only then do they demonstrate that the soul of the person using them is pure, virtuous, and unspoiled. According to Loos, the function of design is not to pack, decorate, and ornament things differently each time, that is, to constantly design a supplementary outside so that an inside, the true nature of things, remains hidden. Rather, the real function of modern design is to prevent people from wanting to design things at all. Thus Loos describes his attempts to convince a shoemaker from whom he had ordered shoes not to ornament them.[2] For Loos, it was enough that the shoemaker use the best materials and work them with care. The quality of the material and the honesty and precision of the work, and not their external appearance, determine the quality of the shoes. The criminal thing about ornamenting shoes is that this ornament does not reveal the shoemaker's honesty, that is, the ethical dimension of the shoes. The ethically dissatisfactory aspects of the product are concealed by ornament and the ethically impeccable are made unrecognizable by it. For Loos, true design is the struggle against design—against the criminal will to conceal the ethical essence of things behind their aesthetic surface. Yet paradoxically, only the creation of another, revelatory layer of ornament—that is, of design—guarantees the unity of the ethical and the aesthetic that Loos sought.

The messianic, apocalyptic features of the struggle against applied art that Loos was engaged in are unmistakable. For example, Loos wrote: "Do

not weep. Do you not see the greatness of our age resides in our very inability to create new ornament? We have gone beyond ornament, we have achieved plain, undecorated simplicity. Behold, the time is at hand, fulfillment awaits us. Soon the streets of the cities will shine like white walls! Like Zion, the Holy City, Heaven's capital. Then fulfillment will be ours."[3] The struggle against the applied arts is the final struggle before the arrival of God's Kingdom on Earth. Loos wanted to bring heaven down to earth; he wanted to see things as they are, without ornament. Thus Loos wanted to appropriate the divine gaze. But not only that, he wanted to make everyone else capable of seeing the things as they are revealed in God's gaze. Modern design wants the apocalypse now, the apocalypse that unveils things, strips them of their ornament, and causes them to be seen as they truly are. Without this claim that design manifests the truth of things, it would be impossible to understand many of the discussions among designers, artists, and art theorists over the course of the twentieth century. Such artists and designers as Donald Judd or architects such as Herzog & de Meuron, to name only a few, do not argue aesthetically when they want to justify their artistic practices but rather ethically, and in doing so they appeal to the truth of things as such. The modern designer does not wait for the apocalypse to remove the external shell of things and show them to people as they are. The designer wants here and now the apocalyptic vision that makes everyone New Men. The body takes on the form of the soul. The soul becomes the body. All things become heavenly. Heaven becomes earthly, material. Modernism becomes absolute.

Loos' essay is, famously, not an isolated phenomenon. Rather, it reflects the mood of the entire

artistic avant-garde of the twentieth century, which sought a synthesis of art and life. This synthesis was supposed to be achieved by removing the things that looked too arty both from art and from life. Both were supposed to reach the zero point of the artistic in order to achieve a unity. The conventionally artistic was understood to be the "human, all too human" that obstructed the gaze from perceiveing the true inner form of things. Hence traditional painting was seen as something that prevents the gaze of a spectator from recognizing it as a combination of shapes and colors on canvas. And shoes made in the traditional way were understood to be a thing that prevented the gaze of a consumer from recognizing the essence, function, and true composition of the shoe. The gaze of the New Man had to be freed of all such obstructions by the force of (anti)design.

Whereas Loos still formulated his argument in rather bourgeois terms and wanted to reveal the value of certain materials, craftsmanship, and individual honesty, the will to absolute design reached its climax in Russian Constructivism, with its "proletarian" ideal of the collective soul, which is manifested in industrially organized work. For the Russian Constructivists, the path to virtuous, genuinely proletarian objects also passed through the elimination of everything that was merely artistic. The Russian Constructivists called for the objects of everyday communist life to show themselves as what they are: as functional things whose forms serve only to make their ethics visible. Ethics, as understood here, was given an additional political dimension, since the collective soul had to be organized politically in order to act properly in accordance with ethical terms. The collective soul was manifested in the political organization that embraced both people and things. The function

of "proletarian" design—at the time, admittedly, people spoke rather of "proletarian art"—must therefore be to make this total political organization visible. The experience of the October Revolution of 1917 was crucial for the Russian Constructivists. They understood the revolution to be a radical act of purifying society of every form of ornament: the finest example of modern design, which eliminates all traditional social customs, rituals, conventions, and forms of representation in order for the essence of the political organization to emerge. Thus the Russian Constructivists called for the abolition of all autonomous art. Art should rather be placed entirely at the service of the design of utilitarian objects. In essence, it was a call to completely subsume art to design.

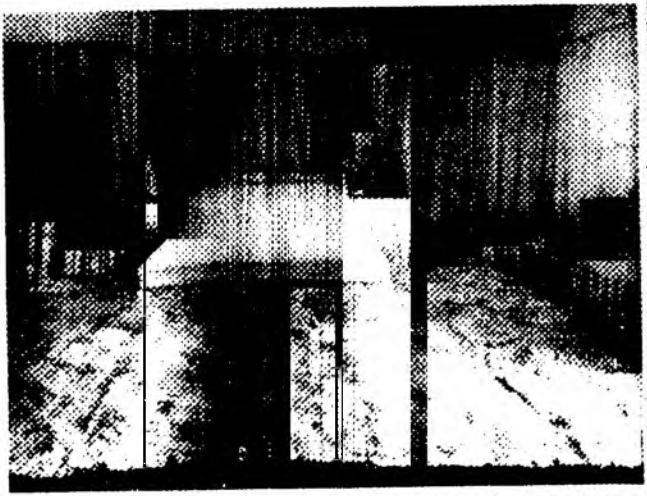
At the same time, the project of Russian Constructivism was a total project: it wanted to design life as a whole. Only for that reason—and only at that price—was Russian Constructivism prepared to exchange autonomous art for utilitarian art: just as the traditional artist designed the whole of the artwork, so the Constructivist artist wanted to design the whole of society. In a certain sense, the Soviet artists had no choice at the time other than to advance such a total claim. The market, including the art market, was eliminated by the Communists. Artists were no longer faced with private consumers and their private interests and aesthetic preferences, but with the state as a whole. Necessarily, it was all or nothing for artists. This situation is clearly reflected in the manifestos of Russian Constructivism. For example, in his programmatic text entitled "Constructivism," Alexei Gan wrote: "Not to reflect, not to represent and not to interpret reality, but to really build and express the systematic tasks of the new class, the proletariat... Especially now, when

the proletarian revolution has been victorious, and its destructive, creative movement is progressing along the iron rails into culture, which is organized according to a grand plan of social production, everyone—the master of color and line, the builder of space-volume forms and the organizer of mass productions—must all become constructors in the general work of the arming and moving of the many-millioned human masses."[4] For Gan, the goal of Constructivist design was not to impose a new form on everyday life under socialism, but rather to remain loyal to radical, revolutionary reduction and to avoid making new ornaments for new things. Hence Nikolai Tarabukin asserted in his then-famous essay "From the Easel to the Machine" that the Constructivist artist could not play a formative role in the process of actual social production. His role was rather that of a propagandist who defends and praises the beauty of industrial production and opens the public's eyes to this beauty.[5] The artist, as described by Tarabukin, is someone who looks at the entirety of socialist production as a ready-made—a kind of socialist Duchamp who exhibits socialist industry as a whole as something good and beautiful.

The modern designer, whether bourgeois or proletarian, calls for the other, divine vision: for the metanoia that enables people to see the true form of things. In the Platonic and Christian traditions, undergoing a metanoia means making the transition from a worldly perspective to an otherworldly perspective, from a perspective of the mortal body to a perspective of the immortal soul. Since the death of God, of course, we can no longer believe that there is something like the soul that is distinguished from the body in the sense that it is made independent of the body and can be separated from it. However,

that does not by any means suggest that a metanoia is no longer possible. Modern design is the attempt to bring about such a metanoia—an effort to see one's own body and one's own surroundings as purified of everything earthly, arbitrary, and subjected to a particular aesthetic taste. In a sense, it could be said that modernism substituted the design of the corpse for the design of the soul.

This funeral aspect of modern design was recognized by Loos even before he wrote "Ornament and Crime." In his text "The Poor Little Rich Man," Loos tells of the imagined fate of a rich Viennese man who decided to have his entire house designed by an artist. This man totally subjected his everyday life to the dictates of the designer (Loos speaks, admittedly, of the architect), for as soon as his thoroughly designed house is finished, the man can no longer change anything in it without the designer's permission. Everything that this man would later buy and do must fit into the overall design of the house, not just literally but also aesthetically. In a world of total design, the man himself has become a designed thing, a kind of museum object, a mummy, a publicly exhibited corpse. Loos concludes his description of the fate of the poor rich man as follows: "He was shut out of future life and its strivings, its developments, and its desires. He felt: Now is the time to learn to walk about with one's own corpse. Indeed! He is finished! He is complete!"[6] In his essay "Design and Crime," whose title was inspired by Loos', Hal Foster interpreted this passage as an implicit call for "running room," for breaking out of the prison of total design.[7] It is obvious, however, that Loos' text should not be understood as a protest against the total dominance of design. Loos protests against design as ornament in the name of another, "true" design, in the name of an antidesign



Adolf Loos' wife Lina's bedroom, published in *Kunst*, 1903, no. 1. © Albertina Archive, Vienna.

that frees the consumer from dependence on the taste of the professional designer. As the aforementioned example of the shoes demonstrates, under the regime of avant-garde antidesign, consumers take responsibility for their own appearance and for the design of their daily lives. Consumers do so by asserting their own, modern taste, which tolerates no ornament and hence no additional artistic or craft labor. By taking ethical and aesthetic responsibility for the image they offer the outside world, however, consumers become prisoners of total design to a much larger degree than ever before, inasmuch as they can no longer delegate their aesthetic decisions to others. Modern consumers present the world the image of their own personality—purified of all outside influence and ornamentation. But this purification of their own image is potentially just as infinite a process as the purification of the soul before God. In the white city, in the heavenly Zion, as Loos imagines it, design is truly total for the first time. Nothing can be changed there either: nothing colorful, no ornament can be smuggled in. The difference is simply that in the white city of the future, everyone is the author of his own corpse—everyone becomes an artist-designer who has ethical, political, and aesthetic responsibility for his or her environment.

One can claim, of course, that the original pathos of avant-garde antidesign has long since faded, that avant-garde design has become a certain designer style among other possible styles. That is why many people view our entire society today—the society of commercial design, of the spectacle—as a game with simulacra behind which there is only a void. That is indeed how this society presents itself, but only if one takes a purely contemplative position, sitting in the lodge and

watching the spectacle of society. But this position overlooks the fact that design today has become total—and hence it no longer admits of a contemplative position from the perspective of an outsider. The turn that Loos announced in his day has proven to be irreversible: every citizen of the contemporary world still has to take ethical, aesthetic, and political responsibility for his or her self-design. In a society in which design has taken over the function of religion, self-design becomes a creed. 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. In accordance with this creed, one is judged by society, and this judgment can certainly be negative and even threaten the life and well-being of the person concerned.

Hence modern design belongs not so much in an economic context as in a political one. Modern design has transformed the whole of social space into an exhibition space for an absent divine visitor, in which individuals appear both as artists and as self-produced works of art. In the gaze of the modern viewer, however, the aesthetic composition of artworks inevitably betrays the political convictions of their authors—and it is primarily on that basis that they are judged. The debate over headscarves demonstrates the political force of design. In order to understand that this is primarily a debate about design, it suffices to imagine that Prada or Gucci has begun to design headscarves. In such a case, deciding between the headscarf as a symbol of Islamic convictions and the headscarf as a commercial brand becomes an extremely difficult aesthetic and political task. Design cannot therefore be analyzed exclusively within the context of the economy of commodities. One could just as soon speak of suicide design—for example, in the case of

suicide attacks, which are well known to be staged according to strict aesthetic rules. One can speak about the design of power but also about the design of resistance or the design of alternative political movements. In these instances design is practiced as a production of differences—differences that often take on political semantics at the same time. We often hear laments that politics today is concerned only with a superficial image—and that so-called content loses its relevance in the process. This is thought to be the fundamental malaise of politics today. More and more, there are calls to turn away from political design and image making and return to content. Such laments ignore the fact that under the regime of modern design, it is precisely the visual positioning of politicians in the field of the mass media that makes the crucial statement concerning their politics—or even constitutes their politics. Content, by contrast, is completely irrelevant, because it changes constantly. Hence the general public is by no means wrong to judge its politicians according to their appearance—that is, according to their basic aesthetic and political creed, and not according to arbitrarily changing programs and contents that they support or formulate.

Thus modern design evades Kant's famous distinction between disinterested aesthetic contemplation and the use of things guided by interests. For a long time after Kant, disinterested contemplation was considered superior to a practical attitude: a higher, if not the highest, manifestation of the human spirit. But already by the end of the nineteenth century, a reevaluation of values had taken place: the *vita contemplativa* was thoroughly discredited, and the *vita activa* was elevated to the true task of humankind. Hence today design is accused of seducing people into weakening their

activity, vitality, and energy—of making them passive consumers who lack will, who are manipulated by omnipresent advertising and thus become victims of capital. The apparent cure for this lulling into sleep by the society of the spectacle is a shock-like encounter with the "real" that is supposed to rescue people from their contemplative passivity and move them to action, which is the only thing that promises an experience of truth as living intensity. The debate now is only over the question whether such an encounter with the real is still possible or whether the real has definitively disappeared behind its designed surface.

Now, however, we can no longer speak of disinterested contemplation when it is a matter of self-manifestation, self-design, and self-positioning in the aesthetic field, since the subject of such self-contemplation clearly has a vital interest in the image he or she offers to the outside world. Once people had an interest in how their souls appeared to God; today they have an interest in how their bodies appear to their political surroundings. This interest certainly points to the real. The real, however, emerges here not as a shock-like interruption of the designed surface but as a question of the technique and practice of self-design—a question no one can escape anymore. In his day, Beuys said that everyone had the right to see him- or herself as an artist. What was then understood as a right has now become an obligation. In the meantime, we have been condemned to being the designers of our selves.

1
Adolf Loos, "Ornament and Crime" (1908), in *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays*, ed. Adolf Opel, trans. Michael Mitchell (Riverside, CA: Ariadne Press, 1998), 167.

2
Ibid., 174.

3
Ibid., 168.

4
Alexei Gan, "From Constructivism," in *Art in Theory, 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993), 320 (translation modified).

5
Nikolai Tarabukin, "From the Easel to the Machine," in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 135–42.

6
Adolf Loos, "The Poor Little Rich Man," in *August Sarnitz, Adolf Loos, 1870–1933: Architect, Cultural Critic, Dandy*, trans. Latido (Cologne: Taschen, 2003), 21.

7
Hal Foster, "Design and Crime," in, *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* (London: Verso, 2002), 17.

The Production of Sincerity

These days, almost everyone seems to agree that the times in which art tried to establish its autonomy—successfully or unsuccessfully—are over. And yet this diagnosis is made with mixed feelings. One tends to celebrate the readiness of contemporary art to transcend the traditional confines of the art system, if such a move is dictated by a will to change the dominant social and political conditions, to make the world a better place—if the move, in other words, is ethically motivated. One tends to deplore, on the other hand, that attempts to transcend the art system never seem to lead beyond the aesthetic sphere: instead of changing the world, art only makes it look better. This causes a great deal of frustration within the art system, in which the predominant mood appears to almost perpetually shift back and forth between hopes to intervene in the world beyond art and disappointment (even despair) due to the impossibility of achieving such a goal. While this failure is often interpreted as proof of art's incapacity to penetrate the political sphere as such, I would argue instead that if the politicization of art is seriously intended and practiced, it mostly succeeds. Art can in fact enter the political sphere and, indeed, art already has entered it many times in the twentieth century. The problem is not art's incapacity to become truly political. The problem is that today's political sphere has already become aestheticized. When art becomes political, it is forced to make the unpleasant discovery that politics has already become art—that politics has already situated itself in the aesthetic field.

In our time, every politician, sports hero, terrorist, or movie star generates a large number of images because the media automatically covers their activities. In the past, the division of labor between politics and art was quite clear:

the politician was responsible for the politics and the artist represented those politics through narration or depiction. The situation has changed drastically since then. The contemporary politician no longer needs an artist to gain fame or inscribe himself within statistical archives. Every important political figure and event is immediately registered, represented, described, depicted, narrated, and interpreted by the media. The machine of media coverage does not need any individual artistic intervention or artistic decision in order to be put into motion. Indeed, contemporary mass media has emerged as by far the largest and most powerful machine for producing images—vastly more extensive and effective than the contemporary art system. We are constantly fed images of war, terror, and catastrophe of all kinds at a level of production and distribution with which the artist's artisanal skills cannot compete.

Now, if an artist does manage to go beyond the art system, this artist begins to function in the same way that politicians, sports heroes, terrorists, movie stars, and other minor or major celebrities already function: through the media. In other words, the artist becomes the artwork. While the transition from the art system to the political field is possible, this transition operates primarily as a change in the positioning of the artist vis-à-vis the production of the image: the artist ceases to be an image producer and becomes an image himself. This transformation was already registered in the late nineteenth century by Friedrich Nietzsche, who famously claimed that it is better to be an artwork than to be an artist.[1] Of course, becoming an artwork not only provokes pleasure, but also the anxiety of being subjected in a very radical way to the gaze of the other—to the gaze of the media functioning as a super-artist.

I would characterize this anxiety as one of self-design because it forces the artist—as well as almost anybody who comes to be covered by the media—to confront the image of the self: to correct, to change, to adapt, to contradict this image. Today, one often hears that the art of our time functions increasingly in the same way as design, and to a certain extent this is true. But the ultimate problem of design concerns not how I design the world outside, but how I design myself—or, rather, how I deal with the way in which the world designs me. Today, this has become a general, all-pervasive problem with which everyone—and not just politicians, movie stars, and celebrities—is confronted. Today, everyone is subjected to an aesthetic evaluation—everyone is required to take aesthetic responsibility for his or her appearance in the world, for his or her self-design. Where it was once a privilege and a burden for the chosen few, in our time self-design has come to be the mass cultural practice par excellence. The virtual space of the internet is primarily an arena in which my website on Facebook is permanently designed and redesigned to be presented to YouTube—and vice versa. But likewise in the real or, let's say, analog world, one is expected to be responsible for the image that he or she presents to the gaze of others. It could even be said that self-design is a practice that unites artist and audience alike in the most radical way: though not everyone produces artworks, everyone *is* an artwork. At the same time, everyone is expected to be his or her own author.

Now, every kind of design—including self-design—is primarily regarded by the spectator not as a way to reveal things, but as a way to hide them. The aestheticization of politics is similarly considered to be a way of substituting substance

with appearance, real issues with superficial image-making. However, while the issues constantly change, the image remains. Just as one can easily become a prisoner of his or her own image, one's political convictions can be ridiculed as being mere self-design. Aestheticization is often identified with seduction and celebration. Walter Benjamin obviously had this use of the term "aestheticization" in mind when he opposed the politicization of aesthetics to the aestheticization of politics at the end of his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."[2] But one can argue, on the contrary, that every act of aestheticization is always already a critique of the object of aestheticization simply because this act calls attention to the object's need for a supplement in order to look better than it actually is. Such a supplement always functions as a Derridean *pharmakon*: while design makes an object look better, it likewise raises the suspicion that this object would look especially ugly and repellent were its designed surface to be removed.

Indeed, design—including self-design—is primarily a mechanism for inducing suspicion. The contemporary world of total design is often described as a world of total seduction from which the unpleasantness of reality has disappeared. But I would argue, rather, that the world of total design is a world of total suspicion, a world of latent danger lurking behind designed surfaces. The main goal of self-design then becomes one of neutralizing the suspicion of a possible spectator, of creating the sincerity effect that provokes trust in the spectator's soul. In today's world, the production of sincerity and trust has become everyone's occupation—and yet it was, and still is, the main occupation of art throughout the whole history of

modernity: the modern artist has always positioned himself or herself as the only honest person in a world of hypocrisy and corruption. Let us briefly investigate how the production of sincerity and trust has functioned in the modern period in order to characterize the way it functions today.

