

Martha Rosler

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

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e-flux journal #12 — January 2010 [Martha Rosler](#)
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Just a few months before the real estate market brought down much of the world economy, taking the art market with it, I was asked to respond to the question whether “political and socio-critical art” can survive in an overheated market environment. Two years on, this may be a good moment to revisit the parameters of such work (now that the fascination with large-scale, bravura, high wow-factor work, primarily in painting and sculpture, has cooled – if only temporarily).

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

We were talking about whether choosing to be an artist means aspiring to serve the rich. . . . that seems to be the dominating economic model for artists in this country.

The most visible artists are very good at serving the rich. . . . the ones who go to Cologne to do business seem to do the best. . . . She told me this is where Europe's richest people go

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

Members of the ascendant new class, the bourgeoisie, as they gained economic and political advantage over previous elites, also sought to adopt their elevated cultural pursuits; but these new adherents were more likely to be customers than patrons.⁴ Artists working in a variety of media and cultural registers, from high

to low, expressed positions on the political ferment of the early Industrial Revolution. One might find European artists exhibiting robust support for revolutionary ideals or displaying identification with provincial localism, with the peasantry or with the urban working classes, especially using fairly ephemeral forms (such as the low-cost prints available in great numbers); smiling bourgeois subjects were depicted as disporting and bettering themselves while decked out in the newest brushstrokes and modes of visual representation. New forms of subjectivity and sensibility were defined and addressed in different modalities (the nineteenth century saw the development of popular novels, mass-market newspapers, popular prints, theater, and art), even as censorship, sometimes with severe penalties for transgression, was sporadically imposed from above.

The development of these mass audiences compelled certain artists to separate themselves from mass taste, as Pierre Bourdieu has suggested,⁵ or to waffle across the line. Artistic autonomy, framed as a form of insurgency, came to be identified by a military term, the *avant-garde*, or its derivative, the *vanguard*.⁶ In times of revanchism and repression, of course, artists assert independence from political ideologies

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The Art Workers' Coalition (AWC) demonstration in front of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* at the MoMA in 1970.



Vittore Carpaccio, *Two Venetian Ladies*, c. 1490. Oil on Panel, 37" x 25".

and political masters through ambiguous or allegorical structures – critique by indirection. Even manifestoes for the freeing of the poetical Imagination, a potent element of the burgeoning Romantic movements, might be traced to the transformations within entrenched ideology and of sensibility itself as an attribute of the “cultivated” person. The expectation that “advanced” or vanguard art would be autonomous – independent of direct ideological ties to patrons – created a predisposition toward the privileging of its formal qualities. Drawing on the traditions of Romanticism, it also underlined its insistence on subjects both more personal and more universal – but rooted in the experiential world, not in churchly dogmas of salvation.⁷ The poetic imagination was posited as a form of knowing that vied with materialist, rationalist, and “scientific” epistemologies – one superior, moreover, in negotiating the utopian reconception and reorganization of human life.⁸ The Impressionist painters, advancing the professionalization of art beyond the bounds of simple craft, developed stylistic approaches based on interpretations of advanced optical theory, while other routes to inspiration, such as psychotropic drugs, remained common enough. Artistic avant-gardes even at their most formal

retained a utopian horizon that kept their work from being simply exercises in decor and arrangement; disengagement from recognizable narratives, in fact, was critical in advancing the claims of art to speak of higher things from its own vantage point or, more specifically, from the original and unique point of view of individual, named producers. Following John Fekete, we may interpret the positive reception of extreme aestheticism or “art for art’s sake” as a panicked late-nineteenth-century bourgeois response to a largely imaginary siege from the political left.⁹ But even such aestheticism, in its demand for absolute disengagement, offered a possible opening to an implied political critique, through the abstract, Hegel-derived, social negativity that was later a central element of the Frankfurt School, as exemplified by Adorno’s insistence, against Brecht and Walter Benjamin, that art in order to be appropriately negative must remain autonomous, above partisan political struggles.

The turn of the twentieth century, a time of prodigious industrialization and capital formation, witnessed population flows from the impoverished European countryside to sites of production and inspired millenarian conceits that impelled artists and social critics of every stripe to imagine the future. We may as well call



Erich Salomon, Haya Conference, 1930.

this modernism. And we might observe, briefly, that modernism (inextricably linked, needless to say, to modernity) incorporates technological optimism and its belief in progress, while antimodernism sees the narrative of technological change as a tale of broad civilizational decline, and thus tends toward a romantic view of nature.

