

# **Art in the Age of its Dissolution: Beyond The Democratic Paradox**

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## **Declaration**

***I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and effort and that it has not been submitted anywhere for any award. Where other sources of information have been used, they have been acknowledged***

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## Abstract

Dating at least back to the avant-garde, the demand for increasing equality has generated several models for the production and consumption of fine art. Today, the democratisation of artistic production and the transformation of everyday life into creative work is already happening in the post-Fordist labour market. Any attempt to re-think the parameters of a democratic art practice thus necessitates a re-evaluation of what critique art might continue to offer that is not immanent in this ironic realisation of the avant-garde dream of uniting everyday life and creativity for all. Critique's current primary mode of operation, exposing that which is concealed within culture to reveal the power structures that determine it, relies on a kind of ironic gap, a hierarchy of knowledge that needs to be eliminated between how things are and how they appear. What happens, then, when this gap is closed, when we all share the underlying assumptions of critique? If the drive to democratise art has historically served as a critique of work and leisure divides outside the realm of art, how does it function in light of the new economy of the creative industry? A self-deprecating irony, exposing and re-enacting this position of impotence is one of the few gestures left in the arsenal of critical art. To overcome this stalemate, we propose an anti-humanist strategy derived from the concept of overidentification. Although related to irony, overidentification has important features that set it apart from other phenomena that fit in this category and make it a potentially useful tool in overcoming the impasse of infinite democratisation. We apply this term, which Žižek uses in passing, to a series of projects and case studies extending beyond the boundaries of professional art practice and investigate the role of authorship in producing and challenging neo-liberalism's instrumentalisation of subjectivity.

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## Introduction

Dating at least back to the avant-garde, the demand for increasing equality has generated several models for the production and consumption of fine art. For several strands of modernism, a greater democratic reach was at the heart of the aesthetic pursuit of the artist, or, even more radically, an apotheosis that would supersede art as a differentiated human activity altogether. This demand reaches its apex in Joseph Beuys' declaration that "everyone is an artist".<sup>1</sup> If art is to become democratic, must everybody become an artist, as suggested by Raoul Vaneigem?<sup>2</sup> Does everyone need to participate in art, or to buy it? Should everyone be able to? And once we have established these or other goals, would a constant revolutionary drive be necessary to keep them vital and relevant or will they just precipitate the end of art? Must utopia be deferred? In many ways, the democratisation of artistic production and the transformation of everyday life into creative work is already happening in the post-Fordist labour market, as Paolo Virno and the Italian post-Autonomists have claimed. Instead of repetitive, alienated manual labour, interrupted only by its inverse, consumption or leisure, work today relies on what Virno calls virtuosity – a specific performance of "intellectual labour".<sup>3</sup> As demonstrated by Boltanski and Chiapello's *New Spirit of Capitalism*, art's criticality is instrumentalised by this re-organisation of the ideology of work within late capitalism.<sup>4</sup> Any attempt to re-think the parameters of a democratic art practice thus necessitates a re-evaluation of what critique art might continue to offer that is not immanent in this ironic realisation of the avant-garde dream of uniting everyday life and creativity for all. Critique's current primary mode of operation, exposing that which is concealed within culture to

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Beuys, *Jeder Mensch ein Künstler*, 1975, available at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/beuys-jeder-mensch-ein-kunstler-ar00798> [accessed 17.3.13]

<sup>2</sup> Vaneigem, Raoul, "Creativity, Spontaneity and Poetry", *The Revolution of Everyday Life* [Donald Nicholson-Smith – tr.], London: Rebel Press, 1994, pp. 190 – 203.

<sup>3</sup> Virno, Paolo, "Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus," in: Virno, Paolo and Hardt, Michael [eds.], *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, pp. 188–208, available at: <http://makeworlds.net/node/34> [accessed 5.7.10].

<sup>4</sup> Boltanski, Luc and Chiapello, Ève, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London: Verso, 2007, p. 346.

reveal the power structures that determine it, relies on a kind of ironic gap, a hierarchy of knowledge that needs to be eliminated between how things are and how they appear. What happens, then, when this gap is closed, when we all share the underlying assumptions of critique? If the drive to democratise art has historically served as a critique of work and leisure divides outside the realm of art, how does it function in light of the new economy of the creative industry?

These were the questions that prompted us to investigate art's relationship to the political theory of democracy. The democratic horizon that we address in this thesis extends far beyond the institutions of liberal democracy that define our current system of governance in the West. What democracy is taken here to mean is both simpler and more elusive: a universal law of equality. This is not merely the limited equality available under the very unequal terms of a free market economy, nor is it the unending act of juggling the different needs and rights of the diverse identity groups that make up society. We make an important distinction between the universal principle of democracy and the universalism invoked by liberal humanist tradition. Our understanding of democracy posits a universalism that precedes other social structures, which might give it an expression or change and limit its direction. Crucially, this ground is social, defined by the relationship between individuals rather than inherent to them. By contrast, the liberal humanism that inflects current articulations of democratic politics proposes as its ground the essence of each individual, a talent, personality or voice that is unique to each and that is brought into the social sphere through the liberal institutions of debate, negotiation and persuasion. Equality, in this liberal formulation, is not a given and necessary ground, but something we might aspire to, a mechanism put in place to enable the co-existence of difference. This liberal concept of equality functions as a political theology, a metaphysical structure that underpins the social but is not included within it. As a consequence, society is defined by what is outside of it and cannot be touched by it; the human essence generates society without being contained by the social system.

Supporters of the liberal democratic order often claim that a commitment to the former version of equality would reduce the plurality of forms of life, opinions, discourses and ethical systems that can be found in the world to a bare minimum, that instead of allowing potential to be nurtured and realised, it would enforce an impoverished form of sameness on all. The same supporters also contend that the human world is too chaotic and unpredictable to be equal, that forms of difference emerge spontaneously out of a chance arrangement of possibilities. But we would like to argue here that we must invert this equation. We hope to show that those things that are supposedly found 'in the world', outside of or before human understanding, culture and the framing mechanism of civilisation are in themselves cultural constructs, the by-products of a liberal-democratic narrative. The state of the world as a chaotic plurality that is 'falsified' or reduced by a demand for equality is, we believe, one of the important myths of liberal democracy, standing in direct contradiction to an ideal of equality whose traces can also be found in the current democratic order.

The tradition that sustains our current system of liberal-democracy is founded on the inherently contradictory demands of equality and freedom, a paradox that political theorists from Alexis de Tocqueville to Carl Schmitt predicted would result in its failure.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, its political force relies on the sense of urgency that accompanies revolution. A stable democracy is therefore an unattainable romantic ideal, and, for post-foundationalist writers like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, represents the end of the political.<sup>6</sup> Transposed to art, this problematises the role of the artist and the way art functions within society and the market. In seeing art as a teleological process rather than a procedure, democratic discourses of art find themselves at a dead end. We explore this problem by examining specific calls for the democratisation of art in light of the debates surrounding democracy within post-foundational political

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<sup>5</sup> For De-Tocqueville, see: De Tocqueville, Alexis, "Of the Omnipotence of the Majority in the United States and Its Effects", *Democracy in America*, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1998, pp. 98 – 107.

For Schmitt, see: Schmitt, Carl, *The Concept of the Political* [Georg Schwab – tr.], Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Laclau, Ernesto and Mouffe, Chantal, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London: Verso, 2001, p. 171.

theory and post-autonomist discussions of immaterial labour. The tensions that arise from these democratic aspirations pose a serious challenge to how contemporary art understands itself. On the one hand, it is evident that contemporary art still relies on the modernist ideal of widening democratic participation and still progresses through a critique of earlier forms of democratisation. Relational art, the internationalisation of contemporary art's institutions and the 'educational turn', have all been discussed and defended as democratic projects that aim to redefine both the production and the consumption of art.<sup>7</sup> But beneath these diverse manifestations of the artistic democratic drive it is possible to locate a creeping crisis of critique. Many contemporary commentators have voiced a kind of critical ennui, a feeling that critical art is itself simply one of the vehicles of a liberal-democratic status quo. Art institutions, like the liberal democratic state at large, are caught in a debilitating paradox. In order to sustain the democratic drive, art, like the state, must keep producing zones of exclusion. These are then added to an ever-expanding catalogue of shapes or gestures (in the case of art) and ways of life or identities (in the case of Western liberalism). Democracy is experienced as a form of meta-stasis: nourished by temporary and resolvable outbreaks of contestation but ultimately supported by a dialectical structure of inclusion and exclusion. Since democracy is perceived as a revolutionary drive towards universal equality and simultaneously as a fluid, but stubborn, form of stability, critique is deemed ineffectual and inauthentic.

At the same time, the modern state, like the institutions of art, has been exposed to a different type of radical transformation in the guise of neo-liberalism. In this new socio-economic regime, the critical potential of both artists and workers in general is seen as itself a zone for the production of value. Here, too, critique finds itself not outside of dominant institutions but, on the contrary, at the heart of a neo-liberal project of workers' exploitation. To make things even worse, some of these new areas of exploitation match the

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<sup>7</sup> The links between relational art and democratic aspirations is expressed clearly in an interview with Grant Kester: Wilson, Mick, "Autonomy, Agonism and Activist Art: An Interview with Grant Kester", *College Art Association Art Journal*, Fall 2007. pp. 107 – 118. For the 'educational turn' in art, see: O'Neill, Paul and Wilson, Mick [eds.], *Curating and the Educational Turn*, London and Amsterdam: Open Editions and De Appel Arts Centre, 2010.

demand of artistic democratisation to bring down the boundaries separating creativity and alienated work. Paradoxically, then, it would appear that while the democratic aspirations of critical art can never be fulfilled, they are, at the same time, being realised through neo-liberal, post-Fordist work practices in the form of their own negative image. A self-deprecating irony, exposing and re-enacting this position of impotence is one of the few gestures left in the arsenal of critical art. It is our aim, however, to resist this erosion of the critical dimensions of contemporary art and to find new paths for critique that respond to the realities of neo-liberalism.

Throughout this dissertation, we argue that many of these problems result from the way artistic critique is constructed through dialectical thinking. We repeatedly show that this method produces states of meta-stasis, in which tensions and conflicts are neutralised and the horizon of revolutionary transformation is held at a utopian distance. Nevertheless, the critical method that we advocate is not entirely free of the dialectic. Rather, we explore the potential of inverted dialectical models in which fissures are found within a seeming unity. Instead of positioning critique at an impossible external point to the super-absorbent totality of late-capitalism, we suggest a model of immanent critique that exploits the untenable contradictions on which this system is founded and which it continues to produce. In this we do not part with Marxist tradition altogether – indeed we are indebted to Karl Marx and devote many sections to his writing and followers. However, working from within the framework of an anti-humanist Marxist critique, we hope to identify useful modes of operation for critical art today.

## **Methodology**

To address these questions, we use a broad tapestry of sources, from classical political philosophers to contemporary commentators on fine art, from post-Marxist critiques of labour to ethnographic studies of subcultures. We developed this approach firstly because we do not think that a definitive,

satisfactory account of overidentification has been written yet. Although Slavoj Žižek's presence can be felt throughout the dissertation, and although he has come closest to providing a theory of overidentification, we want to expand the discussion beyond the associations of this strategy with particular practitioners, most notably the Slovenian group Neue Slowenische Kunst [fig. 1]. While we acknowledge their important work in this field, it is precisely because we recognise the specificity of the socio-political and historico-geographical context in which they developed this work that we would like to find a broader context in which to apply it. Our appropriation of the term therefore situates it in relation to the discourses of democracy, irony and immaterial labour already mentioned. Secondly, our eclectic methodology is aimed at examining the dialectical relationship of art to the everyday. We want to avoid describing this as a hermetic process in which art captures moments of the everyday in its authoring and civilising web and is, in turn, captured by the commodification of the art market. We believe that cultural and political ideas exist in a more complex and nuanced relationship in which they each define, and occasionally contradict, each other. Just as much as art today, in the post-conceptual era, is often thought of as the expression of ideas, political thought shares the idealism of art (in using, for example, the elusive figure of the pre-societal human) and is far from being a field of cold pragmatism. In general, we believe that the arena of ideology today is comprised of aesthetic and ethical, artistic and political questions that cannot be separated. Just as art is no longer a distinct area of production but serves as a paradigm for a more general category of post-Fordist labour, so politics is constituted in the aesthetic and performative field of subjectivisation. Increasingly, political ideas are expressed and interrogated through an engagement with the performance of the self in consumerism: politics is far from being the reasoned debate between subjects in the public sphere imagined by liberal writers, when it is, literally, inscribed in the body.

The lack of specialism of post conceptual art and the more general erosion of labour categories in the workplace are reflected in our own collaborative practice. As artists, we work mainly in film and performance but without limiting ourselves to addressing medium specific questions about the

cinematic or the theatrical. We also write, teach, curate and run a gallery but do not think of any of these preoccupations as dominant. Rather than perceiving this broad and diverse practice as a political solution, set against a lingering formalist tradition in art, we understand that it is nothing more than a reflection of the demands of the labour market. The freedom of the artist, like that of the contemporary worker in general, is no longer a desirable exception. The precarity of work has become a new instrument of oppression – and to a large extent, this dissertation is our attempt to find new ways to offer some resistance to these demands.

Alongside the structuring of the dissertation around a parallel reading of political theory and art theory, it is also organised through a historical or chronological narrative. Although in all the chapters we move back and forth between theoretical abstractions and specific historical examples and between contemporary authors and artists and older ones, the dissertation encompasses a movement from the modern to the postmodern. The first two chapters deal roughly with the modernist paradigm: we describe political and cultural systems that have operated through dialectical oppositions between areas of exclusion and inclusion, defined in relation to modern institutions from the sovereign nation state to the museum. In the first chapter, these zones of exclusion and institutional exclusions are described primarily in relation to the democratic state, while in the second they are considered in relation to art and the everyday. These two chapters enable us to move towards the more recent developments that characterise the contemporary condition. From one perspective, once this economy of inclusion and exclusion is understood as exactly that, as a dialectical balancing of oppositions that constitute each other, we end up with a post-dialectical irony, a culture that experiences itself as incapable of change. On the other hand, through the re-organisation of work under neo-liberalism and the capturing of more areas of life in the capitalist procedures of surplus value production, these distinctions - between life and work, art and the everyday, the producer and the consumer - are collapsed from within.

Our explicit mission here, to reiterate, is not just to describe these developments but also to identify new modes of resistance in relation to them. Rather than settle for the irony that brands critique impotent, we want to understand what other critical tools might be available to us that do not follow the same trajectory and that open up new, post-dialectical possibilities. The main option that we choose to follow here is the concept of overidentification, and we describe the relationship between this and the ironic position that we reject in our last chapter.

## Structure

In the first chapter, we set up the terms of an enquiry into the inherent tensions and contradictions within the concept of democracy in political theory. As we have already explained, the current formulation of liberal-democracy is an untenable synthesis of two conflicting traditions, one in which individual rights take precedence over collectivity, the other in which equality is paramount. It is this democratic paradox that underlies the current crisis of art as a political field. We would like to identify this duality at the heart of democracy and trace the problematic conflation of democracy as a revolutionary project and democracy as a political system through several permutations. Rather than viewing democracy as always historically contingent or as a pure, universal philosophical ideal, we are interested in the tension that the mixture of both generates in the texts under discussion.

A particular strand of the critique of the democratic paradox focuses on the early twentieth century debate around the origin of state power within democracy. Carl Schmitt posits this power as existing outside the framework of the laws of the state.<sup>8</sup> For Schmitt, liberal democracy is not a political system in its own right but simply the temporary suspension of the realm of the political. For him, the excluded political must always return to haunt the

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<sup>8</sup> Particularly useful in this context is: Schmitt, Carl, *Political Theology: Four Chapters On The Concept Of Sovereignty* [Georg Schwab – tr.], Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985. We provide a detailed survey of the critical responses to Schmitt's ideas in the first chapter.



liberal democratic state and indeed even today it is still fraught with a sense of anxiety about its status. It is still possible to find accounts of democracy as both a coherent and stable political system and a negative suspension of the political, as a system built on perpetual expansion and a spent form of citizenship that has exhausted its historical, modern, form. Democracy seems to be always occupying two contradictory positions. More recently, writers like Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou have been returning to Schmitt's discussion of political theology to address the current crisis of democracy and find alternatives to the neo-liberal consensus. Throughout the chapter, we follow several historical configurations of the paradox as a series of tensions between freedom and equality; between competing narratives of the foundations of society; between individual decision and collective action as political engines; and between abstract concepts and situated historical narratives of democratic transformations. In response to these contradictions, current political theory reinstates a universalism that transcends the paradox. Some of the writers we deal with in chapter one address this very state of constant change, a system in which the borders between the excluded and the included are always questioned, as a form of stability in itself. The idea of a 'meta-stability' that encloses tensions and conflicts in a universal frame receives a positive expression in the work of authors like Mouffe and a negative expression in the work of others like Agamben.<sup>9</sup> But both accounts create a new set of problems. Both ask of political agents to act without belief, to engage in debate and contestation, to defend positions, but always with the knowledge that these positions are not ends in their own right, not final goals, but only temporary sides in an argument that can never be settled. Since the liberal democratic order is defined by its instability, by its movement, without commitment, between positions, any definite belief in one solution or another is impossible. Our survey of the field therefore ends with an interrogation of the tenability of this ironic mode of political subjectivity.

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<sup>9</sup> For Mouffe, see: Mouffe, Chantal, *The Democratic Paradox*, London: Verso, 2000. For Agamben: Agamben, Giorgio, *State of Exception* [Kevin Attell – tr.], Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

In the second chapter, the paradox of democracy, expounded in the first chapter from within the context of political theory, is applied to the field of contemporary art. This chapter is divided into two main sections. In the first, we trace early manifestations of the democratic paradox in two competing, yet complimentary, traditions of the European avant-garde: Dada and constructivism. In these two strands, the tension between equality and freedom, the individual and the collective, the autonomous and the everyday, is formulated differently, producing variants of the paradox that can be located at different points on the liberal democratic spectrum. But despite these differences, both traditions operate in a dialectical manner in relation to these dyads, both looking to establish a third, synthetic position to overcome the internal conflicts of their democratic drive. As a result, ultimately, both traditions collapse under the weight of the dialectical structure that defines them. Nevertheless, we attempt here to rebuff the postmodern narrative of the avant-garde as a chronicle of inevitable failure. Rather than seeing the essence of the democratic project as a logical impossibility, we advocate a position according to which the problem with these movements is located not in their democratic drive, but in the dialectical structure of their critique. By isolating several moments in both Dada and the Russian post-revolutionary avant-garde that do not follow the same dialectical trajectory, we claim that another history of the avant-garde is possible and that in it we can still discover an unexhausted critical tension, which we suggest is closer to our subsequent description of over-identification.

In the post-war era, the problematic dialectical structure of the avant-garde solidified into an ironic position towards the possibilities and aims of the democratic project. Art was deemed incapable of ever fulfilling its own democratic ambition to overcome the gap between its own language and institutions and the everyday. The democratic critique of art gradually shifted towards an ironic self-awareness and a critique of its own impotence. In the second section of this chapter we follow two versions of this post-war manifestation of the paradox: Allan Kaprow's treatise, "The Education of the

Un-artist" (1971 – 1974), and Boris Groys's *Art Power* (2008).<sup>10</sup> In Kaprow's version, radical forms of artistic innovation are undone by their own preservation, whether through attempted sidestepping, affirmation or negation, of the conventions of art and its institutions. Their critique of established forms is inevitably absorbed into the canon: for example, the operation of the readymade, which Kaprow names 'non-art' - the removal of objects from 'life' and their placement in the sphere of art - becomes another acceptable form of art making, another known gesture in the vocabulary of art. Kaprow's resolution of the paradox arrives in his notion of 'art as play'. However, this solution is no less problematic since it relies explicitly on the dialectical dyad art/work which, as we argue in the next chapter, becomes uncritical in the wake of the changes to the nature of work under post-Fordism.

A similar trajectory is followed up in relation to Boris Groys' writing. Here, Groys recognises the fact that the artistic attempt to negate the space of the museum or of the canon of art is paradoxical. According to Groys, the expansion of the palate of artistic gestures against those already preserved in the museum cannot but be incorporated into the space of the institution. The museum itself, through its economy and ideology of archiving of differences, demands this variation on, or even negation of, older forms. Groys' solution is ironic: we are asked to continue believing in art, despite understanding the contradictions it relies on. Both the artist and the curator participate in this game, knowing that full equality and a real rejection of the old can never be achieved. Consequently, newness becomes an empty gesture divorced from a political project.

Finally, using Guy Debord's writing on contemporary art, we propose that the Situationist formulation of the paradox represents a more complex and subtle dialectic that allows for more room for maneuvering than Kaprow's identification of art with play or Groys' affirmation of institutional power.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For Kaprow: Kaprow, Allan, "Education of the Un-Artist, Part 1", *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* [ed. Jeff Kelley], Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003. For Groys: Groys, Boris, *Art Power*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle* [Donald Nicholson-Smith], New York: Zone Books, 1997.

Despite Debord's pessimistic view of art, the Situationist concept of *détournement* as a practice in a field of contradictions moves away from the paralysis of Kaprow and Groys.

In the third chapter, we propose an anti-humanist critique of creative labour and suggest that a non-instrumentalised art can no longer be posited as a humanist outside to alienated work. Our use of this anti-humanist tradition forms one part of a triadic movement towards a critique of neoliberal conditions of labour in their relationship to creativity and artistic production and consumption. The other two parts of this triangle are a discussion of immaterial labour and an analysis of the limits of a dialectical critical model in resolving some of the difficulties arising from these new conditions of work. If artistic critical procedures are not only incorporated into the normative modes of capitalist production, but to an extent form its ideological core, critique in art can no longer be seen as oppositional. We locate this problem in the reliance of dialectical critical models on humanist ideas about the role of creativity. This trait is presented as central in the construction of the pre-social individual introduced in the first chapter as an embodiment of the founding myth of liberalism.

As manufacturing jobs gradually disappear from the developed world, workers are increasingly asked to incorporate skills and modes of production taken from the creative work previously pitted against the drudgery of capitalist work. The dialectical gap between these two modes has become untenable as a platform from which critique can emerge, and the two types of work have turned out to inhabit the same world, subject to the same logic of commodification. In this new terrain of labour, when art can no longer be seen as the negation of work, it becomes important to rethink the tools offered to us by the operation of dialectics and to try and find new openings or new possibilities where old dichotomies have collapsed. Using the work of the Italian post-Autonomists to contextualise this problem, we survey in this chapter the literature surrounding the question of immaterial labour and, in particular, attempts to find a formulation of critique that moves away from the cul-de-sac of the art/work dialectic. Using a second strand of thought that

stems from a Maoist critique of dialectics, we also propose here that the rejection of this dialectical relationship can lead to a more effective utilisation of the weakness and inherent contradictions of neo-liberal ideology.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, in our fourth and final chapter, we move on to discuss the relationship between irony and overidentification. If, as we have claimed, there is a version of democracy that reaches a dead end around the impossibility of asserting a universal project while embracing pluralism, holding on to that idea of democracy requires an ironic subject. In the absence of a *telos*, this democracy seems hollow, since it asks that we both maintain our belief in a political project of ‘the social good’ and remain ironic about our ability to achieve it. However, by considering a broad spectrum of ironic stances, some of which are more productive than others, we would like to further investigate the role of irony in generating and addressing the democratic paradox. In particular, in this chapter we would like to focus on the concept of overidentification. Although related to irony, overidentification has important features that set it apart from other phenomena that fit in this category and make it a potentially useful tool in overcoming the impasse of infinite democratisation. Žižek uses this term to suggest that the answer to the liberal tolerance of irony is in fact to “take the system more seriously than it takes itself seriously”.<sup>13</sup> We would like to apply this term, which Žižek uses in passing, to a series of projects and case studies extending beyond the boundaries of professional art practice.

In each of our previous chapters we identify voices and strategies that diverge from the dialectical methodology that stands at the heart of the democratic paradox and have attempted to establish a competing tradition of thinking about critique through a different approach to setting up oppositions and conflicts. We detect such moments in the avant-garde, as well as in the

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<sup>12</sup> This Maoist tradition is taken from Alain Badiou’s writing but we trace its origins back to Althusser and Mao himself.

Badiou, Alain, “One Divides itself into Two”, in: *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth* [Sebastian Budgen, Eustache Kouvélakis and Slavoj Žižek - eds.], Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007

<sup>13</sup> Slavoj Žižek speaking in: Benson, Michael, *Predictions of Fire*, New York, NY: Kinetikon Pictures, 1996.

writings of Marx, Debord, Louis Althusser and Badiou, for example. Here we propose a grouping of these moments under the term overidentification. However, we also aim to present our own very specific interpretation of this term and to measure this interpretation against certain definitions of irony. Several theoreticians and artists have adopted the term overidentification to describe a kind of practice that could easily fall under the remit of something like irony, parody or satire. We would like to propose a different definition of overidentification that would reject such practices and expose them as contiguous with the culture that they attempt to critique. However, rather than disown any ironic dimension to this concept, we think we need to suggest a more nuanced understanding of irony that would differentiate the way we understand overidentification from what we would say are its less persuasive articulations. To do this, we analyse the conceptions of irony elaborated by Kierkegaard, Lefebvre and Rorty, wherein we attempt to identify ironic forms closer to our understanding of overidentification.<sup>14</sup>

We develop our concept of overidentification in particular in relation to post-colonialism, with reference to certain cultural practices, like the *Hauka* rituals documented in Jean Rouch's film *The Mad Masters* [fig. 2], or the subculture of the Congolese *Sapeurs* [fig. 3]. We argue that these examples can be seen as critical forms of overidentification with European colonial power. But we also choose to focus on them because they seem to operate at the same site of subjectivity that post-Fordism relies on for its operation. In bringing together the political and the performative, consumerism and subjectivisation, these examples respond particularly well to the contradictory demands of neo-liberalism. On the one hand, this system is still built around a modernist notion of exclusion (national, cultural and racial borders) and, on the other, it requires a kind of maximal inclusion (of new forms of labour and value). Our case studies do not share the ironic melancholy that we describe earlier. They embrace the power operating on them, and yet this embrace exceeds the

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<sup>14</sup> The Main texts used are: for Rorty - Rorty, Richard, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.; for Lefebvre - Lefebvre, Henri, "On Irony, Maieutic and History" in *Introduction to Modernity*, London: Verso, 1995.; for Kierkegaard - Kierkegaard, Søren, *The Concept of Irony* [Lee M. Capel – tr.], Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press, 1965.

bounds of what this power can tolerate: if they resist the colonial or post-colonial order, it is through a positive identification with its power.

An important problem, however, arises from our use of these examples: if these are not instances of practice authored as artwork, do they then require our appropriation to function critically? What is the role of the anthropologist or researcher in notifying us of these modes of behaviour, and where does this role sit in relation to that of the artist? Can overidentification only 'work' when it is lived but not theorised or understood by its agents? If overidentification does not resolve itself like irony by being understood on a 'higher' plane, the idea of deliberately instigating it strategically runs the risk of an ironic resolution that elevates the artist above the institution or system under investigation. How could these situations be understood as convincing gestures of belief, when they later simply contribute to the accumulation of value as cultural capital for the artist? It is in order to deal with these issues that our conclusion turns to the question of authorship. This question is also central for us for another reason. Since the construction of the author in contemporary art is tied to the more general category of the neo-liberal individual, it is important to consider the relationship between the two paradigms. If the neo-liberal individual is caught between opposing forces and is both a utopian horizon for liberalism and a commodity inside its markets, we would like to understand how this conflict takes place within the field of contemporary art and its discourse.

## Chapter 1: Paradoxes of Democracy

In this chapter, we would like to set up the terms of an enquiry into the inherent tensions and contradictions within the concept of democracy in political theory. Democracy can be simply defined as sovereignty of the people.<sup>1</sup> But it also encompasses opposing political tendencies subsumed within the term. The uneasy compromise between liberal and democratic traditions within contemporary articulations of democracy has been defined by Chantal Mouffe, writing about Carl Schmitt's critique of liberal-democracy, as a paradox. The notion that a split arises within democracy when it is conceived as at once a localised historical struggle with specific aims and a form of state or government recurs in the writings of the contemporary theorists we have chosen to examine. We would like to identify this duality at the heart of democracy and trace the problematic conflation of democracy as a revolutionary project and democracy as a political system through several formulations. To do this, we will draw on Norberto Bobbio's analysis of liberal-democracy, Giorgio Agamben's reading of Schmitt, Ernesto Laclau and Mouffe's delineation of a radical democracy, the debate about pluralism instigated by Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou and the response of Slavoj Žižek to many of these writers, as well as the historical schemas proposed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Alexis de Tocqueville.<sup>2</sup> We establish where these debates locate the universal basis of democracy in order to distance the political ideal from its realisation in the neo-liberal consensus. In juxtaposing recent writers' examinations of the paradoxical nature of democracy, we hope to prepare the ground for the transposition of the terms of this discussion to the context of contemporary art and the legacy of the avant-garde in the next chapters, leading up to our discussion of the roles of belief, irony and overidentification in rethinking the democratic paradox.

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<sup>1</sup> As Alexis de Tocqueville does in his analysis of the American political system. See especially Chapter 3 (IV), "The Principle of the Sovereignty of the People of America", in: De Tocqueville, Alexis, *Democracy in America*, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1998, pp. 30-33.

<sup>2</sup> We are indebted in this discussion, particularly in the case of Schmitt, Badiou and Rancière, to work undertaken in the Political Currency of Art research group's reading sessions on selected texts through 2007-8.



Our investigation begins with an identification of the various ways in which the idea of a democratic paradox has been configured by different writers and then focuses on the particular form it takes in relation to the concept of political theology. Throughout the chapter, we refer to writings from different periods and alternate between using historical examples and more generalised philosophical claims. Our intent is neither to produce a chronological account of historical actually existing democracies nor to trace a lineage of philosophical thinking about democracy. We prefer to focus on the conflicts arising from the contradiction between certain legal understandings of democracy and the liberal values embedded in much thinking about the subject. Rather than viewing democracy as always historically contingent or as a pure, universal philosophical ideal, we are interested in the tension that the mixture of both in the texts under discussion generates.

### **Liberty Begets Equality Begets Liberty**

Our point of departure in this discussion will be the parameters set by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Alexis de Tocqueville, from which we can begin to unpack the paradoxes of democracy. Despite the different historical circumstances that informed Rousseau's and de Tocqueville's writing, leading to and in the aftermath of the French revolution respectively, there are many points of comparison between the two writers. According to Tracy B. Strong, both writers sought political institutions to counter the tendency of modern political systems towards tyranny, Rousseau in his *Social Contract* and Tocqueville in the existing political institutions and constitution of American democracy.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, despite this shared underlying understanding of politics, de Tocqueville and Rousseau present us with two very different accounts of the relationship between freedom and equality, leaving us with diametrically opposed versions of the democratic paradox.

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<sup>3</sup> Strong, Tracy B., "Seeing Further and Seeing Differently: Rousseau and Tocqueville," in: D. Bathory and N. Schwartz [eds.] *Friends and Citizens: Essays Presented to Wilson Carey McWilliams*, Lanham, MD: Rowman, 2000, p.107

Rousseau asserts that “for a newly formed people to understand wise principles of politics and to follow the basic rules of statecraft, the effect would have to become the cause; the social spirit which must be the product of social institutions would have to preside over the setting up of those institutions; men would have to have already become before the advent of law that which they become as a result of law”.<sup>4</sup> The self-determination of the state is thus inherently paradoxical, the force of its law having no discernible origin within the bounds of its formulation by definition. Moreover, the social contract produces a kind of paradox of freedom. In the state of nature, individuals are free to assert their power, and yet in abandoning this liberty to join their forces and form a community, they gain a higher moral freedom: “man acquires with civil society, moral freedom, which alone makes man the master of himself; for to be governed by appetite alone is slavery, while obedience to a law one prescribes to oneself is freedom”.<sup>5</sup> Rousseau’s subject is released from enslavement to his passions and if he try to break this pact, he is forced back into this higher freedom by the social body: “...whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the whole [social] body, which means nothing other than that he shall be forced to be free”.<sup>6</sup>

A specific relation between freedom and equality arises from this account of the state’s formation. Rousseau begins by attempting to prove that men are born free. Equality, on the other hand, is the outcome of a procedure whereby the “articles of association, rightly understood, are reducible to a single one, namely the total alienation by each associate of himself and all his rights to the whole community”.<sup>7</sup> Never a principle in its own right, or an attribute of natural law, equality is a structural feature of the social contract that enables the distribution of rights and power to function smoothly. Pure equality, in and of itself, is relegated to the metaphysical: “If there were a nation of Gods, it

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<sup>4</sup> Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *The Social Contract*, London: Penguin Books, 2004, p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

would govern itself democratically. A government so perfect is not suited to men”.<sup>8</sup>

Alexis de Tocqueville’s analysis of the democratic paradox relies to an extent on an inversion of Rousseau’s in that it privileges equality over freedom. De Tocqueville maintains that “[t]he principle of the sovereignty of the people, which is always to be found, more or less, at the bottom of almost all human institutions, generally remains there, concealed from view”.<sup>9</sup> In democracy, not only is this principle more visible, it also takes priority over liberty:

“...democratic communities have a natural taste for freedom. Left to themselves, they will seek it, cherish it, and view any privation of it with regret. But for equality their passion is ardent, insatiable, incessant, invincible; they call for equality in freedom; and if they cannot obtain that, they still call for equality in slavery. They will endure poverty, servitude, barbarism, but they will not endure aristocracy”.<sup>10</sup> Individualism – and de Tocqueville uses the word advisedly since he is describing a culturally generated and ideologically determined construct and not a natural state – is the product of the given terms of equality, grafted on to society rather than preceding it. In a non-democratic society, people are organised in relation to one another in hierarchical structures that do not allow them individualistic self-determination – one is either father to son, serf to lord, or in any other such relative position. Individualist liberty arises precisely from the equality enshrined in democracy: “As social conditions become more equal, the number of persons increases who, although they are neither rich nor powerful enough to exercise any great influence over their fellows, have nevertheless acquired or retained sufficient education and fortune to satisfy their own wants. They owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands”.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>9</sup> De Tocqueville, Alexis, *Democracy in America*, p. 30.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 206.

This reversal of Rousseau's account of the foundation of the state as movement from freedom to equality has important consequences for the democratic paradox. Rousseau defines a lack, a concession of liberty, as the essence of the foundational act. This leads him to a very static description of the structure of the law governing the state, which forms around this gap and works to close it, paying off the debt which it now owes the people in return for the power that they cede to it in their self-alienation. By contrast, de Tocqueville suggests a dynamic, historical model for the paradox, in which equality tends to infinite expansion, stemming from a natural inclination and producing individual freedom, or atomisation, as it spreads: "There is no more invariable rule in the history of society: the further electoral rights are extended, the greater is the need of extending them; for after each concession the strength of the democracy increases, and its demands increase with its strength. The ambition of those below the appointed rate is irritated in exact proportion to the great number of those who are above it. The exception at last becomes the rule, concession follows concession, and no stop can be made short of universal suffrage".<sup>12</sup> The metaphysical analogy used by Rousseau to explain the impossibility of true democracy becomes a generalised condition in which democracy aspires to deity and realises the divine as a utopian thrust: "The people reign in the American political world as the Deity does in the universe. They are the cause and the aim of all things; everything comes from them, and everything is absorbed in them".<sup>13</sup>

## Pairings

In what follows we will see how the tension between the static structural understanding of the democratic paradox and a more temporal model that rejects democracy as a form of state and defines it as a revolutionary drive continues to shape contemporary debates on the subject. The limitations of considering the paradox as a logical structure become clear when we examine more closely particular instances and terminologies in which it is couched in

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

specific texts. There is a philosophical tradition that follows Rousseau's version of the paradox and leads up to Giorgio Agamben's exposition of sovereignty in the state of exception, running through Carl Schmitt's juridical exegesis. But there is a competing strand of thinking about the subject that posits the paradox as part of a more dynamic, dialectical trajectory that can be traced back to De Tocqueville. Despite the fact that, writing against the background of the recent French revolution, De Tocqueville devotes a substantial part of his analysis to the dangers of the instability structured into democracy's revolutionary, expansive tendencies, his aims come closer to Mouffe and Laclau's project of radical democracy, which we will be looking at below. In asking how democracy might continue its revolutionary task once it has come to define the status quo, he places internal conflict between individuals as central to its vitality. This conception of the paradox becomes especially useful when we consider the way the American civil rights movement, feminism and other struggles of the sixties focused on extending equality through society culminated in the heightened individualism of neoliberalism. As David Harvey has commented:

"The movements of the 1960s had that dual character. During the 1960s they could sort of combine rather uneasily around the idea that individual liberty and freedom and social justice and sustainability and the like were things we were all collectively concerned with. But in some instances there were real schisms within that movement. I think what happened in the 1970s is that when the neoliberal move came in, the idea erupted that, okay, neoliberalism will give you individual liberty and freedom, but you just have to forget social justice and you just have to forget environmental sustainability and all the rest of it. Just think about individual liberty and freedom in particular, and we're going to meet your desires and your interests through the individual liberties of market choice – freedom of the market is what it's all about. In a sense, there was a response by neoliberals to the sixties movement by saying, we can respond to that aspect about what the sixties was about, but we cannot respond to that other aspect. And I think therefore what we see is a movement in the 1970s where many people who were active in the 1960s were co-opted into the neoliberal train of thinking and neoliberal ways of

consumerism as part of how neoliberalization established itself. It is a very broad way of looking at it, but I tend to think that that is what happened".<sup>14</sup>

Rather than a failure of these struggles, the rise of neoliberalism can be seen as an expression of a predisposition of the democratic project. We return to the consequences of the attempt to move beyond identity politics and reassert universalism below.

First, though, it is important to disentangle historical concepts of democracy, liberalism and socialism from their philosophical counterparts. Norberto Bobbio's *Liberalism and Democracy* attempts this by demonstrating the ways in which such ideas are conceived retroactively in their 'pure' forms, obfuscating inherent conflicts and contradictions that arise from the historical evolution of forms of state. Thus, the idea of a natural state of Man, from which a social contract can be arrived at, reverses the historical fact of the liberal state resulting from the erosion of sovereign power. For example, the Magna Carta might appear to be a sovereign concession of rights, but its juridical form obscures the pact between opposing factions to which it in fact attests.<sup>15</sup> Framing these historical conflicts are the competing tendencies of democracy and liberalism, which Bobbio defines in terms of positive freedom, the right to act, and negative freedom, the right to be protected from the actions of others:

To consider this constant dialectical interplay between liberalism and democracy in the perspective of general political theory is to realise that underlying the conflict between the liberals, with their demand that the state should govern as little as possible, and the democrats, with their demand that the government of the state should rest as far as possible in the hands of the citizens [...] is a clash between two different understandings of liberty.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Cited in: Lilley, Sasha, "On Neoliberalism: An Interview with David Harvey", in: *Monthly Review*, New York, June 2006, available at: <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/lilley190606.html> [accessed 27.01.09]

<sup>15</sup> Bobbio, Norberto, *Liberalism and Democracy*, London: Verso, 2005, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.89.

Positive freedom is perceived in liberal doctrine to have been suited to the ancient world, but not to the modern, in which security and private property prevail over the right to engage in society.<sup>17</sup> Liberalism, then, is a struggle in defence of both a minimal and a rights-based state, but these aspects of liberalism do not necessarily coincide in practice. It is possible to have an absolute state that is economically liberal but does not respect rights. Bobbio gives the example of Hobbes' Leviathan: "a state which is at one and the same time absolute in the fullest sense of the term and liberal in its economics".<sup>18</sup> But, one could equally apply this to present day China, where "[t]he weird combination of capitalism and Communist rule [has] proved not to be a ridiculous paradox".<sup>19</sup> At the same time, a rights-based maximal state is also easily conceivable, "as with the social state today".<sup>20</sup>

Democracy, for Bobbio, is simply "government by the people as opposed to government by one or by the few".<sup>21</sup> But while this limited, or formal sense of democracy is compatible with liberalism, it also has a substantial meaning of "government for the people", which is incompatible with it (and perhaps could be more fully realised through the socialist Leninist dogma of the temporary suspension of democracy in order to allow for a wider sense of popular sovereignty which includes the economic sphere).<sup>22</sup> And since in practice this right to take collective decisions takes the form of a government, it finds itself recombined with elements of liberalism or socialism which determine its historical and geographic specificity:

[T]he fact that the democratic ideal has been embraced by both the liberal movement and by the antithetical socialist movement, with the result that both liberal-democratic and social-democratic governments have come into being [...], might incline one to conclude that for the last two centuries democracy has figured as a kind of common denominator among all the regimes that

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, "No Shangri-La", *London Review of Books*, Vol. 30 No. 8, 24 April 2008, at: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v30/n08/letters.html> [accessed 18.01.09].

<sup>20</sup> Bobbio, Norberto, *ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.32.

have developed in the economically and politically advanced countries. However, we should not automatically assume that the concept of democracy has remained unaltered in the passage from liberal to social democracy. In the liberalism-democracy couple, democracy means above all universal suffrage, and thus a means whereby particular individuals can freely express their will. In the socialism-democracy coupling, it signifies above all the egalitarian ideal, which can only be achieved by the property reforms proposed by socialism. In the former case democracy is a consequence, in the latter it is a presupposition.<sup>23</sup>

Democracy therefore has few essential values in abstraction from its allegiances with either socialism or liberalism. This bivalence of democracy, while generating internal conflict, is also a safeguard against the totalities to which both liberalism and socialism might otherwise tend, either despotism, a form of power without limit, or bureaucracy, power without accountability.<sup>24</sup> This idea of the benefit of conflict is nevertheless especially compatible with liberal thinking, which values diversity over conformity.<sup>25</sup>

### **Exceptions**

It is this inconsistency at the heart of liberal democracy that attracted the criticism of Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt, on which writers like Agamben and Mouffe continue to draw today. Schmitt presents his theory of sovereignty and critique of liberalism in terms of a 'political theology', in which the exception parallels the Catholic miracle: the exception sits outside the law, and yet constitutes it by defining its limits, just as the miracle is external to ordinary experience and yet paramount for the faith that sustains it:

All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development – in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby,

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21-2.



for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver – but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts. The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology.<sup>26</sup>

The desire to posit a self-contained rational system obscures the void created by the evacuation of faith from its core, and it is this failure to account for the role of belief in the political project that we will later see recurring in different variations on the critique of liberal democracy. According to Schmitt, at any rate, it is the weakness of liberal societies that they attempt to deny their own theological foundations. Having secularised the institutions of the state, they reject the implications of sovereignty and try to replace decisionism with discussion:

Just as liberalism discusses and negotiates every political detail, so it also wants to dissolve metaphysical truth in a discussion. The essence of liberalism is negotiation, a cautious half measure, in the hope that the definitive dispute, the decisive bloody battle, can be transformed into a parliamentary debate and permit the decision to be suspended forever in an everlasting discussion.<sup>27</sup>

However, for Schmitt, since the exception is the foundation of the law and of sovereignty, it is this foundation – explicit in societies that acknowledge the divine source of the sovereign's power but repressed in post-enlightenment, secular political life – which is exposed when a state of emergency is declared, and the law suspends itself. In the words of Michael Zank:

In a critical move against the liberal assumption of the sufficiency of law to order the entire range of political problems, Schmitt had argued that sovereignty is revealed only by the state of emergency and that the sovereign is the one who has the power to invoke it. According to Schmitt, who reaffirmed and defended his views in a second edition published in the 1950s, this extra- or pre-legal authority distinguishes the political as the foundation of

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<sup>26</sup> Schmitt, Carl, *Political Theology: Four Chapters On The Concept Of Sovereignty* [Georg Schwab – tr.], Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985, p. 36.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 63

the state. The state is constituted by a political sovereignty that precedes the law and may in fact exist without it. Liberal political theory lacks the tools needed to analyze this duality of sovereignty and the law because it is insufficiently aware of its own religious roots.<sup>28</sup>

In the presence of a real enemy, in a real catastrophe, deliberation will not do and the violence implicit in sovereignty is released. This situation is exacerbated in the particular case of liberal democracy, because democracy equates the sovereign with the people. Schmitt asserts that “[t]he specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy”.<sup>29</sup> But if everyone in a society is equal, there can be no such distinction and therefore no politics. The state still needs to define who is of the people and who is not in order to locate its own government, but it cannot do so from within the bounds of its self-description. Thus, democracy derives its politics from outside its own logic and doesn’t have enough self-knowledge to account for this sleight of hand.

This enquiry is taken up by Agamben, as he explores the role of the exceptional in determining political norms and describes the current crisis of an immanent state of emergency, which turns the exceptional into the norm. In a permanent state of exception, the state can no longer confer the ‘good life’ of citizenship to its subjects and thus reduces life into that which precedes this status, what Agamben calls “bare life”, a narrow bio-political definition of what it is to be ‘human’, meaningless beyond the most basic biological forces that are shaped and controlled by the state. For Agamben, this crisis stems from the very definition of sovereignty and political life and is therefore shared by authoritarian dictatorships and liberal-democracies alike. However, following Walter Benjamin, he claims that “in conformity with a continuing tendency in all of the Western democracies, the declaration of the state of exception has gradually been replaced by an unprecedented generalization of the paradigm

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<sup>28</sup> Zank, Michael, “Beyond the ‘Theologico-Political Predicament’: Toward a Contextualization of the Early Strauss”, 2005, at: [http://www.bu.edu/mzank/Michael\\_Zank/Beyond\\_Theo\\_Pol.pdf](http://www.bu.edu/mzank/Michael_Zank/Beyond_Theo_Pol.pdf) [accessed 24/07/07].

<sup>29</sup> Schmitt, Carl, *The Concept of the Political* [Georg Schwab – tr.], Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 26.

of security as the normal technique of government”, in other words, the state of exception has become the norm.<sup>30</sup> As emergency politics proliferate, so does their subject become a ubiquitous bare life: “[...] naked life, which was the hidden foundation of sovereignty, has meanwhile become the dominant form of life everywhere”.<sup>31</sup>

In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben identifies a long lineage of political theory, which distinguishes between two meanings of life, the Greek *zoe* – or life in general common to man and animal - versus *bios* – life proper to an individual or a group. He traces this distinction to modern differentiations between humans and citizens as expressed through the idea, for instance, of civil rights as opposed to human rights. If states are social contracts set up to protect people from the potential of pre-societal anarchy and violence, as for instance in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s formulation, then it is on the exclusion of this notion of a human condition outside society on which they are founded. The existence of a denuded human category which must be given rights, is therefore a product of the state, and vice versa: the state is produced from the exclusion of a raw state of nature, which it simultaneously includes and even creates in order to define itself in opposition to it. This is why liberal democracies can have people within them who are refugees with no rights: the distinction between friend and enemy is extant, though unacknowledged. It is this bare life that dwells within the state of exception in which we now, according to Agamben, all live: “At once excluding bare life and capturing it within the political order, the state of exception actually constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested”.<sup>32</sup>

Agamben suggests this foundation of human society is hidden within the figure of the sovereign, a mirror image of bare life: the sovereign’s capacity to

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<sup>30</sup> Agamben, Giorgio, *State of Exception* [Kevin Attell – tr.], Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Agamben, Giorgio, “Form-Of-Life”, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics (Theory Out of Bounds)* [Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino - Tr.], Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, pp. 6-7.

<sup>32</sup> Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, California: Stanford University Press, 1995, p.9

decide on the limits of the law and to embody a violence external to it but which at the same time constitutes the law is what enables the rest of society to live as political, civilised beings. In a 'functional' state, bare life is never a part of political life - it only emerges in extreme states such as war, when the law is suspended and survival is at stake. But, Agamben continues, "[w]hen its borders begin to be blurred, the bare life that dwelt there frees itself inside the city and becomes both subject and object of the conflicts of the political order, the one place for both the organization of State power and emancipation from it".<sup>33</sup> Our very notion of politics derives from the duality of citizenship and bare life and of the constitution of order, or the norm, through the state of exception. For Agamben, this is why the camp – an ill-defined zone between the state and its exterior - is the contemporary paradigm: places like Guantanamo bay or refugee camps, in which people are interred without being members of society and without the law being applied to them, are the inevitable consequence of this concept of the political. In other words, society is only provisionally constructed in the knowledge that at its limits, in a crisis, its laws can be suspended and a violence transcending the law can be unleashed. Society is there to protect us from this violence, but it can and must assume it, through the sovereign, to survive, and the repression of this fact only serves its inevitable, infinite expansion.

While much of Agamben's writing on this subject is explicitly based on Schmitt, he is also indebted to Hannah Arendt's discussion of human rights. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt relocates the discussion of the foundational paradox of democracy to the field of human rights. Defined in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, these rights "were proclaimed to be 'inalienable', irreducible to and undeducible from other rights or laws", their theological origin replaced by human agency: [...] no authority was invoked for their establishment; Man himself was their source as well as their ultimate goal".<sup>34</sup> The universal claims at the base of the declaration of the Rights of Man meant that these rights could not be protected under any particular law of the state but only by the ambiguous concept of the 'sovereignty of the people', with the 'people' defined

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Arendt, Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, London: Harvest, 1968, p. 291

as a group of enlightened and emancipated subjects united around their explicit acceptance of human rights as the basis of law and civilisation. Those excluded from being “members of the people” (by paradoxically not being civilised enough to share the universal and natural ideal, like the colonial subjects in African countries) ended up beyond the protection of any nation or people: “The rights of Man, supposedly inalienable, proved to be unenforceable – even in countries whose constitutions were based upon them – whenever people appeared who were no longer citizens of any sovereign state”.<sup>35</sup> For Arendt, echoing De Tocqueville’s response to Rousseau, the definition of a category of ‘the people’ and the exclusion of particular individuals from it represented an ironic fulfilment of the ideal of personal freedom. The ‘de-humanised’ fallen bearer of human rights could paradoxically be seen as a fully liberated person whose individuality was finally not contingent upon any specific cultural markers:

The paradox involved in the loss of human rights is that such loss coincides with the instant when a person becomes a human being in general—without a profession, without a citizenship, without an opinion, without a deed by which to identify and specify himself—and different in general, representing nothing but his own absolutely unique individuality which, deprived of expression within and action upon a common world, loses all significance.<sup>36</sup>

Agamben elaborates on the consequences of this irony: “[...] the very rights of man that once made sense as the presupposition of the rights of the citizen are now progressively separated from and used outside the context of citizenship, for the sake of the supposed representation and protection of a bare life that is more and more driven to the margins of the nation-states”.<sup>37</sup> Humanitarian aid organisations perpetuate this rift within the notion of human rights by using the figure of the refugee as bare life in their campaigns – instead of demonstrating the way in which citizenship constructs this figure by exclusion, they essentialise the condition of bare life as a form of humanity to

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 293.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 302.

<sup>37</sup> Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer*, pp. 132-3.

which rights must be bequeathed.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, for Arendt, the nation-less, displaced individual enables the nation state to reinvigorate the dualism of nature and civilisation: since under the conditions of modernity nature has been subdued and no longer serves as the other to civilisation, it can only be reproduced from within it by “forcing millions of people into conditions which, despite all appearances, are the conditions of savages”.<sup>39</sup> This is an argument that Arendt returns to in *On Violence*. Contra Schmitt, Arendt argues that rather than see political action as the moment in which debate within a parliamentary democratic society is no longer possible and the precise decision separating ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’ has to be made, politics is located in men’s ability to act in accord. It is Arendt’s commitment to parliamentary debate that occasions Badiou’s dismissal of her brand of ‘political philosophy’ in *Metapolitics*. For Badiou, on whom we will later expand, the primacy of opinion in Arendt’s discourse leads to a deligitimising process, whereby whatever threatens the State is not granted the status of opinion but instead classed as evil. The shared consensus on which Arendt claims politics is founded turns out to be immune to any real critique that might challenge it and effect change, and so debate becomes sterile:

Indeed, if the political prescription is not explicit, opinions and debates inevitably fall under the invisible yoke of an implicit, or masked, prescription. And we know what draws support from every masked prescription: the State, and the instances of politics articulated around it.<sup>40</sup>

But violence, Arendt continues (like the one from which Rousseau’s social pact saves man or the one inherent to Schmitt’s decisionism) is no more natural or fundamental than the coming together of political action: “neither violence nor power is a natural phenomenon, that is, a manifestation of the life process; they belong to the political realm of human affairs whose essentially human quality is guaranteed by man’s faculty of action, the ability to begin

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 133 – 4.

<sup>39</sup> Arendt, Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 302.

<sup>40</sup> Badiou, Alain, *Metapolitics* [Jason Barker – tr.], London: Verso, 2005, p. 24.

something new”.<sup>41</sup>

To avoid further tragedies like the ones whose origin Arendt analyses, certain writers, including Chantal Mouffe, suggest that we should admit this problematic and paradoxical logic of the political order and perhaps even strive to protect the exclusionary mechanisms of the nation-state, even as we might reject it as a grounds for citizenship. Commenting in an interview on Hans Haacke’s replacement of the term ‘people’ (*Volk*) with ‘population’ (*Bevölkerung*) in his piece for the renovated Reichstag *Der Bevölkerung* (2000), Mouffe objects to notions of cosmopolitan citizenship that would dispense with categories like the foreigner or patriotism [fig. 4]. She asserts the importance of defining the *demos* in terms more concrete and specific than ‘humanity’ in general, on penalty of losing the possibility of self-governance and real politics altogether:

Liberalism does away with political concepts and attempts to replace them with non-political ones like “humanity” or “population.” For that reason, the logic of liberalism is always in tension with the democratic one, which requires the possibility of drawing a frontier between who belongs and who does not belong. This is why I have recently argued that we should acknowledge the paradoxical nature of liberal democracy [...] I think it is a liberal illusion that you can have citizenship without belonging to a demos. The cosmopolitan citizen, if it were ever developed, would simply be the citizen with rights that cannot be exercised anywhere. When they were violated, this citizen might have tribunals to which he could appeal, but he would not have the possibility to exercise his right to self-government [...] one’s identity is truly at stake in the idea of being democratic citizens, and that is only possible through some element of particularity. That’s why I believe that it’s very dangerous for the Left to reject patriotism.<sup>42</sup>

For Mouffe, the problem is that by evacuating categories of national identity, we leave them at the disposal of the Right, which then attains exclusivity over

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<sup>41</sup> Arendt, Hannah, *On Violence*, London: Harvest, 1970, p. 82.

<sup>42</sup> Deutsche, Rosalyn, Joseph, Branden W., and Keenan, Thomas, “Every Form of Art Has a Political Dimension: Interview with Chantal Mouffe”, *Grey Room*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, issue no. 02, Winter, 2001, pp. 98–125.

radical politics. We will return to the consequences of the debate around universalism, particularism and exclusion towards the end of this chapter, but for now Mouffe's work, with and without Ernesto Laclau, merits closer inspection.

## Universal

The difficulty of reconciling the founding logic and philosophy of democracy with its periodic and political legitimation is also at the heart of Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. They locate this conflict historically in a particular moment. In their short account of the birth of modernity, the rise of revolutionary democracy at the end of the eighteenth century is given a dominant role in shaping the political imagination of the modern period in its entirety. This historical moment eradicated the view of society as an organic body in which individuals occupy a fixed place. In the wake of the French and American revolutions, their political identity was no longer defined only in relation to the totality of this political body. More importantly, this point in time demarcated the political sphere and introduced a basic antagonism between two opposed parts of society: the *ancien régime* and a unified 'people', both rooted in a discourse of natural rights and social order. The problematic nature of the idea of a universal subject, bearer of human rights given from birth, has been elaborated by Mouffe as well as others elsewhere, but this transformation remains central to any understanding of modern politics, as Mouffe and Laclau claim:

In all rigour, the opposition people/*ancien régime* was the last moment in which the antagonistic limits between two forms of society presented themselves [...] in the form of clear and empirically given lines of demarcation. From then on the demarcating line between the internal and the external, the dividing line from which the antagonism was constituted in the form of two



opposing systems of equivalences, became increasingly fragile and ambiguous, and its construction came to be the crucial problem of politics.<sup>43</sup>

This original democratic movement matured and mutated in response to the emergence of new hegemonic powers into a plethora of singular democratic rights. Since the new powers of the enlightened middle classes incorporated the logic of the rights of man and universal suffrage, for example, and organised them in new structures of parliamentary liberal-democracy, new, more particular antagonisms, were needed to challenge this hegemony and maintain the democratic momentum. In Mouffe and Laclau's words, "the terrain has been created which makes possible a new extension of egalitarian equivalences, and thereby the expansion of the democratic revolution in new directions".<sup>44</sup> A host of "new social movements" from eco-warriors and feminists to sexual and ethnic minorities define their struggles in terms established by the revolutions of the eighteenth century.<sup>45</sup>

This fragmentation and distribution of the universalism of earlier forms arises from the revolutionary nature that Mouffe and Laclau, following in the footsteps of Alexis de Tocqueville, ascribe to democracy. It is also the central problem with which writers on democracy have struggled with since the 1960s. Rather than a teleological project with a fixed desired outcome, democracy exists as "the terrain upon which there operates a logic of displacement supported by an egalitarian imaginary".<sup>46</sup> But if democracy is left without a universal subject to address, without a teleological objective and without a clearly defined project, then it finds itself caught up in a debilitating paradox: it becomes a static revolution, which, in the name of constant change and inclusion of newer perspectives, annuls the possibility of real change or political action. For Mouffe and Laclau, the immediate danger of this political *cul de sac* is that it can be used to support the neo-conservative agenda of a free market economy: "the new conservatism has succeeded in presenting its

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<sup>43</sup> Laclau, Ernesto and Mouffe, Chantal, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London: Verso, 2001, p. 151.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 159-60.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

programme of dismantling the Welfare State as a defence of individual liberties against the oppressor state".<sup>47</sup> By endorsing difference, neo-liberalism limits the debate of liberties, democracy and equality to a particular set of variables without challenging the superstructure of economic relations. On the other hand, Mouffe and Laclau reject the possibility of reinstating universalism to counter this plurality of struggles or of essentialising the contingent demands and liberties, which share the ever-expanding democratic social sphere.<sup>48</sup>

Mouffe's resolution of this problem through a notion of 'radical democracy' is elaborated in *The Democratic Paradox*. Here, her phrasing of the democratic paradox is similar to Bobbio's. She also identifies an inherent tension between the idea of democracy and its realisation: "on one side, democracy as a form of rule, that is, the principle of the sovereignty of the people; and on the other side, the symbolic framework within which this democratic rule is exercised".<sup>49</sup> However, she attempts to establish a philosophical framework which goes beyond the containment of the liberal-democratic paradox within an idea of compromise or balance in practice, and insists on suspending reconciliation, which would disable politics, in favour of classifying democracy as a paradox, a category which defines both sides of an opposition as true yet mutually exclusive at the same time: "Once it is granted that the tension between equality and liberty cannot be reconciled and that there can only be contingent hegemonic forms of stabilization of their conflict, it becomes clear that, once the very idea of an alternative to the existing configuration of power

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> For John Brenkman, for example, such an attempt to transform liberal democracy into a universal principle is used to justify the foreign policy of the US in the Middle East. Neo-conservative America, he writes, believes that by elevating its particular national culture of liberal democracy to a universal it can defend the very idea of a separatist national identity from other ideologies. To engage again in a search for the democratic universal, he continues, was always bound to fail because "the inner workings of modern democracy are driven by the perpetual rivalry of the co-existing liberal, civic and social frameworks, none of which is capable of giving democracy a conceptual foundation that absorbs or eliminates the other two." American foreign policy fails exactly in its attempt to overcome this continuous struggle between competing strands of democratic thought: "Since open-ended conflict over the principles of democracy is itself a principle of modern democracy, a nation never merely extrapolates its foreign policy from its democratic principles in themselves." Brenkman, John, *The Cultural Contradictions of Democracy: Political Thought since September 11*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008, p. 141.