One might argue that the modernist production of sincerity functioned as a reduction of design, in which the goal was to create a blank, void space at the center of the designed world, to eliminate design, to practice zero-design. In this way, the artistic avant-garde wanted to create design-free areas that would be perceived as areas of honesty, high morality, sincerity, and trust. In observing the media's many designed surfaces, one hopes that the dark, obscured space beneath the media will somehow betray or expose itself. In other words, we are waiting for a moment of sincerity, a moment in which the designed surface cracks open to offer a view of its inside. Zero-design attempts to artificially produce this crack for the spectator, allowing him or her to see things as they truly are.

But the Rousseauistic faith in the equation of sincerity and zero-design has receded in our time. We are no longer ready to believe that minimalist design suggests anything about the honesty and sincerity of the designed subject. The avant-garde approach to the design of honesty has thus become one style among many possible styles. Under these conditions, the effect of sincerity is created not by refuting the initial suspicion directed toward every designed surface, but by confirming it. This is to say that we are ready to believe that a crack in the designed surface has taken place—that we are able to see things as they truly are—only when the reality behind the façade shows itself to be dramatically worse than we had ever imagined.

Confronted with a world of total design, we can only accept a catastrophe, a state of emergency, a violent rupture in the designed surface as sufficient reason to believe that we are allowed a view of the reality that lies beneath. And of course this reality too must show itself to be a catastrophic one, because we suspect something terrible to be going on behind the design—cynical manipulation, political propaganda, hidden intrigues, vested interests, crimes. Following the death of God, the conspiracy theory became the only surviving form of traditional metaphysics as a discourse about the hidden and the invisible. Where we once had nature and God, we now have design and conspiracy theory.

Even if we are generally inclined to distrust the media, it is no accident that we are immediately ready to believe it when it tells us about a global financial crisis or delivers the images from September 11 into our apartments. Even the most committed theorists of postmodern simulation began to speak about the return of the real as they watched the images of September 11. There is an old tradition in Western art that presents an artist as a walking catastrophe, and—at least from Baudelaire on—modern artists were adept at creating images of evil lurking behind the surface, which immediately won the trust of the public. In our days, the romantic image of the *poète maudit* is substituted by that of the artist being explicitly cynical—greedy, manipulative, business-oriented, seeking only material profit, and implementing art as a machine for deceiving the audience. We have learned this strategy of calculated self-denunciation—of self-denunciatory self-design—from the examples of Salvador Dalí and Andy Warhol, of Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst. However old, this strategy has rarely missed its mark. Looking at the public

image of these artists we tend to think, "Oh, how awful," but at the same time, "Oh, how true." Self-design as self-denunciation still functions in a time when the avant-garde zero-design of honesty fails. Here, in fact, contemporary art exposes how our entire celebrity culture works: through calculated disclosures and self-disclosures. Celebrities (politicians included) are presented to the contemporary audience as designed surfaces, to which the public responds with suspicion and conspiracy theories. Thus, to make the politicians look trustworthy, one must create a moment of disclosure—a chance to peer though the surface to say, "Oh, this politician is as bad as I always supposed him or her to be." With this disclosure, trust in the system is restored through a ritual of symbolic sacrifice and self-sacrifice, stabilizing the celebrity system by confirming the suspicion to which it is necessarily already subjected. According to the economy of symbolic exchange that Marcel Mauss and Georges Bataille explored, the individuals who show themselves to be especially nasty (e.g., the individuals who demonstrate the most substantial symbolic sacrifice) receive the most recognition and fame. This fact alone demonstrates that this situation has less to do with true insight than with a special case of self-design: today, to decide to present oneself as ethically bad is to make an especially good decision in terms of self-design (genius=swine).

But there is also a subtler and more sophisticated form of self-design as self-sacrifice: symbolic suicide. Following this subtler strategy of self-design, the artist announces the death of the author, that is, his or her own symbolic death. In this case, the artist does not proclaim himself or herself to be bad, but to be dead. The resulting artwork is then presented as being collaborative, participatory,

and democratic. A tendency toward collaborative, participatory practice is undeniably one of the main characteristics of contemporary art. Numerous groups of artists throughout the world are asserting collective, even anonymous authorship of their work. Moreover, collaborative practices of this type tend to encourage the public to join in, to activate the social milieu in which these practices unfold. This self-sacrifice that forgoes individual authorship also finds its compensation within a symbolic economy of recognition and fame.

Participatory art reacts to the modern state of affairs in art that can be described easily enough in the following way: the artist produces and exhibits art, and the public views and evaluates what is exhibited. This arrangement would seem primarily to benefit the artist, who shows himself or herself to be an active individual in opposition to a passive, anonymous mass audience. Whereas the artist has the power to popularize his or her name, the identities of the viewers remain unknown in spite of their role in providing the validation that facilitates the artist's success. Modern art can thus easily be misconstrued as an apparatus for manufacturing artistic celebrity at the expense of the public. However, it is often overlooked that in the modern period, the artist has always been delivered up to the mercy of public opinion—if an artwork does not find favor with the public, then it is de facto recognized as being devoid of value. This is modern art's main deficit: the modern artwork has no "inner" value of its own, no merit beyond what public taste bestows upon it. In ancient temples, aesthetic disapproval was insufficient reason to reject an artwork. The statues produced by the artists of that time were regarded as embodiments of the gods: they were revered, one kneeled down before them in prayer,

one sought guidance from them and feared them. Poorly made idols and badly painted icons were in fact also part of this sacred order, and to dispose of any of them out would have been sacrilegious. Thus, within a specific religious tradition, artworks have their own individual, "inner" value, independent of the public's aesthetic judgment. This value derives from the participation of both artist and public in communal religious practices, a common affiliation that relativizes the antagonism between artist and public.

By contrast, the secularization of art entails its radical devaluation. This is why Hegel asserted at the beginning of his *Lectures on Aesthetics* that art was a thing of the past. No modern artist could expect anyone to kneel in front of his or her work in prayer, demand practical assistance from it, or use it to avert danger. The most one is prepared to do nowadays is to find an artwork interesting, and of course to ask how much it costs. Price immunizes the artwork from public taste to a certain degree—had economic considerations not been a factor in limiting the immediate expression of public taste, a good deal of the art held in museums today would have landed in the trash a long time ago. Communal participation within the same economic practice thus weakens the radical separation between artist and audience to a certain degree, encouraging a certain complicity in which the public is forced to respect an artwork for its high price even when that artwork is not well liked. However, there still remains a significant difference between an artwork's religious value and its economic value. Though the price of an artwork is the quantifiable result of an aesthetic value that has been identified with it, the respect paid to an artwork due to its price does not by any means translate automatically

Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled 1992 (Pad see-ew)*, woks, cooking utensils, ingredients for pad see-ew, glass display case, SF MoMA, San Francisco, 2002, solo event. Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise.

into any form of binding appreciation. This binding value of art can thus be sought only in noncommercial, if not directly anti-commercial practices.

For this reason, many modern artists have tried to regain common ground with their audiences by enticing viewers out of their passive roles, by bridging the comfortable aesthetic distance that allows uninvolved viewers to judge an artwork impartially from a secure, external perspective. The majority of these attempts have involved political or ideological engagement of one sort or another. Religious community is thus replaced by a political movement in which artists and audiences communally participate. When the viewer is involved in artistic practice from the outset, every piece of criticism uttered becomes self-criticism. Shared political convictions thus render aesthetical judgment partially or completely irrelevant, as was the case with sacral art in the past. To put it bluntly: it is now better to be a dead author than to be a bad author. Though the artist's decision to relinquish exclusive authorship would seem primarily to be in the interest of empowering the viewer, this sacrifice ultimately benefits the artist by liberating his or her work from the cold eye of the uninvolved viewer's judgment.

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

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

Politics of Installation

The field of art is today frequently equated with the art market, and the artwork is primarily identified as a commodity. That art functions in the context of the art market, and every work of art is a commodity, is beyond doubt; yet art is also made and exhibited for those who do not want to be art collectors, and it is in fact these people who constitute the majority of the art public. The typical exhibition visitor rarely views the work on display as a commodity. At the same time, the number of large-scale exhibitions—biennales, triennales, Documentas, Manifestas—is constantly growing. In spite of the vast amounts of money and energy invested in these exhibitions, they do not exist primarily for art buyers, but for the public—for an anonymous visitor who will perhaps never buy an artwork. Likewise, art fairs, while ostensibly existing to serve art buyers, are now increasingly transformed into public events, attracting a population with little interest in buying art, or without the financial ability to do so. The art system is thus on its way to becoming part of the very mass culture that it has for so long sought to observe and analyze from a distance. Art is becoming a part of mass culture, not as a source of individual works to be traded on the art market, but as an exhibition practice, combined with architecture, design, and fashion—just as it was envisaged by the pioneering minds of the avant-garde, by the artists of the Bauhaus, the Vkhutemas, and others as early as the 1920s. Thus, contemporary art can be understood primarily as an exhibition practice. This means, among other things, that it is becoming increasingly difficult today to differentiate between two main figures of the contemporary art world: the artist and the curator.

The traditional division of labor within the art system was clear. Artworks were to be produced

by artists and then selected and exhibited by curators. But, at least since Duchamp, this division of labor has collapsed. Today, there is no longer any "ontological" difference between making art and displaying art. In the context of contemporary art, to make art is to show things as art. So the question arises: is it possible, and, if so, *how* is it possible to differentiate between the role of the artist and that of the curator when there is no difference between art's production and exhibition? Now, I would argue that this distinction is still possible. And I would like to do so by analyzing the difference between the standard exhibition and the artistic installation. A conventional exhibition is conceived as an accumulation of art objects placed next to one another in an exhibition space to be viewed in succession. In this case, the exhibition space works as an extension of neutral, public urban space—as something like a side alley into which the passerby may turn upon payment of an admission fee. The movement of a visitor through the exhibition space remains similar to that of someone walking down a street and observing the architecture of the houses left and right. It is by no means accidental that Walter Benjamin constructed his "Arcades Project" around this analogy between an urban stroller and an exhibition visitor. The body of the viewer in this setting remains outside of the art: art takes place in front of the viewer's eyes—as an art object, a performance, or a film. Accordingly, the exhibition space is understood here to be an empty, neutral, public space—a symbolic property of the public. The only function of such a space is to make the art objects that are placed within it easily accessible to the gaze of the visitors.

The curator administers this exhibition space in the name of the public—as a representative

of the public. Accordingly, the curator's role is to safeguard its public character, while bringing the individual artworks into this public space, making them accessible to the public, publicizing them. It is obvious that an individual artwork cannot assert its presence by itself, forcing the viewer to take a look at it. It lacks the vitality, energy, and health to do so. In its origin, it seems, the work of art is sick, helpless; in order to see it, viewers must be brought to it as visitors are brought to a bedridden patient by hospital staff. It is no coincidence that the word "curator" is etymologically related to "cure": to curate is to cure. Curating cures the powerlessness of the image, its inability to show itself by itself. Exhibition practice is thus the cure that heals the originally ailing image, that gives it presence, visibility; it brings it to the public view and turns it into the object of the public's judgment. However, one can say that curating functions as a supplement, like a *pharmakon* in the Derridean sense: it both cures the image and further contributes to its illness.[1] The iconoclastic potential of curation was initially applied to the sacral objects of the past, presenting them as mere art objects in the neutral, empty exhibition spaces of the modern museum or Kunsthalle. It is curators, in fact, including museum curators, who originally produced art in the modern sense of the word. The first art museums—founded in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and expanded in the course of the nineteenth century due to imperial conquests and the pillaging of non-European cultures—collected all sorts of "beautiful" functional objects previously used for religious rites, interior decoration, or manifestations of personal wealth, and exhibited them as works of art, that is, as defunctionalized autonomous objects set up for the mere purpose of being viewed.

All art originates as design, be it religious design or the design of power. In the modern period as well, design precedes art. Looking for modern art in today's museums, one must realize that what is to be seen there as art is, above all, defunctionalized design fragments, be it mass-cultural design, from Duchamp's urinal to Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, or utopian design that—from Jugendstil to Bauhaus, from the Russian avant-garde to Donald Judd—sought to give shape to the "new life" of the future. Art is design that has become dysfunctional because the society that provided the basis for it suffered a historical collapse, like the Inca Empire or Soviet Russia.

In the course of the modern era, however, artists began to assert the autonomy of their art—understood as autonomy from public opinion and public taste. Artists have required the right to make sovereign decisions regarding the content and the form of their work beyond any explanation or justification vis-à-vis the public. And they were given this right—but only to a certain degree. The freedom to create art according to one's own sovereign will does not guarantee that an artist's work will also be exhibited in the public space. The inclusion of any artwork in a public exhibition must be—at least potentially—publicly explained and justified. Though artist, curator, and art critic are free to argue for or against the inclusion of some artworks, every such explanation and justification undermines the autonomous, sovereign character of artistic freedom that modernist art aspired to win; every discourse legitimizing an artwork, its inclusion in a public exhibition as only one among many in the same public space, can be seen as an insult to that artwork. This is why the curator is considered to be someone who keeps coming between the artwork

and the viewer, disempowering the artist and the viewer alike. Hence the art market appears to be more favorable than the museum or Kunsthalle to modern, autonomous art. In the art market, works of art circulate singularized, decontextualized, uncurated, which apparently offers them the opportunity to demonstrate their sovereign origin without mediation. The art market functions according to the rules of Potlatch as they were described by Marcel Mauss and by Georges Bataille. The sovereign decision of the artist to make an artwork beyond any justification is trumped by the sovereign decision of a private buyer to pay for this artwork an amount of money beyond any comprehension.

Now, the artistic installation does not circulate. Rather, it installs everything that usually circulates in our civilization: objects, texts, films, etc. At the same time, it changes in a very radical way the role and the function of the exhibition space. The installation operates by means of a symbolic privatization of the public space of an exhibition. It may appear to be a standard, curated exhibition, but its space is designed according to the sovereign will of an individual artist who is not supposed to publicly justify the selection of the included objects, or the organization of the installation space as a whole. The installation is frequently denied the status of a specific art form, because it is not obvious what the medium of an installation actually is. Traditional art media are all defined by a specific material support: canvas, stone, or film. The material support of the installation medium is the space itself. That does not mean, however, that the installation is somehow "immaterial." On the contrary, the installation is material *par excellence*, since it is spatial—and being in the space is the most general definition of being material. The installation transforms the

empty, neutral, public space into an individual artwork—and it invites the visitor to experience this space as the holistic, totalizing space of an artwork. Anything included in such a space becomes a part of the artwork simply because it is placed inside this space. The distinction between art object and simple object becomes insignificant here. Instead, what becomes crucial is the distinction between a marked installation space and unmarked public space. When Marcel Broodthaers presented his installation *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* at the Düsseldorf Kunsthalle in 1970, he put up a sign next to each exhibit saying: "This is not a work of art." As a whole, however, his installation has been considered to be a work of art, and not without reason. The installation demonstrates a certain selection, a certain chain of choices, a logic of inclusions and exclusions. Here, one can see an analogy to a curated exhibition. But that is precisely the point: here, the selection and the mode of representation is the sovereign prerogative of the artist alone. It is based exclusively on personal sovereign decisions that are not in need of any further explanation or justification. The artistic installation is a way to expand the domain of the sovereign rights of the artist from the individual art object to that of the exhibition space itself.

This means that the artistic installation is a space in which the difference between the sovereign freedom of the artist and the institutional freedom of the curator becomes immediately visible. The regime under which art operates in our contemporary Western culture is generally understood to be one that grants freedom to art. But art's freedom means different things to a curator and to an artist. As I have mentioned, the curator—including the so-called independent curator—ultimately chooses

in the name of the democratic public. Actually, in order to be responsible toward the public, a curator does not need to be part of any fixed institution: he or she is already an institution by definition. Accordingly, the curator has an obligation to publicly justify his or her choices—and it can happen that the curator fails to do so. Of course, the curator is supposed to have the freedom to present his or her argument to the public—but this freedom of the public discussion has nothing to do with the freedom of art, understood as the freedom to make private, individual, subjective, sovereign artistic decisions beyond any argumentation, explanation, or justification. Under the regime of artistic freedom, every artist has a sovereign right to make art exclusively according to private imagination. The sovereign decision to make art in this or that way is generally accepted by Western liberal society as a sufficient reason for assuming an artist's practice to be legitimate. Of course, an artwork can also be criticized and rejected—but it can only be rejected as a whole. It makes no sense to criticize any particular choices, inclusions, or exclusions made by an artist. In this sense, the total space of an artistic installation can also only be rejected as a whole. To return to the example of Broodthaers: nobody would criticize the artist for having overlooked this or that particular image of this or that particular eagle in his installation.

One can say that in Western society the notion of freedom is deeply ambiguous—not only in the field of art, but also in the political field. Freedom in the West is understood as allowing private, sovereign decisions to be made in many domains of social practice, such as private consumption, investment of one's own capital, or choice of one's own religion. But in some other domains, especially

in the political field, freedom is understood primarily as the freedom of public discussion guaranteed by law—as non-sovereign, conditional, institutional freedom. Of course, the private, sovereign decisions in our societies are controlled to a certain degree by public opinion and political institutions (we all know the famous slogan "the private is political"). Yet, on the other hand, open political discussion is time and again interrupted by the private, sovereign decisions of political actors and manipulated by private interests (which then serve to privatize the political). The artist and the curator embody, in a very conspicuous manner, these two different kinds of freedom: the sovereign, unconditional, publicly irresponsible freedom of art-making, and the institutional, conditional, publicly responsible freedom of curatorship. Further, this means that the artistic installation—in which the act of art production coincides with the act of its presentation—becomes the perfect experimental terrain for revealing and exploring the ambiguity that lies at the core of the Western notion of freedom. Accordingly, in the last decades we have seen the emergence of innovative curatorial projects that seem to empower the curator to act in an authorial, sovereign way. And we have also seen the emergence of artistic practices seeking to be collaborative, democratic, decentralized, de-authorized.

Indeed, the artistic installation is often viewed today as a form that allows the artist to democratize his or her art, to take public responsibility, to begin to act in the name of a certain community or even of society as a whole. In this sense, the emergence of the artistic installation seems to mark the end of the modernist claim of autonomy and sovereignty. The artist's decision to allow the multitude of visitors to enter the space of the

artwork is interpreted as an opening of the closed space of an artwork to democracy. This enclosed space seems to be transformed into a platform for public discussion, democratic practice, communication, networking, education, and so forth. But this analysis of installation art practice tends to overlook the symbolic act of privatizing the public space of the exhibition, which *precedes* the act of opening the installation space to a community of visitors. As I have mentioned, the space of the traditional exhibition is a symbolic public property, and the curator who manages this space acts in the name of public opinion. The visitor of a typical exhibition remains on his or her own territory, as a symbolic owner of the space where the artworks are delivered to his or her gaze and judgment. On the contrary, the space of an artistic installation is the symbolic private property of the artist. By entering this space, the visitor leaves the public territory of democratic legitimacy and enters the space of sovereign, authoritarian control. The visitor is here, so to speak, on foreign ground, in exile. The visitor becomes an expatriate who must submit to a foreign law—one given to him or her by the artist. Here the artist acts as legislator, as a sovereign of the installation space—even, and maybe especially so, if the law given by the artist to a community of visitors is a democratic one.

One might then say that installation practice reveals the act of unconditional, sovereign violence that initially installs any democratic order. We know that democratic order is never brought about in a democratic fashion—democratic order always emerges as a result of a violent revolution. To install a law is to break one. The first legislator can never act in a legitimate manner—he installs the political order, but does not belong to it. He remains external to the order even if he decides later to submit

himself to it. The author of an artistic installation is also such a legislator, who gives to the community of visitors the space to constitute itself and defines the rules to which this community must submit, but does so without belonging to this community, remaining outside it. And this remains true even if the artist decides to join the community that he or she has created. This second step should not lead us to overlook the first one—the sovereign one. And one should also not forget: after initiating a certain order—a certain *politeia*, a certain community of visitors—the installation artist must rely on the art institutions to maintain this order, to police the fluid *politeia* of the installation's visitors. With regard to the role of police in a state, Jacques Derrida suggests in one of his books (*La force des lois*) that, though the police are expected to supervise the functioning of certain laws, they are de facto also involved in creating the very laws that they should merely supervise. To maintain a law always also means to permanently reinvent that law. Derrida tries to show that the violent, revolutionary, sovereign act of installing law and order can never be fully erased afterwards—this initial act of violence can and will always be mobilized again. This is especially obvious now, in our time of violent export, installing, and securing of democracy. One should not forget: the installation space is a movable one. The art installation is not site-specific, and it can be installed in any place and for any time. And we should be under no illusions that there can be anything like a completely chaotic, Dadaistic, Fluxus-like installation space free of any control. In his famous treatise *Français, encore un effort si vous voulez être républicains*, the Marquis de Sade presents a vision of a perfectly free society that has abolished all existing law, installing only one:

everyone must do what he or she likes, including committing crimes of any kind.[2] What is especially interesting is how, at the same time, Sade remarks upon the necessity of law enforcement to prevent the reactionary attempts of some traditionally-minded citizens to return to the old repressive state in which family is secured and crimes forbidden. So we also need the police to defend the crimes against the reactionary nostalgia of the old moral order.

