

Boris Groys
**Under the Gaze
of Theory**

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From the start of modernity art began to manifest a certain dependence on theory. At that time – and even much later – art’s “need of explanation” (*Kommentarbeduerftigkeit*), as Arnold Gehlen characterized this hunger for theory was, in its turn, explained by the fact that modern art is “difficult” – inaccessible for the greater public.¹ According to this view, theory plays a role of propaganda – or, rather, advertising: the theorist comes after the artwork is produced, and explains this artwork to a surprised and skeptical audience. As we know, many artists have mixed feelings about the theoretical mobilization of their own art. They are grateful to the theorist for promoting and legitimizing their work, but irritated by the fact that their art is presented to the public with a certain theoretical perspective that, as a rule, seems to the artists to be too narrow, dogmatic, even intimidating. Artists are looking for a greater audience, but the number of theoretically-informed spectators is rather small – in fact, even smaller than the audience for contemporary art. Thus, theoretical discourse reveals itself as a counterproductive form of advertisement: it narrows the audience instead of widening it. And this is true now more than ever before. Since the beginning of modernity the general public has made its grudging peace with the art of its time. Today’s public accepts contemporary art even when it does not always have a feeling that it “understands” this art. The need for a theoretical explanation of art thus seems definitively passé.

However, theory was never so central for art as it is now. So the question arises: Why is this the case? I would suggest that today artists need a theory to explain what they are doing – not to others, but to themselves. In this respect they are not alone. Every contemporary subject constantly asks these two questions: What has to be done? And even more importantly: How can I explain to myself what I am already doing? The urgency of these questions results from the acute collapse of tradition that we experience today. Let us again take art as an example. In earlier times, to make art meant to practice – in ever-modified form – what previous generations of artists had done. During modernity to make art meant to protest against what these previous generations did. But in both cases it was more or less clear what that tradition looked like – and, accordingly, what form a protest against this tradition could take. Today, we are confronted with thousands of traditions floating around the globe – and with thousands of different forms of protest against them. Thus, if somebody now wants to become an artist and to make art, it is not immediately clear to him or her what art actually is, and what the artist is supposed to do.

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Rodney Graham, *Rheinmetall/Victoria 8*, 2003, Installation, 35mm film, color, silent.

In order to start making art, one needs a theory that explains what art is. And such a theory gives an artist the possibility to universalize, globalize their art. A recourse to theory liberates artists from their cultural identities – from the danger that their art would be perceived only as a local curiosity. Theory opens a perspective for art to become universal. That is the main reason for the rise of theory in our globalized world. Here the theory – the theoretical, explanatory discourse – precedes art instead of coming after art.

However, one question remains unresolved. If we live in a time when every activity has to begin with a theoretical explanation of what this activity is, then one can draw the conclusion that we live after the end of art, because art was traditionally opposed to reason, rationality, logic – covering, it was said, the domain of the irrational, emotional, theoretically unpredictable and unexplainable.

Indeed, from its very start, Western philosophy was extremely critical of art and rejected art outright as nothing other than a machine for the production of fictions and illusions. For Plato, to understand the world – to achieve the truth of the world – one has to follow not one's imagination, but one's reason. The sphere of reason was traditionally understood to include logic, mathematics, moral and civil laws, ideas of good and right, systems of state governance – all the methods and techniques that regulate and underlie society. All these ideas could be understood by human reason, but they cannot be represented by any artistic practice because they are invisible. Thus, the philosopher was expected to turn from the external world of phenomena towards the internal reality of his own thinking – to investigate this thinking, to analyze the logic of the thinking process as such. Only in this way would the philosopher reach the condition of reason as the universal mode of thinking that unites all reasonable subjects, including, as Edmund Husserl said, gods, angels, demons, and humans. Therefore, the rejection of art can be understood as the originary gesture that constitutes the philosophical attitude as such. The opposition between philosophy – understood as love of truth – and art (construed as the production of lies and illusions) informs the whole history of Western culture. Additionally, the negative attitude toward art was maintained by the traditional alliance between art and religion. Art functioned as a didactic medium in which the transcendent, ungraspable, irrational authority of religion presented itself to humans: art represented gods and God, made them accessible to the human gaze. Religious art functioned as an object of trust – one believed that temples, statues, icons, religious poems and ritual performance were the spaces of divine