<sup>49</sup> Mouffe, Chantal, *The Democratic Paradox*, London: Verso, 2000, p. 2.

disappears, what disappears also is the very possibility of a legitimate form of expression for the resistances against the dominant power relations".<sup>50</sup> For Mouffe, the main culprit in the weakening of democracy against neo-liberal forces is political theory itself. Since it relies on reason and looks to resolve the tensions and paradoxes of contemporary politics, political philosophy wishes to separate the essence or core of a democratic ideal from its incomplete and compromised realisation in the present. Schmitt might be right, then, about the hidden mechanisms at work in the juristic definition of liberal democracy, but not about democratic politics:

Democratic politics does not consist in the moment when a fully constituted people exercises its rule. The moment of rule is indissociable from the very struggle about the definition of the people, about the constitution of its identity. Such an identity, however, can never be fully constituted, and it can exist only through multiple and competing forms of identifications. Liberal democracy is precisely the recognition of this constitutive gap between the people and its various identifications.<sup>51</sup>

This claim parallels Noortje Marres' description of the way publics are produced by democratic politics. Marres follows the arguments of Walter Lippmann and John Dewey, who addressed the problem of how a public might be able to form an opinion in a technological society in which matters arose too quickly in ways too complicated and involving too many locations for an informed decision to take place and form the basis of a functional democracy. She uses their questioning of the idea of the subjects of democracy to develop a theory centred on the matters around which a public can form:

...democratic politics is called for when no social community exists that may take care of an issue. In these cases, if the issue is to be addressed, those who are jointly implicated in the issue, must organise a community. What the members of a public share is that they are all affected by a particular affair, but they do not already belong to the same community: this is why they must form a political community, if the issue that affects them is to be dealt with

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

("those who are affected form a public").<sup>52</sup>

Democracy is not conjured into being by a pre-constituted community, but rather generates this community through an allegiance to a cause. Marres describes a process whereby the subject of democracy is formed by its objects:

The "vibes" characteristic of political citizenship, the deeply felt conviction that one somehow participates in a common interest, in a common desire for a common good: these passions, Dewey argued, are evoked by virtue of being implicated in an issue.<sup>53</sup>

There is no obvious route from the recognition of shared interest to the passion Marres here ascribes to the subject of politics. Interestingly, Mouffe also insists in the *Grey Room* interview on the role of passion in generating political allegiances: "this allegiance to the principles of the particular demos is not purely intellectual [...] There is always an element of affect, a mobilization of affect or a mobilization of passions." We expand on the process through which 'vibes' or 'passion' (which we might call belief) could constitute a subject below, in relation to Badiou's theory of the event and Žižek's critique thereof. But for now it is useful to consider the inversion that this schema performs on the Schmittian legalistic understanding of the paradox and its implications for Agamben's interpretation of the state of exception as at once immanent and progressive.

Agamben draws his conclusions by applying a historical narrative – about the expansion of the state of exception – to Schmitt's systemic analysis of how liberal democracy works legally. The state of exception is inherently there, at the foundation of liberal democracy, but it is also taking hold of new aspects of political life and claiming more victims as they fall outside the borders it constantly redraws. It is by no means clear how and why this process

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<sup>52</sup> Marres, Noortje, "Issues spark a public into being: A key but often forgotten point of the Lippmann-Dewey debate", available at: <http://www.debalie.nl/artikel.jsp;jsessionid=ECE2EE374F45AF59C3DF8B722B1A4BED?articleid=53366> [accessed 18.3.13].

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

happens. But as Mouffe and Marres demonstrate, the fact that the concept of democracy is paradoxical as a political or philosophical construct does not address its realisation in time and place. Like Agamben, Mouffe accepts that liberal democracy needs to be accountable for the mechanisms of exclusion that legitimise it, but concludes that it is the aim of finding a consistent, universal and timeless rule that precludes political action, seen as the negotiation of the law between agonistic interpreters. Similarly, Marres claims that stressing the matters around which the democratic struggle takes place does not show its weakness as a system, but rather uncovers the source of its power.

## Foundation

In *Hatred of Democracy*, Jacques Rancière goes even further in rejecting the Schmittian line of argumentation adopted by Agamben: he identifies democracy as neither a “form of government” nor “a form of society” but “an action that constantly wrests the monopoly of public life from oligarchic governments”.<sup>54</sup> It is therefore pointless to show that there is a duality of man and citizen, or of constituting and constituted power at the heart of some essential idea of democracy. Just as there is no essential formulation of a democratic state, so are these dualities further broken down in historical instances that produce intervals in which such names of the common can be played out against one another to contest political divisions.<sup>55</sup> Democracy questions the legitimacy of existing hierarchies by virtue of its inherent illegitimacy, its introduction of the absence of a title of “birth, wealth or science” as a criterion for ruling.<sup>56</sup> However, in defining democracy as a condition for politics, a constant struggle, Rancière reveals the fallacy of any notion of a tenable paradox. Democracy can never be a state of constructive agonism that balances internal contradictions. Without the horizon of a generalised project in which a free and equal society can be envisioned,

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<sup>54</sup> Rancière, Jacques, *Hatred of Democracy* [Steve Corcoran – tr.], London: Verso, 2006, p. 96.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58-9.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

democracy can never be an ideology that is advocated as a structure, only a situated historical demand made on ruling powers.

Despite the absence of a defined political project in democracy, Rancière is careful not to let democracy become an ambiguous and indefinable force. He identifies a current vitality in the democratic idea and traces its political origin back to a classical concept of arbitrariness that is often overlooked in contemporary writing on the democratic paradox. True democracy, he writes, stems from the Greek practice of drawing lots by which government is selected at random and power is given to those who do not necessarily seek it:

There are people who govern because they are the eldest, the highest-born, the richest or the most learned. There are models of government and practices of authority based on this or that distribution of places and capabilities [...] if the ignorant are to understand that they have to obey the orders of the learned, their power must rest on a supplementary title, the power of those who have no other property that predisposes them more to governing than to be govern [...] the power of the best cannot ultimately be legitimated except via the power of equals.<sup>57</sup>

This, according to Rancière, is the “scandal” of democracy to which cultural elites are and have always been opposed: the proposal, if not practice, that power can be given by pure chance to one who has no ‘natural’ or ‘birth’ right to carry it and who is not particularly interested in carrying it. By returning to this radical feature of democracy, Rancière forcibly unlinks democracy and liberalism. Unlike other writers, who see the tension that constantly arises from the uneasy compromise between personal liberties and equality as the site of a democratic political life, he locates the potential of radical democracy in a challenge to the very notion of a liberal right. Drawing lots sets up a more fundamental concept of nature (the laws of chance), which contradicts the liberal idea that good government is the result of a free and equal competition in which representatives strive to convince a general public of their ability to

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

govern. Historically, this might be an argument for a conflation of democracy and liberalism against oligarchy: one is not defined by birth right but rather makes one's own fortune on the basis of natural rights. But the rejection of criteria for mastery means that democracy cannot be defined by any particular right, which demands to be recognised. Nor can one strive for mastery, putting natural endowment to work. Rather, democracy rests on a fundamental operation of randomness, which is alien to any given political constellation and yet generates it.

Alain Badiou, writing about Rancière, identifies two hypotheses at the heart of his argument: that "all mastery is imposture" and that "every bond presumes a master".<sup>58</sup> He calls this a "doctrine of equality [...] whose axiom is that anyone, regardless of experience, can exert mastery without being in a position of mastery provided that the anyone in question is willing to be unbound".<sup>59</sup> Marx's utopian ideal of a community of equals is negated by the fact that the social bond requires mastery. Without mastery, none of the components of what Rancière understands as politics can exist:

[...] the supposed existence of a community of equals would destroy the very intellectual site (interval of discourses, reactivation of sediments, deconstruction of the master's position) that Rancière wishes to inhabit. For if the community of equals is realisable then there is no more interval, only what is unique and held in common; there is no more sediment, since communitarian self-affirmation eliminates all tradition, regarding it as ancient and foreclosed; and there is no longer any master position, since communitarian rites mean that everyone is the brother of everyone else".<sup>60</sup>

Mastery is therefore transformed into an empty place marker to enable the horizontal bond between equals, and it needs to be maintained in order to allow politics to continue. For Badiou, this is the weakness in Rancière's schema. In his reluctance to subscribe to political conclusions drawn from his

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<sup>58</sup> Badiou, Alain, *Metapolitics*, 2005, pp. 109-10

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110-1

postulation of equality, he can only fetishise those moments in which equality briefly confronts the inequality against which it is defined:

“Rancière thus proceeds to a critique of the communitarian motif as realization in order to replace it with the idea of a declared and delineated ‘moment’ of equality conceived in its intrinsic bond with inequality. There is an impasse of the paradigm, and a retrospective promotion of the real flash of lightening, of the scrawling on the surface of time”.<sup>61</sup>

Here again we find ourselves caught between *a priori* and *a posteriori* definitions of democracy, which can only be salvaged fleetingly from temporal overlaps of the two. Badiou attempts to circumvent this gap between concept and realisation by relocating their convergence to the foundational moment. In his own “Speculative Disquisition of the Concept of Democracy”, he rejects the notion that democracy’s political goal is to expand *ad infinitum* and to bring the widest possible equality to its subjects (in which case it is merely one necessary stage in the implementation of universal communism, which would bring about the end of the democratic state). He then asks why democracy is not simply another form of state government. If democracy is not engaged in a search for the universal dispersal of equality, what can save it from being a specific form of state, another contingent historical configuration of political forces that enforce certain procedures and institutions? Paralleling Mouffe, Badiou is also aware of the fact that the problem hangs on the tense relationship between political philosophy and democracy.

To unravel the philosophical meaning of democracy, Badiou follows Lenin’s line of argumentation on the question of democracy. Underlying Lenin’s understanding of democracy, Badiou explains, are three hypotheses: that politics aims to establish communism, through which the state will wither away, that philosophy’s role is to evaluate politics and that democracy is a form of state.<sup>62</sup> In order for democracy to be an essential philosophical concept, at least one of these hypotheses must be false. The first suggestion -

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 81.



that politics aims for the withering away of the state - is true for Badiou. Any alternative would suggest particular forms of regulating society or the economy.<sup>63</sup> Such particular forms, which Badiou equates with 'parliamentarism', could never define politics in general: they would always just be specific articulations of a politics, not a pure philosophical definition of politics as such. Politics might also be pure action with no external aims, and democracy could correspond to this action, but it would then not be a form of state. If philosophy needs to evaluate politics, in keeping with the second hypothesis, then it cannot limit itself to describing its accordance with conventions of the 'good state' without relying on the definition of politics, already discarded, as a particular parliamentary form. Notions of good or bad cannot be axiomatic, or external to the philosophical investigation. Philosophy can deal with politics as a form of thought, but for democracy to occupy this category it cannot be a form of state, since the state cannot think. Democracy therefore has to be something other than a form of state in order to be a philosophical concept. This could be 'mass political activity', but this again constitutes the withering away of the state, and with it, democracy itself.

Badiou is at pains to find a philosophically acceptable definition of democracy, and he finally resolves the question by looking at the mythical moment of the establishment of government that precedes, yet validates, the state. Since the government does not yet legislate in this pre-statist moment, how then does the law of the establishment of the government come into being? Rousseau solves this problem by separating the universal act of the founding of sovereignty and the particular government that follows in a "sudden conversion of Sovereignty into democracy [...] by virtue of a new relation of all to all [whereby] the citizens become magistrates and pass from general to particular acts".<sup>64</sup> This leads Badiou to conclude that "democracy could thus be defined as that which authorises a placement of the particular under the law of the universality of the political will"<sup>65</sup> and that "democracy is what prevents any predicates whatsoever from circulating as political articulations,

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>64</sup> Rousseau, cited in Badiou, *ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

or as categories of politics which formally contradicts the idea of equality”.<sup>66</sup> In this way, only democracy, and no other form of state, can satisfy philosophy’s demand for universal legitimacy while being allowed to replace or ‘authorise a placement’ for this universality in the form of a particular government. Importantly, for Badiou, this is also the reason why democracy cannot delegitimize any case of the particular: all ‘particulars’ have an equal, universal claim.

Replacing Schmitt’s paradox of sovereignty with Rousseau’s does not initially appear productive. But it enables us to see why Schmitt and Agamben carry forward a particular logic that defines political action only as belonging to a certain formulation of the state. Defined as the authority of the unilateral agreement between ‘all and all’ at the moment of the origin of a government, democracy can assume a different role beyond the Schmittian formula of exclusion and inclusion. This second paradox does not initially require us to look to theology to find its justification: Rousseau’s moment of the constitution of democracy relies only on human will and is defined by social relations - it produces its external ‘universal’ from the inside rather than (in Schmitt) externalising a given internal procedure. But although Badiou clearly privileges human agency over divine will, his insistence on the role of fidelity in producing the militant subject of what he terms an ‘event’ acknowledges the necessity of something like belief for politics.

## **Belief**

Like Schmitt, Badiou, especially in his writing on the doctrine of Saint Paul, makes explicit the relationship between political philosophy and theology. Here, the question moves away from the structural gaps defining liberal democracy, like the substitution of the ‘state of nature’ with a social contract in Rousseau, for example, or the excluded empty cipher of ‘bare life’ at the heart of liberal politics according to Agamben. Badiou locates the problem in relation

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

to subjectivisation: the paradox of democracy is not just a question of how as constituted individuals we can come together and find a system that works for all of us, rather we need to consider a system that constitutes us as equal. Žižek is right to locate a problematic relation in Badiou's thought on the event between the status of philosophical knowledge and truth.<sup>67</sup> The Badiouian event, he writes, can never be deduced from an existing situation and can never lead to ontological certainty. Fidelity to the event is different from philosophical certainty or knowledge: it "designates the continuous effort of traversing the field of knowledge from the standpoint of Event, intervening in it, searching for the signs of Truth".<sup>68</sup> Since one cannot formulate a philosophical understanding of the event through knowledge, the only avenue open for an expression of fidelity is that of faith. The theological framework is invoked as an anti-philosophical substitution or, in other words, it is not knowledge of, but faith in the event that can pave the way to an encounter with its truth.

For Badiou, truth has to mean equality: otherwise it is true for some, but not all, and therefore not the truth at all. It cannot be linked to a particular set of questions or procedures, because then it would not be universal. Nor can it be predictable, as it must perform a real break with the present, which is not equal: a universal truth cannot be found in "preconstituted historical aggregates", in as much as it can be 'truth' it has to be such for all regardless of particular historically contingent formulations of political subjectivity.<sup>69</sup> Truth cannot be defined by a politics of difference (i.e. identity politics), as such relativist political subjectivity can only attest to a different kind of universal totality, that of global Capitalism, masquerading as plurality and openness:

For each identification (the creation or cobbling together of identity) creates a figure that provides a material for its investment by the market. There is nothing more captive, so far as commercial investment is concerned, nothing more amenable to the invention of new figures of monetary homogeneity, than a community and its territory or territories. The semblance of non-equivalence

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<sup>67</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, London: Verso, 2000, p. 135.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Badiou, Alain, *Saint Paul: The Foundations of Universalism*, Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2003, p. 6.

is required so that equivalence itself can constitute a process. What inexhaustible potential for mercantile investments is this upsurge — taking the form of communities demanding recognition and so-called cultural singularities — of women, homosexuals, the disabled, Arabs! [...] Capital demands a permanent creation of subjective and territorial identities in order for its principle of movement to homogenize its space of action; identities, moreover, that demand anything but the right to be exposed in the same way as others to the uniform prerogatives of the market.<sup>70</sup>

This is why he looks back to the universalism suggested by St. Paul as an early manifestation of an eventual philosophy: “to sharply separate each truth procedure from the cultural “historicity” wherein opinion presumes to dissolve it: such is the operation in which Paul is our guide”<sup>71</sup>. Saint Paul offers Badiou an alternative to a politics of equality before the market, which is not grounded in a universal truth procedure. Most of his analysis of the Christian saint is dedicated to Paul’s rejection of Jewish and Greek discourses, as both, according to Badiou’s interpretation of Paul, suggest a false path to truth. The Jewish discourse is built on the exceptional miracle that “designates transcendence as that which lies beyond the natural totality”, while the Greek is founded on “wisdom”, consisting in “appropriating the fixed order of the world, in the matching of the logos to being”.<sup>72</sup> Paul’s most original contribution, continues Badiou, is recognising that these two systems of thought depend on each other and hence cancel each other’s claim to universality – the Jewish exception is excessive only to the Greek logos dealing with that which already exists, whilst the Greek does not allow for change, only description – and therefore “neither of the two discourses can be universal, because each supposes the persistence of the other”.<sup>73</sup>

Badiou raises through Paul a second, even more fundamental, objection to Greek and Jewish discourses. As with Rancière, *St. Paul* suggests that the process of subjectivisation in relation to the truth cannot be articulated through

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, pp. 10-11.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, p. 41.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p. 42.

mastery over a particular body of knowledge. For Rancière this means that the only true democratic principle is the arbitrary ceding of power to anyone at all who is without any given skills, education or appetite for ruling, instead of the false (in the sense of not being truly democratic) choice between individuals who are willing and able to work politically to achieve it. Badiou translates this principle of non-mastery into the theological terminology of Paul: Pauline salvation is direct and arbitrary and can never be the result of work towards it. Such work towards salvation will already be contained within a particular 'discourse' and therefore cannot be truly universal. Under Jewish law, for example, the salvation of the subject comes in the form of wages or reward but Badiou's Paul, rejecting this logic, describes a "monotheism [which] can be understood only by taking into consideration the whole of humanity". "If a truth is to surge forth eventually" continues Badiou, "it must be nondenumerable, impredicable, uncontrollable. This is precisely what Paul calls grace, that which occurs without being couched in any predicate, that which is trans-legal, that which happens to everyone without an assignable reason. Grace is the opposite of law insofar as it is what comes *without being due*".<sup>74</sup> Since for Badiou "an event is the appearance of something foreign to the situation that cannot be encompassed within it. It breaks through the order of things, making possible new ways of thinking, acting, and being", an 'evental' subject cannot work towards a truth under an already given system of signification.<sup>75</sup> Jewish Prophecy is dismissed as a "discourse of exception [in which] the prophetic sign, the miracle, election, designate transcendence as that which lies beyond the natural totality [...] it is constitutively exceptional." The prophetic law relies on the "mastery of a literal tradition" which leads to a theory of salvation tied to mastery (to a law)<sup>76</sup>, signifying work for salvation instead of the free gift of grace.

Transposed onto the political, the rewards or wages for the individual's compliance with juridical sovereignty constitute for Badiou 'civil rights' which

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, p. 76-77.

<sup>75</sup> Ingram, James D., "Can Universalism Still Be Radical? Alain Badiou's Politics of Truth", *Constellations*, Volume 12, Issue 4, Pages 561-573, available at: [http://www.politicalreviewnet.com/polrev/reviews/CONS/R\\_1351\\_0487\\_050\\_1005361.asp](http://www.politicalreviewnet.com/polrev/reviews/CONS/R_1351_0487_050_1005361.asp). [accessed 19/07/07].

<sup>76</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 41.

are the opposite of the free 'gift' of grace: "if one understands man's humanity in terms of his subjective capacity, there is, strictly speaking, nothing whatsoever like a "right" of man".<sup>77</sup> Thus Badiou's objection to the rule of the law parallels Agamben's reservations about the constitution of political power on the paradoxical inclusion and exclusion of bare life: man is not first a 'natural' bare 'creature' who then needs to negotiate and demand rights, to work towards his enlightened elevation from the state of nature and into civil society. If we therefore follow Badiou in his dismissal of the two discourses that he identifies as Jewish law and Greek logos, we are left with a third category of subjectivisation: that of faith. But what defines this faith for Badiou? First of all, faith is an ontological procedure that unites the act of believing with the emergence of the subject of the believer. The example used by Badiou is that of Paul's conversion, not by priests of the church, and not in response to being presented with the gospel prior to it. His conversion is displayed as a sudden moment of realisation "in the anonymity of the road", which leads Paul to conclude that "one can only begin from faith, from the declaration of faith. The sudden appearance of the Christian subject is unconditioned".<sup>78</sup> It is also important not to confuse this act of faith with "mere private conviction [...] that of unutterable utterances", as it has "the rude harshness of public action".<sup>79</sup> Faith is, hence, almost paradoxically, both a rupture with the social and an engagement with it, rejecting and addressing the existing order of being at the same time.

But just as democracy is only that which "authorizes a placement of the particular under the law of the universality of the political will", so the Resurrection itself is not at issue but rather represents a higher order of Truth for which it stands. Thus, although the example of Paul's belief in the Resurrection is paradigmatic for Badiou, this is not because he actually shares this belief. In fact, the most radical implication of his analysis of Saint Paul is that the question of whether Christ indeed rose from the dead is irrelevant: what matters is that Paul believed he did, and was thereby constituted as a

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<sup>77</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 77.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, pp.17-18.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 88 and 54.

subject of the event. As Žižek expands, “[o]f course, here Badiou is well aware that today, in our era of modern science, one can no longer accept the fable of the miracle of Resurrection as the form of the Truth-Event. [...] Perhaps the lesson of all this is more radical than it appears: what if what Badiou calls the Truth-Event is, at its most radical, a purely formal act of decision, not only not based on an actual truth, but ultimately *indifferent* to the precise status (actual or fictitious) of the Truth-Event it refers to?”<sup>80</sup> If we concede these points, the rupture of the present situation happens not at the level of the content of the event, but in only at that of subjectivisation. But the problem then, according to Žižek, is that we no longer have any criteria to distinguish it from the situation. For all practical purposes, fidelity to the event becomes the same thing as answering the call of Althusser’s ideological interpellation, basically conforming to the way things are: “Is not the circular relationship between the Event and the subject (the subject serves the event in his fidelity, but the Event itself is visible as such only to an already engaged subject) the very circle of ideology?”<sup>81</sup>

## Belief

Arguing against Agamben (and Schmitt), John Brenkman, author of *The Cultural Contradictions of Democracy*, comes to a similar conclusion to Badiou’s. Democratic action, which follows the principle outlined by Rousseau, can be directly linked to the myths of the constitution of American democracy. Specific, particular historical circumstances brought the early pilgrims of the Mayflower to act in this manner exactly. Since they were originally heading to Virginia and their legal claim for the establishment of a colony was supported by a ‘patent’ from the Virginia Company, when the Mayflower accidentally landed in New England, the pilgrims responded with “the Mayflower Compact”, one of the founding myths of American independence. Responding to a peculiar situation in which “none had power to command them” the pilgrims decided to make themselves “the first foundation of their

<sup>80</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, *The Ticklish Subject*, pp. 142 – 4.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

government”, a decision “as firm as any patent”.<sup>82</sup> As Brenkman explains, “[t]heir compact *is* the arbitrary unpredetermined ungrounded *decision* they took. Schmitt’s decisionism cannot comprehend this inaugurating decision [...] [his] imagination of power can incorporate protection but not a covenant”.<sup>83</sup> To generalise:

One sees here how misleading the claim to have described a *structure* can truly be. The Schmittian dictum on the state of exception is taken (dogmatically, axiomatically) as the unvarying, and complete, definition of sovereignty. [...] Arendt tries to examine “the many perplexities inherent in the concept of human rights,” Agamben transforms the dynamic contradictions she sees in the relations between man and citizen, human rights and civic rights, political identity and national identity, popular sovereignty and democratic self-rule, into the purely logical, fixed pairing of sovereign power and bare life.<sup>84</sup>

Schmitt’s incomprehension is ultimately that of philosophy. We have seen how different writers try to negotiate the limits of a universal logic tested by democracy. Agamben, in extending this logic, collapses democracy into Nazism: his understanding of law and its inclusions and exclusions, gives us no criteria for distinguishing a democracy from a totalitarian regime. All are subject to the same laws, so that both Nazism and current American foreign policy rely on the exception and the camp despite their marked differences. Mouffe, Marres, Rancière, and Badiou, in trying variously to transcend the logic of the law, end up focusing on its relationship to the particular and on the ways in which the internal tensions of democracy function. They make a persuasive case for adopting a more historicised approach to democratic struggles against the purely logical paradigms of Schmitt and, following his argumentation, Agamben. In doing so, they seem to follow Hannah Arendt’s definition of politics as action: “What makes man a political being is his faculty to act. It enables him to get together with his peers, to act in concert, and to

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<sup>82</sup> Brenkman, John, *The Cultural Contradictions of Democracy: Political Thought Since September 11*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007, p. 68.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.



reach out for goals and enterprises which would never enter his mind, let alone the desires of his heart, had he not been given this gift—to embark upon something new”.<sup>85</sup> But ultimately, like Agamben, this definition does not leave us without the means to distinguish the kind of constitutive political action we want to endorse and the kind that undermines the idea of democracy. For example, when the network of Christian fundamentalist churches in America came together to repeal anti-discrimination laws in the 1970s, thus for the first time forming a political public, they were giving a voice to the voiceless, acting in concert and joining forces around a particular political cause. Moreover, the idea that one might act without an ideological basis for this action presents us with a problematic, ironic position, which risks collapsing into exactly the kind of universalism that these situated, historical accounts want to get away from.

This is exactly the criticism Slavoj Žižek makes of the ambivalent place Universalism occupies in postmodern theory. It is worth quoting at length his accusation that Laclau and Mouffe’s project sneaks Universalism in through the back door:

Laclau and Mouffe [...] propose a new version of the old Edouard Bernstein's arch-revisionist motto "goal is nothing, movement is all": the true danger, the temptation to be resisted, is the very notion of a radical cut by means of which the basic social antagonism will be dissolved and the new era of a self-transparent non-alienated society will arrive. For Laclau and Mouffe, such a notion disavows not only the Political as such, the space of antagonisms and struggle for hegemony, but the fundamental ontological finitude of the human condition as such - which is why, any attempt to actualize such a leap has to end up in a totalitarian disaster. What this means is that the only way to elaborate and practice livable particular political solutions is to admit the global a priori deadlock: we can only solve particular problems against the background of the irreducible global deadlock. Of course, this in no way entails that political agents should limit themselves to solving particular problems, abandoning the topic of universality: for Laclau and Mouffe, universality is impossible and at the same time necessary, i.e., there is no direct "true" universality, every universality is always-already caught into the

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<sup>85</sup> Arendt, Hannah, *On Violence*, p. 82.

hegemonic struggle, it is an empty form hegemonized (filled in) by some particular content which, at a given moment and in a given conjuncture, functions as its stand-in [...] Does Laclau and Mouffe's edifice not also imply its own utopian point: the point at which political battles would be fought without remainders of "essentialism," all sides fully accepting the radically contingent character of their endeavors and the irreducible character of social antagonisms.<sup>86</sup>

While embracing contingency seems to point the way out of the democratic paradox, there is no abandoning the utopian point of politics without also giving up on the idea of democracy as a value system. If democracy cannot, as Badiou illustrates, be merely a particular form of state, it is also forever trapped by its own rhetoric, calling for infinite radicalisation and revolution and deferring this action at the same time. Žižek expands on this point in *The Ticklish Subject*, where he claims that philosophers like Rancière, Badiou, Laclau and Mouffe “assume the position of ethical critics who reveal (or voice) the ethical Wrong or Evil committed by politics, without engaging in an alternative political project”.<sup>87</sup> He schematises the impasse of politics as a problem of how to imagine a break with the existing order and claims that while looking for a materialistic determination of where change might come from, they paradoxically produce a “quasi-transcendental” politics that ultimately forecloses the possibility of change.<sup>88</sup> Whether positing a community to come as a split within current communities, like Badiou, proposing a political mode of rebellion against the political order, like Rancière, or a gap between the particular and the universal which comes to constitute a new universality, like Laclau, they present a proto-Kantian case that both fetishises and fears revolution and anticipates its regression into terror: “[...] they seem to fall into the trap of ‘marginalist’ politics, accepting the logic of momentary outbursts of an 'impossible' radical politicization that contains the seeds of its own failure and has to recede in the face of the

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<sup>86</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, “*Objet a* as Inherent Limit to Capitalism: on Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri”, at:

<http://www.lacan.com/zizmultitude.htm> [accessed 7/01/09]

<sup>87</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 171.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

existing Order”.<sup>89</sup>

It is not a coincidence that many of the texts we have examined broach the subject of religion. In setting out to define a democratic universalism adequate to our times, French writers like Badiou and Rancière especially, but not exclusively, have seen it necessary to address the problems arising within multicultural globalised society with regard to questions like the wearing of the Muslim veil. In the encounter between faith and Capitalism, the latter triumphs in the translation potentially universal structures of belief into market niches of difference. Consequently, and in reaction to the rise of identity politics, much work has been done to posit radical, universal politics without recourse to metaphysical, exceptional discourse. These debates have been useful in addressing the shortcomings of philosophical discourse in adequately describing politics. But whether borrowing examples from religious thinking and emptying them of their belief content, proposing an empty signifier to stand in for the impossibility of universalism or favouring contingency over structural paradoxes and teleological edifices, what these writers ask of the political subject is an impossible stance of action without belief. This could almost be a definition of irony, and it is the role of irony in political and critical discourse, which we will further explore in the latter part of this thesis. Nevertheless, we would like to end this chapter with a consideration of the democratic paradox as an ironic structure.

We have seen that democracy can function despite being logically flawed, if its subjects are unaware of this and therefore commit to its cause as victims of a kind of tragic irony. Alternately, one can align oneself to a political project of democracy knowing full well that it is paradoxical and dysfunctional philosophically and professing fidelity to it nonetheless. One is either subjected to the irony of history or constituted as an ironic subject, the agent of irony against history. We can see this irony at work in the way Badiou adopts the operation of belief without committing to its content or in Rancière

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 232.

politics where the “singular appears as a stand-in for the Universal”.<sup>90</sup> It is precisely a passionless, ironic engagement with politics that subjectivises, not a submission to any spontaneous ‘vibe’: we invest in the singular struggle knowing that what we are actually committing to is something else that transcends it. The paradox of democracy thus reflects the difficult relationship between knowledge and action, theory and praxis or the universal and the contingent, which much of the postmodern writing on political theory is an attempt to bridge. Irony fills the gap, the empty place marker, with which recent political theory would supplant discredited belief. According to the survey we have presented here, both the theory and praxis of democracy are structured around a paradoxical movement in opposite directions: democracy as an ideal that can never be fully achieved without becoming its exact opposite can never meet democracy as a system of governance that, despite its ambiguous origins and ontological weakness nevertheless, at least to a degree, functions and generates instances of political action. But even if both perspectives are valid, their juxtaposition is politically debilitating.

Analysing the rhetorics of the first amendment to the American constitution following Kenneth R. Craycraft Jr., Amanda Beech suggests that a politics of tolerance where other people’s views are respected and one’s own are viewed ironically, with an awareness of their inherent limitations, is impossible. Craycraft posits “a self-reflexive critique, a moment when we understand ourselves, and the claims we make as contingent and situated”.<sup>91</sup> But, Beech argues, “[i]f politics were ironic we could therefore protect ourselves from making faith-based claims that universalise (our subjective decisions as) the political”.<sup>92</sup> Thus, if we want to accept a diversity of religious faiths, we need to set up a secular system with the value of tolerance inscribed in it as a universal ideal, disavowing the very faith we are supposedly accepting as valid. Inevitably, we find ourselves back at the threshold of a paradox:

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<sup>90</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, “Afterword”, in: Rancière, Jacques, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* [Gabriel Rockhill – tr.], London: Continuum, 2006, p. 70.

<sup>91</sup> Beech, Amanda, “Matters of Freedom”, in: *The Institute of Psychoplasms* [Pil and Galia Kollektiv – eds.], London Pump House Gallery, 2008, p. 10.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

Here, believers are asked not to believe in themselves. To do this, one must take the belief out of rhetoric in as much as ironising beliefs controls belief, where equality is achieved when all beliefs have to be understood as always already ironic. [...] as soon as we are asked to be aware that our beliefs are exclusive and subjective in public, they are transformed into universalising claims. In this sense, irony is possible only in private form, and in its privation, it reproduces the theologico-political - the exact beliefs that it set out to challenge.<sup>93</sup>

It is towards an exploration of this limit point of irony that we would like to aim our investigation, but before we address the politics of irony in the final chapters of this dissertation, we would like to turn to the early twentieth century avant-garde movements, where the relationship between the theory and praxis of democracy and its paradoxical articulations that we have been outlining will provide the basis for a discussion of art and democracy.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., pp. 10 – 14.

## Chapter 2: Art for All

A recent editorial in *Art Monthly* asks, “[w]hat arts organisation would not want to widen access – in every sense – to develop new audiences, reflect contemporary society in all its diversity, contribute to the local community and, where possible, raise more money from the private sector to supplement its funding?”<sup>1</sup> The rhetorical question is followed by an insistence that such aims should not come before the intrinsic value of art to society, but what it demonstrates is not only the extent to which the ideas of the avant-garde have been assimilated by art institutions, but also the internal contradiction inherited from the absorption of conflicting discourses. The private and the public are conflated not just in fiscal terms, but in the aspiration to both reflect diversity and widen access to new audiences. Art institutions seem increasingly unable to negotiate these two contradictory roles, to protect the privileged position of artistic production in the name of a universal good or to reflect and manage the already existing democratic structure of society as a whole. This tension is systemic and arises from the categories established by art in its modernity.

A persistent strand of discourse of the early twentieth century avant-garde expresses a demand to democratise art and overcome its separation from everyday life. In 1921, Rodchenko proclaimed:

Down with art as a beautiful patch on the squalid life of the rich! Down with art as a precious stone in the midst of the dismal and dirty life of the poor! Down with art as a means of escaping from a life that is not worth living!<sup>2</sup>

In that same year, Tristan Tzara declared:

Dada belongs to everybody. Like the idea of God or of the toothbrush. There are people who are very dada, more dada; there are dadas everywhere all over and in every individual. Like God and the toothbrush.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bickers, Patricia, “Editorial”, *Art Monthly*, London, issue no. 314, March 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Rodchenko, Alexander, “Slogans” in: *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* [Harrison, Charles and Wood, Paul – eds.], London: Blackwell, 2003 p. 340.

This idea has continued to pervade discussions of art. Writing about the avant-garde art of the late 60s and early 70s, Alex Farquharson states that if there was a paradigm for the disparate forms it took, it was “the endeavour to draw what had been the mutually exclusive realms of ‘Art’ and ‘Life’ much closer together; to break out of the physical, social and ideological confines of the museum and merge the avant-garde with the progressive politics and the everyday social flow of the contemporaneous counter-culture”.<sup>4</sup> Of course, paradoxically, the attainment of this ideal would mean the dissolution of art as a differentiated field. So can or should the artist be understood as a special case, removed from the general conditions of work and the everyday? And, if artists refuse this transcendental position outside of ‘everyday’ culture, if contemporary art is not special, how does it transcend the prevailing conditions of production under capitalism? On what ground can it claim any criticality?

In this chapter, we would like to examine the demand to democratise art in all these senses, from the point in the twentieth century where it begins to transform the forms that art takes and set the paradigm for the conceptualisation of contemporary art. We will be surveying writing on and by the artists of the avant-garde, as well as the philosophers and theorists of the everyday who have analysed their call for an end to the separation of art and life. In so doing, we propose that there is a paradox at the heart of this demand that parallels and derives from the democratic paradox we have explored in our first chapter. The tension between the need to maintain art as an autonomous field in the name of freedom and the desire to expand its reach to all in the name of equality parallels that between liberalism and democracy. Moreover, this tension is inherent to our conception of art since the avant-garde: it is a practice that must transcend itself by rejecting the canon, thereby joining the canon, a rebellion against established traditions

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<sup>3</sup> Dachy, Marc, “Dada, A Transparent Transformation: An Essay on Tristan Tzara” in: *Dada - Constructivism: The Janus Face of the Twenties*. [Ades, Dawn, et. al. – eds.], London: Annelly Juda Fine Art, 1984, p. 76.

<sup>4</sup> Farquharson, Alex, “The Avant-garde, Again”, in: *Carey Young, Incorporated*, London: Film & Video Umbrella, 2002 at: <http://www.careyyoung.com/essays/farquharson.html> [accessed 29.03.08]

that has become the most prominent legacy of the avant-garde. Ultimately, we claim that the recognition of the impossibility of this demand leaves art with two options, either retreat into some version of the idea of autonomy, conceding that the vanguard must always be at odds with the masses, or in an ironic position, unable to progress beyond pointing to the paradox of both wanting to collapse such boundaries and reinforcing them. In the chapter that follows, we will demonstrate how this irony is further reproduced and manifested in the structures of post-Fordist creative labour. However, despite the fact that late capitalist work has adopted tropes and gestures from the historical avant-garde, we would like to avoid a purely ironic reading of the avant-garde. At the same time, we do not subscribe to the melancholy of a nostalgic attachment to autonomy, as described by Stewart Martin in his essay on the artwork and the absolute commodity (of which more later): “Art’s resistance to its commodification is therefore sustained as a lament”.<sup>5</sup> The democratic bringing together of the realms of art and the everyday has been partially achieved in the social factories of today’s workplaces without delivering on the emancipatory promises of the twentieth century, but we hope to show that certain critical stances embedded in the historical avant-garde remain valid, useful and largely unrealised. To do this, we need to resist this reduction of avant-garde to one phenomenon. Focusing on the movements of Dada and constructivism specifically, we attempt to find the fissures within the formulation of the avant-garde that will allow us to propose a way out of the democratic paradox.

Despite its playful absurdity, Tzara’s quote about God and the toothbrush seems to offer a concise definition of the options outlined by the avant-garde in relation to the everyday. On the one hand, art must see itself in theological terms, separated from the everyday on which it works critically from the outside. The artist engages in this work from a position of detachment, by organising the forms and objects of the everyday aesthetically, liberating them from their utilitarian and alienated confinement. The other option, according to Tzara’s aphorism, is to see art as a kind of toothbrush, a mode of production

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<sup>5</sup> Martin, Stewart, “The Absolute Artwork Meets the Absolute Commodity”, in: *Radical Philosophy*, no. 146, Nov/Dec 2007, p.17.



that serves a particular function on the same level as other everyday activities. This activity, however, (like dental hygiene) is universal and belongs to all equally. In this case, art operates from within existing conditions of production and its critical faculty is simply an aspect of whatever relations of production prevail. We would like to argue that certain strands of modernism offer nuanced variations on these options. In the first version, the artist, a universal, theological construct, appears before any particular or given socio-economic conditions. The second is closer to the notion of artist as producer as construed by Walter Benjamin.

Viewed today, it is tempting to see both versions of the avant-garde as leading us to the stasis that writers such as Guy Debord, Allan Kaprow and Boris Groys have repeatedly identified in art since the second world war. According to these authors the relationship of art and the everyday ends in a dialectical stalemate in which the critical vitality of art is lost. The attempts of the avant-garde to work on or within the everyday have only led to the annexation of these new forms into the hegemonic institutions of the canon. Nevertheless, despite the almost unavoidable reading of past cultural movements through the trace they leave on the present, we believe that these avant-gardes contain within them a still radical core that has the potential to circumvent the dialectical pitfall. This idea, buried inside movements like Dada and constructivism, is perhaps close to what we describe in the last chapter as overidentification. Rather than abandoning the legacy of the avant-garde altogether, we would like to reimagine it as leading up to the artistic strategies we will discuss there.

### **Art in, as and outside Everyday Life**

The problem of the exceptionality of art can be traced back to the Greek suspicion of this activity that is neither quite work nor quite philosophical enquiry, and therefore hard to find a place for in a democratic society. However, this problem gained urgency in modernity, as art was increasingly aligned with the pursuit of utopian and revolutionary projects which sought to

eradicate art's separation from everyday life, removing restrictions of both access and authorship. In his book, *Philosophizing the Everyday*, John Roberts claims that the current usage of the concept of the everyday, grounded in cultural studies' valorisation of the popular, has furthered this idea from its revolutionary origins. He identifies several twentieth century conceptualisations of the everyday to reinvigorate a depoliticised notion of cultural democratisation that has been subsumed into the category of the 'creative consumer'. Roberts begins by examining a Marxist tradition that calls for the end of alienation through the realisation of a generalised creativity that governs life. In tracing this tradition, he analyses the writings of Henri Lefebvre on the everyday. It's worth quoting the full passage from Lefebvre. Although Roberts glosses over the apocryphal nature of the citation, which famously led to Lefebvre's expulsion from the PFC, it is nevertheless a good summary of a particular trajectory of Marxist thinking around the role of art in a post-revolutionary society<sup>6</sup>:

The creative activity of art and the work of art foreshadow joy at its highest. For Marx, enjoyment of the world is not limited to consumption of material goods, no matter how refined, or to the consumption of goods, no matter how subtle. It is much more than that. He does not imagine a world in which all men would be surrounded by art, not even a society where everyone would be painters, poets or musicians. Those would still be transitional stages. He imagines a society in which everyone would rediscover the spontaneity of natural life and its initial creative drive, and perceive the world through the eyes of a painter, the ears of a musician and the language of a poet. Once superseded, art would be reabsorbed into an everyday which had been metamorphosed by its fusion with what had hitherto been kept external to it.<sup>7</sup>

Here, art ceases to exist as a distinct activity, dissolving into a new reality in which everyday life is permeated with an artistic sensibility. We will look more closely at what Marx does say about labour and its relation to the construction of human nature, creative or otherwise, in the next chapter. However, this

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<sup>6</sup> Lefebvre, Henri, *The Critique of Everyday Life vol. 2* [John Moore – tr.], London: Verso, 2002, p. 37, and p. 361 (footnote 16).

<sup>7</sup> Cited in: Roberts, John, *Philosophizing the Everyday: Revolutionary Praxis and the Fate of Cultural Theory*, London: Pluto Press, 2006, p.13.

version of a Marxist critique of everyday life starts from an understanding of the actually existing everyday as an oppressive reification that needs to be challenged and replaced with a more utopian configuration through revolutionary praxis. As Roberts explains:

The philosophical critique of the naturalism, economism and gradualism of orthodox Marxism and the invention of an interventionist art of the everyday [...] inhabit a similar conceptual universe in the 1920s. Both link politics to revolutionary cultural practice and revolutionary culture practice to the avant-garde notion of a permanent revolution.<sup>8</sup>

The problem with this idea was that going beyond this critical moment required a fully realised proletarian consciousness that would allow the working classes to shatter the spell of commodity fetishism and end the alienation produced by reification.

It is in response to the question of how this leap into consciousness was to be attained that, according to Roberts, Western Marxism developed a hermeneutics of the everyday. Roberts finds Walter Benjamin's engagement with the everyday is particularly useful in this context, since Benjamin is deeply ambivalent about the roles of art and culture in society. On the one hand, as Roberts shows, Benjamin was a proponent of Productivism, and like many leftist intellectuals of his time, sought the breakdown of the professional categories that separated the artist from society. Benjamin's essay, "Author as Producer", clearly echoes Boris Aravtsov's idea that "[i]nstead of socialising aesthetics, [bourgeois] intellectuals aestheticise the social environment" and his demand that "[t]he whole of art must be revolutionized in such a way that artistic creativity becomes the means of organization of all the spheres of life, not as a beautification, but as a reformulation which corresponds to utilitarian usage".<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Benjamin's fascination with the material detritus of mass-produced culture and the urban experience suggest a more complex relationship to both artistic practice and the everyday, anticipating a

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 51-2.

hermeneutics of the everyday that doesn't merely call for its replacement with a future utopian existence. As Roberts writes,

Benjamin's Productivism [...] is neither the determinate influence on his writing on culture as some might say, nor as peripheral as others might want to believe. [...] he never aligned himself directly to the dissolution of art into functionalism; for, with the expansion of the commodity form and the rise of Stalinism and Fascism, the historical tasks of representation seemed ever greater and far too important to warrant their (premature) supersession or aestheticization.<sup>10</sup>

In "Author as Producer", Benjamin himself explains this problem succinctly: "The solidarity of the specialist with the proletariat [...] can never be anything but a mediated one".<sup>11</sup> Benjamin famously explores the problem of determining the relationship between artistic quality and specialised technique on the one hand, and revolutionary commitment or tendentious political intent on the other. The artist, working from within the present, cannot transcend the prevailing conditions of production. Since art is a feature of bourgeois culture, and the artist inevitably a member of this class, solidarity is the best one can hope for. At the same time, the criticality of art is neutered so long as it does not aim to transform these conditions. This is why for Benjamin Dada remains limited in its achievement:

The revolutionary force of Dadaism lay in the fact that it put the authenticity of art to the test. The Dadaists made still-lives out of tickets, spools, cigarette butts that were integrated into painted elements. Then they showed it to the public: see, the picture-frame explodes time, the tiniest real fragment of everyday life says more than painting. Just as the bloody fingerprint of a murderer on the page of a book says more than the text. Many aspects of this revolutionary attitude have made their way into photomontage. [...] it is the political function of photography to renew the world as it actually is from within, in other words, according to the current fashion. Here we have a

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin, Walter, "The Author as Producer" [John Heckman – tr.], in: *New Left Review*, 1/62, July-August 1970, p. 8.

drastic example of what it means to pass on an apparatus of production without transforming it.<sup>12</sup>

The apparatus here extends beyond the medium of photography about which Benjamin was writing. The institutions of art, which frame Dada as art are equally unchanged, ultimately, by its initially unsettling intervention.

The problem of superseding the institution of art remained unresolved in Benjamin's writing, but his account of the limitations of artistic practice is echoed in Peter Bürger's consideration of the avant-garde as inherently paradoxical. In Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-garde*, he proposes that "the avant-gardists' attempt to reintegrate art into the life process is itself a profoundly contradictory endeavour".<sup>13</sup> This is because art requires a degree of autonomy to be critical of the praxis of life. Without this distance, it is incapable of criticising and becomes wholly absorbed in it. We can no longer speak of an artistic function or even functionlessness because we can no longer differentiate artistic activity from any other activity. This is why the readymade's provocation remains, for Bürger, purely historical. Rather than eradicating individual creativity, "it affirms it, and the reason is the failure of the avant-garde to sublimate art".<sup>14</sup> The protest against the institution becomes a gesture in a catalogue of gestures available to the artist, devoid of any real potency. For Bürger, the sublation of art is neither possible nor desirable. It is synonymous with the false promises and false consciousness of the culture industry.

Consequently, much contemporary art appears to relinquish the utopian aims of the avant-garde in favour of a more modest demand for temporary zones of para-artistic activity where life can be more authentically and creatively lived. This is particularly evident in the realm of what Nicholas Bourriaud has termed *Relational Aesthetics*. For him, art exhibitions can generate human

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Bürger, Peter, "The Negation of the Autonomy of Art by the Avant-Garde", *Theory of the Avant-garde* [Michael Shaw - tr.], 1984, cited in: *Participation* [Claire Bishop - ed.], Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2006, p. 49.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

interactions more meaningful than those produced under late capitalism, provisionally allowing art and life to come together, but within specific spatio-temporal confines:

This is the precise nature of the contemporary art exhibition in the arena of representational Commerce: it creates free areas, and time spans whose rhythm contrasts with those structuring everyday life, and it encourages an inter-human commerce that differs from the 'communication zones' that are imposed upon us.<sup>15</sup>

This is posited explicitly in divergence from the avant-garde paradigm. For Bourriaud, "contemporary artistic practice and its cultural plan" no longer rely on an ideological teleology of constructing the world based on a preconceived idea of historical evolution:

Today's fight for modernity is being waged in the same terms as yesterday's, barring the fact that the avant-garde has stopped patrolling like some scout, the troop having come to a cautious standstill around a bivouac of certainties. Art was intended to prepare and announce a future world: today it is modelling possible universes.<sup>16</sup>

Instead of changing the world, art produces micro-worlds within the one that is given. BAVO (a.k.a. cultural activists Gideon Boie and Matthias Pauwels), about whom we write more in the fourth chapter of this dissertation, sum up the problem with this approach very neatly:

In other words, it is believed that only if art is able to accept the given social reality – i.e. the ruling capitalist regime and all the forces within it – will it be able to fulfil its natural role to 'open up' and expand this reality through artistic practices. [...] The precondition for this is, again, that cultural forces shed the authoritarian, utilitarian, idealistic and teleological expectations they mustered and accept the given social and political reality in order to be able to move on. We are thus confronted with a cynical situation. The acceptance of the ruling

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<sup>15</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*, [Simon Pleasanoe & Fronza Woods with the participation of Mathieu Copeland – tr.], Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2000, p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

capitalist regime, and the renunciation to politicize the current socio-economic organisation is presented as the precondition to 'democratize' and 'open up' reality.<sup>17</sup>

This version of post-avant-garde practice is therefore unconvincing when assessed for its criticality. We will return to the problem of how to function critically within the frameworks of art and capitalism, but first we need to clarify which of the terms of the revolutionary origins of the avant-garde might, as John Roberts suggests, still be worth salvaging in light of Bürger and Bourriaud's disillusionment with its historical manifestation.

### **What to do With the Pieces? Dada and Constructivism as Avant-Garde Paradigms**

It is reductive to view the art movements at the start of the twentieth century as identical in the politics that they produced. Although in almost all of them the relation of art to the everyday is pivotal and although, as Bürger argues, all rebelled against the conventions of bourgeois culture, they were part of a complex and diverse network of ideas and practices. Viewed today, a century later, it is tempting to judge these diverse moments and ideas as symptoms of the same syndrome, as manifestations of the failure of the avant-garde, their visions of radical transformation all leading to the same conclusion: an ironic re-affirmation of capitalist market forces, of the hegemony of institutions and the state, of the persistence of a bourgeois culture based on status, respectability and wealth. But, resisting this reductive tendency, it would perhaps be productive to return to a more pluralistic view of the avant-garde, to see in it many trajectories or possibilities, each formulating a different relationship to the paradox of democracy. We would therefore like to follow two of these possible trajectories: the Dadaist and the Constructivist. Rather than thinking about Dada or constructivism through their histories, main actors or central events, we would like to view the two as political ideas that

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<sup>17</sup> BAVO, "Let Art Save Democracy!", 2006, available at: <http://www.museumofconflict.eu/singletext.php?id=32> [accessed 29.03.08]

negotiate the place of the individual artist in relation to the collective, and the place of art in relation to everyday life. This reading enables us to oppose the teleological certainty with which the avant-garde is treated today. Moving away from the ironic reading of the avant-garde as a 'chronicle of a death foretold', it is possible to tease out possibilities that remain dormant in its history and that are still useful for contemporary art.

Dada is the epitome of what Nicolas Bourriaud calls "the modern idea of 'life as a work of art'", an anti-tradition that stretches from the romantics to the Situationists.<sup>18</sup> The essence of this idea, repeated in many of the Dadaists' manifestos, is that the role of art is to resist capitalist separations and the bureaucratic organisation of life by political, economic, scientific or aesthetic means. "What did it mean to leave art behind? [...] Existence was uppermost in our thoughts, not art [...] Above all, I wanted to change life, my life and that of other people, which is why I was indifferent to the way one paints, writes or composes", proclaimed Richard Huelsenbeck.<sup>19</sup> Dada is therefore the opposite of the notion of art as a specialist field of production that requires an aesthetic language acquired through education or training (the way one paints...). Huelsenbeck quotes Hugo Ball: "The Dadaist [...] no longer believes in comprehending things from one single vantage point and yet convinced of the over all connections between people, so convinced of totality, that he suffers from the dissonances to the point of self-disintegration"<sup>20</sup> and again Ball: "In going to extremes and beyond all discipline, we were looking for a new rigor. Although seemingly not following any law, we were producing an inner set of laws...".<sup>21</sup> These quotes outline the simple democratic paradox that stands at the heart of this version of the avant-garde. On the one hand, Dada rejects the separation of art from everyday life and the organisation of cultural activities or aesthetic objects into categories defined by institutions, classes, education and tradition. On the other hand, this totality constitutes a

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<sup>18</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*, 2000, cited in: *Participation* [Claire Bishop – ed.], p. 169.

<sup>19</sup> Huelsenbeck, Richard, *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*, Berkley: University of California Press 1991, pp. 14 – 15.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 30

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.



law in itself, a law that is placed above and is distinguished from all other mechanisms of separation (other 'laws').

In the previous chapter, we have argued that several founding narratives compete to define liberal democracy, and that each understands the place of the individual in relation to the social collective in a different way. One variant of this ideal of democracy sees it as an agreement between free individuals that appear before any given social order. We quoted Rousseau as an example, but an equally valid one is John Locke's description of the origins of the political. For Locke, this chronology in which the individual precedes the political order dictates a clear code of morality where the preservation of the free self is a necessary pre-condition for the political. Only after the space of the individual is established can a social space of mutuality be developed:

Every one, as he is bound to preserve himself, and not to quit his station wilfully, so by the like reason, when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of mankind, and may not, unless it be to do justice on an offender, take away, or impair the life, or what tends to the preservation of the life, the liberty, health, limb, or goods of another.<sup>22</sup>

The Dadaist formula of art shares certain aspects of this liberal narrative. Similarly, it is a utopian, teleological vector of movement from the individual, existing before and as a necessary condition for society, towards a universal community based on the agreement of these free individuals. But here the Dadaists encounter the same paradox that, as we have seen, haunts the liberal imagination. When the avant-garde operates on the everyday from this external position, when the critical hand of the artist rearranges the institutions of 'life' without taking part in them, it ironically reaffirms the cultural separation of the 'everyday' from 'art' to which the Dadaists objected in the first place. But there is also a crucial difference here: unlike the liberal tradition of Locke and Rousseau, the Dadaist seeks the paradox as a productive position. Art, to

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<sup>22</sup> Locke, John, *Second Treatise Of Government*, 1980, available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/7370/7370-h/7370-h.htm> [accessed: 04.01.2012]

return to Hugo Ball's quote, exists in the place where the self is in a state of disintegration, where laws are negated in the name of the law of negation.

This paradox therefore takes place in relation to the self-collective procedure of subjectivisation and is experienced as a disruption in the self-fulfilling movement from the individual to the social. In Raoul Hausmann's words:

We request that this little individual fraud ends and demand the broadening and renewal of man's sensory emanations, since the birth of the working class, an intrepid and ahistorical humankind, has taken precedence. The individual considered as an atom, has only one duty: to find his law through no matter what form imposed on his own hardened ego – against his ego. In this newly present world we should realize the voluntary abandon of all force inherent in the atom!!!<sup>23</sup>

In order for the individual to become liberated from social and political constraints, the individual must first overcome the most fundamental division of society into atomised selves; in order for the 'I' to be an 'I' in any significant way it must destroy itself. A similar movement is described in Tristan Tzara's *Dada Manifesto* (1918):

I destroy the drawers of the brain and of social organization: spread demoralization wherever I go and cast my hand from heaven to hell, my eyes from hell to heaven, restore the fecund wheel of a universal circus to objective forces and the imagination of every individual [...] I am against systems, the most acceptable system is on principle to have none. To complete oneself, to perfect oneself in one's own littleness, to fill the vessel with one's individuality, to have the courage to fight for and against thought, the mystery of bread, the sudden burst of an infernal propeller into economic lilies.... Every product of disgust capable of becoming a negation of the family is Dada.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Benson, Timothy O., "The Functional and the Conventional in the Dada Philosophy of Raoul Hausmann", *Dada/Dimensions* [Stephen C. Foster – ed.], Ann Arbor, Michigan: Umi Research Press, 1985, p. 155.

<sup>24</sup> Tzara, Tristan, "Dada Manifesto 1918", in: *Manifesto: A Century of isms*, Caws, Mary Ann [ed.], Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001, p. 299.

The paradox of the individual and the ambiguous place it takes in defining the relationship of the artist to everyday life cuts through many of the Dadaists' writing and works of art. One of the best-known objects associated with Dada – Marcel Janco's *Untitled (Portrait of Tristan Tzara)* from 1919 – illustrates this well [fig. 5]. This portrait is a mask made of cardboard and paper onto which Tzara's features are crudely painted as if to resemble a collage effect: one eye small and purple, the other larger and bespectacled; the nose and mouth are objects that are glued diagonally across this a-symmetrical face. Inspired by traditional Romanian folk masks [fig. 6], Tzara used the mask during his performance for the Dada event at the Saal zur Kaufleutern in Switzerland, which ended, like other Dadaist events, in a riot. The function of the work is double: it is both a traditional portrait of the artist and a prop for a performance by the artist portrayed. It is therefore both an object that stands for or represents the individual and one that enhances the individual, an object that disguises the 'authenticity' of the artist's character (and his face) and reproduces it on a higher level, as a cartoonish icon. The artist is simultaneously destroyed as a specialist (since the mask is so crudely made as to reject traditional skills) and recreated as a special category – a performer of the self.

There have been attempts to reconcile the legacies of Dada and Constructivism, most notably in Dawn Ades catalogue essay for the 1984 exhibition *Dada – Constructivism*, which proclaims both as similar endeavours to balance "tendencies for order, a structure" and "the law of chance which Dada had discovered".<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, when considered in light of the democratic paradox discussed here, constructivism poses the question of art's relationship to the everyday in a very different way. If Dada, in its own disruptive and contrary way, continued the logic of the liberal project by tracing a teleological, universal totality that supersedes, yet protects, the individual sphere of expression, the constructivists followed another trajectory. Vladimir Tatlin sums up this difference in his 1919 manifesto: "The initiative individual is the collector of the *energy* of the collective, directed towards knowledge and

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<sup>25</sup> Ades, Dawn, "Dada-Constructivism" in *Dada – Constructivism: The Janus Face of the Twenties*, p. 35.

invention".<sup>26</sup> In other words, art is never autonomous but merely an instrument to reflect, organise and reproduce the creativity of the collective, "the working out of impulses and desires of the collective and not of the individual".<sup>27</sup> Unlike Dada, Constructivism posits the collective and the socio-political and economic structures that support it, as a given, preceding the idea of the individual. If the Dadaists sought to negate the self in order to find a more total subjectivity, the constructivists wished to construct a self that is an expression of a totality that is already given in the everyday.

Tatlin sums up this position by asserting that the self is an exception (the individual), which proves the rule (the collective).<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, for Osip Brik, the question of proletarian art after the revolution goes beyond the debate about art by or for the proletariat. The proletarian artist is neither an artisan making proletarian art for the masses nor an amateur granted the role of by virtue of being a one of them. Instead, he unites "a creative talent and proletarian consciousness...fused into an indivisible whole".<sup>29</sup> Brik contrasts this new artist with the existing bourgeois mode of artistic production:

The proletarian artist differs from the bourgeois artist not because he comes from a different social environment, but by virtue of his relationship to himself and his art. The bourgeois artist regarded creation as his private affair. The proletarian artist knows that he and his talent belong to the collective. The bourgeois artist created to assert his own personality; the proletarian artist creates to perform a socially significant task. The bourgeois artist separated himself from the masses as an element that was alien to him; the proletarian artist sees before him his equals.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Tatlin, Vladimir, *The Initiative Individual Artist in the Creativity of the Collective*, in: *Manifesto: A Century of isms*, *ibid.*, p. 401.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* interestingly, to make this claim Tatlin refers to the mathematical theory of primary numbers (Khlebnikov) in terms similar to those used more recently by Alan Badiou to discuss the role of singularity in producing universalism.

