Falling from the Grip of Grace
The Exhibition as a Critical Form since 1968

Dissertation

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By
James T. Voorhies, Jr.

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The Ohio State University

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Dissertation Committee:
Professor Aron Vinegar, Advisor
Professor Lisa Florman
Professor Ron Green
Bill Horrigan
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Abstract

*Falling from the Grip of Grace* is an analysis of the exhibition as a critical form of art with special consideration to the role of the spectator. It charts a history of exhibitions from 1968 to the present to explore how we arrived at a moment when critical art faces many challenges, not least of which is competing with the art institutions that give it voice. It is the first sustained study to critically analyze connections between late-Modernist artistic strategies engaged with the exhibition form and subsequent dispersal of those strategies into curatorial practices at major institutions and biennials.

Artists such as Robert Smithson, Michael Asher and Group Material initially expanded the spectator’s involvement in art to encompass the spatial and temporal contexts of the exhibition. This change signaled a definitive fall from the modernist aesthetic regime of pure visuality, or state of “grace” to use Michael Fried’s term, by placing greater emphasis on integrating engagements between art, spectator and institution. This dissertation interweaves the legacy of work by these artists and that of curator Harald Szeemann to examine contemporary art, institutions and biennials that involve the spectator in exhibition-making processes. New Institutionalism, a critically reflexive mode of curatorial activity, emerged in the 1990s out of a combination of these approaches and in conversation with the relational art promoted by curator Nicolas Bourriaud. New Institutionalism and relational aesthetics were originally interested in
reconfiguring and expanding the exhibition of art into something more active, democratic, open and egalitarian, something other than standardized exhibition methods of displaying objects.

A release from the influence of modernist aesthetic criteria did not, however, alleviate the need to hold art accountable for its fertile position for rethinking how things can be and function differently. My analyses draw on the theoretical project of Jacques Rancière to define and locate an aesthetics in contemporary art forms that take into account the role of the spectator. Within the context of Rancière’s theoretical project, I examine work by Thomas Hirschhorn, Anton Vidokle, Maria Lind, e-flux and Office for Contemporary Art Norway. I demonstrate why their art and exhibitions matter and why they signal steps toward producing an aesthetics of the political.

The work studied in this dissertation proposes alternative models for connecting art with its public. By building upon developments of the late 1960s, this work leads us to question the role and function of art and its institutions. Constant questioning is necessary, especially today, because global capitalism assigns a market value to lived bodily experiences in the industry of contemporary art. We are again at a crossroads, with the need to consider the critical efficacy of art in order for it to remain alive, relevant and potent. Through the ideas put forward in this dissertation, I argue that that challenge is carried forward to the present moment by the exhibitions examined here.
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Vita

January 5, 1970 ........................................ Born, Cambridge, Ohio

1992 ........................................ B.A. History of Art, The Ohio State University

1995 ........................................ M.A. History of Art, The Ohio State University

1998 ........................................ Visiting Faculty, History of Art, San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco


2005–2006 ........................................ Deputy Director, Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco

2006–2010 ........................................ Director of Exhibitions, Columbus College of Art and Design, Columbus, Ohio

2010–present ........................................ Visiting Faculty, Visual Arts, Bennington College, Bennington, Vermont
Publications


Fields of Study

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Introduction: “WARNING”

Experience is the title of Carsten Höller’s 2011–2012 exhibition at the New Museum in New York. It marked the artist’s first large-scale survey in an American museum. Höller is one of the leading artists of the 1990s generation categorized under relational aesthetics, an art form often identified by its solicitation of the spectator for participatory purposes. He has consistently produced work that seeks to engender new relationships between art, spectator and institution through the experiences he stages. In the New Museum exhibition this intent was dramatically realized in a number of ways including the work Untitled (Slide) (2011), a stainless steel and polycarbonate tube that sliced through two levels of the museum. Spectators queued up in the fourth-floor gallery. Once they reached the small mouth of the slide projecting out of the floor, they crouched into it by holding tightly to its edge and inserting their feet and legs into the pocket of a canvas pouch. An attendant signaled to release and they dropped down a steep incline, twisting and turning through the third-floor gallery space, barely seeing anything outside the clear plastic tube as they zoomed along. They settled into a cushioned halt in the second-floor gallery. Another attendant took the canvas pouch, and the rider quickly jumped up and moved aside before the next one ejected.

Twenty-seven more works of art awaited their engagement. *Mirror Carousel* (2005) was a full-scale carousel of hanging swings. It was completely plated in mirrors with carnival bulbs that emitted a soft white glow, dotting the lines of the spindle. A mirrored floor and canopy enveloped spectators as they stepped onto the slowly rotating platform. Once seated in a swing, they circled calmly, chatting and absorbing the kaleidoscopic symphony of reflected surfaces and movements around them. The cacophony in that gallery alone featured *Singing Canaries Mobile* (2009), a work of seven metal birdcages hovering overhead with live yellow canaries making song; spectators wearing *Upside-Down Goggles* (2009/2011) wandering aimlessly in an inverted world of distortion; and, lastly, a long line of eager visitors waiting their chance to course down the slide. On another floor visitors experienced, one by one, *Giant Psycho Tank* (1999). They stepped out of their street clothes and into a 20-x-13-x-12-foot sensory-depravation chamber made of polypropylene, rubber and steel to float (swimsuit or nude) in a heated pool of water filled with salt, emulating the Dead Sea. In other galleries the works were less spectacular but no less entertaining. *Aquarium* (1996) asked spectators to lie horizontal on a padded bench with their heads inserted beneath a Plexiglas tank full of fish, magnified many times, circling overhead. In an intimate gallery on the second floor, visitors could lift the stopper from a glass vile and take a deep whiff of the mood-altering chemical found in chocolate—phenylethylamine. That work was called *Love Drug (PEA)* (1993/2011). It could be experienced either before or after *Giant Triple Mushrooms* (2010), the magnificently colorful mushrooms towering over spectators in the lobby-floor gallery.
Carsten Höller’s work spans a period of more than twenty years. It is part of the bevy of artistic approaches and activity of the ’90s that posed further challenges to modernist paradigms of exhibition making and aesthetic judgment initiated by figures such as Joseph Beuys, Allan Kaprow and Guy Debord in the 1960s. The curator and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud was at the forefront of this recent critique, examining the art of Höller along with Pierre Huyghe, Liam Gillick, Maurizio Cattelan, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and others in his influential book *Relational Aesthetics*. Published in 1998, *Relational Aesthetics* is a compilation of essays that analyze work by artists who use existing “social forms.” Social forms are any kind of human interaction—sliding, floating, cooking, playing—between individuals, groups and communities. Social connections among humans are the basis for a relational art that relies on lived experience that takes place among people in real time. Bourriaud describes this art as a refusal to inherit the ideologies of modernity with its emphasis on medium specificity, limitations posed by disciplines, and prescribed engagements between object and spectator. Instead, relational art sought to “inhabit the world in a better way” by alternatively using existing social forms and dispensing with mandates for art to create imaginary worlds. Bourriaud theorized that relational art was a benchmark for new models of living and action within a tangible reality, and therefore it called for new models of aesthetic assessment. In doing so he proffered and indeed propelled, through curating and criticism, the production of this art that he saw as liberating itself from the

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2 It was in the periodical, *Documents sur l’art*, which Bourriaud founded that his text initially defining “relational aesthetics” was published in 1992.
modernist regime. Such was the potential invested in relational art like Carsten Höller’s exhibited at the New Museum.

*Experience*, unfortunately, signals the rather fast rise and fall of Bourriaud’s ideologies of a transformative rupture in the hierarchy of institution, art and spectator to which relational art aspired.\(^4\) Relational art is corrupted by a profound misreading of *Relational Aesthetics* by artists whose work is billed as “social practice” and “participation.” Social practice skims the surface of Bourriaud’s theoretical depth to make a CliffsNotes version of *Relational Aesthetics* because it concentrates too much on the social and not enough on the search for new aesthetic criteria. By focusing only on participation, for instance, this interpretation has cleaved aesthetics from its equally important position in Bourriaud’s theory. Adding to this misconstrual, the participatory aspect of social practice is increasingly exploited by a museum industry that thrives on the production of experiences to entertain its visitors. This is not to say that Höller’s art is not important. It is. His exhibition at the New Museum arrives at the juncture of these current conditions and proves how astutely the governing body of institution, when under

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\(^4\) In his 2002 follow-up publication *Postproduction*, Bourriaud argues that *Relational Aesthetics* was intended to situate and find common ground for this kind of work that began to emerge with greater frequency in the 1990s. He says he did not intend the book to become a benchmark for characterizing all art that engages socially. To some extent, that is what happened. His intent was to offer new aesthetic criteria for gauging it, tools that reached beyond the usual modernist sensibilities of aesthetics, as Bourriaud contends. With regard to this intention, it is worth citing the following: “*Relational Aesthetics* was content to paint the new sociopolitical landscape of the nineties, to describe the collective sensibility on which contemporary artistic practices were beginning to rely. The success of this essay, which—alas—has at times generated a sort of caricatured vulgate (‘artists-who-serve-soup-at-the-opening,’ etc.), stems essentially from the fact that it was a ‘kick start’ to contemporary aesthetics, beyond the fascination with communication and new technologies then being talked about incessantly, and above all, beyond the predetermined grids of reading (Fluxus, in particular) into which these artists’ works were being placed. *Relational Aesthetics* was the first work, to my knowledge, to provide the theoretical tools that allowed one to analyze works by individuals who would soon become irrefutably present on the international scene.” See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction* (New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2002), 7–8.
criticism, commandeers and melts down critique to reassert its authority over how art reaches the public. A slide inside a museum would have until recently been considered a cheap thrill, lacking an aesthetics of art and an offense to the sanctity of the art institution. But major art institutions today are increasingly economic engines, and they are charged with supplying experiences for visitors who are consumers in what has emerged as a globalized culture industry. In addition to a retrospective survey of Höller’s art, Experience is a symbol of the current fragmentary state of a form of relational art whose aspirations feed institutions’ and visitors’ appetite for spectacular contemporary art.

Before visitors entered Experience they were required to sign a liability waiver for the 102-foot slide. When finally in line for it, a wall text provided another abbreviated warning. The work should be used with caution.

Do not use Untitled (Slide) if:
• You are, or think you may be, pregnant.
• You have heart, respiratory, neck, or back conditions.
• You are affected by motion sickness, acrophobia (fear of height), vertigo (dizziness), or claustrophobia (fear of confined spaces).
• You are particularly susceptible to bruising, sprains, or fractures.

After visitors descended the slide (if fit to do so), they found themselves on the second floor, emerging from that experience into another, hallucinatory one, an atmosphere with cold-cathode lights flicking back and forth on a central axis that comprised the work Double Light Corner (2011). Careful visitors would have noticed at the lobby entrance a caution sign for it.

Experience drew more visitors per day than any other exhibition in the New Museum’s thirty-five-year history.
WARNING: The second floor gallery contains an art installation with bright flashing lights that may cause discomfort for some visitors. DO NOT visit the second floor if you are susceptible to Photosensitive Epilepsy which may cause seizures.

In the intimate second-floor gallery, visitors also needed to take note of a wall label near Love Drug (PEA) (1993/2006).

WARNING: Do not smell the Love Drug (PEA) if you are susceptible to adverse effects from strong odors.

How did we arrive at this moment in contemporary art where there are legal waivers, helmets, warnings and queuing up in a museum for experiences that can be had better and cheaper at a county fair or suburban waterpark? In this case, one might say it is Carsten Höller’s fault since the New Museum evidently disavowed responsibility for the visitor’s experience. It is, after all, his art. The New Museum and countless other large museums and biennials around the world, however, are part of the industry of contemporary art. By the industry of contemporary art I mean the major art institutions, journals, galleries, artists and curators responsible for the presentation and circulation of art and its discourses. This industry defines and disperses what the general public knows is contemporary art. It operates like any other industry, e.g., technology, filmmaking, music, medicine, design and so forth. Its operations function within the same neoliberalist market mentality, and its mandate is to do precisely what Höller did for the New Museum: create an experience for the consumer. That consumer is the spectator.

Yet the question still remains. How did we arrive at this moment when an art with the critical aspirations that Bourriaud attributes to Höller in effect perpetuates and exacerbates the modernist paradigm of art’s making and display? Experience signals
many questions like this that I attend to in this dissertation. Most importantly, this exhibition shows the extraordinary challenge for a critical art to remain alive, intact and relevant. We learn from it that the theoretical language Bourriaud generated around relational art’s criticality simply does not continue to resonate in actuality, just over a decade after its inception. As Claire Doherty remarks when discussing relational art,

[T]he gap between the rhetoric of engagement and the actual experience of the work may make for impotent participation rather than dynamic experience. This is because the visitor’s behavior is already coded by the gallery’s associated exhibition program which demands a much more passive series of encounters. The danger is that exhibitions such as these may operate as novelty participatory experiences, rather than on their own terms.⁶

Höller’s exhibition demonstrates the fugitive position a critical attitude faces in the midst of globalized contemporary art, an industry that reduces the potency of critique through absorption and the need to produce experiences for generating capital. It also demonstrates that critique cannot ascribe such an obvious cause-and-effect relationship to its intentions. It cannot be so literal as inserting a slide to dismantle behavior usually associated with the gallery of an art museum. It should arrest attention of the spectator by modeling situations of strangeness and confusion that disrupt expectations without literally instructing how participation transpires. The critical attitude, therefore, must perform a constant reworking before it sets into institution and becomes the subject of its original scrutiny, because capital lurches forward and critique must move along—just like visitors in a line.

Falling from the Grip of Grace

_Falling from the Grip of Grace_ is an analytical account of the exhibition as a critical form. It charts a history of exhibitions from 1968 to the present to explore how we arrived at this moment when a critical art faces many challenges, not least of which is competing with the art institutions that give it voice. It is the first in-depth study to draw a corollary between late-Modernist artistic strategies engaged with the exhibition form and the subsequent unraveling and dispersal of those strategies into curatorial practices at major institutions and biennials in the Western world. It examines how the exhibition as a critical form originally took shape in the United States only to be taken up with greater interest and concentration in Europe, namely, in the work of curator Harald Szeemann in the early 1970s and later with curators and artists (mostly European) operating under what is referred to as New Institutionalism by the 1990s.

The art and exhibitions I examine are united by a common interest in engaging the spectator. This engagement occurs through a broad range of activity and intensity. It can be as simple as encouraging spectators to ambulate around arranged objects and images, such as rocks and maps inside a gallery, or demand they exit the museum altogether to search for a caravan situated somewhere in the urban space of a German city. Spectators might contribute to performances in a makeshift pavilion sited in suburban Amsterdam or subscribe to an email service that dispenses thrice-daily announcements about

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7 My study is undertaken from a compendium practice of research, lived experience, education and work with ongoing attention to considering conditions under which art is produced and experienced. This practice includes curating exhibitions at large and small institutions, making countless visits to exhibitions, biennials and museums in the United States and Europe, and writing about art. It also includes collaborating with artists to present and produce commissioned projects. _Falling from the Grip of Grace_ has developed out of this practice as well as the seminars I teach at Bennington College in Vermont, conferences I attend and conversations I have with friends, colleagues, advisors and students.
contemporary art events happening around the world. They could attend a seminar on contemporary art and communism as part of an ongoing exhibition-as-school in Berlin or lend a beloved object or personal artwork to an exhibition in an East Village storefront. In all cases the spectator is prioritized in this approach that utilizes the exhibition as a productive way to explore and expand what, how, where and when art reaches its public.