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

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Paul Strand, *Portrait - New York*, 1916. Platinum print.

Photographic modernism in the United States (stemming largely from Paul Strand, but with something of a trailing English legacy),

married a documentary impulse to formal innovation. It inevitably strayed into the territory of Soviet and German photographic innovators, many of whom had utopian socialist or communist allegiances, although few of the American photographic modernists aside from Strand shared these political viewpoints. Pro-ruralist sentiments were transformed from backward-looking, romantic, pastoral longing to a focus on labor (perhaps with a different sort of romanticism) and on workers' milieux, both urban and rural.¹⁰

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

European-style avant-gardism made a fairly late appearance in the United States, but its formally inscribed social critique offered, approximately from the 1930s through the late 1940s, an updated, legible version of the

antimaterialist, and eventually anticonsumerist, critique previously offered by turn-of-the-twentieth-century antimodernism. Modernism is, inter alia, a conversation about progress, the prospects of utopia, and the fear, doubt, and horror over its costs, especially as seen from the vantage point of the members of the intellectual class. One strand of modernism led to Futurism's catastrophic worship of the machine and war (and eventually to political fascism) but also to utopian urbanism and International Style architecture.¹⁴

Modernism notoriously exhibited a kind of ambiguity or existential angst – typical problems of intellectuals, one imagines, whose identification, if any, with workers, peasants, and proletarianized farm workers is maintained almost wholly by sheer force of conviction in the midst of a very different way of life – perhaps linked experientially by related, though very different, forms of alienation. Such hesitancy, suspicion, or indifference is a fair approximation of independence – albeit “blessedly” well-behaved in not screaming for revolution – but modernism, as suggested earlier, was suffused with a belief in the transformative power of (high) art. What do (most) modern intellectual elites do if not distance themselves from power and

express suspicion, sometimes bordering on despair, of the entire sphere of life and mass cultural production (the ideological apparatuses, to borrow a term from Althusser)?¹⁵

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

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

Germany had seen itself as the pinnacle of Enlightenment culture; its wartime barbarism, including the Nazis' perverse, cruel, totalitarian re-imaginings of German history and culture, was an especial blow to the belief in the transcendent powers of culture. Postwar Europe had plenty to be critical about, but it was also staring into the abyss of existentialist angst and the loneliness of *Being and Nothingness* (and Year Zero). In Western(ized) cultures during the postwar period, a world-historical moment centering on nuclear catastrophism, communist Armageddon, and postcoloniality (empire shift), the art that seemed best equipped to carry the modernist burden was abstract painting, with its avoidance of incident in favor of formal investigations and a continued search for the sublime. In a word, it was painting by professionals, communicating in codes known only to the select few, in a conscious echo of other professional elites, such as research scientists (a favorite analogy among its admirers). Abstract painting was both serious and impeccably uninflected with political imagery, unlike the social realism of much of American interwar painting. As cultural hegemony was passing from France to the United States, critical culture was muted, taking place

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mostly at the margins, among poets, musicians, novelists, and a few photographers and social philosophers, including the New York School poets and painters, among them those who came to be called Abstract Expressionists.

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

Abstract Expressionism, like all modernist high culture, was understood to be a critical art, yet it appeared, against the backdrop of ebullient





Resistanbul protesters demonstrating on September 5, 2009.



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

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

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

Its fetishized concerns fallen by the wayside, Abstract Expressionism was superseded by Pop art, which – unlike its predecessor – stepped onto the world stage as a commercially viable mode of artistic endeavor, unburdened by the need to be anything but flamboyantly inauthentic, eschewing nature for human-made (or, more properly, corporate) “second nature.” Pop, as figured in the brilliant persona of Andy Warhol – the Michael Jackson of the 1960s – gained adulation from the masses by appearing to flatter them while spurning them. For buyers of Campbell Soup trash cans, posters of Marilyn or Jackie multiples, and banana decals, no insult was apprehended nor criticism taken, just as the absurdist costumes of Britain's mods and rockers, or even, later, the clothing

fetishes of punks or hip-hop artists, or of surfers or teen skateboarders, were soon enough taken as cool fashion cues by many adult observers – even those far from the capitals of fashion, in small towns and suburban malls.²⁰

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

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rational choice – see under conceptualism – challenged isolated genius as an essential characteristic of artists and furthered the (imaginary) alignment with workers in other fields. These were not arts of profoundly direct criticality of the social order.