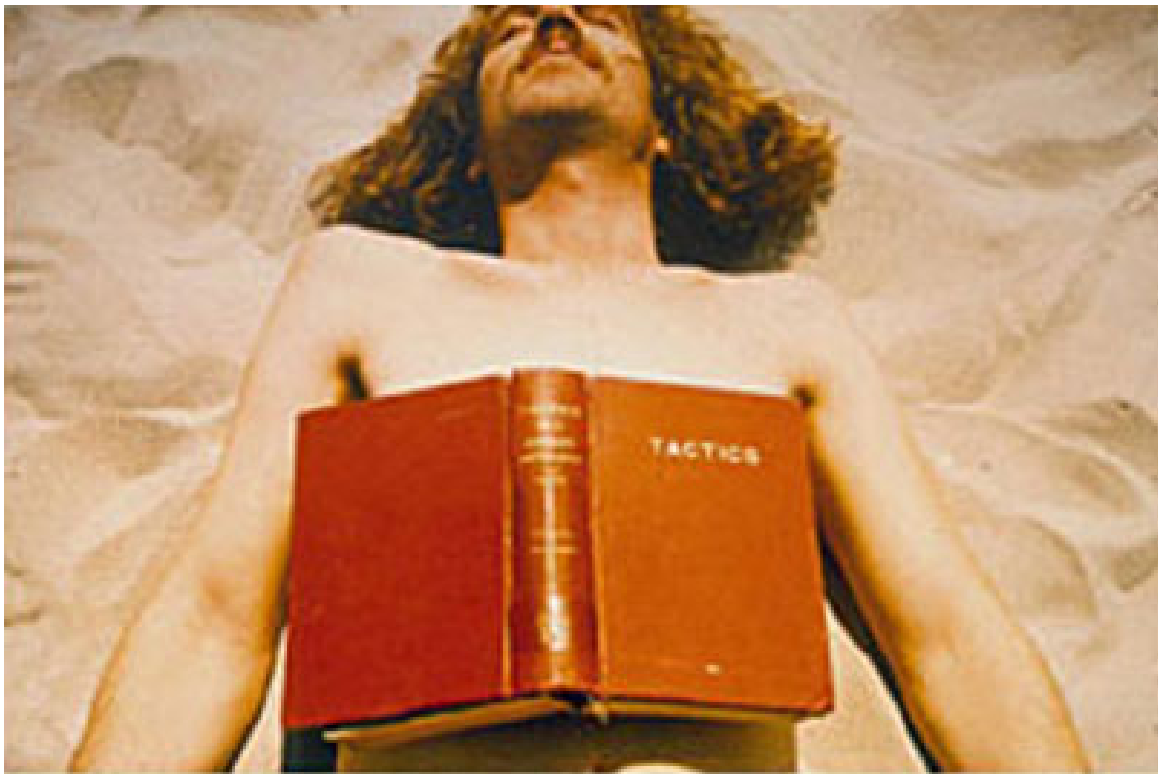
presence. When Hegel said in the 1820s that art was a thing of the past, he meant that art had ceased to be a medium of (religious) truth. After the Enlightenment, nobody should or could be deceived by art any longer, for the evidence of reason was finally substituted for seduction through art. Philosophy taught us to distrust religion and art, to trust our own reason instead. The man of the Enlightenment despised art, believing only in himself, in the evidences of his own reason.

However, modern and contemporary critical theory is nothing other than a critique of reason, rationality, and traditional logic. Here I mean not only this or that particular theory, but critical thinking in general as it has developed since the second half of the nineteenth century – following the decline of Hegelian philosophy.

We all know the names of the early and paradigmatic theoreticians. Karl Marx started modern critical discourse by interpreting the autonomy of reason as an illusion produced by the class structure of traditional societies – including bourgeois society. The impersonator of reason was understood by Marx as a member of the dominant class, and was therefore relieved from manual work and the necessity to participate in economic activity. For Marx, philosophers could make themselves immune to worldly seductions only because their basic needs were already satisfied, whereas underprivileged manual laborers were consumed by a struggle for survival that left no chance to practice disinterested philosophical contemplation, to impersonate pure reason.