<sup>29</sup> Brik, Osip, "The Proletarian Artist", 1918, cited in Kleberg, Lars, *Theatre as Action: Soviet Russian Avant-Garde Aesthetics*, London: Macmillan, 1993, p. 17.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Art is assigned a different role to the one ascribed by the Dada tradition. Art can channel, bring to cohesion, make manifest, complete or negate the structures and forces that already constrain and control society. According to Alexander Bogdanov:

Through living images, art organises social experience not only in the sphere of knowledge, but also in the sphere of emotions and aspirations. This makes it the mightiest tool for the organisation of collective forces, and in a class society, for the organisation of class forces.<sup>31</sup>

It might seem surprising that some artists in the first years after the revolution, while aligning themselves politically with the new regime, declared that the old bourgeois forms of art should not be destroyed. However, this approach was quite consistent with the idea of art as tool for producing collectivity. The old art is useful because it maintains the relationship between artistic expression and the forces of political organisation, even if it does so negatively (by supporting the oppressive socio-economic structure of capitalism):

The treasures of the old art must not be assimilated passively, for in that case they would educate the working class in the spirit of the culture of the ruling classes and thereby in a spirit of subordination to the order of life created by these classes [...] they will become a valuable heritage for the proletariat, a weapon in its struggle against the old world that created them, and a tool in the organisation of the new world.<sup>32</sup>

The new art, meanwhile, was to dispense with the materials and methods of the past altogether. Nikolai Punin's 1920 fervent defence of Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* is a good illustration of how the constructivists understood the relationship between political structures and aesthetic principles [fig. 7].<sup>33</sup> Punin explains that although revolutions do not provide an

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<sup>31</sup> Bogdanov, Alexander "The Proletariat and Art", 1918, cited in Kleberg, Lars, *Theatre as Action: Soviet Russian Avant-Garde Aesthetics*, Ibid., p.13.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Punin, Nikolai "The Monument to the Third International", in: Harrison C. and Wood P. J. [eds.], *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, p. 311 – 315.

instant new aesthetic language, political developments turn the pre-revolutionary monuments of Greek and Italian heroic figures sitting on granite plinths inadequate. A new monumental language will emerge from the revolutionary moment that understands poetically the dense, vibrant and complex image of the mass and rejects the hollow, private and pseudo-heroic image of the classical figure. Tatlin's monument is successful, according to Punin, because it is part of the everyday: "A monument must live the social and political life of the city and the city must live in it".<sup>34</sup> Tatlin's monument is made from the materials of the city – glass, steel and electricity – and not of the dead bronze or marble of the bourgeois past and is also a utilitarian building functioning as a propaganda centre and a meeting hall. For Punin, art is no longer the elevation of the heroic individual above the masses on the street or an elevation of art above the everyday. Rather than functioning as a humanist fantasy of freedom to the regimentation of the everyday under modernity, art should simply be a more effective and less alienated way to organise the everyday. In the words of Alexander Rodchenko:

Down with art as a means of escaping from a life that is not worth living. Conscious and organised life, that knows how to see and build is contemporary art.<sup>35</sup>

This is the inverse of Henri Lefebvre's catchphrase about Dada: "Dada smashes the world, but the pieces are fine". Constructivism does not smash the world, but the pieces are pressed more firmly together to give it a better shape. In the liberal-democratic analogy we have been using here, Dada aims to sever the communitarian unity of individuals (via the nation, race, class, culture, taste etc.) in order to rescue a truly liberated individual connected directly to a universal principle; Constructivism negotiates the private space of artistic freedom only to the extent that it can be deduced from an already given principle of universal organisation. For the Dadaist, art is a continuation

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 312

<sup>35</sup> Rodchenko, Alexander, "'Slogans' and 'Organizational Programme' of the Working for the Study of Painting in State Art Colleges" in: Harrison C. and Wood P. J. (Editors) *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, p. 315.

of real life and never work, for the Constructivist, art is a beautiful form of work that enables and activates life.

### **Performing the Paradox**

The democratic aspirations of the avant-garde were put to the test in the most explicit way in relation to live art. Because of its unique relationship to mimesis, theatrical performance was the arena in which both the Dadaists and the Constructivists tested out their visions of a new relationship between art and society. Erika Fischer-Lichte writes that the stage of the theatrical mass spectacle was a space for “a new community – a self organising and self organised community [in] which [...] all are equal”.<sup>36</sup> However, this project was inextricably bound to the revolutionary cause. Writing in 1908, Andrei Bely criticised the idea of a communal creative improvisation as a means of producing collectivity:

Let's suppose we go into the temple-theatre, robe ourselves in white clothes, crown ourselves with bunches of roses, perform a mystery play (its theme is always the same – God-like man wrestles with fate) and then at the appropriate moment we join hands and begin to dance. Imagine yourself, reader, if only for just one minute, in this role. We are the ones who will be spinning round the sacrificial altar – all of us: the fashionable lady, the up-and-coming stockbroker, the worker and the member of the State Council. It is too much to expect that our steps and our gestures will coincide. While the class struggle still exists, these appeals for an aesthetic democratisation are strange.<sup>37</sup>

The mass spectacles that followed the revolution attempted to correct the problems identified by Bely, in tune with the philosophy of the cultural leadership of the Proletkult:

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<sup>36</sup> Fischer-Lichte, Erika, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre*, London: Routledge, 2005, p. 198.

<sup>37</sup> Rudnitsky, Konstantin, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1988, p. 10.

They advocated a 'pure' and 'absolutely new' proletarian culture, created only by the proletariat, that is by the workers themselves, and having nothing in common with the old, pre-Revolutionary culture. 'New art,' they maintained, 'only arises with the development of new forms. A new form of theatre is not possible as long as the stalls and the stage, the actor and the spectator, the author of the play, all the elements of the old theatre still exist, even if this author has written the most Revolutionary play and the most exclusively proletarian public filled the stalls [...] The new theatre did not require either permanent companies or professional actors. The workers themselves would create the productions [...] the principle of amateurism must be preserved as completely as possible [...] 'Art', assured the Proletkult's theoreticians, 'should become an exultant labour, and not an entertainment'.<sup>38</sup>

The logical conclusion of such an approach was a total rejection of art: "We, the Constructivists, renounce art because it is not useful. Art is by its very nature passive, it only reflects reality. Constructivism is active, it not only reflects reality but takes action itself".<sup>39</sup>

Superficially, this seems like a reiteration of the Dadaists anti-art philosophy. However, as Konstantin Rudnitsky observes, the Constructivists' goal was not the contamination of high art by everyday life, but the transferral of a better model of life from the stage into society:

It may seem strange that people concerned with the arts, poets, came out so resolutely against art, against artistic invention, against fantasy [...] Their attitude to the theatre brings us to an amusing paradox. All of them, unanimously, dismissed it as useless. Yet all, one after another – Sergei Tretyakov, Sergei Eisenstein, Ivan Axenov, Ilya Selvinsky and Liubov Popova – were drawn into it. The dismayed Arvatov attempted to justify this paradox. He expressed the hope that theatre would be turned into 'a factory turning out people qualified for life' and that 'the results achieved in the theatrical laboratory' could be 'transferred into life, recreating our real, everyday social life'.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p. 90.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.



The Constructivist plays frequently ended with “a mighty surge of aroused and indignant crowds over the stage”<sup>41</sup> or the audience joining in to sing the Internationale<sup>42</sup>. As Edward Braun describes in relation to Meyerhold’s *The Dawn* (1920) [fig. 8, 9]:

Admission was free, the walls were hung with hortatory placards, and the audience was showered at intervals during the play with leaflets. [...] A fortnight after the production had opened, the actor playing the Herald interrupted his performance to deliver the news received the day before that the Red army had made a decisive breakthrough into the Crimea [...] As the applause died down, a solo voice began to sing the Revolutionary funeral march ‘As Martyrs You Fell’ and the audience stood in silence. The action on stage then resumed its course.<sup>43</sup>

By contrast, the simultaneous poems and performances of the Dadaists instituted an extreme solipsism, where even words were fragmented beyond a shared meaning [fig. 10 - 12]:

three or more voices speak, sing, and whistle at the same time[...]In such a simultaneous poem[...] the wilful quality of an organic work is given powerful expression, and so is its limitation by the accompaniment – an ‘rrrrrr’ drawn out for minutes, or crashes, or sirens, superior to the human voice in energy.<sup>44</sup>

“On the stage of a gaudy, motley, overcrowded tavern there are several weird and peculiar figures representing Tzara, Janco, Ball, Huelsenbeck, Madame Hennings, and your humble servant”, writes Jean Arp:

Total pandemonium. The people around us are shouting, laughing, and gesticulating. Our replies are sighs of love, volleys of hiccups, poems, moos,

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>42</sup> Kleberg, Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>43</sup> Braun, Edward, *The Director and the Stage: From Naturalism to Grotowski*, London: Methuen, 1982, p. 16.

<sup>44</sup> Sandqvist, Tom, *Dada East: The Romanians of Cabaret Voltaire*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006, p. 35.

and miaowing of medieval *Bruitists*. Tzara is wiggling his behind like the belly of an oriental dancer. Janco is playing an invisible violin and bowing and scraping. Madame Hennings, with a Madonna face, is doing the splits. Huelsenbeck is banging away non-stop on the great drum, with Ball accompanying them on the piano, pale as a chalky ghost.<sup>45</sup>

If the stage is an obvious arena for Dadaist and Constructivist democratic experiments, it is particularly interesting to observe the difference in the attitudes of the two movements towards the popular folklorist theatre of Eastern and Central Europe. The use of folk art and performance in both avant-garde movements derives from their attempts to reformulate the relationship of high art to other forms of culture which are perhaps closer to the everyday. Certain writers dismiss this interest in folklore as simply reactionary, a throwback at odds with a fascination with progress and technology more apt to the Futurist avant-garde. Leah Dickerman, for example, writes of Dada's preoccupation with folk traditions as "a certain nostalgia for older forms of community based on traditional religious structures[...]" and determines that "[i]t is the loss of community, rather than simply its non-existence, that haunts Dada".<sup>46</sup> But this assessment does not account for a more intricate dialectics that is at play here. Tom Sandqvist, on the other hand, subtly implies that the explosion of Dada in Zurich under the guise of Cabaret Voltaire is perhaps radical only because the Romanian Jewish immigrants who formed the core of the Zurich group (Tzara, Janco, Artur Segal) transposed an established Eastern folk tradition onto a Western European art.<sup>47</sup> Sandqvist suggests that the use of carnivalesque masks, costumes and forms of acting and singing derived from a preference for theatre as an oral, improvisational act challenged nineteenth century European bourgeois notions of the interpretation of a literary text. In spite of Dada's staunch rejection of particularism and nationalism, they adopted forms like the religious village fete to dismiss conventional art, which relies on ideas of high and low, good taste and cannon. Furthermore, Tzara and

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<sup>45</sup> Marcus, Greil, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990, pp. 192-3.

<sup>46</sup> Dickerman, Leah, *Dada: Zurich, Berlin, Hanover, Cologne, New York, Paris*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2005

<sup>47</sup> Sandqvist, Tom, *Dada East: The Romanians of Cabaret Voltaire*, pp. 247-8

Huelsenbeck's performances of spoken 'primitive Negro poetry' were not straightforward examples of the avant-garde's exoticisation of African art, or even just a satire on European poetry, but more importantly a positive search for a new universal language which goes beyond the particular signification of known words. In Dada, art imitates other forms of creativity outside the scope of its institutions in order to paradoxically subvert these very notions of inside and outside and ultimately to fashion a new universal subject.

The Russian Constructivists' relationship to folklore was quite different. Like the Dada artists, Soviet theatre directors saw popular theatre as a legitimate source of inspiration. But, unlike the Dadaists, they utilised folk structures while replacing religious iconography with the political messages of the new regime:

The parallels between the finale of the [Soviet] mass spectacles and the Easter liturgy are, in fact, striking. The liturgy confirms the collective identity of the congregation as one of redeemed souls...but] while in the church it was Christ who saved souls, in the performance it was the proletarian masses who saved themselves.<sup>48</sup>

In this instance of the Russian mass spectacles, the popular structure of the religious pageant was never challenged because all that art could do was give an organisational framework to life. The place of the individual within these structures and constructs is sculpted by art's assignment of individual roles in support of the collective project. Fischer-Lichte concludes that this logic is at work in the other Soviet mass spectacle – the mass show trial – in which the individual sacrifices himself for the greater good of the Party's truth and the nation's unity. In the Stalinist show trial, the collective dictates an individuating place for the self-sacrificing (Bukharin, Zinoviev, Kamenev) in order to preserve the unity of the collective.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre*, p. 109.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p. 121.

Both strands of the avant-garde share an aim of negation. Both oppose the normative bourgeois doctrine of art in which art occupies a place of specialism, the artist's work is different inherently to other forms of labour and the experience of viewing it offers a release from the pressures of the everyday. But these two movements offered radically different solutions to this problem. In their attitude towards the folklore traditions of Eastern Europe, both show how this attack on the conventions of institutional art is carried out. Dada insisted on the preservation of the individual as a unifying principle for artistic activity. While the Dadaists of Cabaret Voltaire collected and fused together fragments of different folk traditions (Romanian village fete rituals, Yiddish theatre, Germanic myths and aboriginal poetry to name just a few), they did so in order to invent a new individual. This individual is not part of a particular culture or country but is a universal subject who belongs nowhere (the literal meaning of the name Tristan Tzara in Romanian is 'sad in country'). Through the performative event, which injects an element of socialisation into the act of making art, a community is formed around this universal individual, the empty sign designating only negation and confusion. Tzara declares in his 1918 Dada manifesto: "Art is a private affair, the artist produces it for himself".<sup>50</sup> If something is intelligible, claims Tzara, it is merely journalism, not art. But this position is, of course, ironically negated by the declarative form of the manifesto itself, striving to convince, to make this position of obscurity intelligible. The Constructivists, by contrast, used folklore theatre not in order to confuse high and low culture, East and West, 'primitive' and 'civilised' like the Dadaists, but in order to re-organise culture around a communitarian ideal. Theirs is a communal celebration of the destruction of the bourgeois ideal of the individual. The live theatrical event is simply one prism through which the force of collective life can be felt and when, like in the interruption of Meyerhold's 1920 production, other prisms invade the stage, they are accepted as equally valid. An individual - whether a character in a play or the skilled actor on stage - is nothing more than an image of a previous historical regime and the empty universal sign waiting to be filled is the collective, not the individual.

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<sup>50</sup> Tzara, Tristan, "Dada Manifesto 1918", in: Harrison C. and Wood P. J. (Editors) *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, p. 251.

## **The Ultra-Orthodoxy of the Avant-Garde**

These two different versions of the democratic paradox of art present us with two distinct political programmes of emancipation. And although today the avant-garde seems like a monolithic structure, thinking through the nuanced difference between the Dadaist and constructivist versions can help us go beyond the narrative of inevitable decline. In this narrative the movements of the avant-garde are exposed as victims of a dialectical irony. While striving to abolish the tradition of bourgeois art and to re-invent art as a pure gesture of newness and negation, the avant-garde unwittingly created its own tradition, which soon replaced other models and became the dominant form of bourgeois culture. Instead of a total revolution that transformed the everyday through artistic engagement, the avant-garde survived only as the reified remnant of a nostalgic project of transformation and only in private collections, a testimony of our own inability to transform the political terrain. As against this narrative, we would like to suggest that it is particularly in the field of performance that we find enactments of the paradox that point the way to the critical strategies we identify as useful for circumventing the stalemate of ironic repetition.

Looking at the two versions of the democratic paradox that we have identified - the one cutting the individual off from the collective to re-imagine the individual as a universal category and the other destroying the individual in order to ontologise a collective space – it is evident that the roots of the avant-garde's malaise are already present in its political programme. The problem that anticipates the historical irony of the avant-garde that Bürger identifies, where an initially radical gesture is neutralised through repetition, is located in the dialectical structure of these two political positions. Dada and constructivism might move in opposite directions but they are both directional in essence. This directionality is dialectical because it seeks to establish an ideal, or a positive, out of negation, to construct a universal system out of contradictions and inconsistencies. Rather than see the rebellion of the avant-

garde against bourgeois capitalism as inauthentic or insincere once it becomes a familiar trope, we can say that the problem lies in how we envision rebellion in relation to the avant-garde paradigm in the first place. To put this differently, there is no need to follow the 'pragmatism' of certain strands of contemporary interpretation of the avant-garde by proclaiming that although the modernist 'dream of a different world' was beautiful, it was also naïve and allowed itself to be exploited and commodified. Writers like Bourriaud argue that this beautiful dream of critical transformation of the everyday and of art, although desirable, was always too idealistic in its totality, and if it ever was viable, it is certainly no longer adequate to the prevailing conditions of the present: "Social utopias and revolutionary hopes have given way to everyday micro-utopias and imitative strategies, any stance that is "directly" critical of society is futile, if based on the illusion of a marginality that is nowadays impossible, not to say regressive".<sup>51</sup> But rather than subscribe to this disillusionment, we maintain here that the utopian dream itself, or at least its reflection in the dominant history of the avant-garde, was incomplete. The political programme of the two modernist strands we have followed contains a blind spot, a misrecognition of the conditions of critique that ensure that the criticality of the proposed programme can never be fully realised. It is important to point out that the dialectical tension to which we are drawing attention is not synonymous with the formula of sincere event versus ironic history or naïve and beautiful utopia versus harsh and complex realism. This art historical perspective merely echoes the first, deeper, dialectical problem of the avant-garde.

The modernist negation of the separation of art and life is carried out from an already given position of distinction, from the privileged point of view of the artist. Dada wanted to replace the 'I' of the individual with a universal sign that does not belong to a historical specificity; Constructivism wanted to replace the 'I' of the individual with the collective expression of the natural principle of historical materialism, the collectivity that is already there and has never been given a form. One wanted to destroy the everyday by turning it into art, the

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<sup>51</sup> Bourriaud, Nicholas, *Relational Aesthetics*, *ibid.*, p. 31.

other wanted to destroy art by turning it into the everyday. Either way, by introducing the directionality of the passage, the imagined transition from the one to the other creates a third position: the position of the 'I' who sees the construction of the individual and of the collective, that is both outside of the self and outside of the collective, a position that can observe the dialectical shift from one historical regime to the next. This a-historical position is, of course, impossible, and since the avant-garde based its criticality on this dialectical operation, it opened the door to the ironic capture of its language. The third position, never fully acknowledged by the modernists yet completely indispensable, would now stand for the exceptionality of the artist and would replace the previous markers of this special position. If it was the highly developed craft, the laboured efforts, of the artist of the previous, bourgeois, regime that marked the genius of the artist, it would henceforth be the simultaneous rejection of both these categories, work and genius, that defined the uniqueness of the modern artist.

This third position is evident in the function of the readymade, which we analyse later in greater detail later in this chapter. Through the destruction of oppositions such as the everyday and the museum or the consumed and the produced, the readymade participated in the dialectical attack on the categories with which the bourgeois order defined itself. But from this attack, a new artist is born and new distinctions are made. Henceforth, in the conceptual and post-conceptual era that followed the birth of the readymade, the special category of 'artists' is filled with persons who are more able than others to perform dialectical operations on these categories, to constantly redraw and reshape the boundaries between the museum and the street or the private and the public, as though they were just like any other malleable art material.

Nevertheless, certain moments of the avant-garde do not follow this narrative. Specific gestures were not built on this dialectical directionality that separates and unifies. The avant-garde does contain within it another form of critique that sustains both dialectical positions simultaneously. Two instances from the history of the avant-garde illustrate this point. The first is derived from Slavoj

Žižek's suggestion that Russian Constructivism contained an element of radical orthodoxy in which it zealously pursued a total fulfilment of the official creed of the party after the revolution. Rather than seeing the avant-garde artists who worked in Russia in the first decade after the revolution only as following their own programme of transformation, Žižek proposes that in some cases they simply acted in order to make the ideological demands of the political cadre a reality and to even improve them by following these demands to the extremes of their logical progression: "The Russian avant-garde art of the early 1920s (futurism, constructivism) not only zealously endorsed industrialization, it even endeavored to reinvent a new industrial man — no longer the old man of sentimental passions and roots in traditions, but the new man who gladly accepts his role as a bolt or screw in the gigantic coordinated industrial Machine".<sup>52</sup> By subjecting performers to the strictures of biomechanics, for example, Meyerhold's theatre slotted bodies into the machinic sets designed by artists like Popova [fig. 13].

For Žižek, this withdrawal from individual freedom that was experienced in the West as the ultimate nightmare brought about by Taylorism, was, in contrast, celebrated by the Russian artists as the ultimate gesture of liberation. A good illustration of this is the *Kinopoezd* - a mobile film units that travelled the soviet union with cameras and editing equipment [fig. 14]. Chris Marker, who directed a short documentary on the *kino*-train in 1973 (*The Train Rolls On*), describes the *Kinopoezd*:

[A] film-train, carrying cameras, lab, editing tables, screening material and even actors, to produce the first rail-movies, films made on the spot, in collaboration with the local people (workers in factories, peasants in kolkhozs), shot in one day, processed during the night, edited the following day and screened in front of the very people who had participated in its making...<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, *On Belief*, London: Routledge, 2001, p. 123.

<sup>53</sup> Marker, Chris, "The Last Bolshevik", available at: <http://www.chrismarker.org/the-last-bolshevik-by-chris-marker/> [accessed 10/02.2013]



The films produced on the trains ranged from spontaneous documentaries on life in a particular factory or collective farm to short satirical films with amateur and professional actors. Meyerhold travelled on the *Kinopoezd* for several months, producing short animation sequences to be used between films. The train goes even beyond the example used by Benjamin in “Artist as Producer” of the author Sergei Tretiakov who join a collective farm in 1928, “calling mass meetings, collecting money to pay for tractors, persuading individual peasants who worked alone to enter the kolkhoz, inspecting reading rooms, creating wall newspapers and editing the kolkhoz newspaper, being a reporter for Moscow papers, introducing radio and travelling movies”.<sup>54</sup> In Benjamin’s account the artist finds a useful and productive function alongside other types of workers that does not eliminate the inherent difference between the work of art and other ‘work’, and indeed Tretiakov returned to Moscow to write a book about his experience of life on the farm. The *Kinopoezd*, in contrast, has a double role that destabilises the dialectical coupling of the artist/masses, autonomy/propaganda, authority/liberation. On the one hand, the trains served as a panoptic instrument of surveillance – documenting the work done in the farms and factories from a detached external point of view in order to make it more efficient and identify potential weaknesses. The cameras in effect position themselves here in the place of the factory owner or the police and the artists zealously take on the official role of bureaucratic management, not simply working alongside their comrades but also monitoring them. On the other hand, as Marker observes, the film crew on board the train also managed to produce independent, spontaneous and uncensored cinema at a time (1932-1934) when film makers in more central locations found it very hard to produce autonomous work under a growing bureaucratisation of the arts. The work bypasses completely the capitalist model of artistic production where production, distribution and consumption are distinct phases in the development of the cultural commodity, taking out of the equation the producers, studios and cinema theatres. The films made here therefore represent a radical transformation of the nature and organisation of art and intervene directly in the structures of the everyday. But they do so without

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<sup>54</sup> Benjamin, Walter, “The Author as Producer”, p. 9.

cancelling art's exceptional position outside of the everyday or even temporarily suspending it in a manner close to Bourriaud's microtopia. As Marker wonders: "as exceptional as [the] freedom of action was on the Train, how was [the] team perceived by the people at the bottom? Weren't they also, willy nilly, symbols of a hated central authority?"<sup>55</sup>

According to Žižek, it is this conforming to the doctrine of the central authority which actually made the avant-garde "unbearable to and in the official Stalinist ideology". The Russian avant-garde, he writes, "was subversive in its very 'ultra-orthodoxy', i.e. in its overidentification with the core of the official ideology: the image of man that we get in Eisenstein, Meyerhold, constructivist paintings, etc., emphasizes the beauty of his/her mechanical movements, his/her thorough depsychologization".<sup>56</sup> Stalinist Socialist Realism was effectively an attempt to reassert a "'Socialism with a human face,' to reinscribe the process of industrialisation within the constraints of the traditional psychological individual".<sup>57</sup> The art promoted by the later period of social realism was exactly a return to the tradition role of art: a buffer zone of humanism that protects the psychological core of the individual against the harsh realities of work and the everyday, a re-mystification of the self: "in the Socialist Realist texts, paintings and films, individuals are no longer rendered as parts of the global Machine, but as warm, passionate persons."<sup>58</sup>

The *Kinopoezd* remains a challenging and critical example even today. Since it does not follow the dialectical movement of other works of constructivist art, the temporal nature of the progression from the rejection of the self to the establishment of a community, it retains a critical tension that might otherwise be absent. The temporal directionality is replaced by a simultaneous impossibility or by a concretisation of the paradox: art is exceptional and un-exceptional, it is bureaucratic and authentic, propagandist and autonomous, programmatic and spontaneous, all at the same time. Moreover, it amplifies

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<sup>55</sup> Marker, Chris, "The Last Bolshevik".

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>57</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, *On Belief*, p. 123.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, pp. 123-4.

these contradictions beyond the ability of the regime under whose aegis it is born to sustain it.

A similar case can be found in the history of the Dada movement. In the volatile period following Germany's defeat in the war, the Berlin Dadaists adopted a more directly political and structured approach to their activities. In the aftermath of the suppressed Spartakist uprising and the funeral of Karl Liebknecht in early 1919, several Dada artists, including George Grosz, Walter Mehring and John Heartfield, printed a publication titled *Every Man his own Football*, and organised a funeral procession [fig. 15]:

We hired a horse carriage such as those customary for Pentecost outings and hired a brass band, complete with frock coats and top hats, which used to play at veterans' funerals, while we were the editorial staff, six men deep, walked behind carrying bundles of *Every Man...* instead of wreaths.

By the time the procession reached Alexanderplatz, 7,600 copies of the publication had been sold. Police officers then arrested some (Heartfield served a four week prison sentence), while most managed to escape into a nearby pub.<sup>59</sup>

The procession was experienced as a threat by the police and was seen as an illegal activity in the courts, but it is almost impossible to pin down its political message. It utilises tropes from both left and right, repeating the hyper-nationalistic character of official funerals while re-enacting the subversive funeral of the Spartakist leader. Gavin Grindon writes:

Pageants and funeral-protests in particular were a longstanding form in social movement art but rather than a funeral for a specific figure, this played with the form, incorporating and parodying elements of the nationalist military funerals given to Freikorps members, which were regularly visible on the streets of Berlin at the time (the band played the Preußenlied, the national

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<sup>59</sup> Walter Mehring quoted in: Grindon, Gavin, "Surrealism, Dada, and the Refusal of Work: Autonomy, Activism, and Social Participation in the Radical Avant-Garde", *Oxford Art Journal* 34.1 (2011), p. 91.

anthem of the early nineteenth-century Prussian Kingdom; I Had a Comrade, a military funeral-lament of the same period; and the popular song The Grassy Bank by my Parents Grave). However, travelling East they also repeated the general route of the Spartakist Karl Liebknecht's funeral parade towards Friedrichsfled cemetery a month before, which had involved 40,000 people.<sup>60</sup>

Although Grindon reads the funeral as parody, the form of the theatrical performance itself does not use any exaggeration or distortion, but rather a concentration of form that exceeds the permissible bounds of such displays. Loyal to the format of both the military parade and the funeral-protest, the procession was joined by both a group of artists and a group of sailors. It is true that the familiar Dadaist theme of the suspension of particular affiliation of the self (to a nation, a race, a class, a gender) appears here. But in this instance, it does not resolve into the universalism of other Dada actions. A universal subject, greater than the options given at any particular historical period, does not emerge here. Rather, the subject is suspended in a paradoxical position, both a participant in the nationalist rite and a subversive objecting to the militarised language of official culture. Here too art is free, spontaneous and unsupervised and at the same time oppressively participating in the monumental organisation of everyday life.

Both examples demonstrate the adoption of an official language not intended for artistic liberation as a means of creative emancipation. What makes them interesting is not the fact that they were suppressed, although this is of course telling. Many other forms of artistic activity relying on much simpler ironic modes of operation were also opposed by the regimes in question. Rather, it is the fact of positing an untenable identification with the powers that be – and not an outright criticism – that makes these instances useful for further consideration, in ways that will become more apparent towards the end of this thesis. Returning to Nicholas Bourriaud's problematic formulation of a modern project without a teleological drive. "How is aesthetics to be used?" asks Bourriaud, "and can it possibly be injected into tissues that have been

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

rigidified by the Capitalist economy?” In attempting to respond to this demand, Bourriaud quotes Félix Guattari, who has written that “the only acceptable goal of human activities [...] is the production of a subjectivity that constantly self-enriches its relationship with the world”. Guattari’s definition, adds Bourriaud “is ideally applicable to the practices of the contemporary artists who create and stage life-structures that include working methods and ways of life...”.<sup>61</sup> These practices, in Bourriaud’s formulation, are a compromise between the two hostile modernist tendencies we have attempted to map so far. Rejecting the dictates of the commodification, division and rationalisation of social space within the society of the spectacle, relational artists seek to construct the collective as a form of labour (working methods) and, at the same time, challenge the privileging of a separate specialist field of artistic creativity (ways of life). This is a double negation of the modern paradox: art that delimits a theatrical space for life in order to liberate it from the inherent alienation of subjugation to capitalism, while also defining this autonomous space of the theatre as a continuation of real life; it is both a “machine for provoking and managing individual or collective encounters” and what “produce[s] relational space-time, interhuman experiences that try to shake off the constraints of the ideology of mass communication”.<sup>62</sup> In other words, without committing to either the universal supra-social subject of Dada or to the utopian post-aesthetic collective of Constructivism, this is a classic case of having your cake and eating it. Lacking this ideological commitment, all we have is either the common without the individual or the atomised individual without a common: empty gestures of communication with nothing to communicate.

The current critical discourse surrounding the avant-garde contains, therefore, two positions that are equally impotent. One sees the failure of the avant-garde as proof that all ideological propositions are weak and incapable of the transformation they promise on their own when they operate against the power of the state or capital. This view is problematic because, while it views

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<sup>61</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*, 2000 cited in: *Participation* [Claire Bishop – ed.], p. 169-170.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 163 and 166

the utopian promises of the avant-garde as a heightened sphere of cultural activity, it naturalises the operation of the state or of capitalism: the ideological position of the avant-garde is seen as naïve and utopian but that of the state or the market is seen as inevitable and everlasting. Art is condemned here to the limited role that liberalism ascribes to it: a humanist critique of the inhuman structures of state and market, a negative critical position that never dares to make real demands on the status quo. The other position, slightly more sophisticated, but no less problematic, maintains that the ideas of the avant-garde persist in the present, but they must now co-inhabit the terrain of political and public space with the forces of capitalism. While capitalism and the state work from above, 'top down', art re-organises life from below in the hope that its ideas will rise to the surface. Both historical views of the avant-garde seem to lead us to a similar impasse since both are built on a similar ironic move. The first looks at the critique of the avant-garde as a phase in a meta-historical story of capitalism – the story of the absorption of all forms of critique into an ever-improving economic totality. We are asked to believe in the universalist demands of the avant-garde and at the same time dismiss them as unrealistic, to oppose the power of the state and the market and at the same time to admit that they are the only possible forms of social organisation. This second version is also ironic because it too wants us to keep dreaming of the transformation of the everyday in the hands of art, while at the same time to understand that this 'utopian' demand is unreasonable and can never be satisfied.

In both postmodern narratives, art is only the dream of the powerless. But the two examples that we have explored here, of the Russian film train and the Dadaist funeral procession of 1919 show that another version of the avant-garde existed, which embraced the power and language of the state and turned it against itself. This strand of the avant-garde, which leads us perhaps to the later incarnations analysed in our last chapter, does not give in to the dialectical temporality of the other formulae. The paradox of democracy is not structured around the temporal transformation in stages of the individual and the collective, art and the every day, but both its sides have an equal

presence and validity, coinciding in a totality that refuses to be released into its opposite.

### **Art/ non-art/ anti-art/ unart**

So far we have dealt here with the legacy of the European pre-war avant-garde and attempted to open up new avenues for reading its politics, avoiding the dominant narrative of failure. On top of reducing the complexity of the avant-garde to a single, unified historical event, this narrative fuels the pessimistic postmodern cultural view that any demand for change is futile. In the decades after the war, as the democratic ideas of the avant-garde were increasingly experienced as disappointing, artists started to operate under a double bind: the ethos of art was still largely structured around ideas of social transformation taken from the avant-garde, while, at the same time, many felt this transformation to be unachievable. This paradoxical position played an important role in shaping the discourse of art in the postmodern era, and in the section that follows we would like to trace two of its manifestations. Wishing to remain loyal to the avant-garde formula in which the artist brings about the closure of the gap between art and the everyday - but with a growing suspicion that this very task is impossible - Allan Kaprow and Boris Groys offer two different, but equally ironic, solutions to the problem. One maintains that the only way for art to preserve its integrity as a democratic project is through a complete assimilation of art into the everyday and the end of its institutions. The other holds that the dialectical tension between art and the everyday or the museum and the street is still intact and is still an engine for cultural production, while conceding that this tension is now a function of the institution.

In his 1971 essay, "Education of the Un-Artist", Allan Kaprow distinguishes between Art art, nonart and antiart. Art art, no matter how revolutionary its content, is immediately recognizable as an acceptable form of artistic representation: a painting, a sculpture, a film and so on. Whether a Cubist portrait, or a film by Godard, Art art is condemned to reshaping its own

conventions and forms. Its innovation relies on the referencing of previous forms of Art art and its institutions. Nonart, by contrast, does not formally identify itself as worthy of aesthetic contemplation. It is better described as “whatever has not yet been accepted as art but has caught an artist’s attention with that possibility in mind”.<sup>63</sup> Antiart might be confused with nonart, but is in fact quite different in intent. The attempt to destroy art, is a proposition that recurs in art conceptually. However, it is in fact an impossibility, for all such gestures are co-opted in contemporary art, thereby becoming pro-art and effectively, Art art. The crucial difference between antiart and nonart can be located in their relationship to the institution: while the antiartist “aggressively (and wittily) introduced [nonart] into the arts world to jar conventional values”, nonartists have “chosen to operate outside the pale of art establishments”, but “have informed the art establishment of their activities”.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, nonart can exist as such in the mind of the artist only fleetingly, but once it is communicated, or “offered publicly”, it too is captured by Art art.<sup>65</sup>

Both antiart and nonart reject the commitment of Art art to already recognizable forms. Both wish to transfer artistic meaning from these formal aspects of the work and distribute it across a more complex network of relations between artist, institution and art object. Both also rely on a necessary prior recognition of hegemonic forms of art and seek to challenge this authority. But even though antiart and nonart are both strategies which inevitably lead to their own failure, their failures are different and should not be so easily collapsed into the scheme of institutional absorption. This difference could perhaps be demonstrated by comparing two examples that seem to fit Kaprow’s criteria for nonart and antiart. Kaprow mentions the latter in the context of Dada, but the assault on culture initiated by Dada persists to this day in work like that of Alexander Brener, who was imprisoned for the vandalism of Malevich’s painting *Suprematism 1920-1927 (White Cross)* [fig. 16]. Following this action, undertaken at the Stedelijk museum in Amsterdam, Brener handed himself over to the authorities. In his subsequent

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<sup>63</sup> Kaprow, Allan, “Education of the Un-Artist, Part 1”, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* [Jeff Kelley – ed.], Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2003, p. 98.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 98-9.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.



trial, he claimed that his painting of a green dollar sign over Malevich's cross was "not directed at the painting, [but] a dialogue with Malevich".<sup>66</sup> Appropriating the words of Malevich himself in his "Manifesto of Suprematism" Brener rejected the way in which the painting had become "obscured by the accumulation of 'things'" and saw himself as reanimating a dead artwork. By contrast, Vito Acconci's "Following Piece" from 1969, operates in closer conformity to Kaprow's category of nonart [fig. 17]. The piece involved the artist following one randomly chosen stranger through the streets of New York every day for a period of one month. The pursuit ended when his subjects entered a private location and effectively removed themselves from the public realm. Acconci then produced a report, typed on a typewriter, detailing the movements of the person followed chronologically. These typed documents were likened to forensic evidence or, by the artist himself, to the work of a newspaper reporter, and sent out to various art world people.<sup>67</sup>

It is this informing of the art audience that marks the first significant difference between antiart and nonart. While the former uses existing art (or Art art) as a platform, and therefore places less emphasis on the documentation of the action that later gets reported in the media, nonart relies on the document for its existence, as in its absence it would go unnoticed. This establishes two disparate types of relationship to the institution: in finding everyday occurrences that can be perceived as art, Acconci validates the idea that art needs to expand and incorporate new forms, reaffirming the logic of the museum's purchasing of innovative art. But Brener, too, although appearing to attack the museum, confirms the narrative that the institution provides of avant-garde movements like Suprematism radically transforming the field of art. By defacing the painting, Brener exposes the hypocrisy that allows the museum to make such claims while undermining them through financial and curatorial practices. Underlying this attack is a belief in the radical potential of

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<sup>66</sup> Brener's defence is quoted in: Guttu, Ane Hjort, "Dialogue with Malevich", in: *Moderne Kunst*, 2008, available at: <http://www.anehjortguttu.net/page179/page179.html> [accessed 14.4.10]

<sup>67</sup> Trainor, James, "Vito Acconci, Gladstone Gallery, New York, USA", *Frieze*, Issue 85 September 2004, available at: [http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/vito\\_acconci/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/vito_acconci/) [accessed 18.3.13]; Florence Gilbard, An Interview with Vito Acconci. *Videoworks 1970-1978*, in *Afterimage*, vol. 12, no. 4, 1984, p. 9.

the artwork, perhaps stronger than that of the museum curator. Thus, while nonart works extensively, colonising new areas of lived experience for artistic representation, antiart works intensively, reinvesting the art revolutions of the past with meaning and power.

In spite of these differences, however, all three categories – Art art, antiart and nonart - share a common problem: their drive to innovate is pre-empted through their preservation, whether through attempted sidestepping, affirmation or negation, of the conventions of art and its institutions. Art art can only offer a self-referential auto-critique, desiring to be disconnected from life in its autonomy, but it is inevitably contaminated by nonart. When we acknowledge that everything, given the right artistic appreciation, can be art, all art ends up being compared to nonartistic instances of the same, or more broadly, to life. And in the comparison between art and life, art always loses: “With ordinary reality so brightly lit, those who choose to engage in showcase creativity invite (from this view) hopeless comparisons between what they do and supervivid counterparts in the environment”.<sup>68</sup> As soon as an object or an idea is framed as art, it finds itself removed from life, and consequently art becomes dead, absorbed in its own reflection. Implicit within this “art-not-art dialectic”, as Kaprow calls it, is an assumption that art needs to be alive, and that this aliveness is to be found in collapsing the boundaries between artists and consumers, professionals and their audiences, in other words, a democratisation of art:

Art. There’s the catch. [...] Its sole audience is a roster of the creative and performing professions watching itself, as if in a mirror, enact a struggle between self-appointed priests and a cadre of equally self-appointed commandos, jokers; guttersnipers and triple agents who seem to be attempting to destroy the priests' church. [...] But a]rtists cannot profitably worship what is moribund; nor can they war against such bowing and scraping when only moments later they enshrine their destructions and acts as cult objects in the same institution they were bent on destroying.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

Although the possibility of nonart seems to suggest a kind of democracy of artworks – everything can be art – in annexing lived experiences into the art context, it ends up relying on the exclusion of these art ‘instances’ from those that have yet to be annexed nevertheless. Practitioners who ignore this problem may act out a kind of revolutionary scenario, but their ritual is an empty one.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, such demands for a permanent revolution, in this case an expansion of art beyond its own boundaries, can only result in paradox, and indeed Kaprow identifies the endeavour to escape culture as such, acknowledging its dialectic as a ‘nice irony’.<sup>70</sup> Just as the success of an egalitarian project would negate the possibility of the ‘deconstruction of mastery’ required by Rancière, just as the utopian horizon of Laclau and Mouffe’s struggle against hegemony would signal the end of all struggles, so the demolition of art as an exclusive field of production separate to life would leave no place of worship for its clergy, to follow Kaprow’s metaphor. If certain practices, objects and materials are privileged as being already art (Art art), contemporary art follows the same path as political philosophy in searching for a structural basis on which more rights could be given to an expanded field of practices. In the discourse surrounding the democratic project, new procedures of universal and total validity are needed to replace the metaphysical claim of inherited aristocratic or clerical power. But these procedures, the expansive nature of democracy incorporating previously excluded social forms, are built on a potent paradox: in order to replace non democratic power as legitimate, democracy has to keep expanding, threatening to collapse means and ends or to forever postpone the realisation of its own promise of total and universal equality. In Kaprow’s formulation, contemporary art is crippled by the same inherent problem. Even if one rejects the formal criteria of Art art and expands its vocabulary to incorporate newer forms of ‘life’ into ‘art’, this ultimately results in a procedural and not essential equality. Once ‘life’ is captured by this

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., pp.98-9.

expansive procedure of art it reformulates the canon of art by inserting new forms into it. But the 'enfranchisement' of more art forms cannot challenge the basic separation of 'art' from 'life' or deny the surplus value added to meaningful artistic gestures as opposed to inconsequential life events. For Kaprow, even the shift in the 1960s from formal concerns to more conceptual practices does not circumvent this problem. The relocation of artistic authorship to either the institutional critique of the antiartist or the conceptual methodology of the nonartist, working outside conventional institutions and art forms, leads the artist to the same problem of canonical Art art. Desiring to close the gap between art and life, the artist ironically reinforces it. Kaprow attempts to resolve the paradox by proposing the end of art and the replacement of work by play through the concept of 'un-art'. But before we explore the consequences of the un-artisting of artists, we would like to look at the way in which the problem of democratisation and the dialectic of art and life has been phrased elsewhere. In the following chapter we expand on this particularly in relation to the role of work in modern society.

### **Curating Democracy**

The kind of analogy that we are trying to make here, that between art and politics, and more specifically the politics of democracy, is also made by Boris Groys in his book *Art Power*. In his chapter on "Equal Aesthetic Rights", Groys asserts that both art and politics involve a struggle for recognition, and he dates the struggle for the equal rights of images to the historical avant-garde:

The classical avant-garde has struggled to achieve recognition of all signs, forms, and things as legitimate objects of artistic desire and, hence, also as legitimate objects of representation in art. Both forms of struggle are intrinsically bound up with each other, and both have as their aim a situation in which all people with their various interests, as indeed also all forms and artistic procedures, will finally be granted equal rights.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Groys, Boris, "Equal Aesthetic Rights", *Art Power*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008, p.14.

However, like Kaprow, Groys argues that when this struggle for equality becomes a ruling principle, it can no longer bring new exclusions into the fold. The acknowledgement that everything can be art in theory leads to a discourse of the end of art history, paralleling the idea of the end of history in the political sphere:

People are constantly referring to the end of art history, by which they mean that these days all forms and things are “in principle” already considered works of art. Under this premise, the struggle for recognition and equality in art has reached its logical end—and therefore become outdated and superfluous. For if, as it is argued, all images are already acknowledged as being of equal value, this would seemingly deprive the artist of the possibility to break taboos, provoke, shock, or extend boundaries of the acceptable.<sup>72</sup>

That all forms are potentially acceptable as art does not mean that there are no distinctions left to be made between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ art: “Good art is precisely that practice which aims at confirmation of this equality”<sup>73</sup>. Art can manoeuvre itself between the factual inequality of images and their formal equality. There are strong distribution and production forces at work in selecting which images get displayed, and ‘good’ art, operating under the presupposition of equality, seeks to criticise their judgments as unfounded. In doing so, of course, it legitimises itself as worthy of selection, and in fact establishes a kind of autonomy. By setting itself up against social, political, cultural and economic inequality, art uses the idea of aesthetic equality as a meta-historical principle independent of any particular configuration of power. But because this affirmation of equality transcends the particularity of a specific historical struggle, like Kaprow’s ritual of escaping culture, this too becomes an empty gesture.

Groys expands on this problem in his chapter “On the New”. The assertion of the equality of images amounts to a demand for the inclusion of new forms into art that have not previously been recognised as such. We have seen that

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16.

Groys dates this demand to the avant-garde. More recently, artistic discourse has celebrated the end to the narratives of progress and a newfound freedom in the impossibility of the new. Here, again, Groys briefly considers the possibility of the end of history, or the endgame of this dialectic of art and nonart. Artists and theoreticians are supposedly no longer interested in introducing new forms into the canon and focus instead on cultural identities and real action in the present. But the rejection of formal innovation in favour of social engagement ultimately ends up in the same place: “[...] ‘being alive’ means, in fact, nothing more or less than being new”<sup>74</sup>. The problem, then, is how to maintain this newness, or how to sustain faith in the project of art in the knowledge that newness, the rejection of the old and established, is prescribed by the law itself.

To resolve this problem, Groys looks at how newness, and the permanent revolution of nonart, is staged not in relation to history, but to the museum:

New artworks function in the museum as symbolic windows, opening onto a view of the infinite outside. But, of course, new artworks can fulfill this function only for a relatively short period of time before becoming no longer new but merely different, their distance to ordinary things having become, with time, all too obvious. The need then emerges to replace the old new with the new new, in order to restore the romantic feeling of the infinite real<sup>75</sup>.

If we concede the equality in principle of all images, then the only thing precluded from appearing in the museum is that which has already been included in its collection, hence the structural necessity of nonart. This does not necessarily mean the production of new things that have not existed before, but rather that the newness of things becomes contingent on their place inside or outside the museum. As a consequence,

The relationship of the museum to what is outside is not primarily temporal, but spatial. And, indeed, innovation does not occur in time, but rather in

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<sup>74</sup> Groys, Boris, “On the New”, *Art Power*, p. 24.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

space: on the other side of the physical boundaries between the museum collection and the outside world.<sup>76</sup>

Artists might produce art that negates the museum (or anti-art), but their efforts are rewarded in inclusion by the museum, which can only take in such art as breaks away from what is already within. Paradoxically, not only is negation eventually co-opted, but its origin is to be found in the institution it targets. In the absence of museums, this negation is not necessary, and the old can just be repeated. The appearance of 'aliveness' outside is actively produced through the contrast with the 'deadness' of the art already inside. The museum becomes a framing device that defines and redefines everything beyond its bounds as life. Groys continues to describe this process as a potentially eternal return of the new:

The production of the new is merely a result of the shifting of the boundaries between collected items and noncollected items, the profane objects outside the collection, which is primarily a physical, material operation: some objects are brought into the museum system, while others are thrown out and land, let us say, in a garbage. Such shifting produces again and again the effect of newness, openness, infinity, using signifiers that make art objects look different from those of the musealized past and identical with mere things and popular cultural images circulating in the space outside the museum. In this sense we can retain the concept of the new well beyond the alleged end of the art historical narrative [...]<sup>77</sup>

In this discussion of the way in which the museum produces the new and circumvents the end of history, Groys does not address the question of how the selection is made between the objects that find themselves in the garbage and those that are rescued from their natural lifespan by the museum. Of course the figure missing from this account is that of the museum curator, who, by making such decisions, could be said to replace the artist, whose role might have been to make new forms. In a subsequent chapter, "On the Curatorship", Groys does in fact look at the role of curatorship in framing and

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., pp. 33-4.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 33-4.

contextualising art within this scheme. The curator, whether working for the museum or independently, may define the new by generating the difference between included and excluded objects or ideas, but as soon as he or she makes the selection, the new must forfeit its life and become a dead thing in the archive of dead things. This, for Groys, is an iconoclastic gesture that denies the object of the worship accorded to it as a living thing. The magic of transforming things into art dissipates in their canonisation:

The museum's iconoclastic gesture consists precisely of transforming 'living' idols into 'dead' illustrations of art history. It can therefore be said that the traditional museum curator has always subjected images to the same double abuse as the independent curator. On the one hand, images in the museum are aestheticized and transformed into art; on the other, they are downgraded to illustrations of art history and thereby dispossessed of their art status.<sup>78</sup>

There is no escaping this paradox, and Groys wishes to preserve it, in the same way that Chantal Mouffe calls for a "coming to terms with the paradoxical nature of liberal democracy"<sup>79</sup>. He recognises that making all objects, images and ideas truly equal and ending the dialectic of nonart entering the institutions of art would spell the end of art, and decides to defend art in its separation from life, even if this separation requires a disingenuous demand for the end of all such separations. The museum is important, for Groys, because it gives us a historical measure by which we can judge the present, with its abundant visual culture dictated by media and markets. The incessant production of difference within late capitalism does not provide us with the critical tools necessary for the evaluation of images; everything is always new and therefore nothing really is. Art, by contrast, through its insistence on the equality of images, continues a project that transcends the present:

The mass media constantly renew the claim to confront the spectator with different, groundbreaking, provocative, true and authentic art. The art system keeps, on the contrary, the promise of aesthetic equality that undermines any

<sup>78</sup> Groys, Boris, "On the Curatorship", *Art Power*, p. 51.

<sup>79</sup> Mouffe, Chantal, *The Democratic Paradox*, p. 12.



such claim. The museum is first and foremost a place where we are reminded of the egalitarian projects of the past and where we can learn to resist the dictatorship of contemporary taste.<sup>80</sup>

But in exposing the museum's mechanism of producing the new, Groys reveals its resistance to be founded on simulation. Artists used to want to bring forth the real through an attack on the museum, a site of disconnection from life, or reality. But they are now confronted with the realisation that the real is nothing more than a product, or an effect, of the museum. How can they therefore continue to produce this effect in the knowledge that it is false? To use Mouffe's terminology, "[i]f the Real is conceived not as an *effect* of a deeper ground but as operating in the very terrain of constitution of the social, its forms of appearance – antagonism, dislocation – cannot be reduced to the positive ground explaining them".<sup>81</sup> What at first appears to be an unintentional by-product of a problem overlooked in the construction of the idea of contemporary turns out to be its fundamental principle, however contradictory.

Rancière sees this effect as a positive tension within the aesthetic regime, which circumvents the dangers of either dissolving art into life or giving up on any effect it might have on the social:

To the extent that the aesthetic formula ties art to non-art from the start, it sets up that life between two vanishing points: art becoming mere life or art becoming mere art. I said that 'pushed to the extreme', each of these scenarios entailed its own entropy, its own end of art. But the life of art in the aesthetic regime of art consists precisely of a shuttling between these scenarios, playing an autonomy against a heteronomy and a heteronomy against an autonomy, playing one linkage between art and non-art against another.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Groys, Boris, "Equal Aesthetic Rights", *Art Power*, p. 22.

<sup>81</sup> Mouffe, Chantal, *The Democratic Paradox*, p. 139.

<sup>82</sup> Rancière, Jacques, "The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes", *New Left Review*, no. 14, mar-apr. 2002, p. 150.

This shuttling between scenarios, however, feels empty once it is done self-consciously. Both the artist and the curator participate in this game, knowing that full equality and a real rejection of the old can never be achieved, that utopia must always be deferred. Consequently, newness becomes an empty gesture divorced from a political project and it remains unclear what kind of resistance can be derived from the space of contemplation set up by the museum that does not just reaffirm the existence of the institution itself. Just as we have seen in Žižek's critique of Laclau and Mouffe that "universality is impossible and at the same time necessary"<sup>83</sup>, so does newness function as the horizon of a utopia with moving goalposts, "accepting the logic of momentary outbursts of an 'impossible' radical politicization that contains the seeds of its own failure and has to recede in the face of the existing Order".<sup>84</sup>

### **The Negation of Style and the Style of Negation**

The problematic identified by Groys and Kaprow is also central to Guy Debord's analysis of culture in *Society of the Spectacle*. Like them, Debord suggests that art's infinite expansion can only end in the dissolution that Kaprow seems to welcome and Groys tries to fend off from behind the walls of the museum. Debord devotes the eighth chapter of his book, "Negation and Consumption in the Cultural Sphere" to art's, or more generally culture's, separation from 'life'. By abolishing the continuity between these realms in a myth based society, culture finds autonomy, but at the same time announces the impending demise of this autonomy: "In thus gaining its independence, culture was embarked on an imperialistic career of self-enrichment that was at the same time the beginning of the decline of its independence".<sup>85</sup> Art's criticality, here as with Groys, is a necessary outcome of this paradox, with every generation attacking the previous for its insufficient proximity to lived reality: "the whole triumphant history of culture can be understood as the

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<sup>83</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, "Objet a as Inherent Limit to Capitalism: on Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri", at: <http://www.lacan.com/zizmultitude.htm> [accessed 7/01/09].

<sup>84</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 171.

<sup>85</sup> Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle* [Donald Nicholson-Smith], New York: Zone Books, 1997, p. 130.

history of the revelation of culture's insufficiency".<sup>86</sup> This procedure is "predicated entirely on the permanent victory of innovation", a "critique without end", paralleling the permanent revolution of the democratising process, culminating in "the transcendence of its own cultural presuppositions – and hence towards the suppression of all separations".<sup>87</sup>

For Debord, the self-transcendence of art follows the movement of total history, a history judged from an external vantage point not subject to time. Just as late Western historical research attempts to fashion this vantage point as a kind of heterotopia, so modern culture seeks the collapse of its own boundaries to produce an immanent field beyond all separations. There are two possible consequences to this self-negation. On the one hand, this produces a social critique that cannot account for itself within the historical time it observes. On the other, the desire to recapture the lost common language that is displaced through art's separation from life generates an artificial reconstruction of dead traditions as objects of contemplation within the spectacle. Neither the critical nor the conservative option resolves the problem instigated by art's assumption of independence from social reality. Opposing Greenbergian autonomy, Debord sees art's separation from other aspects of life as a doomed project:

Art's declaration of independence is thus the beginning of the end of art [...] When a newly independent art paints its world in brilliant colors, then a moment of life has grown old. By art's brilliant colors it cannot be rejuvenated but only recalled to mind. The greatness of art makes its appearance only as dusk begins to fall over life.<sup>88</sup>

Since art in modernity is disconnected from social, lived experience (in a way that mythical, ritualistic art is supposedly not), it becomes increasingly individualistic, proposing a series of negations and fragmentations, ending up with an equivalence of styles. Artistic movements of the past are relativised within this framework, providing a kind of consumer choice, but also heralding

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., pp. 130-1.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

the end of art, or art history, to complement the end of history itself. Debord is far less enthusiastic about this prospect of an equalising action for art forms than Groys:

Only in this era of museums, when no artistic communication remains possible, can each and every earlier moment of art be accepted – and accepted as *equal in value* –for none, in view of the disappearance of the prerequisites of communication *in general*, suffers any longer from the disappearance of its own *particular* ability to communicate.<sup>89</sup>

Within spectacular society, art indeed functions as an assertion of a democracy of images, but this democratising is the result of an impoverishment of communicative capacity. The egalitarian drive may be utopian, but it is also suicidal:

Art in its period of dissolution, as a movement of negation in pursuit of its own transcendence in a historical society where history is not yet directly lived, is at once an art of change and the purest expression of the impossibility of change. The more grandiose its demands, the further from its grasp is true self-realization. This is an art that is necessarily *avant-garde*; and it is an art that *is not*. Its vanguard is its own disappearance.<sup>90</sup>

Debord's formulation of the paradox of contemporary artistic expression is more total than Kaprow's and Groys'. There is no possible critical position to be taken against this paralysing predicament, no way for the artist to tear through the illusionary veil of the spectacle without strengthening its grip. Every time a new movement in art 'rediscovers' life and criticises previous movements of falsifying life via inauthentic representation, it only serves to widen the gulf between the utopian "unified social practice" and its actual alienated form. The only indicator of success in this endeavour would be self-annihilation, the final dissolution of art.

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid, p. 135.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

In “Marginal Notes on *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*”, Giorgio Agamben provides a gloss on Debord’s formulation of this paradox. According to Agamben, the spectacle stems directly from and is synonymous with language. As a consequence, any critique of the spectacle that relies on language is doomed to fail, a point conceded by Debord when he asserts that “the critical concept of the *spectacle* is susceptible of being turned into just another empty formula of socio-political rhetoric designed to explain and denounce everything *in the abstract*”.<sup>91</sup> In the linguistic communication of meaning, the spectacle not only manages direct lived experience, but also removes itself from the discussion. To resolve this structural weakness, claims Agamben, Debord searches for a way to communicate communication itself through the ‘situation’, not as a linguistic appendix to life, a mapping of ‘becoming’, but as a simultaneous collapse of the categories of representation altogether:

The situation is neither the becoming-art of life nor the becoming-life of art. We can comprehend its true nature only if we locate it historically in its proper place: that is, after the end and self destruction of art, and after the passage of life through the trial of nihilism. The ‘Northwest passage of the geography of the true life’ is a point of indifference between life and art, where both undergo a decisive metamorphosis simultaneously.<sup>92</sup>

Continuing Debord’s call not to “make an artificial distinction between theoretical and practical struggle”, Agamben suggests that to resolve the paradox, we need to look for a ‘gesture’ which will unify means and ends and make practice indistinguishable from theory.<sup>93</sup> This gesture is a form of communication but also a pure act, a sign signifying nothing outside of itself that sits “between life and art, act and power, general and particular, text and execution”.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>92</sup> Agamben, Giorgio, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. 78

<sup>93</sup> Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 143.

<sup>94</sup> Agamben, Giorgio, *Means Without End*, p. 80.

Agamben's desire to rescue politics from language is criticised by Amanda Beech, in the essay "Matters of Freedom", mentioned in the previous chapter, for "separating the organizational from the representational in a refusal of identification".<sup>95</sup> Agamben fails to recognise that ends are also means, and that the figure of the 'non-figural' requires and cannot escape representation:

Agamben links the activity of a critique that centres on figuring the 'non-figural' as a point of resistance to normative power and to aesthetics itself, since for him, the production of this non-figural element needs constructing but not representing [...] This makes the mythology that Agamben builds up, of gestures that emancipate themselves from any relation to an end – from any representationalism – incapable of admitting that as the defining characteristic of political agency that they constitute *another identification* [...] The final paradox is that this act of figuration is denied outright in a predilection for emancipation from language that is grounded in the process of gesture, and "pure means".<sup>96</sup>

It is unclear how 'gestures' can liberate themselves from signification without simply being trapped by a wider conceptual concentric ring. Agamben's solution is no more than a reformulation of the old paradox: for the 'gesture' to be non-communicative it has to be assigned a non-linguistic place through language such as Agamben's, and therefore be placed right at the heart of a representational order of signification. A 'gesture' has to be named in order to function as an extra-linguistic expression. "The gesture is, in this sense, communication of a communicability. It has precisely nothing to say because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as pure mediality. However, because being-in-language is not something that could be said in sentences, the gesture is essentially always a gesture of not being able to figure something out in language", he writes.<sup>97</sup> But this pure mediality can never be removed from a linguistic order of signification.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Beech, Amanda, "Matters of Freedom", p. 17.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17-8.

<sup>97</sup> Agamben, Giorgio, *Means Without End*, p. 59.

<sup>98</sup> Rancière, as mentioned earlier, identifies a similar contradiction within the discourse of painterly formalism. In the essay "Painting in the Text", he shows that in order to be 'purely' gestural, tactile or pictorial, modern painting uses the medium of paint, but also demonstrates that it is doing nothing more than using the medium of paint. This demonstration, articulated

We would like to suggest a slightly different interpretation of Debord's analysis, but before we continue with his proposals for the kinds of activities that might be useful in response to the spectacle, we would like to return to Kaprow's categories, focusing on the fourth option of 'un-art', which his text puts forward as a solution to the deadlock represented by antiart and nonart's relationship to Art art. Similar to Agamben's reading of the 'situation' as distinct from the "becoming-art of life" and "the becoming-life of art", un-art does not rely on what Kaprow calls the '*lifelike*' quality of nonart, where "the condition 'art,' is assigned to what has not been art, creates a new something that closely fits the old something".<sup>99</sup> This would be a form of simulation, conforming to the tools of the spectacle, and just as art imitates life, life has its revenge in absorbing the lessons of art: all snow shovels becomes readymades after Duchamp. By contrast, un-art is a form of play. Like Agamben's gesture, this play is non-instrumental, it has no ends and cannot be co-opted into work. At the same time, it is not entirely useless, supplanting artistic autonomy with a social engagement born of the end of separation:

Only when active artists willingly cease to be artists can they convert their abilities, like dollars into yen, into something the world can spend: play. We can best learn to play by example, and un-artists can provide it. In their new job as educators, they need simply play as they once did under the banner of art, but among those who do not care about that. Gradually, the pedigree 'art' will recede into irrelevance.<sup>100</sup>

Kaprow's insistence here on play, crucially stripped of the goal-oriented notions of game theory, derives from his account of the dwindling necessity of manual labour in an increasingly automated economy. In an age of plenty, the role of play becomes central in generating social wellbeing. For Kaprow, the solution to the endgame of art annexing life is dropping out of the game

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through the words of the critic, belies the claim of a formal painterly quality existing outside of discourse: "This transformation of the visible into the tactile and of the figurative into the figural is only possible through the highly specific labour of the writers words [...] The surface is not wordless, is not without 'interpretations' that pictorialize it". Rancière, Jacques, *The Future of the Image*, London: Verso, 2007, pp. 81-9.

<sup>99</sup> Kaprow, Allan, "The Education of the Un-Artist, Part II", *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, p. 110.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

altogether, abandoning the framework of art, and performing an educational function in society, against the backdrop of “the sky, the ocean floor, winter resorts, motels, the movements of cars, public services, and the communications media” and not “the Environments we are familiar with already: the constructed fun house, spook show, window display, store front, and obstacle course [...] sponsored by art galleries and discotheques”.<sup>101</sup> Because this function is never returned to the art context or institution, it appears at least to escape representation, in accordance with Agamben’s demand for a situation after the destruction of art and the transformation of life:

Art work, a sort of moral paradigm for an exhausted work ethic is converting into play. As a four letter word in a society given to games, *play* does what all dirty words do: it strips bare the myth of culture by its artists, even.<sup>102</sup>

Finally, although at first forming a kind of vanguard operating in the fleeting field of nonart, artists disappear altogether, the profession of art having been discarded and the very category of art having become “antique”.<sup>103</sup>

Much more needs to be said and has been written about the ironic realisation of this vision in the current regime of immaterial labour, and, as stated earlier, we will expand on this topic in the next chapter. For now, however, we would like to compare Kaprow’s concept of play with the Situationists proposals for undoing the separation between art and life. The call to replace alienated modern life with non-alienated play is often associated with the Situationist International, and their seminal call to arms, “On the Poverty of Student Life”, indeed ends with the demand for a revolutionary festival of which “play is the ultimate principle”.<sup>104</sup> The society of the spectacle, according to Debord, produces modes of being, knowledge and experience, directly as a commodity. Hence, under the sign of the spectacle there could be no place for non-productive play such as that ascribed to un-art by Kaprow, or to gesture by Agamben. However, the idea that artists have a special educational role to

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., pp. 103-4.