My analysis of the role of the spectator in this form of art takes its point of departure from one of the most heated (and celebrated) debates in modernism that involved the work of Tony Smith, Donald Judd and Robert Smithson. Their art posed a threat to the paradigm of artistic autonomy upheld by Clement Greenberg and later his disciple Michael Fried. It was the solicitation of the spectator that Fried disliked in their work because he believed the spectator’s spatial and temporal experience of it introduced an aspect of theatricality that negated its position as art. The bodily experience signaled a contamination of the purity of modernist painting and sculpture, ultimately sacrificing, Fried believed, its artistic autonomy because of its inability to be wholly present through a visual immediacy at any given moment. Fried thought spectators of Minimalist works were not convinced of their entirety without seeing them from all angles. He believed the sculpture of Anthony Caro, alternatively, possessed an extraordinary presence; when “in

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8 Michael Fried’s “Art and Objecthood” appeared in *Artforum* in June 1967. He cited Tony Smith’s account of the experience on the New Jersey turnpike, which Smith recounted to Samuel Wagstaff in an *Artforum* interview published in December 1966. Fried’s essay also remarked on Donald Judd’s works and referred to Judd’s essay “Specific Objects,” which appeared in *Arts Yearbook* in 1965. Fried does not remark on Smithson’s work in “Art and Objecthood.” He does, however, refer obliquely to Smithson’s letter to the editor of *Artforum*, published October 1967, in his introduction to *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. Fried states, “Although I didn’t realize it then (Phil Leider did though), Smithson’s writings of the late 1960s amounted to by far the most powerful and interesting contemporary response to ‘Art and Objecthood.’” See Michael Fried, “Introduction,” in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), 73, fn. 76.
the grip” of it, one was convinced it was “wholly manifest,” right there before them. In his infamous essay “Art and Objecthood,” Fried writes,

> It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness, as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it.\(^9\)

In the late 1960s another kind of theater played out in the pages of *Artforum* between Fried and Smithson. In October 1967 Smithson submitted a rebuttal to Fried’s essay in *Artforum* in a letter to the editor.\(^11\) Smithson’s letter aggressively challenged Fried’s rigid adherence to the modernist insistence that works of art connect with the spectator through a momentary engagement. In his essay Fried assigned an almost religious quality to this experience, concluding “Art and Objecthood” with the sentence: “Presentness is grace.”\(^12\) Smithson rallied against this claim. In his letter he wrote, “Fried has set the stage for manneristic modernism, although he is trying hard not to fall from the ‘grip’ of grace. […] What Fried fears most is the consciousness of what he is doing—namely being theatrical himself.”\(^13\) In the following year Smithson made this critique visible through a series of works called *Non-Sites*. *Non-Sites* physically performed Smithson’s challenges to Fried’s modernist dictum by asking spectators to take time looking, walking, seeing, reading and thinking about the meaning of the works.

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\(^10\) Ibid.

\(^11\) In addition to Smithson’s rebuttal in the October 1967 issue of *Artforum*, the September issue included a reply by Allan Kaprow, Peter Plagens and Lawrence Schaffer.

\(^12\) Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 168.

arrangements and combinations of objects, texts and images he placed inside a gallery. Ultimately, the critical challenge by Smithson is this art—the Non-Site—that takes the form of exhibition to put spectators through a durational exercise of space and time to experience it. Smithson’s complex staging of experiences between art and spectator, and between interior and exterior sites of the institution, used the exhibition in an expanded critical form to leverage an attack against modernist exhibition principles and their methods of aesthetic assessment.

Smithson negotiated an art free from the authority and confinement of critics and exhibitions. That challenge permeated beyond the confrontation with Fried. Four years later in 1972 he dramatically opposed Harald Szeemann’s organization of Documenta 5 in Kassel by withdrawing his visual work and substituting it with only a written statement for the catalogue. In it he condemned Szeemann’s curatorial tactics in what became the highly charged atmosphere of Documenta 5. Smithson’s writings, combined with his exhibitions, make astute and calculated critiques of the increasingly demanding incursions by the institution, its critics and curators at that time.

This dissertation is a history and analysis of a selection of exhibitions, institutions and art, like Smithson’s Non-Sites, that pose critical challenges to conventional forms of presenting art and its ideas to the public. The exhibitions are not displays of individual works of art installed inside galleries with labels that instruct viewers about what they see and how to feel. They are exhibitions that interweave objects, images, texts, sound, video

or social engagement to create complex and immersive environments both inside and outside the art institution, materially and virtually. In all cases the critical efficacy of the art investigated emerges through a unique spatial and temporal involvement with the exhibition form in a manner that apprehends and implicates the spectator. The very nature of this work breaks with other artistic and curatorial conventions because it does not always openly critique kinds of production and reception. The form of the work, whether it is an exhibition-as-school or an empty gallery open twenty-four hours a day, is the critical challenge this work poses, opposed to blatantly evident political content.

_Falling from the Grip of Grace_ prioritizes an investigation of the spectator’s engagement with the exhibition form. An important distinction of the work I study is its unexpected apprehension of the spectator’s attention opposed to obvious invitation to participate. I use the term apprehension because it connotes an act of intuitive understanding through perception. It suggests a durational quality of becoming that forgoes absolute comprehension in exchange for awareness via multiple senses that go beyond simply concrete knowledge. To be apprehended by something is to feel it, and sometimes that sensation is inexplicable with words. Participation, on the other hand, inherently implies the act of taking part in something that profits. It has a purpose to an intended outcome. It assigns, therefore, a causal effect that gives art a function to define and change something, for example to fix social problems, disseminate political action or directly alter behaviors of society and institutions. Participation has been widely explored and used with increasing frequency over the past decade in artistic practices, exhibitions,
institutions and criticism. It can be mistakenly invested with an extraordinary level of criticality—and thus political agency—because of a sometimes misguided belief that it creates renewed and productive intersections between art, spectator and institution. It is often done for free, which tends to alleviate responsibility for both the participant and the artist for the quality and effectiveness of the outcome. Participation is commonly categorized under vaguely decipherable terms like “social practice” or “socially engaged art.” It is not to say art that invites participation does not invoke change. It does on many levels. The work that I examine is critical because it draws on multiple senses of perception and feeling, combined with space and time, to comprehensively apprehend the spectator to a greater degree than what might be readily categorized as participation.

Grant Kester’s book Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art (2004) is a critical study of participatory and socially engaged art. It attempts to assign what he calls “dialogical aesthetics” to the work of artists who engage in the social sphere. The book fails to offer a clear way to gauge the aesthetic quality of this work. Since 2006 Claire Bishop’s research has steadily sought to do so by critically analyzing this work and making it accountable for the outcome of its artistic intentions. Her criticism includes “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents” in Artforum (February 2006); an edited volume for the Documents of Contemporary Arts series Participation (2006); interviews with participants of Thomas Hirschhorn’s The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival in Thomas Hirschhorn: Establishing a Critical Corpus (2009); Rate of Return in Artforum (October 2010) and a forthcoming book on participation Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship (2012). Other recent studies on art and participation are Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the Age of Cultural Production (2012) by Nato Thompson; Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture (2011) by Gregory Sholette; Community Art (2011) edited by Paul De Bruyne and Pascal Gielen; The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context (2011) by Grant Kester; Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics (2011) by Shannon Jackson; Education for Socially Engaged Art (2011) by Pablo Helguera; The Nightmare of Participation (2010) by Markus Miessen; New Communities (2009), a book and exhibition by Nina Mönntmann; and Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945 (2007) edited by Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette. Exhibitions and conferences that include substantial accompanying publications are Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991–2011 (2011) organized by Creative Time; since 2009 Creative Time has also organized the annual Creative Time Summit that includes presentations about participatory and social-based practices; The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now (2008) organized by San Francisco Museum of Art; theanyspacewhatever (2008) organized by the Guggenheim, New York. This list excludes countless biennials, art fairs and museums that organize some component of participatory art in their programs and the plethora of writing and journals that accompany such events.
Relational aesthetics in many ways initiated an intense social turn in participation in art. Much of what is produced under the guise of social practice strives to unite art and everyday life without full comprehension that doing so negates art’s productive position of aesthetics. Influenced by Jacques Rancière, I demonstrate that the realm of art is a fertile place for generating new meaning and understanding about humanity and its place in the world without being obvious—or literal—in the intention to do so. Art’s capacity to alter the appearance of things is what can give it a politics of aesthetics, assigning or opening up new meanings by creating new contexts and repositioning viewers’ perspectives.

In the exhibitions that I examine and argue as possessing a critical efficacy, the spectator is not invited to participate. These exhibitions, too, operate solidly within the realm of art and insist on maintaining that position as art, whether they occur inside or outside the art institution, or through discursive forms of writing. The exhibition in all its incarnations and connections to a public sphere is a crucial aspect for this argument, because the exhibition is the mechanism through which the art institution legitimates and defines art. My emphasis on an art that relies on the exhibition and thus adheres to its position as art diverges from previous studies on participation, social practice and what is called dialogical aesthetics. Claire Bishop believes the artistic intention of causal effect that sometimes describes social practice dissolves art’s capacity for criticality. Its place within the field of art is obfuscated and then reasserted into the service of social and political goodwill.

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16 Ibid.
The discursive criteria of socially engaged art are, at present, drawn from a tacit analogy between anticapitalism and the Christian “good soul.” In this schema, self-sacrifice is triumphant: The artist should renounce authorial presence in favor of allowing participants to speak through him or her. This self-sacrifice is accompanied by the idea that art should extract itself from the “useless” domain of the aesthetic and be fused with social praxis. As the French philosopher Jacques Rancière has observed, this denigration of the aesthetic ignores the fact that the system of art as we understand it in the West—the “aesthetic regime of art” inaugurated by Friedrich Schiller and the Romantics and still operative to this day—is predicated precisely on a confusion between art’s autonomy (its position at one remove from instrumental rationality) and heteronomy (its blurring of art and life). Untangling this knot—or ignoring it by seeking more concrete ends for art—is slightly to miss the point, since the aesthetic is, according to Rancière, the ability to think contradiction: the productive contradiction of art’s relationship to social change, characterized precisely by that tension between faith in art’s autonomy and belief in art as inextricably bound to the promise of a better world to come. For Rancière the aesthetic doesn’t need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change, as it already inherently contains this ameliorative promise.17

The promise of a better world is the literal investment Nicolas Bourriaud attributed to relational art like Carsten Höller’s. That responsibility assigned it to the realm of political art, which does not necessarily guarantee its political effectiveness. The responsibility is also part of the reason for its misinterpretation by social practice artists, its waning criticality and its transformation into an entertainment vehicle. Bishop refers above to Jacques Rancière, and indeed my analyses of the art and exhibitions in this study draw on his theoretical project. Rancière’s writings are useful for defining and locating the politics of aesthetics in contemporary art forms that are not always overtly political or literal in their critiques. In his writings he studies recent artistic production by artists like Martha Rosler, Josephine Meckseper, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Hans Haacke, Maurizio

Cattelan, Christian Boltanski and others. These concrete references clarify his theoretical intentions in relation to art and politics and encourage productive comparisons to work by other artists and exhibitions.

Rancière debunks the presupposition that politically effective art manifests in banners for the sides of buses, photographs of demonstrations, disruptions of museums or parodies of political figures. The understanding of a political or social situation does not guarantee a mobilization to change it. Rancière relies on an underlying theory that aesthetics is assigned to each and every part of our life. He therefore believes art is a productive place of critical potential because it has the capacity to change existing aesthetic regimes. He proposes to release art from the shackles of historical determinism and grand narratives, like modernism, and infuse it with new possibilities for disrupting institutional, cultural and social consensus. Art has the power through aesthetic rupture to change the governing of our sensibilities.

Critical art is an art that aims to produce a new perception of the world, and therefore to create a commitment to its transformation. This schema, very simple in appearance, is actually the conjunction of three processes: first, the production of a sensory form of “strangeness”; second, the development of an awareness of the reason for that strangeness; and third, a mobilization of individuals as a result of that awareness.¹⁸

Rancière’s ideas about the spectator are the basis for my aesthetic assessment of the exhibition form and its durational involvement with the spectator, because while these works I examine operate solidly within the realm of art, they instigate a productive kind of strangeness that is not easy to classify. They produce confusion in their defiance of categorization and by doing so apprehend the spectator. The durational quality of that

apprehension becomes an experience that helps inculcate the art with a possibility for critical efficacy, opposed to didactically and literally seeking to generate understanding and awareness. This approach represents a dissensus in the expected behaviors of art and its discourses. Dissensus is the crux of art’s critical capacity and maybe the source of its autonomy.

The Exhibition as a Critical Form in Art since 1968

*Falling from the Grip of Grace* is divided into four chapters. The first, “The Rise of the Exhibition as a Form,” analyzes the art of Robert Smithson, Michael Asher and Group Material produced between 1968 and 1985. The main focus of this chapter is to provide a historical basis and context for the emergence of the exhibition as a sustained critical form and the coinciding interest in the role of the spectator within that work. This basis is used as a means to show that the curatorial practices which emerged in the 1970s and continue today find their history in the period under study in this chapter.

Contemporaneous criticism by Michael Fried, Rosalind Krauss and Brian O’Doherty contextualizes the work of the artists studied here. This art and writing are considered together because of the productive interplay between the visual arts and criticism that existed in the late 1960s and ’70s and continues to resonate in contemporary art. It was this interplay that stimulated the fruitful exchanges between Fried and Smithson. Group Material is examined within the context of their artistic activity that concentrated largely on inhabiting the forms of the institution and the exhibition as part of the very content of their critique. Group Material is analyzed within the framework of Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Author as Producer” (1934) because their work signals a new trajectory in its
use of the exhibition as a technical apparatus for disseminating social and political beliefs. Group Material understood the value of the exhibition as a means for making direct contact with the public and thus disseminating their ideas. The critical efficacy of the work of Smithson, Asher and Group Material is analyzed more fully in Chapter 3 within the philosophical framework of Jacques Rancière and in relation to recent art.

The second chapter, “On New Institutionalism,” builds on the historical background in Chapter 1. It introduces the curatorial strategies of Harald Szeemann, who borrowed the conceptual underpinnings in work by artists like Smithson and Asher to curate exhibitions that voiced his own critical positions (often overlapping with artists). This chapter draws a corollary between the artistic strategies described in Chapter 1 and the work of Szeemann to consider what he took from Conceptual Art to subsequently inspire other generations of curators, artists and institutions with license to use the exhibition form in many alternative ways. The exhibitions by Szeemann that I study are the groundbreaking exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* in Bern in 1969 and the controversial and influential fifth edition of Documenta in Kassel in 1972.