On the other hand, Nietzsche explained philosophy's love of reason and truth as a symptom of the philosopher's underprivileged position in real life. He viewed the will to truth as an effect of the philosopher overcompensating for a lack of vitality and real power by fantasizing about the universal power of reason. For Nietzsche, philosophers are immune to the seduction of art simply because they are too weak, too "decadent" to seduce and be seduced. Nietzsche denies the peaceful, purely contemplative nature of the philosophical attitude. For him, this attitude is merely a cover used by the weak to achieve success in the struggle for power and domination. Behind the apparent absence of vital interests the theoretician discovers a hidden presence of the "decadent," or "sick" will to power. According to Nietzsche, reason and its alleged instruments are designed only to subjugate other, non-philosophically inclined – that is, passionate, vital – characters. It is this great theme of Nietzschean philosophy that was later developed by Michel Foucault.

Thus, theory starts to see the figure of the



READING POSITION FOR SECOND DEGREE BURN
Stage I, Stage II, Book, SKIN, solar energy, Exposure time 5 hours, Jones Beach, 1970



Dennis Oppenheim, *Reading Position for Second Degree Burn*, 1970. Book, skin, solar energy. Exposure time: 5 hours. Jones Beach, New York.

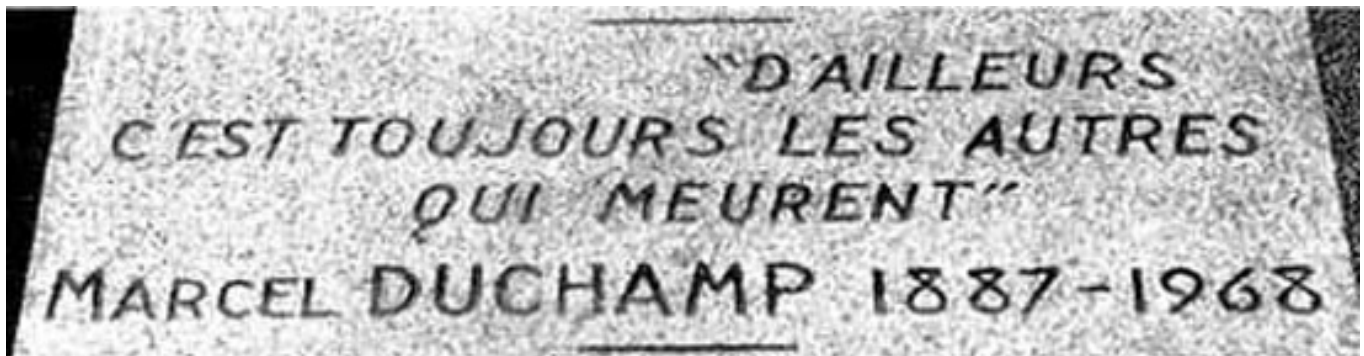
meditating philosopher and its own position in the world from a perspective of, as it were, a normal, profane, external gaze. Theory sees the living body of the philosopher through aspects that are not available to direct vision. This is something that the philosopher, like any other subject, necessarily overlooks: we cannot see our own body, its positions in the world and the material processes that take place inside and outside it (physical and chemical, but also economical, biopolitical, sexual, and so on). This means that we cannot truly practice self-reflection in the spirit of the philosophical dictum, “know yourself.” And what is even more important: we cannot have an inner experience of the limitations of our temporal and spatial existence. We are not present at our birth – and we will be not present at our death. That is why all the philosophers who practiced self-reflection came to the conclusion that the spirit, the soul, and reason are immortal. Indeed, in analyzing my own thinking process, I can never find any evidence of its finitude. To discover the limitations of my existence in space and time I need the gaze of the Other. I read my death in the eyes of Others. That is why Lacan says that the eye of the Other is always an evil eye, and Sartre says that “Hell is other people.” Only through the profane gaze of Others may I discover that I do not only think and feel – but also was born, live, and will die.

Descartes famously said “I think, therefore I am.” But an external and critically-theoretically minded spectator would say about Descartes: he thinks because he lives. Here my self-knowledge is radically undermined. Maybe I do know what I think. But I do not know how I live – I don’t even know I’m alive. Because I never experienced myself as dead, I cannot experience myself as being alive. I have to ask others if and how I live – and that means I must also ask what I actually think, because my thinking is now seen as being determined by my life. To live is to be exposed as

living (and not as dead) to the gaze of the others. Now it becomes irrelevant what we think, plan, or hope – what becomes relevant is how our bodies are moving in space under the gaze of Others. It is in this way that theory knows me better than I know myself. The proud, enlightened subject of philosophy is dead. I am left with my body – and delivered to the gaze of the Other. Before the Enlightenment, man was subject to the gaze of God. But following that era, we are subject to the gaze of critical theory.