<sup>104</sup> “On the Poverty of Student Life”, in: *Situationist International Anthology* [Ken Knabb – ed. and tr. ], Berkley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981, p. 337.



play in this transformation of life, and the call to them to un-art themselves is no more than a “movement of negation in pursuit of its own negation”, to use Debord’s circular terminology, since its realisation will bring an end not just to art but also to artistic ideas and their ability to convince. Much as the demand for a politics of equalisation ends up undermining itself at the horizon point where there is no politics left to be done, Kaprow can only call for the abolition of the separation of art and life or of signification (production) and being, as a paradoxical product of this division itself.

Debord’s proposal at the end of “Negation and Consumption in the Cultural Sphere” could, however, be read as different to this interpretation of play as un-art. Instead of the impossible overcoming of the division between life and art through the medium of art, artists and theoreticians, suggests Debord, should embrace the “language of contradiction, dialectical in form as well as in content [...n]ot a negation of style but the style of negation”.<sup>105</sup> To this he assigns the Situationist term *détournement*. This concept is often confused with the artistic strategy of parodic intervention in dominant forms of popular culture such as adbusting or culture jamming. But the uncomplicated liberal political message of these artistic forms and their reliance on an easily resolved irony miss the more complex aspects of Debord’s idea. In an earlier SI text on methods of *détournement* written together with Gil Wolman, Debord is very careful not to confuse this technique with “parodical methods” [...] “the result of contradictions within a condition whose existence is taken for granted”.<sup>106</sup> Debord also acknowledges the dialectical problem that we have described earlier in relation to the readymade. The (non-Situationist) dialectical structure of the avant-garde generates a new category for the artist, who is still removed from the everyday, but also from the museum, by occupying a third position outside of both. But in Debord’s version of the dialectical procedure, this loophole is neutralised. *Détournement* should certainly not be seen in the light of the artistic “scandal”: a mustachioed Mona Lisa is no more interesting than the original, since the modified (but not

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<sup>105</sup> Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 144.

<sup>106</sup> Debord, Guy and Wolman, Gil J., “Methods of *détournement*” in: *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 9.

*détourned*) painting leaves notions of artistic originality and genius intact. As a form of propaganda, *détournement* is closer to Bertolt Brecht making “cuts in the classics of the theatre in order to make the performances more educative”.<sup>107</sup> Thus, the artist does not liberate him or herself here through the dialectical elevation of art beyond the oppositions that define its modern condition. On the contrary, the artwork becomes more bureaucratic, more pedagogical, more institutional. It also transcends taste: Debord and Wolman acknowledge the greatness of works espousing a politics to which the SI completely object, such as Griffith’s racist film *Birth of a Nation*, but claim they could easily be *détourned* to reveal the contradiction between their political position and radical aesthetics and shown in this corrected form.<sup>108</sup>

*Détournement* is therefore not a rejection of representation, as proposed by Kaprow’s ‘un-art’ and Agamben’s ‘gesture’. Unlike these writers’ insistence on the negation of language or artistic appropriations of life, *détournement* speaks through the spectacle itself, forcing a unifying ambiguity on the spectacular field of separation: “*Détournement* [...] is the fluid language of anti-ideology. It occurs within a type of communication aware of its inability to enshrine any inherent and definite certainty.”<sup>109</sup> By channelling this unifying “language of contradictions”, Debord does not try to establish a space beyond the separation of language from being, of art from life or of event from representation. Nor does he, like Groys, erect the museum as an ironic but necessary safeguard of separation in the face of an all-encompassing spectacle. Instead, he insists that only by splitting the spectacle from within, embodying these contradictions beyond the point where they can be sustained, can one hope to find more effective means of critique.

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, p. 12

<sup>109</sup> Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 146.

## The Absolute Commodity

Stewart Martin, in the essay briefly mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, proposes a reading of Adorno's writing on the autonomous artwork that leads to a similar point. According to Martin, for Adorno, art's singularity makes it the ultimate commodity in that it discards every last semblance of use value or justification of price through notions of labour and scarcity. As a kind of hyper-commodity, it makes the inherent contradictions of capitalism extremely visible. Rather than viewing the idea of the autonomous artwork as somehow destroyed by capitalism or a false ideology generated by capitalism, Martin suggests that it is a peculiar effect of capitalism that undermines the system that brings it forth. Just as for Groys the real is an effect of the museum, so here autonomy is created by capitalism. At the same time, though, it is a site of critique by virtue of the contradictions it heightens:

[...] if art's autonomy is a produced, and reproduced, contradiction of developed capitalist culture then it remains a vital form through which this culture can be resisted and criticized. And in times and places where commodification has become a pervasive form of social life, such an immanent critique is essential.<sup>110</sup>

Martin proposes that Adorno sees the production of this immanent critique as a kind of 'subversive mimesis'.<sup>111</sup> On the one hand, the artwork is so far abstracted from the world of use value and labour as to become a subject in and of itself, independent of the artist or the audience: its abstractness "wipes out any human trace".<sup>112</sup> On the other, the artwork's sensuousness, its specificity and its singularity, are at odds with the abstraction that grounds the interchangeability of commodities under the aegis of their exchange value. Thus, the artwork is an 'ironic form' that attains its distance from use value only to then annihilate the pure exchange value to which it aspires.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Stewart, Martin, "The Absolute Artwork Meets the Absolute Commodity", *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

This criticality might be immanent to the artwork, but it is precisely because it is ironic that it leads us to a dead end. As we have already seen with regard to Groys' defence of the museum, as soon as this irony is digested by the artist, it ceases to function. Adorno is explicit with regard to these consequences:

Artworks that do not insist fetishistically on their coherence, as if they were the absolute that they are unable to be, are worthless from the start; the survival of art becomes precarious as soon as it becomes conscious of its fetishism and, as has been the case since the middle of the nineteenth century, insists obstinately on it. Art cannot advocate delusion by insisting that otherwise art would not exist. This forces art into an aporia.<sup>114</sup>

Martin acknowledges this impasse and concedes the futility of the self-critical dialectic relationship art establishes with anti-art in light of it. He concludes that “art must extract itself from its heteronomous determination to a seemingly unprecedented degree” in order to avoid these pitfalls.<sup>115</sup> He does not, however, demonstrate the ways in which this might happen. Scanning the horizon of contemporary art, an example does emerge of an artistic practice that fits these ideas well. In Jeff Koons' earlier work from the mid 1980s and particularly in his series of shiny, stainless steel kitsch objects such as *Louis XIV* and *Flowers* (both from 1986), we can identify something resembling an ‘absolute commodity’ [fig. 18, 19]. That Koons answers Adorno's description might seem unlikely, considering Adorno's dismissal of any flirtation high art might have with popular culture. But these objects – pointless and tasteless artifacts that bare no traces of the artist's hand, of any skill in their making, have no obvious ‘use value’. They are not even useful as decoration since they are removed from the kitsch market in which they might be consumed as such and placed, in their singularity, in the gallery. Duchamp's readymades produce meaning from the re-location of an ordinary everyday object into the space of art, changing not their materiality but their relative positioning in relation to social use and systems of display. Koons' shiny objects go beyond this procedure since they are made from expensive and decorative metal. Their previous use as fetish commodity – standing in for the idea of ‘good

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

classical European culture' – is superseded: the original reference, their auratic trace, is so diluted that they can no longer signify 'power' or 'beauty' but only industrial reproduction. In 1987, Koons was interviewed by *Flash Art* magazine about this series of works:

Gregorio Magnani: Can you explain what you mean by "proletarian luxury?"

JK: The polished stainless steel has a reflective quality which is associated with a luxurious item. In my work the situation is set up so that the individual from the lower classes feels economic security in a fake situation. Polished objects have often been displayed by the church and by wealthy people to set a stage of both material security and enlightenment [sic] of spiritual nature; the stainless steel is a fake reflection of that stage.

GM: Don't you think your bust of Louis XIV and many of the other works, as well, can be seen as embodiments [sic] of the confidence that can be placed in a multinational situation?

JK: The bust of Louis XIV is a symbol of the confidence that can be placed in an authoritarian regime but it is also a symbol of all labor exchange systems in history, including capitalism. What is being communicated is a decriticalized political situation. As Louis XIV is not performing as a monarch anymore, the lower class individual can feel comfortable that he can not be betrayed once he has gone into this state of entropy, and the upper class is able to partake in a false security and therefore can not betray the lower classes. Once the object has seduced the viewer into the acceptance of this political situation, there is no way for the lower class to revolt and there is no way for the aristocracy to betray again. If that were to occur, and it could not, the aristocracy would be biting its own tail.<sup>116</sup>

In this interview, and many others from this period, a wide gap is formed between the appearance of the work, their association with kitsch and 'tacky' taste and the discourse with which they are discussed. Koons asserts that he envisions:

[...] the formation of a total society where every citizen will be of the blue

<sup>116</sup> Politi, Giancarlo, "Jeff Koons", *Flash Art* 132, 1987, available at: [http://www.flashartonline.com/interno.php?pagina=articolo\\_det&id\\_art=348&det=ok&title=JEF-F-KOONS](http://www.flashartonline.com/interno.php?pagina=articolo_det&id_art=348&det=ok&title=JEF-F-KOONS) [accessed: 01.03.13]

blood. In such a society the individual will exist in a state of entropy, or rest, and will inhabit an environment decorated with object art that is beyond critical dialogue.<sup>117</sup>

At the same time he holds on to the structure of a class society in describing how his work functions:

For the lower and middle class it will lead to an ultimate state of rest; for the upper class it will lead to an unprecedented state of confidence. So all members of society would benefit. There would be no losers.<sup>118</sup>

The work is thus both the embodiment of the absolute commodity and a vehicle for a post-market utopia. If the work possesses any criticality (which the artist denies), it is as a kind of performative art act that aspires to constitute the future audience it addresses.<sup>119</sup> However, the internal contradictions in the artist's statements produce an ambiguity that undermines the total confidence of which Koons speaks. It is difficult to know how to read Koons' work as anything but ironic, and yet he repeatedly rejects such an interpretation. At the same time, rather than comforting the viewer with familiarity, his appropriation of kitsch unsettles and confuses. Ultimately, the absolute commodity falters in its under-identification with its own conditions of production and consumption. We are pre-empting our own elaboration of the concept of overidentification here, but for now suffice it to say rather than presenting us with an untenable split in the fabric of the structures in which he operates, a paradox in which two statements are true yet mutually negating, Koons asks us to suspend our disbelief and accept a contradictory position.

The strong intentionality and authorship with which these objects are imbued in the interview are very different to the mischievous attitude of the Dadaists towards the author and are nearly the opposite of the near annihilation of the author under productivist experiments such as the *kino* train. Therefore, the success of Koons' objects in demonstrating Adorno's 'absolute commodity' points to a lack in this concept. Adorno's thinking is limited to the conception

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid,

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Dorothea von Hantelmann expands on this in the last chapter of her book: Von Hantelmann, Dorothea, *How to Do Things with Art*, Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2010.

of art and of commodification to the realm of objects. It considers acts of subversion only through the material production of things that stand outside of the producer. But, as Koons' case demonstrates, an equally important site of production for neo-liberalism is immaterial and centred around human capital. In other words, two sets of (interrelated) values are created here. One is in the objects themselves, and they could be described, convincingly, as subversive absolute commodities. The other value is linked to the artist, whose language, creativity and personality are accumulated and exchanged just like any other type of market commodity. Since we are arguing here that at certain points the avant-garde over-produced an identification with the cultural and political systems in which it was placed without falling into irony, such an operation under the current conditions of production – neo-liberal market economy – would necessitate an over-production also in relation to the author. We shall continue to explore the sphere of human capital in our next chapter in order to better understand the critical possibilities that are open to artists today and will attempt to re-construct a notion of overidentification in relation to neo-liberalism in the fourth and final chapter.

## Chapter 3: Post-Fordist Labour and the Fate of Artistic Critique

According to Lewis Mumford, “The artist has a special task: that of reminding men of their humanity and the promise of their creativity”, lest they surrender to the machine.<sup>1</sup> This humanist ideal continues to sustain art practices such as that of Bill Viola, who wishes to reintroduce human emotions into an environment made alienating by an image machine: “We are in a situation now culturally whereby the people who have created this huge, giant image machine which is inundating us, flooding us with images, every night, every hour, every day all around us, have no knowledge or awareness or understanding of the real effect those images are going to have on us”.<sup>2</sup> The artist’s responsibility is therefore to connect from his or her privileged position with the “deepest knowledge human beings have evolved on this planet”.<sup>3</sup> Although formally diametrically opposed to his neo-classical aesthetic, the collaborative, participatory practices described in Claire Bishop’s critique of the ‘social turn’ in art share Viola’s ambition: “the creative energy of participatory practices rehumanises—or at least de-alienates—a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalism”. The assumption behind these claims is that there is an opposition between alienated life in industrialised societies and a humanist commitment that might offer a critique of this life. However, today we find similar sentiments shared by corporate art collections, instructed that “displaying art humanises the workplace and gives the business a context within the normal spheres of human life and activity”,<sup>4</sup> or the Beijing Biennial, themed around “Contemporary Art with Humanistic Concerns”.<sup>5</sup> As we hope to show in this

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<sup>1</sup> Mumford, Lewis, *The Arts in Renewal*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969, pp. 30-1.

<sup>2</sup> Campbell, Clayton, “Bill Viola: The Domain of the Human Condition,” *Flash Art*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 229, March-April 2003, available at: [http://prod-images.exhibit-e.com/www\\_jamescohan\\_com/53722505.pdf](http://prod-images.exhibit-e.com/www_jamescohan_com/53722505.pdf) [accessed 18.3.13]

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Burrows, Catherine “Corporate Art Collections”, *Art Collecting*, 23 August 2010, available at: <http://www.artcollecting.co.uk/corporate-art-collections.html> [accessed 25.6.11].

<sup>5</sup> Correia, Andrew, “Humanism Guides Second Art Biennale, *Beijing This Month*, 1 September 2005, available at:



chapter, it is unsurprising that the humanist agenda can be embraced by large corporations and oppressive regimes.

The figure of the human as it is used by the artists and institutions mentioned here and its corresponding ideology of humanism are central to our argument in this chapter. As a critique of metaphysical philosophy and theology, humanism is a major aspect of modern thinking from its infancy and serves as an ethical and philosophical foundation for the liberal democratic politics that have dominated the West since the Second World War. The American socialist philosopher Corliss Lamont summarised the principles of humanism in his essay “The Affirmative Ethics of Humanism”.<sup>6</sup> In Lamont’s account, humanist philosophy is a call to establish human happiness in the here and now, away from the Christian Utopia of heaven. It also dictates an ethical system that is based neither on self-interest nor on altruism but instead combines a belief in reason and a compassion for all fellow human beings in a programme promoting the “worldwide community good”. Superseding any affiliation to a religion, class, nationality or ethnicity, humanism espouses universal values that are grounded in individual freedom and a rejection of the capitalist drive to profit.

But, even Lamont’s socialist variant of humanism (and similar beliefs can be found in the work of rightist liberal authors such as Milton Friedman) exposes the problematic nature of this philosophical system. Despite their claims, humanist thinkers fail to see that rather than placing a truly universal and egalitarian value at the centre of their philosophical system, the universal subject they imagine in fact corresponds only to a particular paradigm. The abstract human subject, who supposedly sits outside any specific socio-historical configuration (or affiliation) and who supposedly possesses qualities that are shared by all regardless of social or economic position, is in fact nothing but the liberal, enlightened bourgeois subject. Capable of reason,

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<http://www.btmbeijing.com/contents/en/btm/2005-09/feature/humanismguide> [accessed 25.6.11].

<sup>6</sup> Lamont, Corliss, “The Affirmative Ethics of Humanism”, in: *The Humanist*, March/April issue, Volume 40, Number 2, 1980, available at: <http://www.corliss-lamont.org/ethics.htm> [accessed 4/11/11]

action and armed with a strong belief in progress, this liberal, yet abstracted human, allows enough space for manoeuvring for a capitalist-liberal system that is nourished by these claims but that, at the same time, produces and maintains a differentiation between various social groups. This is evident in Lamont's emphasis on the realm of free choice as the locus of humanism:

[A] viable Humanist ethics proceeds on the conviction that the human individual has true freedom of choice at the moment of making a decision, whether important or unimportant. A human being is conditioned by many factors, including the genes of ancestors, personalities of the parents, education, state of health, the nature of the work, and the law of gravity. Causal sequences follow from all such factors. Yet at the moment of choosing between two or more alternatives a spark of real freedom, genuine initiative, exists.<sup>7</sup>

Although in other parts of his essay Lamont qualifies and limits the scope of this human freedom of choice, he is fierce in his protection of the "spark of real freedom" to be found in the moment of choice. However, it is unclear from this description from where, if not the social factors that condition one's choice, this freedom would arrive. As we will argue later, following Marx and Althusser, this freedom of the individual from any contingent socio-economic reality serves as the abstract metaphysical *telos* of liberal capitalism, equivalent to the myth of political foundation presented in our first chapter. This pure, a-social freedom can never be subsumed by any existing historical situation and yet, in actuality, as many Marxist writers have demonstrated, concrete social realities are created in its defence, since this supposedly universal freedom is never equally distributed.

A competing tradition of thinkers has critiqued these assumptions. Some of the authors whom we have surveyed in our first chapter focus their critique of humanism on the contradictions that emerge between humanism's operations through bio-power, i.e. the management of these abstracted human traits, and the juristic and political structures of the state. Hannah Arendt and Giorgio

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Agamben, for example, locate the weaknesses in the humanist ideology in the gap between 'human rights' and 'civil rights'. But in this chapter we will focus on a different version of the anti-humanist tradition. This version, which we trace from Marx to Althusser and to the writers of the Italian *Autonomia Operaia* movement, is more concerned with the contradictions between the abstract figure of the human - the ethical ideal in which liberal economic structures find their *raison d'être* - and the concrete historical human that is produced precisely from these very structures. In particular, we strive to develop here an understanding of how these contradictions operate in relation to the conditions of work and how the paradox of abstract humanist assumptions on the one hand and concrete economic configurations on the other can be located at the heart of the figure of the contemporary post-Fordist worker.

Our use of this anti-humanist tradition forms one part of a triadic movement towards a critique of neoliberal conditions of labour in their relationship to creativity and artistic production and consumption. The other two parts of this triangle are a discussion of immaterial labour and an analysis of the limits of a dialectical critical model in resolving some of the difficulties arising from these new conditions of work. Using these axes, we would like to incorporate the attack on humanist notions into the developing of a better understanding of how essentialist ideas about human creativity work in the context of the present to undermine the modes of critique associated with artistic endeavour. Since the transition from manual to immaterial labour as the dominant form of production in the West, work in late capitalist economies has grown closer to, or even inseparable from, artistic modes of production. As demonstrated in our second chapter, a strong strand within artistic critique over the last century sought an efficacy for art in its opposition to the alienation of work. If in work the energy and vitality of the worker were subsumed by capitalist exploitation, many artists considered art to be a separate, autonomous and even therapeutic sphere, offering some resistance to the ruthlessness of capitalist labour. William Morris, for example, writes of "two kinds of work--one good, the other bad; one not far removed from a blessing, a lightening of life; the other a mere curse, a burden to life". The "worthy work", for him, "carries with

it the hope of pleasure in rest, the hope of the pleasure in our using what it makes, and the hope of pleasure in our daily creative skill”, while the other is “worthless”, nothing but a “slaves' work--mere toiling to live” in order to “live to toil”.<sup>8</sup> Despite the changing nature of work in post-Fordist societies, this dichotomy persists in much discourse about art.

While manufacturing jobs have gradually disappeared from the developed world in the last few decades, workers are increasingly asked to incorporate skills and modes of productions taken from the creative work pitted by Morris against the drudgery of capitalist work. The dialectical gap between these two modes has become untenable as a platform from which critique can emerge, and the two types of work have turned out to inhabit the same world, subject to the same logic of commodification. In this new terrain of labour, when art can no longer be seen as the dialectical negation of work, it becomes important to rethink the tools offered to us by the operation of dialectics and to try and find new openings or new possibilities where old dichotomies have collapsed. In short, it would now seem that perhaps the dialectic of work and non-work was never strong enough to support a credible offence against capitalist modes of production and should therefore be rethought and refined.

Returning to the question of humanism, we would argue that a strong correlation exists between humanist values and the now problematic zone of artistic or creative work. William Morris, Lewis Mumford, Alan Kaprow and Bill Viola all imagine this zone of non-work to be a direct expression of the humanist values celebrated by Lamont: it is a space of spontaneity and the freedom of chance and choice, a space where the individual experiences human mastery over the world of objects, over commodities and commerce, a space where production is not necessarily goal oriented and where social communication, play and sensuous pleasure bring closer, at least temporarily (as in Nicolas Bourriaud's microtopias), the coming community of men.<sup>9</sup> If one

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<sup>8</sup> Morris, William, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil”, 1885, available at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1884/useful.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Bourriaud's notion of microtopias is discussed in: Bishop, Claire, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”, *OCTOBER* 110, Fall 2004, p. 54.

has to give up part of one's humanity by selling labour time as a commodity, art can be a refuge where one rediscovers one's humanity.

Despite its persistence in some discourses surrounding artistic production, for many writers and artists, humanism has exhausted its historical role as an antithesis to alienated work. Some have adopted an ironic position towards this critical impasse, using art as an illustration of its own inability to offer real resistance to dominant modes of labour. But since this older model of humanist critique is itself presented as ineffective in the Marxist tradition, others have also identified an opening up of new critical possibilities in the new social character of post-Fordist work. Following this line of thinking, it becomes vital to reconsider the dialectical model of oppositions that has so far supported a stable superstructure of liberal capitalism. If true alternatives are to emerge from the closing of the gap between work and other spheres of life, they must be based on other models. Using the writing of Badiou, Michel Feher, Althusser and post-Autonomist theory, we examine some suggestions for such a rethinking of the dialectical oppositions that would posit the place of critique as an outside to work under capitalism. It is only by rejecting the humanist model of resistance, that it might be possible to force new splits within the totality of post-Fordist, affective labour.

### **Towards an Anti-Humanist Critique**

In his "Theses On Feuerbach", Marx claims that the notion of a human essence, a unique and free quality of individuals, although developed in opposition to the religious concept of a human bound by a metaphysical force, is in effect no different to the religious idea.<sup>10</sup> Such 'humanism' elevates the individual to the same abstract and essentialist level as the metaphysical account. The uniqueness of humans, counters Marx, comes not from this abstract essence but from specific historical and material conditions, shaping each individual according to the social bonds and structures in which he or

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<sup>10</sup> Marx, Karl, "Theses On Feuerbach", available at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/index.htm> [accessed 20/06/2011]

she exists. The same critique of the humanist ideal is found in Marx's writing in relation to the Capitalist sphere of labour. For Marx, humanism is simply a complimentary side of the capitalist exploitation of the worker. Both exploitative work and human rights are not real oppositions, but are rather locked in a dialectical relationship that resolves itself in the totality of liberal capitalism.

The issue is further explored in *Capital*. In an important moment in the development of the narrative of the book, Marx identifies the limitations of the discourse of human rights as a way of countering exploitation and alienation in industrial labour. Marx observes that it is in work that man finds his humanity.<sup>11</sup> Although work is to an extent a collaboration between man and nature, it is here that man asserts his difference to nature by applying the mastery of mind over matter, environment and instinct. The spider might be doing the same job as the weaver, the bee as the architect, but their human counterparts distinguish themselves by the fact that in their labour they make a speculative concept into a physical reality, an idea into a building or shirt. For Marx, humans only become humans through the technology required for work: being human is not a quality preceding the extension of the body through technology. In fact, Marx adopts the anthropological definition of man as the 'tool-making animal'.<sup>12</sup>

Yet even though humanity is founded on work, under capitalist conditions of production, work also produces the exact opposite of this process. In commodifying his capacity to work, abstracting and separating it from himself, the labourer starts to reverse his ascent from the realm of the object. Although labour is defined not as the physical action of muscles but as the ability to impose concept on matter, for the capitalist, it is simply a commodity to be purchased and consumed in the process of production.

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<sup>11</sup> Marx, Karl, *Capital: An Abridged Edition*, New York: Oxford World Classics, Volume 1, 1995, p. 115.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

Due to the fact that it plays such a crucial role in ontologising what it is to be human, it is not surprising that for Marx the workplace is a battlefield where a savage conflict between the capitalist and labourers takes place. In this war, the question of how to define the working day or how to calculate a reasonable number of work hours per day is of pivotal importance to Marx. It is in fact around this question that Marx first gives the workers their proper voice, their identity, against the capitalist who is the aloof and cold protagonist of *Capital*. But, more importantly, this is also where Marx constructs a critique of the discourse of liberal humanism. This form of humanism, radically different to Marx's own structural definition of a human as a thing ontologically formed in the social and technological process of labour, is where capitalism finds its false ethical justification.

In the section on "The Limits of the Working-Day" of *Capital*, Marx carefully constructs this attack on humanism.<sup>13</sup> To do so, he starts by outlining a simple problem of accounting. Since for the capitalist work is just another commodity intended for consumption, it too, like any other commodity, can be ascribed a value equal to the labour time that is necessary to produce it. If six hours of work are enough to provide the subsistence of the labourer, these six hours of work are the 'use value' of labour. Any additional work becomes 'surplus labour', which serves only to produce surplus value for the capitalist. The first conclusion we can draw from this is that the working day is therefore not a constant, but a variable, determined by the negotiation of two opposing forces. On one side stands the labourer who wishes to reduce to a minimum any work time beyond what is necessary for the reproduction of labour-power itself (i.e., only enough to provide food, rest etc., to restore the capability of the labourer to work). On the other, stands the capitalist who relies on surplus labour to create profit and must produce as much of it as possible.

In this conflict, the capitalist's position is decisively straightforward and solid: "As capitalist, he is only capital personified. His soul is the soul of capital. But capital has one single life impulse, the tendency to create value and surplus-

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 148

value, to make its constant factor, the means of production, absorb the greatest possible amount of surplus-labour.”<sup>14</sup> Since the capitalist is defined by his reliance on the creation of surplus value, he demands from the worker the greatest amount of surplus labour and therefore the longest work hours possible in a day. But the logic of capitalism is even more extreme than this. Since labour is a type of commodity, free time is viewed by the capitalist as a simple act of theft: “if the labourer consumes his disposable time for himself, he robs the capitalist”.<sup>15</sup>

At this point, for a brief sentence, the tone of the text, until now reasoned and measured, changes abruptly: “Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. The time during which the labourer works, is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour-power he has purchased of him.”<sup>16</sup> The use of such imagery invokes the full extent of the horror of the equation carefully constructed earlier. But it also does something else: it suggests that poetic and political forms both share a kind of power. Just as there is an economy of poetic expression that constructs the text, the economic nature of capital is constructed as fiction; the myth of the vampire is only as fictitious as the myth of capital, both artificial and real at the same time. Capital is speculative realism, a material reality fabricated out of pure ideas and this reality is only as natural and certain as the faith we invest in it. Or, as Philip Goodchild puts it in his essay “Capital and Kingdom”: “Financial value depends on an imagined future. This imagined future is transcendent to current reality and, furthermore, the future never comes. For, even if there is a stock market crash, the value of any asset still depends on projections about its future. In this respect, financial value is essentially a degree of hope, expectation, or credibility. Being transcendent to material and social reality yet the pivot around which material

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*



and social reality is continually reconstructed, the value of money is essentially religious".<sup>17</sup>

It is because of the abstract nature of this system, because money is constructed rhetorically, that Marx's solution to the labourer's problem relies not on action but on a rhetorical argument. The labourer finds his power in discourse. But, crucially for Marx, this power should not be grounded in a different kind of discourse to the capitalist logic of exchange, it should not be constituted as an outside to it but operate from within. Therefore, the capitalist's argument should not be countered by a moral notion of 'natural' or 'inalienable' human rights. Humanism, seeking to appeal to the respectable and charitable side of bourgeois culture, is insufficient in resisting the rational, albeit ruthless, demands made by the factory owner, whose vampiric character, when it comes to managing capital, makes such moral conventions irrelevant. Given that the relationship between employer and worker is purely economic, and that labour is a particular type of economic commodity, to apply a weak discourse of rights, would turn the worker into the buying side in this exchange, in effect asking to charter back from the capitalist his rights for the time of the day which is used to produce surplus labour. And if such an exchange is carried out, the labourer remains indebted to the seller of his 'moral' right.

Hence, explains Marx, the shortening of the workday can only be gained when the worker sees himself as the owner and seller of the commodity of labour to the capitalist. Moreover, the worker should also see himself as responsible for the reproduction of his own labour power. This shift in logic also leads to a stylistic development in the slightly monotonous tone of *Capital*. For the first time in the book, the words of the labourer are heard against that of the capitalist:

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<sup>17</sup> Goodchild, Philip, "Capital and Kingdom: An Eschatological Anthology", in: *Theology and the Political: The New Debate*, [Davis, Creston, Milbank, John and Žižek, Slavoj – eds.], Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005, p. 133.

Suddenly the voice of the labourer, which had been stifled in the storm and stress of the process of production, rises: The commodity that I have sold to you differs from the crowd of other commodities, in that its use creates value, and a value greater than its own. That is why you bought it. That which on your side appears a spontaneous expansion of capital, is on mine extra expenditure of labour-power. You and I know on the market only one law, that of the exchange of commodities. And the consumption of the commodity belongs not to the seller who parts with it, but to the buyer, who acquires it. To you, therefore, belongs the use of my daily labour-power. But by means of the price that you pay for it each day, I must be able to reproduce it daily, and to sell it again.<sup>18</sup>

It is only by adopting the 'master' discourse of the capitalist that the worker can argue from a position of strength. Becoming himself a capitalist merchant in ownership of a commodity, the worker has to ensure that the price he receives for it is high enough to guarantee its reproduction, so that it could be offered as a commodity on the market again in the future. Instead of rejecting the logic of economic exchange and capitalist accumulation, the labourer overidentifies, to use Žižek's term, which we will discuss more extensively in the next chapter, with the capitalist's position, going further in commodifying not just labour, but also labour power, his own capacity to work.

The discourse of human (or indeed animal) rights plays no part in this appeal for justice. Even if the capitalist has humanist sentiments towards the suffering of his worker, his hands are 'tied' by the market forces of competition:

You may be a model citizen, perhaps a member of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and in the odour of sanctity to boot; but the thing that you represent face to face with me has no heart in its breast. That which seems to throb there is my own heart-beating. I demand the normal working-day because I, like every other seller, demand the value of my commodity.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Marx, Karl, *Capital*, p. 150.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

There are two main outcomes to this shift of perspective from an argument grounded in human rights to one grounded in the 'heart-less' logic of capital. First, now that the struggle of worker and factory owner is between two sides with equal economic stakes, it can only be viewed as a real conflict involving comparable powers. Liberal reform that puts a powerless worker at the mercy of capitalist morality is thoroughly rejected as inadequate. This is clearly reflected in Louis Althusser's 1969 essay, "How to Read Marx's Capital", where he attacks the 'compromise' of the capitalist with the workers via the introduction of over-time exactly on this ground: "For the workers, overtime earnings are anything but free gifts presented to them by the employers. These earnings do of course mean something extra for the workers, which they can do with, but it ruins their health. Despite its deceptive appearance, overtime means nothing more than additional exploitation for the workers".<sup>20</sup>

But from this capitalist exchange a radical transformation in the character of the labourer occurs. As Marx continues: "It must be acknowledged that our labourer comes out of the process of production other than he entered. In the market he stood as owner of the commodity 'labour-power' face to face with other owners of commodities, dealer against dealer. The contract by which he sold to the capitalist his labour-power proved, so to say, in black and white that he disposed of himself freely."<sup>21</sup> This newfound freedom, defined in the capitalist's own laws of the market disappears only after the consumption of the commodity of labour sold by the worker: "The bargain concluded, it is discovered that he was no 'free agent,' that the time for which he is free to sell his labour-power is the time for which he is forced to sell it, that in fact the vampire will not lose its hold on him 'so long as there is a muscle, a nerve, a drop of blood to be exploited'".<sup>22</sup> This move also necessitates, for the first time in *Capital*, the emergence of class consciousness, the recognition of an identical, rightful claim by a group of people who, in order to win the argument with the purchaser of their commodity, "must put their heads together, and, as

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<sup>20</sup> Althusser, Louis, "How to Read Marx's Capital", in: *Marxism Today*, 1969, pp. 302 – 5, available at: <http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpalthusser11.htm> [accessed 22.8.10].

<sup>21</sup> Marx, Karl, *Capital*, p. 181.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

a class, compel the passing of a law, an all-powerful social barrier that shall prevent the very workers from selling, by voluntary contract with capital, themselves and their families into slavery and death”.<sup>23</sup> The weak discourse of rights is thus replaced by legislative action, identical to that which protects the right of any capitalist seller of commodities: “In place of the pompous catalogue of the ‘inalienable rights of man’ comes the modest Magna Carta of a legally limited working-day, which shall make clear ‘when the time which the worker sells is ended, and when his own begins’”.<sup>24</sup>

This passage of *Capital* is crucial in allowing us to think about a form of critique not dependent on humanism for its argument. It also gives us an insight into Marx’s dialectical methodology. While the dialectical opposition between the legal economic rights of the capitalist over the commodity that he owns, i.e. labour, and the inalienable rights of man is shown to be false and discarded, a new more meaningful dialectical opposition is discovered in the equal, yet diametrically opposed, claims of the different classes. The first dialectical opposition simply supports the totality of capitalist production, while the second, although produced from within its relations of production, is destabilising.

In his essay “Self-Appreciation; or, The Aspirations of Human Capital”, Michel Feher elaborates on this moment in Marx’s account of the dialogue between the capitalist and the worker. He focuses on the framing of the worker as a ‘free labourer’, since the exchange of labour power for wages assumes a non-coercive contractual agreement. He notes that Marx doesn’t propose exposing the falsehood of the labourer’s merely formal freedom as a viable critique:

While it is certainly part of the Marxist heritage (for better and for worse) to expose the ‘formal’ equality offered by liberal democracies as a condition of reproduction of the ‘real’ inequalities created by capitalism, it is also the case that the labor movement (including in its Marxist variant) has organized along rather different lines: labor unions have indeed relied on this very notion of the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 181-2.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 182

free laborer, and the labor movement even developed as a movement of free laborers whose union and solidarity were meant either to maximize the exchange value of their labor power or, in a more radical vein, to precipitate the crisis of capitalism.<sup>25</sup>

Feher goes on to apply this appropriation of capitalist discourse to a kind of critique suited to the specific problems of post-Fordist labour. Since many theorists of post-Fordism have proposed a proximity of art and labour within this present organisation of work, the question of the worker's capacity for critique along these lines is especially pertinent to our discussion. We will therefore return to the implications of this transformation in the status of the worker for a non- or even anti-humanist critique towards the end of this chapter. Following Marx's refinement of the methodology of dialectics as a critical tool, we would try to observe a similar yet unformulated opposition in post-Fordism to move us away from the static and insufficient critique offered by humanism. First, however, it is important to outline the way in which the transformation of the conditions of labour in post-Fordist late capitalism has changed the terms of the struggle described above.

### **Instrumentalising the Human**

In "The Direct Production Process", the draft for the intended Chapter 6 of *Capital*, Marx distinguishes between the categories of the formal and real subsumption of labour. In the first case, an existing mode of production is appropriated by capitalism, modifying labour relations but not the work itself. Thus, a peasant might continue in agricultural work, or an artisan in a given craft, but raw materials and wages would now be supplied by an employer, who would then sell the product of labour for a profit. This is formal subsumption: "the subsumption under capital of a mode of labour already developed before the emergence of the capital-relation".<sup>26</sup> Subsequently, in

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<sup>25</sup> Feher, Michel, "Self-Appreciation; or, The Aspirations of Human Capital", in: *Public Culture*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, Volume 21, Number 1, Issue 57, Winter 2009, p. 22.

<sup>26</sup> Marx, Karl, "The Direct Production Process" [Ben Fowkes – tr.], *Marx/Engels Collected Works*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2005, available at:

this account, capitalism develops new modes of production better suited to mass manufacture. Here the nature of work changes alongside the worker's relationship to an employer. Under real subsumption, new technologies might support the emergence of altogether new industrial, rationalised processes: "on this basis there arises a mode of production — the capitalist mode of production — which is specific technologically and in other ways, and transforms the real nature of the labour process and its real conditions. Only when this enters the picture does the real subsumption of labour under capital take place".<sup>27</sup> The worker on the assembly line is no longer a skilled labourer, but an interchangeable part of the manufacturing machine, a body subsumed in the production process. For Marx, this is the cause of alienation, the separation of the worker from the end-product of labour in which the object, no longer overseen to completion, dominates its maker: "The material conditions necessary for the realisation of labour are therefore themselves alienated from the worker, and appear rather as fetishes endowed with a will and a soul of their own, and commodities figure as the buyers of persons".<sup>28</sup>

At the same time, in his "Fragment On Machines", Marx observes that the increasingly central role of automation in production processes following the logic of mass manufacturing also has a potentially liberatory aspect: if workers are ultimately to be pushed out of the production process altogether, then their time need no longer be subjugated to alienating labour. The inherent contradiction between the demand to premise value on labour time and yet also reduce labour time to reduce the expense of wages can only lead to the inevitable collapse of the system as a whole:

Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth. Hence it diminishes labour time in the necessary form so as to increase it in the superfluous form; hence posits the superfluous in growing measure as a condition – question of life or death – for

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<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/economic/ch02a.htm#469a> [accessed 4.7.10]

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

the necessary. On the one side, then, it calls to life all the powers of science and of nature, as of social combination and of social intercourse, in order to make the creation of wealth independent (relatively) of the labour time employed on it. On the other side, it wants to use labour time as the measuring rod for the giant social forces thereby created, and to confine them within the limits required to maintain the already created value as value. Forces of production and social relations – two different sides of the development of the social individual – appear to capital as mere means, and are merely means for it to produce on its limited foundation. In fact, however, they are the material conditions to blow this foundation sky-high.<sup>29</sup>

These two passages from Marx's writing, both published in Italy in the 1960s, have been central to the elaboration of the theory of post-Fordism by the Italian Autonomists, in that they first describe the ways in which capitalism molds and is in turn molded by the changing nature of work and anticipating as they do the conditions of a post-industrial labour market. As Franco "Bifo" Berardi explains in his book, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, the rise of automation and the transition from manual to mental or immaterial labour were at least in part a response to the demands made by workers in the 1960s and 1970s: "The workers' struggle for power pushed capital to use machines instead of workers, exactly as Karl Marx had anticipated in his *Grundrisse*".<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, this has not (yet) led to the liberation from labour foreseen by Marx. Rather, the new modes of immaterial labour that have resulted require us to rethink the abstraction of labour that he describes, and to find new ways of identifying its subjects.

Here, following a similar trajectory to ours, Bifo explains that an effective analysis of immaterial labour would incorporate a critique of the basic assumptions of humanism and at the same time of the methodology of

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<sup>29</sup> Marx, Karl, "Fragment On Machines", *The Grundrisse* [Martin Nicolaus – tr.], London: Penguin, 1973, p. 706.

<sup>30</sup> Berardi, Franco "Bifo", *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* [Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia – tr.], Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2009, p. 94. This analysis arises from the Autonomist understanding of workers' struggles as playing a constitutive role in relation to capitalism. As Jason Smith explains, in his introduction to Bifo's book, "worker insubordination alone initiates restructuration on the part of capital" (p. 14). This restructuration, in turn, changes the composition of the working class.

dialectical thinking. Therefore, for him, the project undertaken by the Autonomists is a means of breaking away from both dialectical materialism and humanist existentialism. Following Hegel, dialectical materialism understood alienation as a historical form to be overcome. Sartre's existentialism, by contrast, maintained that alienation is an essential aspect of human existence. But whether positing a human essence lost with the advent of capitalist alienation, or claiming alienation to be itself a feature of the human condition, both theories relied on an underlying humanism that the Autonomists rejected. The Autonomists, however, took alienation, or rather estrangement, to be a ground for a collectivity autonomous from capital. Not being lonely, but feeling distanced from one's work under capitalism would be the basis for the refusal to work. Estrangement was thus the starting point of the struggle that would allow them to redefine the proletariat in terms better suited to late capitalism:

Compositionism [as Bifo prefers to call Italian Workerism insofar as it addresses class composition], even if in complete agreement with the critique of the Stalinist *diamat*, dialectical and historicist dogmatism, does not anticipate any restoration of humanity, does not proclaim any human universality, and bases its understanding of humanity on class conflict. Compositionism overturns the issue implicit in the question of alienation. It is precisely thanks to the radical inhumanity of the workers' existence that a human collectivity can be founded, a community no longer dependent on capital.<sup>31</sup>

In late 1970s Italy, but also elsewhere, the refusal of manual labour on which the Autonomists had based their ideas produced the restructured form of post-Fordism. This new regime strove to accommodate the worker's demands for greater flexibility and reduced work time. The new composition of the working class that follows from this restructuring relies heavily on intellectual or cognitive labour. The proletariat is thus replaced with a cognitariat, to use Bifo's terminology. On the one hand, these workers sit uniformly in front of their computer screens and type. On the other, though, their work relies

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.



heavily on their accumulated knowledge, abilities and personalities, aspects of the self increasingly instrumentalised in the labour market. In Bifo's words:

Human terminals perform the same physical gestures in front of computers and they all connect to the universal machine of elaboration and and communication: yet the more their jobs are physically simplified, the less interchangeable their knowledge, abilities and performance. Digital labor manipulates absolute abstract signs, but its recombining function is more specific the more personalized it gets, therefore even less interchangeable.<sup>32</sup>

To an extent, real subsumption reverts here to formal subsumption, with the specific, personalised content of work undermining its superficial interchangeability. The result of this process is that every aspect of life, of the worker's subjectivity, or, in Bifo's use of the term (after Spinoza), the worker's soul, can be used to derive value, in a way that was previously limited to the worker's body and specific labour time only. As Bifo continues,

Consequently, high tech workers tend to consider labour as the most essential part in their lives, the most specific and personalized.<sup>33</sup>

The Autonomists largely agree on this diagnosis of post-industrial labour. Where the theorists of post-Fordism differ is in their prognosis. Like Bifo, in his book *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Paolo Virno asserts that the contradictory nature of capitalist subsumption observed by Marx does not result in a destabilisation of capitalist control. "[T]he post-Ford era", he writes, "is the full factual realization of the tendency described by Marx without, however, any emancipating consequences. The disproportion between the role accomplished by knowledge and the decreasing importance of labor time has given rise to new and stable forms of power, rather than to a hotbed of crisis".<sup>34</sup> Although we might now, in light of the current ongoing financial crisis, look on the 'hotbed of crisis' as itself playing a part in the production of a meta-stable capitalism, Virno is right in observing that it is the suppression of

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p.76.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.76.

<sup>34</sup> Virno, Paolo, *Grammar of the Multitude* [Isabella Bertolotti et. al. – trs.], Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2004, pp. 100-101.

dialectically opposed tensions that gives late capitalism its stable form. In the same way that capitalist economies responded to the economic crisis of 1929 and to the October revolution by the “gigantic socialization (or better, nationalization) of the means of production”, so capitalism responds to the social changes that have emerged from its own inconsistencies in the second half of the twentieth century by transforming itself again: “Post-Fordism [...] puts forth, *in its own way*, typical demands of communism (abolition of work, dissolution of the state, etc.). Post-Fordism is the communism of capital”.<sup>35</sup>

Antonio Negri takes this idea of a subversive, almost ‘communist’ element within late capitalism even further. He identifies Marx’s paradox of capitalist subsumption with a founding principle of postmodernism. If the capitalist mode of production eventually not only becomes hegemonic but also “becomes the only existing one”, the whole of society becomes a factory, a site of production.<sup>36</sup> And since capitalism has no more external or archaic modes of production to subsume, it engulfs the entire social sphere and subsumes, i.e. turns into surplus value via exploitation, its most basic functions: language and communication. More than a new form of social control, post-Fordism brings these contradictions to the very surface of capitalist production. For Negri, relying on Marx’s analysis of capitalism’s imminent implosion, this points towards an inevitable failure of neoliberal theories. In limiting the state to a body that maintains and regulates competition in the market between free agents, neoliberalism does not account for the subsumption of socialised work, of the social and communicative potential of those agents operating within the market:

[...] the elimination of the antagonism cannot hide, even in postmodernism, the maturation of human society in which the paradox of the most complete abstraction of labour, together with its extraordinary productivity, is dissolved and becomes, according to Marx, a power of the collective individual, the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 110-111.

<sup>36</sup> Negri, Antonio, *The Politics of Subversion: A Manifesto for the Twentieth-First Century* [James Newall – tr.], Cambridge: Polity, 1989, pp. 204.

liberation of singularity and the discovery and joy of free, communal activity. This enormous contradiction is latent in postmodernism.<sup>37</sup>

Negri is therefore largely optimistic about the consequences of a post-Fordist economy: “Extreme liberalization of the economy reveals its opposite, namely that the social and productive environment is not made up of atomized individuals and that where these exist, they represent marginal or residual phenomena (pertaining to the ‘formality’ as opposed to ‘reality’ of subsumption) while the real environment is made up of collective individuals”.<sup>38</sup> Rather than “create equivalent and interchangeable individuals” as the laws of the free competitive market demand, even the neoliberal interpretation of post-Fordism ends up affirming a pre-individual collective potentiality. Writing with Hardt, Negri would subsequently term this collectivity in which difference is retained the ‘multitude’, as distinct from ‘the people’, ‘the masses’ or ‘the working class’.<sup>39</sup>

Other writers of the *Autonomia* group have been more cautious in their evaluation of these changes. For Virno, the multitude cannot be assigned the kind of positive political agency that Hardt and Negri would like it to have:

[...] Michael Hardt and Toni Negri are friends – of course we agree a great deal. But to me, multitude is an ambivalent notion. It is a concept for a mode of existence and, like any mode of existence, it accommodates good and evil. Multitude is ambivalent.<sup>40</sup>

Writing in the introduction to Virno’s book, Sylvère Lotringer adds that at its limit, this concept is more like a religion than a politics, and that the analogy Hardt and Negri draw between the rise of Christianity during the decline of the Roman Empire and revolutionary desire is problematic. As soon as the multitude is spoken for as a revolutionary class, despite Hardt and Negri’s

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.206

<sup>39</sup> Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, London: Penguin, 2005, p. xiv.

<sup>40</sup> Virno, interviewed by Sonja Lavaert and Pascal Gielen in: de Bruyne, Paul and Gielen, Pascal [eds.], *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2009, p. 35.

reluctance to describe the ways in which it might act, it is transformed into an essentialist notion that undoes the critical value of this new form of subjectivity. Instead of being a contingent political construct arising from the operations of late capitalism, the multitude is unified in a predetermined program of liberation, superseding capitalism:

For Hardt and Negri, the multitude is this new social class that removes itself from nations and parties to meet head on the challenge of Empire. 'In its will to be-against and its desire for liberation', the multitude 'Must push through Empire to come out the other side'. The other side, of course, is so much better. Paradise is another example. The problem is that a multitude capable of doing such a feat doesn't exist-or doesn't exist yet. At best, it remains a taunting hypothesis, and a promising field of investigation for whoever wants to follow the lead. But the idea that capital could simply be 'destroyed' by such an essentialist notion is a bit hard to swallow. Unlike the industrial proletariat, the postmodern multitude doesn't make up 'a workers' army', the kind that is readily launched against capital, or against Empire.<sup>41</sup>

Žižek is similarly skeptical about capitalism's ability to spawn a multitudinal, post-state communism in Hardt and Negri's writing: "The main problem with Empire is that the book falls short in its fundamental analysis of how (if at all) the present global, social-economic process will create the space needed for such radical measures".<sup>42</sup>

Yet, regardless of this criticism and despite the fact that much Autonomist writing shies away from offering a concrete description of how and under what conditions the late capitalist project and its multitudinal subject would be transformed into a new form of equality, these writers are important in their attack on humanism and its simple dialectical mode of resistance. They recognise that there is no place outside of capitalist production, that the

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<sup>41</sup> Lotringer, Sylvère, "We, The Multitude", in: Virno, Paolo, *Grammar of the Multitude* [Isabella Bertolotti et al – trs.], Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2004, pp. 14 – 15.

<sup>42</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, "Have Michael Hardt And Antonio Negri Rewritten The Communist Manifesto For The Twenty-First Century?", *Rethinking Marxism*, Volume 13, Number 3/4, 2001, available at: <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/have-michael-hardt-and-antonio-negri-rewritten-the-communist-manifesto-for-the-twenty-first-century/> [accessed 5/7/10].

psycho-linguistic traits of human communication, as well as sociability, performativity and creativity are co-optable because they do not stand in real opposition to work. Rather than fall into a mode of irony or despair, simply acknowledging an inability to offer resistance, these authors see new possibilities emerging with the collapse of old models of critique. Moving away from the old oppositions of Fordist labour necessitates a new political subject and a new terrain for political struggle that is not defined along the limited lines of class. This new terrain also dictates a re-imagining of the work of the artist under post-Fordism and of the role of creativity in shaping political subjects.

### **Mining the General Intellect**

The Autonomists share the belief that in a changing landscape of work, one cannot still hold on to orthodox notions of class antagonism. Paradoxically, the dialectical struggle of capitalism against the workers has resulted in capitalism adopting some of the aims of communism: the abolishing of alienated mechanical labour, the deregulating of labour time, the introduction of more 'playful' modes of work, etc. Post-Fordism offers new modes of subjective freedom and new modes of control: it defeats the workers by complying with many of their demands, but at the same time circumventing their aim of establishing a regime of equality. In doing so, it absorbs the last pockets of external cultural forms into its totality. The very definition of who is a 'worker' has to be radically rethought, and subjects previously conceived of as non-proletarian must now be included in a new formulation of political structure. "Owing to the evolution of capitalism and the working class, the walls of the 'factory' fell down long ago [...] the enormous factory of the tertiary sector demands to be analysed as a 'society-factory'", writes Negri<sup>43</sup>. Like Bifo, he defines this new political subject as an intellectual and creative one who organises social labour in a radically new way and for whom creative subversion replaces older modes of organised resistance.<sup>44</sup> In the new political and economic landscape, the work of the artist, no longer marginal or

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<sup>43</sup> Negri, Antonio, *The Politics of Subversion*, p. 215

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47-60.

oppositional to hegemonic productive forces, is the very paradigm of the worker in general. As Alexei Penzin states in the introduction to his interview with Virno, “the subjectivity of the contemporary artist is probably the brightest expression of the flexible, mobile, non-specialized substance of contemporary ‘living labor’”.<sup>45</sup>

The notion of creativity is central to this idea that the artist is an exemplary post-Fordist worker. In *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello demonstrate the way in which what they term the ‘artistic critique’ of capitalism has demanded the introduction of more creativity into the relations governing work and exchange in contemporary society. Parallel to a ‘social critique’ that was more focused on issues of poverty and exploitation, artistic critique elaborated “demands for liberation and authenticity”.<sup>46</sup> This critique can be traced back to the invention of a ‘bohemian lifestyle’ to counter the standardisation of the bourgeois capitalist order of the nineteenth century, “affecting not only everyday objects, but also artworks (the cultural mercantilism of the bourgeoisie) and human beings”.<sup>47</sup> Artistic critique celebrates “the freedom of artists” and “their rejection of any contamination of aesthetics by ethics”, and finds its epitome in the figure of the dandy and “the aristocratic libertinism of the artistic avant garde”.<sup>48</sup> Boltanski and Chiapello consider that this critique has been successfully addressed in some respects through an increased emphasis on creativity in the workplace. Instead of merely mediated decisions from above, workers wanted not only increased flexibility at work, but also to participate in designing their roles. This demand was, at least to an extent, answered, and through the logic of recuperation, which Boltanski and Chiapello describe at length, transformed the system that it criticised:

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<sup>45</sup> Penzin, Alexei, “The Soviets of the Multitude: On Collectivity and Collective Work (An Interview with Paolo Virno)”, *Manifesta Journal*, # 8, 2010, available at: <http://www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/the-soviets-of-the-multitude> [accessed 6.11.11]

<sup>46</sup> Boltanski, Luc and Chiapello, Ève, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London: Verso, 2007, p. 346.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 38-9.

The demand for *creativity*, voiced primarily by high qualified wage earners, engineers or *cadres*, has received greater recognition than could ever have been hoped for thirty years earlier, when it became obvious that an ever growing share of profits derived from the exploitation of resources of inventiveness, imagination and innovation developed in the new technologies, and especially in the rapidly expanding sectors of services and cultural production.<sup>49</sup>

Despite arising from the context of an artistic critique, creativity is generalised here beyond artistic endeavour. It is used in two ways: firstly, to deregulate systems of production and the social bonds they entail and, secondly, to allow for a self-management of the production process itself. Boltanski and Chiapello demonstrate how both forms of creativity place contradictory demands in turn on the employee who might have initially demanded them. Since artistic critique requires liberation from inflexible systems, the worker must always be adaptable to new circumstances. A series of temporary links between people and groups, ready to be activated in the service of a particular project, defines this new, connexionist world:

To adjust to a connexionist world, people must prove sufficiently malleable to pass through different universes while changing properties [...] Adaptability – that is, the ability to treat one's own person in the manner of a text that can be translated into different languages – is in fact a basic requirement for circulating in networks, guaranteeing transit through heterogeneity of a being minimally defined by a body and the proper noun attached to it.<sup>50</sup>

However, since artistic critique also calls for authenticity, a consistent core must remain. To be valued as a worker, one must have something to offer beyond merely fitting in easily:

But in another respect, the success of connexionist human beings does not depend solely on their plasticity. In fact, if they simply adjust to the new situations that arise, they risk passing unnoticed, or, worse, being adjudged

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 326.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 461.

wanting in status and assimilating to the little people, the newcomers, the ignorant, the 'trainees'.<sup>51</sup>

The integration of creativity into the system has further consequences: as with all recuperation, it weakens the critical force it may have once possessed. In the same way that automation ironically ends up increasing the workers' servitude rather than founding their liberation, the function of creativity within immaterial labour performs an ironic realisation of the dissolution of art as a differentiated field that was sought by Alan Kaprow and Guy Debord (see previous chapter).

Like the notions of formal and real subsumption and the analysis of automation, the idea of immaterial labour has been developed from sections of Marx's writing that seemed to resonate with the developments in the work market under late capitalism. Marx writes of a specific category of labour with no material product, virtuosic pursuits where the performance of the work is its own outcome.<sup>52</sup> The Autonomists take what is for Marx a restricted phenomenon and assert it as the paradigm of contemporary labour in general, no longer applicable merely to artists and service providers, but also to a broad range of info-workers operating under what Bifo calls semiocapital.<sup>53</sup> As Virno states explicitly, "[w]ithin post-Fordist organization of production, activity-without-a-finished-work moves from being a special and problematic case to

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> "With non-material production, even if it is conducted purely for the purpose of exchange, purely produces commodities, two things are possible:

1) it results in commodities which exist separately from the producer, hence can circulate in the interval between production and consumption as commodities; this applies to books, paintings, and all the products of artistic creation which are distinct from the actual performance of the executant artist. Here capitalist production is applicable on a very restricted scale. In so far as these people do not employ assistants, etc., in the manner of sculptors, they mostly work (if they are not independent) for merchant etc., capital, e.g. for booksellers; this is a relation which itself constitutes merely a form transitional to a *mode of production capitalist only in form*. The fact that it is precisely in these transitional forms that the exploitation of labour reaches its highest level does not alter the situation at all;

2) the product is inseparable from the act of producing it. Here too there is only a restricted field for the capitalist mode of production, and it can in the nature of things only take place in a few spheres. (I need *the* doctor, not his errand boy.) In educational institutions, for example, teachers may well be merely wage labourers for the entrepreneur who owns the teaching factory. But similar cases do not need to be considered when dealing with capitalist production as a whole." Marx, Karl, "The Process of Production of Capital", *ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Bifo, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, p. 89.



becoming the prototype of waged labor in general”.<sup>54</sup> What is put to work in jobs as diverse as web-design and telemarketing, is the ‘general intellect’, another term borrowed from Marx, encompassing the worker’s potential to communicate, share knowledge and, most crucially for us, the potential to be creative. For Marx, the general intellect was inextricably linked to the scientific and technological advances that would automate labour and free the worker to pursue other activities. What Marx did not anticipate was the way in which this general intellect could be embodied in living labour, forming the basis not just for the work of “some particularly qualified third sector” or “labour aristocracy”, but for post-Fordist labour in general.<sup>55</sup> Mass intellectuality, explains Virno, is inherently a social phenomenon that operates outside the individual: “‘general’ refers to what exists or occurs in the borderland, between you and me, in the relation between you, him and me”.<sup>56</sup> The general intellect is equal to the logical and linguistic abilities that enable a community to have a shared language, to come to an agreement over the meaning of words and concepts. Virno also maintains that since it is precisely this fundamental human potential to participate in the production of linguistic structures that the post-Fordist labour market seeks to exploit, the general intellect moves to the forefront of political self-determination. No longer, the hidden support structure of communal language, the general intellect becomes a core component in defining a new public or political body: “the “life of the mind” becomes, in itself, *public* [...] the One which lies beneath the mode of being of the multitude”.<sup>57</sup>

Attempting to “get beyond the concept of creativity as an expression of ‘individuality’ or as the patrimony of the ‘superior’ classes”, Maurizio Lazzarato, in his essay “Immaterial Labour” demonstrates how creativity is dispersed across a network of labour relations:

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<sup>54</sup> Virno, Paolo, “Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus,” in: Virno, Paolo and Hardt, Michael [eds.], *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, pp. 188–208, available at: <http://makeworlds.net/node/34> [accessed 5.7.10]

<sup>55</sup> Virno, Paolo, “General Intellect” [Arianna Bove tr.], *Lessico Postfordista*, Rome: Feltrinelli, 2001, available at: <http://www.generation-online.org/pfpvirno10.htm> [accessed: 13.12.2010]

<sup>56</sup> Virno, in: de Bruyne, Paul and Gielen, Pascal [eds.], *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, p. 21.

<sup>57</sup> Virno, Paolo, *Grammar of the Multitude*, p. 37.