The work of Smithson, Asher, Group Material and Szeemann evolved into what is referred to as New Institutionalism. The critically reflexive work of New Institutionalism emerged in the 1990s alongside the relational art promoted by Nicolas Bourriaud to redefine the contemporary art institution and its role in shaping art and culture through expanded notions of the exhibition and social engagement. This chapter encompasses an investigation of New Institutionalism. It considers how, paradoxically, New Institutionalism came out of a legacy of artistic practices that originally critiqued, in part,
the institution of art. The analysis of New Institutionalism coincides with a look at the curating and critical writing of Maria Lind, who is a leading figure in the early curatorial strategies of New Institutionalism. Within the context of Lind’s and Szeemann’s work I examine exhibitions at major European perennial institutions, namely, Documenta, Manifesta and Venice Biennale. These exhibitions and institutions are studied because, since the early 1990s, they have focused with increasing frequency and intensity on staging experiences for the spectator. But this emphasis on the spectator coincided with the rise of the blockbuster exhibition and the need to rely on private sources for funding, which in total placed greater emphasize on the presence of the spectator. The economy associated with these mass audiences that turn out for large, entertaining activities has become one of the driving factors for cities, countries, foundations and corporations to capitalize on the commercial value of the spectator. By the late 1990s and early 2000s this practice was in full swing.

The third chapter, “The Efficacy of a Critical Art,” is a sustained study of the philosophical project of Jacques Rancière. His theory of a politics of aesthetics is introduced in context with work by Josephine Meckseper and Martha Rosler. Interwoven within this study of Rancière’s philosophy on art and politics is a look at Michel Foucault’s text “What is Critique?” (1978), which helps to situate the history of the critical attitude against governing authority. The combination of writings by Rancière and Foucault are the theoretical underpinnings for evaluating the critical efficacy of art and exhibition that involve spatial and temporal experiences of the spectator and challenge governing principles of the institution under which contemporary art operates. Once
equipped with these analytical tools, Chapter 3 turns to examining the politics of aesthetics in two large-scale works by Thomas Hirschhorn from 2005 and 2009 and Anton Vidokle’s e-flux, which began in 1999. Their work is considered within this theoretical context of Rancière and Foucault to illustrate the critical capacity for art, specifically, art that uses the exhibition as its primary mode of production and circulation.

Chapter 4, “The Industrial Art Complex,” applies the accumulation of historical, analytical and theoretical content of the previous chapters to do three tasks. It describes and assesses another work by Anton Vidokle that signals a turn in contemporary art to use the exhibition as a mode of education and other forms of knowledge production, such as research, journals, panel discussions and conferences. Vidokle’s unitednationsplaza in 2006–2007 is considered within this changing framework for the critical form of the exhibition, a change that integrates the spectator even further into the work. The second task is to consider the critical efficacy of the work of New Institutionalism presented in Chapter 2. This is accomplished within the context of Rancière’s philosophical project and in comparison to Vidokle’s works. By 2006 New Institutionalism had pivoted its focus from the visual to greater emphasis on knowledge production and alternative education strategies in which the spectator is not only subjected to the curatorial technique but contributes to that very mode of address. This chapter pays specific attention to Office for Contemporary Art Norway, an institution that is an early forerunner in this mode of experimental curatorial practice. It looks at the contradictory situation in which New Institutionalism finds itself recently, advocating for routes of self-organization such as free schools and artist-run initiatives while the work it initiated in
the 1990s and early 2000s in relation to the spectator has been coopted by the industry of contemporary art. Chapter 4 concludes with a return to Carsten Höller’s *Experience*. With the accumulation of knowledge and analytic tools gathered over the course of this dissertation, a portrait of the evolution of critical art in relation to the role of the spectator emerges. At the conclusion I am able to assess with greater clarity how it is we arrive at this moment where the spectator is transformed into a commodity and assigned a market value. This moment signals, perhaps, yet another kind of grip: instead of modernism, one with more potency and decidedly less grace—capital.
Chapter 1: The Rise of the Exhibition as a Form

Staging Grounds

Cultural confinement takes place when a curator imposes his own limits on an art exhibition, rather than asking an artist to set his limits. Artists are expected to fit into fraudulent categories. Some artists imagine they’ve got a hold on this apparatus, which in fact has got a hold of them. As a result, they end up supporting a cultural prison that is out of their control. Artists themselves are not confined, but their output is. Museums, like asylums and jails, have wards and cells—in other words, neutral rooms called “galleries.” A work of art when placed in a gallery loses its charge, and becomes a portable object or surface disengaged from the outside world. A vacant white room with lights is still a submission to the neutral. Works of art seen in such spaces seem to be going through a kind of esthetic convalescence. They are looked upon as so many inanimate invalids, waiting for critics to pronounce them curable or incurable. The function of the warden-curator is to separate art from the rest of society. Next comes integration. Once the work of art is totally neutralized, ineffective, abstracted, safe, and politically lobotomized it is ready to be consumed by society. All is reduced to visual fodder and transportable merchandise. Innovations are allowed only if they support this kind of confinement.1

These words are part of a statement by the American artist Robert Smithson published in the catalogue for the exhibition Documenta 5 in Kassel, Germany, in 1972.

The statement amounted to Smithson’s only contribution to the exhibition. That was not the plan. In fact, his statement was a formal objection to the way that curator Harald Szeemann intended to present the artist’s work originally selected for the exhibition. As a theme for Documenta, Szeemann sought to challenge the role of the museum as an

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influential determinant of artistic and cultural value. True to its title, *Documenta 5: Questioning Reality⎯Image Worlds Today*, the exhibition presented various thematic sections throughout the Fridericianum Museum and Neue Galerie in Kassel. It employed a combination of fine art and material culture, such as advertising, illustration, science fiction, political propaganda, urban plans and children’s art. This collection of things from the visual world was meant to be “a concentrated version of life in the form of an exhibition.” Theme groupings collectively examined the global emergence of a living reality, Szeemann argued, based solely on the images of real concepts, actions and objects. Determinants of what we now call high and low culture were purely instrumental because the images—or signs—that pointed to the reality of art, for example, were located everywhere. Art was made public by the instruments of films, books, television and magazines, alongside the more traditional modes of distribution like museums and exhibitions. If that is the case, then what is art? Szeemann asked. Since the museum is one of the most important instruments to lend legitimation to art, he polemicized the question of what was appropriate for the site of the institution by combining fine art with everyday objects and actions inside the Fridericianum and Neue Galerie, challenging the museum’s traditional authority in assigning value to visual culture. What he did, however, at least from Smithson’s and other artists’ perspective, was produce something even more restrictive.

Comparable topics related to the role of the museum had already begun to concern a number of Conceptual artists, such as Daniel Buren, Marcel Broodthaers, Hans

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Haacke and Michael Asher. Since the late 1960s, these artists had been developing various tactical inquiries that challenged the social, economic and physical circumstances under which art is produced, funded and experienced. While the term institutional critique had not yet come into regular use to describe the work of these artists, within the realm of critical practice they stood at the helm of those artists and writers seeking to reveal the museum’s effect on artistic and cultural production.³

While Szeemann used Documenta 5 as the dissemination point for this critique, he paradoxically polemicized it by insisting the museum was the only place to exhibit the art. Instead of reinforcing the utopian ideas of inserting art into the streets prevalent at that moment, he confined the exhibition to the physical limits of the Fridericianum and Neue Galerie. He asked artists to make or lend work that would be shown within this thematic context and these museum spaces. The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung reported just days after the exhibition opened, “For the first time this 5th Documenta renounces almost any outside: the park landscapes in Kassel riverside meadows as well as the neighboring city area, in short: any kind of environment.”⁴ Since Robert Smithson’s art is predicated upon a dialectic between the interior and exterior sites of exhibition and therefore the art institution, the limitations imposed by Szeemann in actuality and theoretically were, evidently, troubling for him.


Robert Smithson: The Time to See Non-Sites

Although Robert Smithson wrote “Cultural Confinement” in 1972 as a reaction to Szeemann’s organization of Documenta 5, his ideas about containment and limits had already begun to formulate. Smithson’s interest in fringe spaces is fundamental to the series of works he called Non-Sites, all made in 1968. Non-Sites represent a pivotal moment in the history of modern art when the arrangement of objects inside the gallery started to become integrated into an artist’s working process. They generally consist of three parts: media, such as maps, photographs and descriptive texts of a site; mineral samples, such as sand, rock, dirt and slag taken from a site; and metal bins or trays, fabricated sometimes with machine-like precision, to hold the samples and arranged in a gallery or museum in relation to the maps, photographs and texts. Smithson’s arrangement of these components “point” to actual sites often situated within landscapes on “fringes” or “boundaries.”

The disparate parts function, comprehensively, as the Non-Site, an index corresponding to the Site located somewhere outside the gallery confines.

A Non-Site (Pine Barrens, New Jersey) is the first Non-Site made by Smithson. His text installed as part of the work describes it:

A NON-SITE (an indoor earthwork)
31 sub-divisions based on a hexagonal “airfield” in the Woodmansie Quadrangle—New Jersey (Topographic) map. Each sub-division of the

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5 Mark Linder points out the name “Non-Site” is not only a pun but a complex double of sight in response to Greenberg’s and Fried’s criticism that ultimately discounts architecture’s effects and the impact the gallery site has on art. Mark Linder, “Towards ‘A New Type of Building’: Robert Smithson’s Architectural Criticism,” in Robert Smithson, ed. Eugenie Tsai with Cornelia Butler (Berkeley: University of California and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2004), 193.

Non-Site contains sand from the Site shown on the map. Tours between the Non-Site and the Site are possible. The red dot on the map is the place where the sand was collected.

A Non-Site (Pine Barrens, New Jersey) was made in early 1968. It includes this text reproduced on the same panel as a topographic map cut into the shape of a hexagon with six compartments, each with five sub-divisions decreasing in size as they converge in the center of the hexagon, which accounts for the 31st sub-division. The second component is an object, a set of thirty-one aluminum bins painted blue. Their hexagonal organization corresponds exactly to the sub-divisions one sees in the topographic map. Each bin contains sand from the actual site of the airfield in New Jersey to which Smithson refers. The bins descend in scale, in accordance with the topographic map, as they converge in the center of the hexagon, which itself is a small hexagonal bin filled with sand. In a discussion with Michael Heizer and Dennis Oppenheim in 1970, Smithson describes the Site of Pine Barrens,

This place was in a state of equilibrium, it had a kind of tranquility and it was discontinuous from the surrounding area because of its stunted pine trees. There was a hexagon airfield there which lent itself very well to the application of certain crystalline structures which had preoccupied me in my earlier work. […] Initially I went to Pine Barrens to set up a system of outdoor pavements but in the process I became interested in the abstract aspects of mapping.⁷

Mapping proves an important part of the underlying premise of the Non-Sites. It is literally and conceptually embedded within their makeup. Smithson sets up two overlapping dialectics, one connecting the gallery to the non-gallery sites and a second that draws correspondences between the various parts of a Non-Site inside a gallery. A

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Non-Site (Pine Barrens, New Jersey), for example, includes the topographic map, the text label, the aluminum bins and the sand. Each component of a Non-Site is arranged to encourage viewers to walk around and among the photographs, descriptive texts, mineral samples and maps. Visitors read, view, compare and stitch together the relationship of the components in a period of contemplation that turns the entire Non-Site into an exhibition. The viewer’s understanding, or at least increased awareness of the Site, located well beyond the perimeters of the gallery, surfaces only after this activity that involves the Non-Site, the totality of which is both a sample and negation of the Site. In the same interview mentioned earlier, Smithson was asked why he still found it necessary to work inside the gallery. He responded, “I like the artificial limits that the gallery presents. I would say my art exists in two realms—in my outdoor sites which can be visited only and which have no objects imposed on them, and indoors, where objects do exists.”

Smithson leveraged the gallery site both as reference to its place of engagement and as directional to another site beyond its boundary.

Against a “Manneristic Modernism”

Today, many large-scale art installations are immersive environments. This situation is most apparent in the mise-en-scène installations by artists like Ryan Trecartin, Thomas Hirschhorn and Mike Nelson who completely take over every aspect of the gallery to make it part of their work. But a discourse in exhibitions and criticism on the temporal and spatial experience of art was just beginning to occupy artists and critics in the late 1960s. In 1967, Michael Fried published “Art and Objecthood” in the June issue

8 Ibid., 244.
of *Artforum*. He deplored what he saw as theatricality in the “literalist” work of Tony Smith, Robert Morris and Donald Judd, ideas which they explored in both their art and writing.9 Their art stepped out of the illusionistic space of the picture plane to create a stage presence that demanded a bodily experience of it through time and space. Judd’s early sculptures, for instance, rely so heavily on geometric symmetry with appearances of mass production they appear to be nothing more than literal objects. A Minimalist work reveals itself through time and space, as the spectator uses both to move around it. The lack of visual immediacy in their work, Fried claimed, theatricalized its relationship with the spectator. Theater is “what lies between the arts” and the “concepts of quality and value” are possible “only within the individual arts.”10 The inability of this work to hold conviction in a perceptual immediacy meant it sacrificed an artistic autonomy based exclusively on pure visuality and medium specificity. Unable to reconcile the position of “not-painting” and “not-sculpture” while still acknowledging the work as art, Fried identified this condition as “objecthood.”

Objecthood allowed Fried to situate their art within its own category, but repositioning it presented a whole new set of problems for determining and understanding the aesthetic quality of this new category of art. Fried wrote that “literalist sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which

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9 The writings or comments by Judd and Morris that Fried responded to include an interview with Bruce Glaser, edited by Lucy R. Lippard and published in “Questions to Stella and Judd” in *Art News* in 1966; Donald Judd’s essay “Specific Objects” in *Arts Yearbook* in 1965; Robert Morris’s essays, “Notes on Sculpture” and “Notes on Sculpture, Part 2” in *Artforum* in February and October 1966, respectively. Fried’s “Notes” for the reprint of “Art and Objecthood” are telling for their personal comments reflecting Fried’s position in 1998 when the book was published. See Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 1967, in *Art and Objecthood. Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), 168–172.

the beholder encounters literalist work [...] the experience of literalist art is of an object in a situation—one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder.”11 An essential feature of a modernist work of art, according to him, is its ability at every moment to be “wholly manifest. [...] It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness.”12

Robert Smithson’s use of the actual circumstances of the gallery to present objects in a multiplicity of forms and arrangements that essentially directed viewers’ attention outside of the gallery to other circumstances did not fit easily into Fried’s criticism.

In 1966, just a year prior to the publication of Fried’s text, Tony Smith recounted to Samuel Wagstaff in an Artforum interview about a memorable car ride in the early 1950s along the newly minted New Jersey Turnpike:

It was a dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes and colored lights. This drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn’t be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done. At first I didn't know what it was, but its effect was to liberate me from many of the views I had had about art. 13

While Smith voiced doubt about art’s ability to produce that kind of experience, his account of the drive on the New Jersey Turnpike was profoundly influential for both Fried and Robert Smithson.14 Smith’s account was part of the impetus for Fried’s “Art and Objecthood” in which he reprints excerpts from Smith’s recollection and spends a

11 Ibid., 153.
12 Ibid., 167.
number of pages assessing it. Smith continues his recollections, telling Wagstaff, “The experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized. I thought to myself, it ought to be clear that’s the end of art. Most paintings look pretty pictorial after that. There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it.”

In *Artforum* in 1968, Smithson reflects on Smith’s words saying, “He is talking about a sensation, not the finished work of art; this doesn’t imply that he is anti-art. Smith is describing the state of his mind in the ‘primary process’ of making contact with matter.” Smith’s references to mapping, to coordinates in space and time and the connections of geographic points along a continuum proved a challenge to Smithson and were important to the development of his ideas for the *Non-Sites*. These involved not only the *inter*-bridging of two distant geographic points between the interior and exteriors spaces of the gallery but also the *intra*-bridge between what may at first seem disparate objects, images and texts positioned inside a gallery. Through overlapping systems of dialectics, the *inter*- and *intra*-coordinates that Smithson made for viewers, he began to explore the *Non-Sites* as a mode of staging experiences in the gallery. These staged arrangements asked spectators both mentally and physically to do the work, to make the connections. His experiments with the *Non-Sites* would certainly not have been easily slotted into the modernist dictum of sculpture, painting or even, as Fried might say, “objecthood.”