At first glance, the rehabilitation of the profane gaze also entails a rehabilitation of art: in art the human being becomes an image that can be seen and analyzed by the Other. But things are not so simple. Critical theory criticizes not only philosophical contemplation – but any kind of contemplation, including aesthetic contemplation. For critical theory, to think or contemplate is the same as being dead. In the gaze of the Other, if a body does not move it can only be a corpse. Philosophy privileges contemplation. Theory privileges action and practice – and hates passivity. If I cease to move, I fall off theory’s radar – and theory does not like it. Every secular, post-idealistic theory is a call for action. Every critical theory creates a state of urgency – even a state of emergency. Theory tells us: we are merely mortal, material organisms – and we have little time at our disposal. Thus, we cannot waste our time with contemplation. Rather, we must act here and now. Time does not wait and we do not have enough time for further delay. And while it is of course true that every theory offers a certain overview and explanation of the world (or explanation of why the world cannot be explained), these theoretical descriptions and scenarios have only an instrumental and transitory role. The true goal of every theory is to define the field of action we are called to undertake.

This is where theory demonstrates its solidarity with the general mood of our times. In



Inscription on the tomb of Marcel Duchamp, as requested by the artist before his death.

earlier times, recreation meant passive contemplation. In their free time, people went to theatres, cinemas, museums, or stayed home to read books or watch TV. Guy Debord described this as the society of spectacle – a society in which freedom took the form of free time associated with passivity and escape. But today's society is unlike that spectacular society. In their free time, people work – they travel, play sports, and exercise. They don't read books, but write for Facebook, Twitter, and other social media. They do not look at art but take photos, make videos, and send them to their relatives and friends. People have become very active indeed. They design their free time by doing many kinds of work. And while this activation of humans correlates with the major forms of media of the era dominated by moving images (whether film or video), one cannot represent the movement of thought or the state of contemplation through these media. One cannot represent this movement even through the traditional arts; Rodin's famous statue of the *Thinker* actually presents a guy resting after working out at a gym. The movement of thought is invisible. Thus, it cannot be represented by a contemporary culture oriented to visually transmittable information. So one can say that theory's unknowable call to action fits very well within the contemporary media environment.

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to me. Both participants remain self-identical during and after this exchange. But critical theoretical discourse is not simply an informative discourse, for it does not only transmit certain knowledge. Rather, it asks questions concerning the meaning of knowledge. What does it mean that I have a certain new piece of knowledge? How has this new knowledge transformed me, how it has influenced my general attitude towards the world? How has this knowledge changed my personality, modified my way of life? To answer these questions one has to perform theory – to show how certain knowledge transforms one's behavior. In this respect, theoretical discourse is similar to religious and philosophical discourses. Religion describes the world, but it is not satisfied with this descriptive role alone. It also calls us to believe this description and to demonstrate this faith, to act on our faith. Philosophy also calls us not only to believe in the power of reason but also to act reasonably, rationally. Now theory not only wants us to believe that we are primarily finite, living bodies, but also demonstrate this belief. Under the regime of theory it is not enough to live: one must also demonstrate that one lives, one should perform one's being alive. And now I would argue that in our culture it is art that performs this knowledge of being alive.

Indeed, the main goal of art is to show, expose, and exhibit modes of life. Accordingly, art has often played the role of performing knowledge, of showing what it means to live with and through a certain knowledge. It is well known that, as Kandinsky would explain his abstract art by referring to the conversion of mass into energy in Einstein's theory of relativity, he saw his art as the manifestation of this potential at an individual level. The elaboration of life with and through the techniques of modernization were similarly manifested by Constructivism. The economic determination of human existence thematized by Marxism was reflected in the Russian avant-garde. Surrealism articulated the discovery of the subconscious that accompanied this economic determination. Somewhat later, conceptual art attended to the closer control of human thinking and behavior through the control of language.

Of course, one can ask: Who is the subject of such an artistic performance of knowledge? By now, we have heard of the many deaths of the subject, the author, the speaker, and so forth. But all these obituaries concerned the subject of philosophical reflection and self-reflection – but also the voluntary subject of desire and vital energy. In contrast, the performative subject is constituted by the call to act, to demonstrate oneself as alive. I know myself as addressee of



Joos van Craesbeeck, *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, 1650.