The activities of this kind of immaterial labor force us to question the classic definitions of *work* and *workforce*, because they combine the results of various different types of work skill: intellectual skills, as regards the cultural-informational content; manual skills for the ability to combine creativity, imagination, and technical and manual labor; and entrepreneurial skills in the management of social relations and the structuring of that social cooperation of which they are a part.<sup>58</sup>

Lazzarato is explicit in his use of artistic models for theorising immaterial labour. Tracing a mechanism of valorisation in post-Fordism, a mechanism that might explain how specific immaterial products gain value and meaning and how they contribute to the production of subjectivity, Lazzarato adopts what he calls an “aesthetic model”. Instead of looking at Taylorist economic models that are grounded in material notions of production and in a rigid separation of producer and consumer, he suggests that this aesthetic model is better suited to tackle the economic operation of post-Fordism. Not unlike the artistic critique of authorship to emerge from the 1960s with texts such as Umberto Eco’s “The Poetics of the Open Work” and Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author”, Lazzarato’s aesthetic model is a fluid space where the relationship between author, (re)production and audience is negotiated. In this space, it is the very act of consumption that gives the commodity its value and translates the product of human communication into an economic commodity. The public (used here to describe the user, listener, reader or audience etc.) supports authorship by serving as a specific “ideological signifier” to which the work of social communication is addressed. But more importantly, since the process of production is already imbued with subjectivity and happens on the level of inter-personal communication, the public or audience itself assumes a productive role and, “by means of reception [...] gives the product a ‘a place in a life [...] and allows it to live and evolve.” Lazzarato concludes that “Reception is thus, from this point of view, a creative act and an integrative

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<sup>58</sup> Lazzarato, Maurizio, “Immaterial Labour”, in: *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, pp. 133–149, available at: <http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcimmateriallabour3.htm> [accessed 5.7.10]

part of the product. The transformation of the product into a commodity cannot abolish this double process of “creativity”.<sup>59</sup>

In the absence of the kind of machinic alienation described by Marx, the immaterial labourer experiences work as part of a personal enterprise. The resistance to work, on which the Autonomists premised their struggle, disappears in a context where producing what Bifo calls “communication, the creation of mental states, of feelings, and imagination” requires an “investment of desire”.<sup>60</sup> Work is never refused, because the worker has to be on call at all times to compete (responsive to emails, mobile phones, etc.):

[Info-workers] prepare their nervous system as an active receiving terminal for as much time as possible. The entire lived day becomes subject to a semiotic activity which becomes directly productive only when necessary.<sup>61</sup>

According to Bifo, the problem with this subjugation of subjectivisation to incessant work is that it produces constant stress and leads to psychological breakdown, manifested in the rise of panic, depression and mind altering drug use, both medical and illegal.<sup>62</sup> Virno, however, sees an even more worrying consequence in the difficulty of finding a place for political action in a society structured around immaterial labour. He follows Aristotle, in asserting that it was precisely its externality to work that historically made ‘Action’ inherently political. As something that does not have an end product, it engaged with conduct and not with extrinsic aims. Virno also cites Arendt as extending this view to the performing arts, which require the presence of a public in the same way that political action does. The problem with virtuosic, or immaterial labour, then, is that it pre-empts political action, closing the distance to productivity essential for criticality and opposition:

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<sup>59</sup> Lazzarato, Maurizio, “Immaterial Labor” in: Virno, Paolo and Hardt, Michael [eds.], *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p. 144

<sup>60</sup> Bifo, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, p. 84.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 98-100.

[...] the virtuoso works (in fact she or he is a worker par excellence) not despite the fact, but precisely because of the fact that her or his activity is closely reminiscent of political praxis [...] The 'presence of others' is both the instrument and the object of labor; therefore, the processes of production always require a certain degree of virtuosity, or, to put it another way, they involve what are really political actions. Mass intellectuality (a rather clumsy term that I use to indicate not so much a specific stratum of jobs, but more a quality of the whole of post-Fordist labor power) is called upon to exercise the art of the possible, to deal with the unforeseen, to profit from opportunities. Now that the slogan of labor that produces surplus value has become, sarcastically, 'politics first', politics in the narrow sense of the term becomes discredited or paralyzed.<sup>63</sup>

In the same way that the proximity of work to politics disables political action, the role of creativity in immaterial labour endangers the critical potency of art. Once instrumentalised, the un-art envisioned by Kaprow, creativity unleashed from the formal structures of the art world, becomes impoverished in terms of its capacity to present a critique of alienated labour. It is precisely the democratic aspirations of art, diffusing a distinct field of production into a generalised experience of creativity, which render it ineffective and co-optable. The accumulation of value (both in a cultural and monetary sense) directly from within a shared common language or general intellect is what defines post-Fordist production in Negri's 'society factory'. In the political field, the Italian Autonomists suggest a 'withdrawal' or 'refusal' to replace the positive political action that has been absorbed into post-Fordist labour. Similarly, in the aesthetic field they appear to look for a new way of distinguishing creativity from work, withdrawing art from its instrumentalised context. As we shall see, not all these writers are equally successful in their effort to define a new role for art under immaterial work. But while some fall back on essentialist and even humanist notions of artistic production, others find art to be useful in dismantling the dialectical oppositions that still colour much of the discussion of the political effect of art. These accounts will become useful for us in our

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<sup>63</sup> Virno, Paolo, "Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus".

attempt here to move art beyond humanism and its dialectical relationship with alienated work.

### **Art as Non-Instrumentalised Creativity**

The specific relationship of post-Fordist annexations of creativity and art as a distinct field of discourse is taken up by Marina Vishmidt. In an interview with Marion von Osten, Vishmidt explains her decision to look at immaterial labour in the context of cultural production as premised on the converging of two discourses. On the one hand, the managerial discourse analysed by Boltanski and Chiapello has appropriated creativity as a virtue in an employee, while on the other, artists are increasingly part of a broader field of culture entrepreneurs that slots into general trends of post-Fordist labour:

If the ideal worker is an information worker, then the ideal worker is an artist. There likewise seemed to be productive analogies to be drawn between, on the one hand, the adoption of classically artistic traits like creativity and spontaneity into the management dogma of a flexibilised economy, and on the other, the artist's emerging, or ongoing, identification as a cultural worker (or sometimes as cultural entrepreneur), not to mention the cultural workers who mediate and perpetuate the art economy, from curators to retail and maintenance staff. The convergence of these discourses, which had probably never been that separate but are now less distinct than ever, seemed to bespeak a common form of subjectivation that was profiling recognisably 'artistic' modes of being as the desirable [sic], if not necessary, attributes of the contemporary producer/consumer, and that was able to absorb resistant practices more fluidly than ever.<sup>64</sup>

Vishmidt locates the origin of the erosion of boundaries between these discourses in the oppositions set up in the industrial age and the way they

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<sup>64</sup> Osten, Marion von, "de-, dis-, ex- on Immaterial Labour: An Interview with Marina Vishmidt, Conducted by Marion von Osten", 2004, available at: [http://www.republicart.net/disc/precariat/vishmidt-osten01\\_en.htm#\\_ftn1](http://www.republicart.net/disc/precariat/vishmidt-osten01_en.htm#_ftn1) [accessed 29.11.10]

were negated by the avant-garde in general and Russian Constructivism in particular. However, it is in conceptual art that this tendency reaches its apex:

conceptual art heralded the de-materialisation of the art object, focusing instead on the symbolic mediations that instantiate art as an event and mode of communication. The object has also been displaced from contemporary capitalist production as it concentrates on branding, differentiation, lifestyle marketing, attention management and so forth.<sup>65</sup>

Elsewhere, Vishmidt criticises the tendency to collapse the discussion of precarity in post-Fordism into a discourse on cultural work that does not account for other forms of affective labour, such as housework or care.<sup>66</sup> She suggests that seeing the artist as a 'model precarian' does not account sufficiently for the ways in which the field of art is entangled in the processes of immaterial labour and commodification. Socially engaged community art thus naively fails at undoing the precarity it thinks it shares with other forms of perhaps less glamorous labour. Vishmidt asks whether we can envision another kind of art, critically able to utilise the singularity of artistic work and the specificity of the structures it does not share with post-Fordist work in general:

Against the instrumentalisation of art and the instrumentalisation of its critique in the discourse of creativity, how far can we go with grasping a specificity that can be resistant to this, the specificity of the already existing and not-yet at once? This might be what is really precarious about art; the oscillation between what it can do as social production and how it is deployed as 'social engagement'.<sup>67</sup>

To resolve this question, Bifo proposes to separate instrumentalised creativity from art as a distinct field of activity. Adopting Guattari's thinking on art as a 'chaoid', he describes art as continuing to offer a useful 'aesthetic paradigm',

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Vishmidt, Marina, "Precarious Straits", in: *Mute: Precarious Reader*, Vol. 2 #0, 2005, available at:

<http://www.metamute.org/en/Precarious-Straits> [accessed 29.11.10]

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

by rendering the chaos of living sensible. From the sensory overload produced by the proliferation of signs necessitated by semicapital, art composes forms and gestures, registering disturbances, but also finding new modalities of being: “art builds devices that can temporarily model chaos”<sup>68</sup>. These semiotic devices are “capable of translating the infinite velocity of reality flows into the slow rhythm, of sensibility”.<sup>69</sup> In this understanding of art, which remains autonomous from instrumentalised creativity, art becomes interchangeable for Bifo with therapy.<sup>70</sup> But at the heart of this argument lies the assumption of creativity as an intrinsic human quality. Despite setting out to refute humanist essentialism, the concept of creativity as an important part of the general intellect situates it as a capacity preceding capitalism and therefore capable of retaining critical power in relation to it.

Bifo therefore fails in the task he sets himself. By holding on to a notion of art that is not already given in particular social, historical or economic relations but that is a prerequisite of these structures, he again relegates art to the realm of the metaphysical. And since he does not allow art to occupy a real historical position, embedded in the socio-economic relations of production in a given situation, his understanding of art as a ‘chaoid’ is ripe for post-Fordist co-optation. In the recent Hollywood film *Limitless*, the protagonist – a novelist (artist) – starts using a new experimental drug that enables him to literally ‘mine’ meaningless communications and transform random conversational noise into a commodity.<sup>71</sup> He uses this capacity to organise chaos to impress his boss, finish his long overdue novel and play the stock market. It is clear that ‘a device capable of rendering the chaos of living sensible’ is a fantasy shared by the psyche of late capitalism, and that it cannot be defended as a unique and unsubsumable quality in art.

The question of how the distinction between art and other post-Fordist activities might be made is posed explicitly to Virno in the interview conducted by Gielen and Lavaert:

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<sup>68</sup> Bifo, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, p. 134.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>71</sup> Burger, Neil [dir.], *Limitless*, Los Angeles, CA: Relativity Media, 2011.

*Does creativity transform when it is at the centre of the post-Fordist production system? Or, more concrete: is there a difference between a creative thinker or artist and a web designer or a publicity expert at the centre of the economic process? Are these two kinds of creativity, or is it about the same kind of creativity?*<sup>72</sup>

Less optimistic than Bifo about the persistence of artistic autonomy, Virno's answer echoes Groys' analysis of the mechanics of canonisation, or Kaprow's account of the transformation of non-art into Art art:

This is a complex dialectic. First, it is important to post-Fordist capitalism that creativity develops autonomously, so it can subsequently catch it and appropriate it. Capitalism cannot organize reflection and creativity, for then it would no longer be creativity. The form applied here is that of the ghetto: 'You go on and make new music, and then we will go and commercialize that new music'.<sup>73</sup>

On the one hand, then, it is clear that models of artistic production are particularly well suited to the aims and operations of socialised capitalism. Michael Hardt, for example, sees evidence for the successful, albeit sometimes unintended, collaboration between art and economic forces in the production of the common or "the creation of social relations and forms of life" in the proliferation of Biennials and the branding of places as "creative cities".<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, many of the Autonomists hold on to a notion of at least a partial autonomy for art. Even Hardt is careful to leave an ambiguous space for art's potential for subversion, or a resistance that might arise out of this forced co-existence.<sup>75</sup> As Virno rightly observes the problem is a one of dialectics. Capitalist production works through expansion, through new consumer markets, new products and through the production of more debt. If

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<sup>72</sup> Virno, in: de Bruyne, Paul and Gielen, Pascal [eds.], *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, p. 29.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Hardt, Michael, "Production and Distribution of the Common" in: de Bruyne, Paul and Gielen, Pascal [eds.], *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2009, pp. 51-53.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.



we give up the special and autonomous place of art in relation to post-Fordist labour and simply treat it as another branch of capitalist productivity, late capitalism loses its source of as yet unexploited potential wealth, the outside to which it must expand. Art and capitalist production are caught in a dialectical relations from which no side can break free: art continues to define itself as a humanist haven away from the alienation of work and at the same time post-Fordist capital sees the ‘creative ghetto’ of art as a source of potential growth to sustain its internal logic.

But Virno suggests this dialectical gambit could actually be useful for artists working today. Although art has lost its uniqueness and negative or disruptive position in late capitalism, he suggests that it still has an important political role to play under the current economic structures. Like the newfound freedom of the worker, whose labour time is deregulated and therefore exists outside of the disciplinary control of the factory, capitalist production must retain a level of autonomy for the artistic and communicative production of the common (the creative ghetto). Out of this relative autonomy art can still create what Virno calls a “crisis of the units of measure” – new aesthetic models that reveal the hegemonic systems of measuring the existent to be inadequate, perhaps in the same way as the Adornian absolute commodity.<sup>76</sup> In another text on the subject, Virno claims that in its utilisation of the general intellect for productive labour, post-Fordism is significantly different from previous modernist forces of production. Post-Fordism does not rely on the abstraction of labour and its transformation into universal equivalences or “units of measure” (of which money is the most obvious example), but rather remains reliant on social differences of subjects: “The models of social knowledge do not turn varied labouring activities into equivalents; rather, they present themselves as an ‘immediately productive force’. They are not units of measure; they constitute the immeasurable presupposition of heterogeneous effective possibilities”.<sup>77</sup> The crisis of the units of measure, therefore, is where art points to or represents the empty space left by the removal of the universal equivalence of

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<sup>76</sup> Virno, in: de Bruyne, Paul and Gielen, Pascal [eds.], *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, p. 17.

<sup>77</sup> Virno, Paolo, “General Intellect”, 2001.

capitalist production. In this scheme, the critical potential of art arises from the tension between two historical modes of capitalist production. Art can make visible the contradiction between the necessity of the production of subjectivities and the universality of money. It belongs neither to the modern nor to the post-Fordist regime but operates in the gap between them.

It is here that we begin to find a model for art production to replace the dialectical antagonism of creativity and work or control and freedom. Both Virno and Lazzarato attempt to open new critical horizons beyond the inherent, positive transformative capacities that Negri finds in his formulation of the anti-dialectical multitude. In his short essay, “Three Remarks Regarding the Multitude's Subjectivity and Its Aesthetic Component”, Virno claims that since “today the fundamental problem is not to oppose the abstraction of social life in the name of the supposedly ‘concrete’, the task of art, or the prerequisite for the activity of the artist, is to “derive a totally new ‘concrete’ precisely from the reality of abstraction”.<sup>78</sup> To illustrate this idea, Virno chooses the figure of the coin collector, the numismatist, a stand-in for the artist, about whose actual activity Virno claims to know little.<sup>79</sup> Although money is an abstraction, a universal unit of measure that establishes equivalence between all other types of commodities, “it presents us with a miracle: the abstraction is real, the object ideal”.<sup>80</sup> Money also abstracts the fact that human labour is made equal through its universal form, with no regard to the nature and quality of the particular activity involved in the work process. But the numismatist “takes the most abstract object of the realm, money, and treats it like a sensible creature, full of contingency and variety of qualities”, by giving the universal equivalent a historical character (collecting a specific American dollar coin from 1910), finding difference within this unit of equivalences. The numismatist looks at money as an aesthetic object of craft, and thereby, for Virno, parallels the Marxian utopia, which “shall make concrete, that is to say sensual and temporal, all that is constrained by today’s

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<sup>78</sup> Virno, Paolo, “Three Remarks Regarding the Multitude's Subjectivity and Its Aesthetic Component”, in: *Under Pressure: Pictures, Subjects and the New Spirit of Capitalism* [Birnbbaum, Daniel and Graw, Isabelle - eds.], Berlin: Sternberg, 2008.p. 41.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

dominant 'real abstractions'".<sup>81</sup> In this model, the inefficacy of the Fordist paradigm of dialectical relations between art and capital, the fact that art can no longer present itself as a process of de-materialisation against the world of commodity fetish, or as a form of concept, sociability or communication against the meaningless production or consumption of objects can actually lead to new critical positions. If the dyad critique/matter is empty, then for Virno, art can still be critical through a renewed engagement with the most fetishistic aspects of the commodity. However, this approach runs the risk that in the act of measuring, the artist as post-Fordist worker re-establishes value as cultural capital.

Lazzarato's analysis of the readymade continues to develop this discussion of art, critique and dialectics under post-Fordism. Lazzarato's essay "Art, Work and Politics in Disciplinary Societies and Societies of Security" looks for an alternative model for art production in response to the emergence of immaterial labour as the contemporary paradigm for work. Much critical theory, argues Lazzarato, fails to deal with the new realities of immaterial labour because it is founded on a dialectical thinking that parallels the duality of work and its 'other' – sociability, communication, creativity etc. Lazzarato wants to avoid a generalised understanding of creativity as a humanising force that unifies art and life or work and play, but at the same time remains cautious not to endorse an autonomous aesthetic position that distances art completely from other forms of work. He proposes to avoid these pitfalls through claiming a third position that destabilises the basic dialectical antagonism between artistic production and labour. A world where an increasing convergence of labour and art occurs, in which spheres of control become inseparable from spheres of freedom, demands new artistic models of resistance. Previous forms of critique that rely on a simple separation of these fields are no longer inadequate. Late Capitalism, he claims, constructs these spheres of control through a production of differential freedom: in order to enable surplus control over certain areas of social and economic life, other areas are allowed to produce what Foucault terms surplus freedom. Art, or the

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

art world, is an archetype for this privileged sphere of social freedom. Art is therefore essential for the production of mechanisms of control, while it is also, at the same time, exempt from them.

While this formulation corresponds to Giorgio Agamben's writing on biopolitics, explored in our first chapter, Lazzarato chooses to focus on Rancière's concept of aesthetic regimes to illustrate the faults that he identifies in dialectical thinking. Rancière's conception of art, he writes, is in opposition to "the sensorium of work qua domination" and therefore "harbours the promise of the abolition of the separation between 'play' and 'work', between activity and passivity, between autonomy and subordination".<sup>82</sup> Art operates politically in Rancière's scheme through two modalities:

The first (the becoming life of art) does politics by suppressing the separation between art and life, and therefore by suppressing itself qua separate activity. The second (resistant art) does politics by jealously safeguarding this very separation, as a guarantee of autonomy from the world of commodities, markets and capitalist valorization.<sup>83</sup>

The problem with both options is that these positions have been abandoned by both art and labour under capitalism since the Second World War. 'Play' is no longer in opposition to 'work' and between the two positions, a continuum has opened on which it became possible to "arrange in a thousand different ways the coefficients of work and play" as variations available for a capitalist model based on differentiation and combination. "Under the conditions of contemporary capitalism, all these dialectical oppositions no longer represent alternatives", concludes Lazzarato.

Lazzarato's detailed analysis of two examples, Duchamp's readymade and Kafka's story "Josephine the Singer", is indicative of this problem. First, in discussing Marcel Duchamp's readymade, he states that the artist's 'undecidable' process short-circuits dialectical oppositions. Duchamp

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<sup>82</sup> Lazzarato, Maurizio, "Art, Work and Politics in Disciplinary Societies and Societies of Security", *Radical Philosophy* 149, 2008, p. 26.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, p. 26-7

collapses the binary of the utility of the industrially manufactured object and the non-utility of the artwork: “The readymade does not testify to the dialectical passage from the prosaic world of commodities to the proper world of art, nor to the blurred boundary between art and non-art; nor indeed does it constitute a simple amalgam (or clash) between heterogeneous elements”.<sup>84</sup> The rejection of taste involved in the nomination of the readymade as artwork, produces a subjectivity, a way of living, from “a situation of absolute immanence, for there is no model - either positive ('play' in art) or negative (domination in work) - to which we can refer in order to combat it or realize it”.<sup>85</sup> The role of the artist is not to gain awareness or critically uncover the world of commodities, but to demonstrate the impossibility of “separating political revolution from the revolution of the sensible”:

Art does not entirely pass into life, nor does it hold itself in splendid autonomy, as the avant-gardes dreamed, because between art and life there is always a gap that cannot be filled. But it is on the basis of this gap, by installing oneself in its interval, that a production of subjectivity may take place.<sup>86</sup>

Similarly, in the story of Josephine and the mouse folk, Lazzarato finds an illustration of the problem of maintaining an opposition between art/play/creativity and work/life/non-art. Josephine is a singer who wishes to be exempt from work to pursue her calling. She is not particularly talented at singing, but her singing is valued if only for the brief respite it offers the mouse people from work. Nevertheless, her request for recognition is denied. For Lazzarato, the mouse folk's refusal is comparable to the traditional Left's rejection of the avant-garde:

If art in disciplinary societies is defined in opposition work, when Josephine struggles, in various guises, for the 'recognition' of the strain of her singing, it is this very opposition that no longer makes sense. It is the status of both art and work that must be clarified. This would lead to the invention of a new

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., pp. 27-8.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

system - at once economic, political and aesthetic - whose conditions cannot even be envisaged within the theoretical framework of the present-day Left.<sup>87</sup>

The essay ends in a call for a new politics that would not persist in maintaining oppositions that are no longer valid in light of the changes to the structures they describe. This new political agenda would have to be “transversal to the separate orders of the economic, the political, the social and the cultural artistic”.<sup>88</sup> Lazzarato contests Boltanski and Chiapello’s separations between ‘artistic’ and ‘social’ critique, which he sees as reactionary.<sup>89</sup> However, he does not articulate the ways in which this new politics beyond the opposition of art and work would operate.

Lazzarato’s two examples of the readmade and the story of Josephine, together with Virno’s coin collector, provide us with important new models with which to understand artistic production under late capitalism. These examples, however, do not resolve the question of artistic authorship. Even when Duchamp’s work successfully challenges the binary opposition between utility and non utility or when Virno’s numismatologist challenges that between material and non-material production, it is not evident why these moments do not simply become new forms of capital and how these operations avoid being incorporated in the structures of the present. In other words, as we have seen in the second chapter, Duchamp’s collapsing of the binary is collected and invested in the cultural capital of authorship. Artistic production is temporarily destabilised but eventually finds its resolution in the character of the artist itself, in the moment of one’s choice between available mass-produced objects. Similarly, we can argue that only when the coin collector’s concretisation of the immaterial financial world is made into a metaphor in the work of Virno does this action gain a critical dimension. Finally, although the story of Josephine deals with the blurring of the relationship between worker and artist, it still operates within the territory of authorship, toying with a carefully crafted comparison between the character and the author, Kafka. As

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 30

the story was Kafka's last before his death and was written after the author's loss of the capacity to talk, there is a neat symmetry here between the story of Josephine's failure and her ultimate disappearance and Kafka's own failure to disappear (when his works were preserved and published after his death against his will). Either way, all of these examples produce a meta-narrative – the story of art's negation itself, but it is still a narrative form that contains a strong and stable author or source. The question of authorship continues to be an unresolved tension in the models surveyed here and in subsequent examples in this dissertation and we shall return to it in our conclusion.

But for now we would like to extend our initial investigation of the problems of dialectics in relation to art and post-Fordist work into a more generalised attempt to think about dialectics as a methodology. The urgent need to overcome the dialectical stasis described here in relation to artistic production is, as we have argued earlier, related to the place of the human in the current political system. If we stop to consider the humanist option as a form of active resistance to capitalism and construct a different platform from which critique can operate, we can find a more effective way of identifying weaknesses within neoliberal capitalism, of identifying real (rather than formal) contradictions that cannot so easily be resolved in a dialectical synthesis. Using the lineage of anti-humanist thinking - from Marx to Mao to Althusser and then Badiou - we would like to propose that this critique is effective since neoliberalism itself constitutes a radical critique of humanist liberalism that, at the same time, is absolutely reliant on liberal premises and humanist beliefs.

### **Inverting Dialectics**

Both Virno and Lazzarato's efforts to think beyond the stability of dialectical oppositions can be traced back to Louis Althusser's writing from the 1960s. Beyond the theoretical development of this methodology in his concept of overdetermination, to which we shall return later, Althusser also provided a short account of how a more complex form of dialectics could work in relation to artistic production. In response to André Daspre's question about the

relationship between art and ideology, Althusser remarked that it is necessary to start with the basic principles of Marxism to understand the way art works. Good artists, writes Althusser, “make us ‘perceive’ (but not know) in some sense *from the inside*, by an *internal distance*, the very ideology in which they are held”.<sup>90</sup> These artists participate in the ideological regimes in which they work but find a way of “making us see” the “lived experience” of these regimes by splitting them from within. Art does not produce scientific universal knowledge about capitalism external to the social structure supporting it but, from a position of identification with these structures, creates a distance or critical space. This, continues Althusser, is how an author such as Balzac was able to produce a powerful critique of the conservatism he himself endorsed politically:

[...] it is not possible to say [...] that art ‘*has its own logic*’ which *made Balzac abandon his political conceptions*’. On the contrary, *only because he retained them could he produce his work*, only because he stuck to his political ideology could he produce *in it* this internal ‘distance’ which gives us a critical ‘view’ of it.<sup>91</sup>

It is possible that we will need to go further than Althusser and discard even this notion of authorship, tied as it is to a kind of negative intentionality, where Balzac makes politically relevant art despite himself. But the crucial point Althusser makes in this context is that by trying to separate art or aesthetic effects from politics and ideology, moving too quickly away from ‘basic Marxist principles’, one risks arriving at “the latent humanist ideology” of art, which links it to ideas of ‘creation’ as external to ideology.<sup>92</sup> It is in order to avoid this latent humanism that we must better understand the consequences for artistic critique of the collapsing boundaries between art and labour. Althusser suggests that effective critique derives not from the establishment of an outside position to existing hegemonic power, but from a splitting of the dominant social conditions in two from within. For Marx, this is achieved when the worker demands to actualise the formal freedom he is given in his

<sup>90</sup> Althusser, Louis, *On Ideology*, London: Verso, 1971, p. 175.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.



contractual agreement with the factory owner on which capitalist labour is established. It is the re-imagining of employment relations - and not the essentialist ideal of human rights - that presents the possibility for political action. For Althusser, the political content of art comes from an opening up of an internal critical distance through a description of, and to an extent, participation in hegemonic social structures and not from a notion of creativity external to these conditions.

Despite the fact that Marxist dialectical methodology is derived from Hegelian philosophy, for Althusser it is of “vital” importance to explore the ways in which Marxist thinking could be seen as a radical break from its predecessor, an exploration on which the “philosophical development of Marxism [...] depends”.<sup>93</sup> The Marxist methodology, he continues, extracts from Hegelian dialectics a “rational kernel” from the “mystical shell” in which it is locked - its “structure different from the structure [it has] for Hegel”.<sup>94</sup> Marx’s work is therefore twofold: it is dialectically antithetical to the Hegelian system itself and at the same time it is a radical reconfiguration of it. In other words, Marx’s critique itself serves as a splitting of philosophical principles from within.

To illustrate this point, Althusser uses Lenin’s analysis of the Russian revolution. Unlike revolutionary attempts in Germany after the First World War, the Russian revolution was successful precisely because Russia was Europe’s “weakest link” – “the ‘most backward’ country in Europe”. This weakness “was the product of [...] a special feature: the accumulation and exacerbation of all the historical contradictions then possible in a single State”.<sup>95</sup> Russia, for example, contained some of the most advanced signs of modernity and capitalist industry alongside a near feudal state in the countryside; it was influenced by Western Marxism but at the same time had its own Eastern cultural influences; its own ruling classes were divided between a modern police state and a traditional feudal aristocracy. But, most

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<sup>93</sup> Althusser, Louis, “Contradiction and Overdetermination”, 1962, available at: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1962/overdetermination.htm>

<sup>94</sup> Ibid

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

importantly, according to Lenin “Russia was overdue with its bourgeois revolution on the eve of its proletarian revolution; pregnant with two revolutions, it could not withhold the second even by delaying the first”.<sup>96</sup> A successful revolution is therefore not driven by an orchestration of resistance from above but can only be seen as an event in which different contradictory forces “fuse into a ruptural unity”. The ruptural unity is one in which unrelated different points of origin, “a vast accumulation of ‘contradictions’ [...] comes into play in the same court” without cancelling each other out. Althusser calls this structure “over-determination” – an event that arises out of the combination or unity of various contradictory and contingent forces, operating according to their own internal logic:

This means that if the ‘differences’ that constitute each of the instances in play [...] ‘merge’ into a real unity, they are not ‘dissipated’ as pure phenomena in the internal unity of a simple contradiction. The unity they constitute in this ‘fusion’ into a revolutionary rupture, is constituted by their own essence and effectivity, by what they are, and according to the specific modalities of their action. In constituting this unity, they reconstitute and complete their basic animating unity, but at the same time they also bring out its nature: the ‘contradiction’ is inseparable from the total structure of the social body in which it is found, inseparable from its formal conditions of existence, and even from the instances it governs.<sup>97</sup>

Althusser concludes that a rejection of Hegelian dialectics is also simultaneously a rejection of the abstract concept of humanism. Hegel’s concept of history is based on a principle of ‘dialectical reductionism’, a reduction of “the totality, the infinite diversity, of a historically given society [...] to a simple internal principle”.<sup>98</sup> This reduction of historical, cultural, economic or social forces necessitates a similar reductive concept of interiority, an “internal spiritual principle” or generally the “internal principle of a people”.<sup>99</sup> Thus, the subject, an abstract and mechanical concept of history as a play of differences (rather than contradictions), possesses an equally reductive, non-

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

contradictory sovereignty.<sup>100</sup> With the Marxist rejection of this abstracted human subject, continues Althusser, disappears also the foundational, rational, liberal 'homo economicus' whose struggles, oppositions and autonomy give shape to a 'civil society' in the Hegelian system. Again, in terms close to the ones we discuss in chapter one, this liberal character is replaced in Marxist thinking with a subject who is born out of a specific socio-economic relations of production.

Althusser's text is first and foremost an assault on the notion of causality in political philosophy. Political changes do not occur simply as a result of certain logical, observable conditions of history. Events emerge from complex and contradictory conditions that often work independently of each other and come together temporarily in a surprising instant of over-determination. This basic hypothesis is relevant to our discussion of neoliberal conditions of work since these too, like Tsarist Russia, are premised on a system full of contradictory demands, each with its own internal logic. In neoliberalism, ideology is supposedly vacated from the economic field, to allow market forces to fully extend their logic of commodification to all aspects of life without the intervention of governmental regulation. Neoliberalism does not understand itself as an ideology but simply as the neutral removal of the limited blindness of other (socialist or democratic) ideologies. But the neoliberal argument has no validity or force without the ethical anchor provided by the liberal assumptions of humanism. Neoliberalism demands to liberate markets because in this way the individual, configured as a pre-societal human, can find the fullest expression of freedom, uniqueness and talent. The older model of liberal democracy is deemed insufficient in providing this liberty.

Consequently, two contradictory ideological representations of the human are in operation in late capitalism. Each demands of the post-Fordist worker a total and impossible allegiance, while paradoxically each is completely dependant on the other. On the one hand, the post-Fordist worker needs to work in order to express the individual and essential qualities of the 'soul',

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<sup>100</sup> Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Philosophy of History*, available at: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hi/history3.htm> [accessed 07/07/2011]

'talent' or 'personality', which in turn are the grounds for meriting financial reward. On the other hand, the neoliberal logic dictates that these very qualities are commodities, produced and traded within the social, communicable, cognitive nature of immaterial work. They are therefore neither the property of a unique individual, nor essential and unchangeable. We shall use Michel Feher's analysis of post-Fordism to conclude our discussion by suggesting that this contradiction could perhaps be the source of new avenues of critique. But before returning to the question of work and in order to do so, we would like to briefly develop a broader understanding of the competing tradition that stems from a rejection of the Hegelian dialectical scheme, here refused by Althusser.

### **One Divides Itself into Two**

According to Althusser, there is no inherent causal connection between economic and ideological structures. Although the ideological 'superstructure' is an expression of the economic 'base' it operates in an independent and contradictory manner to the economic incentive. A political reorganisation of the economy after a revolution, for example, does not necessarily alter the cultural, legal or religious nature of society: it does not "modify the existing superstructures and particularly the ideologies at one blow".<sup>101</sup> This idea also parallels Badiou's proposal in "One Divides itself into Two", where he suggests that political action is to be found in a forced division of a totality into two positions. This operation, writes Badiou, is inherently anti-dialectical, since it does not put forward a synthesis of two antithetical positions in which the opposition nostalgically yearns to be unified with the 'One' from which it was born. A division of 'One into Two' produces renewal without a teleological unification of oppositions into a totality. The split does not produce a resolution; instead, the "question of the new immediately becomes the

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<sup>101</sup> Althusser, Louis, "Contradiction and Overdetermination".

question of the creative division in the singularity of the situation”.<sup>102</sup> This anti-dialectical method offers a new direction in overcoming critique’s presentation of capitalist exploitation and human rights as antithetical. It would suggest that only in thinking human capital as a unified ‘singularity’ can new ways of splitting the self at work come to the fore.

Badiou borrows this inversion of dialectics from Maoist thinking and in particular from Mao Zedong’s “Examples of Dialectics” from 1959. Against the background of the failure of the “great leap forward” and a growing rift in the communist world between China and Russia, Mao claims that communist thinking in China must resist the notion of a stable plateau of socialism and encourage new contradictions to emerge from the seeming unity. He even finds the possibility of an ideological opposite to socialism coming out of the party itself as a sign of good health:

Let them go in for capitalism [...] If one only goes in for socialism and not for capitalism, isn't that too simple? Wouldn't we then lack the unity of opposites, and be merely one-sided? Let them do it. Let them attack us madly, demonstrate in the streets, take up arms to rebel — I approve all of these things. Society is very complex, there is not a single commune, a single hsien, a single department of the Central Committee, in which one cannot divide into two.<sup>103</sup>

For Žižek, this inverted dialectical thinking introduced a paradox into Chinese history from which communism has never recovered. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao invited the young generation to rebel against already established dogmas, even when these dogmas were in themselves revolutionary. This resulted in a paradox where Mao himself was eventually forced to order the army in to control the revolutionary fervor of the younger generation that he himself had promoted. For Žižek, the same political

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<sup>102</sup> Badiou, Alain, “One Divides itself into Two”, in: *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth* [Sebastian Budgen, Eustache Kouvélakis and Slavoj Žižek - eds.], Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007, p. 11.

<sup>103</sup> Mao, Zedong “Talk On Questions Of Philosophy, August 18, 1964”, available at: [http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-9/mswv9\\_27.htm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-9/mswv9_27.htm) [accessed 23.05.2011]

paradox is at play in China today where the transition to capitalism is assisted by a party that “resuscitates big ideological traditions in order to contain the disintegrative consequences of the capitalist explosion that the Party itself created”.<sup>104</sup> But Žižek locates the paradox in the specific moment of the Cultural Revolution and understands it as a traditional dialectical history where opposites, ideological totalitarianism and market Capitalism, eventually combine to create a unity.

Unlike Žižek, Badiou identifies Maoist dialectics as a form of thinking politics that does not allow ideological closures such as the free market socialism that exists in China today. In an unattributed short essay from 1992, “The Dialectical Mode: With Regard to Mao Zedong and Problems of Strategy in China’s Revolutionary War”, he describes this methodology as a dialectics different from “the image of the ‘turn about’ or flip-flop”.<sup>105</sup> In contradiction to Hegelian dialectics, the Maoist version does not assume an empty place or outside of the current conditions into which it can grow and evolve as an antithetical position. The Maoist split from within, says Badiou, does not look for closures or stability of theory and therefore is particularly adequate for the philosophical task of thinking through change itself: “...if we consider an entity in its becoming, in the way it transforms itself, its name will be a contradictory multiplicity. The [Maoist] dialectical mode has at its center a dialectical materialism of transformation”.<sup>106</sup> This Maoist logic, alongside the Cultural Revolution it inspired, are for Badiou the “only innovative and consequent political current of post-May '68” since they signal “the closure of an entire sequence, whose central object is the Party, and whose main political concept is that of proletariat”.<sup>107</sup> In similar terms to the Italian Autonomists, Badiou recognises a need for a socialist project beyond the workers movement and a

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<sup>104</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, “China Adopted Our Capitalist Model -- Will We Adopt Their Despotism?”, available at: <http://www.16beavergroup.org/mtarchive/archives/002434.php> [accessed: 23.05.11]

<sup>105</sup> Anonymous, “The Dialectical Mode: With Regard to Mao Zedong and Problems of Strategy in China’s Revolutionary War” [Bruno Bosteels – tr.], in: *Positions*, Duke University Press, 13:3, Winter, 2005, p. 666-7. Originally in *La Distance Politique*, issue 3, May, 1992. Despite texts appearing anonymously in this publication, the essay has been widely ascribed to Badiou.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 667.

<sup>107</sup> Badiou, Alain, “One Divides itself into Two”, p. 12.

party or union as its main organisational principle. Maoist dialectics could therefore become instrumental in theorising the new relations of production that form post-Fordism.

It is evident that the new form of labour we have described so far in this chapter contains its own unique logic of dialectical contradictions. According to Autonomist thinking, this form is the bringing together of conditions that were until now antithetical: the production of objects and the production of subjectivities, Fordist rationalisation and the emphasis on flexibility and fluidity, and ultimately, artistic critique and its object. Rather than allowing for a critical, dialectical, distance between the regulation of human capacities and the emergence of individuals who wish to isolate and remove themselves from this regulatory power, under immaterial labour, the process of individuation becomes itself a productive quality of capital. Under these new conditions, the opposites established in relation to previous, industrial, modes of production prove insufficient in resisting new conditions and inadequate in addressing new forms of exploitation.

### **Escaping the Humanist Trap**

In chapter one, we described a tension within accounts of democracy between two notions of the place of the individual in a democratic society. The first, more liberal account, presupposes a free atomised individual who by signing a social contract with others relinquishes some of that freedom in return for a degree of equality. For Rousseau, this transition from a state of nature to a social contract, or from the freedom of action based on “pure instinct” to the moral judgment of society, is a necessary founding myth of democracy.<sup>108</sup> The competing notion of the foundation of democracy is closer to Marx’s anthropological account of man as the “tool-making animal” with which we opened our discussion in this chapter. According to this model, it is only through a process of co-operation and socialisation that the individual

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<sup>108</sup> Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *The Social Contract*, London: Penguin Books, 2004, p. 27.

emerges from within the already formed social structure. Engels expands on this idea in his essay “The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man”<sup>109</sup>. In Engels’ account, a sense of selfhood, of separation between the self and the natural world around oneself, comes out of a technical mastery achieved through the co-operative process of work. In Engels’ dialectical model, language, which enables individuals to co-exist in a social organism, and this sense of individualism or separateness from nature occur at the same time and are mutually supportive of each other. This idea can also be found in Alexis De Tocqueville’s and Hannah Arendt’s assertions discussed in our first chapter that the individual does not precede the social and that a sense of equality between members of a society supports a later moment of separation or individuation.

These two competing versions of the democratic paradox roughly correspond to the humanist paradigm presented in this chapter and its critique. Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben both claim that the management of the essential quality of human life is the central feature of modern liberal power. The writers associated with the Italian *Autonomia* movement apply this concept to the socio-economic sphere of work. Through immaterial labour, late capitalism deals directly with the production, circulation and administration of essential human traits - the ability to communicate, to socialise, to think and to create. This development also presents for Virno, Negri and Bifo the potential to overcome the liberal myth of the constitution of society out of individual atoms and its legitimating of the state as a sphere in which these individuals negotiate their differences. Virno, for example, posits that “our question is whether the peculiar public character of the intellect, which is today the technical requirement of the production process, can be the actual basis for a radically new form of democracy and public sphere that is the antithesis of the one pivoting on the state and on its ‘monopoly on political decision’”.<sup>110</sup> Hardt and Negri go even further in their analysis: the new conditions of immaterial production, heavily reliant on communication technologies, will give a voice to

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<sup>109</sup> Engels, Frederick, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, New York: International Publishers 1981, pp. 251-264.

<sup>110</sup> Virno, Paolo, “General Intellect”, 2001.



a new historical figure to replace the working class. This figure, the multitude, the mass of individuals connected together through the communicative and social nature of post-Fordist work, will eventually produce a different type of 'common' which does not rely on the exploitative notion of private ownership and the accumulation of wealth.<sup>111</sup> The conditions of post-Fordism will therefore enable a new type of social relationship to exist, liberated from the control of the territorial state and the institution of work (the factory).

The theorists of immaterial labour claim to reject the humanist assumptions of rival critiques of capitalism. Bifo praises Althusser's *For Marx* as "a declaration of war against Marxist Humanism".<sup>112</sup> However, in advocating a therapeutic, non-totalising politics centred on sensual pleasure, creativity and the return of the soul, he reinstates many of the problems he diagnoses in the humanist models that he refuses. He cites Heidegger's analysis of the way in which ideas of human mastery of technology ultimately lead to the annihilation of the human that the "end of Humanism stems from the power of Humanism itself", but in doing so ends up invoking a naturalised idea of the human that is as essentialist as the ones he wants to dispense with.<sup>113</sup> The human capacities that the Autonomists claim capitalism appropriates become the basis for a covert humanism prioritising linguistic and affective traits as external to the social context configured by capitalism. Imagining a utopian subjectivity that will follow from the implosion of late capitalism merely dislocates in time Rousseau's pre-societal figure of the mythic individual. The creative, emancipated idea of a humanity liberated from work fails to address the way in which subjectivity is constituted by work. In Rousseau's writing, the democratic paradox is encapsulated in the transformative moment where the state of nature is reconfigured through the social contract. No causal explanation is provided for how and when this happens. The constitutive gap has been addressed in various ways by some of the writers we have looked at

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<sup>111</sup> Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio, *Empire*, Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 2001, pp. 300-303

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>113</sup> Bifo, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, p. 206.

earlier, from Althusser to Badiou.<sup>114</sup> Similarly, in Hardt and Negri's reversal of Rousseau's temporal sequence, this gap is time shifted to the point at which capitalism topples over into a post-capitalist being in common.

If we follow the anti-humanist critique that we have presented in this chapter to its logical conclusion, we risk losing the singularity of art as a site of resistance to post-Fordism's appropriation of all the aspects of human life and subjectivity that were previously beyond the remit of capitalist exploitation. The artists of the avant-garde, and even more so the proponents of artistic critique in the 1960s and 1970s that we have looked at earlier, all called for the eradication of the boundaries between art as a specialised field and life in general. Yet the ironic realisation of this vision in the instrumentalisation of creativity within immaterial labour has tempted theorists to redraw those boundaries to rescue art from this recuperation. However, if we take on board the idea that artists are indeed the model workers of post-Fordism, then we should resist neoliberalism as artists, but make demands on it as workers. Following from Feher's analysis, as well as Althusser's anti-humanist approach, Badiou's anti-dialectical model and Marx's examination of the limits of the working day, we need to find a way of embracing the neoliberal condition in such a way as to hold it to its promises, instead of exposing these as false. It is to this end that we will need to interrogate more closely in the next chapter Žižek's concept of overidentification and its complex relationship to irony, as well as art.

### **Splitting Human Capital**

For now, returning to Feher's analysis, and following from our account above, a response to the post-Fordist demand of constant investment in the worker's own 'human capital' would have to force a similar splitting of the neoliberal regime of work. Neoliberalism moves away from the liberal figure of the free worker, who was distinct from the capacity to work, since no worker can take

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<sup>114</sup> For Badiou's writings on the problem of the foundation of society see chapter one. Althusser deals with this transformation in his discussion of Epicurus' theory of the transition from atoms to matter in: Althusser, Louis, "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter", *The Philosophy of the Encounter*, London: Verso, 2006.

ownership over their human capital. But this radical critique from the right opens the door to a possible re-imagining of the sphere of the individual as a socio-economic political unit. In other words, neoliberalism allows us to move away from liberalism's constitutive humanism and to think of the personal as a zone shaped by political and economic forces. Liberated from humanism, this individual could also become involved in a political struggle on the terrain of the personal. In post-Fordism we find the 'free labourer' replaced by the figure of 'human capital'. The free labourer was a split being, whose productive capacities were separated from reproductive ones. In human capital, or immaterial labour, as we have seen, any activity can contribute to labour power: innate (genetic) traits, acquired skills, lifestyle choices - all help determine one's value on the job market. Life becomes a game of appreciation or depreciation of the self, where conduct is constantly scrutinised to monitor investment in the self for future returns in terms of employability or marketability. The concurrent revival of behaviourism (recently evidenced in David Cameron's Behavioural Insights Unit) makes perfect sense in this context, as influencing personal choices becomes central to the governing of the work force.<sup>115</sup> Since it would seem that no aspect of the self therefore survives outside the domain of work, it is easy to reach the conclusion that the sovereign subject, free to sell labour and hold onto the self doing the selling, disappears. This is indeed the basis for the humanist critique that seeks to withdraw from the exploitation of human potentiality within post-Fordist labour:

[...] This critique, the hallmark of the detractors of neoliberal globalization, likens the neoliberal condition to that of a free laborer besieged by an ever-expanding market and thus reduced to a mere consumer where once he or she also was a citizen (or a flaneur, a user of public goods, an art aficionado, a lover, etc.). From this characterization stems a humanist protest, which often amounts to the expression of a longing for the free laborer of yore: the world is not a commodity, the argument goes; what I am cannot be reduced to

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<sup>115</sup> Curtis, Adam, "From Pigeon to Superman and Back Again", 16 November 2010, available at: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/adamcurtis/2010/11/post\\_1.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/adamcurtis/2010/11/post_1.html) [accessed 13.12.10]. Catherine Hakim's notion of the need to manage one's erotic capital also falls in line with this approach: Hakim, Catherine, *Honey Money: The Power of Erotic Capital*, London: Allen Lane, 2011.

what I can buy; my desires cannot be reduced to the laws of supply and demand; there can be no humanity in a world where everything is for sale.<sup>116</sup>

Feher, however, finds inspiration in Marx's analysis of the limits of the working day, as well as in Foucault's writing on gender, for a different kind of response. Rather than replacing the free labourer with a commodity, what the notion of human capital actually does is produce a neoliberal subjectivity premised on entrepreneurialism. Unlike the owners of a business, however, these entrepreneurs do not own their enterprise. As investors in their own human capital, neoliberal subjects do not own their labour power in the way that the free labourer did. They can never sell it on, only affect its value through actions taken or not taken.

Feher ties the rise of this neoliberal subjectivity to a convergence of two types of critique of liberalism. On the one hand, exponents of Chicago school economics were concerned with the cost of maintaining the reproduction of labour power outside the sphere of the market. In order to minimise the state's roll in doing so, they set about producing the conditions for the dismantling of the welfare system. An entrepreneurial subject reconfigured as human capital would be eager to invest in reproductive power (look after good health, etc.), as soon as such measures would be perceived as representing self-interest. From the other end of the political spectrum, the radical left produced a parallel critique of the liberal welfare state in the 1960s and 1970s. Abandoning the traditional left's appropriation of the rhetoric of the free labourer, new voices on the left attacked the way in which such appropriations relied on precisely the idea of the self on which capitalism was predicated. Although varied in their approaches, writers ranging from Herbert Marcuse to Gilles Deleuze objected to the way in which desire was produced within capitalism as a lack to be overcome and to the homogenising forces through which individuals were to be governed in the pursuit of their supposed self-interest. These critics of the state sought to replace its authority with autonomy. It is in this sense that they overlap with the neoliberal agenda, as already noted in chapter one:

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<sup>116</sup> Feher, *Ibid.*, p. 30.

What neoliberal and radical critics of the liberal condition have in common is not that they give precedence to self-regard over the regard for others but that they consider the regard for others from the perspective and as a constitutive part of self-regard. Far from disregarding social concerns to merely focus on personal ones, they no longer recognize the pertinence of allocating the care of others and the care of the self to two distinct realms. In a way, they both hold on to the notion that ‘the personal is (the) political’ — that the contest for the definition of the conditions under which we may appreciate ourselves is politically decisive.<sup>117</sup>

Feher suggests that the only way forward for the left today is to embrace the neoliberal condition of human capital in the same way that past incarnations of the left have attached themselves to the condition of the free labourer. Instead of denouncing the place of the personal in politics, and again rejecting the humanist critique of the idea that some things should not be commodified, he proposes that we concede that we are all investors in our own human capital and focus on challenging “the conditions under which we appreciate ourselves”.<sup>118</sup> Feher’s example is the Scandinavian ‘flexsecurity’ model, where labour unions address the fact that flexible work has increased precarity and that traditional union structures are insufficient in protecting workers from periods of unemployment or retraining. Workfare programs in Britain and the U.S. have attempted to encourage the idea of working as a form of self-esteem, epitomised by Clinton’s slogan, “helping people help themselves”.<sup>119</sup> The aim of these programs is to cut down the cost of unemployment benefits, and this is achieved by making them limited in time, and conditional on the search for work and the willingness to retrain and accept any job offered. The Scandinavian response to these trends has been to mitigate the replacement of the universal wage with the jobseeker’s allowance through new forms of organisation. However, the implications for Feher are wider reaching:

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

[...] the potential conflicts over what a person needs to navigate a flexible labor market are not simply conflicts over what type of protections will be guaranteed or over how these protections will be financed. Rather, they are over the more profound questions of what constitutes the basic conditions, the criteria, and the required means for self-appreciation. Clinton's slogan, in other words, has become an open question: What does it really mean to help people help themselves? What does one need to appreciate and to value oneself? The problem has quantitative aspects (e.g., what should be the size and distribution of investments in human capital, how does one measure the training received, and how can training be incorporated into salary?) as well as qualitative aspects (e.g., what types of training and what types of incentives or aid for job seekers encourage self-appreciation?). These aspects will have to be addressed, and they delineate a space of confrontation in which it may be possible for a Left discourse about autonomy to reconstitute itself.

We could, however, take these demands further. On the one hand, the worker is now expected to invest in the construction of his or her subjectivity. On the other, this subjectivity is premised on given genetic inheritance and social conditions. If we accept these propositions, we take away the grounds for any kind of meritocratic notion of remuneration: one can only invest in the self insofar as circumstances beyond the self have made this investment possible on the basis of pre-existing (human) capital. Post-Fordism contains within it a paradox that undermines the consistency of the neoliberal argumentation. In Althusserian terms, it is a condition where the economic base of production, that is the production and accumulation of value directly from human capital, is in direct contradiction to the ideological claims that support it. Subjectivisation has a double, and contradictory, function under post-Fordism. It is a product of labour that is as unstable as any other commodity: its value must be constantly maintained via the economic functions of exchange and investment and measured against other productive subjectivities. But if the process of becoming is a commodity produced by labourers, exposed to capitalist speculation and circulation, then it cannot also be of intrinsic and constant value. And since the sphere of the individual is not external to the precise social and economic conditions of post-Fordism, there is no basis for any

differential valorisation of these subjectivities. In other words, inequality can no longer be seen as a natural human condition but only as the direct product of a particular economic system.

We therefore find within neoliberalism a strong ground for an even broader concept of the universal wage. The role of the artist in relation to this political claim is no different to other workers. The separation between artist and worker is premised on the false logic of dialectical opposition between humanism and capitalism. This opposition simply maintains the current structure of social inequality since it holds on to the fictitious notion of an intrinsic quality of the individual that stands against the oppressive conditions of the market. Since the individual is nothing but a commodity of 'bundled' qualities and abilities, this claim sustains a contradiction that no longer has any political value and resolves critical tension in an unproductive way. The demand for increased creativity, for greater freedom of expression and greater flexibility, must be replaced with a demand for egalitarian financial structures within which the distinction between art and other kinds of production would be less pertinent.

## Chapter 4: Irony and Overidentification

So far, we have identified the reliance of many practitioners on a particular form of dialectics as a problem for critique in the current political configuration. In the political theories of democracy with which we have dealt in the first chapter, this dialectical weakness is present in the way certain writers understand democracy as a meta-stable structure that continues to produce zones of exclusion. For these writers, the very stability of the democratic model relies on its ability to keep producing these exclusions and to sustain an antagonism between various positions fighting over the definition of the democratic public sphere. The meta-stability of democracy is a horizon above and beyond the reach of its constitutive parts, which each preserve a faith in the status quo of the liberal democratic order despite their notional differences. Whether the configuration of this idea is a positive one, as in the writing of Mouffe and Laclau, or negative as in Giorgio Agamben's, both options paradoxically place this liberal democratic whole as a dynamic historical force of change, and at the same time as standing outside of historical actuality.

In our second chapter, we traced the origins of the dialectical problem in relation to art and the European avant-garde. We argued that the narrative of failure that emerged in recent art history addressing the avant-garde is a reflection of a problematic dialectical structure defining the movement. We also located the same problem in the critical discourse of contemporary art and in particular in describing the relationship of artistic practices and art institutions. Both Boris Groys and Allan Kaprow understand contemporary art as a constant dialectical movement in which various generations of artists search for new ideas that contrast with what is already contained within the institution. Here, too, this dialectical operation results in the re-affirmation of art as a stable democratic institution. Just as the law controls and conditions its transgressions in the context of politics, so the museum produces its challengers and critics simply in order to collect them in its archive of failed attempts. For Kaprow, defeated, art has to be abandoned, while for Groys



critical art should be content with its limited role of revitalisation and support for the institution contra the forces of capitalist media culture that threaten it. But for both the possibility of thinking of a critical operation outside these parameters does not exist.

In the third chapter, we describe how certain authors construct a dialectical opposition between work and leisure, or between the oppressive structure of economic production that extracts surplus value from living labour and a kind of freedom that exists outside the walls of the factory. Following recent changes in work patterns in the West, we claim that these dialectical positions have ceased to be antithetical to each other. In fact, this emptied-out dialectical opposition, which continues to be used today as the basis of critique, only nourishes and sustains the metaphysical ground of late capitalism - humanism. We claim that new, more vital oppositions that cannot be so easily resolved should be identified in the new landscape of immaterial labour to enable a direct attack on this humanist ground.

In each of these chapters we have also identified voices and strategies that diverge from the dialectical methodology and have attempted to establish a competing tradition of thinking about critique through a different approach to setting up oppositions and conflicts. Even when these other strategies are still in dialogue with Hegelian dialectics, they strive to establish a more complex understanding of how thinkers, workers and artists oppose the existing order without falling back onto an affirmation of the oppressive system in which they operate. We have detected such moments in Marx, Debord, Althusser and Badiou, for example. We would like to propose a grouping of these moments under the term overidentification. We borrow this term from Žižek, who in turn appropriates it from Lacan. Yet, we hope to present our own very specific interpretation of this term. We would like to measure this interpretation against certain definitions of irony and assess the relationship between the two terms. Several theoreticians and artists have adopted the term overidentification to describe a kind of practice that could fall under the remit of something like irony, parody or satire. We would like to propose a different definition of overidentification. However, rather than disown any ironic dimension to this

concept, we think we need to suggest a more nuanced understanding of irony that can differentiate the way we understand overidentification from what we would say are its less persuasive articulations.

The subject of irony has been written about extensively in different contexts. It has been analysed as a rhetorical device, a philosophical tool, a narrative method and a political concept. Much literary theory focuses on the search for signifiers of irony, a means of nailing down this act of speech that tends to refuse stable meaning. Irony is often seen to be symptomatic of a postmodern relativism, a collapse of the shared language that holds the social order together (hence the pronouncement of the ‘death of irony’ in the wake of 9/11). Wayne C. Booth’s attempt to find structural markers that would universally account for the use of irony in writing could be seen as a way of responding to this threat. As he asks in the preface to *A Rhetoric of Irony*: “Is there any way to get hold of any corner of this large slippery subject with precision enough to allow two readers to agree *and to know how they have agreed?*”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Richard Rorty’s defence of irony as a ‘social glue’ strong enough to uphold liberal society and its institutions is a response to those who might assume “that a taste for ‘deconstruction’ – one of the ironists’ current catchwords – is a good sign of lack of moral responsibility”.<sup>2</sup> Recognising that there is no neutral ground from which we can assert or observe any universal truth, Rorty asks that we use irony to relativise our own beliefs or ‘final vocabulary’. He urges us to “stay on the lookout for marginalised people” and ask not whether we share their beliefs but whether they are in pain.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, we would like to argue for a different understanding of irony, one which seeks to destabilise the given rather than function as an adhesive to hold it together. We intend to do so through the examination of several theories of irony and several examples of ironic practices. And although these theories offer very different ideas regarding the nature of irony, a dialogue between them will help us demonstrate why overidentification can be

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<sup>1</sup> Booth, Wayne C., *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Chicago, IL: University Of Chicago Press, 1975

<sup>2</sup> Rorty, Richard, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 89

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 196 – 198.

considered a special case of irony that retains a critical potential. Despite the fact that so far much of the debate around overidentification has centred around artistic practices and art institutions, we would like to propose that it is possible to attribute the term to a wider range of activities, from the contexts as diverse as subculture, ethnography and post-colonial race relations. We think that by looking at overidentification beyond the term's use by contemporary artists and activists, we can identify the potential for this strategy to tackle the challenges presented by late capitalism. The examples we bring towards the end of the chapter relate to the performative construction of subjectivity, achieved through assuming characters and behaviours, dressing up in a particular manner or adopting a certain style of talking or moving. This link to the performance of subjectivity is particularly helpful in thinking about the forces that shape lives and artistic practices today, the economic forces that produce value directly from the subject by placing the worker in a situation of performative sociability. But these examples also enable us to consider the limitations of the way in which irony is used by many contemporary artists: through imitation, identification and exaggeration, the participants in the practices we discuss do not attempt to make themselves different, to demonstrate their uniqueness and their resistance to social norms. They wish, on the contrary, to become close as much as possible to the image of the other, to become one with the image of the 'normalising' institutions.

Irony can become an oppressive weapon in the hands of the powerful as Kierkegaard claims or an important part of the control mechanism of capitalism today as Žižek does. But the economic conditions of post-Fordism and the political conditions of liberalism demand from us flexibility and relativism, and under these conditions, irony, or rather the production of excessive irony, can become a double-edged sword. If it is possible to exaggerate enough the terms under which irony operates - the split that it introduces into positions of identification - it ceases to be complicit in the reproduction of capitalist structures of exclusion. This exaggeration, however, cannot be achieved without the fulfilment of certain conditions, primarily that the 'positive' identification making up one part of the ironic expression is

sincere and that it cannot be dismissed immediately as inauthentic. Instead of an ironic formulation in which a positive declaration is followed by a negative interpretation or reading of that initial statement, we would like to propose an irony in which the two voices are inseparable, each ringing true in its own terms. The temporal and cultural separation of the parts of an ironic phrase or gesture neutralises its critical potential and we believe that in the instance of overidentification this potential is not exhausted.

Before we plead for overidentification as a special case of irony, it is worth paying more attention to the way in which Richard Rorty uses the notion of irony to redefine and defend liberalism as a valid political system. We would like to start with Richard Rorty because the type of irony he presents is compatible with the irony of hegemonic capitalist structures. And, since we claim that overidentification is a unique type of irony that retains its criticality, it is important to understand first why other forms of irony are unable to do so. Following our discussion of Rorty's understanding of irony, we will develop our own reading of irony through a comparison between Henri Lefebvre's and Søren Kierkegaard's treatments of the subject. This comparison will enable us to focus on the relationship between irony and dialectics. Whereas Lefebvre sees irony as an effect of the objective forces of history as they impress themselves on the subject, Kierkegaard holds on to a notion of irony that is purely subjective. Lefebvre understands it as a dialectical problem, the problem of the contradictions that emerge from within a particular historical regime to form the basis for its successor. But Kierkegaard strives to develop an anti-dialectical conception for irony and devotes much of his work on the subject to a critique of Hegelian thinking. This question is crucial for us, since we believe that the failure of irony as critique has to do with its placement within a dialectical framework and that most ironic practices and theories allow the critical potential of irony to become absorbed into and defused by the next dialectical step in a reciprocal play of opposites. Our own understanding of overidentification is based on the idea that instead of an irony that progresses from positive statement to negative reading or from one historical position to its opposite, irony can be built on a refusal to abandon the first position. In a system premised on the wasting of critical potential through irony such as the

regime under which we currently live, this entrenchment is a possible route to a renewal of critique.

### **Liberal Irony**

Rorty's main goal in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* is to redefine philosophy not as the task of finding and maintaining positions of absolute truth but as a way of interacting with and reshuffling contingent positions in language. In this sense, it is easy to see why irony might be useful for Rorty. Irony opens up gaps and inconsistencies in the linking of linguistic signifiers to 'objective' realities. It forces one to accept a notion of relativism with respect to the capacity of one's audience to engage with the ironic expression. In other words, irony proves that two positions of truth can co-exist inside one linguistic phrase. Since, for Rorty, language is only meaningful as an expression of a relationship between two parties, it is always situated in a specific cultural and historical context and cannot be considered a universal value that precedes the social. Rorty prefers to replace the term philosopher with the term "literary critic" the one who examines, from within the possibilities enabled by a particular discourse, the construction and affect of other types of discourses and rather than asking what is always true, limits her investigation to what possible conditions of truth are available in a particular language.