Fried’s lack of criticism of Smithson’s work at that time perhaps implies

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17 Fried did not discuss Smithson’s work within the context of modernism. In the essays and reviews collected and reproduced in *Art and Objecthood*, Smithson’s name appears only four times, once in a reference to a letter that Smithson sent to *Artforum* in response to Fried’s 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood” and three other times in Fried’s footnotes for his “Introduction” to the volume.
his certainty that Smithson stood for something well beyond “objecthood,” maybe even
his undermining of the major tenets of modernism.

Writing in 1972, Rosalind Krauss indicts Fried and Clement Greenberg for
ignoring artists working in a range of forms and outside of the gallery, saying,
“Modernist critics appear to have cut themselves off from what is most energetic and felt
in contemporary sculpture. Their inability to deal with Richard Serra or Michael Heizer,
or Keith Sonnier, or Robert Smithson is anomalous in the extreme.”

Smithson, too, was
critical of Fried’s dogmatic, modernist position. In October 1967, Smithson wrote a letter
to the editor of *Artforum* responding to Fried’s “Art and Objecthood.” Smithson reacted
to the almost religious orthodoxy that Fried assigned to maintaining a version of modern
painting and sculpture, pure of theatricality, in which the object was able to keep a
“presentness” or “grace” in its conviction to be continually whole and true to the qualities
of its medium. And Smithson envisions already that Fried had instigated an art historical
shift. The theatricality Fried spoke of would come to propel and define Minimalism and
later postmodernist art. Smithson writes,

Fried has set the critical stage for *manneristic modernism*, although he is
trying hard not to fall from the “grip” of “grace.” […] What Fried fears
most is the consciousness of what he is doing—namely being himself
theatrical. He dreads “distance” because that would force him to become
aware of the role he is playing. His sense of intimacy would be annihilated
by the “God” Jonathan Edwards feared so much. Fried, the orthodox
modernist, the keeper of the gospel of Clement Greenberg has been
“struck by Tony Smith,” the agent of endlessness.

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18 Rosalind Krauss, “A View of Modernism,” 1972, in *Perpetual Inventory. Rosalind K. Krauss*
(Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2010), 126.
proponent of Puritanism and religious revitalization in the American colonies. He, like other Euroamerican
colonials, viewed skeptically the Native Americans as devil worshipers and worked intensely for their
salvation, spreading the word of Christianity on behalf of God. Fried’s essay “Art and Objecthood” begins
Only a year later, Smithson would begin to work with his concepts for the Non-Sites; the built-in solicitation of the spectator and multiplicity of mediums appear, seemingly, as immediate reactions and antagonism to Fried’s criticism.

In her 1978 essay “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” Krauss confirms that, indeed, beginning in the late 1960s, an extraordinary number of artists felt “permission” to work within conditions that “can no longer be described as modernist.” Her roster of artist includes Robert Morris, Heizer, Serra, Walter De Maria, Bruce Nauman and Smithson. While she cites Spiral Jetty, which Smithson began working on in 1970, and Mirror Displacements in the Yucatan, from 1969, as examples of different kinds of “marked” sites within the landscape, representative of expanded notions of what is sculpture, she also poses broad and poignant challenges to the modernist insistence of the artist to work with a single medium and thus consider themselves only painter, sculptor or photographer. She contends, “At both these points the bounded conditions of modernism have suffered a logically determined rupture.” She calls to dispense with the modernist insistence, like Fried’s, that an artist work in one medium and that their practice be realized through only one form—sculpture, for example. Referring generally to the work of the artists that she lists, Krauss concurs: “It is easy to see that many of the artists in question have found themselves occupying, successively, different places within the expanded field.” But, she defends that field, continuing:

with a quote by Perry Miller, Edwards’s biographer. Fried closes his essay with reference to the puritanical desire of Edwards writing “Presentness is Grace.”


21 Ibid., 288.
And though the experience of the field suggests that this continual relocation of one’s energies is entirely logical, an art criticism still in the thrall of a modernist ethos has been largely suspicious from the modernist demand for the purity and separateness of the various mediums (and thus the necessary specialization of a practitioner within a given medium). [...] For, within the situation of postmodernism, practice is not defined in relation to a given medium—sculpture—but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium—photography, books, lines on walls, mirrors, or sculpture itself—might be used.\(^{22}\)

Krauss’s words speak directly to what Smithson was already doing in 1968, combining multiple mediums—text, photography, mineral samples, aluminum objects and maps, essentially visual and textual data in all its various forms—inside the space of the gallery, without prioritizing any as the core of his practice. While Conceptual artists like William Anatasi, Mel Bochner, Christo and Jeanne Claude, and Dennis Oppenheim were beginning to explore a critique of the architectural space of the art institution, Smithson’s *Non-Sites* signal the inception of an artist thinking about the totality of the arranged, curated exhibition as a form.

In Smithson’s *Non-Sites* one can locate the emerging qualities of postmodernism. These are reflected in his disregard for prioritizing a single medium, his situating of the material immediately in the space of the gallery, and his subsequent redirecting of the attention and time taken to experience that data to the exterior perimeters of a landscape. Krauss’s list cited earlier includes a plethora of mediums to support her theory of the rupture in the medium-specificity of modernism. She fails, however, even as late as 1978, to acknowledge the site of exhibition, the gallery, and the way an artist uses that space, as an integral shift deployed by artists. Critics and institutions seemed unable to keep up.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.
Even the Whitney Biennial, which professed to reflect new aspects, directions and talents in contemporary American art, had not, until the 1977 edition, presented video as a viable artistic medium. David Deitcher points out,

This was the first acknowledgement by a Biennial curator [John Hanhardt] that contemporary art was shifting away from the modernist project of critical reflection on the material properties of each artistic medium to reflect critically on representation in all its forms and its role in shaping individual identity and experience.  

Although working toward a postmodern ethos, Krauss’s critical reflections in “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” remained tied to conventional forms. She does not take into account the exhibition, as I believe Smithson and later Michael Asher and Group Material did with increasing intention (nor does she even mention video). It is the awareness of the exhibition as a powerful form that gave these artists a means to pull together or completely discard conventional mediums as a way to touch the viewer and connect the space of the gallery to distant sites, in Smithson’s case, as far away as the Yucatan, New Jersey and even Oberhausen, Germany.

The Non-Site as Exhibition

Non-Site (Oberhausen, Germany) is another Non-Site made after Smithson accepted an invitation by the dealer Konrad Fischer to show in his gallery in Dusseldorf in late 1968.  

It is more complex than A Non-Site (Pine Barrens, New Jersey) in the kinds and number of components and their arrangement inside the gallery. It represents

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the rather quick development of ideas related to the role of exhibition that Smithson was evidently working through. To help him form ideas for the work in Germany, Fischer arranged for the photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher to tour Smithson around the industrial sites of the Ruhr Valley, which included a visit to a steelworks plant. Smithson was most attracted to the landscape at a plant in Oberhausen because of the gray and brown colors and jagged quality of the rocks.25

Documentation photographs of the exhibition installation in Dusseldorf show how Smithson arranged the components of Non-Site (Oberhausen, Germany). Samples of slag—gray rocks of various sizes and shapes—that he collected on several visits to the industrial site, along with aluminum bins, photographs, maps and texts make up this Non-Site. On each of five Photostat panels, there is a map, five photographs and a descriptive text. The maps are almost identical except for marks signaling where the slag was collected. At their center is a blank, roughly oval space that indicates the general area where the slag was pulled; Smithson marked that site with an “S,” written in red ink. Around this blank space are graphic indications of a network of railroad and highway systems, a nearby park and other green spaces. The Photostat panels are installed in proximity to five aluminum bins, each filled with slag. Smithson had made sand-colored bins with slanted vents that allowed the slag to be exposed on the sides and top. The bins are placed in a row perpendicular to the wall on which the five panels hang, each panel containing five black-and-white photographs on an upper register and a handwritten descriptive text on a lower register. The bins are graduated in size. They increase in

height as they approach the wall and consequently decrease in depth; the tallest and
thinnest bin is closest to the wall, about waist-high and parallel to the fifth Photostat
panel, as one reads the panels left to right. The width of the bins is constant and about
the width of the Photostat panels. Ann Reynolds notes that *Non-Site (Oberhausen,
Germany)* also included a third physical component inside the gallery, not visible in
documentation photographs. A lump of asphalt was picked up at the plant and placed
inside the perimeters of a white square on the gallery floor.

Photographs had been absent from the earlier *Non-Sites*, such as *Pine Barrens*. At
Oberhausen, the snapshots Smithson took of the steelworks site include close-up images
of dry, cracked earth and barren expanses of land with all the evidence of human
intervention in the landscape, but little actual proof except tire tracks in some images.
Other pictures from the plant show slag in various states of processing and sizes—the
liquid hardened, smooth or broken into large and small chunks. For Smithson,
photographs did not operate as a means to represent landscape, as an independent
medium within the *Non-Site*, which supports my reading that prioritizes the overall
experience of the installation of the work as a function of using the exhibition as a form.
In the 1970 discussion with Michael Heizer and Dennis Oppenheim mentioned earlier,
Smithson makes clear,

> I think we all see the landscape as coextensive with the gallery. I don’t
think we’re dealing with matter in terms of a back to nature movement.
For me the world is a museum. Photography makes nature obsolete. My
thinking in terms of the site and non-site makes me feel there’s no need to
refer to nature anymore. I’m totally concerned with making art and this is

They are also numbered in handwritten text on the bottom of each Photostat panel.

mainly an act of viewing, a mental activity that zeroes in on discrete sites. I’m not interested in presenting the medium for its own sake. I think that’s a weakness of a lot of contemporary work.\textsuperscript{28}

None of the photographs on the Photostat panels captures images of the furnaces or buildings, the more obvious built infrastructure associated with this kind of industrial site. Smithson intentionally kept the photographs less specific. If he included images of the buildings and chimney stacks, viewers of the exhibition at Fischer’s gallery would have been able to easily identify them; the gallery in Dusseldorf was located just a short distance from Oberhausen. This omission is important for Smithson because it prevented the photographs from communicating by themselves anything comprehensive about the site and thus steering clear of the use of the images as documentary photographs or as, he says, making the Site “obsolete.” Thus he strategically positions the individual components of the Non-Site to provide complementary—but independently insufficient—reference to the Site.\textsuperscript{29} The handwritten descriptions on the lower registers of each panel supply basic information to help connect the slag material inside the bins with the maps and photographs. For the fifth bin, for example, the description reads:

MAP FOR SECTION FIVE OF NONSITE-OBERHAUSEN IN (RUHR-DISTRICT) TOPOGRAPHISCHE KARTE 4507 MÜLHEIM. RUHR SLAG COLLECTED NEAR “S” ON MAP. PLACED INTO STEEL CONTAINER.

\textsuperscript{28} Bear and Sharp, “Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson,” \textit{The Collected Writings}, 246.
\textsuperscript{29} Ann Reynolds criticizes the exhibition of Smithson’s \textit{Non-Site (Palisades, Edgewater, New Jersey)}, 1968, installed at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1988. The work is part of the museum’s permanent collection. Only a light-blue, aluminum bin filled with rock was installed next to a work by Donald Judd, which is also in the museum’s collection. Reynolds contends, and I agree, that this presentation of Smithson’s work “stripped” its meaning because the map and photographs (which the museum also owns) were not installed as part of Non-Site. Instead, the museum attempted to slot Smithson’s work within an easy history of Minimalism by juxtaposing the bin and rocks next to a Minimalist work by Judd. This situation helps to support my argument that the various components, arranged as exhibition, are the Non-Sites, and not the individual artifacts. See Reynolds, “Reproducing Nature,” 126.
Each description has information about the size of the bin associated with the Photostat panel and the location and date of “THE FIVE SNAPSHOTs TAKEN.” In the case of bin five, the slag was collected on “DEC 13 1968.”

Smithson understood the value of the exhibition as a technique, a locus for the distribution of his ideas; the Non-Site “pointed” to the actual Site. He later utilized different forms of distribution—periodicals and films—which are other techniques in their own rights that also helped to disperse his work more widely. Since the concept of the Non-Sites was inextricably linked to the space of the gallery, he was able to use the vast expanse of landscape as a medium, a Site. Simultaneously, he satisfied the necessity to present something to an art-going public, to remain relevant, accessible and therefore critical, by showing photographs, texts, maps and mineral samples not merely as “documentation” but something more substantive represented in their totality. In fact, he must have been delighted in 1970 when the Whitney showed documentation for Spiral Jetty as part of their Annual, by no means the work that rested out in the Great Salt Lake, only a reference to it that very few if any visitors to the Whitney Museum exhibition would ever experience in person. Smithson used these modes of distribution to connect with the public and simultaneously “de-center” the art world by making the ultimate

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30 I use the word technique here within the context of Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Author as Producer,” 1934. In it he calls for the political writer to focus on the distribution, or technique, of his work as much as the political content. In this chapter, I draw parallels between the publication of a writer’s work and the exhibition of an artist’s work, the exhibition serving as a critical form of technique, or touch, with the public. In a discussion about his work for Spiral Jetty, Smithson states that “a museum could exist just as well as a magazine, it is just a matter of changing context, and more and more of this will happen.” See Paul Toner and Robert Smithson, eds. “Interview with Robert Smithson,” 1970, in Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings (Berkeley: University of California, 1996), 236.
locus of interest well beyond the typical viewer’s capacity to experience it.\textsuperscript{31} Among his references to the gallery as the site of the *Non-Sites* and the dialectic he set up between that space and the exterior landscape already cited, we also know he was thinking about the exhibition as a technique from a 1969 statement in which he uses the word “exhibition” to describe what he made outside the gallery. In a conversation about a *Site* he was working on, Smithson says,

> Then what I’m doing here—I’m going to use a room and a salt mine...(It’s out here on Lake Cayuga, Cayuga Salt Mine)—and tomorrow I’ll go down there and put on an exhibition in the salt mines and arrange these mirrors in various configurations, photograph them, and then bring them back to the interior along with rock salt of various grades. As you can see, the interior of the museum somehow mirrors the site and I’m actually going to use mirrors. Most sculptors just think about the object, but for me there is no focus on one object so it is the back-and-forth thing.\textsuperscript{32}

Smithson’s *Non-Sites* are an accumulation of references and clues, some of which are more saturated with information than others but none of which completely supplies the answers in an immediate experience of the work. Smithson intentionally staged a process of revealing while holding back critical information so that the spectator’s experience was one of looking, reading and walking around the exhibition. In doing so,

\textsuperscript{31} In his analysis of Smithson’s 1968 text “A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art,” Craig Owens makes clear that Smithson’s *Non-Sites*, which include the works installed in the gallery but also texts, were ways for de-centering attention from the gallery as well as more geographically centralized art world sites, like New York. Owens states, “All of Smithson’s work effected a radical dislocation of art, which was removed from its locus in the museum and gallery to remote, inaccessible locations. This displacement is not only geographic, but economic as well: the ‘value’ of the work of art is no longer determined by its status as a portable commodity; it is now the work itself which bestows value (upon the depreciated site where it is installed).” See Craig Owens, “Earthwords,” 1979, in *Beyond Recognition. Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California, 1992), 41.