But, of course, theory does not merely call us to take action towards any specific goal. Rather, theory calls for action that would perform – and extend – the condition of theory itself. Indeed, every critical theory is not merely informative but also transformative. The scene of theoretical discourse is one of conversion that exceeds the terms of communication. Communication itself does not change the subjects of the communicative exchange: I have transmitted information to somebody, and someone else has transmitted some information

this call, and it tells me: change yourself, show your knowledge, manifest your life, take transformative action, transform the world, and so on. This call is directed toward *me*. That is how I know that I can, and must, answer it.

And, by the way, the call to act is not made by a divine caller. The theorist is also a human being, and I have no reason to completely trust his or her intention. The Enlightenment taught us, as I have already mentioned, to not trust the gaze of the Other – to suspect Others (priests and so forth) of pursuing their own agenda, hidden behind their appellative discourse. And theory taught us not to trust ourselves, and the evidence of our own reason. In this sense, every performance of a theory is at the same time a performance of the distrust of this theory. We perform the image of life to demonstrate ourselves as living to the others – but also to shield ourselves from the evil eye of the theorist, to hide behind our image. And this, in fact, is precisely what theory wants from us. After all, theory also distrusts itself. As Theodor Adorno said, the whole is false and there is no true life in the false.²



Detail of Ad Reinhardt's cartoons from the book *How to Look at art*.

Having said this, one should also take into consideration the fact that the artist can adopt another perspective: the critical perspective of theory. Artists can, and indeed do, adopt this in many cases; they see themselves not as performers of theoretical knowledge using human action to ask about the meaning of this knowledge, but as messengers and propagandists of this knowledge. These artists do not perform, but rather join the transformative call. Instead of performing theory they call others to do it; instead of becoming active they want to activate others. And they become critical in the sense that theory is exclusive towards anyone who does not answer its call. Here, art takes on an illustrative, didactic, educational role – comparable to the didactic role of the artist in the framework of, let say, Christian faith. In other words, the artist makes secular propaganda (comparable to religious propaganda). I am not critical of this

propagandistic turn. It has produced many interesting works in the course of the twentieth century and remains productive now. However, artists who practice this type of propaganda often speak about the ineffectiveness of art – as if everybody can and should be persuaded by art even if he or she is not persuaded by theory itself. Propaganda art is not specifically inefficient – it simply shares the successes and failures of the theory that it propagates.

These two artistic attitudes, the performance of theory and theory as propaganda, are not only different but also conflicting, even incompatible interpretations of theory's "call." This incompatibility produced many conflicts, even tragedies, within art on the left – and indeed on the right – during the course of the twentieth century. This incompatibility therefore deserves an attentive discussion for being the main conflict. Critical theory – from its beginnings in the work of Marx and Nietzsche – sees the human being as a finite, material body, devoid of ontological access to the eternal or metaphysical. That means that there is no ontological, metaphysical guarantee of success for any human action – just as there is also no guarantee of failure. Any human action can be at any moment interrupted by death. The event of death is radically heterogeneous in relationship to any teleological construction of history. From the perspective of living theory, death does not have to coincide with fulfillment. The end of the world does not have to necessarily be apocalyptic and reveal the truth of human existence. Rather, we know life as non-teleological, as having no unifying divine or historical plan that we could contemplate and upon which we could rely. Indeed, we know ourselves to be involved in an uncontrollable play of material forces that makes every action contingent. We watch the permanent change of fashions. We watch the irreversible advance of technology that eventually makes any experience obsolete. Thus we are called, continually, to abandon our skills, our knowledge, and our plans for being out of date. Whatever we see, we expect its disappearance sooner rather than later. Whatever we plan to do today, we expect to change tomorrow.

In other words, theory confronts us with the paradox of urgency. The basic image that theory offers to us is the image of our own death – an image of our mortality, of radical finitude and lack of time. By offering us this image, theory produces in us the feeling of urgency – a feeling that impels us to answer its call for action now rather than later. But, at the same time, this feeling of urgency and lack of time prevents us from making long-term projects; from basing our actions on long-term planning; from having great

personal and historical expectations concerning the results of our actions.