Rorty is very careful not to support his political system on a metaphysical foundation that sustains it from a theoretical outside. Instead he proposes an ever shifting, ever changing ground, a fluid field of debate rather than an unmovable certainty: "It is not as if the philosophers had succeeded in finding some neutral ground on which to stand. It would be better for philosophers to admit there is no *one* way to break such standoffs, no single place to which it is appropriate to step back".<sup>4</sup> 'Cultural universals' are replaced here with a call for commitment to a project of permanent re-description that consists of a lively dialogue between different forms of discourse. The dynamism and

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<sup>4</sup> Rorty, Richard, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, 1989, p. 51.

flexibility of this plurality of linguistic forms is enough to offer us a philosophical field in which truth is adhered to and at the same time change, or the re-description of old language by newer languages, is required. In Rorty's system, one must insist on the truths that are made possible by one's particular discourse and at the same time recognise, through encounters with other discourses, the validity of similar claims: "*A liberal society is one which is content to call 'true' whatever the upshot of such encounters turns out to be.* That is why a liberal society is badly served by an attempt to supply it with 'philosophical foundations.'"<sup>5</sup> It is important to mention that unlike other liberal thinkers, Rorty does not allow an essentialist view on human qualities to determine his political system. Such humanism, abstracted from the contingent conditions of linguistic discourse, is exactly the kind of philosophical ground that he rejects: "our insistence on contingency, and our consequent opposition to ideas like "essence", "nature", and foundation" make it impossible for us to retain the notion that some actions and attitudes, are naturally "[in]human".<sup>6</sup>

But despite Rorty's rejection of a humanist foundation for philosophy, he never clarifies who can gain access to this field of debate and whose voice remains mute, what the relationship might be between hegemonic power and types of discourse, or why certain 'descriptions' become more dominant, while others are repressed. This is a particularly important question for the post-Fordist worker whose control of linguistic and communicative modes, flexibility and adaptability are essential for achieving economic gain. In light of these post-industrial shifts in the West, Rorty's contingent field of discourses seems unable to explain how economic power and economic exploitation emerge from what appears to be a fairly liberal and open society. How is it possible, for example, that the proliferation of opinions, comments and analysis on social media websites – an almost utopian realisation of Rorty's idea of a liberal society – does not translate into a more equal political system or at least the greater solidarity to which Rorty aspires? The openness that Rorty advocates and the constant social and cultural changes that his system

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

produces are limited to a narrow liberal horizon. This system excludes forms of antagonism that are not already contained in this liberal democratic formulation. Rorty's liberal anti-ground is nevertheless a system that produces areas of distinction. Even when each discourse cannot appeal to universal truth anymore, when conviction is as important as adaptability, some (liberals, successful post-Fordist workers in the West) are able to operate in and to benefit from the ironic emptying out of truth while others (fundamentalists, industrial workers in the east) are not. To the latter group, the liberal demand of flexibility is experienced exactly as the cruelty, the blind operation of ideology on individuals, that Rorty wishes to avoid.

As a partial attempt to plug some of these theoretical holes, Rorty drafts the concept of irony into his political system. Irony is introduced through an allegorical account of two types of intellectuals – the metaphysician and the ironist. Rorty allocates a place in language to what he calls “final vocabulary” – words which are final because even when doubt is cast on their worth, “their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse”.<sup>7</sup> The ironist is defined here as one who has doubts over the validity of their final vocabulary and recognises the logical limits of their language. This situation is ironic because it splits the act of speaking into two equally valid positions: the ironist speaks and at the same time experiences her language from an external position of detachment. Thus, the act of speaking represents not only what she believes in but also what she is uncertain of. The difference between the ironic and metaphysical positions is a structural one: the structure of a metaphysical investigation necessitates a notion of truth that could be unearthed through reason (or worse for Rorty, defended through an appeal to ‘common sense’), while the ironic position is one of uncertainty, one in which the ironist “spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game”.<sup>8</sup> These structures give birth to sets of values and solutions to questions that might arise from the conflict between discourses: for the metaphysician a good investigation is one in which the philosopher manages to penetrate the obstructing murkiness of

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

language and hold on to a crystallised concept of truth; For the ironist, the project has no clear objectives or end goal: despite her worries over speaking the wrong language, “she cannot give a criterion of wrongness”.<sup>9</sup>

But irony has an even greater part in Rorty’s thinking and is given an ethical role in liberalism. To re-describe someone’s final vocabulary means to humiliate that person, to expose his or her language as inadequate. However, this cruelty is also mutual: the ironist’s “sense of human solidarity is based on a sense of a common danger, not on a common possession or a shared power”.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the power that one’s language could inflict on another’s is equal to that which could be inflicted by others on one’s own language. Rorty is careful not to equate this capacity of irony with the universal claims of the metaphysician, as irony operates from a specific and contingent set of linguistic parameters that are the opposite of the essentialist claims of metaphysics. It nevertheless serves as a rough ethical guide:

The liberal metaphysician wants our *wish to be kind* to be bolstered by an argument, one which entails a self-redescription which will highlight a common human essence, an essence which is something more than our shared ability to suffer humiliation. The liberal ironist just wants *our chances of being kind*, of avoiding the humiliation of others, to be expanded by redescription. She thinks that recognition of a common susceptibility to humiliation is the *only* social bond that is needed.<sup>11</sup>

Solidarity, therefore, is not an essential component of the liberal system but a property that emerges from its contingent arrangement of power and opinions, a fact that is acknowledged by the ironist alone.

In order for this unstable ethical horizon to exist, Rorty insists on a strict separation between the private and the public: ironic thinking, he says, is “largely irrelevant to public life and to political questions” while philosophers of

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



irony are “pretty much useless when it comes to politics”.<sup>12</sup> It is not at all clear if such a separation is at all defensible or that we could find a clear line that separates the private from the public: is the private not shaped and regulated by the public through institutions of education, for example? And furthermore, is the subject today not also a commodity that could be enhanced through training or investment in skills and then traded on the work market (and therefore, paradoxically, an object of economic speculation and not just a subject)? But even if we accept Rorty’s claim that such a separation is at all possible, that the private subject stands before or outside of public life, this division severely limits the scope of critique. Rorty claims that the masses cannot be ironic or “blasé about their own final vocabulary” and therefore irony is the special trait of the intellectual: “In the ideal liberal society, the intellectuals would still be ironists, although the nonintellectuals would not.”<sup>13</sup> The operation of irony in this case is always limited to a position of servitude: it is the dialectical ethical shadow of power, but power itself cannot have the reflexive doubting of critique. In other words, critique will forever be a part of the system that enables the operation of liberal power. This system would require a number of metaphysical structures of belief to exist after all, because irony can only work in relation to the convictions of others. A new social separation is affirmed here: the separation between those who are flexible about their own beliefs and can move between types of discourses freely and those who are unable to. But this also leads us, in a similar way to Groys’ treatment of the avantgarde and the art institution, to recognise that critique is an empty promise of change that cannot really change anything, a tokenistic gesture of political resistance that takes for granted its own impotence:

[...] cannot go on to claim that there could or ought to be a culture whose public rhetoric is *ironist*. I cannot imagine a culture which socialized its youth in such a way as to make them continually dubious about their own process of socialization. Irony seems inherently a private matter [...] Irony is, if not

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

intrinsically resentful, at least reactive. Ironists have to have something to have doubts about, something from which to be alienated.<sup>14</sup>

We shall return to this problem of private versus public irony later in our discussion.

Despite the fact that beliefs, institutions and truths might be challenged in a liberal political system and be subjected to re-description at any given moment, power is organised and maintained along particular and persistent lines. But if then there is no correlation between the operation of power and the ability to re-describe or to develop an ironic stance, what sustains the liberal structure and what controls and limits its contingent potential? Instead of the truths and convictions of the metaphysician, irony functions here as a substitute or a 'stepping in for' the action that is directed towards a notion of truth. Because of this structural gap, Rorty empties out a space in his structure for an element on which the ironic power of language cannot operate. He claims that "victims of cruelty, people who are suffering, do not have much in the way of a language" and that suffering is the non-linguistic condition that connects humans with animals through pain.<sup>15</sup> It is the critical role of those who possess language, yet understand it as contingent, to speak for those who cannot express their pain. This is the critical horizon towards which the liberal gaze of the ironist is directed, not outwardly but towards the point at which liberal discourse renders itself obsolete. This idea is not unlike the Schmittian description of the moment at which democracy suspends itself we dealt with the first chapter. Rorty performs a dialectical inversion of the relationship between foundation (the metaphysical concept of truth) and structure: the outside is now generated from within the structure. But, as with Schmitt, we still find here a separation between the limited and timid power of language, or deliberation and negotiation and the only authentic position which cannot be re-described - that of the non-linguistic sufferer. Through communication and the self-doubt of the ironist, liberal societies can extend their idea of what being is, what makes a particular definition of a human valid

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

in a particular discourse. But they do so only by banishing those on whom power is operated from the discursive liberal community. In the previous chapter we described the point in chapter ten of Karl Marx's *Capital* at which the factory workers find their voice through an over-identification with the logic of the hegemonic language of the capitalist factory owner. The workers in Marx's text speak through the 'final vocabulary' of capitalism (i.e. the logic of surplus value), and refuse the position of the human on which power is operated, the suffering human-animal. This understanding of the linguistic structure of antagonism provides us with a radically different prism through which to think the potency of the act of splitting up one's own language.

### **Historical Irony and Private Irony**

If Rorty's description of irony fails, it is because he does not recognise the fact that the qualities he wishes to promote as desirable correspond to the qualities which are deemed desirable by the current socio-economic forces operating on the individual today. The reflexive and flexible doubt about one's own beliefs that he wants intellectuals to possess (but that is impossible for all others to have) is part of the work ethos of post-Fordism in which one's ability to 're-invent' oneself is vital. Rorty's liberal understanding of politics pushes him to see irony only as a one-directional externalisation of a private position outwards into the social sphere, where it meets and negotiates with other positions. But to find a critical role for irony, we must consider also the opposite of this movement: the ironic operation of socio-economic or historical circumstances on the individual. In other words, if power itself is ironic could one develop an ironic, yet critical, position towards it? Lefebvre and Kierkegaard offer two diametrically opposed answers to this question. For Lefebvre, the ironic operation of history on the individual is inevitable. But the individual can still develop productive knowledge from the ironic twists and turns of history, knowledge that can be harnessed to withstand the disappointments and failures of the Communist project and to keep one's faith in it. This is an irony against the irony of power and Lefebvre urges his readers to recognise its strength: "Leave others to wield power over things, and, more

importantly, over men [... but] take responsibility for the negativity operating deep beneath the surface".<sup>16</sup> Kierkegaard's answer is very different. He sees critical potential only in a radical subjective position, a position that does not wish to communicate itself and thus to become public. He distinguished between different types of ironies, some, like the irony assumed in the post-Fordist market, are part of the operation of power, but others, private and unknown to the rest of society, have subversive potential.

Henri Lefebvre takes up the subject of irony in his essay "On Irony, Maieutic and History". Because irony for Lefebvre is inseparable from the Socratic mode of philosophical investigation in which a subject is interrogated through a series of questions asked in a debate between opposing sides, he again returns to the problem of dialectics. Socrates' maieutic philosophy is inherently dialectical: by finding contradictions in one position, the debater refines the notion of truth that waits passively to be born out of this exchange ('maieutic' derives from the Greek word for midwifery). Socratic truthful knowledge hides here in its dialectical opposite, the lack of self-knowledge, and is ready to be pulled out of the conversation and to transform the ignorant into the wise. But this dialectical method (from Socrates to Marx) is again problematic when considering the emergence of the new, of other possibilities that are not already contained in the situation. The new is a specific problem for Lefebvre since he is concerned with the cult of the new in modernity. In the context of modernity – an era built on the notion of newness – and in particular of the Stalinist era, irony is useful in dealing with its history. Irony is instrumental here in ensuring that one does not turn this potential birth of the new (new knowledge, new political regimes) into a blind act of faith, and that its emergence is measured from a safe critical distance:

Even if the beautiful child of our dreams (Communism, the Communism of the utopian and the scientist reconciled at last) may yet be born, would it not still be a good thing to experience uncertainty so as to enhance our appreciation

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<sup>16</sup> Lefebvre, Henri, "On Irony, Maieutic and History" in *Introduction to Modernity*, London: Verso, 1995. p. 48.

of the present moment of becoming? We need irony. Without irony, we all become embroiled in acts of faith.<sup>17</sup>

Lefebvre's aim here is to consider the critical newness postulated by the communist project in light of the events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in the aftermath of Stalinism. Irony, he argues, can rescue a sense of direction for the left after Stalin. He attempts to reach a compromise between subjective and objective irony, between irony as a mastered private moment and irony as a historical force that operates on the individual. In other words, he is trying to force irony back into dialectics by seeing it as a tension or interplay between subjectivity and history.

For Lefebvre, irony as an objective force that operates in history is most visible in the fate of the Marxist project at the beginning of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

Marx's thought and radical critique announced and prepared the way for the end of ideologies (and consequently the end of religions as well as of philosophical systems); but then it transformed itself into a doctrine saturated with religiosity: the cult of personality.<sup>18</sup>

In this dialectical conception of history, when historical forces work on radical critique they eventually transform it into its opposite, or in Lefebvre's words: "[r]adical critique of all dogmatism has therefore produced a new dogmatism, no less rigid and ossified than the old ones."<sup>19</sup> We have already dealt with similar descriptions of the ossification of critique today that also rely on a dialectical understanding of history. The radical critique of the 1968 generation of institutional power, the state, the family, the university and the factory and the demands to allow workers, students and other marginal groups a greater degree of freedom in personal life as well in work have found ironic realisation in late capitalism. While neoliberalism guaranteed the deregulation of state institutions and promised to combat big bureaucracies, post-Fordism injected

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

a degree of personal freedom and openness and creative and communicative labour into the work place. Following a similar dialectical historical line of argumentation, it can be said that the fate of the struggles of the sixties reaffirmed the pattern of previous historical revolts which all arrived at their death by being fulfilled by their ideological opposite.

Lefebvre's solution to this problem is to propose a "dialectical irony" that would be able to deal with the cruelty of history better. Going back to his example of Stalinism, this irony "can situate and define this extraordinary phenomenon: a pseudo-religion, a political religiosity, an antireligious religion".<sup>20</sup> If one acknowledges that objective irony is a force that will continue to haunt history, the same dialectical irony is already at work in the newly formed synthesis (in this case of critique and dogmatism): "the crisis of Marxism, its difficulties, its momentary deteriorations, already contain its greatest victories (perhaps!...)".<sup>21</sup> Irony can function as an antidote to the painful revenge of history because it aligns the individual with history and introduces a sense of flexibility into the modernist notion of teleological progress. Instead of viewing history as a straight line, progressing towards a final resolution of conflicts, the ironist imagines a force that can throw him to the other end of the spectrum without warning. Irony "defines the attitude of the man who sees himself as part of the 'problematic' of history, who is ready for all eventualities, the best and the worst, and who attempts to calculate the odds."<sup>22</sup>

Irony then is in Lefebvre's analysis what "defines subjectivity" in face of the unpredictable movement of history. It gives the subject "a form, a situation, a 'foundation' by placing it in history."<sup>23</sup> It is through irony that the subject can assert a voice against the understanding of history as a type of "discourse or representation", and while history is observed from above by the Hegelian philosopher who charts its often contradictory movement, the ironic subject experiences history from within. Lefebvre concludes that in order to foster a modern brand of irony, one must keep a critical distance from events, a

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

separation from history that is nevertheless imbued in its movement: "Irony distances itself in relation to the present, that overwhelming topicality which submerges so many people precisely because of their desire to be aware and always up-to-date".<sup>24</sup> In a historical period permeated with a strong sense of alienation, irony is awareness or an acknowledgement of this distancing of oneself from one's environment. Irony can orient the subject to find grounding inside alienation, between the contradictory demands of history and actuality, ideology and practice, ideas and the world. Despite the fact that Lefebvre holds on to a dialectical notion of historical change and even though his dialectics here are a negative - of historical forces that move dialectically towards their ironic negation - this is an attempt to find a place for subjectivity and a sense of belonging even while the subject is exposed to the blind cruelty of history. Lefebvre sees in irony a critical tool that opens up possibilities not inscribed in the present: there is no point in clinging to an ideal of a future that will find its realisation in an ironic manner.

As Lefebvre rightly points out, the dialectical origins of Marxism (or at least of one significant strand of Marxist thinking) inevitably lead the left to fulfil its own prophecy by becoming one with its ideological opposite. But this is why his endeavour to reject the dialectical mode and to preserve it at the same time, his need to let irony run its unruly course in actuality and, at the same time, to harness and nurture its radical nature, leads to a deadlock. It is not clear how the ironist can retain maieutic non-knowledge, the refusal to take a position of mastery, while keeping the ability to measure and calculate the trajectory of a history derailed by irony. Despite his efforts, Lefebvre is unable to purge dialectics from metaphysical aspirations: he asks us to view history externally as an ironic force and then deliberately choose to accept our position of weakness, to wholly submit to it. Resigning oneself to the irony that history inevitably ends up elsewhere than where we plan seems antithetical to Lefebvre's demands that we continue to anticipate the future, however ironically, and engage with the political. This becomes clear towards the end

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.46.

of the essay, where Lefebvre advocates “a happy medium” for irony.<sup>25</sup> The ironist needs to establish the right distance from “*people, situations, events, things*”, “*not too near, not too far*” to avoid getting caught up in the flow of history, but still act within it.<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, although he maintains that irony can produce radical critique, Lefebvre’s insistence on irony ‘bridging distances’ by taking distances into account begins to sound a lot more like Rorty’s liberal irony than one might at first expect: the subject, pre-established in his ideological views, enters a realm in which there are gaps “between men, between men and their ideas and their actions, between the consequences of actions and motives”.<sup>27</sup> Using irony as a kind of relativising tool, these distances are negotiated, and “almost [...] up to a certain point” bridged. It becomes clear that for irony to function as a philosophical strategy and as artistic critique, it must find a more radical path that moves away from a reliance on this kind of historical dialectic.

For Kierkegaard, the ironist is in no position to envisage the future, not even ironically. Taking as its starting point a defence of the historical validity of Socratic methodology, but also incorporating a discussion of its effectiveness in the writing of the German Romantics, Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Irony* provides us with a useful vocabulary with which to address the subject. But, more importantly, and more radically than Lefebvre, Kierkegaard’s real interest in this book is in using irony as a weapon against Hegelian dialectics by finding in it critical possibilities that are not given in the dialectical structure.

Rather than distancing the ironist from the present, in the manner of the prophet, irony serves to unravel the meta-stability of the dialectic forces of history altogether. Kierkegaard understands this problem of the dialectical absorption of critique in terms of history. Every individual, he explains, is caught in the particular conditions of his or her being in history: the particular circumstances that shape an age and define its possibilities. Ideas, says Kierkegaard, can only become concrete through this actuality, in which

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 47.



peoples and individuals are placed. The problem is, then, how new ideas might come into being from these existing conditions. This is what the dialectical mode of thinking endeavours to describe: the relationship of historically existing conditions and the new defined not as a revolution but as an evolution.<sup>28</sup> The dialectical moment when the two regimes of the old order and the new co-exist historically is understood here as tragic. The new is yet unrecognised as an authority, but at the same time the old is doomed to wither away. Here Kierkegaard outlines three possibilities for understanding the relationship between the new and the established, which roughly match the options outlined earlier in relation to artistic critique and the institutions it critiques. The first figure sketched by Kierkegaard to illustrate this problem is that of the prophetic individual. Since this character envisages “the new in the distance” and “cannot assert” it, “he is lost to the actuality to which he belongs”.<sup>29</sup> The prophetic character’s relationship to actuality, says Kierkegaard, is peaceful – the prophet is not a destructive revolutionary as “the given actuality is not aware of any opposition”.<sup>30</sup> The second character embodying the relationship of history and critique is the tragic hero. While this figure calls to assert the new, he destroys the past indirectly and, like Jesus, is sacrificed by a historical epoch not yet ready for a paradigm shift. But, paradoxically, through this act of sacrifice itself, the tragic hero brings about the end of the old regime. These two options, despite their radical and critical relationship to the existing order suffer from the same dialectical problem: their validity is only asserted in retrospect and only after a new historical regime has been established. Their authority (in Kierkegaard’s words) or indeed the fact that they can even be recognised as harbingers of change can only be located by looking backwards after the emergence of a new order. In other words, these characters may have destroyed a particular actuality, but in their actions they have preserved the principle of a dialectical whole, the principle of the movement of history, which is always greater than any particular era. And because critique exists here in complete dissonance with the actuality it critiques, it can only be understood as part of this larger movement of history,

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<sup>28</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren, *The Concept of Irony* [Lee M. Capel – tr.], Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press, 1965, p. 276-7.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

not as its end point but as part of a meta-structure of infinite progression that destroys actualities while preserving its own structure of power. For Boris Groys, this meta-historical stability is embodied in the museum. The prophetic and tragic artistic attempts to oppose a certain regime are forever collected in the museum's collection, archived reminders of the fact that any attempt to overcome the institution can only result in making it stronger.

Against the dialectical operation of critique, Kierkegaard sets the more ambiguous character of the ironist. "For the ironic subject the given actuality has completely lost its validity", yet "[h]e does not possess the new" but "only knows the present does not correspond to the Idea".<sup>31</sup> Unlike the prophet's peaceful co-existence with historical time, the ironist is out of step with the era, having advanced "beyond the reach of his age and opened a front against it".<sup>32</sup> The ironist is also a sacrificial figure but not in order to re-establish a positivity – a new era and a new order. Instead, the ironist works to sustain a negative relation to actuality. Irony is a negative force that destroys the present but does not establish an alternative, that does not look for a new order that will form another part of the meta-stability of dialectical history. The ironist, writes Kierkegaard, steps out of actuality but does not belong to a new one: "[t]hat which shall come is hidden from him, concealed behind his back, but the actuality he hostilely opposes is the one he shall destroy".<sup>33</sup> Here Kierkegaard arrives at his definition of irony as "infinite absolute negativity". It is negative because it only negates without establishing a positive; it is infinite because "it negates not this or that phenomenon", it does not seek to challenge or reform a particular aspect of reality; It is absolute because "it negates by virtue of a higher which is not", or in other words, irony sets negative critique as a principle that operates as a de-actualised horizon above particular social or moral principles and it does not ask to establish a competing one in actuality.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

### The Thief in the Court of Aristocratic Irony

Kierkegaard describes irony as a rhetorical device containing two distinct entities set in opposition to one another. These two distinct identities – the meaning or “the thought” and its phenomenological expression, “the word” split the act of speech, but only in order to find an almost immediate resolution. Although a semiotic gap opens up here momentarily, as soon as the statement is understood as ironic, it is absorbed back into a unity achieved on a higher plane. In its dialectical operation, Kierkegaard maintains, “the ironic figure cancels itself [...] like a riddle and its solution possessed simultaneously”.<sup>35</sup> This in itself is not particularly troubling for the Danish philosopher, until he considers the political implications of this rhetorical act. Since this type of irony assumes the shape of a positive truthful expression and at the same time seeks to be understood negatively as a form of deceit, it also splits its audience into ‘those who get it’ and ‘those who don’t’. This irony, he continues, “travels in an exclusive incognito [...] and looks down from its exalted station with compassion on ordinary pedestrian speech”.<sup>36</sup> Traced back to an aristocratic mode of address, it is a political instrument of hegemony since it does not allow antagonism to appear. At the same time, it creates a privileged and hidden inner circle: “while according to its concept it is isolation, it nevertheless seeks to constitute a society, and, when it cannot elevate itself to the Idea of community, seeks to realize itself in conventicles”.<sup>37</sup> In this sense, aristocratic irony cancels itself because its underlying, ‘real’ message is easily understood by its intended audience. With regard to this audience, it is not at all ambiguous, and serves to affirm rather than destabilise the regime within which it is situated. By contrast, Kierkegaard proposes a more complex form of irony that performs a necessarily far more private subjective emancipation. In its critical potential, irony is a negative force that seeks to break down the inexorable flow of time and history. And it is this negativity that Kierkegaard posits to counter the dialectical method that

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<sup>35</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren, *The Concept of Irony*, 1965, p. 265.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.

would present historical development as a constructive sequence of critique and its absorption in the production of new stages of social and political organisation.

This operation is common in contemporary art. Conceding that all critique is co-optable and therefore impotent, the artist points to its limits by asserting this impotence with varying degrees of sarcasm and cynicism. The recipient of this message is of course meant to recognise the irony and congratulate him- or herself for being sophisticated enough to be included in the joke. Many artists today take this position of pointing to art's inability to create a language and institutions that are removed from hegemonic social and economic forces. Much of the work of artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset falls under this category and a good example is their recent exhibition at the ZKM Museum of Contemporary Art in Germany entitled *Celebrity – The One & The Many* (2011) [fig. 20]. One of the installations in the museum consists of a "fictive hall where a VIP party is in full swing". Visitors to the museum cannot participate in the party but only imagine the events unfolding within by "the silhouette cast on the frosted glass panes of the closed doors." Barred from the exclusive society portrayed inside the installation the visitors are only able to hear the noises of the excessive party taking place within. Standing alongside visitors are golden statues depicting maids and live performers cast as butlers. Elmgreen & Dragset's installation is a direct representation of the exclusions that are at play in the art world and presents the democratic aspirations of art as deeply inauthentic. Moreover, the VIP party, the epitome of post-Fordist activities where power is maintained and shared by a minority through a structure of leisure as work, divides the exhibition into two spaces: one where immaterial work is produced through socialisation and one where this space is supposedly critically dissected. The position that the work of art itself takes here is akin to the sphere of mass media – transmitting and reproducing the glamour and exclusion of the world of the rich for the masses. This deeply ironic work fails to overcome the difficulties we have been described for two reasons. First, it holds on to the idea that there is an outside to the world of the spectacle where critical or intellectual work could be produced through an act of viewing (where in fact the museum itself is a zone

of exclusion produced through a discourse of criticality shared by a social elite). Second, art is presented here only negatively – as a power that participates in a mechanism of exclusion but that cannot generate an equal critical force outside of these narrow parameters.

The collectors who buy the ironic artworks produced by such practices are fully complicit in this game. Gavin Turk's bronze sleeping bags, for example, demand that the buyer recognise the object as representing the uninvited and unwelcome presence of homelessness at the doorstep of White Cube gallery and understand the irony of casting such an object in bronze [fig. 21].

Similarly, Merlin Carpenter's "Die Collector Scum", a painting of said text scrawled on canvas during the opening, having already been sold, toys with the irony of purchasing such objects: the context in which they are exhibited and traded neuters any potential efficacy for the critique they appear to propose [fig. 22]. Indeed that is their *raison d'être*, to identify the uselessness and even counter-productiveness of artistic critique. As a Timeout review of Carpenter's work observes,

[...] the more antagonistic a work is, the more likely it will find a buyer. No doubt Carpenter's performance will one day achieve perfection when the canvas bearing the epithet die collector scum goes for a million at auction.<sup>38</sup>

Another contemporary artist who utilises irony in his work is Maurizio Cattelan. Cattelan's work could be generally described as a jokey form of institutional critique. For his 1997 entry for the Italian Pavilion at the Venice Biennial Cattelan created a work entitled *Turisti* consisting of 200 stuffed pigeons and fake pigeon shit [fig. 23]. The pigeons were placed strategically on poles near the ceiling of the pavilion to resemble the familiar sights of plazas, squares and churches visited by tourists across Europe. The work treats, in a humorous way, the transformation of art biennials into touristic experiences and the poverty of the tourist experience itself, which offers an inauthentic, dull and predictable engagement with sites, histories and cultures. Four years

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<sup>38</sup> Armetta, Amoreen, "The Opening", Timeout, New York, Oct 18 2007, available at: <http://www.timeout.com/newyork/art/merlin-carpenter-the-opening> [accessed 4.7.12]

before this, again at the Venice Biennial, Cattelan exhibited a work entitled *Working Is a Bad Job*, which is even more overtly ironic in tone [fig. 24]. In this work Cattelan rented out the space that was allocated to him by the curators of the show to an Italian Ad agency. Instead of an artwork by Cattelan, an advertisement for a new perfume adorned one of the walls of the Arsenale, hanging awkwardly against the aged industrial interior of the exhibition space. In this act of delegation, Cattelan highlights the link between art and commerce or between the visual language of contemporary art and that of the consumerist space. The title of the piece also suggests that this is a critique of the role of the contemporary artist whose job is not inherently different to that of the creative in an ad agency, both producing consumerist desire through the display of images and objects. In this case, the work is ironic because its reading necessitates a movement between two levels of signification: the image itself signifies consumerist desire but because of the institutional and physical location of the work, it is clear that an additional reading is possible. In this case the ad agency collaborating with Cattelan either did not understand or did not care about Cattelan's critique. In order to 'expose' the similarity between the art market and the general consumer market, the artist uses the consumerist discourse, but not seriously and only as a platform for a secondary and more complicated message. An ironic gap opens between the statements: "this brand of perfume is desirable" and "the artist is not different from the ad man", between the sincere language of the ad and the subversive intentions of the artist.

According to Žižek, this circular logic is inherent to a system that requires skepticism as part of its normative function. Critique, specifically the kind grounded in ironic disavowal, is not a de-stabilising force under conditions that demand precisely this attitude:

[...] the system itself has as its inherent condition of functioning that its own ideology must not be taken seriously. In other words, cynicism as today's prevailing mode of ideology means that it is the *positive condition* of the functioning of the system that its own ideology must by its own subject not be

taken seriously. An ideal subject today is the one who has ironic distance towards the system.<sup>39</sup>

There is therefore little at stake in participating in this game. In this sense, irony becomes part of a kind of existential *ennui* devoid of political currency. The naïve artist who still believes in the romantic ideology of art and does not seek to subvert it cynically or the naïve consumer who still believes in the liberatory promises of consumerism cannot cross the class threshold of the new post-Fordist elite. The flexibility inherent in the reading of a kitsch image as meaningful, in the interpretation of an ad as a valuable work of art or in the performance of the artist as a cynical operator in the art market is the weapon of the new elite. Like geographic flexibility – the ability to follow the spontaneous and rapid demands of economic forces to move between ‘hubs’ at ease – this ironic, subjective, flexibility is what separates the post-Fordist Elite from other classes. With the weakening of older (modernist) signifiers of class (such as membership of a professional body, party, union, church or the distinction between ‘blue’ and ‘white collar’ jobs) newer forms of distinction come to the surface and it is the subject who is able to accumulate human capital without attachment to a limiting position of ideological identification, to dismantle these former institutions with the greatest ease, that emerges as triumphant. As Pascal Gielen argues: “Cynicism and opportunism are now a structural component of our globalized society”.<sup>40</sup>

Against this use of irony as a token of power, Kierkegaard labours to clear a path for his ironist beyond this aristocratic game, far from the cynicism of the stately diplomat who declares: “*mundus vult decipi, decipiatur ergo*”.<sup>41</sup>

Kierkegaard provides several examples of historical figures who have acted, negatively and critically, according to ironic principles (first and foremost Socrates, to which the first part of the book is devoted). But the *Concept of Irony* does not provide many examples of those who have employed private

<sup>39</sup> Slavoj Žižek speaking in: Benson, Michael, *Predictions of Fire*, New York, NY: Kinetikon Pictures, 1996.

<sup>40</sup> Gielen, Pascal, “The Biennale: A Post-Institution for Immaterial Labour”, available at: <http://classic.skor.nl/article-4113-en.html> [accessed: 7.9.2012]

<sup>41</sup> “The World desires to be deceived, let it therefore be deceived.”, Kierkegaard, Søren, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 271.

irony. This investigation is carried out more extensively in subsequent works by the Danish philosopher who finds such moments of private radicalism in the biblical stories of Abraham and Jesus, for example. However, even here Kierkegaard does provide one succinct image that captures the essence of the more challenging possibilities of irony. He describes a police detective who comes dressed as a thief in the night and relishes the possibility of detainment though he has done no wrong: "And should he wholly succeed in leading people astray, perhaps to be arrested as a suspicious character or involved in interesting domestic situations, then the ironist has attained his wish".<sup>42</sup> This particular image is useful in our discussion for two main reasons: the irony here is performative, situated in the gap between an image projected outwardly by a particular type of behaviour or manner of dressing and a position maintained privately. Secondly, in this instance, irony doesn't cancel itself by evacuating a critical distance that re-writes the original content of its statement. The two discourses supported by the ironic moment: the private deceit and the public act are not separated from each other and they do not establish two audiences. The subject is literally split here between two statements, both of which represent, at least partially, a truth. Moreover, the 'thief' shows that the law that arrests him is incapable of addressing this duplicity. We shall return later to this discussion of irony in the context of performativity and will see how this position can be effective in subverting that of the law.

But for now we would like to follow a more contemporary example to show how this unique kind of irony might operate differently to other forms of critique. While the irony of Carpenter or Cattelan is supported by the institutions in which they operate, this other form of irony, similar to the position of Kierkegaard's thief, has a much tenuous relationship with power. A 1984 television interview with the Yugoslav band Laibach demonstrates Kierkegaard's definition of the radical ironist well [fig. 25].<sup>43</sup> Žižek developed his theory of overidentification specifically in relation to Slovenian art collective

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<sup>42</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, pp. 269-70.

<sup>43</sup> Laibach - "Bravo interview", online video, available at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xz\\_PhMpFR9U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xz_PhMpFR9U) [accessed 3.7.12]



Neue Slowenische Kunst, of which Laibach were members. If a cynical disengagement from the system is its pre-requisite, he explains in a film about NSK, “the only way [...] to be really subversive is not to develop critical potentials, or ironic distance, but precisely to take the system more seriously than it takes itself seriously”.<sup>44</sup> Emerging from 1980s Yugoslavia, NSK had to operate under the limitations of a still oppressive regime, however much it sought to present itself as ‘socialism with a human face’. Since any direct criticism was precluded by this context, they resorted to placing demands on the state from a position of overidentifying with its authority rather than challenging it, exposing internal contradictions and loopholes in the self-definition of the system. Thus, when asked about their preference of German over Slovenian in light of the struggle of Slovenians in Austria for cultural recognition, the band replies:

Laibach deals with the relationship between art and ideology, the tensions of which are sublimated in expression. Thus, each direct ideological discourse is eliminated. Our activity is above direct involvement. We are completely apolitical. We are not interested in actual political problems.

When the interviewer continues by asking “what can you tell me about yourselves?”, Laibach answers: “We are the children of spirit and brothers of might. We are the black spirits of the world”. They finally add:

Art is a higher mission and demands fanaticism [...] Not state, not party, not God, not the Devil, happiness lies in total negation of one’s identity, a deliberate rejection of personal tastes and beliefs, in depersonalization, sacrifice, in identification with a higher system. The mass, collective, ideology.

It is important to mention here that the young men sitting in front of the television camera are covered in ideological symbols (their identity is in fact itself ambiguous: while important members of the band are missing, others in the interview are not part of Laibach at all). They wear what seems to be old army uniform, reminiscent of the German army’s Second World War attire.

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<sup>44</sup> Benson, Michael, *Predictions of Fire*, 1996.

The space behind them is decorated with images that also reference a heavily ideological language (one can observe in one of the prints, for example, the modernist silhouette of a factory labourer clutching a hammer, a recurring motif for the group: the juxtaposition of the steel worker and the name of occupied Ljubljana, the word Laibach, is in itself scandalous in this context, sending mixed signals about industrial pride, protest and political submission). The band's rejection of actually existing conflicts, their refusal to adopt a particular national or personal identity or to declare allegiances to any particular form of ideology (the state, God...) is akin to the Kierkegaardian irony that refuses to take sides in a dialectic already defined by existing power structures. Politics becomes inconsequential when it only affirms a particular position and art is irrelevant when it only articulates a particular identity. Only by not succumbing to a critical position based on the possibilities already given in a particular actuality (of a Europe divided to nations, or ideological camps, East and West, for example), can they critically address the political conditions in which they live. Both for the West and for the Slovenian 'Socialism with a human face', for instance, artistic critique is linked with humanist ideas and only a total negation of the conditions that define one as socialist or capitalist, as Slovenian or German can expose and critique this latent humanism. This is also why they mix together references to different historical ideological symbols: the division between Nazi and Stalinist propaganda or between Eastern Orthodox paintings and modern socialist iconography is another example of a dialectical opposition which must be overcome in order to establish a more meaningful critique of the present.

For Kierkegaard the difference between the dialectical mode of critique and his brand of subjective irony is identified exactly at this point of the attachment of the individual to history and here he diverges most significantly from Henri Lefebvre's writing on irony. Dialectics, Kierkegaard argues, quoting Hegel, also contain an element of irony – the irony that history plays on the individual:

All dialectic accepts as valid what shall become valid as if it were valid, and allows the internal destruction to develop within it. Such is the universal irony of the world [...] Inasmuch as each particular historical actuality is but a

moment in the actualization of the Idea, it bears within itself the seeds of its own dissolution.”<sup>45</sup>

This irony, however, can only be observed from the lofty vantage point of history, and only after the given actuality has lost its validity through the dialectical process. This type of irony is not critical, since here the forces of history are at play and individual actuality is sacrificed to a meta-historical Idea. What sets the ironic subject apart is a sense of consciousness or awareness of the ironic conditions, by placing “himself in the service of the irony of the world” achieved through “destroying actuality through itself”.<sup>46</sup> In other words, Kierkegaard’s formulation necessitates a kind of authorship, which the philosopher defines as “free negativity”. This is another form of paradox as this authorship is a total refusal to commit to anything particular: it is a refusal of a position of mastery that nevertheless endows the ironist with a certain mastery.

Negative freedom is described here in aesthetic terms: “for the ironic formation to be perfectly developed, it is required that the subject also become conscious of his irony, feel negatively free as he passes judgment on the given actuality, and enjoy this negative freedom”.<sup>47</sup> This freedom is also a form of contingency, unbound by given circumstances: “at every moment” irony “has within its power the possibility of a beginning and is not generated from previous conditions.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, negative freedom relies on the awareness and enjoyment of the ironic subject but has to emerge almost spontaneously from within subjectivity, rather than be impressed on it by external forces. This leads Kierkegaard to conclude that the authorship of the ironist is different to other forms of mastery. One cannot purchase or obtain it through education or mould subjective freedom through practice or knowledge. The objective of the ironic subject, he claims, is “to become

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<sup>45</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 279.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

nothing”, to unlearn “a multitude of determinations in the form of possibilities before he ends in nothingness.”<sup>49</sup>

Since *The Concept of Irony* promotes this universal subjectivity as a critical strategy, it is important to understand the differences between Kierkegaard’s principle and the liberal individualism of the contemporary political landscape. In our preceding discussion of the humanist liberal myth, we write about a tension in neoliberal politics within humanism: on the one hand, this ideology relies on the myth of the pre-societal human whose subjectivity is already given before coming into contact with the world, and on the other it is an environment in which the human is a form of capital that can be multiplied and accumulated through an investment in skills, status and education.

Kierkegaard, in a way, already pre-empts these arguments. On the one hand, his ironic subject is removed from the world completely and, similarly to the pre-societal human of liberalism, he is outside the world. But, unlike the liberal humanist model, the ironist is not interested in, and is incapable of, negotiating this position with others. He is alone in the world like the primal figure of Rousseau’s imagination wondering alone in the thick forest. But Kierkegaard’s ironist derives pleasure from this isolation and would never consider trading it for liberal rights. His forest is liberal society; his detachment from the world emerges from within it. Irony is also the opposite of an investment in the self as a commodity: it is a process of undoing rather than of accumulation. The knowledge of the ironist does not grow but, on the contrary, diminishes to the degree of total Socratic doubt. His subjectivity is never opened to the market, never traded for a reward, never formally quantified.

Lefebvre is repeatedly sceptical about the political potential of romantic subjective irony:

It deludes itself, becomes whimsical and complacent; it wants only to be charming, irritating (provocative, challenging), pleasing. Once established in this way, subjectivity cuts itself off from practical activity, and atrophies.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 298.

<sup>50</sup> Lefebvre, Henri, “On Irony, Maieutic and History”, 1995, p. 18.

But as we have seen in Kierkegaard's analysis of subjective irony, its relationship to actuality is more complex than this description of a withdrawal into private pleasure would suggest. The enjoyment the ironist finds in refraining from a straight answer or taking a clear position does not detract from the direct consequences for the public discourse on which the ironist operates. We can see something like this occurring in the Bravo interview, where Laibach are asked: "Did workers proudly support you when police banned your activities?" They retort,

The Trbovlje action in 1980 was meant to test the national security network. It was a test of positive awareness of the red mining areas. The action was a success, since it was meant to be banned. The workers acted in accordance with the police, confirming a high level of positive awareness.<sup>51</sup>

Rather than arguing against the accusation that they are being subversive, Laibach affirm a non-existent collaboration with the powers of the state. They do not negotiate with the interviewer, or indeed with the police or the workers. A commentator on YouTube writes, "It's times like these I feel privileged to be in on the Laibach 'joke', it makes me feel superior to those who don't get it!" [sic].<sup>52</sup> However, it is difficult to resolve this as a jokey address to 'fans' who might be in on it. In a way, Laibach do set out to be banned, deliberately rejecting equally the identitarian politics of Slovenian separatism, German neo-fascism and state socialism. These categories all collapse into inadequacy in the face of what Alexei Monroe terms their "full spectrum provocation", antagonising potential allies as much as enemies.<sup>53</sup> As Lefebvre recognises, the ironist "is not afraid of setting himself up as a universal agitator – in other words, as an agitator of the universal".<sup>54</sup> Without ever assuming a position or clear authorship of a consistent ideological view – they famously refuse to answer the question of whether they actually support or condone fascism – Laibach set in motion a process that activates an

<sup>51</sup> Laibach - "Bravo interview", *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Monroe, Alexei, "Full Spectrum Provocation: The Retrogarde Strategies of Neue Slowenische Kunst", in: *AS Mediatijdschrift* No.176 Winter 2005-2006.

<sup>54</sup> Lefebvre, Henri, "On Irony, Maieutic and History", 1995, p. 8.

otherwise latent totalitarian potential on the part of the state. Laibach present themselves as a group, not as an individual, and yet the identity of this group is ambiguous, isolated from their immediate context. Agreeing with them is not a tenable option: this form of irony does not seek community in actuality, to use Kierkegaard's terminology. But what they do reconstitutes the ground on which existing divisions might rest.

Through Kierkegaard it becomes clear that in order to re-imagine a critical position for practitioners today, one must tread a tricky path between authorship and the negation of authorship, between articulating a position and refusing to 'take sides'. On the one hand, aristocratic irony is not critical, as, despite its rhetorical sophistication, it assumes and preserves a dialectical division between two distinct antagonistic groups (the nobles and the plebs, or those who get it and those who don't). Here the position of mastery is never questioned, never put in doubt. In contrast, Kierkegaard's subjective and universal irony articulates a more challenging position. The ironist is not allowed to draw comfort from belonging to a particular order, from the conviction of a side of a debate. He is not allowed to follow a teleological direction or to develop a sense of historical placement or progression, of gaining knowledge and advancing: "Irony is free, to be sure, free from all the cares of actuality, but free from the joys as well, free from its blessings."<sup>55</sup> This irony is private, but its privacy is elevated to the level of a universal principle. Since it does not have the safety of being in actuality, it aims to destroy all particulars. In this way, Kierkegaard's irony responds well to Karl Marx's critique of the revolutionary forces working in France in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The revolutionaries, claims Marx, are caught in a dialectical relationship with the past. Embroiled in the struggles of the past, they fail to articulate a current opposition in a clear and relevant way: "The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past".<sup>56</sup> The nothingness of the ironist is like the unknown future of Marx's

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<sup>55</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 296.

<sup>56</sup> Marx, Karl, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, available at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm> [accessed: 3.7.12]

revolutionary: it is a “speculative nothingness [...] which at every moment is vanishing for the concrete” and at the same time it is a “nothingness” that is a “deathly stillness in which irony returns to ‘haunt and jest’”.<sup>57</sup>

### **(Un)stuck in Hidden Reverse: Political Irony and Overidentification**

The irony described here via Laibach does not seek to establish a present community or imagine a future society, and it is by no means the liberal irony that Rorty and Booth want everyone to agree on. All it can do is destabilise the present to generate the conditions under which real change can emerge.

Kierkegaard’s aristocratic irony, the kind of irony that allows things to carry on as they are, that makes ‘collector scum’ feel good about being in the know and doesn’t threaten or invalidate any current institutions, comes from a disidentification with the system that is in fact a conformity to its demand for critical distance. The form of irony that we would like to rescue and relate to overidentification has to start from identification. It necessitates finding a point at which the system can be taken seriously, and then going beyond that to the production of an excess that the system cannot tolerate in its present configuration. It is through identifying the contradictions that sustain such a system that we can begin to unpick these stress points and undermine its normative functioning. We have already hinted at some examples of this practice, especially in relation to NSK. In what follows, we hope to expand on this and other examples, and contrast them with the practices and literature most often associated with the concept of overidentification.

Žižek expands on this notion in his book *The Plague of Fantasies*. He claims that ideology doesn’t just institute laws, but also relies on transgressive acts in excess of this law, similar to the excessive violence we have already described in the first chapter as inherent in the foundation of the state. Inverting the idea that transgression requires the law it contests, Žižek suggests that a ‘nightly’ law has to supplement official directives to guarantee

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<sup>57</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 275.

their hold on their subjects. As one example of many, he invokes Arendt's thesis that the Nazi evil was in fact a banal compliance with orders and argues instead that the Nazis' enjoyment of violent humiliation 'beyond the call of duty' exemplifies the way in which the mechanism of transgression is built into the law, or, to use the Lacanian terminology that Žižek employs, the way *jouissance* forms a part of the libidinal economy that sustains Symbolic power and keeps the Real at bay:

Power thus relies on an obscene supplement – that is to say, the obscene 'nightly' law (superego) necessarily accompanies, as its shadowy double, the 'public' Law. As for the status of this obscene supplement, one should avoid both traps and neither glorify it as subversive nor dismiss it as a false transgression which stabilizes the power edifice (like the ritualized carnivals which temporarily suspend power relations), but insist on its *undecidable* character. Obscene unwritten rules sustain Power as long as they remain in the shadows; the moment they are publicly recognized, the edifice of Power is thrown into disarray.<sup>58</sup>

However, while the obscene supplement might not, in itself, be subversive, the potential to throw power into disarray by exposing the nightly law to daylight does seem to offer Žižek a way forward in terms of his critical methodology. He describes a method of ideological anamorphosis, a new perspective, which brings to the fore what is meant to function as a hidden support for ideology. Since, as we have seen, 'cynical' ideology requires 'self-distance', a gap between the subject and the system that allows us to think we are not fully contained by it, an 'over-orthodox' position can "subvert the ruling ideology by taking it more literally than it is ready to take itself".<sup>59</sup> One of the best-known examples of this is NSK's submission of a poster to a competition asking for designs celebrating socialist youth day [fig. 26]. NSK won first prize with the image of a barely modified Nazi propaganda poster. When the poster's origins were discovered, much to the embarrassment of the organisers, youth day was cancelled. Despite their supposedly adopting the 'totalitarian' aesthetic –

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<sup>58</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, *The Plague of Fantasies*, London: Verso, 1997, p. 93

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.



which many critics have accused NSK of actually revelling in – Žižek insists that NSK cannot be viewed as totalitarian precisely because totalitarianism would never seek to display publicly its “underlying obscene phantasmic support [...] in all its inconsistency”.<sup>60</sup>

In *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, Žižek expands on his notion that certain political structures can only function through an ironic distance between an official creed, the explicit laws of any given society, and its hidden, but tolerated (or even encouraged) transgression:

In the Czech ‘normalization’ that followed the Soviet invasion of 1968, the regime took care that, in one way or another, the majority of people were somehow morally discredited, compelled to violate their own moral standards. When an individual was blackmailed into signing a petition against a dissident [...] he knew that he was lying and taking part in a campaign against an honest man, and it was precisely this ethical betrayal that rendered him the ideal Communist subject. The regime relied on and actively condoned the moral bankruptcy of its subjects.<sup>61</sup>

Žižek explains that if there was “a ‘psychological’ mechanism at work in late Socialist ideology”, it was “not that of belief but, rather, that of *shared* guilt [...]”.<sup>62</sup> The release from this ‘double speak’ inherent to the system is a mechanism of extracting pleasure from the private sphere. If the public realm demands one to proclaim things one does not believe in, the private social circle provides a zone of ‘truth’ or a ‘critical distance’ towards the regime that makes the situation tolerable: “[...] such acts of indifference, of making fun of official rituals in private circles, are the very mode of reproduction of the official ideology.”<sup>63</sup>

Žižek also recognises that this ironic gap between private and public rituals also exists in the West, where, while intellectuals denounce capitalism

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>61</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, London: Verso, 2002, p. 91.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., pp. 90-91.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

publically, they endorse it privately (his example is of the intellectuals of the Frankfurt school who elected to return to capitalist West Germany after the war and not to join the socialist East). In this analysis, the subject, both in socialist and capitalist countries, is structurally divided and asked to perform an impossible role of simultaneously praising and critiquing the regime. This is also a similar structural irony (between the public and private spheres) to the one Rorty writes about. But where Žižek sees this gap as foreclosing real critique, Rorty sees it as one of the strengths of a liberal system. In both cases, however, the ironic gap, rather than leading to a destabilisation and the collapse of the regime, is, on the contrary, precisely the glue that bonds societies together.

Kierkegaard claims that it is those who are unwilling to dis-believe in the promises of their historical societies that lead to historical change. His example is John the Baptist, who demanded from Judaism the universal justice that it promised would lead to happiness it could not in reality guarantee. The religion is organised around a law that could not be fulfilled or that even, as in Žižek's account, invited the believer to transgress. By insisting on preserving this promise of Judaism, John the Baptist brought forth Christianity as an unarticulated option within Judaism and heralded a change on the world stage.<sup>64</sup> Following a similar line of argumentation, for Žižek the real dissident, the one who is truly feared by the repressive regimes of late socialism in Eastern Europe is the one who sincerely believes in or identifies with official propaganda, and who therefore places a demand on them to come good on their promise. This action of identification is critical since it misplaces the logic of the law and its permitted transgression by addressing it explicitly and without retreating to the private.

The idea of exposing what Žižek calls the 'hidden reverse' of ideology to the light of day underpins the relationship he outlines between overidentification and artistic practice: "the ethical duty of today's artist" is to confront us with the "phantasmic support" in such a way as to undermine "the hold a fantasy exerts

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<sup>64</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 280.

over us”.<sup>65</sup> Overidentification does this “by *embracing simultaneously, within the same space, the multitude of inconsistent phantasmic elements*”, as an example of which Žižek cites surrealist art.<sup>66</sup> In this account, NSK who are exonerated of any fascist tendencies by Žižek, indeed perform an ethical role (although Žižek would later withdraw his support for the group in light of their involvement with Slovenian nationalism).<sup>67</sup> Something similar could be said to take place in the work of the Yes Men, celebrated by Belgian art and architecture researchers and cultural activists BAVO (Gideon Boie and Matthias Pauwels) as prime exemplars of overidentification [fig. 27]. The Yes Men (Mike Bonanno and Andy Bichlbaum) famously pose as World Trade Organisation representatives making the kind of extreme unethical proposals that even the most cynical CEOs wouldn’t dare suggest publically. They “bluntly and openly propagated all kinds of hardcore neo-liberal arguments and schemes, to the obvious confusion of the other participants in the debate”.<sup>68</sup> For BAVO, the Yes Men’s ultra-orthodox over-enthusiasm for such projects as reprocessing McDonald’s customers’ faeces into hamburgers for the third world makes the organisations they confront have to tone down their own neo-liberal message.<sup>69</sup> They recognise the ineffectiveness of the critique of what they call NGO art – the obvious, humanitarian lefty art that finds itself all too easily co-opted by capitalism in precisely the way we have been discussing thus far. They give the example of Art Without Borders, whose practice “is not aimed at the deposition of the existing order, but rather at ‘making the best of a bad situation’”.<sup>70</sup> As against this subsumption, they suggest choosing “the worst option [...] no longer trying to make the best of the current order, but precisely to *make the worst of it*, to turn it into the worst possible version of itself. It would thus entail a refusal of the current blackmail in which artists are offered all kinds of opportunities to make a difference, on

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<sup>65</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, *The Plague of Fantasies*, p.95.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, italics in the original.

<sup>67</sup> Parker, Ian, “The Truth about Over-identification”, pp.14-15, available at: <http://www.discourseunit.com/publications/discourse-unit-publications-papers/ian-parker/> [accessed 26.7.12]

<sup>68</sup> BAVO, “Always Choose the Worst Option: Artistic Resistance and the Art of Over-Identification”, in: *Cultural Activism Today: The Art of Over-identification* [BAVO - eds.], Rotterdam: Episode, 2007, p. 30.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

the condition that they give up on their desire for radical change”.<sup>71</sup> In this way, overidentification is used not to counter a system that would silence dissent through censorship, but rather to oppose one which all too readily co-opts any explicit dissent and turns it into an ethical justification for continued exploitation.

According to BAVO, the critical effectiveness of this model relies on a kind of inundation: if capitalism is careful not to “‘drown’ its subject with its ideology, offering it in small doses instead”, overidentification, they claim, “is closer to Søren Kierkegaard’s ‘emetic’, which entails deliberately swallowing too much of the loved poison – overdoing it – so as to be able to break with it for good”.<sup>72</sup> But the problem with this model of overidentification is that it all too quickly translates into a different Kierkegaardian formulation, into precisely the kind of irony that we have seen him cautions us against. We are asked to believe that a display of insincere support for ideas going beyond those expressed by the WTO and the corporate sector would lift the scales from the eyes of participants in such debates as presented in the Yes Men films. But this undoing of false consciousness relies on these participants translating the critique into a fairly standard accusatory form. Never really committing to any kind of convincing identification with the target of their actions, the Yes Men cannot really produce an excess of this identification. In other words, it is fairly easy to discern that they are being ironic in their propositions, and the true recipients of their message – the viewers of their films – are never really challenged by this preaching to the converted. The corporate sector workers they lampoon might be momentarily confused by these usurpers, but the Yes Men never really threaten to split their allegiances or unravel their contradictory stances. They are swiftly classed as outsiders in disguise, at the very least by the films that expose their ‘real’ views to be predictably anti-capitalist. Consequently, their critique reasserts its position outside the phenomenon it addresses, vulnerable to the same forces that made us want to embrace overidentification as an alternative method.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

The Yes Men's performance is comparable to Andrea Fraser's adoption of the role of the museum docent in *Museum Highlights* (1989) [fig. 28]. In this performance, Fraser famously extends the gallery tour beyond the limits of its remit, including extraneous features like the toilet or the cafeteria in her presentation. Here, again, Fraser could be perceived as overidentifying with the museum as an institution, taking on the authoritative voice of the institution and exaggerating it, taking the structure underpinning the display of art more seriously than it takes itself seriously. She takes on her role unbidden and gives voice to the museum as a framework. But, like the Yes Men, Fraser is never fully subsumed in her character, and an ironic gap opens between the artist's knowingness and her alter ego's overly dramatic performance and attachment to what are clearly meant to be understood as trivial aspects of the museum. Fraser has been accused of complicity with the institution upon which this kind of critique depends, but she has convincingly argued that since late capitalism does not permit an external position for critique, this does not invalidate her project.<sup>73</sup> However, we would argue that the problem here is not of too much proximity to the institution. On the contrary, the performance of *Museum Highlights* is unconvincing precisely because it retains an artistic voice external to the performance. For Marc James Léger, Fraser's role is like that of the analyst, 'the subject supposed to know' in the Lacanian paradigm: in revealing the emptiness of this position, the artist transfers the responsibility for knowledge back onto the audience.<sup>74</sup> But since there is no question of her actually meaning what she says, a subtext of 'real' knowledge, the knowledge of critique, undermines this interpretation. The position of the artist, who understands the institution and maintains a distance from it through parodic critique remains distinct from the position of the docent, who is exposed as possessing insufficient cultural capital to recognise that the museum's toilet is not meant to be part of the show.

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<sup>73</sup> Fraser, Andrea, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique (Institutional Critique as Artistic Phenomena)", in: *Artforum International*, January, 2005.

<sup>74</sup> Léger, Marc James, "Andrea Fraser and the Subjectivization of Institutional Critique", in: *Brave New Avant Garde: Essays on Contemporary Art and Politics*, Alresford, Hants: Zero Books, 2012, pp. 19 – 26.

This question around the degree of actual identification required within the process of overidentification will therefore have to be at the root of our assessment of overidentification as a practice. Stemming from this, we will have to see what form of authorship might be established in accordance with how public this identification might be. But before delving deeper into these questions, it might be worth considering the psychoanalytic origins of the term. In his essay on overidentification, Ian Parker contrasts Žižek's use of this idea with a normative psychoanalytic understanding of excess identification between analyst and analysand as problematic. Parker ultimately denounces much of Žižek's work in what has become a very public dispute, accusing him of both a kind of leader cult authoritarianism and fake Leftist individualism. However, he is useful in elucidating the role of overidentification in psychoanalysis. In this account, overidentification is part of a 'dominant clinical problematic' in which it is to be avoided: "the logic of this therapeutic intervention is to educate others so that they will be good self-governing subjects as reasonable as us, and then not liable to entangle us in overidentification with them".<sup>75</sup> For Lacan, however, the self-identity of signifiers (A=A) stems from a Cartesian conception of cognition that is questionable (equating the conscious self with the self as an object of cognition). In fact, rather than guarantee this self-identity, the repetition of signifiers (explaining A with another A) serves only to undermine it.<sup>76</sup> The Lacanian view of identification therefore does not see overidentification as something to be avoided: "Instead, 'the signifier has a fecundity because it is never in any case identical to itself', and the repetition of signifiers – such as 'War is War' - produces difference rather than being simply tautology".<sup>77</sup> Parker demonstrates this operation in relation to Laibach's song "God is God":

If we consider, for a moment, Laibach's chant 'God is God', we can see how this functions to disturb rather than fix the signified that is attached to the signifier 'God'. This identification of God is already an overidentification that

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<sup>75</sup> Parker, Ian, "The Truth about Over-identification", p. 4.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

breaks down its unity into nonsensical signifiers, something we could see as 'reducing the signifiers into their nonsensicality'.<sup>78</sup>

In this context, overidentification is therefore "a strategy for making the conditions of possibility for the rule of the master visible in such a way as to make that rule impossible".<sup>79</sup> What is clear, however, is that to take something so seriously as to explode it from within is a position that must start from identification. It should therefore not be confused with an exaggerated form of satire of the sort deployed by the Yes Men. As we have seen, far from destabilising the rule, the ironic distance they enact in relation to that rule is what allows that rule to persist. We might contrast this approach with a few more complex examples.

Parker cites Žižek's analysis of Brecht's 'over-orthodoxy' as one such example.<sup>80</sup> In "Lenin's Choice", Žižek relates the following story:

on his way from his home to his theatre in July 1953, Brecht passed a column of Soviet tanks rolling towards the Stalinallee to crush the workers' rebellion. He waved at them, and wrote in his diary later that day that at that moment he (never a Party member) was tempted for the first time in his life to join the Communist Party.<sup>81</sup>

In Žižek's analysis, Brecht was sincere in his support for this action:

It was not that Brecht tolerated the cruelty of the struggle in the hope that it would bring a prosperous future; the harshness of the violence as such was perceived and endorsed as a sign of authenticity. For Brecht, the Soviet military intervention against the East Berlin workers was aimed not at the workers, but at "organized Fascist elements" which exploited the workers'

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Parker, Ian, *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction*, available at: <http://www.lacan.com/zizcritintro.htm> [accessed 31.7.12]

<sup>81</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, "Lenin's Choice", in: Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich, *Revolution at the Gates: A Selections of Writings from February to October 1917* [Slavoj Žižek – ed.], London: Verso, 2002, p. 194.

dissatisfaction; for this reason, he claimed that the Soviet intervention actually prevented a new world war".<sup>82</sup>

Despite this, Brecht proved difficult for the authorities, precisely in his enthusiasm for these sorts of excesses. According to Žižek: "Brecht was unbearable to the Stalinist cultural establishment because of his very 'over-orthodoxy'".<sup>83</sup> If, as Žižek claims, totalitarianism expected and even relied on a level of cynicism on the part of its subjects, it is no wonder that it could not handle full support. Brecht was rightly deemed dubious because of the way in which his writing, like his response to the tanks, leaves no space between the official doctrine and any other identity. As Žižek explains, writing about Brecht, but interestingly also Kierkegaard amongst others:

The uneasy, disturbing effect on the reader of [Brecht's learning plays] resides in the fact that they, as it were, disclose the hidden cards of the ideology the identify with [...] These works violently confront us with the fact that ideology requires distance towards itself in order to rule unimpeded: if ideology is to maintain its hold on us, we must experience ourselves as not fully in its grasp. 'I'm not merely a direct embodiment of [Communism]; beneath this ideological mask there lurks a warm human person with his small sorrows and joys which have nothing to do with big ideological issues [...]'.<sup>84</sup>

It is because of this that Brecht was officially classed as "problematic" by the German Democratic Republic, with "authors who, although committed Marxists, were not totally controlled by the Party, and were thus always under suspicion and tightly controlled".<sup>85</sup> And it is this kind of commitment that is lacking in many of the standard examples of artistic practice that have come to be associated with overidentification.

