

1. The Contract

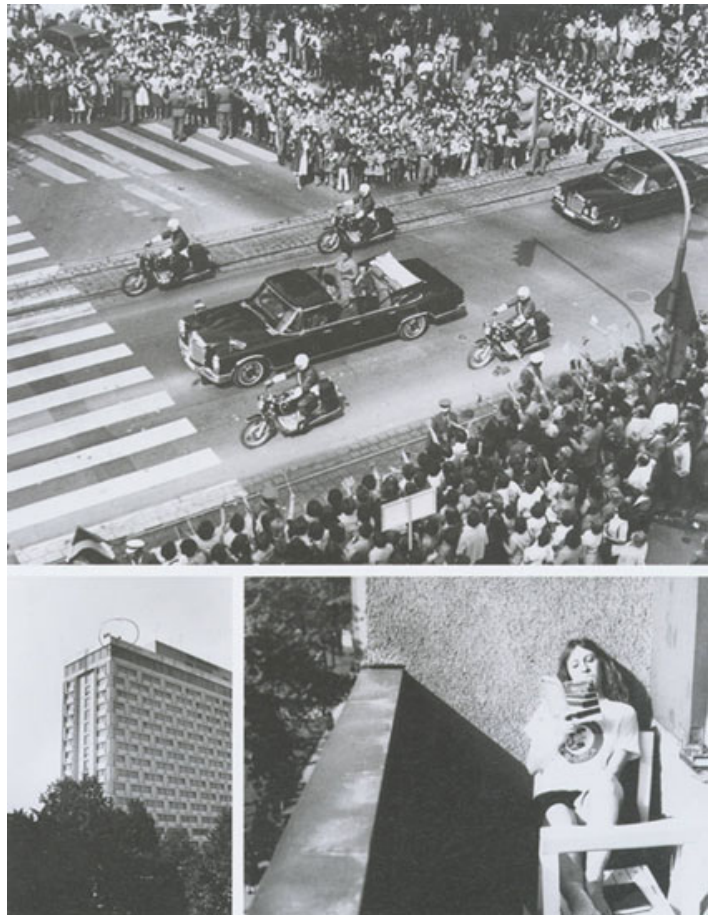
The Duchampian revolution leads not to the liberation of the artist from work, but to his or her proletarianization via alienated construction and transportation work. In fact, contemporary art institutions no longer need an artist as a traditional producer. Rather, today the artist is more often hired for a certain period of time as a worker to realize this or that institutional project.

– Boris Groys¹

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Sanja Iveković, *Triangle*, 1979. Performance, 18 min.

When his readymades entered the space of art, Duchamp effectively rearranged the contract between the exhibition and the work of art into what we now accept as the status quo, liberating the artist from the laws of traditional taste by breaking open a space within the exhibition for artists to work – or, more precisely, to think. In a wily chess move, the presentation of industrial objects as art freed the artist from manual labor and allowed simple spatial and temporal arrangements within an exhibition to release a dynamic cosmology in which the ontological and

epistemological foundations of art itself could be simultaneously made and unmade. This advanced the position of the artist enormously; he or she became free to do and exhibit anything, and the institution was thus expected to respect the will of the artist by staying out of the way.

But there was a high price to pay for the total sovereignty Duchamp gained for the artist, and this is only becoming clear almost a century after Duchamp exhibited his fountain: Duchamp's liberated artist could only appear when sanctioned by an art institution. In other words, the basic condition allowing the artist to produce whatever he or she pleased was that the liberated artistic gesture must only appear in sanctioned spaces of art. This has likewise given enormous authority to art institutions, which are in turn just as responsible for producing art as artists themselves. From a white cube in New York to a remote Nepalese mountaintop, the sanctioning forces of the art world are the sole enabler of art, but also the artist's ball and chain.