And yet, the violent act of constituting a democratically organized community should not be interpreted as contradicting its democratic nature. Sovereign freedom is obviously non-democratic, so it also seems to be anti-democratic. However, even if it appears paradoxical at first glance, sovereign freedom is a necessary precondition for the emergence of any democratic order. Again, the practice of art installation is a good example of this rule. The standard art exhibition leaves an individual visitor alone, allowing him or her to individually confront and contemplate the exhibited art objects. Moving from one object to another, such an individual visitor necessarily overlooks the totality of the exhibition's space, including his or her own position within it. An artistic installation, on the contrary, builds a community of spectators precisely because of the holistic, unifying character of the installation space. The true visitor to the art installation is not an isolated individual, but a collective of visitors. The art space as such can only be perceived by a mass of visitors—a multitude, if you like—with this multitude becoming part of the exhibition for each individual visitor, and vice versa.

There is a dimension of mass culture which is often overlooked that becomes particularly manifest in the context of art. A pop concert or

a film screening creates communities among its attendees. The members of these transitory communities do not know each other—their structure is accidental; it remains unclear where they have come from and where they are going; they have little to say to one another; they lack a joint identity or previous history that could provide them with common memories to share; nevertheless, they are communities. These communities resemble those of travelers on a train or airplane. To put it differently: these are radically contemporary communities—much more so than religious, political, or working communities. All traditional communities are based on the premise that their members, from the very beginning, are linked by something that stems from the past: a common language, common faith, common political history, common upbringing. Such communities tend to establish boundaries between themselves and strangers with whom they share no common past.

Mass culture, by contrast, creates communities beyond any common past—unconditional communities of a new kind. This is what reveals its vast potential for modernization, which is frequently overlooked. However, mass culture itself cannot fully reflect and unfold this potential, because the communities it creates are not sufficiently aware of themselves as such. The same can be said of the masses moving through the standard exhibition spaces of contemporary museums and Kunsthalles. It is often said that the museum is elitist. I have always been astounded by this opinion, so counter to my own personal experience of becoming part of a mass of visitors continuously flowing through the exhibition and museum rooms. Anyone who has ever looked for a parking lot near a museum, or tried to leave a coat at the museum checkroom,

or needed to find the museum lavatory, will have reason to doubt the elitist character of this institution—particularly in the case of museums that are considered particularly elitist, such as the Metropolitan Museum or the MoMA in New York. Today, global tourist streams make any elitist claim a museum might have seem like a ridiculous presumption. And if these streams avoid one specific exhibition, its curator will not be at all happy, will not feel elitist but disappointed for having failed to reach the masses. But these masses do not reflect themselves as such—they do not constitute any *politeia*. The perspective of pop-concert fans or moviegoers is too forward-directed—at stage or screen—to allow them to adequately perceive and reflect the space in which they find themselves or the communities of which they have become part. This is the kind of reflection that advanced present-day art provokes, whether as installation art, or as experimental curatorial projects. The relative spatial separation provided by the installation space does not mean a turn away from the world, but rather a de-localization and de-territorialization of mass-cultural transitory communities—in a way that assists them in reflecting upon their own condition, offering them an opportunity to exhibit themselves to themselves. The contemporary art space is a space in which multitudes can view themselves and celebrate themselves, as God or kings were in former times viewed and celebrated in churches and palaces (Thomas Struth's *Museum Photographs* capture this dimension of the museum very well—this emergence and dissolution of transitional communities).

More than anything else, what the installation offers to the fluid, circulating multitudes is an aura of the here and now. The installation is, above all,

Thomas Struth, Pergamon Museum 3, Berlin, 2001. C-print, 180.5 x 220.8 cm.

a mass-cultural version of individual *flânerie,* as described by Benjamin, and therefore a place for the emergence of aura, for "profane illumination." In general, the installation operates as a reversal of reproduction. The installation takes a copy out of an unmarked, open space of anonymous circulation and places it—if only temporarily—within a fixed, stable, closed context of the topologically well-defined "here and now." Our contemporary condition cannot be reduced to being a "loss of the aura" to the circulation of the copy beyond "here and now," as described in Benjamin's famous essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."[3] Rather, the contemporary age organizes a complex interplay of dislocations and relocations, of deterritorializations and reterritorializations, of de-auratizations and re-auratizations.

Benjamin shared high modernist art's belief in a unique, normative context for art. Under this presupposition, to lose its unique, original context means for an artwork to lose its aura forever—to become a copy of itself. To re-auratize an individual artwork would require a sacralization of the whole profane space of a copy's topologically undetermined mass circulation—a totalitarian, fascist project, to be sure. This is the main problem to be found in Benjamin's thinking: he perceives the space of a copy's mass circulation—and mass circulation in general—as a universal, neutral, and homogeneous space. He insists upon the visual recognizability, on the self-identity of a copy as it circulates in our contemporary culture. But both of these principal presuppositions in Benjamin's text are questionable. In the framework of contemporary culture, an image is permanently circulating from one medium to another medium, and from one closed context to another closed context. For example, a bit of film

footage can be shown in a cinema, then converted to a digital form and appear on somebody's website, or be shown during a conference as an illustration, or watched privately on a television in a person's living room, or placed in the context of a museum installation. In this way, through different contexts and media, this bit of film footage is transformed by different program languages, different software, different framings on the screen, different placement in an installation space, and so on. All this time, are we dealing with the same film footage? Is it the same copy of the same copy of the same original? The topology of today's networks of communication, generation, translation, and distribution of images is extremely heterogeneous. The images are constantly transformed, rewritten, reedited, and reprogrammed as they circulate through these networks—and with each step they are visually altered. Their status as copies of copies becomes an everyday cultural convention, as was previously the case with the status of the original. Benjamin suggests that the new technology is capable of producing copies with increasing fidelity to the original, when in fact the opposite is the case. Contemporary technology thinks in generations—and to transmit information from one generation of hardware and software to the next is to transform it in a significant way. The metaphoric notion of "generation" as it is now used in the context of technology is particularly revealing. Where there are generations, there are also generational Oedipal conflicts. All of us know what it means to transmit a certain cultural heritage from one generation of students to another.

We are unable to stabilize a copy as a copy, as we are unable to stabilize an original as an original. There are no eternal copies as there are no eternal originals. Reproduction is as much infected by

originality as originality is infected by reproduction. In circulating through various contexts, a copy becomes a series of different originals. Every change of context, every change of medium can be interpreted as a negation of the status of a copy as a copy—as an essential rupture, as a new start that opens a new future. In this sense, a copy is never really a copy; rather, a new original in a new context. Every copy is by itself a *flâneur*—experiencing time and again its own "profane illuminations" that turn it into an original. It loses old auras and gains new auras. It remains perhaps the same copy, but it becomes different originals. This also shows a postmodern project of reflecting on the repetitive, iterative, reproductive character of an image (inspired by Benjamin) to be as paradoxical as the modern project of recognizing the original and the new. This is likewise why postmodern art tends to look very new, even if—or actually because—it is directed against the very notion of the new. Our decision to recognize a certain image as either an original or a copy is dependent on the context—on the scene in which this decision is taken. This decision is always a contemporary decision—one that belongs not to the past and not to the future, but to the present. And this decision is also always a sovereign decision—in fact, the installation is a space for such a decision where "here and now" emerges and profane illumination of the masses takes place.

So one can say that installation practice demonstrates the dependency of any democratic space (in which masses or multitudes demonstrate themselves to themselves) on the private, sovereign decisions of an artist as its legislator. This was something that was very well known to the ancient Greek thinkers, as it was to the initiators of the earlier democratic revolutions. But recently, this

knowledge somehow became suppressed by the dominant political discourse. Especially after Foucault, we tend to detect the source of power in impersonal agencies, structures, rules, and protocols. However, this fixation on the impersonal mechanisms of power lead us to overlook the importance of individual, sovereign decisions and actions taking place in private, heterotopic spaces (to use another term introduced by Foucault). Likewise, the modern, democratic powers have meta-social, meta-public, heterotopic origins. As has been mentioned, the artist who designs a certain installation space is an outsider to this space. He or she is heterotopic to this space. But the outsider is not necessarily somebody who has to be included in order to be empowered. There is also empowerment by exclusion, and especially by self-exclusion. The outsider can be powerful precisely because he or she is not controlled by society, and is not limited in his or her sovereign actions by any public discussion or by any need for public self-justification. And it would be wrong to think that this kind of powerful outsidership can be completely eliminated through modern progress and democratic revolutions. The progress is rational. But not accidentally, an artist is supposed by our culture to be mad—at least to be obsessed. Foucault thought that medicine men, witches, and prophets have no prominent place in our society any more—that they became outcasts, confined to psychiatric clinics. But our culture is primarily a celebrity culture, and you cannot become a celebrity without being mad (or at least pretending to be). Obviously, Foucault read too many scientific books and only a few society and gossip magazines, because otherwise he would have known where mad people today have their true social place. It is also well known that the contemporary political elite is a

part of global celebrity culture, which is to say that it is external to the society it rules. Global, extra-democratic, trans-state, external to any democratically organized community, paradigmatically private, this elite is in fact, structurally mad, insane.

Now, these reflections should not be misunderstood as a critique of installation as an art form by demonstrating its sovereign character. The goal of art, after all, is not to change things—things are changing by themselves all the time anyway. Art's function is rather to show, to make visible the realities that are generally overlooked. By taking aesthetic responsibility in a very explicit way for the design of the installation space, the artist reveals the hidden sovereign dimension of the contemporary democratic order that politics, for the most part, tries to conceal. The installation space is where we are immediately confronted with the ambiguous character of the contemporary notion of freedom that functions in our democracies as a tension between sovereign and institutional freedom. The artistic installation is thus a space of unconcealment (in the Heideggerian sense) of the heterotopic, sovereign power that is concealed behind the obscure transparency of the democratic order.

1
Jacques Derrida, *La dissémination* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972), 108ff.

2
Marquis de Sade, *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 191ff.

3
Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. H. Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 221ff.

The Loneliness of the Project

The formulation of diverse projects has become a major contemporary preoccupation. These days, regardless of what one sets out to do in the economy, in politics, or in culture, one has first to formulate a project for official approval or funding from one or several public authorities. Should this project be initially rejected, it is then modified in an attempt to improve its chances of being accepted. If the revision is rejected a second time, one has no choice but to propose an entirely new one in its place. In this way, all members of our society are constantly preoccupied with devising, discussing, and rejecting an endless number of projects. Appraisals are written, budgets meticulously calculated, commissions assembled, committees appointed, and resolutions tabled. And quite a few of our contemporaries spend their time reading nothing but proposals, appraisals, and budgets, all for projects that will mostly remain forever unrealized. After all, it only takes one or two reviewers to assess a project as being difficult to finance, lacking promise, or simply undesirable, and all the labor invested in formulating the project has been rendered a waste of time.

Needless to say, a considerable amount of work goes into presenting a project. And projects today are submitted with ever-greater detail so as to suitably impress their various juries, commissions, and public bodies. Accordingly, this mode of project formulation is gradually advancing to become an art form in its own right—one whose significance for our society remains little acknowledged. For regardless of whether or not a particular project is actually carried out, it nevertheless stands as a draft for a particular vision of the future, and can for this reason be fascinating and informative. Yet most of the projects generated ceaselessly by our civilization simply vanish or are thrown away once they

are rejected, and this negligent treatment is highly regrettable indeed, as it bars us from analyzing and understanding the hopes and visions for the future that have been invested in them—hopes and visions that might offer the greatest insights into our society. And while this is not the place for a sociological analysis of contemporary projects, the real question concerns what hopes are linked to the project as such. Why would people even choose to do a project at all, rather than just sail into the future unfettered by projections?

We may answer this question with the following: above all else, each project strives for a socially sanctioned loneliness. Indeed, to lack a plan of any kind inevitably places us at the mercy of the general flow of world events, of a generalized fate, compelling us to maintain constant communication with our immediate surroundings. This is strikingly apparent in the case of events that *per definitionem* occur without prior planning, such as earthquakes, major fires, or flooding. These sorts of events bring people closer together, they force us to communicate with one another and act in unison. But the same also applies to any kind of personal misfortune—whoever has broken a leg or been struck down by a virus immediately becomes dependent on outside help. But in everyday life, even when it mindlessly ticks on without purpose, people are held in a common bond by a shared rhythm of work and recreation. In the prevailing conditions of daily life, individuals who are not prepared to enter into communication at any moment with their fellow people rate as difficult, antisocial, and unfriendly, and are subject to social censure.

But this situation changes drastically the moment one presents a socially sanctioned individual project as his or her justification for self-

isolation. We all understand that when a project must be carried out, an immense time pressure leaves no time whatsoever for anything else. It is commonly accepted that writing a book, preparing an exhibition, or striving to make a scientific discovery oblige the individual to avoid social contact without automatically being judged a bad person. But the paradox is that the longer the project is scheduled to run, the greater the time pressure one is subjected to. Most projects approved in the present framework of contemporary art run for a period of up to five years at the most. In turn, after this limited period of seclusion, the individual is expected to present a finished product and return to the fray of social communication—at least until submitting a proposal for yet another project. In addition, our society still continues to accept projects that occupy an entire lifetime, as in the fields of science or art. Someone in pursuit of a particular goal in either knowledge or artistic activity is permitted no time for his social environment for an unlimited duration. And yet this person is nonetheless expected to present, by at least the final moments of his or her life, some form of finished product—a work—that will retroactively offer social justification for a life spent in isolation.

But there are also other kinds of projects with no set time limit, infinite projects such as religion or the building of a better society that irrevocably remove people from their social environment and place them within the timeframe of the lonely project. The execution of such projects often demands collective effort, and their isolation thus frequently becomes a shared one. Numerous religious communities and sects are known to withdraw from their social environment to pursue their own project of spiritual improvement. During the communist

era, entire countries severed their ties to the rest of humanity in order to achieve their goal of building a better society. Of course, we can now safely say that all these projects have failed, since they have no finished product to show, and because there were so many cases in which their proponents eschewed their self-isolation in favor of returning to social life. Accordingly, modernization is generally understood as a constant expansion of communication, as a process of progressive secularization that dispels all states of loneliness and self-isolation. Modernization is seen as the emergence of a new society of total inclusion that rules out all forms of exclusivity. But the project as such is an altogether modern phenomenon—just as the project to create an open, thoroughly secular society of uninhibited communication ultimately remains an ongoing one. And the reality that each project amounts to a proclamation and establishment of seclusion and self-isolation gives modernity an ambivalent status. While it fosters a compulsion for total communication and total collective contemporaneity on the one hand, on the other hand it constantly generates new projects that foster the repeated reconquest of radical isolation. This is how we must perceive the various projects of the historical artistic avant-garde, which devised their own languages and their own aesthetic agendas. While the languages of the avant-garde might have been conceived as being universal, as the promise of a common future for one and all, in their own time they required the hermetic (self-)isolation of their advocates—clearly branding them for all to see.

Why does the project result in isolation? In fact, the question has already been answered. Each project is above all the declaration of another, new future that is thought to come about once the

project has been executed. But in order to build such a new future, one first has to take a leave of absence, a time in which the project shifts its agent into a parallel state of heterogeneous time. This other timeframe, in turn, disconnects from time as society experiences it—it is de-synchronized. Society's life carries on regardless—the usual run of things remains unaffected. But somewhere beyond this general flow of time, someone has begun working on a project—writing a book, preparing an exhibition, or plotting a spectacular assassination—in the hopes that the completed project will alter the general run of things and all mankind will be bequeathed a different future: the very future, in fact, anticipated and aspired to in this project. In other words, every project thrives solely on the hope of being resynchronized with the social environment. And the project is deemed a success if this resynchronization manages to steer the social environment in the desired direction, while it is deemed a failure if the run of things remains unaffected by the project's realization. Yet the project's success and failure share one thing in common: both outcomes terminate the project, and both resynchronize the project's parallel state of time with that of the social environment. And in both cases this resynchronization typically prompts a feeling of malaise, even despondency, regardless of whether the project ends in success or failure. In both cases, what is felt to be lost is this suspension in parallel time, a life beyond the general run of things.

If one is involved in a project—or, more precisely, is living in a project—one is always already in the future. One is working on something that cannot yet be shown to others, that remains concealed and incommunicable. The project transports one from

the present into a virtual future, causing a temporal rupture between oneself and those who still wait for the future to happen. The author of the project already knows the future, since the project is nothing other than a description of it. And this is why the approval process is so highly unpleasant to a project's author: at the earliest stage of its submission, the author is already asked to give a meticulously detailed description of how this future will be brought about and what its outcome will be. While the project will be turned down and refused funding if the author proves incapable of doing so, successfully delivering such a precise description will also eliminate the very distance between an author and the others—a distance critical to the entire development of the project. If everyone knows from the very outset what course the project will take and what its outcome will be, then the future will no longer come as a surprise. And with that, the project loses its inherent purpose, for the project's author views the present as something that has to be overcome, abolished, or at least altered. This is why he or she sees no need to justify the project to the present, but it is rather the present that should justify itself to the future that has been proclaimed in the project. It is precisely this precious opportunity to view the present from the future that makes the life lived in the project so enticing to its author—and that ultimately makes the project's completion so upsetting. Hence, in the eyes of any author, the most agreeable projects are those that, from their very inception, are never intended to be completed, since these maintain the gap between the future and the present. These projects are never carried out, never generate an end result, never bring about a final product. But this is by no means to say that such unfinished, impossible to realize projects are utterly

excluded from social representation, even if they do not resynchronize with the general run of things through some specific result, successful or not. These projects can, after all, still be documented.

Sartre once described the state of "being-in-the-project" as the ontological condition of human existence. According to Sartre, each person lives from the perspective of an individual future that necessarily remains barred from the view of others. In Sartre's terms, this condition results in the radical alienation of each individual, since everyone else can only see this individual as the result of his or her personal circumstances, and never as a heterogeneous projection from these circumstances. Consequently, the heterogeneous parallel timeframe of the project remains elusive to any form of representation in the present. Hence for Sartre, the project is tainted by the suspicion of escapism, the deliberate avoidance of social communication and individual responsibility. So it is no surprise that he also describes the subject's ontological condition as a state of "mauvaise foi" or insincerity. And it is for this reason that the existential hero of Sartrean provenance is perennially tempted to close the gap between the time of his project and that of the social environment through a violent "action directe," thereby synchronizing both frames, if only for a brief moment. But while the heterogeneous time of the project cannot be brought to a conclusion, it can, as previously observed, be documented. One could even claim that art is nothing other than the documentation and representation of such project-based heterogeneous time. Whereas historically this meant documenting divine history as a project for world redemption, it is nowadays about individual and collective projects for diverse futures. In any case, art documentation now grants

all unrealized or unrealizable projects a place in the present without forcing them to be either a success or a failure. And Sartre's own writings could be considered documentation of this kind as well.

In the past two decades the art project—in lieu of the work of art—has without question moved center stage in the art world's attention. Each art project may presuppose the formulation of a specific aim and a strategy designed to achieve this aim, but we are most often denied the criteria that would allow us to ascertain whether the project's aim has or has not been achieved, whether excessive time was required to complete the project, or even whether the target is intrinsically unattainable as such. Our attention is thereby shifted away from the production of a work (including a work of art) onto life in the art project—a life that is not primarily a productive process, that is not tailored to developing a product, that is not "result-oriented." Under these terms, art is no longer understood as the production of works of art but as documentation of life-in-the-project—regardless of the outcome. This clearly has an effect on the way art is now defined, as art no longer manifests as another, new object for contemplation produced by the artist, but as another, heterogeneous timeframe of the art project, which is documented as such.