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

Another exception to the prevailing reactive gambits in 1960s art was presented by two largely Paris-based neo-Dada, neo-Surrealist avant-garde movements, Lettrism and the Situationist International (SI), both of which mounted direct critiques of domination in everyday life. The SI eventually split, in good measure over whether to cease all participation in the art world, with founding member Guy Debord, a filmmaker and writer, among those who chose to abandon that milieu.²¹ Naturally, this group of rejectionists is the SI group whose appreciation in the art world was revived in the 1980s following a fresh look at Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967). The book proposes to explain, in an elegant series of numbered statements or propositions, how the commodity form has evolved into a spectacular world picture; in the postwar world, domination of the labor force (most of the world's people) by capitalist and state capitalist societies is maintained by the constant construction and maintenance of an essentially false picture of the world retailed by all forms of media, but particularly by movies, television, and the like. The spectacle, he is at pains to explain, is a relationship among people, not among images, thus offering a materialist, Marxist interpretation. Interest in Debord was

symptomatic of the general trend toward a new theoretical preoccupation with (in particular) media theory, in post-Beaux Arts, post-Bauhaus, postmodern art education in the United States beginning in the late 1970s. The new art academicism nurtured criticality in art and other forms of theory-driven production, since artists were being officially trained to teach art as a source of income to fund their production rather than simply to find markets.²²

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

The Right-Republican assault on relatively autonomous symbolic expression that began in the mid-1980s and extended into the 1990s became known as the "culture wars"; it continues, although with far less prominent attacks on art than on other forms of cultural expression.²⁴ Right-wing elites managed to stigmatize and to restrict public funding of certain types of art. Efforts to brand some work as "communist," meaning politically engaged or subversive of public order, no longer worked by the 1980s. Instead, U.S. censorship campaigns have mostly taken the form of moral panics

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meant to mobilize authoritarian-minded religious fundamentalists in the service of destroying the narrative and the reality of the liberal welfare state, of “community,” echoing the “degenerate art” smear campaigns of the Nazis. Collectors and some collecting institutions perceived the *éclat* of such work – which thematized mostly sex and sexual inequality (in what came to be called “identity politics”) as opposed to, say, questions of labor and governance, which were the targets in earlier periods of cultural combat – as a plus, with notoriety no impediment to fortune.²⁵ The most vilified artists in question have not suffered in the marketplace; on the contrary. But most public exhibiting institutions felt stung and reacted accordingly – by shunning criticality, since their funding and museum employment were tied to public funding. Subsequent generations of artists, divining that “difficult” content might restrict their entry into the success cycle, have engaged in self-censorship. Somewhat perversely, the public success of the censorship campaigns stems partly from the myth of a classless, unitary culture: the pretense that in the United States, art and culture belong to all and that very little specific knowledge or education is, or should be, necessary for understanding art. But legibility

itself is generally a matter of education, which addresses a relatively small audience already equipped with appropriate tools of decipherment, as I have claimed throughout the present work and elsewhere.

But there is another dimension to this struggle over symbolic capital. The art world has expanded enormously over the past few decades and unified to a great degree, although there are still local markets. This market is “global” in scope and occupied with questions very far from whether its artistic practices are political or critical. But thirty years of theory-driven art production and critical reception – which brought part of the discursive matrix of art inside the academy, where it was both shielded from and could appear to be un-implicated in the market, thereby providing a cover for direct advocacy – helped produce artists whose practices were themselves swimming in a sea of criticality and apparently anti-commodity forms.²⁶ The term “political art” reappeared after art world commentators used it to ghettoize work in the 1970s, with some hoping to grant such work a modicum of respectability while others wielded it dismissively, but for the most part its valence was drifting toward positive. Even better were other, better-behaved forms of “criticality,”



Art Basel Miami. Photo Bill Wisser.

such as the nicely bureaucratic-sounding “institutional critique” and the slightly more ominous “interventionism.” I will leave it to others to explore the nuances of these (certainly meaningful) distinctions, remarking only that the former posits a location within the very institutions that artists were attempting to outwit in the 1960/70s, whereas the latter posits its opposite, a motion outside the institution – but also staged from within. These, then, are not abandonments of art world participation but acceptance that these institutions are the proper – perhaps the only – platform for artists.²⁷ A further sign of such institutionality is the emergence of a curatorial subgenre called “new institutionalism” (borrowing a term from a wholly unrelated branch of sociology) that encompasses the work of sympathetic young curators wishing to make these “engaged” practices intramural.