\textsuperscript{32} During a symposium held at Cornell University in 1969, Smithson mentioned a work he was making at the Cayuga Salt Mines as part of his participation at that time in the exhibition *Earth Art* at White Museum, Cornell University. See “Earth,” 1969, in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California, 1996), 178.
he made the kind of durational engagement with a work that Fried condemned and Smith thought impossible in art. Smithson was aware of the aesthetic value in the level of uncertainty he posed for viewers and of the importance of the temporal quality of that experience. In 1972 in an interview with Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, he explains how he developed ideas for the Non-Sites. Opposed to simply building sculptures to be contained within the gallery at this transitional moment in modernism when the gallery played a crucial role in the making of the work of art, Smithson explains,

I began to see things in a more relational way. In other words, I had to question—where the works were, what they were about. The very construction of the gallery with its neutral white rooms became questionable. So I became interested in bringing attention to the abstractness of the gallery as a room, and yet at the same time taking into account less neutral sites, you know, sites that would in a sense be neutralized by the gallery. So it became a preoccupation with place.  

Smithson’s Non-Sites are the earliest move toward artists thinking about and utilizing the exhibition as a critical form, consequently theatricalizing the experience of the work for the spectator, asking more from them and positing a set of relations that challenged the rarified space of the modernist exhibition site.

**Michael Asher: The Gallery as an Experiential Environment**

Accessible day and night from February 13 to March 8, 1970, Michael Asher’s installation at the Gladys K. Montgomery Art Center at Pomona College in Claremont, California, was an architectural intervention of the museum. In this work,

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Asher was interested in exploring how to introduce light and sound into the museum without using any outside objects or equipment. He reconfigured the museum’s space into two intersecting triangles that required spectators to pass through a narrow corridor where the triangles met. Asher recalls, “Entering and moving through the installation, the viewer became increasingly removed from the exterior reality, at the same time perceiving gradual abstractions of that reality within a formally determined and controlled space.”

None of Asher’s works have titles. The institutions that commission the work sometimes invent titles, such as *Michael Asher Installation*. But Asher refers to the works by the name of the exhibition, its date and location, in this case: “Gladys K. Montgomery Art Center at Pomona College, February 13–March 8, 1970, Claremont, California.” The installation at Pomona included construction of three large walls in the exhibition space and lobby. The gallery is forty-one feet, three inches in length and twenty-five feet, nine inches in width. The lobby is twenty-seven feet square. Each of these spaces has an existing eleven-foot, eight-inch ceiling. For his exhibition, Asher inserted one three-part wall, two parts of which were placed in front of two already existing, perpendicular gallery walls, twenty-eight feet, five inches on the north and twenty-five feet, nine inches on the east. The third section of this wall, forty-three feet, four inches, formed a diagonal from the southeast corner across the original rectangular gallery space to the northwest corner creating a significantly reduced, triangular space cutting off public access to the rest of that area. A second wall, twenty-seven feet,

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was built diagonally across the lobby starting at the entrance of the building and running to the entrance of the gallery. It ran parallel to Asher’s diagonal wall that cut across the gallery space, overlapping by five feet and creating a two-foot-wide corridor between the lobby and the gallery. The wall Asher inserted in the lobby prohibited passage into other parts of that original space, alternatively guiding visitors directly from the entrance of the building into the gallery. A third wall measured twenty-one feet, four inches; it was sited to the right of the entrance, or south wall, perpendicular to the west wall with the doorway and through which visitors walked. The new entrance to the exhibition was six feet, four inches wide. A new ceiling, six feet, ten inches high, covered both the lobby and triangular areas inside the building; it was much lower than the original eleven-foot ceiling. The lobby was compressed into an almost perfect square. The gallery’s linoleum floor was completely covered with protective tape. Everything, including the floor, was painted off-white, and all seams and gaps between new construction and the entry to the building were completely smoothed over.

Two glass doors that separated the lobby from the outside were removed. The doorjamb and hinges were covered to obscure any indication that a door had ever existed. As Asher recalls, the removal of the doors was crucial, allowing not only twenty-four-hour visitor access during the course of the exhibition but also uniting outdoor environmental conditions with the gallery space.

I got to a point where I’d figured out the installation and how these two triangular spaces were going to work. Since I was looking at everything that pre-existed, I finally wondered about the doors. Why do I have to use the doors? Because in fact, all the elements that I wanted to use in
the work were coming through the passageway anyway, why not have basically a work which truly merges to the out of doors, and yet is defined by the indoors? So I took them off… As a matter of fact, I really liked the idea of accessibility day and night because I was interested in how the air was changing, the sounds were changing, and light was changing. And if one really wanted to follow it, like I wanted to follow it, they would come back at night to see what shifts were taking place in those three elements.55

Asher was systematic about deconstructing the gallery at Pomona in order to create a unique atmospheric affect for the visitor.36 Today, while major structural interventions in galleries as temporary exhibitions are commonplace (Mike Nelson, Urs Fischer and Carsten Höller, for example), Asher’s installation was unique in early Conceptual Art. It was one of the first instances when an artist relocated the physical work they might do in a studio to the gallery. The gallery became his studio and the institution took on co-responsibility for making the work. The administrative and building staff had to take precise measurements, prepare drawings, source materials, acquire estimates, pick up or arrange delivery of materials, file permits and, of course, help Asher build the work. That effort, time and energy for both the artist and institution are extraordinary given the temporary duration of the work, equal to the length of the exhibition—only three and half weeks.

In fall 1969, the new Pomona director and curator Hal Glickman invited a selection of Conceptual artists working in Southern California to participate in a series of exhibitions he titled the Artist’s Gallery. Running throughout the academic year, the


program essentially called for transforming the gallery into a studio residence. Asher took his lead from debates on the theatricality in art that had been recently issued in the discourse around Minimalism. By 1970 he had begun to consider time and space in relation to the spatial configurations of a gallery. Instead of making a Minimalist work, he used the architecture of the gallery to transform it into an experiential environment in which,

The sound in this work was the sounds of the activity of the community surrounding the work as well as that of the viewers who entered it. Because of the twenty-four hour time structure, viewers activated the work by entering at a time determined by them, rather than the museum’s usual daytime schedule.

This work at Pomona functioned performatively through the spectator’s physical encounter with the actual space, achieving a level of theatricality and a disruption of the pristine modernist museum site that was unheard of at that time.

Regular visitors, faculty and students accustomed to the Pomona gallery would likely have been unsettled when entering this space. Uninitiated visitors would have generally expected a much higher ceiling and larger space for a gallery, let alone doors. These spectators’ responses, primarily one of confusion, were integral to the installation, as Asher implies above. The architectural alterations enabled them to act partially free of interference from the institution, which means mediating text panels, labels, handouts or, for that matter, objects. They could walk into and wander through the quizzical, open space anytime they chose. Employing a drastically revisionist

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37 Artists included Asher, Lewis Baltz, Michael Brewster, Judy Chicago, Ron Cooper, Tom Eatherton, Lloyd Hamrol, Robert Irwin and others. They presented work or created different environmental situations inside the gallery.

approach to the gallery, Asher used the architectural language of the museum and the social behaviors expected in it to disrupt viewer expectations.

About the Pomona College installation, he writes:

The visual, spatial, and formal continuity of the installation was dialectically in opposition to the actual continuity of time, sound, light, and climatic conditions. To stage a work that would express these oppositions with ideal clarity, it seemed that certain facets of the reality of the work—its various levels of support, for example—had to be suppressed. This work’s specific reality—what it shares with the institution that contains it—remained elusive. This apparent absence derived from conditions created in the work’s construction: the demarcation of the existing space and the partial concealment of the activities within that space. 39

And disrupt the spatial contexts he did. Exterior sounds filtered naturally into the first triangular space, then amplified as they reached the tight corridor, finally intensifying further at the end of the second triangular area in the gallery. Asher forced the gallery to relinquish its formal influence over the spectator by creating, instead, continuity between an outside reality and its interior. The lack of doors allowed street noise to flow into the exhibition site, eliminating the quiet isolation visitors expected, while the intensity of daylight and streetlight changed as it travelled from the first triangle, through the corridor into the second triangle. The quality of the air, usually controlled by humidity and conditioning systems, was left to natural shifts in temperature, wind, sunlight and precipitation. All of these qualities coalesced to create a shift in the spatial contexts that define the sensibilities of a modernist gallery and the “activities,” as Asher says, that take place inside it.

39 Ibid.
Other Frames for the Viewer

Asher’s installations, such as that made at Pomona, always address the accompanying contexts of the exhibition site. Museums, foundations, Kunsthallels, biennials and galleries commission his work; his oeuvre doesn’t include any pre-existing work made inside a studio, ready for loan. Kirsi Peltomäki comments on this unique artistic approach: “Because his works engage with existing environments, they most frequently cease to exist at the end of their exhibition, leaving no art object that can be re-exhibited, preserved, circulated or commodified.” About the role of the viewer, she observes that “[Asher’s] installations require, and draw from, whatever discursive knowledge a viewer may have regarding the operation of art institutions, while they simultaneously solicit individuated social and psychological responses.” Asher does not recreate installations; doing so would allow the work to become an object for consumption, ready on the demand of institutions, curators or collectors who select it. His approach instills an uncompromising determination on site specificity, an approach that explains why his work does not exist in permanent collections of any major museums and why there have not been any large retrospective exhibitions of it to date. Extended critical interpretation is also scant.

Asher’s installation at Pomona College is one of the earliest works in Conceptual Art to address the cultural confinement of the production and experience of works of art in relation to the gallery, the same kind of confinement that Smithson would deride just two years later in 1972 at Documenta 5. Asher’s site-specific work

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41 Ibid., 8.
not only dismantled the physical qualities of the gallery space but he substituted social, visual and aural experiences for the art object. It was at once ephemeral, durational, immaterial and resistant to commodification. Working in this mode, Asher was part of a growing cadre of artists and critics who, as Miwon Kwon writes, began to make art in response to the “actual location, a tangible reality, its identity composed of a unique combination of physical elements: length, depth, height, texture, and shape of walls and rooms; scale and proportion of plazas, buildings, or parks; existing conditions of lighting, ventilation, traffic patterns; distinctive topographical features, and so forth.”

Asher’s installation at Pomona possesses a number of those qualities. It is his attention to site specificity, particularly with regard to the physical structure of the gallery as a cultural dominant, from which institutional critique emerged and Asher became a leading figure. Kwon’s words are relevant for thinking about Asher’s early work within the context of institutional critique.

In the nascent forms of institutional critique, in fact, the physical conditions of the exhibition space remained the primary point of departure […] the task of exposing those aspects which the institution would obscure was enacted literally in relation to the architecture of the exhibition space—highlighting the humidity level of a gallery by allowing moisture to “invade” the pristine minimalist art object (a mimetic configuration of the gallery space itself); insisting on the material fact of the gallery walls as “framing” devices by notating the walls’ dimensions directly on them; removing portions of a wall to

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42 Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2002), 11.
43 In 1973 at the Galleria Toselli in Milan, Asher made a work that required every inch of the gallery walls and ceiling to be sandblasted. Hardware and pipes were also sandblasted. After the gallery was put into this rudimentary state, as if under construction, only natural light was permitted to illuminate it. In 1974 at the Claire Copley in Los Angeles, Asher deinstalled a partition wall that divided the area for administrative functions and art storage from the exhibition space. The office area and its activities could be viewed from the exhibition area and vice versa. These works, more than Pomona, situate his practice within the analytical approach that came to define institutional critique.
reveal the base reality behind the “neutral” white cube; and exceeding the physical boundaries of the gallery by having the art work literally go out the window.  

While my study is not exclusively focused on a history of institutional critique, it is important to point out that alternatives to existing curatorial models of the modern art institution began to take shape at this time. My reading of the work of Asher and Smithson is engaged with its emerging entanglement with exhibition parameters. The work discussed thus far reveals a dependence on the inherent parameters of an exhibition, such as a gallery space and visitors, in order to materialize as a work of art. It also requires the exhibition’s temporal qualities, including the dates and hours accessible to the public, and the use of the institution’s resources, such as administrative and physical labor. Around 1970, these approaches to conceiving and producing art began to manifest and ultimately become part of what we know today as institutional critique. But this form of critical art also initiates a mode of operating that makes art dependent on commissions and the cooperation of the institution by way of the exhibition form as the locus of contact with the public and thus realization of the work.

The dates of the exhibition are the only period when the installation at Pomona existed and, indeed, dates are a part of what Asher uses to identify his works. Dates, of course, also define all other exhibitions, but most often the works presented in exhibitions exist before and after the timeframe of presentation to the public. In the case at Pomona, all the other factors associated with a conventional exhibition were

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44 Kwon, One Place After Another, 18.
removed by Asher. The spatial conditions he constructed placed spectators into a situation that was both disorienting and confusing. By disrupting an understanding of what the exhibition is or why the site was structurally altered encouraged visitors to experience that space differently.

Recall, that just two years earlier Smithson’s *Non-Sites* had taken up a comparable dialectic involving interior and exterior spaces and the viewer’s engagement within the exhibition site. Smithson’s inquiry was a less overt critique but nonetheless a hurdle for viewers as they experienced the modern gallery differently through the arrangement of visual and textual data. The *Non-Sites* initiated a trajectory that sought to draw the viewer’s attention away from the gallery, de-centering the focus of the art world to remote geographic locations. Alternatively, at Pomona Asher adamantly laid claim to the gallery interior, putting the wall to service his work. He literally removed the door between the interior and exterior spaces of the museum, using it as a device for repositioning viewers in a multivalent sensorial experience inside what was both previously and subsequently a closed, or “pristine,” architectural space. In the process, he subverted the normative cultural institution framework, or as Kirsi Peltomäki puts it, “whatever discursive knowledge a viewer may have regarding the operation of art institutions,” for his own critique.⁴⁵ The Pomona installation speaks to a pivotal shift as ideas related to the spectator and the art institution began to develop and intensify.

Michael Asher and Robert Smithson were not alone in their pursuits of rethinking relationships among artistic production, gallery and spectator. In fact, Brian O’Doherty’s observations of the ideologies of the modernist exhibition space are part of the general discourse—exhibitions, publications and critical writings—from which institutional critique emerged. In his 1976 *Artforum* article “Notes on the Gallery Space,” O’Doherty writes,

> A gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church. The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes a source of light. The wooden floor is polished so that you click along clinically, or carpeted so that you pad soundlessly, resting the feet while the eyes have at the wall. The art is free, as the saying used to go, “to take on its own life.”

Like Smithson, Asher and Donald Judd, who all wrote extensively about art, O’Doherty too is an artist and a writer. He continues in the same text, stating, “Modernism’s transposition of perception from life to formal values is complete. This, of course, is one of modernism’s fatal diseases.” His reference to formal values speaks to the rigid adherence to disciplines and mediums that Krauss criticized in Fried, discussed earlier.