A work of art is traditionally understood to be something that wholly embodies art, lending it immediacy and palpable, visible presence. When we go to an art exhibition we generally assume that whatever is there on display—paintings, sculptures, drawings, photographs, videos, readymades, or installations—must be art. The works can of course make references to things that they are not, whether to real-world objects or to certain political issues, but they do not allude to art itself,

because they themselves are art. However, this traditional assumption defining visits to exhibitions and museums has proven to be progressively more misleading. Besides works of art, in present-day art spaces we are now increasingly confronted with the documentation of art in various guises. Similarly, here too we see pictures, drawings, photographs, videos, texts, and installations—in other words, the same forms and media in which art is commonly presented. But art cannot be presented through these media, only documented. For art documentation is, by its very definition, not art. Precisely by merely referring to art, art documentation makes it quite clear that no actual art is present and visible, but is rather absent and hidden.

Art documentation thus signals the use of artistic media within art spaces to make direct reference to life itself, to a form of pure activity or pure praxis—indeed, to life-in-the-art-project—yet without wishing to represent that life directly. Art is here transformed into a way of life, whereby the work of art is turned into non-art, to mere documentation of this way of life. To put it in different terms, art now becomes biopolitical, because it has begun to produce and document life itself as pure activity by artistic means. Not only that, but art documentation as such could only have evolved under the conditions of our biopolitical age, in which life itself has become the object of technical and artistic creativity. So we are once again faced with the question as to the relationship between life and art—but in an utterly novel constellation characterized by the paradox of art in the guise of the art project, now also wanting to become life, instead of, say, simply reproducing life or furnishing it with art objects. But the question arises as to what extent documentation, including art documentation,

Roman Opalka, self-portraits from the series *OPALKA 1965–∞*. 1965– . Courtesy of the artist and Yvon Lambert Gallery, Paris.

can actually represent life itself?

All documentation is generally suspected of inexorably usurping life. For each act of documentation and archiving presupposes a certain criteria with regard to its contents and circumstances, to values that are always questionable, and necessarily remain so. Furthermore, the process of documenting something always opens up a disparity between the document itself and the documented events, a divergence that can neither be bridged nor erased. But even if we manage to develop a procedure capable of reproducing life in its entirety with total authenticity, we would again ultimately end up not with life itself, but with life's death mask, for it is the very uniqueness of life that constitutes is vitality. It is for this reason that our culture today is marked by a deep malaise with regard to documentation and the archive—and even by vociferous protest against the archive in the name of life. The archivists and bureaucrats in charge of documentation are widely regarded as the enemies of true life, favoring the compilation and administration of dead documents over the direct experience of life. In particular, the bureaucrat is viewed as an agent of death who wields the chilling power of documentation to render life grey, monotonous, uneventful, and bloodless—in a word, deathlike. Similarly, once the artist too becomes involved in documentation, he or she runs the risk of being associated with the bureaucrat, and is consequently suspected of being a new agent of death.

We know, however, that the bureaucratic documentation stored in archives does not consist solely of recorded memories, but also includes projects and plans directed not at the past but at the future. These archives of projects contain drafts for life that have not yet taken place, but are

perhaps meant to take place in the future. And in our own biopolitical era this is a matter not of merely making changes to the fundamental conditions of life, but of actively engaging in the production of life itself. While the term "biopolitics" is frequently understood to mean the scientific and technological strategies of genetic manipulation that, theoretically at least, aim to reshape individual living beings, the real achievement of biopolitical technology has far more to do with shaping longevity itself, with organizing life as an event, as pure activity occurring in time. From procreation and the provision of lifelong medical care to the regulation of the balance between work and leisure and medically supervised (if not medically induced) death, the life of each individual today is permanently subject to artificial control and advancement. And precisely because life is no longer perceived as a primeval, elementary event of being, as fate or fortune, as a result of time unraveling on its own accord, but is seen instead as time that can be artificially produced and formed, such a life can be documented and archived before it has even taken place.

Indeed, bureaucratic and technological documentation serves as the primary medium of modern biopolitics. The schedules, regulations, investigative reports, statistical surveys, and project outlines that comprise this kind of documentation generate new life constantly. Even the genetic archive contained in every living being can ultimately be understood as a part of this documentation—one that both documents the genetic structure of previous, obsolete organisms, but also enables the same genetic structure to be interpreted as a blueprint for creating future living organisms. This means that given the current state of biopolitics, the archive no longer allows us to differentiate between memory

and project, between past and future. And incidentally, this also offers a rational basis for what the Christian tradition has termed the resurrection—and for what in political and cultural domains is known as a revival. For the archive of elapsed forms of life can at any moment turn out to be a blueprint for the future. By being stored in the archive as documentation, life can be repeatedly relived and reproduced within historical time—should anyone resolve to undertake such reproduction. The archive is the site where past and future become interchangeable.

Comrades of Time

1

Contemporary art deserves its name insofar as it manifests its own contemporaneity—and this is not simply a matter of being recently made or displayed. Thus, the question "What is contemporary art?" implicates the question "What is the contemporary?" How can the contemporary as such be shown?

Being contemporary can be understood as being immediately present, as being here-and-now. In this sense, art seems to be truly contemporary if it is perceived as being authentic, as being able to capture and express the presence of the present in a way that is radically uncorrupted by past traditions or strategies aiming at success in the future. Meanwhile, however, we are familiar with the critique of presence, especially as formulated by Jacques Derrida, who has shown—convincingly enough—that the present is originally corrupted by past and future, that there is always absence at the heart of presence, and that history, including art history, cannot be interpreted, to use Derrida's expression, as "a procession of presences."[1]

Rather than further analyze the workings of Derrida's deconstruction, I would like to take a step back and ask: What is it about the present—the here-and-now—that so interests us? Already Wittgenstein was highly ironical about his philosophical colleagues who from time to time suddenly turned to contemplation of the present, instead of simply minding their own business and going about their everyday lives. For Wittgenstein, the passive contemplation of the present, of the immediately given, is an unnatural occupation dictated by the metaphysical tradition, which ignores the flow of everyday life—the flow that always overflows the present without privileging it in any way. According

to Wittgenstein, the interest in the present is simply a philosophical—and maybe also artistic—*déformation professionnelle*, a metaphysical sickness that should be cured by philosophical critique.[2]

That is why I find the following question especially relevant for our present discussion: How does the present manifest itself in our everyday experience—before it begins to be a matter of metaphysical speculation or philosophical critique?

Now, it seems to me that the present is initially something that hinders us in our realization of everyday (or non-everyday) projects, something that prevents our smooth transition from the past to the future, something that obstructs us, makes our hopes and plans become not opportune, not up-to-date, or simply impossible to realize. Time and again, we are obliged to say: Yes, it is a good project but at the moment we have no money, no time, no energy, and so forth, to realize it. Or: This tradition is a wonderful one, but at the moment there is no interest in it and nobody wants to continue it. Or: This utopia is beautiful but, unfortunately, today no one believes in utopias, and so on. The present is a moment in time when we decide to lower our expectations of the future or to abandon some of the dear traditions of the past in order to pass through the narrow gate of the here-and-now.

Ernst Jünger famously said that modernity—the time of projects and plans, par excellence—taught us to travel with light luggage (*mit leichtem Gepäck*). In order to move further down the narrow path of the present, modernity shed all that seemed too heavy, too loaded with meaning, mimesis, traditional criteria of mastery, inherited ethical and aesthetic conventions, and so forth. Modern reductionism is a strategy for surviving the difficult journey through the present. Art, literature, music,

and philosophy have survived the twentieth century because they threw out all unnecessary baggage. At the same time, these radical reductions also reveal a kind of hidden truth that transcends their immediate effectiveness. They show that one can give up a great deal—traditions, hopes, skills, and ideas—and still continue one's project in this reduced form. This truth also made the modernist reductions transculturally efficient—crossing a cultural border is in many ways like crossing the limit of the present.

Thus, during the period of modernity the power of the present could be detected only indirectly, through the traces of reduction left on the body of art and, more generally, on the body of culture. The present as such was mostly seen in the context of modernity as something negative, as something that should be overcome in the name of the future, something that slows down the realization of our projects, something that delays the coming of the future. One of the slogans of the Soviet era was "Time, forward!" Ilf and Petrov, two Soviet novelists of the 1920s, aptly parodied this modern feeling with the slogan "Comrades, sleep faster!" Indeed, in those times one actually would have preferred to sleep through the present—to fall asleep in the past and to wake up at the endpoint of progress, after the arrival of the radiant future.

2

But when we begin to question our projects, to doubt or reformulate them, the present, the contemporary, becomes important, even central for us. This is because the contemporary is actually constituted by doubt, hesitation, uncertainty, indecision—by the need for prolonged reflection, for a delay. We want to postpone our decisions and actions in order to have more time for analysis, reflection, and

consideration. And that is precisely what the contemporary is—a prolonged, even potentially infinite period of delay. Søren Kierkegaard famously asked what it would mean to be a contemporary of Christ, to which his answer was: It would mean to hesitate in accepting Christ as Savior.[3] The acceptance of Christianity necessarily leaves Christ in the past. In fact, Descartes already defined the present as a time of doubt—of doubt that is expected to eventually open a future full of clear and distinct, evident thoughts.

Now, one can argue that we are at this historical moment in precisely such a situation, because ours is a time in which we reconsider—not abandon, not reject, but analyze and reconsider—the modern projects. The most immediate reason for this reconsideration is, of course, the abandonment of the Communist project in Russia and Eastern Europe. Politically and culturally, the Communist project dominated the twentieth century. There was the Cold War, there were Communist parties in the West, dissident movements in the East, progressive revolutions, conservative revolutions, discussions about pure and engaged art—in most cases these projects, programs, and movements were interconnected by their opposition to each other. But now they can and should be reconsidered in their entirety. Thus, contemporary art can be seen as art that is involved in the reconsideration of the modern projects. One can say that we now live in a time of indecision, of delay—a boring time. Now, Martin Heidegger has interpreted boredom precisely as a precondition for our ability to experience the presence of the present—to experience the world as a whole by being bored equally by all its aspects, by not being captivated by this specific goal or that one, such as was the case in the context of the

modern projects.[4]

Hesitation with regard to the modern projects mainly has to do with a growing disbelief in their promises. Classical modernity believed in the ability of the future to realize the promises of past and present—even after the death of God, even after the loss of faith in the immortality of the soul. The notion of a permanent art collection says it all: archive, library, and museum promised secular permanency, a material infinitude that substituted the religious promise of resurrection and eternal life. During the period of modernity, the "body of work" replaced the soul as the potentially immortal part of the Self. Foucault famously called such modern sites in which time was accumulated rather than simply being lost, heterotopias.[5] Politically, we can speak about modern utopias as post-historical spaces of accumulated time, in which the finiteness of the present was seen as being potentially compensated for by the infinite time of the realized project: that of an artwork, or a political utopia. Of course, this realization obliterates time invested in achieving it, in the production of a certain product—when the final product is realized, the time that was used for its production disappears. However, the time lost in realizing the product was compensated for in modernity by a historical narrative that somehow restored it—being a narrative that glorified the lives of the artists, scientists, or revolutionaries that worked for the future.

But today, this promise of an infinite future holding the results of our work has lost its plausibility. Museums have become the sites of temporary exhibitions rather than spaces for permanent collections. The future is ever newly planned—the permanent change of cultural trends and fashions makes any promise of a stable future for an artwork

or a political project improbable. And the past is also permanently rewritten—names and events appear, disappear, reappear, and disappear again. The present has ceased to be a point of transition from the past to the future, becoming instead a site of the permanent rewriting of both past and future—of constant proliferations of historical narratives beyond any individual grasp or control. The only thing that we can be certain about in our present is that these historical narratives will proliferate tomorrow as they are proliferating now—and that we will react to them with the same sense of disbelief. Today, we are stuck in the present as it reproduces itself without leading to any future. We simply lose our time, without being able to invest it securely, to accumulate it, whether utopically or heterotopically. The loss of the infinite historical perspective generates the phenomenon of unproductive, wasted time. However, one can also interpret this wasted time more positively, as excessive time—as time that attests to our life as pure being-in-time, beyond its use within the framework of modern economic and political projects.

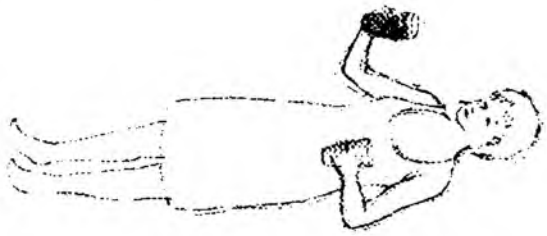
3

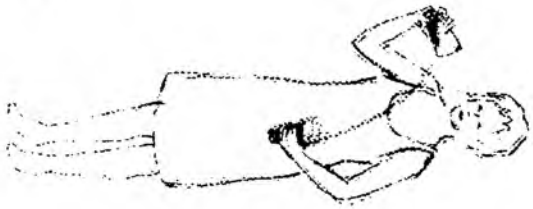
Now, if we look at the current art scene, it seems to me that a certain kind of so-called time-based art best reflects this contemporary condition. It does so because it thematizes the non-productive, wasted, non-historical, excessive time—a suspended time, "stehende Zeit," to use a Heideggerian notion. It captures and demonstrates activities that take place in time, but do not lead to the creation of any definite product. Even if these activities do lead to such a product, they are presented as being separated from their result, as not completely invested in the product, absorbed by

it. We find exemplifications of excessive time that has not been completely absorbed by the historical process.

As an example let us consider the animation by Francis Alÿs, *Song for Lupita* (1998). In this work, we find an activity with no beginning and no end, no definite result or product: a woman pouring water from one vessel to another, and then back. We are confronted with a pure and repetitive ritual of wasting time—a secular ritual beyond any claim of magical power, beyond any religious tradition or cultural convention.

One is reminded here of Camus' Sisyphus, a proto-contemporary-artist whose aimless, senseless task of repeatedly rolling a boulder up a hill can be seen as a prototype for contemporary time-based art. This non-productive practice, this excess of time caught in a non-historical pattern of eternal repetition, constitutes for Camus the true image of what we call "lifetime"—a period irreducible to any "meaning of life," any "life achievement," any historical relevance. The notion of repetition here becomes central. The inherent repetitiveness of contemporary time-based art distinguishes it sharply from happenings and performances of the 1960s. A documented activity is not any more a unique, isolated performance—an individual, authentic, original event that takes place in the here-and-now. Rather, this activity is itself repetitive—even before it was documented by, let us say, a video running in a loop. Thus, the repetitive gesture designed by Alÿs functions as a programmatically impersonal one—it can be repeated by anyone, recorded, then repeated again. Here, the living human being loses its difference from its media image. The opposition between living organism and dead mechanism is rendered irrelevant by the





Francis Alÿs, *Song for Lupita*, 1998. Drawing for animation, pencil on tracing paper, 35 x 29 cm. Courtesy David Zwirner Gallery, New York.

originally mechanical, repetitive, and purposeless character of the documented gesture.

Francis Alÿs characterizes such a wasted, non-teleological time that does not lead to any result, any endpoint, any climax as the time of rehearsal. An example he offers—his video *Politics of Rehearsal* (2007), which centers on a striptease rehearsal—is in some sense a rehearsal of a rehearsal, insofar as the sexual desire provoked by the striptease remains unfulfilled even in the case of a "true" striptease. In the video, the rehearsal is accompanied by a commentary by the artist, who interprets the scenario as the model of modernity, always leaving its promise unfulfilled. For the artist, the time of modernity is the time of permanent modernization, never really achieving its goals of becoming truly modern and never satisfying the desire that it has provoked. In this sense, the process of modernization begins to be seen as wasted, excessive time that can and should be documented—precisely because it never led to any real result. In another work, Alÿs presents the labor of a shoe cleaner as an example of a kind of work that does not produce any value in the Marxist sense of the term, because the time spent cleaning shoes cannot result in any kind of final product, as it is required by Marx's theory of value.

But it is precisely because such a wasted, suspended, non-historical time cannot be accumulated and absorbed by its product that it can be repeated—impersonally and potentially infinitely. Already Nietzsche has stated that the only possibility for imagining the infinite after the death of God, after the end of transcendence, is to be found in the eternal return of the same. And Georges Bataille thematized the repetitive excess of time, the unproductive waste of time, as the only possibility

of escape from the modern ideology of progress. Certainly, both Nietzsche and Bataille perceived repetition as something naturally given. But in his book *Difference and Repetition* (1968) Gilles Deleuze speaks of literal repetition as being radically artificial and, in this sense, in conflict with everything natural, living, changing, and developing, including natural law and moral law.[6] Hence, practicing literal repetition can be seen as initiating a rupture in the continuity of life by creating a non-historical excess of time through art. And this is the point at which art can indeed become truly contemporary.

4

Here I would like to mobilize a somewhat different meaning of the word "contemporary." To be con-temporary does not necessarily mean to be present, to be here-and-now; it means to be "with time" rather than "in time." "Con-temporary" in German is "zeitgenössisch." As *Genosse* means "comrade," to be con-temporary—*zeitgenössisch*—can thus be understood as being a "comrade of time"—as collaborating with time, helping time when it has problems, when it has difficulties. And under the conditions of our contemporary product-oriented civilization, time does indeed have problems when it is perceived as being unproductive, wasted, meaningless. Such unproductive time is excluded from historical narratives, endangered by the prospect of complete erasure. This is precisely the moment when time-based art can help time, to collaborate, become a comrade of time—because time-based art is, in fact, art-based time.

Traditional artworks (paintings, statues, and so forth) can be understood as being time-based, because they are made with the expectation that they will have time—even a lot of time, if they are

to be included in museums or in important private collections. But time-based art is not based on time as a solid foundation, as a guaranteed perspective; rather, time-based art documents time that is in danger of being lost as a result of its unproductive character—a character of pure life, or, as Giorgio Agamben would put it, "bare life."[7] But this change in the relationship between art and time also changes the temporality of art itself. Art ceases to be present, to create the effect of presence—but it also ceases to be "in the present," understood as the uniqueness of the here-and-now. Rather, art begins to document a repetitive, indefinite, maybe even infinite present—a present that was always already there, and can be prolonged into the indefinite future.

A work of art is traditionally understood as something that wholly embodies art, lending it an immediately visible presence. When we go to an art exhibition we generally assume that whatever is there on display—paintings, sculptures, drawings, photographs, videos, readymades, or installations—must be art. The individual artworks can of course in one way or another make reference to things that they are not, maybe to real-world objects or to certain political issues, but they are not thought to refer to art, because they themselves are art. However, this traditional assumption has proven to be increasingly misleading. Besides displaying works of art, present-day art spaces also confront us with the documentation of art. We see pictures, drawings, photographs, videos, texts, and installations—in other words, the same forms and media in which art is commonly presented. But when it comes to art documentation, art is no longer presented through these media, but is simply referred to. For art documentation is *per definitionem* not art. Precisely by

merely referring to art, art documentation makes it quite clear that art itself is no longer immediately present, but rather absent and hidden. Thus, it is interesting to compare traditional film and contemporary time-based art—which has its roots in film—to better understand what has happened to art and also to our life.

From its beginnings, film pretended to be able to document and represent life in a way that was inaccessible to the traditional arts. Indeed, as a medium of motion, film has frequently displayed its superiority over other media, whose greatest accomplishments are preserved in the form of immobile cultural treasures and monuments, by staging and celebrating the destruction of these monuments. This tendency also demonstrates film's adherence to the typically modern faith in the superiority of *vita activa* over *vita contemplativa*. In this respect, film manifests its complicity with the philosophies of *praxis*, of *Lebensdrang*, of *élan vital*, and of desire; it demonstrates its collusion with ideas that, in the footsteps of Marx and Nietzsche, fired the imagination of European humanity at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries—in other words, during the very period that gave birth to film as a medium. This was the era when the hitherto prevailing attitude of passive contemplation was discredited and displaced by celebration of the potent movements of material forces. While the *vita contemplativa* was for a very long time perceived as an ideal form of human existence, it came to be despised and rejected throughout the period of modernity as a manifestation of the weakness of life, a lack of energy. And playing a central role in the new worship of *vita activa* was film. From its very inception, film has celebrated all that moves at high speeds—trains,

cars, airplanes—but also all that goes beneath the surface—blades, bombs, bullets.