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

Perhaps a more general consideration of the nature of work itself and of education is in order. I have suggested that we are witnessing the abandonment of the model of art education as a search for meaning (and of the liberal model of higher education in general) in favor of what has come to be called the success model . . . “Down with critical studies!” Many observers have commented on the changing characteristics of the international work force, with especial attention to the “new flexible personality,” an ideal worker type for a life without job security, one who is able to construct a marketable personality and to persuade employers of one’s adaptability to the changing needs of the job market. Commentators like Brian Holmes (many of them based in Europe) have noted the applicability of this model to art and intellectuals.²⁸ Bill Readings, until his death a

Canadian professor of comparative literature at the Université de Montréal, in his posthumously published book, *The University in Ruins* (1997), observes that universities are no longer “guardians of the national culture” but effectively empty institutions that sell an abstract notion of excellence.²⁹ The university, Readings writes, is “an autonomous bureaucratic corporation” aimed at educating for “economic management” rather than “cultural conflict.” The Anglo-American urban geographer David Harvey, reviewing Readings’ book in the *Atlantic Monthly*, noted that the modern university “no longer cares about values, specific ideologies, or even such mundane matters as learning how to think. It is simply a market for the production, exchange, and consumption of useful information – useful, that is, to corporations, governments, and their prospective employees.”³⁰ In considering the “production of subjectivity” in this context, Readings writes – citing the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben – that it is no longer a matter of either shop-floor obedience or managerial rationality but rather the much touted “flexibility,” “personal responsibility,” “communication skills,” and other similarly “abstract images of affliction.”³¹

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

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

Virno argues that the new forms of globalized “flexible labor” allow for the creation of new forms of democracy. The long-established dyads of public/private and collective/individual no longer have meaning, and collectivity is enacted

in other ways. The multitude and immaterial labor produce subjects who occupy “a middle region between ‘individual and collective’” and so have the possibility of engineering a different relationship to society, state, and capital. It is tempting to assign the new forms of communication to this work of the creation of “a radically new form of democracy.”

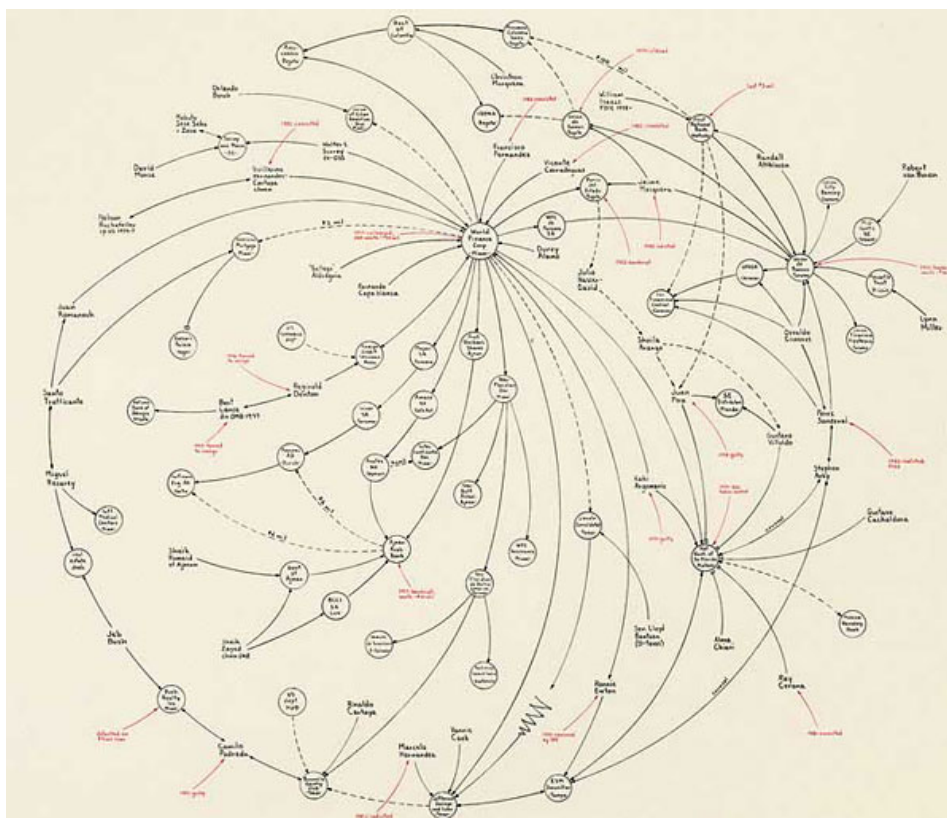
Let us tease out of these accounts of the nature of modern labor – in an era in which business types (like Richard Florida) describe the desired work force, typically urban residents, as “creatives” – some observations about artists-in-training: art students have by now learned to focus not on an object-centered brand signature so much as on a personality-centered one. The cultivation of this personality is evidently seen by some anxious school administrators – feeling pressure to define “art” less by the adherence of an artist’s practice to a highly restricted discourse and more in the terms used for other cultural objects – as hindered by critical studies and only to be found behind a wall of craft. (*Craft* here is not to be understood in the medieval sense, as bound up in guild organization and the protection of knowledge that thereby holds down the number of practitioners, but as reinserted into the context of individualized, bravura