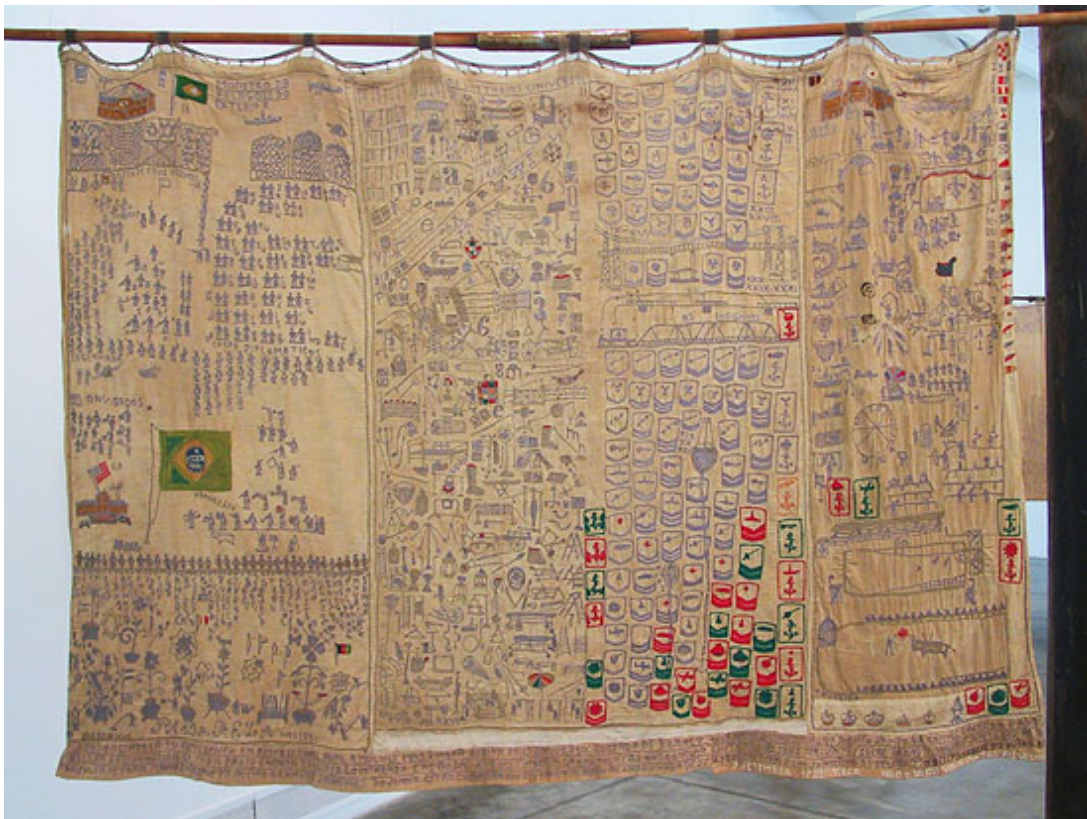
2. Artistic Sovereignty

And yet, an artist today nevertheless aspires to a certain kind of sovereignty, to the freedom to work as one pleases. Unlike artists, say, before

the French Revolution, who worked merely to satisfy a commission from the church or the aristocracy, or to serve public taste and critics, artists today understand themselves as being not only capable of deciding what kind of practice they want to have, what subject matter is important to them, what form it may take, and so forth; they also understand themselves as fundamentally free to follow their own personal interests or to respond to urgent events in the world around them. And this fundamental freedom is understood as a basic condition of any work of art, as the pillar that the content and form of any artwork rests upon.²

In fact, public exhibitions of art also started at the time of the French Revolution, when the royal palace was returned to the hands of the people in the form of the first fully public exhibition of painting and sculpture by contemporary artists of that day. The audience for this salon show at the Salon Carré became, in a sense, the first real "public": a group comprised of new citizen-subjects who had just violently gained political power and instituted a republic in the name of popular sovereignty. And while the exhibition did not include any explicitly politically or socially engaged art – but rather traditional paintings of landscapes, nudes, and

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Arthur Bispo do Rosário, *Estandarte (Flagpole)*, date unknown.

mythological and religious motifs – the actual experience of being able to enter the royal palace to view art was surely political in itself, for it was intimately connected to the Revolution. The mere fact of entering the palace-as-exhibition demonstrated, in a material way, the belief that the legitimacy of the state is created by the consent of its people and that the state exists to serve the people, and not the other way around.

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Michael Asher, *Installation*, 1970. Pomona College Museum of Art.