However, while film as such is a celebration of movement, in comparison to traditional art forms, it paradoxically drives the audience to new extremes of physical immobility. While it is possible to move one's body with relative freedom while reading or viewing an exhibition, the viewer in a movie theater is put in the dark and glued to a seat. The moviegoer's peculiar situation in fact resembles a grandiose parody of the very *vita contemplativa* that film itself denounces, because cinema embodies precisely the *vita contemplativa* as it would appear from the perspective of its most radical critic—an uncompromising Nietzschean, let us say—namely as the product of frustrated desire, lack of personal initiative, an example of compensatory consolation and a sign of an individual's inadequacy in real life. This is the starting point of many modern critiques of film. Sergei Eisenstein, for instance, was exemplary in the way he combined aesthetic shock with political propaganda in an attempt to mobilize the viewer and liberate him from his passive, contemplative condition.

The ideology of modernity—in all of its forms—was directed against contemplation, against spectatorship, against the passivity of the masses paralyzed by the spectacle of modern life. Throughout modernity we can identify this conflict between passive consumption of mass culture and an activist opposition to it—political, aesthetic, or a mixture of the two. Progressive, modern art has constituted itself during the period of modernity in opposition to such passive consumption, whether of political propaganda or commercial kitsch. We know these activist reactions—from the different avant-gardes of the early twentieth century to

Clement Greenberg ("Avant-Garde and Kitsch"), Adorno (Cultural Industry), or Guy Debord *(Society of the Spectacle),* whose themes and rhetorical figures continue to resound throughout the current debate on our culture.[8] For Debord, the entire world has become a movie theater in which people are completely isolated from one another and from real life, and consequently condemned to an existence of utter passivity.

However, at the turn of the twenty-first century, art entered a new era—one of mass artistic production, and not only mass art consumption. To make a video and put it on display via the internet became an easy operation, accessible to almost everyone. The practice of self-documentation has today become a mass practice and even a mass obsession. Contemporary means of communications and networks like Facebook, YouTube, Second Life, and Twitter give global populations the possibility to present their photos, videos, and texts in a way that cannot be distinguished from any post-Conceptual artwork, including time-based artworks. And that means that contemporary art has today become a mass-cultural practice. So the question arises: How can a contemporary artist survive this popular success of contemporary art? Or, how can the artist survive in a world in which everyone can, after all, become an artist? In order to make visible himself or herself in the contemporary context of mass artistic production, the artist needs a spectator who can overlook the immeasurable quantity of artistic production and formulate an aesthetic judgment that would single out this particular artist from the mass of other artists. Now, it is obvious that such a spectator does not exist—though it could be God, but we have already been informed of the fact that God is dead. If contemporary society is,

therefore, still a society of spectacle, then it seems to be a spectacle without spectators.

On the other hand, spectatorship today—*vita contemplativa*—has also become quite different from what it was before. Here again the subject of contemplation can no longer rely on having infinite time resources, infinite time perspectives—the expectation that was constitutive for Platonic, Christian, or Buddhist traditions of contemplation. Contemporary spectators are spectators on the move; primarily, they are travelers. Contemporary *vita contemplativa* coincides with permanent active circulation. The act of contemplation itself functions today as a repetitive gesture that can not and does not lead to any result—to any conclusive and well-founded aesthetic judgment, for example.

Traditionally, in our culture we had two fundamentally different modes of contemplation at our disposal to give us control over the time we spent looking at images: the immobilization of the image in the exhibition space, and the immobilization of the viewer in the movie theater. Yet both modes collapse when moving images are transferred to museums or exhibition spaces. The images will continue to move—but so too will the viewer. As a rule, under the conditions of a regular exhibition visit, it is impossible to watch a video or film from beginning to end if the film or video is relatively long—especially if there are many such time-based works in the same exhibition space. And in fact such an endeavor would be misplaced. To see a film or a video in its entirety, one has to go to a cinema or to remain in front of his or her personal computer. The whole point of visiting an exhibition of time-based art is to take a look at it and then another look and another look, but not to see it in its entirety. Here, one can say that the act of contemplation itself is

put in a loop.

Time-based art as shown in exhibition spaces is a cool medium, to use the notion introduced by Marshall McLuhan.[9] According to McLuhan, hot media lead to social fragmentation: when reading a book, you are alone and in a focused state of mind. And in a conventional exhibition, you wander alone from one object to the next, equally focused—separated from the outside reality, in inner isolation. McLuhan thought that only electronic media such as television are able to overcome the isolation of the individual spectator. But this analysis of McLuhan's cannot be applied to the most important electronic medium of today—the internet. At first sight, the internet seems to be as cool, if not cooler, than television, because it activates users, seducing, or even forcing them into active participation. However, sitting in front of the computer and using the internet, you are alone—and extremely focused. If the internet is participatory, it is so in the same sense that literary space is. Here and there, anything that enters these spaces is noticed by other participants, provoking reactions from them, which in turn provoke further reactions, and so forth. However, this active participation takes place solely within the user's imagination, leaving his or her body unmoved.

By contrast, the exhibition space that includes time-based art is cool because it makes focusing on individual exhibits unnecessary or even impossible. This is why such a space is also capable of including all sorts of hot media—text, music, individual images—thus making them cool off. Cool contemplation has no goal of producing an aesthetic judgment or choice. Cool contemplation is simply the permanent repetition of the gesture of looking, an awareness of the lack of time necessary

to make an informed judgment through comprehensive contemplation. Here, time-based art demonstrates the "bad infinity" of wasted, excessive time that cannot be absorbed by the spectator. However, at the same time, it removes from *vita contemplativa* the modern stigma of passivity. In this sense one can say that the documentation of time-based art erases the difference between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. Here again time-based art turns a scarcity of time into an excess of time—and demonstrates itself to be a collaborator, a comrade of time, its true con-temporary.

1
Jacques Derrida, *Morges de la philosophie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1972), 377.

2
Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (London: Routledge, 1922), 6.45.

3
See Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity* (New York: Vintage, 2004).

4
See Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" in *Existence and Being*, ed. W. Brock (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co, 1949), 325–349.

5
See http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html.

6
See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, [1968] 2004)

7
See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

8
See Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Oakland: AKPress, 2005).

9
Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994).

The Weak Universalism

In these times, we know that everything can be an artwork. Or rather, everything can be turned into an artwork by an artist. There is no chance of a spectator distinguishing between an artwork and a "simple thing" on the basis of the spectator's visual experience alone. The spectator must first know a particular object to be used by an artist in the context of his or her artistic practice in order to identify it as an artwork or as a part of an artwork.

But who is this artist, and how can he or she be distinguished from a non-artist—if such a distinction is even possible? To me, this seems a far more interesting question than that of how we can differentiate between an artwork and a "simple thing."

Meanwhile, we have a long tradition of institutional critique. During the last few decades, the role of collectors, curators, trustees, museum directors, gallerists, art critics, and so forth has been extensively analyzed and criticized by artists. But what about the artists themselves? The contemporary artist is clearly an institutional figure as well. And contemporary artists are mostly ready to accept the fact that their critique of art institutions is a critique from within. Today, the artist could be defined simply as a professional fulfilling a certain role in the general framework of the art world, a world that is based—as any other bureaucratic organization or capitalist corporation—on the division of labor. One can also argue that part of this role is to criticize the art world with a goal to make it more open, more inclusive, and better informed, and because of that also more efficient and more profitable. This answer is certainly plausible—but at the same time not really persuasive.

1. De-professionalizing Art

Let us remember Joseph Beuys' well-known maxim: "Everybody is an artist." This maxim has a long tradition, going back to early Marxism and the Russian avant-garde, and is therefore almost always characterized today—and was already characterized in Beuys' time—as utopian. This maxim is usually understood as an expression of a utopian hope that, in the future, the mankind that currently consists predominantly of non-artists becomes a mankind consisting of artists. Not only can we now agree that such a hope is implausible, but I would never suggest that it is utopian if the figure of the artist is defined as it was described above. A vision of the world completely turned into the art world, in which every human being has to produce artworks and compete for the chance to exhibit them at this or that biennial, is by no means a utopian vision, but quite dystopian—in fact, a complete nightmare.

Now it can be said—and, indeed, it was often said—that Beuys had a Romantic, utopian understanding of the figure and role of the artist. And it is also often said that this Romantic, utopian vision is passé. But this diagnosis does not seem very persuasive to me. The tradition in which our contemporary art world functions—including our current art institutions—was formed after the Second World War. This tradition is based on the art practices of the historical avant-garde—and on their updating and codification during the 1950s and 1960s. Now, one does not have the impression that this tradition has changed a lot since that time. On the contrary, through time it has become more and more established. The new generations of professional artists find their access to the art system predominantly through the network of art schools and educational programs that have become increasingly globalized

in recent decades. This globalized and rather uniform art education is based on the same avant-garde canon that dominates other contemporary art institutions—and that includes, of course, not only avant-garde art production itself but also the art that was made later in the same avant-garde tradition. The dominant mode of contemporary art production is the academicized late avant-garde. That is why it seems to me that to be able to answer who is the artist one should first of all turn back to the beginnings of the historical avant-garde—and to the role of the artist as it was defined at that time.

All art education—as with education in general—has to be based on certain types of knowledge or a certain mastery that is supposed to be transmitted from one generation to another. Thus, the question arises: what kind of knowledge and mastery is transmitted by contemporary art schools? This question, as we all know, produces a lot of confusion nowadays. The role of the pre-avant-garde art academies was well enough defined. There, one had to do with the well-established criteria of technical mastery—in painting, sculpture, and other media—that could be taught to the art students. Today, the art schools partially return to this understanding of art education—especially in the field of new media. Indeed, photography, film, video, digital art, and so forth require certain technical skills that art schools can teach. But of course art cannot be reduced to the sum of technical abilities. This is why we now see the reemergence of the discourse on art as a form of knowledge—a discourse that becomes unavoidable when art comes to be taught.

Now the claim that art is a form of knowledge is by no means new. Religious art had a claim to present the religious truths in a visual, pictorial form to a spectator who could not contemplate them

directly. And traditional mimetic art pretended to reveal the natural, everyday world in a way in which the common spectator could not see it. Both of these claims were criticized by many thinkers, from Plato to Hegel. And both were endorsed by many others, from Aristotle to Heidegger. But whatever one can say about the corresponding philosophical benefits and drawbacks, both of these claims about art being a specific form of knowledge were explicitly rejected by the historical avant-garde—together with the traditional criteria of mastery connected to these claims. Through the avant-garde, the profession of the artist became de-professionalized.

The de-professionalization of art has put the artist in a pretty awkward situation, because this de-professionalization is often interpreted by the public as a return of the artist to a status of non-professionalism. Accordingly, the contemporary artist begins to be perceived as a professional non-professional—and the art world as a space of "art conspiracy" (to use Baudrillard's term).[1] The social effectiveness of this conspiracy would appear to present a mystery only decipherable sociologically (see the writings of Bourdieu and his school).

However, the de-professionalization of art undertaken by the avant-garde should not be misunderstood as a simple return to non-professionality. The de-professionalization of art is an artistic operation that transforms art practice in general, rather than merely cause an individual artist to revert back to an original state of non-professionality. Thus the de-professionalization of art is in itself a highly professional operation. I will later discuss the relationship between de-professionalization and the democratization of art, but I should begin with how knowledge and mastery are needed in order to de-professionalize art in the first place.

2. The Weak Signs of the Avant-garde

In his recent book *The Time That Remains*, Giorgio Agamben describes—using the example of Saint Paul—the knowledge and mastery required to become a professional apostle.[2] This knowledge is messianic knowledge: knowledge of the coming end of the world as we know it, of contracting time, of the scarcity of time in which we live—the scarcity of time that annuls every profession precisely because the practicing of every profession needs a perspective of *longue durée*, the duration of time and the stability of the world as it is. In this sense, the profession of the apostle is, as Agamben writes, to practice "the constant revocation of every vocation."[3] One can also say, "the de-professionalization of all professions." Contracting time impoverishes, empties all our cultural signs and activities—turning them into zero signs or, rather, as Agamben calls them, weak signs.[4] Such weak signs are the signs of the coming end of time being weakened by this coming, already manifesting the lack of time that would be needed to produce and to contemplate strong, rich signs. However, at the end of time, these messianic weak signs triumph over the strong signs of our world—strong signs of authority, tradition, and power, but also strong signs of revolt, desire, heroism, or shock. Speaking about the weak signs of the messianic, Agamben obviously has in mind "weak messianism"—a term introduced by Walter Benjamin. But one can also remember (even if Agamben does not) that in Greek theology, the term "kenosis" characterized the figure of Christ—the life, suffering, and death of Christ as a humiliation of human dignity, and an emptying out of the signs of divine glory. In this sense, the figure of Christ also becomes a weak sign that can be easily (mis)understood as a sign of weakness—a point

that was extensively discussed by Nietzsche in *The Antichrist*.

Now I would suggest that the avant-garde artist is a secularized apostle, a messenger of time who brings to the world the message that time is contracting, that there is a scarcity of time, even a lack of time. Modernity is, indeed, an era of the permanent loss of the familiar world and of traditional conditions of living. It is a time of permanent change, of historical breaks, of new ends and new beginnings. Living within modernity means to have no time, to experience a permanent scarcity, a lack of time due to the fact that modern projects are mostly abandoned without being realized—every new generation develops its own projects, its own techniques, and its own professions to realize those projects, which are then abandoned by the following generation. In this sense, our present time is not a postmodern but an ultramodern time, because it is the time in which the scarcity of time, the lack of time, becomes increasingly obvious. We know it because everybody is busy today—nobody has time.

Throughout the modern era, we saw all our traditions and inherited lifestyles condemned to decline and disappearance. But neither do we today trust our present time—we do not believe that its fashions, lifestyles, or ways of thinking will have any kind of lasting effect. In fact, the moment new trends and fashions emerge, we immediately get a feeling that their inevitable disappearance will come sooner rather than later. (Indeed, when a new trend emerges, the first thought that comes to one's mind is: but how long will it last? And the answer is always that it will not last very long.) One can say that not only modernity, but even—and to a much greater degree—our own time, is chronically messianic, or, rather, chronically apocalyptic. We

almost automatically see everything that exists and everything that emerges from the perspective of its impending decline and disappearance.

The avant-garde is often associated with the notion of progress—especially technological progress. Indeed, one can find many statements by avant-garde artists and theorists directed against conservatives and insisting on the futility of practicing old forms of art under new conditions determined by new technology. But this new technology was interpreted—at least by the first generation of avant-garde artists—not as a chance to build a new, stable world of the future, but as a machine effectuating destruction of the old world, as well as the permanent self-destruction of modern technological civilization itself. The avant-garde perceived the forces of progress as predominantly destructive ones.

Thus the avant-garde asked whether artists could continue to make art amid the permanent destruction of cultural tradition and the familiar world through the contraction of time, which is the main characteristic of technological progress. Or, put differently: How can artists resist the destructiveness of progress? How can one make art that would escape permanent change—art that would be atemporal, transhistorical? The avant-garde did not want to create the art of the future—it wanted to create transtemporal art, art for all time. One repeatedly hears and reads that we need change, that our goal—also in art—should be to change the status quo. But change *is* our status quo. Permanent change *is* our only reality. And in the prison of permanent change, to change the status quo would be to change the change—to escape the change. In fact, every utopia is nothing other than an attempt to escape from the historical change.

When Agamben describes the annulment of all our occupations and the emptying of all our cultural signs through the messianic event, he does not ask how we can transcend the border that divides our era from the coming one. He does not ask this question because the Apostle Paul does not ask it. St. Paul believed that an individual soul—being immaterial—would be able to cross this border without perishing, even after the end of the material world. However, the artistic avant-garde did not seek to save the soul, but art. And it tried to do so by means of reduction—by reducing cultural signs to the absolute minimum so that they could be smuggled across the breaks, shifts, and permanent changes in cultural fashions and trends.

This radical reduction of artistic tradition had to anticipate the full degree of its impending destruction at the hand of progress. By means of reduction, the artists of the avant-garde began to create images that seemed to them to be so poor, so weak, so empty, that they would survive every possible historical catastrophe.

In 1911, when Kandinsky speaks in "On the Spiritual in Art" about the reduction of all painterly mimesis, all representation of the world—the reduction that reveals that all paintings are actually combinations of colors and shapes—he wants to guarantee the survival of his vision of painting through all possible future cultural transformations, including even the most revolutionary ones. The world that a painting represents can disappear, but the painting's own combination of colors and shapes will not. In this sense, Kandinsky believes that all images already created in the past or to be created in the future can also be seen as his own paintings—because regardless of what the images were, are, or could be, they necessarily

remain combinations of certain colors and shapes. And that relates not only to painting, but also to all other media including photography and cinema. Kandinsky did not want to create his own individual style; rather, he used his paintings as a school for the spectator's gaze—a school that would allow the spectator to see the invariable components of all possible artistic variations, the repetitive patterns underlying the images of historical change. In this sense, Kandinsky did understand his own art as being timeless.

Later, with the *Black Square* (1915), Malevich undertakes an even more radical reduction of the image to a pure relationship between image and frame, between contemplated object and field of contemplation, between one and zero. In fact, we cannot escape the black square—whatever image we see is simultaneously the black square. The same can be said about the readymade gesture introduced by Duchamp—whatever we want to exhibit and whatever we see as being exhibited presupposes this gesture.

Thus we can say that avant-garde art produces transcendental images, in the Kantian sense of the term—images that manifest the conditions for the emergence and contemplation of any other image. Art of the avant-garde is the art not only of weak messianism, but also of weak universalism. It is not only an art that uses zero signs emptied out by the approaching messianic event, but is also the art that manifests itself through weak images—images with weak visibility, images that are necessarily structurally overlooked when they function as components of strong images with a high level of visibility, such as images of classical art or mass culture.

The avant-garde denied originality, since it

IRWIN, *Corpse of Art*, 2003, mixed media. Reconstruction of Kasimir Malevich in coffin made according Nikolai Suetin's plan for the exhibition of the artist's corpse at the House of Artists Union in Leningrad, 1935. Photo: Jesko Hirschfeld. Courtesy of Galerija Gregor Podnar, Berlin/Ljubljana.

did not want to invent but to discover the transcendental, repetitive, weak image. And, as in philosophy and science, to make transcendental art also means to make universalist, transcultural art, because crossing a temporal border is basically the same operation as crossing a cultural border. Every image made in the context of any imaginable culture is also a black square, because it will look like a black square if it is erased. And that means that—to a messianic gaze—it always already looks like a black square. This is what makes the avant-garde a true opening for a universalist, democratic art. But the avant-garde's universalist power is a power of weakness, of self-erasure, because the avant-garde claim to universality can only be substantiated by producing the weakest images possible.

However, the avant-garde is ambiguous in a way that transcendentalist philosophy is not. Philosophical contemplation and transcendental idealization are operations thought to be effectuated only by philosophers for philosophers. But the avant-garde's transcendental images are shown in the same space of artistic representation as other—in philosophical terms—empirical images. Thus one can say that the avant-garde places the empirical and transcendental on the same level, allowing the empirical and transcendental to be compared in a unified, democratized, uninitiated gaze. Avant-garde art radically expands the space of democratic representation by including in it the transcendental, which was previously the object of religious or philosophical contemplation and speculation. And that has positive, but also dangerous aspects.

From a historical perspective, the images of the avant-garde offer themselves to a spectator's gaze not as transcendental images, but as

specific empirical images manifesting their specific time and the specific psychology of their authors. Thus, the "historical" avant-garde simultaneously produced clarification and confusion: clarification, because it revealed repetitive image patterns behind the changes in historical styles and trends; but also confusion, because avant-garde art was exhibited alongside other art production in a way that allowed it to be (mis)understood as a specific historical style. One can say that the basic weakness of the avant-garde's universalism has persisted until now. The avant-garde is perceived by today's art history mostly as a creator of art-historically strong images—and not of weak, transhistorical, universalist images. In this way, the universalist dimension of art that the avant-garde attempted to reveal remains overlooked, because the empirical character of its revelation has eclipsed it.

Even now, one can hear at exhibitions of avant-garde art: "Why should this painting," let's say by Malevich, "be here in the museum if my child can do it—and maybe even does?" On the one hand, this reaction to Malevich is, of course, correct. It shows that his works are still experienced by the wider public as weak images, notwithstanding their art-historical celebration. But, on the other hand, the conclusion that the majority of the exhibition visitors draw from this comparison is wrong: one thinks that this comparison discredits Malevich, whereas the comparison could instead be used as a means of admiring one's child. Indeed, through his work, Malevich opened the door into the sphere of art for weak images—in fact, for all possible weak images. But this opening can be understood only if Malevich's self-erasure is duly appreciated—if his images are seen as transcendental and not as empirical images. If the visitor to Malevich's

exhibition cannot appreciate the painting of his or her own child, then neither can this visitor truly appreciate the opening of a field of art that allows the paintings of this child to be appreciated.