production – commodity production in particular.) Class and study time give way to studio preparation and exposure to a train of invited, and paid, reviewers/critics (with the former smacking of boot camp, and the latter sending up whiffs of corruption).

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

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

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Mark Lombardi, *World Finance Corporation*, Miami, Florida, c. 1970-79 (6th Version), 1999, Graphite and Colored Pencil on Paper, 35.5 x 46.25", detail.

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

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

More important have been the two other temporary but recurrent, processual developments. First came the hypostatizing biennials of the 1990s. Their frantic proliferation has elicited derision, but these international exhibitions were a necessary moment in the integration of the art system, allowing local institutional players to put in their chips. The biennials have served to insert an urban locale, often of some national significance, into the international circuit, offering a new physical site attracting art and art world members, however temporarily. That the local audience is educated about new international style imperatives is a secondary effect to the elevation of the local venue itself to what might crudely be termed “world class” status; for the biennials to be truly effective, the important audience must arrive from elsewhere. The biennial model provides not only a physical circuit but also a regime of

production and normalization. In “peripheral” venues it is not untypical for artists chosen to represent the local culture to have moved to artist enclaves in fully “metropolitan,” “first world” cities (London, New York, Berlin, Paris – regarded as portals to the global art market/system), before returning to their countries of origin to be “discovered.” The airplane allows a continued relationship with the homeland; expatriation can be prolonged, punctuated by time back home. This condition, of course, defines migrant and itinerant labor of all varieties under current conditions, as it follows the flow of capital.”³⁶

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

We have to stop pretending that the popularity of politically engaged art within the museums and markets over the last few years has anything to do with really changing the world. We have to stop pretending that taking risks in the space of art, pushing boundaries of form, and disobeying the conventions of culture, making art about politics makes any difference. We have to stop pretending that art is a free space, autonomous from webs of capital and power. . . .

We have long understood that the Istanbul Biennial aims at being one of the most politically engaged transnational art events. . . . This year the Biennial is quoting comrade Brecht, dropping notions such as neoliberal hegemony, and riding high against global capitalism. We kindly appreciate the stance but we recognize that art should have never existed as a separate category from life. Therefore we are writing you to stop collaborating with arms dealers. . . .

The curators wonder whether Brecht’s question “What Keeps Mankind Alive” is equally urgent today for us living under the neoliberal hegemony. We add the question: “What Keeps Mankind Not-Alive?” We acknowledge the urgency in these times when we do not have the right to work, we do not get free healthcare and education, our right to our cities, our squares, and streets are taken by corporations, our land,

our seeds and water are stolen, we are driven into precarity and a life without security, when we are killed crossing their borders and left alone to live an uncertain future with their potential crises. But we fight. And we resist in the streets not in corporate spaces reserved for tolerated institutional critique so as to help them clear their conscience. We fought when they wanted to kick us out of our neighborhoods

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

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

The Resistanbul Commissariat of Culture message ends as follows:

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

Long live global insurrection!

This “open letter” underlines the criticism to which biennials or any highly visible exhibitions open themselves when they purport to take on political themes, even if participants and visitors are unlikely to receive such e-mailed messages.⁴⁰ As the letter implies, dissent and dissidence that fall short of insurrection and unruliness are quite regularly incorporated into

exhibitions, as they are into institutions such as universities in liberal societies; patronizing attitudes, along the lines of “Isn’t she pretty when she’s angry!” are effective – even President Bush smilingly called protesters’ shouts a proof of the robustness of “our” freedom of speech while they were being hustled out of the hall where he was speaking. But I suggest that the undeniable criticisms expressed by Resistanbul do not, finally, invalidate the efforts of institutional reform, however provisional. All movements against an institutional consensus are dynamic, and provisional. (And see below.)