A good example of this performance of urgency can be seen in Lars von Trier's film *Melancholia*. Two sisters see their approaching death in form of the planet Melancholia as it draws closer to the earth, about to annihilate it. Planet Melancholia looks on them, and they read their death in the planet's neutral, objectifying gaze. It is a good metaphor for the gaze of theory – and the two sisters are called by this gaze to react to it. Here we find a typical modern, secular case of extreme urgency – inescapable, yet at the same time purely contingent. The slow approach of Melancholia is a call for action. But what kind of action? One sister tries to escape this image – to save herself and her child. It is a reference to the typical Hollywood apocalyptic movie in which an attempt to escape a world catastrophe always succeeds. But the other sister welcomes the death – and becomes seduced by this image of death to the point of orgasm. Rather than spend the rest of her life warding off death, she performs a welcoming ritual – one that activates and excites her within life. Here we find a good model of two opposing ways to react to the feeling of urgency and lack of time.

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Indeed, the same urgency, the same lack of time that pushes us to act suggests that our actions will probably not achieve any goals or produce any results. It is an insight that was well described by Walter Benjamin in his famous parable using Klee's *Angelus Novus*: if we look towards the future we see only promises, while if we look towards the past we can see only the ruins of these promises.³ This image was interpreted by Benjamin's readers as being mostly pessimistic. But it is in fact optimistic – in a certain way, this image reproduces a thematic from a much earlier essay in which Benjamin distinguishes between two types of violence: divine and mythical.⁴ Mythical violence produces destruction that leads from an old order to new orders. Divine violence only destroys – without establishing any new order. This divine destruction is permanent (similar to Trotsky's idea of permanent revolution). But today, a reader of Benjamin's essay on violence inevitably asks how divine violence can be eternally inflicted if it is only destructive? At some point, everything would be destroyed and divine violence itself will become impossible. Indeed, if God has created the world out of nothingness, he can also destroy it completely – leaving no traces.



Richard Artschwager, *Live in your head*, 2002.

But the point is precisely this: Benjamin uses the image of *Angelus Novus* in the context of his materialist concept of history in which divine violence becomes material violence. Thus, it becomes clear why Benjamin does not believe in the possibility of total destruction. Indeed, if God is dead, the material world becomes indestructible. In the secular, purely material world, destruction can be only material destruction, produced by material forces. But any material destruction remains only partially successful. It always leaves ruins, traces, vestiges behind – precisely as described by Benjamin in his parable. In other words, if we cannot totally destroy the world, the world also cannot totally destroy us. Total success is impossible, but so is total failure. The materialist vision of the world opens a zone beyond success and failure, conservation and annihilation, acquisition and loss. Now, this is precisely the zone in which art operates if it wants to perform its knowledge of the materiality of the world – and of life as a material process. And while the art of the historic avant-gardes has also been accused often of being nihilistic and destructive, the destructiveness of avant-garde art was motivated by its belief in the impossibility of total destruction. One can say that the avant-

garde, looking towards the future, saw precisely the same image that Benjamin's *Angelus Novus* saw when looking towards the past.

From the outset, modern and contemporary art integrates the possibilities of failure, historical irrelevance, and destruction within its own activities. Thus, art cannot be shocked by what it sees in the rear window of progress. The avant-garde's *Angelus Novus* always sees the same thing, whether it looks into the future or into the past. Here life is understood as a non-teleological, purely material process. To practice life means to be aware of the possibility of its interruption at any moment by death – and thus to avoid pursuing any definite goals and objectives because such pursuits can be interrupted by death at any moment. In this sense, life is radically heterogeneous with regard to any concept of History that can be narrated only as disparate instances of success and failure.

For a very long time, man was ontologically situated between God and animals. At that time, it seemed to be more prestigious to be placed nearer to God, and further from the animal. Within modernity and our present time, we tend to situate man between the animal and the machine. In this new order, it would seem that it



Peter Hujar, *Thek Working on the Tomb Figure*, 1967-2010. Pigmented ink print.

is better to be an animal than a machine. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also today, there was a tendency to present life as a deviation from a certain program – as the difference only between a living body and a machine. Increasingly, however, as the machinic paradigm was assimilated, the contemporary human being can be seen as an animal acting as a machine – an industrial machine or a computer. If we accept this Foucauldian perspective, the living human body – human animality – does indeed manifest itself through deviation from the program, through error, through madness, chaos, and unpredictability. That is why contemporary art often tends to thematize deviation and error – everything that breaks away from the norm and disturbs the established social program.