Avant-garde art today remains unpopular by default, even when exhibited in major museums. Paradoxically, it is generally seen as a non-democratic, elitist art not because it is perceived as a strong art, but because it is perceived as a weak art. Which is to say that the avant-garde is rejected—or, rather, overlooked—by wider, democratic audiences precisely for being a democratic art; the avant-garde is not popular *because* it is democratic. And if the avant-garde were popular, it would be non-democratic. Indeed, the avant-garde opens a way for an average person to understand himself or herself as an artist—to enter the field of art as a producer of weak, poor, only partially visible images. But an average person is by definition not popular—only stars, celebrities, and exceptional and famous personalities can be popular. Popular art is made for a population consisting of spectators. Avant-garde art is made for a population consisting of artists.

3. Repeating the Weak Gesture

Of course the question arises of what has happened historically to transcendentalist, universalist avant-garde art. In the 1920s, this art was used by the second wave of avant-garde movements as an allegedly stable foundation for building a new world. This late avant-garde's secular fundamentalism was developed in the 1920s by Constructivism, Bauhaus, Vkhutemas, and so forth, even if Kandinsky, Malevich, Hugo Ball, and some other leading figures of the early avant-garde wave rejected this fundamentalism. But even if the early generation of the avant-garde did not believe in the possibility

of building a solid new world on the weak foundation of their universalist art, they still believed that they effectuated the most radical reduction, and produced works of the most radical weakness. But meanwhile we know that this was also an illusion. It was an illusion not because these images could be made weaker than they were, but because their weakness was forgotten by the culture. Accordingly, from a historical distance they seem to us to be either strong (for the art world) or irrelevant (for everyone else).

That means that the weak, transcendental artistic gesture could not be produced once and for all times. Rather, it must be repeated time and again to keep the distance between the transcendental and the empirical visible—and to resist the strong images of change, the ideology of progress, and promises of economic growth. It is not enough to reveal the repetitive patterns that transcend historical change. It is necessary to constantly repeat the revelation of these patterns—this repetition itself should be made repetitive, because every such repetition of the weak, transcendental gesture simultaneously produces clarification and confusion. Thus we need further clarification that again produces further confusion, and so forth. That is why the avant-garde cannot take place once and for all times, but must be permanently repeated to resist permanent historical change and chronic lack of time.

This repetitive and at the same time futile gesture opens a space that seems to me to be one of the most mysterious spaces of our contemporary democracy—social networks like Facebook, YouTube, Second Life, and Twitter, which offer global populations the opportunity to post their photos, videos, and texts in a way that cannot be

distinguished from any other conceptualist or post-conceptualist artwork. In a sense, then, this is a space that was initially opened by the radical, neo-avant-garde, conceptual art of the 1960s–1970s. Without the artistic reductions effectuated by these artists, the emergence of the aesthetics of these social networks would be impossible, and they could not be opened to a mass democratic public to the same degree.

These networks are characterized by the mass production and placement of weak signs with low visibility—instead of the mass contemplation of strong signs with high visibility, as was the case during the twentieth century. What we are experiencing now is the dissolution of the mainstream mass culture as it was described by many influential theoreticians: as the era of kitsch (Greenberg), the culture industry (Adorno), or a society of spectacle (Debord). This mass culture was created by the ruling political and commercial elites for the masses—for the masses of consumers, of spectators. Now the unified space of mass culture is going through a process of fragmentation. We still have the stars—but they don't shine as bright as before. Today everybody writes texts and posts images—but who has enough time to see and read them? Nobody, obviously—or only a small circle of likeminded co-authors, acquaintances, and relatives at the very most. The traditional relationship between producers and spectators as established by the mass culture of the twentieth century has been inverted. Whereas before, a chosen few produced images and texts for millions of readers and spectators, millions of producers now produce texts and images for a spectator who has little to no time to read or see them.

Earlier, during the classical period of mass

culture, one was expected to compete for public attention. One was expected to invent an image or a text that would be so strong, so surprising, and so shocking that it could capture the attention of the masses, even if only for a short span of time, what Andy Warhol famously referred to as one's fifteen minutes of fame.

But, at the same time, Warhol produced films like *Sleep* (1963) or *Empire* (1964) that were several hours long and so monotonous that nobody could expect spectators to remain attentive throughout their entire length. These films are also good examples of messianic, weak signs because they demonstrate the transient character of sleep and of architecture—that they seem to be endangered, put in the apocalyptic perspective, ready to disappear. At the same time, these films actually do not need dedicated attention, or any spectator at all in fact—just as the Empire State Building or a sleeping person do not need any spectator. It is no accident that both of these films by Warhol function at their best not in a movie theater but in a film installation, where as a rule they are shown in a loop. The exhibition visitor can look at them for a moment—or maybe not at all. The same can be said about the websites of the social networks—one can visit them or not. And if one does visit them then only this visit as such is registered—and not how much time one has spent looking at them. Contemporary art's visibility is a weak, virtual visibility, the apocalyptic visibility of contracting time. One is already satisfied that a certain image can be seen or that a certain text can be read—the facticity of seeing and reading becomes irrelevant.

But of course the internet can also become—and partially has become—a space for the strong images and texts that have begun to dominate

it. That is why younger generations of artists are increasingly interested in weak visibility and weak public gestures. Everywhere we witness the emergence of artistic groups in which participants and spectators coincide. These groups make art for themselves—and maybe for the artists of other groups if they are ready to collaborate. This kind of participatory practice means that one can become a spectator only when one has already become an artist—otherwise one simply would not be able to gain access to the corresponding art practices.

Now let us return to the beginning of this text. The avant-garde tradition operates by reduction—producing in this way atemporal and universalist images and gestures. It is an art that possesses and represents the secular messianic knowledge that the world in which we live is a transitory world, subject to permanent change, and that the lifespan of any strong image is necessarily short. And it is also an art of low visibility that can be compared to the low visibility of everyday life. And it is, of course, not accidental, because it is primarily our everyday life that survives historical breaks and shifts, precisely because of its weakness and low visibility.

Today, in fact, everyday life begins to exhibit itself—to communicate itself as such—through design or through contemporary participatory networks of communication, and it becomes impossible to distinguish the presentation of the everyday from the everyday itself. The everyday becomes a work of art—there is no more bare life, or, rather, bare life exhibits itself as artifact. Artistic activity is now something that the artist shares with his or her public on the most common level of everyday experience. The artist now shares art with the public just as he or she once shared with it religion or politics. To be an artist has now ceased to be an exclusive

fate, becoming instead an everyday practice—a weak practice, a weak gesture. But to establish and maintain this weak, everyday level of art, one must permanently repeat the artistic reduction—resisting strong images and escaping the status quo that functions as a permanent means of exchanging these strong images.

At the beginning of his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel asserted that in his time, art was already a thing of the past. Hegel believed that in the time of modernity, art could no longer manifest anything true about the world as it is. But avant-garde art has shown that art still has something to say about the modern world: it can demonstrate its transitory character, its lack of time; and to transcend this lack of time through a weak, minimal gesture that requires very little time—or even no time at all.

1
Jean Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art: Manifestos, Interviews, Essays*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Ames Hodges (New York: Semiotext(e)/MIT Press, 2005).

2
Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

3
Ibid., 68.

4
Ibid., 10.

Marx After Duchamp, or The Artist's Two Bodies

At the turn of the twentieth century, art entered a new era of artistic mass production. Whereas the previous age was an era of artistic mass consumption, in our present time the situation has changed, and there are two primary developments that have led to this change. The first is the emergence of new technical means for producing and distributing images, and the second is a shift in our understanding of art, a change in the rules we use for identifying what is and what is not art.

Let us begin with the second development. Today, we do not identify an artwork primarily as an object produced by the manual work of an individual artist in such a way that the traces of this work remain visible or, at least, identifiable in the body of the artwork itself. During the nineteenth century, painting and sculpture were seen as extensions of the artist's body, as evoking the presence of this body even following the artist's death. In this sense, artist's work was not regarded as "alienated" work—in contrast to the alienated, industrial labor that does not presuppose any traceable connection between the producer's body and the industrial product. Since at least Duchamp and his use of the readymade, this situation has changed drastically. And the main change lies not so much in the presentation of industrially produced objects as artworks, as in a new possibility that opened for the artist, to not only produce artworks in an alienated, quasi-industrial manner, but also to allow these artworks to maintain an appearance of being industrially produced. And it is here that artists as different as Andy Warhol and Donald Judd can serve as examples of post-Duchampian art. The direct connection between the body of the artist and the body of the artworks was severed. The artworks were no longer considered to maintain the warmth of the artist's

body, even when the artist's own corpse became cold. On the contrary, the author (artist) was already proclaimed dead during his or her lifetime, and the "organic" character of the artwork was interpreted as an ideological illusion. As a consequence, while we assume the violent dismemberment of a living, organic body to be a crime, the fragmentation of an artwork that is already a corpse—or, even better, an industrially produced object or machine—does not constitute a crime; rather, it is welcome.

And that is precisely what hundreds of millions of people around the world do every day in the context of contemporary media. As masses of people have become well informed about advanced art production through biennials, triennials, Documentas, and related coverage, they have come to use media in the same way as artists. Contemporary means of communication and social networks such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter offer global populations the ability to present their photos, videos, and texts in ways that cannot be distinguished from any post-Conceptualist artwork. And contemporary design offers the same populations a means of shaping and experiencing their apartments or workplaces as artistic installations. At the same time, the digital "content" or "products" that these millions of people present each day has no direct relation to their bodies; it is as "alienated" from them as any other contemporary artwork, and this means that it can be easily fragmented and reused in different contexts. And indeed, sampling by way of "copy and paste" is the most standard, most widespread practice on the internet. And it is here that one finds a direct connection between the quasi-industrial practices of post-Duchampian art and contemporary practices used on the internet—a place where even those who do not know or

appreciate contemporary artistic installations, performances, or environments will employ the same forms of sampling on which those art practices are based. (And here we find an analogy to Benjamin's interpretation of the public's readiness to accept montage in cinema as having been expressed by a rejection of the same approach in painting.)

Now, many have considered this erasure of work in and through contemporary artistic practice to have been a liberation from work in general. The artist becomes a bearer and protagonist of "ideas," "concepts," or "projects," rather than a subject of hard work, whether alienated or non-alienated work. Accordingly, the digitalized, virtual space of the internet has produced phantom concepts of "immaterial work" and "immaterial workers" that have allegedly opened the way to a "post-Fordist" society of universal creativity free from hard work and exploitation. In addition to this, the Duchampian readymade strategy seems to undermine the rights of intellectual private property—abolishing the privilege of authorship and delivering art and culture to unrestricted public use. Duchamp's use of readymades can be understood as a revolution in art that is analogous to a communist revolution in politics. Both revolutions aim at the confiscation and collectivization of private property, whether "real" or symbolic. And in this sense one can say that certain contemporary art and internet practices now play the role of (symbolic) communist collectivizations in the midst of a capitalist economy. One finds a situation reminiscent of Romantic art at the beginning of the nineteenth century in Europe, when ideological reactions and political restorations dominated political life. Following the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, Europe arrived at a period of relative stability and peace in which the age of

political transformation and ideological conflict seemed to have finally been overcome. The homogeneous political and economic order based on economic growth, technological progress, and political stagnation seemed to announce the end of history, and the Romantic artistic movement that emerged throughout the European continent became one in which utopias were dreamed, revolutionary traumas were remembered, and alternative ways of living were proposed. Today, the art scene has become a place of emancipatory projects, participatory practices, and radical political attitudes, but also a place in which the social catastrophes and disappointments of the revolutionary twentieth century are remembered. And the specific neo-Romantic and neo-communist makeup of contemporary culture is, as is often the case, especially well diagnosed by its enemies. Thus Jaron Lanier's influential book *You Are Not a Gadget* speaks about the "digital Maoism" and "hive mind" that dominate contemporary virtual space, ruining the principle of intellectual private property and ultimately lowering the standards and leading to the potential demise of culture as such.[1]

Thus what we have here does not concern the liberation of labor, but rather the liberation from labor—at least from its manual, "oppressive" aspects. But to what degree is such a project realistic? Is liberation from labor even possible? Indeed, contemporary art confronts the traditional Marxist theory of value production with a difficult question: if the "original" value of a product reflects the accumulation of work in this product, then how can a readymade acquire additional value as an artwork—notwithstanding the fact that the artist does not seem to have invested any additional work in it? It is in this sense that the post-Duchampian conception of art beyond labor seems to constitute

the most effective counter-example to the Marxist theory of value—as an example of "pure," "immaterial" creativity that transcends all traditional conceptions of value production as resulting from manual labor. It seems that, in this case, the artist's decision to offer a certain object as an artwork, and an art institution's decision to accept this object as an artwork, suffice to produce a valuable art commodity—without involving any manual labor. And the expansion of this seemingly immaterial art practice into the whole economy by means of the internet has produced the illusion that a post-Duchampian liberation from labor through "immaterial" creativity—and not the Marxist liberation of labor—opens the way to a new utopia of creative multitudes. The only necessary precondition for this opening, however, seems to be a critique of institutions that contain and frustrate the creativity of floating multitudes through their politics of selective inclusion and exclusion.

However, here we must deal with a certain confusion with respect to the notion of "the institution." Especially within the framework of "institutional critique," art institutions are mostly considered to be power structures defining what is included or excluded from public view. Thus art institutions are analyzed mostly in "idealist," non-materialist terms, whereas, in materialist terms, art institutions present themselves rather as buildings, spaces, storage facilities, and so forth, requiring an amount of manual work in order to be built, maintained, and used. So one can say that the rejection of "non-alienated" work has placed the post-Duchampian artist back in the position of using alienated, manual work to transfer certain material objects from the outside of art spaces to the inside, or vice versa. The pure immaterial creativity reveals

Itself here as pure fiction, as the old-fashioned, non-alienated artistic work is merely substituted by the alienated, manual work of transporting objects. And post-Duchampian art-beyond-labor reveals itself, in fact, as the triumph of alienated "abstract" labor over non-alienated "creative" work. It is this alienated labor of transporting objects combined with the labor invested in the construction and maintenance of art spaces that ultimately produces artistic value under the conditions of post-Duchampian art. The Duchampian revolution leads not to the liberation of the artist from work, but to his or her proletarization via alienated construction and transportation work. In fact, contemporary art institutions no longer need an artist as a traditional producer. Rather, today the artist is more often hired for a certain period of time as a worker to realize this or that institutional project. On the other hand, commercially successful artists such as Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst long ago converted themselves into entrepreneurs.

The economy of the internet demonstrates this economy of post-Duchampian art even for an external spectator. The internet is in fact no more than a modified telephone network, a means of transporting electric signals. As such, it is not "immaterial," but thoroughly material. If certain communication lines are not laid, if certain gadgets are not produced, or if telephone access is not installed and paid, then there is simply no internet and no virtual space. To use traditional Marxist terms, one can say that the big communication and information technology corporations control the material basis of the internet and the means of producing of virtual reality: its hardware. In this way, the internet provides us with an interesting combination of capitalist hardware and communist

software. Hundreds of millions of so-called "content producers" place their content on the internet without receiving any compensation, with the content produced not so much by the intellectual work of generating ideas as by the manual labor of operating the keyboard. And the profits are appropriated by the corporations controlling the material means of virtual production.

The decisive step in the proletarization and exploitation of intellectual and artistic work came, of course, in the emergence of Google. Google's search engine operates by fragmenting individual texts into a non-differentiated mass of verbal garbage: each individual text traditionally held together by its author's intention is dissolved, with individual sentences then fished out and recombined with other floating sentences allegedly having the same "topic." Of course, the unifying power of authorial intention had already been undermined in recent philosophy, most notably by Derridean deconstruction. And indeed, this deconstruction already effectuated a symbolic confiscation and collectivization of individual texts, removing them from authorial control and delivering them into the bottomless garbage pit of anonymous, subjectless "writing." It was a gesture that initially appeared emancipatory for being somehow synchronized with certain communist, collectivist dreams. Yet while Google now realizes the deconstructionist program of collectivizing writing, it seems to do little else. There is, however, a difference between deconstruction and googling: deconstruction was understood by Derrida in purely "idealistic" terms as an infinite, and thus uncontrollable practice, whereas Google's search algorithms are not infinite, but finite and material—subjected to corporate appropriation, control, and manipulation. The removal of authorial, intentional,

ideological control over writing has not led to its liberation. Rather, in the context of the internet, writing has become subject to a different kind of control through hardware and corporate software, through the material conditions of the production and distribution of writing. In other words, by completely eliminating the possibility of artistic, cultural work as authorial, non-alienated work, the internet completes the process of proletarizing work that began in the nineteenth century. The artist here becomes an alienated worker no different than any other in contemporary production processes.

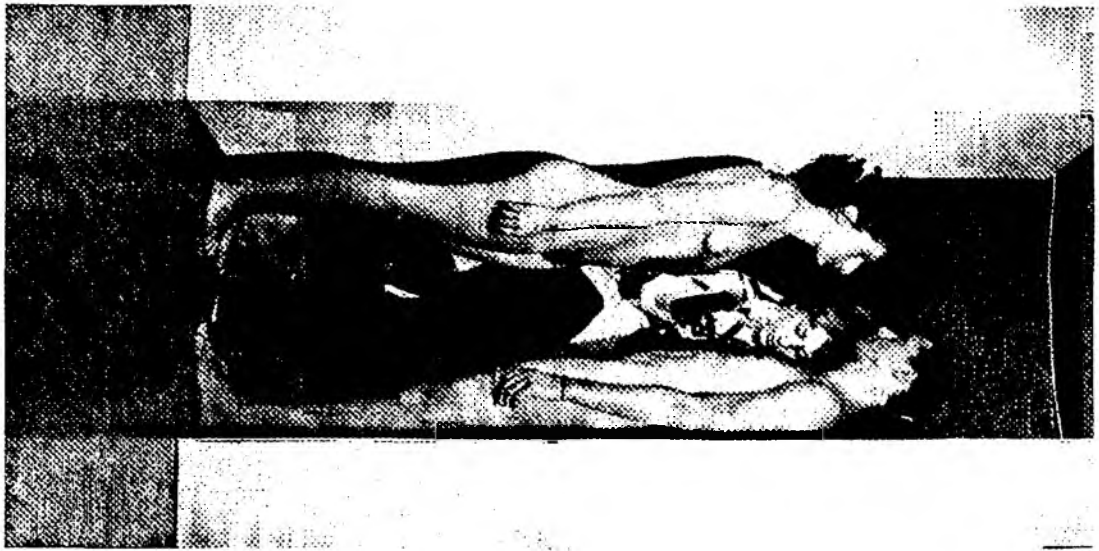
But then a question arises. What happened to the artist's body when the labor of art production became alienated labor? The answer is simple: the artist's body itself became a readymade. Foucault has already drawn our attention to the fact that alienated work produces the worker's body alongside the industrial products; the worker's body is disciplined and simultaneously exposed to external surveillance, a phenomenon famously characterized by Foucault as "panopticism."[2] As a result, this alienated industrial work cannot be understood solely in terms of its external productivity—it must necessarily take into account the fact that this work also produces the worker's own body as a reliable gadget, as an "objectified" instrument of alienated, industrialized work. And this can even be seen as the main achievement of modernity, as these modernized bodies now populate contemporary bureaucratic, administrative, and cultural spaces in which seemingly nothing material is produced beyond these bodies themselves. One can now argue that it is precisely this modernized, updated working body that contemporary art uses as a readymade. However, the contemporary artist does not need to enter a factory or administrative office to find such a body.

Under the current conditions of alienated artistic work, the artist will find such a body to already be his or her own.