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

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

Predictions about the road to artistic success in this scene are easy to make, because ultimately shoppers are in for a quick fix (those Russians!) and increasingly are unwilling to spend quality time in galleries learning about

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

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

A final common feature of this new global art is a readily graspable multiculturalism that creates a sort of United Nations of global voices on the menu of art production. Multiculturalism, born as an effort to bring *difference* out of the negative column into the positive with regard to qualities of citizens, long ago became also a bureaucratic tool for social control, attempting to render difference cosmetic. Difference was long ago pegged as a marketing tool in

constructing taste classes; in a business book of the 1980s on global taste, the apparently universal desire for jeans and pizza (and later, Mexican food) was the signal example: the marketable is different but not *too* different. In this context, there is indeed a certain bias toward global corporate internationalism – that is, neoliberalism – but that of course has nothing to do with whether "content providers" identify as politically left, right, independent, or not at all. Political opinions, when they are manifested, can become mannerist tropes.

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

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

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

x

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

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

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

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e-flux journal #12 — January 2010 Martha Rosler
Take the Money and Run? Can Political and Socio-critical Art “Survive”?

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

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

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

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

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

6
The first application of the term

to art is contested, some dating it as late as the Salon des Refusés of 1863.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

14
Modernist linguistic experiments are beyond my scope here.

15
This is to overlook the role of that major part of the intellectual class directly

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

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

17
Ibid., 53.

18
Ibid., 53–54.

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

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

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

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

23
Again channeling Althusser.

24
The "culture wars" are embedded in a broader attempt to delegitimize and demonize

social identities, mores, and behaviors whose public expression was associated with the social movements of the 1960s, especially in relation to questions of difference.

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

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

27
A favorite slogan of the period was "There is no outside." Another, more popularly recognizable slogan might be "Think different," a slogan that attempts to harness images of powerful leaders of social movements or "pioneers" of scientific revolutions for the service of commodity branding, thus suggesting motion "outside the box" while attempting never to leave it. See the above remarks on Bürger and the theory of the avant-garde.

28
See Brian Holmes, "The Flexible Personality: For a New Cultural Critique" (2001), <http://theadventure.be/node/253>, or at <http://www.16beavergroup.org/pdf/fp.pdf>, and numerous other sites; Holmes added a brief forward to its publication at eipcp (European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies), <http://transform.eipcp.net/t-ransversal/1106/holmes/en#re-dir>.

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

30
David Harvey, "University, Inc.," review of *The University in Ruins*, by Bill Readings, *The Atlantic* (October 1998). Available online at <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/98oct/ruins.htm>. Nothing could be more indicative of the post-Fordist conditions of intellectual labor and the readying of workers for the knowledge industry than the struggle over the U.S.' premier public university, the University

of California system, the birthplace of the “multiversity” as envisioned by Clark Kerr in the development of the UC Master Plan at the start of the 1960s. State public universities, it should be recalled, were instituted to produce homegrown professional elites; but remarkably enough, as the bellwether California system was undergoing covert and overt privatization and being squeezed mightily by the state government’s near insolvency, the system’s president blithely opined that higher education is a twentieth-century issue, whereas people today are more interested in health care, and humorously likened the university to a cemetery (Deborah Solomon, “Big Man on Campus: Questions for Mark Yudoff, *New York Times Magazine*, September 24, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/27/magazine/27fob-q4-t.html?ref=magazine>). The plan for the California system seems to be to reduce the number of California residents attending in favor of out-of-staters and international students, whose tuition costs are much higher. For further comparison, it seems that California now spends more than any other state on incarceration but is forty-eighth in its expenditure on education.

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

32
Paulo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (Cambridge, Mass.: Semiotext(e), 2003), also available online at <http://www.generation-online.org/c/multitude3.htm>. I have imported this discussion of Virno’s work from an online essay of mine on left-leaning political blogs in the United States.

33
Ibid, 66–67.

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

35
Here I will not take up the question of museums’ curatorial responses to this moment of crisis in respect to their definition and role in the twenty-first century. I can only observe that some elite museums have apparently identified a need to offer a more high-end set of experiences, in order to set them apart from the rest of our burgeoning, highly corporatized “experience economy.” At present the main thrust of that effort to regain primacy seems to center on the elevation of the most under-commodified form, performance art, the form best

positioned to provide museum-goers with embodied and nonnarrative experiences (and so far decidedly removed from the world of the everyday or of “politics” but situated firmly in the realm of the aesthetic).

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

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

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

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

40
But they may well be offered flyers.

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

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

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

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