Here it is important to note that the classical avant-garde placed itself more on the side of the machine than on the side of the human animal. Radical avant-gardists, from Malevich and Mondrian to Sol LeWitt and Donald Judd, practiced their art according to machine-like programs in which deviation and variance were contained by the generative laws of their respective projects. However, these programs were internally different from any “real” program because they were neither utilitarian nor instrumentalizing. Our real social, political, and technical programs are oriented towards achieving a certain goal – and they are judged according to their efficiency or ability to achieve this goal. Art programs and machines, however, are not teleologically oriented. They have no definite goal; they simply go on and on. At the same time, these programs include the possibility of being interrupted at any moment without losing their integrity. Here art reacts to the paradox of urgency produced by materialist theory and its call to action. On the one hand, our finiteness, our ontological lack of time compels us to abandon the state of contemplation and passivity and begin to act. And yet, this same lack of time dictates an action that is not directed towards any particular goal – and can be interrupted at any moment. Such an action is conceived from the beginning as having no specific ending – unlike an action that ends when its goal is achieved. Thus artistic action becomes infinitely continuable and/or repeatable. Here the lack of time is transformed into a surplus of time – in fact, an infinite surplus of time.

It is characteristic that the operation of the so-called aestheticization of reality is effectuated precisely by this shift from a teleological to a non-teleological interpretation of historical action. For example, it is not accidental that Che Guevara became the

aesthetic symbol of revolutionary movement: all revolutionary undertakings by Che Guevara ended in failures. But that is precisely why the attention of the spectator shifts from the goal of revolutionary action to the life of a revolutionary hero failing to achieve his goals. This life then reveals itself as brilliant and fascinating – with no regard for practical results. Such examples can, of course, be multiplied.

In the same sense, one can argue that the performance of theory by art also implies the aestheticization of theory. Surrealism can be interpreted as the aestheticization of psychoanalysis. In his First Manifesto of Surrealism, Andre Breton famously proposed a technique of automatic writing. The idea was to write so fast that neither consciousness nor unconsciousness could catch up with the writing process. Here the psychoanalytical practice of free association is imitated – but detached from its normative goal. Later, after reading Marx, Breton exhorted readers of the Second Manifesto to pull out a revolver and fire randomly into the crowd – again the revolutionary action becomes non-purposeful. Even earlier, Dadaists practiced discourse beyond meaning and coherence – a discourse that could be interrupted at every moment without losing its consistency. The same can be said, in fact, about the speeches of Joseph Beuys: they were excessively long but could be interrupted at any moment because they were not subjected to the goal of making an argument. And the same can be said about many other contemporary artistic practices: they can be interrupted or reactivated at any moment. Failure thus becomes impossible because the criteria of success are absent. Now, many people in the art world deplore the fact that that art is not and cannot be successful in “real life.” Here real life is understood as history – and success as historical success. Earlier I showed that the notion of history does not coincide with the notion of life – in particular with the notion of “real life” – for history is an ideological construction based on a concept of progressive movement toward a certain telos. This teleological model of progressive history has roots in Christian theology. It does not correspond to the post-Christian, post-philosophical, materialist view of the world. Art is emancipatory. Art changes the world and liberates us. But it does so precisely by liberating us from history – by liberating life from history.

Classical philosophy was emancipatory because it protested against the religious and aristocratic, military rule that suppressed reason – and the individual human being as bearer of reason. The Enlightenment wanted to change the world through the liberation of reason. Today,

after Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze, and many others, we tend to believe that reason does not liberate, but rather suppresses us. Now we want to change the world to liberate life – which has increasingly become a more fundamental condition of human existence than reason. In fact, life seems to us to be subjected and oppressed by the same institutions that proclaim themselves to be models of rational progress, with the promotion of life as their goal. To liberate ourselves from the power of these institutions means rejecting their universal claims based on older precepts of reason.

Thus, theory calls us to change not merely this or that aspect of the world, but the world as a whole. But here the question arises: Is such a total, revolutionary, and not only gradual, particular, evolutionary change possible? Theory believes that every transformative action can be effectuated because there is no metaphysical, ontological guarantee of the status quo, of a dominating order, of existing realities. But at the same time, there is also no ontological guarantee of a successful total change (no divine providence, power of nature or reason, direction of history, or other determinable outcome). If classical Marxism still proclaimed faith in a guarantee of total change (in the form of productive forces that will explode social structures), or Nietzsche believed in the power of desire that will explode all civilized conventions, today we have difficulty in believing in the collaboration of such infinite powers. Once we rejected the infinity of the spirit, it seems improbable to substitute it with a theology of production or desire. But if we are mortal and finite, how can we successfully change the world? As I have already suggested, the criteria of success and failure are precisely what defines the world in its totality. So if we change – or, even better, abolish – these criteria, we do indeed change the world in its totality. And, as I have tried to show, art can do it – and in fact has already done it.