Indeed, in performance art, video, photography, and so forth, the artist's body increasingly became the focus of contemporary art in recent decades. And one can say that the artist today has become increasingly concerned with the exposure of his or her body as a working body—through the gaze of a spectator or a camera that recreates the panoptic exposure to which working bodies in a factory or office are submitted. An example of the exposure of such a working body can be found in Marina Abramović's exhibition "The Artist Is Present" at MoMA in New York in 2010. Each day of the exhibition, Abramović sat throughout the working hours of the museum in MoMA's atrium, maintaining the same pose. In this way, Abramović recreated the situation of an office worker whose primary occupation is to sit at the same place each day to be observed by his or her superiors, regardless of what is done beyond that. And we can say that Abramović's performance was a perfect illustration of Foucault's notion that the production of the working body is the main effect of modernized, alienated work. Precisely by not actively performing any tasks throughout the time she was present, Abramović thematized the incredible discipline, endurance, and physical effort required to simply remain present at a workplace from the beginning of the working day to its end. At the same time, Abramović's body was subjected to the same regime of exposure as all of MoMA's artworks—hanging on the walls or staying in their places throughout the working hours of the museum. And just as we generally assume that these paintings and sculptures do not change places or disappear when they are not exposed to

the visitor's gaze or when the museum is closed, we tend to imagine that Abramović's immobilized body will remain forever in the museum, immortalized alongside the museum's other works. In this sense, "The Artist Is Present" creates an image of a living corpse as the only perspective on immortality that our civilization is capable of offering its citizens.

The effect of immortality is only strengthened by the fact that this performance is a recreation/repetition of a performance Abramović did with Ulay in her younger years, in which they sat opposite each other throughout the working hours of an exhibition space. In "The Artist Is Present," Ulay's place opposite Abramović could be taken by any visitor. This substitution demonstrated how the working body of the artist disconnects—through the alienated, "abstract" character of modern work—from his or her own natural, mortal body. The working body of the artist can be substituted with any other body that is ready and able to perform the same work of self-exposure. Thus, in the main, retrospective part of the exhibition, the earlier performances by Abramović and Ulay were repeated/reproduced in two different forms: through video documentation and through the naked bodies of hired actors. Here again the nakedness of these bodies was more important than their particular shape, or even their gender (in one instance, due to practical considerations, Ulay was represented by a woman). There are many who speak about the spectacular nature of contemporary art. But in a certain sense, contemporary art effectuates the reversal of the spectacle found in theater or cinema, among other examples. In the theater, the actor's body also presents itself as immortal as it passes through various metamorphic processes, transforming itself into the bodies of others as it plays different roles. In contemporary



Marina Abramović and Ulay, *Imponderabilia*, 1977, performance, 90 min., Galleria Communale d'Arte Moderna Bologna, © Marina Abramović.

art, the working body of the artist, on the contrary, accumulates different roles (as in the case of Cindy Sherman), or, as with Abramović, different living bodies. The artist's working body is simultaneously self-identical and interchangeable because it is a body of alienated, abstract labor. In his famous book *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, Ernst Kantorowicz illustrates the historical problem posed by the figure of the king assuming two bodies simultaneously: one natural, mortal body, and another official, institutional, exchangeable, immortal body. Analogously, one can say that when the artist exposes his or her body, it is the second, working body that becomes exposed. And at the moment of this exposure, this working body also reveals the value of labor accumulated in the art institution (according to Kantorowicz, medieval historians have spoken of "corporations").[3] In general, when visiting a museum, we do not realize the amount of work necessary to keep paintings hanging on walls or statues in their places. But this effort becomes immediately visible when a visitor is confronted with Abramović's body; the invisible physical effort of keeping the human body in the same position for a long time produces a "thing"—a readymade—that arrests the attention of visitors and allows them to contemplate Abramović's body for hours.

One may think that only the working bodies of contemporary celebrities are exposed to the public gaze. However, even the most average, "normal" everyday people now permanently document their own working bodies by means of photography, video, websites, and so forth. And on top of that, contemporary everyday life is exposed not only to institutional surveillance, but also to a constantly expanding sphere of media coverage. Innumerable

sitcoms inundating television screens around the world expose us to the working bodies of doctors, peasants, fishermen, presidents, movie stars, factory workers, mafia killers, gravediggers, and even to zombies and vampires. It is precisely this ubiquity and universality of the working body and its representation that makes it especially interesting for art. Even if the primary, natural bodies of our contemporaries are different, and their secondary working bodies are interchangeable. And it is precisely this interchangeability that unites the artist with his or her audience. The artist today shares art with the public just as he or she once shared it with religion or politics. To be an artist has ceased to be an exclusive fate; instead, it has become characteristic of society as a whole on its most intimate, everyday, bodily level. And here the artist finds another opportunity to advance a universalist claim—as an insight into the duplicity and ambiguity of the artist's own two bodies.

1
See Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

2
See Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

3
Ernst H Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 3.

Religion in the Age of Digital Reproduction

The general consensus of contemporary mass media is that the return of religion has emerged as the most important factor in global politics and culture today. Now, those who currently refer to a revival of religion clearly do not mean anything like the second coming of the Messiah or the appearance of new gods and prophets. What they are referring to rather is that religious attitudes have moved from culturally marginal zones into the mainstream. If this is the case, and statistics would seem to corroborate the claim, the question then arises as to what may have caused religious attitudes to become mainstream.

The survival and dissemination of opinions on the global information market is regulated by a law formulated by Charles Darwin, namely, the survival of the fittest. Those opinions that best adapt to the conditions under which they are disseminated will, as a matter of course, have the best odds of becoming mainstream. Today's opinions market, however, is clearly characterized by reproduction, repetition, and tautology. The widespread understanding of contemporary civilization holds that, over the course of the modern age, theology has been replaced by philosophy, an orientation toward the past by an orientation toward the future, traditional teachings by subjective evidence, fidelity to origins by innovation, and so on. In fact, however, the modern age has not been the age in which the sacred has been abolished but rather the age of its dissemination in profane space, its democratization, its globalization. Ritual, repetition, and reproduction were hitherto matters of religion; they were practiced in isolated, sacred places. In the modern age, ritual, repetition, and reproduction have become the fate of the entire world, of the entire culture. Everything reproduces

itself—capital, commodities, technology, and art. Ultimately, even progress is reproductive; it consists in a constantly repeated destruction of everything that cannot be reproduced quickly and effectively. Under such conditions it should come as no surprise that religion—in all its various manifestations—has become increasingly successful. Religion operates through media channels that are, from the outset, products of the extension and secularization of traditional religious practices. Let us now turn to an investigation of some of the aspects of this extension and secularization that seem especially relevant to the survival and success of religions in the contemporary world.

1. The Internet and the Freedom of Faith

The regime under which religion—any religion—functions in contemporary Western secular democratic societies is freedom of faith. Freedom of faith means that all are free to believe what they choose to believe and that all are free to organize their personal and private lives according to these beliefs. At the same time, however, this also means that the imposition of one's own faith on others in public life and state institutions, including atheism as a form of faith, cannot be tolerated. The significance of the Enlightenment was not so much that it resulted in the complete disappearance of religion, but that religion became a matter of private choice, which then resulted in the withdrawal of religion into the private sphere. In the contemporary world, religion has become a matter of private taste, functioning in much the same way as do art and design. Naturally, this is not to suggest that religion is precluded in public discussion. However, the place of religion in relation to public discussion is reminiscent of the place of art as outlined by

Immanuel Kant in *The Critique of Judgment*: religion may be publicly discussed, but such a discussion cannot result in any conclusion that would become obligatory, either for the participants of this discussion or for society as a whole. Commitment to one religious faith or another is a matter of sovereign, private choice that cannot be dictated by any public authority—including any democratically legitimized authority. Even more importantly, such a decision—as in the case of art—need not be publicly argued and legitimized, but rather publicly accepted without further discussion. The legitimacy of personal faith is based not on the degree of its power of persuasion, but on the sovereign right of the individual to be committed to this faith.

In this respect, freedom of faith is fundamentally different from, let's say, the kind of freedom represented in scientific research. In the context of a scientific discussion every opinion can be argued for or against, but each opinion must also be substantiated by certain facts and verified according to fixed rules. Every participant in such a discussion is undoubtedly free—at least theoretically—to formulate his or her position and to argue in its favor. However, one may not insist on a scientific opinion that is not subject to justification, and that would contravene all proof and evidence to the contrary, without introducing any argument that would otherwise make one's position plausible and persuasive to others. Such unyielding resistance to the obvious, such blindness toward the facts, to logic and common sense, would be regarded as bordering on the insane. If someone were to refer to his sovereign right to insist on a certain scientific opinion without being able to legitimize this insistence by rational argument, he or she would be excluded from the scientific community.

What this means is that our contemporary, Western notion of freedom is deeply ambiguous. In fact, discourse on freedom always pivots on two radical types of freedom: an unconditional freedom of faith, that sovereign freedom permitting us to make personal choices beyond all public explanation and justification, and the conditional, institutional freedom of scientific opinion, which depends on the subject's ability to justify and legitimize this opinion in accordance with pre-determined, publicly established rules. Thus, it is easy to show that our notion of democratic, free society is also ambiguous. The contemporary notion of political freedom can be interpreted in part as sovereign, in part as institutional: in part as the sovereign freedom of political commitment, and in part as the institutional freedom of political discussion. But whatever may be said about the contemporary global political field in general, one thing remains certain: this field is becoming increasingly influenced, or even defined, by the internet as the primary medium of global communication. And the internet favors private, unconditional, sovereign freedom over scientific, conditional, institutional freedom.

In an earlier age of mass media—newspapers, radio, or TV—the only possible assurance of freedom of opinion was an institutionally guaranteed free access to this media. Any discussion revolving around freedom of opinion, therefore, centered on the politics of representation, on the question as to who and what should be included, and who and what should be excluded from standard news coverage and public political discussion. Today, all are free to create their own websites without the need for discussion and legitimization. Freedom of opinion, as practiced on the internet, functions as the sovereign freedom of private

commitment: neither as the institutional freedom of rational discussion, nor as the politics of representation, inclusion and exclusion. What we experience today is the immense privatization of public media space through the internet: a private conversation between MySpace and YouTube today substitutes for the public discussion of the previous age. The slogan of the previous age was, "The private is political," whereas the true slogan of the internet is, "The political is private."

Obviously, this new configuration of the media field favors religion over science, and sovereign religious politics over institutionalized secular politics. The internet is the space in which it is possible for contemporary, aggressive religious movements to install their propaganda material and to act globally—without recourse to any institution for representation, or application to any authority for their recognition. The internet provides these movements with the means to operate beyond any discursively obtained legitimacy and with full sovereignty. In this sense, the contemporary return of religion can be seen as the return of sovereign freedom after many decades or even centuries of the dominance of institutional freedom.

Accordingly, the surge in religion may also be directly connected to the growing, sovereign freedom of private consumption and capital investment on a global scale. Both are dependent on the internet and other digital communications media that transgress the borders of national democratic institutions. In any case, both practices—religious and economic—presuppose the functioning of the media universe as an arena for private, sovereign acts and decisions. There is, moreover, one further significant similarity between capital investment and religious commitment: both operate through

language, though, at the same time, beyond language—where language is understood as the means of (self-)explanation, justification, and legitimization.

2. Religious Ritual and Mechanical Reproduction

Religion is often understood to be a certain set of opinions, associated with whether contraception should be permitted or whether women should wear headscarves. I would argue, however, that religion—any religion—is not a set of opinions but primarily a set of rituals, and that the religious ritual refers to a state in which there is a lack of opinions, a state of opinionlessness—*a-doxa*—for it refers to the will of the gods or of God ultimately concealed from the opinions of mortals. Religious language is the language of repetition, not because its subjects insist on any specific truth they wish to repeatedly assert and communicate. Here, language is embedded in ritual. And ritual is a re-enactment of the revelation of a truth ultimately impossible to communicate. Repetition of a certain religious ritual celebrates the encounter with such an incommunicable truth, the acceptance of this truth, being answerable to God's love, and maintaining devotion to the mystery of revelation. Religious discourse praises God, and praises God in such a way as is supposed to please God. Religious discourse operates not in the opposition between truth and error, as scientific discourse does, but in the opposition between devotion and blasphemy.

The ritual, as such, is neither true, nor false. In this sense it marks the zero point of freedom of opinion, that is, freedom from any kind of opinion, from the obligation to have an opinion. Religious ritual can be repeated, abandoned, or modified—but

not legitimized, criticized, or refuted. Accordingly, the fundamentalist is a person who insists not so much on a certain set of opinions as on certain rituals not being abandoned or modified, and being faithfully and correctly reproduced. The true fundamentalist does not care about fidelity to the truth, but about the correctness of a ritual, not about the theoretical, or rather, theological interpretations of the faith, but about the material form of religion.

Now, if we consider those religious movements especially active today we observe that they are predominantly fundamentalist movements. Traditionally, we tend to distinguish between two kinds of repetition: (1) repetition of the spirit and in spirit, that is, repetition of the true, inner essence of a religious message, and (2) repetition of the external form of a religious ritual. The opposition between these two types of repetition—between living spirit and dead letter—informs all Western discourse on religion. The first kind of repetition is almost always regarded as true repetition, as the authentic, "inner" continuation of a religious tradition—the continuation that presupposes the possibility of a rupture with the merely external, conventional, historically accidental form of this tradition, or even requires such a rupture. According to this spiritualist interpretation of the religious tradition, the inner, spiritual fidelity to the essence of a religious message gives to a believer the right to adapt the external, material form of this message to the changing historical milieus and contexts without betraying the inner truth of this message. A religious tradition capable of transforming and adapting itself to changing circumstances without losing its inner, essential identity is usually praised as a living, spiritually powerful tradition capable of maintaining its vitality and historical relevance. On the other

hand, "superficial" adherence to the mere letter, to the external form of religion, to the "empty" ritual is, as a rule, regarded as symptomatic of the fact that the religion in question lacks vitality, and even as a betrayal of the inner truth of this tradition by the purely mechanical reproduction of its external, dead form. Now, this is precisely what fundamentalism is, namely, the insistence on the letter as opposed to the spirit.

It is for this reason that religious fundamentalism has always possessed a revolutionary dimension: while breaking with the politics of spirit, that is, with the politics of reform, flexibility, and adaptation to the zeitgeist, it goes on to substitute for this politics of spirit the violent politics of the letter. Thus, contemporary religious fundamentalism may be regarded as the most radical product of the European Enlightenment and the materialist view of the world. Religious fundamentalism is religion after the death of the spirit, after the loss of spirituality. Should the spirit perish, all that remains is the letter, the material form, the ritual as event in the material world. In other words, difference in the material form of religion can no longer be compensated by identity in spirit. A rupture with the external form of the ritual cannot be compensated by the inner, spiritual fidelity to the religious truth. A material difference is now just a difference—there is no essence, no being, and no meaning underlying such a formal difference at a deeper level. In this sense, fundamentalist religious movements are religions after deconstruction. If meaning, sense, and intention cannot be stabilized, the only possibility for authentic repetition is literal repetition, mechanical reproduction—beyond any opinion, meaning, sense, and intention. Islam would be an especially good case in point. While

notoriously forbidding the production of images, it does not forbid the re-production and the use of already existing images—especially in the case of so-called "mechanically produced" images, such as photography or film. While it has meanwhile become banal to say that Islam is not modern, it is obviously post-modern.

In his book *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze speaks of literal repetition as being radically artificial and, in this sense, as being in conflict with everything natural, living, changing, and developing, including natural law and moral law.[1] Hence, practicing literal repetition can be seen as initiating a rupture in the continuity of life. In his remarks on the philosophy of history, Walter Benjamin also describes the genuine revolution as a break with the continuity of historical evolution, as a literal repetition of the past in the midst of the present. He also refers to capitalism as a new kind of religion reduced to ritual and so devoid of any theology.[2] Literal repetition, however, is not only a revolution effectuated by capital or against it; that is, it is not only an act of violence against the flow of historical change, and even against life as such. Literal repetition may also be seen as a way toward personal self-sacralization and immortality—immortality of the subject ready to submit him- or herself to such a repetition.

It is no mere accident that the working class has performed the repetitive, alienated, one might say, ritual work in the context of modern industrial civilization, sacralized, in certain ways, by the socialist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whereas an intellectual or an artist—as embodiments of the creative spirit of change—remained profane precisely because of their inability to repeat and to reproduce. Nietzsche

had already made reference to literal repetition—the eternal return of the same—as being the only possible way to think immortality after the death of spirit, of God. Here, the difference between the repetitiveness of religious ritual and the literal reproduction of the world of appearances disappears. One might say that religious ritual is the prototype of the mechanical reproduction that dominated Western culture during the modern period, and which, to a certain degree, continues to dominate the contemporary world. What this suggests is that mechanical reproduction might, in its turn, be understood as a religious ritual. It is for this reason that fundamentalist religious movements have become so successful in our time, for they combine religious ritual with mechanical reproduction.

For Walter Benjamin, of course, mechanical reproduction entails the loss of aura, the loss of religious experience, which he understands as the experience of uniqueness.[3] He describes the religious experience as, one might say, a unique spiritual experience. In this respect, his evocation of the experience of being enchanted by an Italian landscape as an example of an authentic experience (of happiness, fullness, and the intensity of life) lost in the reproduction process is particularly characteristic. But, one might argue, true religious experience is actually the experience of death rather than the experience of life—the experience of death in the midst of life. Hence, precisely because mechanical reproduction may be understood as the lifeless repetition of the dead image, it can also be interpreted as a source of the truly religious experience. In fact, it is precisely the loss of aura that represents the most radical religious experience under the conditions of modernity, since it is in this way that a human being discovers the mechanical, machine-

like, repetitive, reproductive and, one might even say, dead aspect of his own existence.

3. The Digitalized Religion

However, as mentioned above, the new religious movements operate primarily through the internet, by means of digital rather than mechanical reproduction. During the last decades, video has become the chosen medium of contemporary religious propaganda and is distributed through different TV channels, the internet, commercial video stores, etc. This is especially so in the case of the most recent, active, and even aggressive religious movements. The phenomenon of suicide-bomber confession videos and many other kinds of video production reflecting the mentality of radical Islam have meanwhile become familiar to us. On the other hand, the new evangelical movements also operate with the same medium of video. If one asks those responsible for public relations in these movements to provide information, one is initially sent videos. This use of the video as the major medium of self-presentation among different religious movements is a relatively new phenomenon. Traditionally, the standard medium was a script, a book, a painted image or sculpture. The question then arises as to what constitutes the difference between mechanical and digital reproduction and how this difference affects the fate of religion in our age.

At this point, I would argue that the use of video as the principle medium by contemporary religious movements is intrinsic to the message of these movements. Neither is it external to the understanding of the religious as such, which underlies this use. This is not to suggest, following Marshall McLuhan, that here the medium is the message; rather, I would argue that the message has

become the medium—a certain religious message has become the digital code.

Digital images have the propensity to generate, to multiply, and to distribute themselves almost anonymously through the open fields of contemporary communication. The origin of these messages is difficult, or even impossible, to locate, much like the origin of divine, religious messages. At the same time, digitalization seems to guarantee a literal reproduction of a text or an image more effectively than any other known technique. Naturally, it is not so much the digital image itself as the image file, the digital data which remains identical through the process of its reproduction and distribution. However, the image file is not an image—the image file is invisible. The digital image is an effect of the visualization of the invisible image file, of the invisible digital data. Only the protagonists of the movie *The Matrix* (1999) were able to see the image files, the digital code as such. The average spectator, however, does not have the magic pill that would allow him or her, like the protagonists of *The Matrix*, to enter the invisible space otherwise concealed behind the digital image for the purposes of directly confronting the digital data itself. And such a spectator is not in command of the technique that would enable him or her to transfer the digital data directly into the brain and to experience it in the mode of pure, non-visualizable suffering (as could the protagonist of another movie, *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995)). (Actually, pure suffering is, as we know, the most adequate experience of the invisible.) Digital data should be visualized, should become an image that can be seen. Here we have a situation wherein the perennial spirit/matter dichotomy is reinterpreted as a dichotomy between digital file and its visualization, or "immaterial information"

and "material" image, including visible text. In more theological terms; the digital file functions as an angel—as an invisible messenger transmitting a divine command. But a human being remains external to this message, to this command, and thus condemned to contemplate only its visual effects. We are confronted here with the transposition of a divine/human dichotomy from a metaphysical to a technical level—a transposition that, as Martin Heidegger would argue, is only possible by virtue of this dichotomy being implicitly technical from the outset.[4]

By extension, a digital image that can be

Boris Groys, *Medium Religion*, 2006. Video lecture (color, sound), 25 min., loop. Courtesy of the artist.

seen cannot be merely exhibited or copied (as an analogue image can) but always only staged or performed. Here, the image begins to function like a piece of music, whose score, as is generally known, is not identical to the piece—the score being not audible, but silent. For the music to resound, it has to be performed. One could argue that digitalization turns visual arts into performing arts. To perform something, however, means to interpret it, betray it, destroy it. Every performance is an interpretation and every interpretation is a misuse. The situation is especially difficult in the case of an invisible original: if the original is visible it can be compared to a copy—so the copy can be corrected and the feeling of distortion reduced. But if the original is invisible no such comparison is possible—any visualization remains uncertain in its relationship to the original; or one could even say that every such performance itself becomes an original.