In his text, O’Doherty targets all the physical qualities of the gallery that Asher addressed in the Pomona work: unsealing the gallery, removing walls, changing lights, and taping off and painting the floor. For O’Doherty, the significance of the wall in an exhibition site is, on one hand, the actual support onto which

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47 Ibid.
paintings hang. But on the other, it is also symbolic of a border, yet another in a succession of framing devices throughout the history of art that have affected how art is produced and viewed. These borders, according to O’Doherty, have manifested in various forms, from the picture plane within a painting to the frame around it, from the cropping of the photographic image to the physical edge of the photograph. But the gallery wall is the border \textit{par excellence} that even modern art could not overcome (take abstract painting’s reification of inherent material limitations as one example). These limits, these elements of confinement, are the basis of what Asher and Smithson, and Group Material, discussed below, are working through. O’Doherty says, “All this traffic across the wall made it a far-from-neutral zone. Now a participant in, rather than a passive support for the art, the wall became the locus of contending ideologies; and every new development had to come equipped with an attitude towards it.”\footnote{Ibid., 27–28.}

\textbf{At Münster: Moving Toward the Perimeters}

In 1977, one year after O’Doherty’s article appeared in \textit{Artforum}, Asher was invited to participate in the exhibition \textit{Skulptur} organized by the Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte in Münster, Germany. Kasper König and Klaus Bussmann curated the exhibition, which set out to explore the parameters of public sculpture. The exhibition was divided into two parts. Bussmann’s part functioned as a more formal retrospective of important stages in the development of modern sculpture. König’s part was called “Project Section.” Participating artists were asked to
utilize outdoor sites to which the museum had access or to propose sites for the installation of outdoor sculpture.

Asher made the work *Installation Münster: Caravan*, which is the title *Skulptur Projekte* gave it. The Münster work consisted of a rented Eriba “Familia” camping trailer, compact at only eleven feet long. Over the course of the nineteen-week exhibition, it was repositioned each week at various parking locations in and around Münster. Asher determined the number of positions to correspond exactly to the number of weeks of the exhibition. The trailer was locked and curtains pulled closed. Unlike the work at Pomona, which used the architecture specific to a gallery site, the work in Münster expanded what it meant to make a public sculpture in relation to the outdoor space of a city and the indoor space of an institution. The work did not rely on the institution to call it sculpture. Instead, Asher loosely located its legitimacy within the urban context and the artist’s designated placement of the trailer, rather than in the category of a sculpture sited inside or around the institution with a label designating it as such. Asher’s strategic repositioning each week of the caravan radiated further away from the governing center of the museum, projecting it into more rural sites in an eventual radius measuring about three miles away from the Landesmuseum. As the weeks of the exhibition drew to an end, the object was sited incrementally closer back to the museum.

Asher’s approach made the physical architecture of the museum and the temporal parameters of the exhibition—in terms of operating hours and nineteen-week exhibition—relevant to the site. The work is a testament to Asher’s ability to adapt to the environment and create a new form of public art.
week duration—the center of gravity for the work. It simultaneously inserted the Landesmuseum’s exhibition by way of the caravan into sites untouched by other participating artists. Work by the other artists was less challenging to the field of sculpture, installed mostly nearby the museum.\(^{50}\) By contrast, the installation Asher conceived included the caravan, the image of which is automatically laden with nomadic connotations. The caravan is paradoxically both a moving vehicle and a stationary dwelling. It is also a burden, unable to be moved without the assistance of an automobile and a user, but it is not a stationary object. In his description of the work, Asher expands on these ideas.

I intend to first use locations in the area of the museum slowly branching out to suburban areas and planted settings (parks) with the last few weeks comprising again of settings in town. The settings fulfill the structure of the installation. They consist of supposed places where a caravan can stand (be positioned)—without appearing to be in storage or to be functional.

What interests me in the work is the aspect of mobility for a specific unit. The form (caravan) needs the ground to be positioned but not necessarily anchored. Its setting can change throughout the exhibition but its physical make up remains the same. In this sense it remains a packaged form and does not necessarily have to change physically while being transported to each location. The transit from one position to the other is also part of the installation.\(^{51}\)

\(^{50}\) Anne Rorimer observes these contributions as “other works of outdoor sculpture that, for the most part, clung to nearby environs of the museum without venturing to question the traditional nature of the sculpture as a physically detached object in space.” See Anne Rorimer, “Michael Asher: Context as Content,” *Texte zur Kunst* (2004): 3. The other participating artists in “Project Section” that year were Carl Andre, Joseph Beuys, Donald Judd, Richard Long, Bruce Nauman, Claes Oldenburg, Ulrich Rückriem and Richard Serra; Stephan Pascher writes that Asher’s work is the only work in *Skulptur Projekte* “that doesn’t stand still.” See Pascher, “Phantom Limb: Michael Asher’s Sculpture Project,” *Afterall*, vol. 17 (Spring 2008): 115.

This text by Asher was updated weekly to include details of the exact whereabouts of the trailer. Available at the museum’s front desk, the text was printed on different colored handouts and an integral component of the work. Every Monday, when the museum was closed to the public, the trailer was moved to another part of the city. There was nothing monumental in quality or particularly noteworthy in scale about the model of caravan Asher chose. The sites he selected to locate the trailer, too, were everyday spots, ranging from parallel parking spaces on the street in front of apartment buildings, offices and shops to light-industrial sites, parks and the banks of a canal, and moving away from the center in no particular order but encompassing north, south, east and west coordinates. Asher’s work in Münster consists of a number of components of different material, just like Smithson’s *Non-Sites*. It is made up of the white caravan; the printed handout produced each week with the descriptive text, maps and nineteen locations; and photographs that show the caravan’s placement within the surrounding cityscape.52

The Münster installation is also about spectators’ physical search for the caravan and their stumbling upon it by happenstance. Asher develops these two distinct modes of spectatorship in this work. First, the visitor to the museum, most likely a tourist, is instructed by the handout to leave the institution. Either by car, bicycle or on foot, the routes and means of travel they take to find the caravan speak to the diverse experiences embedded in the installation. These factors become part of

52 With the changing factors of the city in mind, Stephen Pascher points out that in 1977 the caravan occupied nineteen sites; 1987, twelve sites; 1997; twelve again; 2007, ten available sites. See Pascher, “Phantom Limb: Michael Asher’s Sculpture Project,” 115.
the durational quality of the work, initiating a kind of hide-and-seek game. Asher also extends the physical exhibition site of the museum by creating an elastic quality in viewers’ peripatetic wandering, inserting them into parts of the city of Münster they may not otherwise see. One of Asher’s primary interests with this work involves the spectator and its relationship to the situation of the exhibition. He explains,

As the work was relocated each week it demanded from the potential viewer the added effort of traveling across town to see it. In opposition to the other outdoor sculptural installations, however, which could not relate travel distance to the specific interaction of the viewer’s presence, the object, and the location, this work, by changing locations within a wide range of specific urban landscapes, set up a situational relationship with the viewer, rather than being simply specifically situated.53

Smithson orchestrated a similar ambulating itinerary of the Non-Sites. That experience, however, remained physically within the realm of the gallery. While Smithson theoretically pointed their attention away from the exhibition or Non-Site to the Site, Asher did so literally, leading them right out to the perimeters of the city of Münster.

The second mode of spectatorship involves the casual passerby on the street, most likely a Münster resident. It involves the viewer who is unaware of what the caravan is and not even in search of it. Over the course of the exhibition timeframe, however, it is likely that they are repeatedly confronted by the trailer’s presence as it moves from place to place through the city they traverse each day. Münster is not a big city. Asher establishes an experience of difference through an accumulation of sameness; he disrupts not only the homogeneity of settings but also the routine

patterns of the residents through unexpected and repeated encounters with the caravan. The disruption or confusion, in this case within the wider existing environment of the city space, performs on a macro level with the viewer what the Pomona work did on a micro level inside the gallery.

The first edition of *Skulptur Projekte* in 1977 was not originally conceived as a perennial exhibition. But in fact, the exhibition has taken place four times, every ten years over the past four decades. The subsequent editions—*Skulptur Projekte* in 1987, *Skulptur Projekte Münster 97* in 1997 and *Skulptur Projekte Münster 07* in 2007—continued to examine issues most pertinent to sculpture at those particular moments. For instance, in 1977 Asher’s work related to the question of permanence in public sculpture, both in location and in duration of existence. Those questions have naturally changed over time as notions of sculpture have changed. Asher is the only artist who has been invited to participate in every edition, and each time his participation has taken exactly the same form: a rented white caravan, same make and model, moved to the same locations (when possible) and same sequence as the first exhibition in 1977.54 Because of the urban transformations, the caravan cannot be parked in some of the original 1977 locations. During those weeks it is garaged. Jennifer King writes that Asher’s “work gains new implications with each successive staging, serving as a lens through which to view and assess the most important question of the time for sculpture, be it the expanded field (1977), the specific site (1987), or the threat of

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54 Due to changing urban conditions, it was not always possible to position the caravan in the same spot. In that case, the caravan was put into storage for those weeks. It was not placed in a substitute position in Münster.
spectacle (1997).” And I would add that for the 2007 edition, the question was social, considering the role of the participant within the realm of sculpture.56

Over the course of more than thirty years and four editions of *Skulptur Projekte*, Asher’s work has taken on changing degrees of involvement with and relevance to the economic, social, political and historical contexts in which it is produced and experienced. He allows the existing realities of these contexts, variable over time as they are, to be incorporated into the work, while the work as object and site remain constant. Although the same model of trailer is presented, each iteration of the exhibition is in fact a new work because it is experienced against the backdrop of shifting social and urban infrastructures. Asher confirms, “The object had, however, a double referent: to the context of the exhibition as a work of outdoor sculpture and to the real spatial and temporal context of its sequence of placements outside the exhibition. Both contexts were potentially experienced by the viewer in real time and space parallel to the exhibition framework.”57 Other more practical factors but no less integral to the work also vary: they include the exhibition dates, its duration, and the knowledge and skills of the curatorial teams, administrators and technical staff who organize *Skulptur Projekte*.58 Asher insists the work does not materialize during the intermediate years between Münster editions but that it exists only during the weeks of presentation of the exhibition. It therefore ceases to exist without the exhibition

56 Works by Mike Kelley, Pawel Althamer, Jeremy Deller and Hans-Peter Feldmann, for example, all drew on social contexts and required viewer participation.
58 In 1977, the exhibition lasted nineteen weeks. Subsequent editions were seventeen (1987), fourteen (1997) and fifteen weeks (2007).
framework. In fact, since the caravan is rented for each edition there are no guarantees it will ever materialize again. As the decades pass and the model of the trailer becomes even more vintage, the chance of locating one for rent becomes more unlikely.

The economic value of an artist’s time and labor are important for thinking about Asher’s approach to participating in repeated editions of the exhibition and the artist’s relationship with the organizing body of the institution. In preparation for the 1987 edition, he wrote to König saying, “I would like to rent a trailer like the one in 1977, if it is in very good condition.”59 In August 1996, after accepting an invitation to participate in the 1997 edition, a letter from Asher to König says, “There are a few small items we ought to sew up before next summer. For me, perhaps the most important one is to seek a way to guarantee the caravan’s correct position each week and its proper photo documentation as well as the appropriate handouts being within the museum.”60 Then later, in March 1997, a letter to König conveys his desire to adhere to the textual and physical parameters set up twenty years earlier:

I would like to go over the locations in Münster so as to make sure we have all clearances and the trailer can be located in its exact position. […] Please use the description of the work from the 1977 trailer work. Each week put the new location of the trailer and a description of the work on a padded sheet of paper so the viewer can take a description and location and drive out to the trailer.61

60 Ibid., 101. In 1987, during many weeks, the caravan was not placed in the correct positions by the Skulptur Projekte staff. It was also not photographed during four weeks of the exhibition.
These comments and instructions are crucial for understanding the work within the context of the division of labor and its connection to the exhibition form. By insisting that the same text is used to describe the work and the same 1977 make and model of caravan rented, Asher subverts the requirement often placed on artists to come up with a new idea. He maintains the concept of the original, forgoing the need to conceptualize another work. All that changes, within each exhibition and from one decade to the next, is the context. Ulrike Groos, the director of the 1997 edition, wrote to Asher, relieved, in late spring that year just weeks before the exhibition opened. She informed the artist that she had secured a trailer.

We have very good news because we found a Caravan for your project which is the same model as in 1977 and 1987! […] We were really a little bit afraid that we wouldn’t find a Caravan because we are looking now for one year and were having advertisements in caravan journals in Belgium, Netherlands and Germany. Just by chance one of our colleagues saw a caravan for rent here in Münster, only 200 meters from the place where I live but in another direction where I normally never go.62

Just as Asher placed responsibility of the construction of the walls in his work at Pomona College onto the institution, he placed the responsibility to realize the Münster work, along with its maintenance and documentation, onto *Skulptur Projekte*. He required the staff to be responsible for regularly hitching the caravan to a car or truck and moving it each week to the predetermined locations. In 1977, in fact, founding co-curator Klaus Bussmann moved the trailer himself.63 This displacement of labor by the artist onto the institution is inherent in the work, further setting it

within the context of the exhibition and the institution, as Asher confirms in the last sentence in his handout: “The transit from one position to the other is also part of the installation.”

**Group Material: Reshaping Forms**

In October 1980 in New York City, Group Material’s *Inaugural Exhibition* opened in a storefront space at 244 East 13th Street, between Second and Third Avenues, in the East Village. The exhibition included a window montage by Peter Szypula that combined personal photographs of group members with text and images pulled from various printed material sources, such as Life Savers advertisements, press clippings of President Jimmy Carter and textbook illustrations of dinosaurs. It also had an installation called *Budgets* by Liliana Dones. This installation was a series of paper documents that showed personal details about Group Material members, such as their ages, addresses and financial data. Tim Rollins made a work that was text stenciled on the floor with red paint and a stereo playing repeatedly “Dancing in the Streets” by Martha and the Vandellas. A printed handout with a calendar of upcoming exhibitions and Group Material’s manifesto was available free for visitors to take. It provides concise responses to the following questions: “Who is Group Material?” “What is Group Material?” “Where is Group Material?” When is Group Material open?” “Why was Group Material organized?” and “How does Group Material plan to implement its work?”

Group Material’s answers to these self-imposed questions gave the East Village community an introduction to the collective. The handout complemented the installations
and, in total, formed an extraordinary level of transparency about the group’s makeup and mission. The handout states:

Group Material is 5 graphic designers, 2 teachers, a waitress, a cartographer, two textile designers, a telephone operator, a dancer, a computer analyst and an electrician. [...] Group Material is also an independent collective of young artists and writers with a variety of artistic and political theories and practices. Group Material is committed to the creation, organization and promotion of an art dedicated to social communication and political change. 64

Some of these young artists and writers were recent graduates of the School of Visual Arts where they studied with Conceptual artists like Joseph Kosuth; others met at more far-flung locations like art schools in Miami and in Rhode Island. Only a year before the opening of Inaugural Exhibition, they had united under the name Group Material, finding common ground in feminism, gender issues, civil rights, Marxist theory, labor, consumerism and popular culture and the political potential in art to address all of it.

The name Group Material derives from an appreciation for group production, while it also emphasizes shared interests in exploring the role of material culture within contemporary society. The collective desired to generate tangible, material change through art by bridging the gap between artists and non-artists. Its original members included Julie Ault, Hannah Alderfer, Patrick Brennan, Liliana Dones, Yolanda Hawkins, Beth Jaker, Mary Beth Nelson, Jan Marek Pakulski, Tim Rollins, Peter Szypula and Michael Udvardy. 65 Along with a changing roster of members, they are responsible for initiating a prolific course of artistic action and commitment to politically engaged art

65 Membership changed constantly during the course of the group’s existence. These members were essential in organizing the group and working to secure the storefront space. See “Minutes: December 11, 1979 Session, Group Material,” in Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material, 27.
that eventually realized forty-five projects between 1979 and 1996 when the collective disbanded. Most of their work materialized in the form of the exhibition. These included art by members often placed alongside store-bought objects, artifacts, documentary material, children’s art, art by non-artists, and fine art. Comprehensively, exhibitions concentrated on social and political subjects of the moment.