But, of course, one can further ask: What is the social relevance of such a non-instrumental, non-teleological, artistic performance of life? I would suggest that it is the production of the social as such. Indeed, we should not think that the social is always already there. Society is an area of equality and similarity: originally, society, or *politeia* emerged in Athens – as a society of the equal and similar. Ancient Greek societies – which are a model for every modern society – were based on commonalities, such as upbringing, aesthetic taste, language. Their members were effectively interchangeable through the physical and cultural realization of established values. Every member of a Greek society could do what the others could also do in

the fields of sport, rhetoric, or war. But traditional societies based on given commonalities no longer exist.

Today we are living not in a society of similarity, but rather in a society of difference. And the society of difference is not a *politeia* but a market economy. If I live in a society in which everyone is specialized, and has his or her specific cultural identity, then I offer to others what I have and can do – and receive from them what they have or can do. These networks of exchange also function as networks of communication, as a rhizome. Freedom of communication is only a special case for the free market. Now, theory and art that performs theory, produce similarity beyond the differences that are induced by the market economy – and, therefore, theory and art compensate for the absence of traditional commonalities. It is not accidental that the call to human solidarity is almost always accompanied in our time not by an appeal to common origins, common sense and reason, or the commonality of human nature, but to the danger of common death through nuclear war or global warming, for example. We are different in our modes of existence – but similar due to our mortality.

In earlier times, philosophers and artists wanted to be (and understood themselves as being) exceptional human beings capable of creating exceptional ideas and things. But today, theorists and artists do not want to be exceptional – rather, they want to be like everybody else. Their preferred topic is everyday life. They want to be typical, non-specific, non-identifiable, non-recognizable in a crowd. And they want to do what everybody else does: prepare food (Rirkrit Tiravanija) or kick an ice block along the road (Francis Alÿs). Kant already contended that art is not a thing of truth, but of taste, and that it can and should be discussed by everyone. The discussion of art is open to everyone because by definition no one can be a specialist in art – only a dilettante. That means that art is from its beginnings social – and becomes democratic if one abolishes the boundaries of high society (still a model of society for Kant). However, from the time of the avant-garde onwards, art became not only an object of a discussion, free from the criteria of truth, but a universal, non-specific, non-productive, generally accessible activity free from any criteria of success. Advanced contemporary art is basically art production without a product. It is an activity in which everyone can participate, that is all-inclusive and truly egalitarian.

In saying all this, I do not have something like relational aesthetics in mind. I also do not believe that art, if understood in this way, can be

truly participatory or democratic. And now I will try to explain why. Our understanding of democracy is based on a conception of the national state. We do not have a framework of universal democracy transcending national borders – and we never had such a democracy in the past. So we cannot say what a truly universal, egalitarian democracy would look like. In addition, democracy is traditionally understood as the rule of a majority, and of course we can imagine democracy as not excluding any minority and operating by consensus – but still this consensus will necessarily include only “normal, reasonable” people. It will never include “mad” people, children, and so forth.

It will also not include animals. It will not include birds. But, as we know, St. Francis also gave sermons to animals and birds. It will also not include stones – and we know from Freud that there is a drive in us that compels us to become stones. It will also not include machines – even if many artists and theorists wanted to become machines. In other words, an artist is somebody who is not merely social, but super-social, to use the term coined by Gabriel Tarde in the framework of his theory of imitation.⁵ The artist imitates and establishes himself or herself as similar and equal to too many organisms, figures, objects, and phenomena that will never become a part of any democratic process. To use a very precise phrase by Orwell, some artists, are, indeed, more equal than others. While contemporary art is often criticized for being too elitist, not social enough, actually the contrary is the case: art and artists are super-social. And, as Gabriel Tarde rightly remarks: to become truly super-social one has to isolate oneself from the society.

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e-flux journal #35 — may 2012 Boris Groys
Under the Gaze of Theory

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1

Arnold Gehlen *Zeit-Bilder. Zur Soziologie und Aesthetik der modernen Malerei*, (Frankfurt: Athenaeum, 1960).

2

Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), 50 and 39 respectively.

3

Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4: 1938-40, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 389-400..

4

Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1: 1913-26, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 236-52.

5

Gabriel Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation* (New York: H.Holt and Co., 1903), 88.