Moreover, today information technology is in a state of perpetual change—hardware, software, simply everything. For this reason alone, the image is transformed with each act of visualization that uses a different and new technology. Today's technology is conceived in terms of generations—we speak of computer generations, of generations of photographic and video equipment. But where generations are involved, so also are generational conflicts, Oedipal struggles. Anyone attempting to transfer his or her old text or image files to new software experiences the power of the Oedipus complex over current technology—much data is destroyed, evaporating into the void. The biological metaphor says it all: it is not only life that is notorious for this, but technology as well, which, supposedly in opposition to nature, has now become the medium of non-identical reproduction. Benjamin's central

assumption in his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"—namely, that an advanced technology can guarantee the material identity between original and copy—was not borne out by later technological developments.[5] Real technological development went in the opposite direction—toward a diversification of the conditions under which a copy is produced and distributed and, accordingly, the diversification of the resulting visual images. Were technology to guarantee the visual identity between the different visualizations of the same data, they would still remain non-identical due to the changing social contexts of their appearances.

The act of visualizing invisible digital data is thus analogous to the appearance of the invisible inside the topography of the visible world (in biblical terms, signs and wonders) that generate the religious rituals. In this respect, the digital image functions like a Byzantine icon—as a visible representation of invisible digital data. The digital code seems to guarantee the identity of different images that function as visualizations of this code. The identity is established here not at the level of spirit, essence or meaning, but on the material and technical level. Thus, it is in this way that the promise of literal repetition seems to acquire a solid foundation—the digital file is, after all, supposed to be something more material and tangible than an invisible God. However, the digital file does remain invisible, hidden. What this signifies is that its self-identity remains a matter of belief. Indeed, we are compelled to believe that each act of visualization of certain digital data amounts to a revelation of the same data, much as we are obliged to believe that every performance of a certain religious ritual refers to the same invisible God. And this means that

opinion about what is identical and what is different, or about what is original and what is copy, is an act of belief, an effect of a sovereign decision that cannot be fully justified empirically or logically.

Digital video substitutes the guarantees of spiritual immortality allegedly waiting for us beyond this world with the technical guarantees of potentially eternal repetition inside this world—a repetition that becomes a form of immortality because of its ability to interrupt the flow of historical time. It is this new prospect of materialist, technically guaranteed immortality that the new religious movements de facto offer their adepts—beyond the metaphysical uncertainties of their theological past. Placing human actions in a loop, both practices—ritual and video—realize the Nietzschean promise of a new immortality: the eternal return of the same. However, this new technical guarantee remains a matter of belief and sovereign decision. To recognize two different images as copies of the same image or as visualizations of the same digital file means to value immortality over originality. To recognize them as different would be to prefer originality in time to the prospect of immortality. Both decisions are necessarily sovereign—and both are acts of faith.

1
Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, [1968] 2004).

2
Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminotions: Essay and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. H. Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 261ff.

3
Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 221ff.

4
Martin Heidegger, *Mindfulness*, trans. Parvis Emad and Thomas Kalary (London: Continuum, 2006), 151–155.

5
See Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

Immortal Bodies

In Michel Foucault's famous phrase, the modern state can be defined by "the right to make live and to let die," in contrast to the sovereign state of the older variety that may "take life or let live."[1] The modern state is concerned with birth rates, health, and providing its population with life's necessities—all understood through statistical values. Thus, according to Foucault, the modern state functions primarily as a "biopower" that justifies itself by securing the survival of the masses. The survival of the individual is, of course, not guaranteed by this. If the survival of the population is presented as one of the state's goals, then the "natural" death of any given individual is passively accepted by the state as unavoidable, and thus belonging to the private realm of that individual. The death of an individual thus marks the insurmountable limit of the state as biopower—a limit it accepts by respecting the private sphere of natural death. And this fundamental limit was not questioned even by Foucault himself.

But what would happen were such a biopower to radicalize its claim by formulating it as "making life and *not* allowing to die?" To put it another way, what would happen were the state to set out to combat not only collective death, but also individual, "natural" death—with the ultimate goal of eliminating it entirely? Admittedly, this kind of demand sounds utopian, and indeed it is. But this very demand was expressed by many Russian authors before and after the October Revolution, and even very much in the spirit of Foucault (though this was not a possibility specifically mentioned by him), this radicalized demand of an intensified biopower served to justify the growing power of the Soviet state. The supporters of the demand that individual immortality should be made a collective, political, and state goal did not, with few exceptions,

belong to the circles of the Marxist intelligentsia that came to power after the October Revolution, who thought in terms of economics and not in terms of life philosophy. But purely economic theories would not have sufficed to justify the immense number of victims and losses that the revolution and subsequent civil war demanded of the country. These millions of deaths called for another, higher justification—a goal to achieve eternal life for all. And these biopolitical utopias reconciled far more Russian intellectuals and artists with Soviet power than Marxism alone ever managed to, especially because these utopias had, unlike "Western" Marxism, a genuinely "Russian" origin, namely in the work of Nikolai Fedorov.

While the "philosophy of the common task" that Fedorov developed in the late nineteenth century was given little attention by the public during his lifetime, the ideas fascinated and influenced illustrious readers such as Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Vladimir Solov'ev. Following the philosopher's death in 1903, his work gained increasing currency, although it remained largely limited to a Russian readership. In summary, Fedorov's project of the common task consists of the creation of the technological, social, and political conditions under which it would be possible to resurrect all people who have ever lived—through technological, artificial means. As Fedorov understood his project, it represented the continuation of the Christian promise that all who have died would be resurrected at the end of time. The only difference is that Fedorov did not believe in a "bloodless," "abstract" immortality of a soul independent of the body, and for him it was not sufficient to wait passively for the second coming of Christ. Fedorov was entirely a child of the late nineteenth century, and accordingly,

he believed material existence to be the only possible form of existence. His belief in technology was thus unshakable, for technology renders everything material, physical, feasible, technically malleable. Above all, however, Fedorov believed in the power of social organization, and in this sense he was thoroughly a socialist. And immortality for him also suggested a means of finding the right technology and the right social organization. In his view, all that was required to commit oneself to the project of artificially resurrecting all the dead was a decision. Once that goal had been established, the means would be discovered on its own, so to speak.

In this way, the problem of immortality was transferred from God to society—or even to the power of the state. Fedorov took seriously the promise of the emerging biopower—that is, the state's promise to concern itself with life as such; and he demanded that this power think its promise through to the end and fulfill it. Above all, Fedorov was reacting to an internal contradiction in the socialist theories of the nineteenth century discussed by several other authors of his day, above all by Dostoevsky. Socialism promised perfected social justice, but it also associated this promise with a belief in progress. The latter faith implied that this justice would be enjoyed only by future generations in an advanced socialist society. Today's generations and those of the past are, by contrast, left to play the role of the passive victims of progress—and they would have no eternal justice. Thus future generations would enjoy socialist justice only by cynically accepting an outrageous historical injustice: the exclusion of all previous generations from the realm of justice. Socialism thus functions as an exploitation of the dead for the sake of the living—and as an exploitation of those living today in favor of those

George Romero, Film still from *Night of the Living Dead*, 1968, Image Ten productions.

who will live tomorrow. For that reason, a socialist society cannot be a just one, since it profits from the discrimination against earlier generations in favor of later ones. The socialist society of the future can only present itself as just if it sets itself the goal of artificially resurrecting all the generations that established the foundation for its success. These resurrected generations can then also take part in the socialism of the future, and the time-based discrimination against the dead in favor of the living will have been rescinded. Perfected socialism must be established not only in space, but also in time, by employing technology to transform time into eternity. This will also fulfill the promise of fraternity made by the bourgeois revolution alongside promises of liberty and equality, though these were never fulfilled. That is why Fedorov calls bourgeois progress "not fraternal" and suggests that it be replaced by a fraternity marked not only by a shared obligation to the living, but to our dead ancestors as well.

While Fedorov's project can be all too easily dismissed as utopian or even fantastic, it is also the first logical articulation of a question that is still highly topical today: How can one conceive and develop one's own immortality if one is certain that it is just one ephemeral body among others—and nothing more? Or, to put it another way: How can one be immortal without any ontological guarantee of immortality? The simplest and most common answer to this question recommends that we simply abandon the pursuit of immortality, remain content with the finitude of our own existence, and accept individual death as a necessary reality. That is how Foucault describes the answer of the real existing biopower, yet this answer carries a fundamental flaw, which is that it leaves a great deal of our

civilization unexplained. One such unexplained phenomenon is the institution of the museum. Fedorov has written that the very existence of the museum contradicts the universally utilitarian, pragmatic spirit of the nineteenth century.[2] By preserving with great care precisely the useless, superfluous things of the past that no longer have any practical use "in real life," the museum does not accept the death and decline these things have already experienced. The museum is thus fundamentally at odds with progress, which necessarily replaces old things with new things. On the other hand, however, the museum is a machine for making things last, for making them immortal. And because each human being is also one body among other bodies, one thing among other things, humans can also be blessed with the immortality granted to things in a museum. For Fedorov, immortality is not a paradise for human souls, but a museum for living human bodies. The Christian immortality of the soul is replaced by the immortality of things or of the body in the museum. And divine grace is replaced by curatorial decisions and the technology of museum preservation.

The technical side of the museum played a crucial role for Fedorov, who saw nineteenth-century technology as internally divided. In his view, modern technology primarily served fashion and war—that is, finite, mortal life. And it is in relation to this technology that one can speak of progress, which changes constantly with time, but also divides human generations: every generation has its own technology and rejects the technology of its parents. But for Fedorov technology also functions as art, as the preservation or revival of the past. There is no progress in art. Art does not wait for a better society in the future—it immortalizes

here and now. Art consists of a technology that no longer serves finite life, but infinite, immortal life. In doing so, however, art does not usually work with the things themselves but with images of things. The preserving, redemptive, reviving task of art thus ultimately remains unfulfilled. Hence art must be understood and used differently: it must be applied to human beings so that they achieve perfection. All of the people who have ever lived must rise from the dead in the form of artworks to be preserved in museums. Technology as a whole must become the technology of art. And the state must become the museum of its population. Just as the museum's administration is responsible not only for the contents of the museum collection, but also for the pristine condition of each work of art, making certain that they are subjected to conservation when they threaten to decay, so should the state bear responsibility for the resurrection and continued life of every individual person. The state can no longer allow for individuals merely to die privately, or for the dead to rest peacefully in their graves. Death's limits must be overcome by the state. The biopower must become total.

This totality is achieved by equating art with politics, life with technology, and state with museum. For Foucault the space of the museum was, characteristically, an "other place." He spoke of the museum as a place where time is accumulated, but for Foucault that was precisely what distinguished the museum from the space for the practice of life, in which there was no such accumulation.[3] Fedorov, in contrast, sought to unite living space with museum space, to overcome a heterogeneity that he took to be ideologically motivated rather than ontologically anchored. This removal of the barrier between life and death is not a matter of

introducing art into life but is rather a radical museumification of life—a life that can and should attain the privilege of immortality in a museum. By means of this merging of living space and museum space, biopower becomes infinite: it becomes the organized technology of eternal life—one that no longer accepts individual death and no longer accepts death as its "natural" limit. Such power is, of course, no longer "democratic," as no one can expect the artworks preserved in a museum collection to democratically elect the museum curator who will care for them. As soon as human beings become radically modern—that is, as soon as they are understood as bodies among bodies, things among things—they must allow the organized technology of the state to treat them accordingly. However, this allowance has a crucial precondition: the explicit goal of this state must be eternal life here on earth for all people. Only then does the state surpass the partial, limited biopower described by Foucault to become a total biopower.

In their first manifesto from 1922, the representatives of a Russian anarchist group known as the Biocosmists-Immortalists wrote:

> We take the essential and real right of man to be the right to exist (immortality, resurrection, rejuvenation) and the freedom to move in cosmic space (and not the supposed rights proclaimed by the bourgeois revolution in 1789).[4]

Hence Aleksandr Svyatogor, one of the leading Biocosmist theoreticians, subjected the classical doctrine of anarchism to a fundamental criticism by pointing out that a central power must exist to ensure every individual's immortality and freedom of movement in the cosmos.[5] Svyatogor thus took

immortality to be at once the goal and the prerequisite for a future communist society, since true social solidarity could only reign among immortals: death separates people; private property cannot truly be eliminated if every human being owns a private piece of time. The total biopower, then, must collectivize not only space but also time. The resulting eternity would allow for a resolution of conflicts between individual and society that could not have been achieved in time. As the goal of immortality is the highest goal for every individual, the individual will always remain faithful to a society that makes this its goal.[6] At the same time, only such a total society would allow people to experience life not only without temporal limits but without spatial limits: the communist society of immortals must also be "interplanetary," which is to say that it will occupy the entire space of the cosmos. Svyatogor tries to distinguish himself from Fedorov by characterizing him as old-fashioned, even archaic, for placing too much emphasis on the fraternity of all human beings.[7] Even so, the fraternity between Fedorov and the Biocosmists is clear.

The path the Biocosmists followed from radical anarchism to acceptance of Soviet power as one (possible) authority of a total biopower is characteristic of many fellow travelers of the October Revolution as well. For example, Valerian Murav'ev converted from being a fierce opponent of the Bolshevist revolution to being an advocate the moment he believed he had discovered in Soviet power a promise of the "usurping of time," that is, of the artificial production of eternity. He too saw art as a model for politics. He too saw art as the only technology that could overcome time. He too called for a departure from a purely "symbolic" art in favor of one that could render society as a whole—and

indeed the entire space of the cosmos and all time—into objects of design. A global, central, unified political leadership is an indispensable condition to solve such a task, and that is the kind of leadership he called for. But, far more radically than most of the other authors, Murav'ev was prepared to view the human being as an artwork. Murav'ev understood resurrection to follow logically from the process of copying; and even before Benjamin, Murav'ev observed that there could be no difference between the "original human being" and his or her copy under the conditions of technological reproducibility.[8] Murav'ev thus sought to purify the concept of the human being of the metaphysical and religious remains that Fedorov and the Biocosmists still clung to. For Murav'ev the human being was simply a specific mixture of chemical elements—just like every other thing in the world. For that reason Murav'ev hoped to eliminate gender difference in the future and create a non-gendered, purely artificial means of producing human beings. The human beings of the future would thus have no guilt with respect to their dead ancestors: they will owe their existence to the same technologically organized state that guarantees the duration of their existence, their immortality.

This was indeed the last step in the secularization of Christianity, for secularization remains only partial if it merely negates, censors, and prohibits the hopes, desires, and demands for life articulated by religion. It is not sufficient to simply state that there is no such thing as immortality and then prohibit people from seeking immortality. For if people are told that they cannot hope for immortality, that they lack souls and are simply things, then they can only ask why such things cannot be preserved. The response to this question is usually

that a human being is indeed something other than a mere thing, and thus cannot be preserved and copied like a mere thing. And what is this "something other," if not a soul? Thus biopower today is not really consistent in its task of enlightening its citizens. By simply leaving death to the private sphere, as Foucault rightly observed, it is ultimately left to religion, which governs the private sphere today. This is why the thinkers of Russian socialism sought to eliminate religion by replacing the immortality of the soul guaranteed by God with an immortality of the body guaranteed by the state, thereby completing the transition to a new era and a new total biopower.

These biopolitical projects may have been utopian to the extent that they were not based on any knowledge or processes that had already been achieved, but at the same time, as is often the case, they stimulated the development of purely scientific technological programs. One of the most spectacular and influential of these radical biopolitical projects in the 1920s was the rocket research that Konstantin Ciolkovskii conducted with the goal of transporting our resurrected ancestors to other planets, and this became the starting point for later Soviet space travel. Ciolkovskii himself was a follower of cosmic biopolitics who wanted to fulfill in practice Fedorov's call for the "patrification of the heavens" (that is, the transformation of the planets into habitable places for our resurrected fathers). A great deal of Ciolkovskii's many writings were devoted to the social organization of the universe, and though he believed strongly in human creativity, he still saw the human being in the best biopolitical tradition as a mere body, a thing, that as such by definition could not be creative. Most of Ciolkovskii's texts are devoted to solving this

philosophical problem central to his thinking, and his solution consisted in seeing the human brain as merely one material part of the universe. Thus all of the processes that take place in the human brain are ultimately processes that have their origin in the whole universe, which is to say the will of an individual human being is simultaneously the will of the universe. Human creativity is a passive expression of the creativity of the universe.[9]

Another fascinating biopolitical experiment, although not as influential, was the Institute for Blood Transfusion that Aleksandr Bogdanov founded and directed in the 1920s. Bogdanov had been a close personal friend of Lenin when they were young, and he was a cofounder of the intellectual and political movement within the Russian Social Democratic Party that led to Bolshevism. Later, however, he increasingly distanced himself from contemporary politics and was sharply criticized by Lenin for his favorable view of Ernst Mach and his positivist philosophy. After the revolution Bogdanov directed the famous Proletkul't in which he promoted the transformation of traditional culture into a "life-building" practice. With time, Bogdanov's thought thus evolved in the direction of an active biopolitics. At the same time, he became enthusiastic about experiments with blood transfusions, with which he hoped to slow aging, if not stop it completely. Blood transfusions from younger generations to older ones were thought to rejuvenate the elderly and establish the intergenerational solidarity that Bogdanov considered essential to establishing a just socialist society. As it happened, however, Bogdanov died from such a blood transfusion.

For the present-day reader, Bogdanov's reports on the Institute for Blood Transfusion evoke

Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*—particularly the case in which the blood of a "young student" was partially exchanged with the blood of an "elderly writer," and both supposedly benefited from this exchange.[10] This analogy is by no means coincidental. The society of vampires—that is, of immortal bodies—over which Dracula reigns, is a society of total biopower par excellence. Having been written in 1897, around the same time as Fedorov's project of the common task, *Dracula* does not, however, describe the reign of total biopower as a utopia, but as a dystopia. Hence the "human" heroes of the novel bitterly defend their right to a natural death, and the struggle against the society of the vampires that produces and guarantees the immortality of the body has continued ever since in the mass culture of the West—even when the seduction of the vampiric is not denied. The aversion to the eternity of the body is certainly not new, as the stories of Faust, Frankenstein, and Golem all demonstrate. Those stories, however, were written at a time in which faith in the immortality of the soul had not yet been completely extinguished. Vampires, by contrast, represent a society beyond all such belief—a body of the total biopower, a communist community of immortal bodies. Corporeal immortality was and still is longed for by many—especially in Russia at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. In order to understand the radical biopolitical imagination of our day, it becomes necessary to read Fedorov, Bogdanov, and Bram Stoker all together.

1
Michel Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Macmillan, 2003), 241ff.

2
See Nikolai Fedorov, "Das Museum, sein Sinn und seine Bestimmung" (The Museum, Its Meaning and Its Vocation), in *Die Neue Menschheit: Biopolitische Utopien in Rußland zu Beginn des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts* (The New Humankind: Biopolitical Utopias in Russia at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century), ed. Boris Groys and Michael Hagemeister (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995), 127–232.

3
See Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 22–27; esp. 26.

4
Kreatorii Rossiiskich i Moskovskich Anarchistov-Biokosmistov, "Deklarativnaia rezoljuciia," *Biokosmist* 1 (1922), 1.

5
See Aleksandr Svyatogor, "Die 'Doktrin der Väter' und der Anarcho-Biokosmismus" (The "Doctrine of the Fathers" and Anarcho-Biocosmism), in *Die Neue Menschheit*, 402–404.

6
Ibid.

7
Ibid.

8
Valerian Murav'ev, "Kultur als Beherrschung der Zeit" (Culture as the Control of Time), in *Die Neue Menschheit*, 441f.

9
K. E. Tsiolkovskii, "Volia Vselennoi" (Will of the Universe), in K. E. Tsiolkovskii, *Genii sredi liudi*, ed. L. V. Golovanov and E. A. Timoshenkova (Moscow, 2002), 224–31, esp. 227.

10
Alexandr Bogdanov, *God Roboty Instituta Perelivanya Krovi* (Annals of the Institute of Blood Transfusion) (Moscow: Izd. I.P.K., 1926–1927), 33.