Group Material operated entirely as a collective. Meeting minutes from the year leading up to *Inaugural Exhibition* show they had in-depth conversations about determining membership dues, setting up an answering service, organizing publicity, writing the manifesto and searching for a storefront space. Minutes from December 11, 1979, for example, remind all members of a January deadline to submit logo designs for consideration at the next meeting. The group also talked about how they might participate in an upcoming Marxist School Symposium to take place at the New York Marxist School and stated that the group “agrees to allow those GM members who are interested in this project to get involved as representatives of GM.”66 The minutes announce to members they are responsible for conceiving and writing ideas independently about the manifesto and “the manifesto will then be forged from the collection of members’ notes.”67 These seemingly ordinary details show extraordinary intention to work and exist as a collective, giving insight to Group Material’s level of dedication to removing the identity and idolization of the singular artist, suppressing individual careerism, as implied

67 Ibid., 9–10.
with the word “representatives” in the quotation above, thus seeking to avoid co-optation of the work and identities of individual Group Material members by the art market.

Group Material not only enforced a completely collective approach to their internal organization but also reshaped the content and form of the conventional non-profit institution. By summer 1980, they decided to seek tax-deductible, non-profit recognition, which would enable access to various sources of funding, such as grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. This status, however, required written records of the group’s mission statement, budget projections, committees, names of officers, other details about day-to-day operations and the duties of each member. While Group Material steadfastly maintained a collective approach within its internal makeup, it acquiesced to go ahead and simulate a non-profit corporation hierarchy in order to have access to more funding sources. The collective feigned the form of a real non-profit organization, as Julie Ault explains, in order to maintain a “semblance of professionalization and hierarchical salaried staff structure (on paper) in order to be eligible for grants.” Group Material decided, she says, to “keep minimal overheads, operate on an ad hoc basis, and never have salaried positions in order to avoid any conflict of interest.”

Not unlike how they used the form of the non-profit institution solely for fundraising, the collective also used the form of the exhibition to challenge and rethink its role in contemporary art, tapping its unrealized potential for the distribution of ideas and contact with the public. They saw the exhibition as an effective outlet for communicating

68 Ibid., 11.
a sociopolitical agenda, an agenda that became increasingly intense with exhibitions related to the AIDS crisis, U.S./Central American relations and Reagan-era politics. Their work would not fit easily into the less-politicized and far more conservative exhibition programs at museums or the roster of largely modernist, medium-specific artists at commercial galleries. Initially seeking an association with neither museum nor gallery, Group Material, therefore, looked toward the exhibition itself as a form and means to voice critical challenges to the expectations placed on art, to reconfigure what is art and to offer alternatives as far as who has the means to distribute it. They drew on a range of imagery and objects from popular culture, media, advertising, non-artists, children and consumerism, incorporating unconventional content and tactics into the overall makeup of exhibitions they produced.

In a November 1980 *Village Voice* interview of Tim Rollins about *Inaugural Exhibition* and the group’s move into the storefront space, he comments that Group Material was not like “New Wave artists,” which were “a camp critique, the middle class making fun of itself. It’s like the warning Walter Benjamin gave about the danger of aestheticizing politics. We’re less interested in reflecting than projecting out into the community.” And project into the community they did. Group Material achieved the insertion of its own voice by co-opting the form of the non-profit institution and the form

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of the exhibition, managing to destabilize the limitations imposed on art and artists by both contemporary art institutions and commercial art markets.

**Grabbing Hold of the Technique**

Tim Rollins refers to Walter Benjamin and, indeed, I want to consider Benjamin here within the context of Group Material’s use of the exhibition as a form of artistic production and means for the collective to connect directly to the public. In his 1934 text “The Author as Producer,” Benjamin uses the example of the political work of a poet in order to reflect on the efficacy of the poet’s potential for creating change through political writing. While Benjamin believes a poet with a political point of view can use his writing to inspire change in what people know and think about the functions of society, he questions the effectiveness of such an approach that ultimately operates in service to a larger entity, or production apparatus, such as a publisher. The poet’s political value, according to Benjamin, is compromised because the poet inevitably works for a particular constituent or class, by way of a particular method of distribution, even if that class is the proletariat for whose interests he advocates. The point of Benjamin’s text, a lecture written and intended for presentation in Paris on the rise of fascism in Europe, is to illustrate the impotence of political “tendency,” as Benjamin calls it.\(^{70}\) He says,

> For I hope to be able to show you that the concept of political tendency [...] is a perfectly useless instrument of political literary criticism. I should like to show you that the tendency of a literary work can only be politically correct if it is also literarily correct. That is to say, the politically correct tendency includes a literary tendency.\(^{71}\)


The phrase literary tendency, for Benjamin, refers to the author’s work as a means to incite political change. Those means, however, are powerless without its insertion into a broader social context through the technical quality of a work. The quality of political tendency comes down not only to questions of content but, more importantly, to the effectiveness of the technique, or form, through which the content is distributed. While the author of a work—and for Benjamin this also constitutes the playwright, photographer, musician, artist and critic—can certainly produce politically motivated content that seeks to encourage transformative changes in society, it is not possible if the form is not within reach. Benjamin draws on Bertolt Brecht to illustrate the urgency of possessing the form, or means of distribution, in order to help serve a political tendency. Benjamin explains,

For the transformation of the forms and instruments of production in the way desired by a progressive intelligentsia—that is, one interested in freeing the means of production and serving the class struggle—Brecht coined the term *Umfunktionierung* [functional transformation]. He was the first to make of intellectuals the far-reaching demand not to supply the apparatus of production without, to the utmost extent possible, changing it in accordance with socialism.

Benjamin then quotes Brecht directly, “The publication of *Versuche* occurred at a time when certain works ought no longer to be individual experiences (have the character of works) but should, rather, concern the use (transformation) of certain institutes and

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72 Throughout his text, Benjamin uses interchangeably the terms “form” and “technique.” See for example, “The Author as Producer,” 231.
73 Ibid., 228.
institutions." In his 1930 essay “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre,” Brecht insightfully makes clear,

For a long time now they have taken the handiwork (music, writing, criticism, etc.) of intellectuals who share in their profits—that is, of men who are economically committed to the prevailing system but are socially near-proletarian—and processed it to make fodder for their public entertainment machine, judging it by their own standards and guiding it into their own channels; meanwhile the intellectuals themselves have gone on supposing that the whole business is concerned only with the presentation of their work, is a secondary process which has no influence over their work but merely wins influence for it.

Benjamin draws on Brecht to demand that it is not the supplying of content to the technical apparatus but the grabbing hold of the technique that is the primary means for distributing the content and therefore touching the public, concretely and effectively.

In the same text, Benjamin discusses the bourgeois author who works with deliberateness to help the interests of a class that in fact is not his own. The political effectiveness of the writer and his work is not achieved by joining the proletariat, a feeble gesture that serves only the ego of the author. It is the acknowledgement of difference in class and the integration of a technique into the hands of the community that the author is professing to serve. Benjamin derides the left-wing political tendency of the intellectual representing a particular social group interest.

In Germany the leading politico-literary movements of the last decade have emanated from this left-wing intelligentsia. I shall mention two of them, Activism and New Matter-of-factness, to show with these examples that a political tendency, however revolutionary it may seem, has a

\[74\] Ibid.

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counterrevolutionary function as the writer feels his solidarity with the proletariat only in his attitudes, not as a producer.76

The Exhibition as a Work

Group Material’s *Inaugural Exhibition* and the exhibition *The People’s Choice* (*Arroz con Mango*), which opened in January 1981, are illustrative of Walter Benjamin’s theories on the efficacy of politically engaged work and the artist’s relationship with class struggle and social change. As Rollins makes clear in the *Village Voice* interview, *Inaugural Exhibition* and the collective were conscious of class, and intent on making sure their work was not “a camp critique” or “the middle class making fun of itself.”77 Indeed, in the manifesto, their response to the question “Why was Group Material organized?” includes this statement: “We want our work and the work of others to take a role in a broader cultural activism.”78 From the onset, Group Material acknowledged the class difference between the collective and the surrounding community of mostly low-income, Spanish-speaking residents, while striving to carefully integrate their work into the Latino community. They did not pretend to be something other than a group of young artists and writers operating, from all immediate observations, a gallery for presenting art.79 Of course, the work they called art and the approaches they used to present it are

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76 Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” 226.
77 Goldstein, “Enter the Anti Space,” *The Village Voice*, November 5-11, 1980. Quoted in *Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material*, 20. The exhibition title, too, was thoroughly considered by Group Material in relation to their new location. *Inaugural Exhibition* is not a lofty reference to an obscure political moment or movement. The word “inaugural” conveys more than a single affair; it connotes the first of many, the beginning of something sustained and committed. It is a title that communicates a sense of permanence and dedication and therefore connection to the surrounding community.
79 The storefront was open 5–10 p.m. in the evenings, which made it both gallery and social space, available to the residents of a working-class community who had jobs and school during the day.
what made the storefront space on East 13th Street, formerly a Hispanic social club, unique.

Written in Spanish and English, the printed handout announcing *Inaugural Exhibition* and introducing Group Material evokes a conscious effort to make direct, controlled contact with the public. On a basic level, the printed handout—long a technique of the revolutionary—was a self-published piece of printed matter that inherently possessed the technical qualities Benjamin believed makes for a politically effective work, unmediated by other constituents. The content and design of the handout is evocative of Group Material’s insistent attention to the socioeconomic location of their new space. On the front of the handout was a map of their East Village neighborhood, encompassing the area north to south from 13th Street to St. Marks Place and bounded, east to west, from Second to Third Avenues. A black square defines the location on East 13th Street. It is identifiable but not overly prominent, providing only the necessary visual clues. The design does not announce with any great fanfare the collective’s new home, discouraging a reading of gentrification that may at first be associated with the encroaching presence of artists and galleries. It simply communicates that the collective is now part of this community and the “first show is a survey of the cultural activism emergent in the work of artists, collectives and non-artists in the U.S. and abroad.”

On the reverse of the handout, Group Material’s manifesto was spelled out with answers to the series of questions already noted earlier. Their response to the question “Where is Group Material?” is particularly noteworthy in the context of Benjamin’s call

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for effective political work to engage with the form of distribution, such as the institution and the exhibition.

Our location is at once physical and social. Besides our art exhibitions, Group Material will be directly involved in the life of our neighborhood. Part of G.M.’s working responsibility is to the immediate local problems that shape the special character of this place. Housing, education, sanitation, community organizing, recreation: these are the concrete areas of practice that give our artistic and theoretical work sustenance and meaning. That our address might seem to be an unlikely site for an art gallery makes it all the more important that we begin to rethink the purpose of art and the orientation of its institutions. Group Material wants to explode the assumptions that dictate what art is, who art is for and what an art exhibition can be.81

The People’s Choice (Arroz con Mango) was the fourth exhibition at the storefront space, the “unlikely site for an art gallery,” and it represents how Group Material continued to work through and rethink the role of an art institution’s engagement with its surrounding community.82 Through the distribution of an open letter, word of mouth and assistance from neighborhood kids, the group invited all residents of East 13th Street “to show things that might not usually find their way into an art gallery: the things that you personally find beautiful, the objects that you keep for your own pleasure, the objects that have meaning to you, your family and your friends.”83 Many residents lent objects of sentimental value, including portraits from weddings, service in the army and even grade school. Other residents with a bent toward collecting peculiar objects lent things such as a collection of PEZ brand candy dispensers and toy animals; while others took the call more literally and lent the art they or friends made, ranging

82 “Arroz con Mango” translates loosely as “What a Mess.” Julie Ault writes that the subtitle was suggested by Liliana Dones, who is Cuban. See Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material, 30.
83 Letter to neighbors; Letter was written in both English and Spanish. See Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material, 35.
from drawings of comic-book heroes to paintings of people having tea. The eccentricity of the collections spoke to the way all collections are born, even those in a museum, no matter the quirkiness of the owner’s personality. While these kinds of personal objects from the community were included, Group Material also selected work odd in other ways but recognized by more established art world denizens. One such case was Robert Morris’s poster from 1974 in which the artist posed in S&M gear. In an early 1981 review in *Artforum*, Thomas Lawson recalls the Morris work, “It was presented here with the explanation that it was taken from the apartment of a man who had hanged himself.”

Group Material used the exhibition to connect with the community, inserting personal objects—store-bought and those made by non-artists—into the realm of art. They utilized the exhibition as a means to challenge and dissolve conventional lines between spectator and institution and art and non-art by inviting the local audience to become invested, contributing producers of the exhibition. As Lawson’s review conceded,

Nearly everything came with a story, as a whole, the show turned into a narrative of everyday life, a folk tale in which intimacies were shared without shame. The artwork on display was diverse in both intent and degree of sophistication.

Because Group Material also included work of their own making and selection, they exposed that work to an audience that otherwise might not have seen it and, more importantly, gave greater understanding of who they were. *The People’s Choice* was not about the neighborhood, exhibiting, for example, documentary photographs of a Latino

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85 Ibid.
community or a scripted history (from a white person’s perspective) of immigrant life in the East Village. Instead the exhibition was of the texture of that community without aestheticizing the politics inherent in its presentation. As Rollins says, “We’re less interested in reflecting than projecting out into the community.” The subject of the exhibition was the coexistence of people from various backgrounds living within the same community, emphasizing difference while conveying a sense of common ground. The exhibition bridged socioeconomic gaps to create a work that relayed its ideas impressionistically, through immersive experiences that drew a postmodern portrait of intersecting values, lives, personalities, interests and idiosyncrasies. In an October 1981 flyer-cum-newsletter, Group Material reflects on their year at East 13th Street, “Our most rewarding and warm and fun audience was the people on the block. Because they integrated us immediately into the life of their street, our work, no matter how tedious and unrecognized by media, always had a direct and energetic social meaning.”

In fact, by late 1981 Group Material had decided to move out of their storefront space. Plagued by indecision and argument amongst its members and realizing the extraordinary time and energy needed to operate a physical space, they decided to function nomadically, in concept rather than attached to site. In the same newsletter that summarized past activities and future plans, they report that,

Repairs, new installations, gallery sitting, hysterically paced curating, fundraising and personal disputes cut into our very limited time as a bunch of individuals who had to work full-time jobs during the day or night or

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both. People got broke, people got tired, people quit. [...] We had to cease being a space and become a working group once again.\textsuperscript{88}

Their work, however, was no less focused on utilizing art for political engagement by way of the institution and the exhibition. They mobilized to exhibit in a number of public areas, such as Union Square, NYC taxicabs, subway trains, newspapers and Fifth Avenue buses. They also collaborated with a number of institutions, such as Artists Space, Taller Latinoamericano, P.S. 1, and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

\textbf{Inhabiting the Institution: Modes of the Dialectic}

Group Material participated in the \textit{1985 Whitney Biennial} by making the exhibition \textit{Americana}. The exhibition represented the collective’s ongoing effort to agitate entrenched institutional behaviors, keeping with the groundwork already initiated by the exhibitions on East 13\textsuperscript{th} Street. The manifesto referenced earlier posed this question: “Why was Group Material organized?” Their entire answer follows.