This is not to suggest that overidentification relies on a verifiable conflation of exterior statement and interior sentiment. On the contrary, it is from the

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>84</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, *The Plague of Fantasies*, p. 99.

<sup>85</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, "Lenin's Choice", p. 318.



unverifiability of any gap between the two that the critical potential of this strategy emerges. For example, the question of whether or not Laibach and NSK are actually fascists has arisen on numerous occasions. Indeed, for some of their fans, this question seems to be at the core of the frisson that makes the group exciting: concerts, exhibitions and other gatherings are invariably attended by men in boots, armbands and epaulettes. However, it is the fact that the question needs to be restated repeatedly that forces the discussion of ideology that their work solicits. Žižek addresses this in an essay titled “Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?”, but in a way a better title would have been “Why the Question of Whether Laibach and NSK are Fascists is both Wrong and Necessary”. Žižek interprets the encounter with the signifiers of fascism in terms of psychoanalytic transference:

By means of the elusive character of their desire, of the indecidability as to "where they actually stand," Laibach compels us to take up our position and decide upon our desire. Laibach here actually accomplishes the reversal that defines the end of psychoanalytical cure.<sup>86</sup>

### **Overproduction in the Social Factory**

Another way of looking at this problem is to consider the relationship between identity and identification in overidentification, or, in short, to consider the field of identity politics. The way the term ‘identity politics’ is used in theory is problematic and we would reject many of the claims made around its deployment. Nevertheless, we believe that the strategy of overidentification could open up new possibilities for understanding how the manner in which signifiers of identity are used can become a site of political resistance. By considering certain subcultural rituals, forms of dress, languages and social structures as cases of overidentification, we would also like to move away from a particular set of relationships that, at least in the writing of certain authors, brings overidentification close to institutional critique. Many of the

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<sup>86</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, “Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?”, available at: <http://www.reanimator.8m.com/NSK/zizek.html> [accessed 31.7.12]

examples we have used so far rely on a simple mechanism of identification with political or cultural institutions. This identification is a challenge to the position of the contemporary artist who is presumed to use art as an overt critique of the forms the organisation of power takes. But overidentification can offer a more fluid mode of resistance that not only plays on the tension between the hidden and the explicit aspects of institutional power but also exploits this indeterminacy to positively construct subjects. These rituals are inherently social and involve intricate forms of cultural and economic exchange between individuals and groups and yet have caused the same type of friction that Kierkegaard's fake thief causes when the police arrest him. This process of subjectivisation through rituals of overidentification can therefore also help us resolve the problem of irony belonging exclusively to the private sphere.

'Identity politics' is pitched against the universalist assumptions latent in humanism. Similarly to Richard Rorty, writers have set out to challenge the notion that a human essence, existing before any particular social situation, is what binds the political system together. This humanist tradition reduces the contingent arrangements of identity – i.e. the particular configuration of identity as expressed through one's race, gender, sexual orientation, class etc. – to cultural symptoms. As such, these contingent aspects of subjectivity are not seen as having agency in the political field but merely as passive elements on which political forces operate. For the humanists, other traits, such as the capacity of humans for rational decision-making or their ability to convey political ideas through language and argumentation, are seen as the true basis of politics. However, those who support the loose ideas associated with identity politics view these human traits as abstractions that only reflect a particular set of qualities. They argue that the humanists prefer these qualities simply because they reflect the hegemonic configuration of subjectivity in our culture - white, Western, paternal, heterosexual etc. – and that rationality, decision-making and rhetorical tools are simply the reflection of these hidden values. Identity politics inverts this equation and considers politics as a field always already determined by the contingent arrangements of subjectivity. Instead of thinking of politics as a way of bypassing or neutralising notions of

cultural identity, it suggests that they are the core of a liberal multicultural political system. Sonia Kruks, for example, argues that:

What makes identity politics a significant departure from earlier, pre-identarian forms of the politics of recognition is its demand for recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied: it is *qua* women, *qua* blacks, *qua* lesbians that groups demand recognition. The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of “universal humankind” on the basis of shared human attributes; nor is it for respect “in spite of” one’s differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself as different.<sup>87</sup>

In the previous chapter we developed our own critique of the humanist tradition, and we share, from a different perspective, Kruks’ distrust of humanism. However, identity politics remains only a limited and unresolved answer to the difficulties we have raised. The idea of “respect for oneself as different” is based on the same liberal democratic understanding of politics that we have identified earlier as problematic. This plurality, the many voices, positions and identities, one finds in a multicultural liberal society, is elevated here again to the level of a political teleology. A good society is, according to Kruks, always heterogeneous, containing many positions that wish to claim ownership over the image of the social ideal. Every time a certain marginalised position becomes ‘respectable’ and is acknowledged by the hegemony, new forms of identity emerge to take their place in the periphery. As we have shown in the first chapter, this understanding of politics as an expanding field relies on an economy of exclusion and inclusion that protects a certain balance of power from which the oppressed are never able to break free. The number of possibilities within this liberal field of contestation is infinite and new combinations of identities emerge as social groups that claim their right to treat their difference as a legitimate form of identity. The definition of identity here is crucially not identical to the essentialist (humanist) one. Race, gender and sexual orientation are seen as expressions of contingent social possibilities and not as inherent (cultural or biological) differences.

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<sup>87</sup> Kruks, Sonia, *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001, p. 85.

Because of this, this notion of identity is closer to the idea of a 'life style' – a mode of being that is adopted by the individual as a marker of difference and is often expressed through cultural rituals, commodities, behaviours etc. The proliferation of identities is therefore similar to the many possibilities that emerge from the post-Fordist market in which identities are traded as forms of capital. One must actively assert one's difference on the post-Fordist market of identities because this expansion of subjectivity is the direct translation of the basic capitalist principle of an economic system built on infinite expansion and re-investment of surplus capital. The North American Man/Boy Love Association – an advisory civil organisation campaigning for the de-criminalisation of sexual contact between adults and minors – is a good example of how the emergence of new forms of identity fighting over recognition against social taboos is inexhaustible. Any real conflict is denied: we are never given criteria for how to determine which groups rights supersede another's in a case where they cannot co-exist. A structure that demands that social laws are transgressed time and again in order to allow for repressed forms of identity to be included in the social order places one law above the rest. The only law that cannot be transgressed is the law that guarantees the continual proliferation of identities, the law that holds the liberal structure itself together. The flexibility of the capitalist system is similar: all forms of life can be commodified, all modes of being melt in the furnace of the market, yet the law demanding surplus value to be produced out of this process can never be altered.

However, if we are to argue that the problem with many of the practices associated with overidentification is that they do not perform the preliminary identification required for the production of an excess, we need to look at the extent to which overidentification enacts a kind of identity politics. In doing so, we will be asking whether overidentification must be authored and to what degree the stance inherent in such an act needs to be explicit. The connection between the strategy of overidentification and the production of subjectivity is

made explicit in Marc James Léger's book *Brave New Avant Garde*.<sup>88</sup> Léger roughly follows a Žižekian reading of Lacan's seminar on the four discourses. The question of how subjectivity is produced at the intersection of the self and society (or the subject and the other) is central to this seminar. According to Žižek, in late capitalism subjectivisation occurs at the point of the production of excess. This excess can be produced economically in relation to the capitalist "logic of the integrated excess", according to which capitalism requires the continual unveiling of new areas from which it can produce surplus value.<sup>89</sup> Because of this expansionist tendency, new subjective experiences and new ways for consumers to attach themselves to novel commodities and technologies keep the terrain of late capitalism in a state of constant turmoil. The subject is maintained in this state of frustrated and incomplete becoming, divided in essence. According to Léger, this process is intensified under Post-Fordism. Here the creative endeavour of constructing an identity through consumerist desire becomes the direct source of capitalist exploitation. The numerous blogs where personal tastes and stylistic choices are converted into commodities exemplify this well. The creative pleasure one receives from consumerist desire is inseparable from the oppressive conditions of capitalist work:

Lacan relates this kind of surplus enjoyment to surplus value, an excess that sustains the divided subject (\$) in relation to desire. Identification with the capitalist conditions of production, we could say, sustains the subject in a desire for economic and cultural consecration.<sup>90</sup>

Žižek claims that a similar process of subjectivisation occurs in relation to the bureaucratic administration of modern power. This form of power (similar to Foucault's disciplinary society) is the *modus operandi* of the modern state, which wishes to reduce its body of citizens to a manageable archive of technical information, records, targets, statistics and so on. It too produces its own transgressions reflected in the Kafkaesque absurdity of bureaucracy

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<sup>88</sup> Léger, Marc James, "The Subject Supposed to Over-Identify: BAVO and the Fundamental Fantasy of a Cultural Avant Garde" in: *Brave New Avant Garde*, 2012.

<sup>89</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, "Jacques Lacan's Four Discourses", available at: <http://www.lacan.com/zizfour.htm> [accessed: 17.08.2012]

<sup>90</sup> Léger, Marc James, *Brave New Avant Garde*, p. 121.

made into explicit murderous violence in the Stalinist purges of the 1930s. The subject is born out of the triangular tension between this system of power, the transgression permitted by the system and the resistance of the individual to its operation. Both these 'economies of excess', the capitalist and the bureaucratic, share an underlying commitment to the idea that the modern subject must be a desiring one, motivated by an aspiration to obtain happiness through social promotion or material gratification. Both direct this desire carefully without giving away too much of the promised rewards. Each time one gets close to a stable and happy form of subjectivity, the excess of the law forces a split by introducing an object (both in the sense of a goal and of a commodity) beyond one's immediate means.

J. G. Ballard's novel *Kingdom Come* is a good illustration of how those two regimes (the consumerist and the bureaucratic) are integrated to create a meta-economy of managed transgression.<sup>91</sup> The suburban residents of Ballard's fictional 'Heathrow town' experience a radical displacement of subjectivity. While the old institutions that have previously defined their place in society erode, a new mega-shopping mall provides them with an alternative sense of belonging. But this sense of community revolves around consumer rituals that have to be carefully designed and maintained by manufactures, advertisers, consultants and sales people. Consequently, the newly found sense of community and selfhood is always lacking, always requiring more consumer credit and shopping trips: a hysterical subjectivity that is always on the verge of fulfilment but can never attain it. This results in the novel in a transference of this lack into excessive violence: the community finds its sense of unity only in attacks on symbolic figures who stand outside it and whose otherness is a constant reminder to the limits of the universal utopianism of consumerism – Afghan asylum seekers, poor Polish workers, Pakistani shop keepers and so on. For Žižek the link between the violence towards otherness and the erosion of the old definitions of self through (class) institutions is clear:

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<sup>91</sup> Ballard, J. G., *Kingdom Come*, London: Fourth Estate, 2006.

Typically, in today's critical and political discourse, the term worker has disappeared from the vocabulary, substituted or obliterated by immigrants or immigrant workers: Algerians in France, Turks in Germany, Mexicans in the United States. In this way, the class problematic of workers' exploitation is transformed into the multiculturalist problematic of "intolerance of otherness," and the excessive investment of the multiculturalist liberals in protecting immigrants' ethnic rights clearly draws its energy from the "repressed class dimension."<sup>92</sup>

However, if the production of subjectivity is completely subsumed by the operation of late capitalism, one question, central to our discussion of overidentification, persists: what is the place of subjective agency and resistance to hegemony in this scheme? When the law permits the emergence of difference and transgression, how can one find distance from the law? The problem is that even when one is able to understand that the law (of surplus value or surplus violence) operates in a dialectical manner through its excluded excesses, it is not clear how this knowledge can be translated into a form of active resistance. In this context it is important to consider briefly how such 'knowledge' itself is constituted: what does it mean to know something? Žižek emphasises the shift in Lacan's thinking from the early fifties to the sixties around the role of the analyst in psychoanalysis. In the fifties, Lacan had identified the position of the analyst who provides this sort of knowledge or self-awareness to the analysed with the discourse of the master, which "make[s] them accept their proper symbolic place within the circuit of symbolic exchange". But later he modified his theory to suggest that the "analyst stands precisely for the ultimate inconsistency and failure of the big Other, that is, for the symbolic order's inability to guarantee the subject's symbolic identity."<sup>93</sup> The early mode promised to reveal a deeper truth unknown to the analysed but later this hermeneutic approach was rejected in favour of an understanding of 'knowledge' as an ontological drive that sustains itself (which Žižek compares to scientific research today that continues its work in the name of pure knowledge without investing in a secondary goal like bettering

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<sup>92</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, "Jacques Lacan's Four Discourses", available at: <http://www.lacan.com/zizfour.htm> [accessed: 17.08.2012]

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*

human life).<sup>94</sup> This type of knowledge does not rely on a secondary object of signification that it is trying to achieve or reveal. In the early version, knowledge was given in a particular relationship of signification; in the later it is a free signifier that operates only in relation to itself.

By using this Lacanian scheme, Žižek proposes a more radical way to think about this trinity of knowledge-subjectivity-law, illustrated through the character of the masochist. The masochist occupies a place of duality: he understands how the law operates through its transgression and knows that violence is legitimated by the law exactly through its exclusion (Agamben's *Homo Sacer* comes to mind here). But at the same time, he derives pleasure from this inconsistency. The excluded violence generated by the system and the mechanism of desire that sustains it swap places here; the abhorrent violent excess produced by the law becomes the central object of desire which it tries to regulate. Furthermore, the masochist takes on the role of the object, an instrument for the other's desire, operating paradoxically both from an external view of the system as an economy of desire and transgression and an internal one. An example used by Žižek elsewhere is useful in understanding this masochistic position.<sup>95</sup> In the film *On Dangerous Ground*, Robert Ryan played a wary police detective who becomes increasingly uncertain of his role inside a legal system that seems unable to stop criminal behaviour, and indeed seems to even tolerate certain forms of transgression.<sup>96</sup> This unease grows into violence that the detective himself is unable to contain or to understand. In one of the scenes he confronts a crook and before beating him shouts: 'why do you make me do it?' while the crook replies: 'Come on! Beat me! Beat me!'. The crook in this scene understands something about the operation of the police that the detective refuses to acknowledge. He knows that his transgression of the law, his violent crime, is not different in essence from the violence of the police and yet he is willing to perform the role of the passive object for the detective's hatred and violence. He performs a role of powerlessness in the face of the violence of the police

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<sup>94</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, *The Plague of Fantasies*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

<sup>96</sup> *On Dangerous Ground*. Directed by Nicholas Ray, Los Angeles: RKO Radio Pictures, 1952.



and, at the same time, performs the position of knowledge (demonstrated by his knowing mockery of the confused detective).

This indissoluble duality is perhaps close to the operation of overidentification. If subjectivisation occurs, as Žižek argues, in the process of the production of excess, it is not enough for a critical position to be in synonymous with the discourse of the master or knowledge. The critical understanding of the dialectical operation of power is in itself a position of excessive power. In the case of institutional critique, for example, this knowledge (about the co-dependency of culture and capital and of institutions and their critique) operates as surplus cultural capital. Here the artist 'reveals' for the institutions and the public a 'deeper' truth about their operation and this revelatory knowledge translates into a position of excessive exceptionality. The artists lift themselves above others who are not in a position to perceive this dialectical balance of power. Through this knowledge of the system the artist is established as occupying a unique position outside of the law regulating it. But in overidentification, critical knowledge is dialectically separated from one's functioning under the law. Like the masochistic position, in overidentification it is impossible to allocate a precise place for the desire constituted by the law and for the excess excluded from it. There is also no point of exchange here, knowledge is not converted into a form of mastery or given a place of exceptionality. It is rather a complete identification with the law that is, at the same time, unacceptable by the law.

This scheme can also help us understand why the actions of the Yes Men are not successful example of overidentification. One of the Yes Men's best-known pranks took place on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2004 when the Yes Men's Andy Bichlbaum gave a live interview on the BBC, pretending to be a representative of the Dow Chemical Corporation. On that date, marking the 20th anniversary of the chemical disaster in Bhopal, the BBC had sought out a representative from Dow to speak about the tragedy since Dow had inherited responsibility for the disaster via a corporate acquisition. During the interview Bichlbaum announced that not only had Dow decided to accept full responsibility for the

incident, but that it was going to pay a large sum in compensation to the victims. In response to the news, Dow's stock value promptly dropped.

This action demonstrates the problem with the Yes Men. It is intended to expose the gap between the ethical claims of Western liberalism and the fact that capitalism can only be based on the continual exploitation of workers and therefore to point at the inconsistencies in the operation of power. But, they do not do so by perverting the positions assumed in the relationship of power. The Yes Men invert the hermeneutic act of the revelation and instead of lifting a visible layer to reveal an underlying one, they place an inauthentic mask of ethical decency over the core capitalist practice of exploitation. But despite its sophistication, this act is not different in its effect from any other hermeneutic investigation. This act preserves a structure of signification that could be deciphered and revealed by a discourse of knowledge, and thus preserves the positions of master (who possesses this knowledge) and blind servant for which the real remains hidden, relying on the exceptional power of others.

Because of this structural problem, the Yes Men misunderstand capitalism as an antagonistic struggle between an ethical position available for choosing by corporations or individuals and an exploitative core. In our previous chapter we followed Marx in his dismantling of the validity of this ethical position as critique and it is this understanding of the human as a subject capable of choosing between the ethical and the economic that we set out to challenge earlier. We find here the liberal myth that sustains the production of subjectivity: ethics must be available to the subject but only at the level of personal action against a corrupt system, only to protect the integrity of the individual against corrupting socio-economic forces. Following a similar line of argumentation, Žižek claims that:

The drive inheres to capitalism at a more fundamental, systemic level: drive propels the entire capitalist machinery; it is the impersonal compulsion to engage in the endless circular movement of expanded self-reproduction. The capitalist drive thus belongs to no definite individual - it is rather that those

individuals who act as direct "agents" of capital (capitalists themselves, top managers) have to practice it.<sup>97</sup>

This misrecognition works both ways and while the liberal position of the capitalist agent is legitimated, the residents of Bhopal are also impacted. They are treated like those for whom the act of speaking needs to exist in order to give a voice to their suffering. Echoing Rorty's idea that the role of the liberal artist is to voice pain for victims whose suffering is non-linguistic, the residents need the activists to speak for them.<sup>98</sup> The symbolic order here is restored: those who were until now invisible receive their proper place as powerless victims waiting for recognition and compensation while the benevolent power admits its paternal position of ethical duty. Ignoring for a moment the important fact that the identification with a position of power is later revealed to be untrue, even the action itself is never radical enough to imagine anything but the normative power relations between victim and master, those for whose behalf action must be taken and those who are in a position to take action (artistic or ethical). In the FAQ section on their website, the Yes Men respond to the question "don't you feel bad about arousing false hopes?" thus:

If you think we hurt the Bhopalis, then do something about it! If the deaths, debilities, organ failure, brain damage, tumors, breathing problems, and sundry other forms of permanent damage caused by Dow and Union Carbide aren't enough to arouse your pity, and the hour of 'false hopes' we caused is—fantastic, we won! Go straight to Bhopal.net and make a donation.<sup>99</sup>

In other words, what the simulation of power that is part of the hoax can achieve is pity. The violent excess of capitalist production that manifested itself in a literal overflow of poisonous industrial materials can be corrected by re-directing the flow of excessive capital from the West to India in the form of charity. Structurally, there is never a questioning here of the slave-master

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<sup>97</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, "Jacques Lacan's Four Discourses".

<sup>98</sup> Rorty, Richard, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 94.

<sup>99</sup> Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonnano, "The Yes Men FAQ" available at: [www.theyesmen.org/faq](http://www.theyesmen.org/faq), [accessed: 24.03.2013].

positions assumed in the operation of capitalism, only an attempt to divert some of the excess.

To summarise, what we are looking for is a critical position that enables us to operate within the excessive structures of capitalism and that acknowledges its power in producing subjectivity. This position operates from awareness that it is impossible not to be, in some way, constituted as a subject by these structures. But at the same time, this position needs to be excessive in its own right. It exploits potential excess in the process of production and reproduction of the desiring subject, the main industry of late capitalism. But the excess here is different in essence to the excess created by the regulatory mechanisms of late capitalism. An operation that seems legitimate under the current regime of power is the exchange of this excessive production of subjective identification into a moral position, as in the Yes Men's Bhopal action. This exchange effectively releases the surplus desire produced initially and neutralises its critical potential. Or, to return to Žižek again, this is an operation that is very much part of the self image of power, a pseudo-ethical doubling of its own nature of exploitation:

Public figures from the pope downward bombard us with injunctions to fight the culture of excessive greed and consummation – this disgusting spectacle of cheap moralization is an ideological operation, if there ever was one: the compulsion (to expand) inscribed into the system itself is translated into personal sin, into a private psychological propensity, or, as one of the theologians close to the pope put it: 'The present crisis is not crisis of capitalism but the crisis of morality'.<sup>100</sup>

This translation suspends the element of overidentification and turns it into an act of capitalist irony, 're-investing' the surplus in a renewed production of subjective positions (in this case a position of sin, of moral degradation). We would like to locate examples that do not follow a similar trajectory and that,

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<sup>100</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, "Occupy Wall Street: what is to be done next?", *The Guardian*, 24 April 2012, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2012/apr/24/occupy-wall-street-what-is-to-be-done-next> [accessed: 25.08.2012]

although in a relationship with the production of subjectivity under capitalism, do not simply offer absolution.

### **Performing Power: Overidentification as a Theatrical Ritual**

Judith Butler's reading of Jennie Livingstone's film *Paris is Burning* (1990) is useful in looking at how an overidentification with hegemonic constructions of identity can produce a critical stance that does not rely on a position of externality [fig. 29]. Butler's essay opens with an account of Althusser's concept of interpellation, the subjectivisation occasioned by an encounter with the law. When hailed by an authority figure, we become a potential criminal, a child, we submit to the force of the utterance that configures our role in a situation. Butler suggests, however, that our submission to this law can go beyond conformity by generating an excess that cannot be absorbed by the system:

Where the uniformity of the subject is expected, where the behavioral conformity of the subject is commanded, there might be produced the refusal of the law in the form of the parodic inhabiting of conformity that subtly calls into question the legitimacy of the command, a repetition of the law into hyperbole, a rearticulation of the law against the authority of the one who delivers it. Here the performative, the call by the law which seeks to produce a lawful subject, produces a set of consequences that exceed and confound what appears to be the disciplining intention motivating the law. Interpellation thus loses its status as a simple performative, an act of discourse with the power to create that to which it refers, and creates more than it ever meant to, signifying in excess of any intended referent.<sup>101</sup>

Butler demonstrates this idea through a close reading of *Paris is Burning*. The film describes the drag ball culture of 1980s New York, where groups organised as houses hold events in which they compete at various categories of dress and posing. Famously, categories such as executive realness saw

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<sup>101</sup> Butler, Judith, "Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation", in: *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 122.

these protagonists adopting white, hegemonic dress codes belonging to a class from which they were generally excluded [fig. 30]. When Butler wrote her essay, the film had been criticised for exoticising its subject matter for a white audience. bell hooks, whose polemic Butler cites, claimed that rather than celebrating a predominantly black and latino sub culture, the film, made by a white filmmaker and enjoyed by a largely white audience, was in fact a celebration of whiteness. For hooks, the mimicry involved in the ethnic minorities' embracing of power suits and golf wear was a testament to white domination. The tragic nature of the doomed dreams of stardom expressed by the drag queens was depoliticised in the film's reception as a vehicle for their exposure:

What could be more reassuring to a white public fearful that marginalized disenfranchised black folks might rise any day now and make revolutionary black liberation struggle a reality than a documentary affirming that colonized, victimized, exploited, black folks are all too willing to be complicit in perpetuating the fantasy that ruling-class white culture is the quintessential site of unrestricted joy, freedom, power, and pleasure.<sup>102</sup>

Butler, however, pointed out that the film could be read differently. While it is true that it might say more about whiteness than about any kind of alterity, what it does *to* whiteness (and to heterosexuality and male dominance) is a form of estrangement or denaturalisation. It isn't in the performance of drag that this subversive content is to be found, because drag can be completely absorbed within hegemonic representations of power relations as a poor imitation that reaffirms normativity. But rather it is the extroverted performance of 'realness' that undermines the possibility of seeing white, heterosexual men and women as neutral or natural. To suggest that these roles can be put on is to suggest that they are always already put on. This is why the most interesting moment in the film is not its revelling in the extravaganza of subcultural attire, but rather its sharp cut to 'normal' people on the street, who suddenly start to look strange and unconvincing in their 'straight' gear [fig. 31].

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<sup>102</sup> hooks, bell, "Is Paris Burning?", in: *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, Boston, MA: South End Press, 1999, p. 149.

As Butler explains, the comparison generated by the film's editing exposes "the phantasmatic status of the 'realness' norm"<sup>103</sup>:

In the drag ball productions of realness, we witness and produce the phantasmatic constitution of a subject, a subject who repeats and mimes the legitimating norms by which it itself has been degraded, a subject founded in the project of mastery that compels and disrupts its own repetitions.<sup>104</sup>

The shoulder pads and expensively blow-dried hair of the real eighties executive class begin to look like a construct through its re-enactment by the 'wrong' performer. As Butler insists, there is more to this emulation than the desire to belong to this class:

This is not an appropriation of dominant culture in order to remain subordinated by its terms, but an appropriation that seeks to make over the terms of domination, a making over which is itself a kind of agency, a power in and as discourse, in and as performance, which repeats in order to remake- and sometimes succeeds.<sup>105</sup>

We would argue that to the extent that such a performance succeeds in disrupting the norm, it operates in a way comparable to the notion of overidentification that we are trying to articulate here. The agency through which Butler's subject 'makes over' the 'terms of domination' is asserted through what she describes as an excess or hyperbolic staging:

If a white homophobic hegemony considers the black drag ball queen to be a woman, that woman, constituted already by that hegemony, will become the occasion for the rearticulation of its terms; embodying the excess of that production, the queen will out-woman women, and in the process confuse and seduce an audience whose gaze must to some degree be structured through those hegemonies, an audience who, through the hyperbolic staging of the

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<sup>103</sup> Butler, Judith, "Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation", p. 130.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

scene, will be drawn into the abjection it wants both to resist and to overcome.<sup>106</sup>

The idea of 'out-womaning woman' is very similar to Žižek's description of taking the system more seriously than it takes itself seriously, a kind of exaggeration that undoes itself. However, crucially, this strategy is not deployed here ironically. In fact, far from acting strategically to author an artistic or activist position, the drag queens of *Paris is Burning* do not articulate their stance as a political critique. Nevertheless, their representation in Livingstone's film delivers that critique through their juxtaposition with prevalent norms:

This is not a subject who stands back from its identifications and decides instrumentally how or whether to work each of them today; on the contrary, the subject is the incoherent and mobilized imbrication of identifications; it is constituted in and through the iterability of its performance, a repetition which works at once to legitimate and delegitimize the realness norms by which it is produced.<sup>107</sup>

It is important to notice here how overidentification operates differently from the liberal irony proposed by Richard Rorty. At first glance, Butler's reading of the film might appear to be close to Rorty's understanding of how subjects are produced in a political sense. "Gender is Burning" also stems from an anti-essentialist position; here too there is no universal ground from which subjects emerge and no subjectivisation that occurs prior to the point of contact with others; Like Rorty, Butler sees structures of belief, practices and opinions as contingent, flexible and reflexive. Rorty's liberal ironists are capable of understanding the limits of their own discourse and at the same time understand that the discourse of others is also contingently constructed. Like Butler's performative subjects, they reject the certainties of a humanist universalism. But whereas Rorty treats the various positions available in our current liberal society as neutrally equal, Butler's reading acknowledges that social positions are always already caught up in a relationship of power. For

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.



Rorty, political force comes into being when one discursive subject ironises another and by doing so inflicts cruelty. In Butler's text, however, the subject is produced at the moment of contact with an already given power and the subject's language is never equal to the social forces operating on the subject. Rorty writes: "solidarity [...] is thought of as the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs and the likes) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation – the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of 'us'".<sup>108</sup> But the balls in *Paris is Burning* show that the way for the marginalised member of a subculture to be 'included in the range of 'us' is not to overlook those differences but, on the contrary, to attribute immense importance to their power of signification.

We hope that two additional examples from the context of post-colonialism will further demonstrate the difference between the ironic flexibility of the subject of late Capitalism and the production of an excess of identification that cannot be supported by the system that professes them. The first comes from the film *The Mad Masters*, Jean Rouch's famous ethnographic study of the Huaka cult.<sup>109</sup> The second is the subculture of the *Sapeurs* in The Democratic Republic of Congo. In Rouch's 1955 film, a group of day labourers from Niger, having come to seek work in Ghana, come together to perform the rituals of the *Hauka*, a possession cult that was widespread in West Africa in the early twentieth century. Their eyes roll back, they foam at the mouth, they touch lit torches to their naked torsos, showing that they are no longer human, but possessed with supernatural powers [fig. 32]. However, these are not the powers of nature or the deities of tradition: they are specifically possessed by representatives of Western colonial power, becoming the governor general, the engineer, the doctor's wife, the major, the corporal of the guard.

The *Hauka* were part of a proliferation of possession cults that flourished in various parts of the African continent, in particular around the First World War.

<sup>108</sup> Rorty, Richard, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 192.

<sup>109</sup> Rouch, Jean, *Les Maitres Fous*, 1955, available at: <http://www.der.org/films/mad-masters.html> [accessed 15.3.12].

Many of these acephalous societies responded in their rituals to contact with other cultures, including the culture of the Colonial French and British powers. These rituals marked, through imitation and exaggeration, forms of otherness from the 'white man masks' worn by the possessed of the *Igbo* cult in Nigeria to the *masaba* dances in Tonga where dancers "rubbed down with diesel oil and dragged across the dance floor on ox-chains" in imitation of new technologies.<sup>110</sup> Although most Western anthropologists ignored the political dimension of these practices, Jean Paul Sartre described them in his preface to Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* as "a weapon against humiliation and despair". In his view, "the colonized people protect themselves against colonial estrangement by going one better in religious estrangement", turning colonial oppression into religious fervour and thereby turning one structure of alienation against the other.<sup>111</sup> The *Hauka* serve as a particularly good example not only because their ritual is methodically documented in Rouch's film but also because of the forceful negative reaction from anyone from the African students to conservative anthropologists to the British authorities in Accra to what was portrayed in the film.<sup>112</sup> Rouch's film and the cult ritual it was documenting employed something like Alexei Monroe's "full spectrum provocation", being an offence to both progressive African audiences and the colonial order. Despite never overtly presenting any objection to colonial rule, the ceremonies of the *Hauka* were banned, together with the film, the year after the documentary was made. The authorities were clearly threatened by "this ceremony in which the oppressed become, for a day, the possessed and the powerful".<sup>113</sup>

The second example we would like to invoke is that of the *Sapeurs*. These Congolese men of taste and elegance dress in the most refined French fashions, staging a hierarchy that ascends from local tailoring to Parisian *haute couture* [fig. 33 - 35]. The unranked youth wishing to join these clubs must travel to Paris and endure economic hardship in order to purchase suits,

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<sup>110</sup> Kramer, Fritz W., *The Red Fez: Art and Spirit Possession in Africa*, London: Verso, p. 121.

<sup>111</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul, "Preface to *Frantz Fanon's Wretched of the Earth*, 1961", available at: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/1961/preface.htm> [accessed 5.9.12]

<sup>112</sup> Kramer, Fritz W., *The Red Fez*, p. 137.

<sup>113</sup> Rouch, Jean, *Les Maitres Fous*, 1955, *ibid.*

shoes and other accessories, returning victorious to a highly ritualised gala event in which acquisitions are displayed. However, these are more than mere status symbols. As anthropologist Jonathan Friedman notes,

the ultimate paradox of the entire project is that it begins and ends in consumption, yet generates no steady income. [...] it is entirely authentic. No tricks are played on reality. The strategy is not to fool the audience, to use appearance as a means to status that is not rightfully attained. In a world where appearance tends to fuse with essence rather than merely representing it, dressing up is not a means but an end in itself. [...] The dangerous success of their project consists in the demonstration that one can reach the 'top' without passing through the accepted channels of education and 'work'. This is the great crime against the identity of prestige and power. But it is by no means easily dealt with by the authorities. They cannot simply ignore this illegitimate elegance any more than they can give it up themselves, on the implicit understanding that clothes, after all, do not make the man. There is, then, an even more deadly logic at work in this subversion of symbolic hierarchy.<sup>114</sup>

Both the *Hauka* and the *Sapeurs* are located in specific and complex histories and contexts that cannot be fully addressed here. And of course both are mediated and transformed through external Western framing, whether it is a film by a Western director or an anthropological study by a Western academic. In recent years, the *Sapeurs* even completed a circular movement back to the heart of the Western fashion industry when their style was replicated in a catwalk show for designer Paul Smith and captured in popular music videos and glossy coffee table books. But, despite this irony, the performance of the *Sapeurs* retains a disturbing presence that does not escape even Smith, who has commented that this level of attention to detail should not really exist in a poor suburb of the Congolese capital. Rather than be annihilated by the encounter with the reifying forces of capitalism that transform forms of 'authentic' expression of subjectivity into commodities, rather than be consumed as images by Western cameras, the *Sapeurs* create an inexhaustible mirroring effect, reflecting the reflection back. The peripheral

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<sup>114</sup> Friedman, Jonathan, *Consumption and Identity*, London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 130-2.

subjects of Western civilisation imitate the style of the ‘masters’ and the masters treat this imitation as more authentic than their own and create another copy which in turn may well be taken up by future members of the group. The *Hauka* and the *Sapeurs* never laid any claim to authenticity and are not therefore so easily betrayed by the forces of cultural commodification.

These two examples are therefore extremely useful in furthering our understanding of overidentification as distinct from the dialectical operation of irony described earlier. In Kierkegaard’s analysis, irony, like “dissemblance”, causes the “disparity between essence and the phenomenon”, or subject and object. But this results in the triumphant return of the subject who ultimately “emancipates himself from the constraint imposed upon him by the continuity of life, whence it may be said of the ironist that he ‘cuts loose’”.<sup>115</sup> In our formulation, overidentification takes a different trajectory. Neither the *Hauka* nor the *Sapeurs* are under any delusions about their status in relation to the white colonisers whom they emulate. But nor are they seeking to mock them in order to establish a distance between what they seem to copy and what they really think. The theatrical rituals they propose represent an authentic belief in the power of fashion and conduct in allowing them to ascend the social ladder. And yet by short-circuiting the aspirational route through which they are allowed to do so, they produce excess that the system cannot tolerate and goes on to suppress.

Commonly, the aesthetic ideology, the gaze, of the Western anthropologist constitutes a subject supported by the principles of the enlightenment, observation, reason, detached judgment etc., lifting itself above its object of study (the tribe or subculture). Here this process of subjectivisation occupies a far more ambiguous space. In the ritual of the *Hauka* and the stylistic choices of the *Sapeurs*, this aesthetic ideological component, comprising, for example, of norms of respectability and systems of governance and classification (into classes, professions, genders etc.) is addressed as pure phenomenological appearance, as theatre or a collection of gestures. This is not to say that the

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<sup>115</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 272-3.

power of this aesthetic ideological component is applied arbitrarily and without order, but the *Hauka* and the *Sapeurs* do not allow signifiers of class, respectability or race to be used as mechanisms of subjectivisation and ultimately of distinction. They remain forms of theatre that challenge the essentialist separation of object (practice or appearance) and subject (as the one who masters these forms).

Fritz Kramer claims that the ethnographic study of African possession cults illustrates the difference between different forms of engaging otherness.<sup>116</sup> The Western ethnographer studies societies and rituals, isolates objects and customs in order to find a structure supporting them and to compare them to one's own society. The possession cults, on the other hand, engage with forms of otherness through a process of mimesis. In the scientific ethnographic tradition, precedence is given to the ontological creation of new knowledge in a process that re-routes the study back onto itself. In the possession ritual, such reflexive questioning is not necessary and the participants are not trying to enhance their knowledge of their own culture. The original subjective position of the members of the *Hauka* is not taken as a stable ground from which one can, safe in the knowledge of one's own limits, come into contact with other forms of subjectivity.

Irony in contemporary art fails as critique because the negative distance opened by irony is itself part of the hegemonic ideological construct. But here the dialectical gap between the cynical core of ideology and an external position of commitment is closed. Much of the critique of the left over the last few decades has dealt directly with this gap between the rites and rituals of the space of consumerism that are produced and managed within an economy of desire that at the same time produces its externalities or transgressions. In Naomi Klein's *No Logo* for example, the brand machine creates the 'bare life' existence of sweatshop workers; Giorgio Agamben describes a similar operation where civil order and rights are produced directly from their abject outside. But the *Hauka* and the *Sapeurs* cancel this distance

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<sup>116</sup> Kramer, Fritz W., *The Red Fez*, pp. 140-142.

by taking consumerist rituals and the rites of power, authority and civilisation not as side-effects of a bio-political ideological machine but as significant in their own right. The appearance (the fashion and uniforms of Western society) becomes the source of power and to dress or act in a particular way is not seen as an act of subjugation, such as buying into the American dream, but as a direct route to the power produced within the desiring machine.

Kierkegaard rejects the Hegelian hypothesis that irony should be treated as a form of knowledge that leaps from its momentary negativity to a re-embraced position of mastery, but he proposes a different route to the mastery of irony. Describing something that perhaps resembles what we have been calling overidentification, he suggests that true irony, as opposed to the aristocratic irony with which we started, collapses the distinction between practice and theory: "Irony as a mastered moment exhibits itself in its truth precisely by the fact that it teaches us to actualize actuality, by the fact that it places due emphasis on actuality."<sup>117</sup> This again could be applied to the political space in which the *Sapeurs* and *Hauka* make their manoeuvres. Despite being seen at different times as emblems of Congolese resistance or apologists for colonialism and moving between underground illegitimacy to respectability, the *Sapeurs* have never aligned themselves with an existing ideology. Rather, their practice amplified existing structures of power. These systems, from colonial cultural superiority to African nationalism were found equally inadequate in containing the demand to harness the real potential of global liberal capitalism, the universal demand that a better life could be shaped and performed away from the confines of ethnicity, class, nationality, gender etc.

As mentioned earlier, for Žižek, the purpose of overidentification is to expose the 'hidden reverse' of ideology: since even fascists don't behave like caricature fascists, claiming to be nice and tolerant, NSK's appropriation of totalitarian insignia exposes a dark side that the power they are confronting would rather not display. In the case of the *Hauka* and the *Sapeurs*, what is being exposed is the West's hypocrisy in relation to notions of equality,

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid, p. 340

progress and civilisation. In sending aid to Africa and promoting Western standards of culture and education, the West encourages the colonised to become more 'like us'. And yet when our rituals are mirrored in tribal and subcultural ceremonies, we find that there is a dangerous subversion at work when the Other becomes too much like us, to the point of making our society's construction of power and identity seem tribal and atavistic. Underlying the civilising rhetoric, the hidden reverse of the Western ideology of charity is the fact that equality must always be deferred.

Our third and final example of a critical use of overidentification in relation to questions of race is different from the previous two in so far as it is a play within a film (Brian De Palma's *Hi Mom!* from 1970, starring Robert De Niro)<sup>118</sup>. We don't wish to discuss here the differences between De Palma's work of fiction and Rouch's Cinéma vérité or the relationship between the photographic documentation of the *Sapeurs'* style and the construction of fictive realities. Our intent is to identify relevant models of thinking beyond uncritical irony and the fact that De Palma's film is a work of the imagination does not prevent it from offering an interesting and appropriate case of overidentification. One of the most subversive aspects of the African possession cults or couture subcultures is the fact that such a distinction between a theatrical image and cultural 'essence' does not exist in them. The *Hauka* and the *Sapeurs* identify excessively with a host of behaviours, looks and rituals in a way that challenges the intangible separation between fiction and 'reality'. They demonstrate that what is can appear to be merely an inessential theatre of the state power (military parades, uniforms) or a theatre of class (wearing 'proper' designer attire, conspicuously) is in fact an important structural feature of power. Power is premised on a fiction of itself and when cracks appear in this fiction power collapses like the statues of Middle Eastern dictators during periods of upheaval.

In *Hi Mom!*, De Niro's character becomes involved with a black activist theatre group. For their performance, 'Be Black, Baby', the group invites an audience

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<sup>118</sup> De Palma, Brian, *Hi Mom!*, New York: West End Productions, 1970.

of white middle class theatre-goers to partake in 'the black experience' [fig. 36]. Initially, this seems like a typical participatory performance project, albeit a rather uncomfortable prospect for the participants. They are asked to touch the performers' hair, loosen their hips and eat 'soul food'. When they complain that they are merely the audience and do not wish to participate, it is explained to them that they too are actors now. Their attempts to squeamishly reject a taste of pig feet are met with forceful insistence. Things quickly degenerate to the point where the white audience, by now in black-face, are assaulted by the black actors whose faces are now covered in white makeup, with one woman nearly raped. In the nick of time, a white policeman shows up – played by De Niro. But of course he is in on the act, and turns out to defend the (whited-up) black actors and further assault and abuse the white 'audience'. It is here that the liberal, white audience's views are put to the test. The film cynically shows them leaving the venue, shaken but also exhilarated at having truly had the 'black experience'. But the play is not about verisimilitude. It doesn't just convey an experience through audience participation, but rather, it identifies the fissures within the progressive mind-set that allow racism to persist insidiously in a society that preaches tolerance.

'Be Black, Baby' offers a different model of criticality for the theatre because it circumvents the obvious pitfalls of the modernist dialectical model. In this context, it is important to stress that the play dealt with here is part of a film and is, therefore, only ever presented through the mediation of cinema. The idea that theatre can offer an authentic experience of blackness is even more absurd since it is doubly removed, through cinematic framing, from 'life'. In the long scenes devoted to the play in *Hi Mom!*, the camera assumes a very active role, buzzing around the actors and the audience as if it too were a character. In some shots, the action of the actors is obscured from view, while others are too dark for the viewer to see clearly, mimicking the style of *cinéma vérité*. Stylised filmic interventions are also used in a deliberately noticeable manner. De Palma uses sharp cuts and dynamic angles and, more importantly, direct documentary-style interviews with members of the audience. The relationship between theatre and cinema is of course not coincidental in *Hi Mom!*.



Similarly to the *Hauka*, the performers of 'Be Black, Baby' don't inhabit characters but rather mimic stereotypes. The effect of their performance does not rely on the liveness of the experience. It is enough for their audience to serve as proxies for us because we don't need to be convinced by this performance. Instead the film asks us to question any performance of racial authenticity. At the same time, it is literally impossible to separate the performers from their acting: are the actors antagonistic towards the audience because they are black militants encountering members of the hegemony or are they simply enacting the role of the aggressors outside the theatre (such as, the police, cultural and educational institutions)? 'Be Black, Baby' does not allow for ethical stability and the positions articulated by the actors cannot be open to debate and deliberation. Writing about Brecht's Epic Theatre, Walter Benjamin argues that for an actor on stage, identification with one's tormentor is impossible, but the actors here are shown enjoying the subversive assuming of the role of hegemony.<sup>119</sup> We are left incapable of the ethical judgment asked for by Brecht: can we approve of the sexual assault of audience members in the name of artistic freedom? If members of the audience are told that they are actors too now, do they stop performing once they leave the theatre?

After attending a screening of Jean Rouch's *The Mad Masters*, Jean Genet wrote the play *The Blacks*, in which he borrowed several theatrical techniques from the *Hauka* ritual. In the play, some (black African) characters wear white masks and assume the roles of Western figures of power (the judge, the governor, the missionary). The play, generally, is a meditation on the relationship between race and performativity, but perhaps its most interesting aspect is Genet's preface, quoted here in full:

This play, written, I repeat, by a white man, is intended for a white audience, but if, which is unlikely, it is ever performed before a black audience, then a white person, male or female, should be invited every evening. The organizer of the show should welcome him formally, dress him in ceremonial costume

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<sup>119</sup> Benjamin, Walter, "What is Epic Theatre", *Illuminations*, London: Fontana, 1992, p. 150.

and lead him to his seat, preferably in the first row of the orchestra. The actors will play for him. A spotlight should be focused upon this symbolic white throughout the performance.

But what if no white person accepted? Then let white masks be distributed to the black spectators as they enter the theater. And if the blacks refuse the masks, then let a dummy be used.<sup>120</sup>

Genet understood that any performance of race is already caught up in the power relations of the colonial era. Although race is a performance, a mask one puts on, the performance is not neutral. Those who are required to perform their subjectivity are the colonial subjects and those who sit back to look at this performance are the masters; those who need to conceal or accentuate their otherness are 'the blacks' on stage and those who judge the authenticity of this performance are 'the whites'. Like in *Hi Mom!* the audience here is implicated in the performance of race (and class), its neutrality and detachment threatened. Genet puts the audience on stage, metaphorically, and without the role of the audience, without the silent observer against which this performance of race is measured, there can be no show.

'Be Black, Baby' may have been intended as a satire, but it leaves the viewer with a lot of uncomfortable questions. The audience of the play might learn little from the experience, but for us, the audience of the film, there is nowhere to hide: we see ourselves reflected in their smug admiration for the experience they've just had and that response is foreclosed for us. The avoidance of an ethical ground forces a new split into the political map whose existing oppositions are complicit with racial inequality. The racist position, that there is an essential biological difference between races, is obviously questioned here. The performative reversal of behaviours (when black actors in white faces become racist aggressors) clearly demonstrates how cultural and political differences are produced as exactly that – non-essentialist social behaviour. But, the other position of mainstream American society in the late 1960s - that of the liberal audience who, from a position of sympathy, wishes to adopt the

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<sup>120</sup> Genet, Jean, *The Blacks: A Clown Show* [Bernard Frechtman –tr.], London: Faber and Faber, 1960.

otherness of black culture as 'cool' - is also challenged and exposed as racist. If the play in De Palma's film is an illustration that the otherness of African Americans is produced as a direct result of the power structures in which they operate and if the behaviour of the audience confirms this, then both the positive-liberal and negative-racist understandings of this otherness are exposed as political fantasies that ultimately support inequality. When the liberal and the racist are grouped together a new political fissure opens up, this time not between the admirers and debasers of black culture but between an understanding of race as an inherent quality of the individual and the understanding of race as a performance built on socio-political signifiers.

So why is 'Be Black, Baby' an example of overidentification? Or rather, what do the performers in the play identify with positively? Obviously, we don't expect a group of African American activists to sincerely identify with the roles of racist abusers or the police. But behind the performance is a real demand to be included in the idea of liberty, the core of the American ethos. David Hackett Fischer follows the historical trajectory out of which two distinct ideas of autonomy were created: the north European idea of freedom as an entity that belongs to a community in which individual rights are guaranteed by the community and the Roman model of liberty, later adopted by the fathers of the American nation, according to which the individual becomes liberated through a shaking off of the constraints and prohibitions of the community, arriving at the freedom to pursue one's will without interruption. The American idea of liberty is thus premised on negative freedom – to become liberated from something, to be above laws, tradition and social structures.<sup>121</sup> In the simulated space of the theatre, this negative liberty is pushed to its ultimate conclusion, not as an overt critique of the idea, but out of a genuine desire to cash in on this promised 'America Dream'. Of course, what the performance shows is that American liberty is an ideal very much grounded in its own institutions and traditions, that it is given only to certain people under certain conditions but is unavailable to those who in 1970 have just barely emerged from their segregated, second class status. The American ideal of liberty is

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<sup>121</sup> Hackett Fischer, David, *Liberty and Freedom: A Visual History of America's Founding Ideas*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 1 – 15.

exposed as an illusion since freedom can only ever be differential – achieved through the un-freedom of others in a relationship of exclusion (factory owners and workers, whites and blacks, citizens and immigrants). But, if the real political promise wrapped inside this myth is acted on, even by achieving a very temporary liberation, it is possible to turn it into a critical instrument, to universalise it. This is not a struggle for more rights, but an intervention that lays bare the limitations of the very notion of rights.

De Palma's theatrical model presented in 'Be Black, Baby' pairs the immersive theatre of cruelty with anti-theatrical Brechtian techniques, at once producing a realism that transgresses the boundaries of art and life and imposing a critical distance and awareness of artifice on participants. But instead of reasserting the dialectical gap between the theatre and lived reality, De Palma's theatre attacks the assumptions underlying both the audience's engagement with this representation of race relations and the tenability of their politics outside the context of the theatre. 'Be Black, Baby' quickly dismisses the theatrical engagement with the gap between the everyday and representation. Because what is represented on stage here in 'documentary' style is in fact the stereotype of an ethnic group and because it is performed by the audience rather than the actors, there is never any expectation of authenticity or suspension of disbelief. The white middle class audience knows full well that the suggestion that it can somehow be magically transformed into poor black people simply by applying paint to their faces is absurd – almost as ridiculous as the liberal idea that skin colour does not matter in the American society of the late 60s. Instead of this engagement with authenticity and artifice, the play forces us to locate the tension elsewhere, not in the relationship of the stage and its double but between the different types of performances that are fighting over the theatricality of public space or the performativity of everyday life.

We can see a similar logic at work in the performances of the Israeli art group, Public Movement, whose motto states: 'the army did not demonstrate sufficient creativity'. Appearing in dress uniform, they mimic state rallies and folk dancing, holding hands in a circle, crossing their feet, rearranging

themselves into a marching phalanx, giving speeches and singing in city squares [fig. 37]. These acts are often juxtaposed with car crashes, riots and terrorist attacks, presented in an equally dispassionate, stylised fashion. Here, again, the point is not to establish a critical distance from the action, which is presented as a kind of ritual and really does function in the same way as an official ceremony. We are not invited to view the appropriation of militaristic choreography as ironic, nor are we ever comfortable in succumbing to its seduction. But by juxtaposing Zionist state aesthetics with collective trauma, Public Movement reveals both to be equally ritualised in the responses they elicit. The unity of the performances that govern our movements in public and the private emotions we associate with them is split from within to the point where we can no longer be certain of the boundaries between self-determination and social construction. The stage is not shown to be any more or less artificial than the social constructs being portrayed and no gap opens between performers and their actions: in fact, Public Movement have been accused of being 'IDF propaganda minions'.<sup>122</sup> Yet the kind of propaganda they seem to manifest is also curiously dated, at odds both with the violent content of their work and with the post-ideological façade of the state in the name of which they purport to speak. Much like the San Francisco band Crime, whose 1979 performance at the San Quentin prison saw them wearing uniforms identical to those worn by the guards policing their audience [fig. 38], Public Movement send mixed signals that lay bare tensions pre-existing in the unacknowledged performances they re-enact.

### **Authoring Overidentification**

One question in our discussion of overidentification so far has remained unanswered – the question of authorship and knowledge. Since we are interested in overidentification as practitioners in the field of contemporary art, we would like to know whether we can understand overidentification

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<sup>122</sup> Miller, Daniel, "Performing Politics for Germany", Frieze, 13.7.2009, available at: [http://blog.frieze.com/performing\\_politics\\_for\\_germany/](http://blog.frieze.com/performing_politics_for_germany/) [accessed 27.3.12]

pragmatically, as a strategy that could be implemented by artists and other practitioners, or whether it must remain a phenomenon which can only be observed and never premeditated? As much as we could isolate moments of overidentification in art, film and culture, does enveloping them in this theoretical discussion, building with them a body of knowledge, not neutralise their critical tension? Could it become a type of knowledge without establishing artistic authorship, without becoming a rigid type of 'reading' of acts that happen elsewhere outside of research? Can we avoid converting this critical tension into human capital?

This question of authorship or, more broadly, of agency, is already played out in the dialogue between Kierkegaard's brand of irony and Lefebvre's. For Kierkegaard, ironic intention must remain private and can never be communicated. If the pseudo-thief shares with the police the 'real' nature of his nocturnal excursion, the fact that he had no intention of stealing, his act loses its critical dimension and becomes another form of aristocratic irony. Instead of buying a position of mastery through the use of irony, Kierkegaard wants to arrive at the actual, the real conditions of a given historical moment through a mastery of irony. Lefebvre sees the ironic forces of history as overwhelming and can only imagine a limited agency in developing an ironic stance against this inevitability. The individual can resist the force of history by allowing its traitorous currents to carry him as they will, instead of fighting against them and drowning. But in both formulas, irony does not really belong to the social, to the communicable or to an experience shared by many. Whether private or historical, both thinkers cannot imagine a community based on irony. Neither can Rorty. His irony is the private property of the intellectual and only effective against an inherently non-ironic world. Žižek does not help us resolve this problem either. He describes a gap between the private position and public behaviour, between one's beliefs and one's ability to act on these principles. Although in his description of the current political system this gap is fully acknowledged and even exploited, it is still not clear how one can use this understanding as a critical tool. To simply know that the system is ironic is nothing more than a form of cynicism, but to truly identify, to still believe in the promises of the system, is again a private position. Once

this excessive identification is turned into strategic knowledge, it becomes dishonest and cancels itself.

In the examples of irony we selected from the field of contemporary art, it is clear that irony is an instrument for practitioners to establish their own cultural capital. It is important for the artists we talked about here to be read ironically, to be understood as producing a multiplicity of meanings. Irony and even cynicism are not opposed to the forces of the market and the operation of institutions. On the contrary, when an artistic position seems hard enough to pin down but still makes clear that the artist is on the side of critique (against the market or the institution for example), the artist's reputation increases. Despite the fact that irony splits the authorial voice (into negative and positive statements), authorship reasserts itself on the institutional level.

By contrast, in the work of the Museum of American Art Berlin (MoAA) we begin to identify a strategy for art that neither naively reverts to the modernist work/art dyad discussed in our second chapter nor offers an ironic and ultimately weak critique of its own inability to produce alternatives to capitalist labour, as illustrated above. Rather than produce new subjectivities for the reinvestment of human capital, or new ironies from the impossibility of not doing so, MoAA treats the story of modern art not as an open project to which new forms can be added, but as a closed narrative ripe for institutional reframing. Spanning over three decades, the complex and diverse activities of MoAA revolve around the recreation and representation of historical exhibitions from the canon of modern art. Although the Museum operates from residential addresses in New York and Berlin (and previously Belgrade), its reenacted exhibitions were included in Biennials and various art institutions. For example, at the Venice Biennial in 2003, MoAA presented an exhibition devoted to the curatorial selection for the America pavilion at Venice in 1964 in which, famously, Europe finally acknowledged the vibrancy of contemporary American art by awarding the grand prize to the then little known Robert Rauschenberg [fig. 39]. The exhibition in 2003 led the New York Times to

mistake the pavilion of Serbia and Montenegro for the American pavilion.<sup>123</sup> However, MoAA does not merely exhibit reproductions of some of the original art presented at the American pavilion in the 60s, but also a scaled down model of the pavilion (and the work in it) and various ephemeral materials related to the original exhibition – press coverage and pages from the catalogue – that are also transformed into paintings and hung on the walls [fig. 40]. The exhibition itself is divided into two main spaces named after the legendary curators Dorothy Miller and Alan R. Solomon who commissioned the original exhibition.

Although many contemporary artists deal with questions of copying and originality (for example, Sherrie Levine's recasting of Duchamp's *Urinal in Bronze*, "Fountain (after Marcel Duchamp)", 1991 [fig. 41]), MoAA goes beyond a problematising of artistic authorship. Whereas other copyists have used this strategy to suggest that the act of repetition could in itself be original and authored, the work of MoAA upsets the dialectical balance that governs much of the contemporary thinking about critical art. The place of the author, synonymous with artistic insight, originality, a unique style or language etc., is sacrificed for an anti-humanist historical narrative. The differences between original artworks is blurred by the monotonous and flat painting style of their recreations, which are also treated in the same way as the ephemeral paper trail that the exhibition has left on history long after the event. According to the titles of the Venice show, it did not take place in 1964 or even in 2005 but in 2064. This fictional, future point of view is used as another critical weapon against humanist notions of art production. By 2064, the original American artists (Rauschenberg, Johns, Noland and Louis), their life stories, opinions and style, will have receded into the background, their work merging with the social events that surrounded the exhibition and its critical reception: the art object turns into the story of art. The material mechanisms of production of meaning in art - the paintings and gallery structure - and their twin immaterial ones - the gala events, the press release, the catalogue essays - are given an

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<sup>123</sup> An apology was later issued online. Vogel, Carol, "Heat Upstages Art at the Venice Biennale", *New York Times*, 16 June 2003, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/16/arts/heat-upstages-art-at-the-venice-biennale.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm> [accessed 18.3.13]



equal treatment of disinterestedness. The fictional bundle that is the author becomes a pure signifier, a representation of an idea, in the greater story of art history in which it is embedded. In other words, the human individual here is not the foundation of society but is produced only in retrospect and only by the forces of history dwarfing it. The historical narrative, of the American economic boom after the war, of the change of cultural hegemony, of the cold war, is already in itself passé now, but MoAA reminds us that rather than look for essential truths in art or an irreducible humanist quality in the artist, it is social forces shaped by history, and far greater than any individual, that give a place and meaning to creation.

If there is any irony here, it is the irony of history that wrests intention away from the individual and produces meaning in spite of its originator. We do not know whether one or more people are responsible for the output of MoAA, but the critical proposition at the heart of the project suggests that there is in any case never one person behind any art project. The museum's spokesperson is a posthumous Walter Benjamin still commenting on art now, in the age that comes after mechanical reproduction, perhaps the age of psychical reproduction, the infinite dissemination of ideas. In an interview, he states: "For me it is now clear that the entire art domain is a thing of the past and will continue to exist only by inertia, the way religion continued to exist after the Enlightenment".<sup>124</sup> If we heed this new Benjamin's call to look at art in its modernity as a particular historical configuration, perhaps we can begin to think alternative models for creativity and ultimately for human nature that go beyond the competitive valorisation of the new.

Ultimately, MoAA does not resolve the problem of authorship. The project merely defers it to another level, and even this perhaps only temporarily and contingently. Nevertheless, in doing so it problematises the distinction between artist and subject matter or ethnographer and object of research. As a kind of auto-ethnographic study, MoAA proposes an overidentification with

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<sup>124</sup> Kopsa, Maxine, "The Museum is History: Museum of American Art at the Van Abbe Museum", *Metropolis M*, 28 May 2010, available at: <http://metropolism.com/features/the-museum-is-history/english> [accessed 16.8.11]

the institutions of art that foregrounds their role in authoring art and in so doing questions the paradigms that underpin modern and contemporary art. What this practice demonstrates is that there can never be a formula for overidentification that can be applied wholesale to make a work of contemporary art successfully critical. At the same time, it also shows that a consideration of the parameters within which the artwork takes place can nevertheless be used to dismantle them, not through negation, but through a subsumption that generates fissures in the totality of this support structure. It is only through recognising the seductive power of genuinely positive propositions within this structure that critique can hope to regain some kind of efficacy.

## Conclusion

We would like to conclude our work by returning to the question of authorship in art. This question is interesting for us for several reasons. Firstly, the construction of the author in contemporary art is tied to the more general category of the neo-liberal individual and we would like to consider the relationship between the two paradigms. As we pointed out in chapter 3, the idea of the individual in the current neo-liberal regime is caught between opposing forces with their own logic: the individual is both a utopian horizon for liberalism and a commodity inside its markets. We would like to understand how this conflict takes place within the field of contemporary art and its discourse. Secondly, our discussion of overidentification as a critical tool, has marked authorship for us as a point of tension. Is it possible to construct situations of overidentification without capturing them in an authorial voice? If overidentification does not resolve itself like irony by being understood on a 'higher' plane, the idea of deliberately instigating it strategically runs the risk of an ironic resolution that elevates the artist above the institution or system under investigation. How could these situations be understood as convincing gestures of belief when they later simply contribute to the accumulation of value as cultural capital for the artist?