This situation created unprecedented positions and opportunities both for artistic practice and for art institutions: the sudden presence of a public offered artists the potential to transform community through art's critical function, to engage groups and influence public opinion in a way that could in turn result (and did result) in tangible social and political change. It is in no way accidental that several decades later saw the emergence of such figures as Courbet, Manet, and others who helped to institute the paradigm of critically engaged art practice we still aspire to follow today. For arts institutions, the emergence of an art-viewing public marked a transition from private collections to a much more meaningful social function. And it was through this commitment to a public, to an idea of popular sovereignty, that both the artist and the institution suddenly managed to obtain sovereign positions for themselves as well.

Interestingly, all this was possible within a process of mere spectatorship: looking at art objects and representations. □ Here it is important to insist that, though we now live in a more complex time, art exhibitions still carry this potential today.

While it's tempting to assume that artistic and popular sovereignty are connected and interdependent, this is not always the case. Claims to artistic sovereignty are often found in the works of artists who are in the most unfree circumstances. Much like popular sovereignty, artistic sovereignty is perpetually contained, contested, recuperated, or co-opted. While as an artist you may think you are free to do as you please, in order for your work to be economically sustainable, critically acknowledged, or even simply brought into contact with the art public, it needs to conform to certain network protocols that dictate the forms of art production that circulate. With the ever-increasing professionalization of artists, curators, and other practitioners in the field of art, it seems that the industry of contemporary art is actually moving towards a certain restoration of a more prescriptive position vis-à-vis the artist. This reality necessitates a more focused positioning of liberated artistic work within, against, and beyond the contextual superstructure that enables and envelops the sovereign artistic gesture.

3. What Is Contemporary Art?

Politics and biography have merged. We are all tolerant of art that is rooted in specific stories. This is the inclusive zone where the artist plays his or her own perspective for a collective purpose. The drive is towards unhooking from who you are while simultaneously becoming only yourself. Some people can sleep with their eyes open.

– Liam Gillick³

After Duchamp, the artist can now address the politics of the exhibition, but it's equally true that the artist can never produce outside of these politics. After all, is this not what prompted many artists, primarily centered in and around Yugoslavia, from Mladen Stilinović to NSK, to auto-institutionalize themselves in order to produce legitimacy as they simultaneously produced work? Artists now continue to produce their own self-defined institutions, but this tactic is quickly becoming insufficient for gaining the freedom to work. Just as social networks are rapidly auto-institutionalizing everyone by

introducing a common protocol for making individual people visible to each other across long distances, even the artist seeking a total exit from the art system must paradoxically not venture too far in order for such a heroic gesture to exist within the frame of art. There are no longer any artist unions worth mentioning, for why should they be necessary when artist and institution alike are inextricably bound together by the supra-institution of Contemporary Art?⁴

Carl Schmitt famously wrote, "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception." But an exception from what? What is the implicit contract – the constitution that grants contemporary art its legitimacy as a strong systemic power? What is the contract that a new Duchamp in our time must break? And how would this break be made apparent?

For decades now many have looked to politically or socially engaged art to provide the means of breaking through, and for many years this kind of work did succeed in doing so. Now, however, the enclosure of contemporary art has accounted for this work in its calculations, for we have come to see the insertion of political art in museum spaces as a zombie-like caricature of social commitment, a walking dead of social life and artistic currency that masks a total

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confusion with regard to the question of how to render artistic form relevant and challenging. The vast number of artists filled with genuine social commitment are wisely secretive of the fact that they must inhabit a double life, knowing that the social relevance of their work is trapped in their own subjectivity and even in their process of developing their work. These same artists tend to be increasingly uncomfortable and elusive at their own openings as they watch the exhibition context hermetically seal the very content of their works into the forms they use to present it.

This is not because political consciousness has become irrelevant to art, but because the concrete social conditions that these artists address in their work have been overshadowed by the much more pressing politics of what constitutes contemporary art in the first place – the question of why this or that work is even being shown in a given space. Recent biennials and documentas have evaded thematization specifically under the banner of a vague and relativistic, open-ended idea of heterogeneous plurality. But this is possible only as the master theme becomes increasingly clear: more contemporary art.

Paradoxically, this has produced an entire



Goran Đorđević, *Salon de Fleurus*, a fictionalized reconstruction of Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas' Parisian salon. Đorđević has maintained a microcosmic alternative history of modernism for more than twenty years in a private apartment only a short distance from the the Museum of Modern Art.

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Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige, *Khiam*, 2000. Video, 52'

generation of amazing artists who opt for a hyper-formalism that borders on the arcane, because they know that the only option available to them is to advance the enclosure of the art context by adopting a museological format within their very own exhibition-ready works – employing plinths, shelves, and vitrines as artistic forms par excellence.⁵ They know, like Duchamp perhaps did, that their freedom must be bought using the currency of the regime that governs them. The exceptions tend to be artists working in video, because video allows a window into a world that does not concern the art institution.

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messianic hope for total rupture, but simply as a means of articulating a form of agency that does not lean entirely on the professional superstructure of art in order to come into being as art. It is the implicit drive behind the amplified pitch of a great deal of art writing, because many practitioners in art, and almost all artists, still believe, in spite of their cynicism, that a similar break is still possible, and that this break can align itself with a cohesive social project. In the meantime, we function more and more like NGO employees who are alcoholic yet naively idealistic. The first step is perhaps to recognize the scale of the system of enclosure that needs to be broken, then its structure, then its openings.

The systemic enclosure of contemporary art is much larger than a consensus around exhibition codes, curatorial sensibility, and relevant artists, because the very function of cultural spaces themselves has been superseded or redeployed by a political superstructure. Over the past decade, contemporary art has merged increasingly with the sensibilities of actual, concrete political structures, which have discovered in contemporary art and culture a means of exhibiting liberal, enlightened, globally conscious moral values.⁶ The artistic field is happy to serve in this diplomatic capacity, because expanding its rule allows it to bury its own ontological crisis. To create more institutions, more artists, in more places allows artists and institutions alike to escape the question of what is actually happening. There is a lot of money in this game, for it is in many cases financed by municipalities, monarchs, and oligarchs who have discovered in the cultural field a new, advanced form of social capital. Many well-intentioned artists can cash in for the first time in their careers and still have their work exhibited in flattering spaces and celebrated by some of the greatest critical minds of our time, who are flown in and hosted for this very reason. Many of the same artists worry that they cannot deviate from the path, as the stakes have suddenly become very high.

The paradox comes in the fact that the instrumentalization of art as a tool to promote liberal and democratic values coincides in so many ways with the actual history of art, from the modern period back to the French Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the Renaissance. This produces an even more confusing effect for those who see the role of art compromised by its deployment in a broader field of cultural politics, because it also appears that it may not be the art system per se that is expanding, but the very liberal tradition that undergirds it. As if rescuing art from the industry



Frédéric Bruly Bouabré, *Connaissance du Monde*, 1992. Colored pencil and ballpoint pen on cardboard.

These are the most immediate exit points we have available at the moment. Without delving too deeply into Duchamp scholarship, we still look forward to something that can escape the enclosure of the present time – not as a

of contemporary art were not difficult enough, moving one level higher, even contemporary art itself becomes harder to disentangle from cultural diplomacy and municipal and state marketing. But it is also here that contemporary art becomes almost hysterical in its structural instability.

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Installation view of *Projects 96: Haris Epaminonda*, 2011. Photo: Jonathan Muzikar. © MoMA.

As a product of the so-called postmodern era, the classification of art as “contemporary” emerged as a convenient means of playing two sides of a paradigmatic shift simultaneously. Contemporary art distances itself from the period of modernity and its culturally sited humanistic project by casting a more modest temporal rather than ideological signifier – a momentary distraction from liberal humanism though an articulation of a more fluid and inclusive project that could encompass artistic practices supposedly less readily integrated into the Western humanistic worldview, simply for being made in the current moment. But just as we now know postmodernity to have been an extension or expansion of modernity, and not a break with it, so does contemporary art sustain its link to the Western liberal tradition while simultaneously claiming a cultural exteriority that has allowed for its enormous lateral movement across the world in the period of globalization. Inherent in the DNA of contemporary art is this drive to cover the world and draw complex artistic localities into a context and format that renders them coherent and available to other localities, within a comprehensive discourse. It is prematurely alarmist to say that this is always a colonial project, even if it often moves in parallel with soft and neo-colonial economic colonization, always in search of capital for more spectacle. But we can say with some certainty that contemporary art has a very peculiar way of

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distancing itself from the universalizing impulses of modernity by replacing these impulses with a much more concrete, actual universal format for drawing art from all corners of the globe together into a single, massive container.⁷