To address these questions we would like to propose a different reading of the author, one that does not think of these concepts as external to the institutions of art but as a side effect of a particular configuration of socio-economic forces. According to this view, artists, curators and writers simply participate in the construction of a narrative of authorship (and individuality) that forms the mythical base for artistic production and at the same time is traded as a commodity. Looking at authorship as a site of socio-economic production opens up possibilities for artists. Rather than striving to establish a 'real' or authentic self or author outside markets and commodities, we believe that authorship can be exercised in art ideologically. Much critical discourse in art contains a bias against representation and a preference of a direct involvement in social structures and actions. But in fact the ability to represent

authorship as an ideological narrative has greater critical potential. Rather than trying to establish alternative forms of authorship outside of dominant market conditions, we need to think of art exhibitions as devices for the display of the strange ideological commodity of the author and to explicitly show, produce and even over-produce it.

In his much quoted conference speech from 2010, business secretary Vince Cable criticised the banks as directly responsible for the current economic crisis: “On banks, I make no apology for attacking spivs and gamblers who did [...] harm to the British economy”. The controversial speech was reported to have infuriated the financial sector in the UK.<sup>1</sup> The BBC’s *Newsnight*, for example, described the speech as “an extraordinary attack on capitalism”.<sup>2</sup> But Cable’s speech was structured around a more complex argument. While he maintained that “[c]apitalism takes no prisoners and kills competition where it can, as Adam Smith explained over 200 years ago”, he was also adamant that the principle of competition was a good one and that it was “central to my pro market, pro business, agenda”.<sup>3</sup> Cable made a distinction between a good capitalist system that encourages competition, benefiting all, and a bad capitalism that leads to the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few, offering few benefits to the population at large. But what separates these two versions of capitalism? If greater competition is the goal in both versions than surely tighter regulation and control over markets will fail to achieve this. Cable implies then that the fault is not systemic but private, that certain individuals, his “spivs and gamblers” exploit an essentially ethical system unlawfully. Although a system of economic competition can bring happiness and prosperity to all, his argument continues, it is the immoral decisions of individuals who prevent this future from materialising. In order to be able to manipulate the system in such a way, these ‘bad’ individuals must

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<sup>1</sup> Milmo, Dan, “Vince Cable’s attack on capitalism prompts rebuke from the City”, *The Guardian*, 22 September 2010, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2010/sep/22/vince-cable-capitalism-city-reaction> [accessed 12/11/12].

<sup>2</sup> BBC *Newsnight*, 21 September 2010, available at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Klp9YS\\_NzWI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Klp9YS_NzWI) [accessed 12/11/12]

<sup>3</sup> Cable, Vince, *Liberal Democratic Party 2010 Conference Speech*, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/sep/22/vince-cable-full-speech> [accessed 12/11/12]

be seen as free agents whose actions and morality are not conditioned by the socio-economic system in which they exist but operate above it.

In this dissertation, we have presented the view that the individual is not simply the organic ground of a liberal society, a basic cell or unit out of which the complex structures of society grow. Rather, the individual occupies a more ambiguous place, forming a narrative that supports and nourishes the liberal-capitalistic system. When the system fails (at least partially, as in the recent economic crisis) it is the position of liberals such as Vince Cable that it is the individual who has betrayed the system, and not that the system has produced an individual whose actions produce a conflict with the system itself. The individual is a problem for liberal market ideology. The ultimate expression of the freedom of the individual in a market driven economy is one's ability to achieve gains through tactical manipulation of market conditions. To be a successful competitor is to be able to transgress the given conditions of productivity in the market, to be able to identify in the current configuration something that is hidden from others, something that is not yet fully contained in the array of possibilities and combinations. And, as Marx shows, this freedom (surplus value) is always produced from its opposite, the limiting of others' freedom (the producers of surplus labour). The liberal system requires therefore the constant upkeep of powerful regulatory mechanisms, the source of Cable's 'ethical capitalism', although these always somehow turn out to be inadequate. Liberal market conditions are built on a careful and paradoxical balancing act. On the one hand, the explicit goal is to create situations where individuals transgress the given conditions of production, where the myth of the individual is validated by going 'one step ahead of the competition'. On the other hand, an invisible yet firm socio-economic structure guarantees the unequal distribution of this freedom and makes sure that only a select few will have access to these acts of transgression and will be spared punishment for them. As Slavoj Žižek puts it:

On the market - and, more generally, in the social exchange based on the market - individuals encounter each other as free rational subjects, but such subjects are the result of a complex previous process which concerns

symbolic debt, authority, and, above all, trust (into the big Other which regulates exchanges).<sup>4</sup>

This can easily be demonstrated when we consider the recent and more extreme or condensed conditions of neo-liberalism. Because of the global reach of neo-liberalism, the contemporary idea of freedom is transnational. The ability to move across borders and localities freely and quickly is a desirable quality and an industry that supports this precarious, transnational way of being has emerged in recent years, from airbnb to the proliferation of yachts and private jets. The Daily Mail, for example, reports that billionaire Nat Rothschild “rarely spends more than four days in the same place, flying in his elaborately equipped private jet from Siberia, to Switzerland via Greece, to New York - but always retaining a link to Britain.”<sup>5</sup> However, this melting away of national borders is not equally distributed and while certain individuals enjoy a unique border-less status, greater measures of control are put in place to monitor the movement of unskilled immigrants between countries. It has been widely reported in the press, for example, that Greece plans the construction of a separation wall, similar to the one built to isolate a pocket of population in the West Bank, on its border with Turkey in an attempt to control the flow of immigrant from Asia into the country.<sup>6</sup> While certain zones of freedom open up for certain individuals, the same zones are more tightly regulated for most.

To return to Cable’s position of personal responsibility, the problem for him lies in the fact that certain individuals have produced too much freedom in a system premised on the promise of freedom. In these cases, the transgression of individuals who have gone beyond the regulated permitted transgression disturb the delicate balance of liberalism: It is as if bankers offend by bringing competition and risk to their logical conclusion. In recent

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<sup>4</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, “The Liberal Utopia”, available at: <http://www.lacan.com/zizliberal2.htm> [accessed 12/11/12].

<sup>5</sup> Brennan, Zoe, “The Richest Rothschild of them all”, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-446056/The-richest-Rothschild-all.html> [accessed 12/11/12].

<sup>6</sup> Stroobants, Jean-Pierre and Perrier, Guillaume, “Plans for a wall on Greece's border with Turkey embarrass Brussels”, *The Guardian*, 11 January 2011, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jan/11/greece-turkey-wall-immigration-stroobants> [accessed 12/11/12].

times, bankers have become figures of hate for a wide spectrum of political powers, from liberal democratic ministers like Cable to some of the activists of the occupy movement. But, in a way, are those who accuse bankers of being exceptionally evil not simply deferring the utopian promise of liberalism? Capitalism cannot guarantee, and even must retaliate against, the total freedom it offers as a reward for hard work and sacrifice, and it is in this structure that its theological/ideological structure is revealed.

Cable's humanist understanding of the crisis misunderstands a fundamental aspect of liberal capitalism. This is best explained by some of Thorstein Veblen's arguments in the *Theory of the Leisure Class*.<sup>7</sup> Veblen describes market capitalism as a system held together by the constant pressures of competition and risk taking. Rather than helping the individual to transcend social limitations and obstacles or liberating the social agent from dependency, competition is in itself a kind of power that binds individuals together in a web of reciprocal mutuality from which one is never able to break free. Individuals are involved in the accumulation of wealth not because they are greedy, but because conditions force them to respond, by imitation or by opposition, to others in their social environment:

The motive that lies at the root of ownership is emulation; and the same motive of emulation continues active in the further development of the institution to which it has given rise and in the development of all those features of the social structure which this institution of ownership touches. The possession of wealth confers honour; it is an invidious distinction. Nothing equally cogent can be said for the consumption of goods, nor for any other conceivable incentive to acquisition, and especially not for any incentive to accumulation of wealth.<sup>8</sup>

Incessant competition is not a result of vanity or human flaws but a desperate attempt by individuals to purchase or preserve a position of power and authority in a class society:

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<sup>7</sup> Veblen, Thorstein, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 1899, available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/833/833-h/833-h.htm#2HCH0002> [accessed: 13/11/12]

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Those members of the community who fall short of this, somewhat indefinite, normal degree of prowess or of property suffer in the esteem of their fellow-men; and consequently they suffer also in their own esteem, since the usual basis of self-respect is the respect accorded by one's neighbours.<sup>9</sup>

Veblen recognises, of course, the fact that this principle is differential and since wealth, status and quality of life are abstractions rather than concrete terms, it is impossible for most to ever win this race. Not even the dominant leisure class, which dictates good taste and the benchmark for quality of life, is exempt from this ruthless competition. This class needs to constantly prove its superiority, its ability to be liberated from demeaning labour and utilitarian consumption.

It is important to mention that the social competition described by Veblen is still capable of producing diverse and remarkable individuals and a proliferation of very different expressions of selfhood through consumption. And even though the very concept of the individual is a result of a particular social structure, the narrative of the self is still capable of producing distinct voices and forms of being. But the idea of individualism – as seen through the prism of capitalist desire in which accumulation of wealth and status (or honour in Veblen's terms) are synonymous – is nothing but a mechanism that guarantees the socio-economic dominance of the liberal capitalist model. Individuals whose accumulation of wealth is obscene and far greater than the norms of social 'decency' do not betray this system but are the purest expression of its logic, their 'lack' of morality being the strongest moral code of this system.

The notion of the author in artistic production parallels that of the individual in the larger social context. Just as the individual is an important myth that organises socio-economic forces in a particular way, so does the author operate as a kind of narrative that fulfils similar social functions in the art world. A critique of authorship was an important facet of postmodernism,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



harking back to Umberto Eco's "The Poetics of the Open Work" and Roland Barthes' "Death of the Author". Artists like Cindy Sherman and Sherrie Levine questioned patriarchal notions of authorship and used the artist's subjectivity as a canvas. But much recent critical practice seems to strive to go beyond this, seeking alternative forms of life that evade or undo authorship.<sup>10</sup>

Sidestepping the construction of authorship as approved by institutions via the canon, groups like Occupied Museums stage exhibitions like the 7<sup>th</sup> Berlin Biennale's empty room at the Kunstwerke, the aim being "to create an OPEN SPACE for everyone interested in acting politically, thinking critically, improving his/her own skills or - literally – 'changing the world'" [fig. 42].<sup>11</sup> The suggestion here is that art exhibitions should not be authored but rather operate as a support structure for spontaneous, relational activities. The individuals or groups who orchestrate these situations seem to want to fade into the background, to leave an empty stage for the activities and experiences of others.

More generally, participants in the recent 'Occupy' events placed a great emphasis on direct action and on finding new forms of political organisation that do not rely on traditional media or political representation (i.e. elections, lobbies, unions). As David Graeber explains:

Over the past decade, activists in North America have been putting enormous creative energy into reinventing their groups' own internal processes, to create viable models of what functioning direct democracy could actually look like. In this we've drawn particularly, as I've noted, on examples from outside the Western tradition, which almost invariably rely on some process of consensus finding, rather than majority vote. The result is a rich and growing panoply of organizational instruments—spokescouncils, affinity groups, facilitation tools, break-outs, fishbowls, blocking concerns, vibe-watchers and so on—all aimed at creating forms of democratic process that allow initiatives

<sup>10</sup> Eco, Umberto, *The Open Work* [Anna Cancogni – tr.], Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989; Barthes, Roland, "The Death of the Author", *Image-Music-Text* [Stephen Heath – tr.], New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1978.

<sup>11</sup> "#occupyBerlinBiennale: General concept for 15M/Occupy @7thBiennale: BERLIN group", available at: <http://takethesquare.net/2012/03/14/occupyberlinbiennale-general-concept-for-15moccupy-7thbiennale-berlin-group/> [accessed 16.11.12]

to rise from below and attain maximum effective solidarity, without stifling dissenting voices, creating leadership positions or compelling anyone to do anything which they have not freely agreed to do.<sup>12</sup>

A similar move away from political representation and the representation of political ideas can be traced in recent trends in art: like “leadership positions”, authored exhibitions are replaced with “organizational instruments” that enable ‘creative situations’. Here too we encounter a resurgent interest in direct organisation of artistic modes and structures of production that replace the critique of mediation and of the structuring and aesthetics of narratives in the political sphere. This sentiment has been strongly expressed in an essay by Hito Steyerl where the author proposes that the solution to what she refers to as ‘image spam’ that “drain[s] away your life” is to stop producing or engaging with images altogether:

This is why many people by now walk away from visual representation. Their instincts (and their intelligence) tell them that photographic or moving images are dangerous devices of capture: of time, affect, productive forces, and subjectivity. They can jail you or shame you forever; they can trap you in hardware monopolies and conversion conundrums, and, moreover, once these images are online they will never be deleted again.<sup>13</sup>

But this withdrawal from representation poses a problem for the critical treatment of the author. If Cable’s understanding of economic crisis is skewed because he does not acknowledge the fact that the individual is a socially constructed narrative, then artists who shy away from dealing with representation are incapable of responding to this narrative as a narrative, that is to say as a form of representation. The author, as Barthes observes, is not a metaphysical abstraction standing outside of the text but an effect of writing, a figure that emerges from the represented: “[...] it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality [...] to reach

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<sup>12</sup> Graeber, David, “The New Anarchists”, in: *New Left Review*, London, no. 13, January-February 2002, available at: <http://newleftreview.org/II/13/david-graeber-the-new-anarchists>

<sup>13</sup> Steyerl, Hito, “The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation”, 2012, available at: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-spam-of-the-earth>, [accessed: 13/11/2012]

that point where only language acts, ‘performs’, and not ‘me’”.<sup>14</sup> Inadvertently, the withdrawal from representation, advocated by Steyerl, enhances the humanist assumption that the author, or the individual, is a constant ground that stands outside of the performance of language, or representation. The author is construed as someone who chooses to represent reality and can therefore choose to prefer not to. But if one can choose not to be represented or captured by language, not to be present in the text, we return to the old model of authorship, Barthes’ “final signified” that “closes the reading” as it stands as an invisible border outside of the experience of the text. The author chooses not to represent an image and therefore this process of representation is itself absent, not represented. At best the withdrawal from representation can produce a kind of libertarian autarchy or autonomy that doesn’t undo or threaten the system in any way. Ultimately, the author’s status as itself a construct generated in the process of representation is obscured.

This is, of course, also an ironic position, since the refusal to engage with this system of meaning resolves itself on a higher plane of meaning: the refusal itself becomes simply another authored gesture. The short history of artists who have adopted this strategy of withdrawal from the production of authored work - from Gustav Metzger’s art strike in the 1970s to that of Stewart Home in the 1990s to Steyerl herself in her video series *Art Strike* - makes it clear that withdrawal is nothing but an ironic mechanism for establishing a kind of negative authorship [fig. 43].

This anti-representational drive plays an important role in the crisis of critique that we have described throughout this essay. In her article “Take the Money and Run? Can Political and Socio-critical Art ‘Survive’?” Martha Rosler describes the shortening of a gap between critical positions and their assimilation into a market driven global art world.<sup>15</sup> When art institutions, both private and public, are assimilating critical positions and when these positions

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<sup>14</sup> Barthes, Roland, “The Death of the Author”, *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Rosler, Martha, “Take the Money and Run? Can Political and Socio-critical Art ‘Survive’?”, in: *e-flux*, 2010, available at: [http://www.e-flux.com/journal/take-the-money-and-run-can-political-and-socio-critical-art-survive/#\\_ftn43](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/take-the-money-and-run-can-political-and-socio-critical-art-survive/#_ftn43) [accessed 11.11.12]

themselves are becoming harder to separate from the neo-liberal spirit of socio-technological innovation (finding newer ways to capture and commodify aspects of the social) contemporary art produces gestures and actions that express profound self-doubt. Unable to settle her unease about the instrumentatlisation of criticality, Rosler concludes that perhaps it is “this gap between the work’s production and its absorption and neutralisation that allows for its proper reading and ability to speak to present conditions”.<sup>16</sup> In other words, despite recognising that art cannot offer a real or radical critique anymore but only operate in the gap between critical intention and institutional neutralisation, the artist is meant to carry on producing this critique. In our writing we associate this stance with irony - a procedure in which a position or an act of speech is encased within a secondary meta-position. The prevailing irony of the contemporary art world means that artists are asked to simultaneously invest in and be suspicious of the critical potential of art, paradoxically occupying the roles of cynics and believers at the same time. This irony is also recursively productive in its own right: some artists produce work which comments on, measures, or even takes pleasure in this irony - enclosing the ironic operation of art in yet another, second, layer of critical irony. A good example of this ‘double irony’ can be found in the work of Christian Jankowski. Jankowski’s recent commission for the Frieze art fair in 2011 was a fully functioning Yacht especially designed in collaboration with the artist that, while on display at the art fair, was offered for sale at two different prices – a standard price for a buyer who wishes to purchase it as a standard luxury vehicle and a higher price for those who wish to buy it as a work of art [fig. 44]. Jankowski’s work is a playful comment on the Adornian concept of the ‘absolute commodity’, where art demonstrates the fact that value in all commodities is arbitrary and bears no relation to its production or use value. This is an ironic statement about the status of contemporary art: a luxury commodity that reflects the taste of the international millionaires who frequent art fairs and European biennials and nourish the art world with both art speculation and philanthropic activities. The difference in price between buying the Yacht as a luxury boat (€65m) and buying it as a work of art

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

(€75m) is asking the market to acknowledge and even participate in what Adorno called “subversive mimesis”. This is a deepening of the ironic historical narrative in which autonomous and critical works of art were captured by market forces and, against the intention of their makers, made into luxury commodities. Here, the object is already a luxury commodity while its capturing by the market is akin to a creative act: “I’m interested to see whether some collector has the capacity to push what they do to an extra level”, said Jankowski before the opening of the art fair.<sup>17</sup>

Brain Holmes calls this double irony ‘Liar’s Poker’: artists ‘bluff’ a critical position while they are fully aware that the demand for what Holmes calls ‘picture politics’ actually comes from the institutions and the market and that they can never fully act on the critical promise of their work. Holmes argues that the failure of contemporary art to offer a viable critical position derives from its dependence on an economy of representation, on a separation between artistic or political production that is embedded in, but separated from, a secondary object, image or exhibition:

The only way to go beyond the small change of individual prestige on the institutional market is to radically reverse the valuations effected by the critical gaze. And this requires an effort from a great many players of the game: a transformation of the very definition of cultural capital, a shift in the illusion of the artistic field. What is ultimately at stake is the very definition of autonomy, which can no longer be established in the sphere of representation alone.<sup>18</sup>

Holmes goes on to argue that the critique of political art presented in museums and galleries is blunt, and that “the greatest symbolic innovations are taking place in self-organization processes unfolding outside the artistic frame”.<sup>19</sup> The only relevant activities taking place in the museum are those

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<sup>17</sup> Higgins, Charlotte, “Frieze art fair puts a €10m premium on the price of a superyacht”, *The Guardian*, 12 October 2011, available at: [www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/oct/12/frieze-art-fair-2011-friezeartfair](http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/oct/12/frieze-art-fair-2011-friezeartfair) [accessed: 26.02.2013]

<sup>18</sup> Holmes, Brian, “Liar’s Poker: Representation of Politics/Politics of Representation”, *Springerlin*, 1/03, available at: [http://www.springerin.at/dyn/heft\\_text.php?textid=1276&lang=en](http://www.springerin.at/dyn/heft_text.php?textid=1276&lang=en) [accessed 18.3.13]

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

that take advantage, at least temporarily, of the organisational frameworks of the art world in order to launch direct political actions. Such activities – seminars on anti-police tactics for demonstrators, workshops in which shield making or poster printing skills are shared, the planning of a travelling “show bus to ‘bring culture to the people’” – expose the lie of the museum and force the institution to admit its real political affiliation and eject the subversives.<sup>20</sup>

While the art world wraps hollow commodities in critical discourse in order to appreciate their value, the ‘real’ community of activists and artists, outside and (temporarily) inside of art institutions, contains a more authentic type of criticality. Acts of representation, both visual and linguistic, are seen as inauthentic, sterile and incapable of producing convincing politics. In general, this platonic suspicion towards representation, traces of which can be found in the work of many of the neo-Marxist writers we have mentioned in this thesis, is structured around a separation between two types of political power. The art market and the corporate world harness the corrupting powers of ideology - transforming a socio-economic reality grounded in materialist truths into a system of exploitation and thereby capturing the radical potential of aesthetics in an inherently non-egalitarian structure. On the other hand, communities possess an organic power that stems from a direct engagement with social forms of life not yet captured by the representational powers of capitalist institutions.

This bias against representation means that acts of direct intervention in the structures of the art world and alternative models of artistic production are often seen as more critical. Rosler cites the recent proliferation of art collectives as another futile gesture: “Young artists perennially reinvent the idea of collaborative projects, which are the norm in the rest of the world of work and community and only artificially discouraged, for the sake of artistic entrepreneurship and ‘signature control’, in the art-market world”.<sup>21</sup> Holmes mentions Thomas Hirschhorn as an example of such an artist who, while

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Rosler, Martha, “Take the Money and Run? Can Political and Socio-critical Art ‘Survive’?”, Ibid.

presenting critical art against global capitalism received the “Young Swiss Artist” award sponsored by a major Swiss financial corporation. Hirschhorn is opposed here to a plethora of artist-activist organisations: Yo-Mango, ®™ark, Reclaim the Streets, Kein Mensch ist illegal, Ne pas plier, Communication Guerrilla, London Indymedia. These anonymous groups choose to reject singular authorship and prefer to work collaboratively. While practices based on what Holmes calls “picture politics” (ones in which political concerns are represented pictorially rather than directly enacted) have to engage with the ironic mechanisms of the commodification of critique and with the compromised structures of the art world, these groups at least attempt to make it harder for the art market to collect political work under the reactionary banner of an authorial voice. In so doing, they mis-understand their own representational status. By functioning in any kind of relation to art, they mark themselves as representations of ideas. The materials might be ‘real people’, but these practices still operate to convey concepts just like any other art form. Insofar as they are discussed in an art context, and whatever their ‘real’ political effects, they cannot but produce representations, whether literary (in their description by writers like Holmes) or visual (in the images that an internet search for these groups might conjure).

In place of this ‘pre-figurative’ politics, which attempts to produce microtopian communities in the present, we are arguing for a recognition of the power of representation, if not to illustrate alternative ways of being then at least to unravel the ideological underpinnings of the way things are, all too often taken to be the way things always have been and can only ever be. This does not require an evasion of authorship but an understanding that authorship is only ever retrospective, institutionally captured despite one’s best attempts. Accepting this historical irony does not necessitate acting in bad faith, cynically, but rather splitting existing structures from within so as to make way for new ideas to emerge. This kind of overidentification cannot be reduced to a formula that parodies these structures. Instead it requires a more refined analysis of their appeal that can separate desire and promise from their betrayal.

There are two main contemporary strategies that deal with the problem of authorship in contemporary art. The first prefers to ignore the author and the author's position in relation to markets or institutions altogether. Instead, the critical potential of the work alone is considered as relevant and any discussion of its production and, more importantly, its reception is marginal. For those who adhere to this view, it does not matter that certain artists cater to an elite of art connoisseurs. This disavowal does not, however, succeed in removing the artwork from such externalities. We might no longer be the naïve readers described by Roland Barthes in "The Death of the Author", for whom the text bears a direct relationship to the author's biography, but nor can we divorce an artwork from its context.<sup>22</sup> The second, competing approach would therefore lay claim to a rejection of authorship that does not disavow context, but rather asserts a kind of multiple or anonymised authorship to counter the inherent individualism of the concept. Here, too, though, we find authorship re-asserting itself through the institutions that regulate the intelligibility of art.

In "What is an Author", Michel Foucault remarks that the author is an ideological device that controls the flow and proliferation of meaning. This device ties together disparate types of discourse and instances of speech; it is the framework in which a body of work is given a place and a sense of cohesion and progression. The author is "a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses", a function that is not divorced from the mechanisms of the culture industry.<sup>23</sup> For Foucault, the author is not simply a cipher that helps cultural markets turn certain gestures into commodities. Rather, the author functions as the law that constitutes its own outside, the organisational power that operates on the endless diversity of expression that is possible. Perhaps in the future it would be possible to negate the author as the bearer of the bourgeois ideal of "individualism and private property", but even then, when "fiction and its polysemous texts will

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<sup>22</sup> Barthes, Roland, "The Death of the Author", *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Foucault, Michel, "What is an Author", in: *The Foucault Reader*, New York: Vintage, 1984, p. 119.



once again function according to another mode”, this mode will still be “with a system of constraint”.<sup>24</sup>

The transgression of the law, the refusal to acknowledge its bounds, does not inherently change its structure and operation. The anti-authorship position maintains that a place outside of the law, outside of power, exists, yet we have already seen in this thesis that this outside is constructed by the very system it both negates and founds. In the first chapter, we have presented a strand of critique that addresses the notion of ‘human rights’ - the rights of those who are not in a civic relationship with the institutions of power of the state and its laws. Those individuals, like uprooted refugees who are still, barely, protected by the legal system of a state, are therefore given exceptional rights that are derived from an abstract universal power external to the state. The political theology in which an outside to state power is used by the state in relation to a certain population is, for writers like Arendt, Foucault and Agamben, one of the defining features of modern sovereignty. The law constituted by the ‘function of the author’ is not different. Those who wish to reject authorship are still subjected to the power of a constituting institution regulating this operation. In relation to human rights, this institution is the modern sovereign state; in contemporary art, it is the museum, the gallery, the market or the art magazine. The state still gives rights to those who are not citizens in order to separate them from ‘animals’; the museum and the market author instances of rejection in order to mark them as ‘meaningful’ and remove them from Foucault’s chaotic and contingent “proliferation of meaning”. In other words, artistic authorship becomes a curatorial function of the institutions of art and their power is only heightened by their ability to collect voices who present themselves as speaking from the outside and give them a place and ascribe to them meaning.

To resist the dialectics of the law and its exclusions, to avoid becoming subjects that stand outside of, and yet legitimise, the institution, artists must deal with authorship directly as a ‘function of fiction’. This is, for Foucault, a

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

central aspect of thinking about art, since it is through the 'author function' that art is brought into close proximity with power. The humanist narrative of neo-liberalism organises, edits and selects a point of view, cutting through the vast and complex socio-economic systems in which we operate and bundling them together in a myth of the individual. It offers a fictive focus to what would otherwise be experienced by the subjects of neo-liberalism as a rigidly controlled, and at the same time, arbitrary structure. In post-Fordist economies, the humanist 'individual function' is very close to the 'author function'. Foucault notes that the author is a way of negotiating ownership in a market of meaning in which discourses, like commodities, are "objects of appropriation" that flicker between use value and exchange value.<sup>25</sup> In post-Fordist economies, this question is even more acute. Theoretically the horizon of neo-liberal reification is limitless – value can be extracted from every, and even the most abstract, linguistic gesture. Isolating certain linguistic moments in the flow of the 'murmur of the workers' and establishing ownership over them is a vital socio-economic function. To be a successful, productive individual one must collect disparate and unique moments under the banner of authorship.

In an article published in *Frieze* magazine, Boris Groys, following Foucault, argues that modernity produces subjectivity through the regulation of visibility by means of surveillance, a human internalisation of the divine gaze. However, this subjectivisation remains partial, as bureaucratic mechanisms of control can never be as totalising as the oversight of a God. Since any artistic activity can now be art as long as it feeds into the cultural capital building enterprise of an artist, artists are particularly adept, according to Groys, at mastering and manipulating their own visibility. The self-exposure of artists therefore attempts to fill the gaps left by the instruments of the state, the media and society in general. In what could be described as an overidentification with this process, the artist enacts an excessive self-exposure that reveals "the impossibility of expressing one's own natural

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

subjectivity".<sup>26</sup> Groys uses the example of Hugo Ball's performance of sound poetry reading to illustrate this in similar terms to ours. However, for Groys, the artist holds a unique capacity to respond to the pressures the society of control:

The artist is primarily a specialist in exposure and self-exposure. Thus, if everybody else may be an involuntary subject (controlled by power and the system), the artist is, as it were, a professional subject.<sup>27</sup>

As we have contended throughout this dissertation, under the conditions of post-Fordism, the artist can no longer lay claim to such a specialism or professionalism. In a sense, everyone is now professional subject.

Because value under post-Fordism is derived directly from human capacity, irony has only very limited critical currency in relation to the problem of authorship. The way irony produces a gap in discourse between two possible readings and then dissolves it on a higher level and cancels it out, is not far off Foucault's understanding of authorship as the function that unifies and collects different forms of discourse, different ways of reading. Irony is the moment in which a proliferation of readings is reified. As a result, in order to retain efficacy, artistic critique needs to incorporate an over-identification with the author precisely as a function of power. If the author, like the individual, is the hollow centre of a fiction that nourishes the power of institutions and markets, artistic critique can invert this equation. Rather than thinking about authorship as something that is captured and commodified by institutions, the author must be understood as the ideological core of art institutions. NSK, for example, is such an institution that unifies the fiction of artistic authorship and the fiction of power: simply by authoring a fiction of a state, they have created a 'real' performance of a legitimating and separating power. NSK's 'state in time' began issuing passports in 1992, as the former Yugoslavia was

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<sup>26</sup> Groys, Boris, "Artistic Self-Exposure", *Frieze*, Issue 1, Summer 2011, available at: <http://frieze-magazin.de/archiv/features/kuenstlerische-selbstenthuellung/?lang=en> [accessed 20.3.13]

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

dissolving into a number of new national territorial entities. The little black booklet bearing a fairly convincing hot foil stamp of the kind of elaborate logo that tends to appear on East-European identification documents is an almost believable artefact designed to look convincing [fig. 45]. But although no more valid than a painting on a canvas as a means of travel, it has still had the rather incredible consequence of having forced the Slovenian state to publish the following statement on its website:

NSK Passport is not an official passport of the Republic of Slovenia. NSK Passport is a sort of a cultural project and has nothing to do with the official passports of the Republic of Slovenia.<sup>28</sup>

During the war years, it was rumoured that some people managed to flee Yugoslavia using diplomatic NSK passports. More recently, a flood of requests for passports from Nigeria has raised suspicions amongst both NSK and the Slovenian authorities. However, when representatives of NSK visited, they found that the Nigerian citizens who had been eagerly purchasing NSK passports were frequently aware of these documents' status, claiming that it was still useful to have more than one passport in Nigeria, while others explained that they knew people who had already been there and said that it is a beautiful country.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, the Nigerians who have purchased the passport are responding to the same legitimising mechanism of any state built on the power to separate between those who belong to it and those who do not: as Inke Arns writes, "in Nigeria, the NSK passport functioned not so much as a 'confirmation of temporal space' but as a material vessel for something spiritual—a fierce hope in the possibility of a better future".<sup>30</sup> When the *Sapuers* dress in an overtly European and fashionable manner, they too simply ask to partake in the fiction of globalism that already designates them non-Europeans but promises that anyone is a master of one's own fortune.

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<sup>28</sup> General notice available at: [http://www.london.embassy.si/index.php?id=1718&L=&no\\_cache=1&sword\\_list\[\]=nsk](http://www.london.embassy.si/index.php?id=1718&L=&no_cache=1&sword_list[]=nsk) [accessed 9.1.11].

<sup>29</sup> Arns, Inke, "The Nigerian Connection: On NSK Passports as Escape and Entry Vehicles", *e-flux*, #34, 04/2012, available at: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-nigerian-connection-on-nsk-passports-as-escape-and-entry-vehicles/> [accessed 18.3.13]

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

One final example through which we can think this distinction is Kurt Schwitters' "Ursonate". Retaining the strict structure of a sonnet, Schwitters replaces all content with nonsensical syllables. However, rather than proclaiming the end of the sonnet, he declares his poem a primary form, the ur-sonnet. With this move, Schwitters does not expose the form as void, but on the contrary, as an ideological mechanism that takes precedence over any words that might fill it. The "Ursonate" doesn't negate the sonnet or destroy it, but splits it into constitutive parts that no longer support each other. For Evan Calder Williams, this operation is the essence of what he calls salvagepunk. This, he writes, is not a postmodern, a-historic sampling: "It is a modernist project never fully started".<sup>31</sup> And yet the kernel of this project, for Williams, is to be found in Schwitters' concept of *Merz*. Williams is less interested in the designation of Dada as art, anti-art or non-art, as described above, but in the way *Merz* cuts out the 'with' of *com-merce* to leave the broken objects of past social relations ready for reappropriation and retro-fitting. Distinguishing this from mere up-cycling, Williams insists that this is a way "to relate to what has been ruined, yet persists", the only way of dismantling a system that confronts us as a totality to which there is no outside, one that is not temporarily 'in crisis', but inherently apocalyptic.<sup>32</sup> Williams, following the same text by Badiou that we have already referenced in our third chapter, describes capitalism as bringing into existence "a world of the non-dialectical Two (there is only that which is capital and that which might become capital [...])".<sup>33</sup> He continues:

All this under the shifting veil that insists that the world is global now, that it's a tremendous heterogeneous One. Our thoughts must be dialectical exactly because capitalism itself is not [...].<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Calder Williams, Evan, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse*, Winchester: Zero Books, 2011, p. 41.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

We have attempted earlier to outline the kind of inverse dialectic that might be adequate to this problem. For Williams, what is at stake is finding out “what’s worth saving in the One that was never visible”.<sup>35</sup> In recognising that history is always also a re-writing, we might add to this demand the need to understand the role of fiction in this process of remaking from the wreckage. Rather than escaping institutions and totalities, we need to unpick them by retelling their stories while re-arranging their words.

If the Yes Men construct a fake corporation, they are at pains to show they are actually just two pranksters. By contrast NSK’s organigram, a diagram implying an organisation of more departments than it actually has members, proposes a complex bureaucracy that has a kind of reality despite its limited means and constituency [fig. 46]. Bureaucracy is not simply ridiculed, but placed centre stage as an artefact. The elaborate costumes of the *Sapeurs* do not invalidate the power of clothing to define class and status: these structures remain in place, but their lexical components cease to have a stable meaning through this specific utilisation. The institution is not merely empty, it is populated by members who have lost their job descriptions and can no longer continue its smooth operation. As we have attempted to show, these tactics are not necessarily new phenomena. There are precedents for what we have defined as overidentification, following Žižek but not always adhering to his version very strictly. In searching for a model for artistic critique that diverges from much of contemporary art practice, we have looked backwards as much as forwards. Variations on the theme of the particular approach we have taken to dialectics have surfaced throughout modernity, but have frequently not taken hold. Our task has been to unearth these ur-forms as much as contest the present understanding of critique by suggesting existing and future, speculative alternatives.

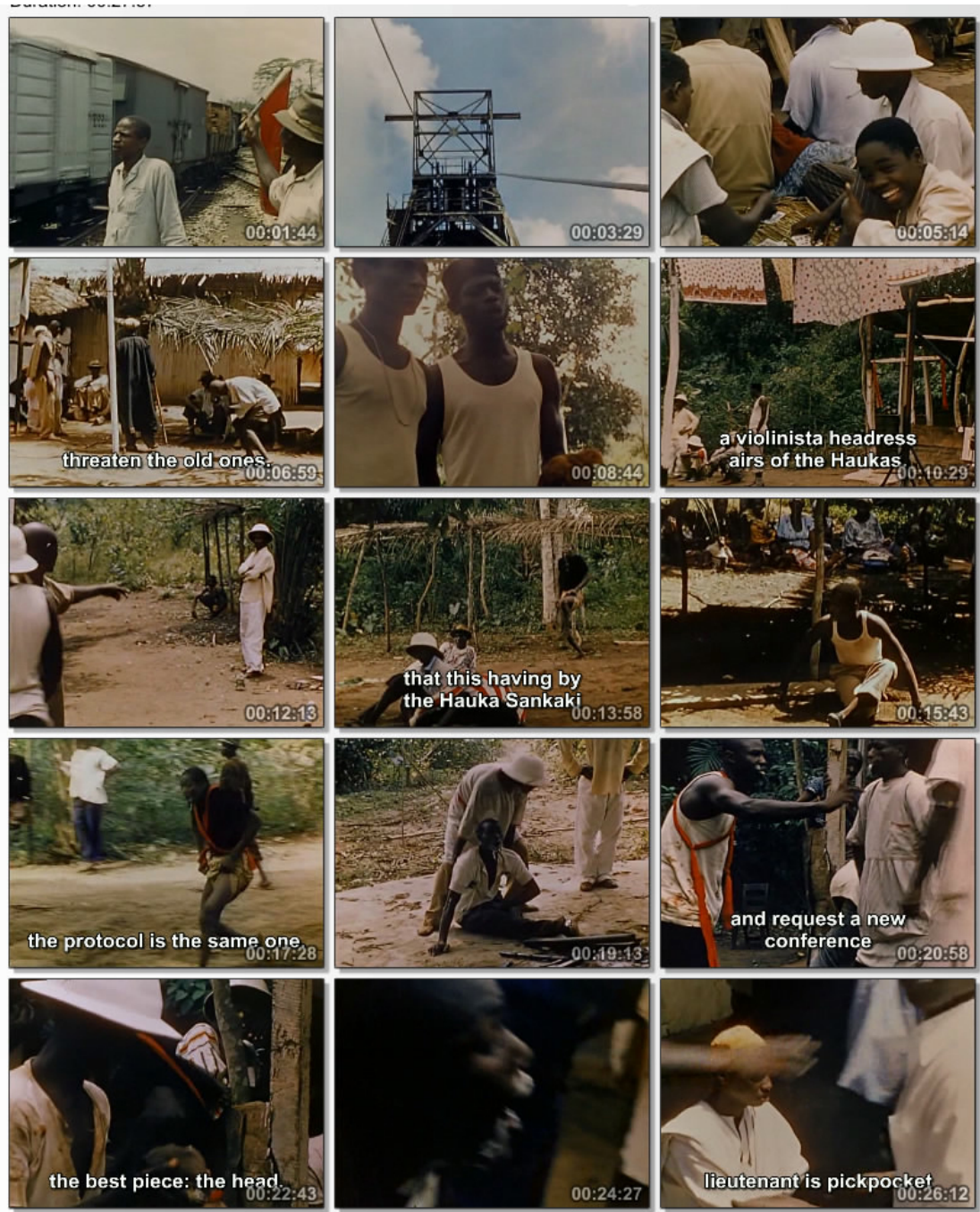
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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

## Illustrations



**Fig 1.: NSK logo, from the exhibition *Neue Slowenische Kunst 1984-1992* at Chelsea Space, London, 20. Mar - 21. Apr 12 2012.**



**Fig 2.: Stills from *Les Maîtres Fous* by Jean Rouch, 1955**



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***Fig. 3: Sapeur, from The Gentlemen of Bacongo by Daniele Tamagni,  
London: Trolley Books, 2009***



***Fig. 4: Hans Haacke, Der Bevölkerung, 2000 – ongoing.***



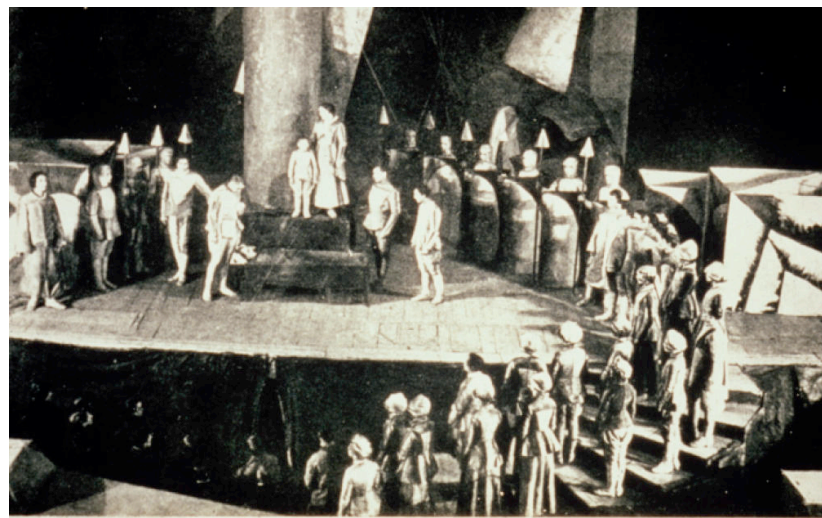
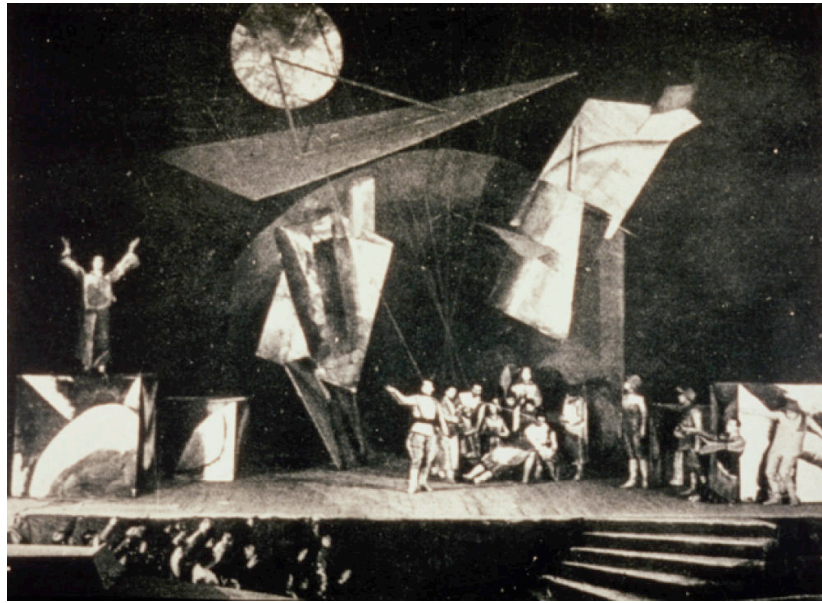
**Fig. 5: Marcel Janco, Untitled (Mask - Portrait of Tzara), 1919**



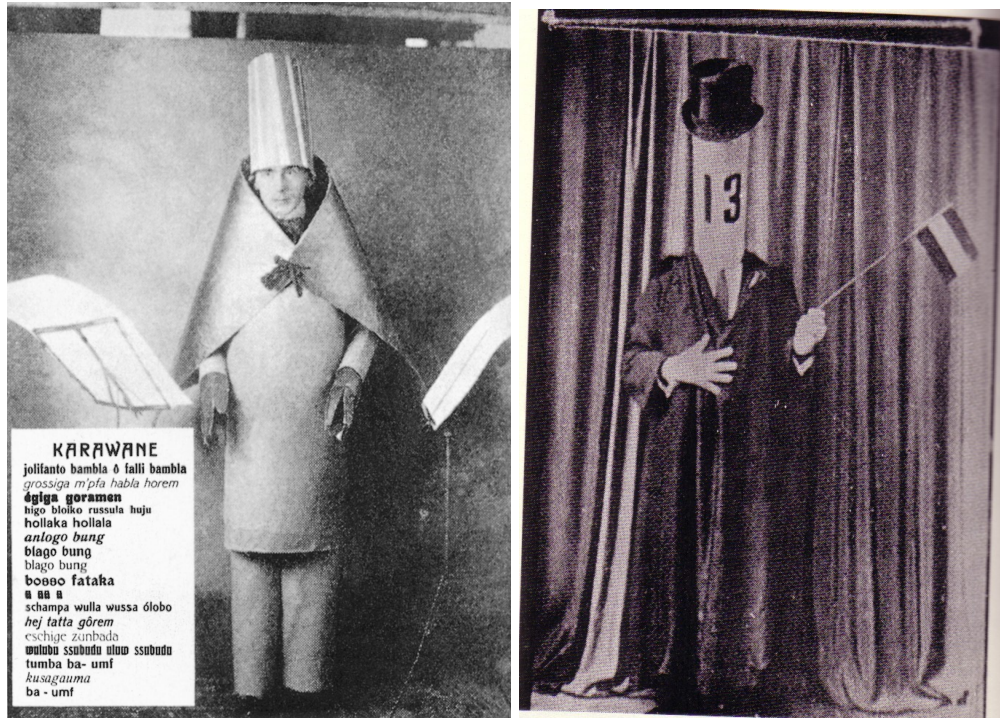
**Fig. 6: Romanian folk mask**



*Fig. 7: Vladimir Tatlin, Model for Monument to the Third International, 1920*



***Fig. 8, 9: Vsevolod Meyerhold, The Dawn, 1920***



**Fig. 10, 11: Hugo Ball at the Cabaret Voltaire, 1916**



**Fig. 12: Marcel Janco, Cabaret Voltaire, Photographic reproduction, ca. 1916**



*Fig. 13: Vsevolod Meyerhold, The Magnanimous Cuckold, 1922*



*Fig. 14: Cinema Train, 1932-1934*

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# "Jedermann sein eigener Fussball"

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Deutsche Manneschönheit 1 (Verf. Otto G)

# Die Sozialisierung der Parteifonds

Eine Forderung zum Schutze vor allgemein üblichem Wahlbetrug

(Diese Ausführungen sollen den Unfug unserer Nationalversammlung selbst vom Gesichtspunkt der Demokraten aus illustrieren, jener Leute, die meinen, ein Volk dürfe keine Regierung besitzen, deren Niveau dem seines eigenen Durchschnitts überlegen ist.)

Man mag Demokrat sein, deutsch-sozialistischer Untertan oder Kommunist, man mag mit Schiller sagen: Verstand ist stets bei wenigen nur gewesen oder behaupten auf jede Stimme komme es (sogar mit Recht) an, die Tatsache wird man nicht bestreiten: Wahlen gehören zu den ge-

Fig. 15: John Heartfield, *Every Man his own Football*, 1919





**Fig. 16: Alexander Brener's defacement of Kazimir Malevich's *Suprematisme 1920-1927*, 1997**



**Fig. 17: Vito Acconci, *Following Piece*, 1969**

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***Fig. 18: Jeff Koons, Louis XIV, Stainless steel, 117 x 68 x 38 cm, 1986***

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**Fig. 19: Jeff Koons, *Flowers*, Stainless steel, 32 x 45 x 31 cm, 1986**

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**Fig. 20: Elmgreen & Dragset, *Celebrity - The One & the Many* Installation view, ZKM | Museum of Contemporary Art, 2011**

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**Fig. 21: Gavin Turk, *NOMAD*  
painted bronze, 42 x 169 x 105 cm., 2003**



**Fig. 22: Merlin Carpenter, *The Opening*, installation view, Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York, 2007**



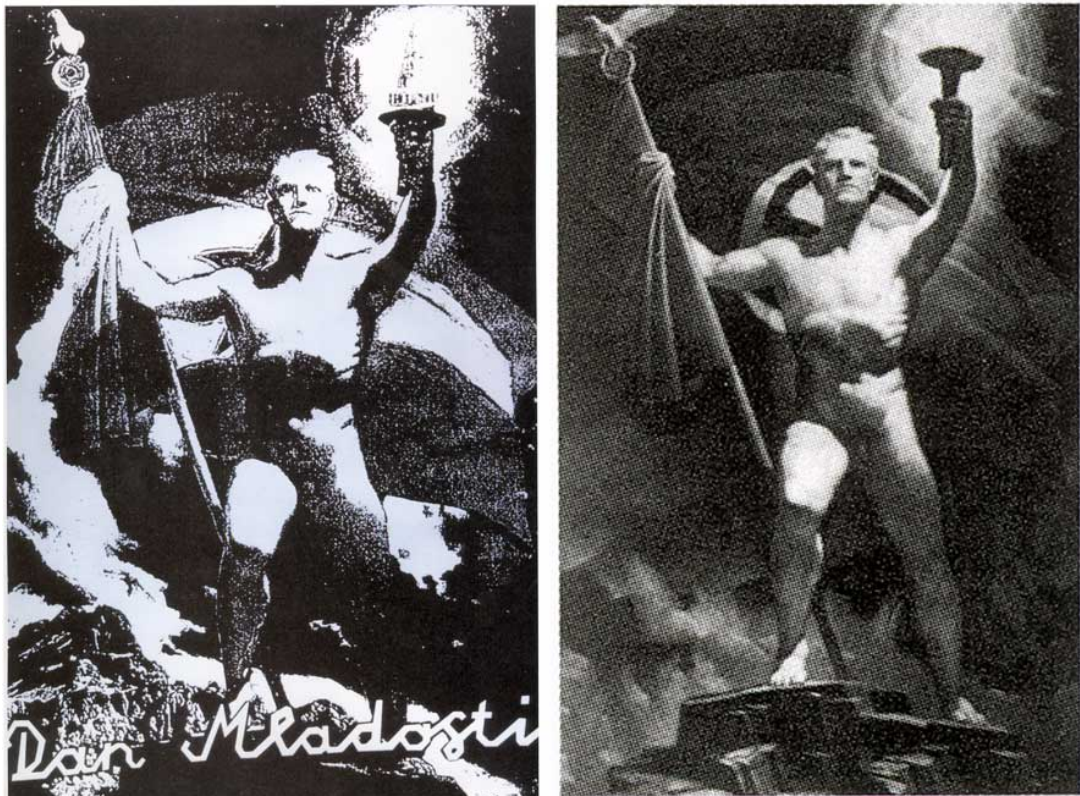
**Fig. 23: Maurizio Cattelan, *Turisti*, 200 stuffed pigeons, Venice Biennale, 1997**



**Fig. 24: Maurizio Cattelan, *Working is a Bad Job*, Venice Biennale, 1993**



*Fig. 25: Laibach television appearance on Bravo, 1984*



*Fig. 26: Novi Kolektivism, Proposal for the poster of the Youth Day, 1987, left / Richard Klein, The Third Reich, 1936, right*



**Fig. 27: Mike Bonnanno & Andy Bichlbaum, *The Yes Men*, 2009**



***Fig. 28: Andrea Fraser, Museum Highlights, live performance at Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1989***

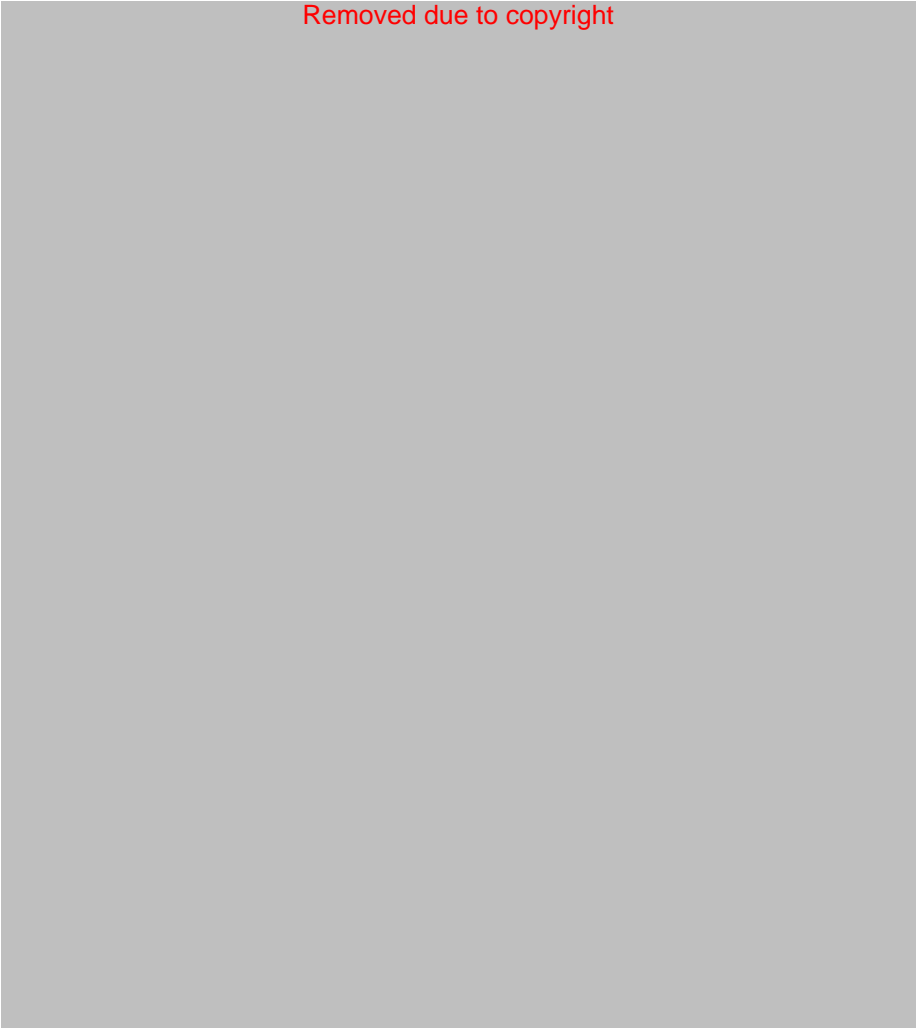


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***Fig. 29: Jenny Livingstone, Paris is Burning, 1990***

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***Fig. 30: Jenny Livingstone, Paris is Burning, 1990***

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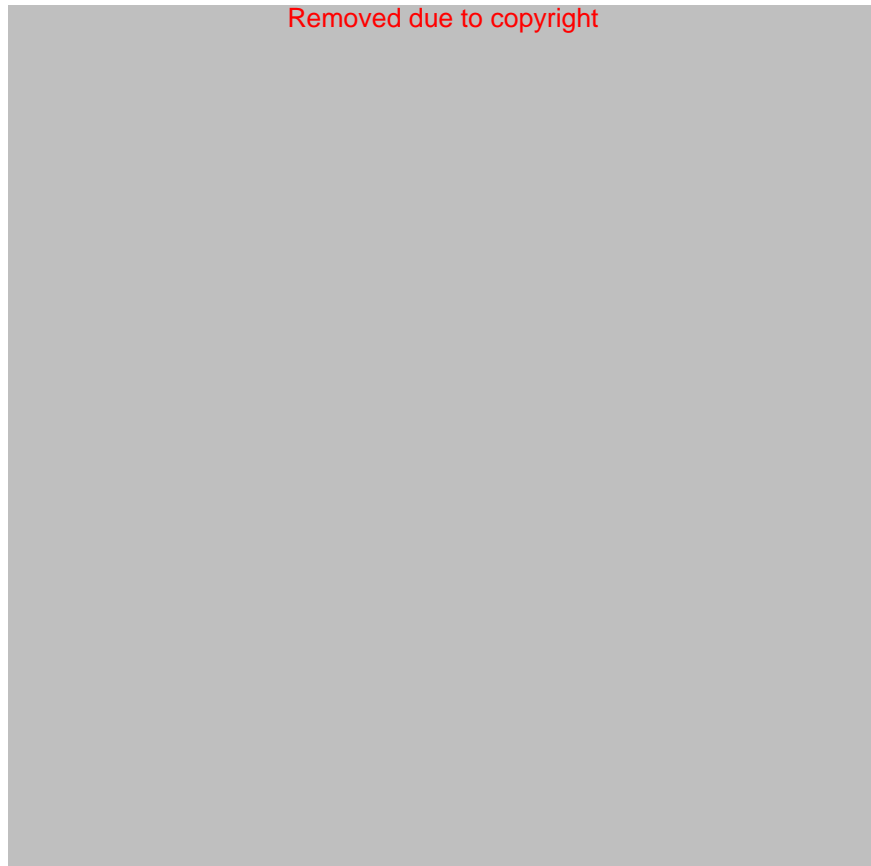


***Fig. 31: Jenny Livingstone, Paris is Burning, 1990***



**Fig. 32: Jean Rouch, *Les Maîtres Fous*, 1955**

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**Fig. 33: *Sapeur*, from *The Gentlemen of Bacongo* by Daniele Tamagni, London: Trolley Books, 2009**

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***Fig. 34: Sapeur, from The Gentlemen of Bacongo by Daniele Tamagni, London: Trolley Books, 2009***

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***Fig. 35: Sapeur, from *The Gentlemen of Bacongo* by Daniele Tamagni, London: Trolley Books, 2009***



*Fig. 36: Brian De Palma, Hi Mom!, 1970*



***Fig. 37: Public Movement, Performing Politics for Germany, Olympic Stadium, live performance produced by Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin, 2009, photograph by David Schmidt***





**Fig. 38: James Stark, *The Band Crime*, 1977**



**Fig. 39: International Exhibition of Modern Art, 2003**



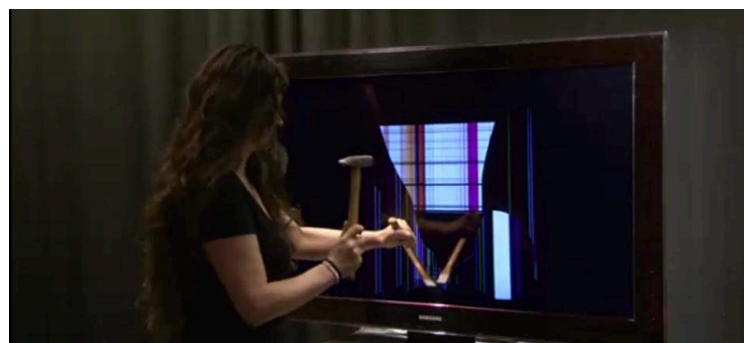
**Fig. 40: The Museum of American Art – Berlin, installation view including Alfred Barr's Museum of Modern Art, New York, (1936) Dorothy Miller, Americans (1953-58)**



**Fig. 41: Sherrie Levine, *Fountain (after Marcel Duchamp)*, 1990**



**Fig. 42: *Occupy Berlin in the Kunst Werke, Berlin Biennial, 2012.*  
Photograph: by Marcin Kalinski**



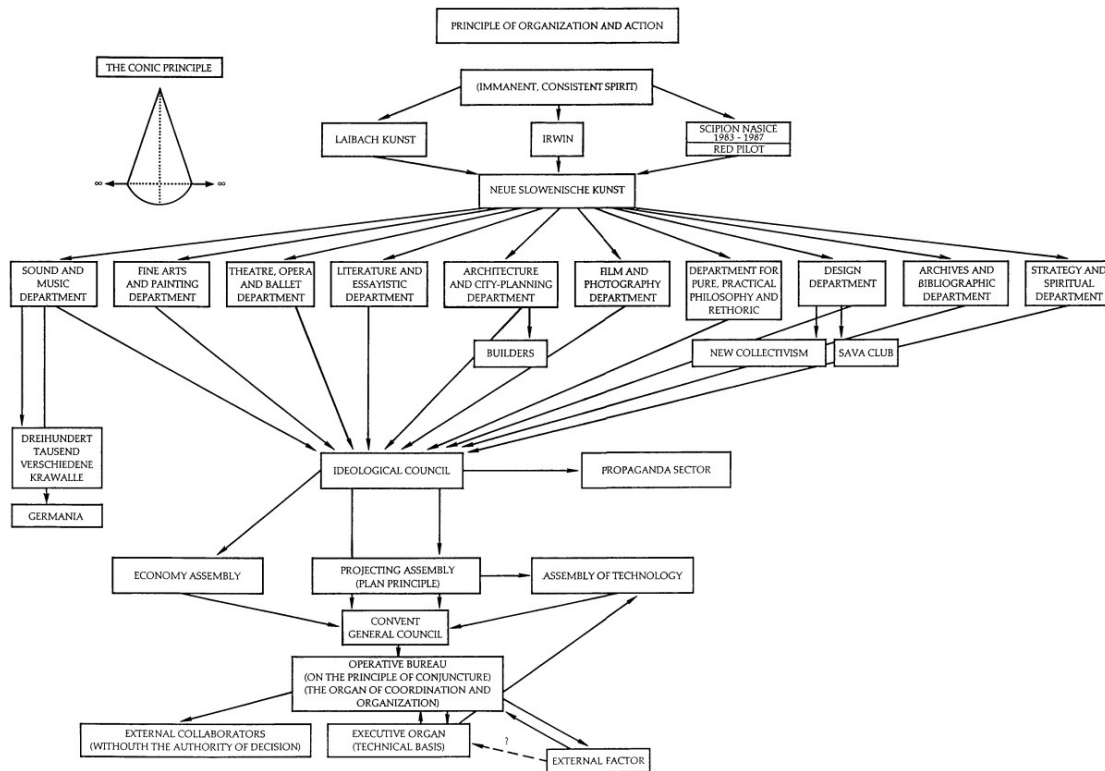
**Fig. 43: Hito Steyerl, *Strike II*, 2012**



**Fig. 44: Christian Jankowski: *The Finest Art on Water* / Frieze Projects, Frieze Art Fair, 2011**



**Fig. 45: NSK Passports, 1992 – Ongoing**



**Fig. 46: NSK Organigram**

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