So what is the edge of the container of the contemporary – what is not contemporary? For many artists, it is very literally *history*. And here we start to see that many of the young museological artists whose serenely arcane or anachronistic forms serve to absorb the space of the museum into their work also attempt to escape the enclosure of the present by producing work in a way that stretches back if not to high modernism or the Soviet era, then even further. For them, it is a contact with the past that can break the imperative to be in the present time, and it is through this that they assert their sovereignty and regain their subjectivity. But to return to Duchamp, what his readymades produced was not just an exceptional space for his own works, but a rupture at the most vulnerable point in the epistemological and systemic foundation of art. He did something that the field of art was forced to come to terms with *somehow*, even by producing a new tradition, for there are innumerable artists today, in contemporary art and not, who do not recognize Duchamp’s break and continue to work in a way that extends from the nineteenth century, or simply an era that did not need to come to terms with the structural and systemic edges he exposed.

In this sense, Duchamp’s break becomes such a tantalizing moment to return to precisely because he was able to unravel a system by making works out of its very edges, by using the limits of the system that validated it as the very material for his work. It is not unlike Robert Bresson’s *A Man Escaped* (1956), in which a prisoner liberates himself using the debris found in his prison cell – a material and metaphysical demand for freedom. This is arguably not an aspect of Duchamp that carried into the era of institutional critique, which notoriously functioned firmly within the confines of the contemporary art system to, so to speak, redecorate the prison canteen or rearrange the furniture.⁸ On the other hand, institutional critique was absolutely crucial for recognizing the integration of contemporary art within a global system of power – and this constitutes the core challenge facing any Duchampian break today in a way that did not concern Duchamp in his own time. Could it be, then, that if we are to take the lessons of institutional critique to heart, that a Duchampian break today would necessarily have to take into consideration not only the aesthetic field and its logics of museological enclosure, but would also have to



Ilya Kabakov, *The Man who Flew into Space from His Apartment*, 1984. Installation.

identify the weak points and systemic inconsistencies of the meta-museum of global liberal democratic capitalism that has absorbed it?⁹

4. The Task of the Curator

In a 1995 film by Wayne Wang and Paul Auster entitled *Smoke*, Harvey Keitel plays the part of Auggie. Auggie runs a Brooklyn tobacco shop and has a personal project: he photographs the same intersection at the same time every day, not unlike photoconceptual practices such as those of Ed Ruscha. There is some ambiguity as to whether Auggie sees this as explicitly an art project, and perhaps this is because the film marks a point when contemporary art practices had become so assimilated into the popular imaginary that everyone – shopkeepers and accountants, junior stock brokers and Kurdish militants – was expected to have a conceptual art project, or something like it, in their daily life. Everyone is an artist indeed. But the early nineties also mark the ascendance and rapid proliferation of the figure of the curator, and two decades later, with the rise of the internet and social media platforms, it is arguably curating rather than artistic methodology that has come to dominate the popular imaginary as *the* primary creative act. Self-design accomplished through selective aggregation of friends, images, words, brands, and so forth takes the place of the act of artistic creation. As Kyle Chayka has recently written:

Today, the verb “curate” can be applied to just about anything. The rise of social media, with ascendant platforms like Facebook, Tumblr, Svvply, and Pinterest, has lead to an increased awareness of how we present the things we like and the objects and brands we associate ourselves with. We now carefully choose just the right image and just the right product to display, building up an aggregate identity of small judgments. Choice as a creative or intellectual act was before the province of the curator. Now, it’s possible to curate everything from a Facebook photo album to a Pinterest fashion moodboard, bookshelf selection, or pop-up shop of artisanal food products. It was not always thus.¹⁰

But curating does not limit itself to social platforms and biennials. Take Soho House for example, a boutique hotel and members-only club with branches in more than a dozen cities. Soho House hosts curated screenings, temporary exhibitions, artist talks, workshops, and even has its own art collection. It also organizes art tours and publishes a monthly magazine –

designed to look very much like an art publication – in which the word “curated” is used liberally. Soho House is not the only enterprise to profitably deploy a curatorial model as business model.

While Duchamp’s readymade granted enormous sovereignty to artists, it also endowed curators with an awesome power to decide which artworks could become comprehensible as art by being exhibited; in this way, the production of art was subordinated to the realm of exhibition-making and curation. And yet, over the past decade or so we find a similar process underway in the contextual framing of our experience of life itself – now formed by curatorial decision-making processes that arbitrate between a mass of goods and experiences based on their aesthetic effects. When artists confronted the advent of mechanical reproduction, their response brought about the invention of an entirely new kind of art – abstract art. Today, when artists seeking the freedom to work as they please do so by employing curatorial methodologies in their work, and when curators themselves seem to be the proven beneficiaries of Duchamp’s contextual break, should it not be the task of the curator to pose these questions concerning sovereignty and contextual freedom? If we accept that the artist’s compromised position within the exhibition and within the strategic deployment of global contemporary art is primarily a contextual problem of political containment, whereby artworks are reduced to scraps of content, then perhaps the curator is in a position to slice through this knot.

But how? The most immediate solution would be to look affectionately to the figure of Auggie, whose project documenting the everyday life of his local street corner blurs the line between a personal hobby and a fully-formed artistic practice. He has the appearance of an artist whose sovereignty is so absolute that he has no need for contemporary art, and it is tempting to think that valorizing a practitioner working at the very border of contemporary art would be enriching for all. This might make for a wonderful exhibition, but as we have established already, such a contextually inclusive gesture would accomplish little in merging the worlds of art and life, because the expansionary impulse of contemporary art has already injected art into daily life, just as it has enclosed art practitioners within a particular life-world known as the art world.¹¹ If the curator is indeed the inheritor of Duchamp’s contextual break, then how precisely do we thematize the enclosure of contemporary art that curators themselves have been tasked with maintaining and expanding?

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1
Boris Groys, "Marx After Duchamp, or The Artist's Two Bodies," *e-flux journal* no. 19 (October 2010). See <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/marx-after-duchamp-or-the-artist%E2%80%99s-two-bodies/>.

2
Some readers will notice that, while the formulation may sound eerily similar, we found it necessary in this essay to steer clear of the long twentieth-century debate over artistic autonomy, fraught with a paradox that reached its peak in institutional critique. Whereas discussions of artistic autonomy depart from a fundamental distinction between art and life that the avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes were tasked with resolving, this essay presupposes such a resolution to be an ominous *fait accompli* established by a regime of contemporary art that absorbs art and life in equal measure. We invoke Duchamp here as a figure of paradoxical escape in order to ask whether it is possible to think beyond contemporary art as a de facto End of (Art) History.

3
Liam Gillick, "Contemporary art does not account for that which is taking place," *e-flux journal* no. 21 (December 2010). See <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/contemporary-art-does-not-account-for-that-which-is-taking-place/>.

4
But there are new unions attempting to protect artists from exploitation. However, they fight an uphill battle against an idea of artistic freedom that precludes cohesive organization. Among these groups are Precarious Workers Brigade, ArtLeaks, and WAGE (Working Artists and the Greater Economy).

5
See Dieter Roelstraete's epic text on melancholic retreat entitled "The Way of the Shovel: On the Archeological Imaginary in Art," *e-flux journal* no. 4 (March 2009). See <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-way-of-the-shovel-on-the-archeological-imaginary-in-art/>.

6
See Hito Steyerl's "Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy," a short text to which this essay owes a lot, in *e-flux journal* no. 21 (December 2010). See <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/politics-of-art-contemporary-art-and-the-transition-to-post-democracy/>.

7
For an amazing analysis of liberal democracy as totalizing container, see Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "After the Last Man: Images and Ethics of Becoming Otherwise," *e-flux journal* no. 35 (May 2012). See <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/after-the-last-man-images-and-ethics-of-becoming-otherwise/>.

flux.com/journal/after-the-last-man-images-and-ethics-of-becoming-other-wise/.

8
As has been famously pointed out by Andrea Fraser in her 2005 essay "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," in *Artforum* 44, no. 1 (September 2005): 278–286.

9
On the triumph of logistics and containerization, see Alberto Toscano's "Logistics and Opposition" in *Mute Magazine* 3, no. 2 (Autumn/Winter 2011–2012): 30–41. See <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/logistics-and-opposition>.

10
See <http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/817400/how-the-art-worlds-lingo-of-exclusivity-too-k-root-branched-out-and-then-rotted-from-within>.

11
Stephen Wright often speaks eloquently about the "double ontological status" of many artists who straddle and negotiate this division. What we take for granted here, however, is a more sinister prospect of art and life having already merged into a monolithic singularity.