Group Material was founded as a constructive response to the unsatisfactory ways in which art has been conceived, produced, distributed and taught in New York City, in American society. Group Material is an artist-initiated project. We are desperately tired and critical of the drawn-out traditions of formalism, conservatism and pseudo avant-gardism that dominate the official art world. As artists and workers we want to maintain control over our work, directing our energies to the demands of social conditions as opposed to the demands of the art market. While most art institutions separate art from the world, neutralizing any abrasive forms and contents, Group Material accentuates the cutting edge of art. We want our work and the work of others to take a role in a broader cultural activism.\textsuperscript{89}

In the Whitney Biennial, the official art world is exactly where Group Material found itself. And they used \textit{Americana} to challenge the dominance that the Whitney

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid.
Museum and its Biennial have as determinants of artistic and cultural legitimacy. But *Americana* served a twofold critique. The late 1970s and early 1980s was a troubled moment in American and world history. That period saw the largest nuclear accident in U.S. history occur at Three Mile Island, Pennsylvania; the Iranian Hostage crisis; the election of Ronald Reagan; and the identification of the HIV/AIDS virus. Group Material’s exhibition was as much a reflection on the museum industry as an interrogation of the imperialist, neoliberalist corporate and consumerist agendas that defined Reagan-era America. *Americana*’s critique was less vocal against specific topics like racism or feminism within museum practices. It was interested more generally in the tenor of American life and the institutions—cultural, political and religious—that defined it. The Biennial, however, was and is a veritable force in making the careers of young artists—and more recently curators—acting as a benchmark for advanced contemporary American art, and questions to that condition were certainly inherent in the organization of *Americana*.  

In the same *Village Voice* interview where Tim Rollins commented on the dangers of aestheticizing politics, he says “If anything has to do with Group Material, it’s reinventing the dialectic through art.” The dialectic manifests in many ways in *Americana*. Group Material’s two-page proposal to the Whitney outlines that *Americana*

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90 In fact, the Whitney had escaped much of the critique of the early 1970s launched against the Museum of Modern Art by the Art Workers’ Coalition (AWC) whose activism ignited a fervor over the extraordinary number of work by white males regularly exhibited at that museum compared to woman and people of color as well as the scrutiny of trustees’ and administrators’ connections to war and corporations. By 1985 the Whitney had begun to show more artwork by artists of diverse backgrounds, responding quietly to the kinds of criticisms launched against MoMA.

intended to address the following question: “How does American culture represent America?” The exhibition had four distinct components including art by Group Material artists and other upcoming and established artists, such as Eric Fischl, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Andy Warhol, Norman Rockwell and Leon Golub. That work generally evoked notably American sensibilities. It was juxtaposed with mass-produced American decorative art, such as a painting by LeRoy Neiman and a Western calendar.

The exhibition also included American consumer products, ranging from a Maytag washer and dryer pair and Wonder Bread to Tide detergent and GE electric can openers. A soundtrack of recorded American music by James Brown, Loretta Lynn, Twisted Sister, Woody Guthry and others coated the entire exhibition space. This extraordinary collection of disparate but interconnected objects and representations was installed in a first-floor gallery just off the lobby. The walls of the gallery were covered completely with vinyl contact paper decorated with floral, faux wood grain and brick, and American Bicentennial designs. Before entering the gallery, visitors were confronted with a Photostat text panel with font recalling that of a mausoleum or memorial. The text was engraved in what appeared to be granite blocks and placed exactly where museum visitors normally find an explanatory didactic panel in the museum’s “voice” introducing the exhibition. Group Material, however, used the form of this panel to present an introductory text, part of which told viewers, “As new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners and opinions change, with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times.”

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92 Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material, 91.
The conflation of representations and images distorting what is lived reality and the image of reality recalls curator Harald Szeemann’s thematic focus for his 1972 Documenta exhibition *Questioning Reality*—*Image Worlds Today*, which was introduced at the beginning of this chapter and is analyzed more closely in Chapter 2. In fact, Szeemann’s and Group Material’s exhibitions, while separated by over a decade, share the same use of dialectics to mount the same kind of critique of the authority posed by the art institution and the large-scale, biennial exhibition. Recall also that Robert Smithson was highly critical of Szeemann’s curatorial tactics, which, like Group Material, included presenting together a combination of disparate objects from fine art, consumer culture and everyday life inside the space of a museum.

Both curatorial approaches used the totality of the immersive experience of the exhibition, in the case of *Americana* visual and aural, to communicate a sense that contemporary culture is made of the “high” and “low,” the status of which is determined by the context and the institution setting. The form of the exhibition—or technique—was used to communicate this critique. For example, visitors walking into an exhibition, an exhibition nonetheless inside the preeminent Whitney Museum of American Art, did not know what was art and not art in *Americana*. The critique was performed by positioning fine and everyday objects next to one another inside an art institution, broadening notions of what can possess an aesthetics because of the legitimacy associated with the exhibition. As the collective reminded the Whitney curators in their proposal: “In a Group Material exhibition, a bag of ‘Almost Home Cookies’ is as important as, say, a piece by Barbara Kruger. Fine art, mass art and commercial products are shown with
equal status.” The spectator, therefore, was inserted into this spatial and temporal situation at the Whitney that asked them to interpret the exhibition as an overall work, opposed to relying on a singular work for the distribution of a critical attitude.

The priority placed on the exhibition is what aggravated Smithson and other artists like Daniel Buren and Robert Morris in Szeemann’s Documenta in 1972. But, while Smithson condemned Szeemann for staging this kind of dialectic relationship, pitting high and low culture against one another inside a setting otherwise considered more sanctimonious, he in fact used the same model with the dialectical critique applied to the Non-Sites. He put dirt inside a gallery and generated an artistic dialogue in relation to a remote exteriority. Then, in 1985, almost twenty years after Smithson’s Non-Sites, Group Material used contexts of the Whitney Biennial and the museum visitor to build on those earlier curatorial strategies. They, however, achieved an even stronger critique because the stakes were higher; the Whitney Biennial was and is an extraordinary force in contemporary art.

In all cases outlined thus far, from the work of Robert Smithson and Michael Asher to Group Material’s The People’s Choice and Americana, spectators were invited to become active, integral agents in the fulfillment of the work. The apparatus of the exhibition inside or in coordination with the art institution was the defining site of engagement. It is the point of distribution and the involvement of the spectator that Benjamin argues is absolutely necessary to enact any level of political tendency, whether in this case subtle commentary on the white cube or more overt attacks on American art.

93 Ibid., 95.
and culture. As Benjamin declares,

> This apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers—that is, readers or spectators into collaborators. We already possess such an example, to which, however, I can only allude here. It is Brecht’s epic theatre. ⁹⁴

In reflecting on the increasing importance of the exhibition as a technique and the spectator’s role within it, Brecht’s theories of the Epic Theatre are useful for thinking about the work discussed in this chapter. Those examples mark an initial rupture in the modernist exhibition that shifts the role of the spectator into a necessary agent, thus transforming the way knowledge is produced by the exhibition and how people engage with the art institution. This role of the spectator as a transformative fulcrum in the critical form of the exhibition evolves even further in the 1990s and early 2000s. The exhibition becomes a precarious site where we are uncertain whether the goals set forth by Group Material, Asher and Smithson continue to be effective, or if artists have become complicit in what as early as 1930 Brecht surmised of the value of intellectual and artistic content, that “we are free to discuss any innovation which doesn’t threaten its social function—that of providing an evening’s entertainment.” ⁹⁵

While Brecht poses serious questions about the “entertainment machine,” in the same text he also comments on the value of the content provided by the intellectuals (in our cases, the artists) and how:

> Their output then becomes a matter of delivering the goods. Values evolve which are based on the fodder principle. And this leads to a general habit of judging works of art by their suitability for the apparatus without ever judging the apparatus by its suitability for the work. People say, this or that is good work; and they mean (but do not say) good for the apparatus.

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⁹⁵ Brecht, “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre,” 34.
Yet this apparatus is conditioned by the society of the day and only accepts what can keep it going in that society.\textsuperscript{96}

Smithson understood the critical importance of the exhibition as apparatus and thus his irritation with Szeemann’s approach to organizing Documenta 5 bears repeating: “Some artists imagine they’ve got a hold on this apparatus, which in fact has got a hold of them. As a result, they end up supporting a cultural prison that is out of their control. Artists themselves are not confined, but their output is.”\textsuperscript{97}

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{97} Robert Smithson, “Cultural Confinement,” in \textit{The Collected Writings}, 154–156.
Chapter 2: On New Institutionalism

The Critical Work

In 2015 art is almost completely instrumentalized in the economic sense, regardless of whether financing is private or public. Art then services either national or European interests that wish to construct a certain identity: it is a desirable marketable commercial good for private ownership and it contributes to regional development and provides society with new creative employment opportunities. Visiting art museums and art centers is a popular leisure activity.¹

This view of the future is provided by the Swedish curator and critic Maria Lind in her introduction to European Cultural Policies 2015: A Report with Scenarios of the Future of Public Funding for Contemporary Art in Europe. The report was produced in collaboration between International Artists Studio Program in Sweden (IASPIS) in Stockholm and the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies (EIPCP) in Vienna on the occasion of the 2005 Frieze Art Fair in London. It includes essays by eight writers from seven regions in Europe and was conceived as a critical examination of the underlying operations of the art world, namely, its institutions, audiences, and instrumentalization by various funding sources. The report examined the complex relationships between public and private funding on which the Frieze Art Fair, its parent

organization, the Frieze Foundation, and many museums, biennials and non-profit arts organizations function today.

Lind’s observations on the serviceability of art and the expectation that it deliver economic and social change are fitting departure points for this chapter’s study of New Institutionalism, a practice that emerged in the early 1990s to redefine the contemporary art institution and its role in shaping culture, art and politics through an expanded notion of the exhibition. In 2003 Office for Contemporary Art Norway (OCA) published *Verksted #1*, the first in its series of thematically focused journals. This edition was edited by Jonas Ekeberg and dedicated exclusively to New Institutionalism. It examines a selection of exhibitions, institutions and biennials alongside a history of Conceptual Art and institutional critique to historicize and assess what is “New Institutionalism.” Lifting the term from the fields of economics and sociology, Ekeberg applies it to the self-reflexive activity occurring at art institutions, mostly in Europe, such as Rooseum in Malmö, Palais de Tokyo in Paris and Bergen Kunsthall in Norway that,

[...] seemed at last to be ready to let go, not only of the limited discourse of the work of art as a mere object, but also of the whole institutional framework that went with it, a framework that the “extended” field of contemporary art had simply inherited from high modernism, along with its white cube, its top down attitude of curators and director, its links to certain (insider) audiences, and so on and so forth.²

As part of this process of redefining the art institution, New Institutionalism uses the exhibition as a critical form and involves the spectator in situations that reduce emphasis on the presentation of the singular art object and place greater emphasis on a

more integrated engagement between art, spectator and institution. But, contrary to what Ekeberg implies, New Institutions do not invite only artists to produce this work. What makes New Institutionalism unique from the work examined in Chapter 1 is that curators themselves take up an extraordinary place in questioning the aims, functions and methods of the institution, intentionally exploring its impact on shaping knowledge derived from art and exhibitions. These kinds of inquiries, of course, resemble that of Conceptual artists identified with institutional critique from the early 1970s to the 1990s in their scrutiny of the social, economic and physical structure of the art institution. But, whereas institutional critique generally pitted the artist against the institution, on a temporary basis confined to exhibition parameters and catalogues, New Institutionalism absorbs this mode of inquiry as a continuous form of auto-critique from within the very borders of the institution. It seeks to demonstrate realizable alternative methods for use by art institutions.

While exhibitions at New Institutions present objects, they are not the only means through which ideas are communicated. Functions such as research, periodic journals, radio programs, television stations, lectures, libraries, seminars and workshops that usually take more auxiliary positions to the main exhibition (and are sometimes even categorized in the realm of education) are put on equal ground with what occurs inside the gallery. New Institutions adapt these discursive and overlapping artistic, intellectual and learning pursuits by encouraging artists, curators and critics to expand the exhibition

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3 I use the term “New Institution” throughout this text to refer to institutions that generally practice behaviors of or related to characteristics of New Institutionalism. Critics such as Jonas Ekeberg, Alex Farquharson, Maria Lind, Sven Lütticken and Nina Möntmann use the term. See bibliography for sources by them in which the term New Institution is used.
into a multiplicity of simultaneous activity. They are invited to reside for weeks or months on-site, encouraged to be active in the day-to-day operations of the institution and integrated within the public and private spheres of the local community and the institution by organizing ephemeral, often socially based engagements-as-exhibitions. In fact, sometimes it is impossible to identify whether the source of the work is the artist or the institution. Sometimes it is impossible to identify what the work is.

If the art institution has adopted the challenges and critical voice once held by artists, how do the technical apparatuses of the exhibition and the institution, the outlets of distribution that Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht speak of with such urgency, remain alive, relevant and vocal? This is an underlying question that surfaces in this chapter when considering the characteristics of New Institutionalism. With an emphasis on the curator as the organizer and source of critical content, the responsibility of the institution to police its own behaviors and borders would have proven detrimental to the work of artists like Robert Smithson, Michael Asher, Group Material and early practitioners of institutional critique who, as Julia Bryan-Wilson writes,

[...] held out the hope that they could transform museums, provide more democratic relationships with audiences, forge different types of artistic identities that were not based on the idea of the singular genius, and circumvent the commodity culture of art buying. That was a large part of the promise of the Conceptual Art in the 1960s. Any curriculum for institutional critique will need to keep alive this activist, even utopian, component.4

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That promise becomes today questionable because New Institutionalism is based on the increasingly prominent role of the curator, who emerged from a caretaker of collections and an organizer of exhibitions to an impresario and creative producer who significantly affects how artists realize work and how the public experiences it. A curator, by definition, is connected to the institution of art, the point of dissemination of critical thought, whether via the exhibition, the publication or the Internet. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, institutions such as Kunstverein München in Munich, Moderna Museet in Stockholm and Office for Contemporary Art Norway in Oslo began to prioritize the curator as a vital, creative and intellectual-producing agent within the institution. The work of curators and artists at these institutions, including Maria Lind, Will Bradley, Liam Gillick, Nicolaus Schafhausen and Apolonija Šušteršič, reflects the increasingly porous parameters in the division of labor assigned to the artist and the curator. Curators began to play significant roles in conceiving ideas, while artists began to fill roles of organizer and strategist, often invited by the institution to challenge the structure of it or asked to solve a problem in the social, urban and economic life of the surrounding community.

The turn toward the curator as a driving conceptual force is rooted in the emergence of perennial exhibitions, commonly referred to as biennials, taking place primarily in Europe and including Documenta, Manifesta and the Venice Biennale. This pivotal shift can be traced to the 1972 exhibition Questioning Reality—Image Worlds Today, made for Documenta 5 in Kassel, Germany, by Harald Szeemann. Szeemann elevated the role of the curator to a dynamic position and by extension gave even more
authority to the exhibition and the institution as formidable techniques. He is part of what could be viewed as the nascent spirit of New Institutionalism, a spirit whose activity begins in the early 1970s when the curator first became an author of exhibitions to the present moment when, as Boris Groys remarks in 2010, “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.”

Groys’s statement may have a tinge of hyperbole but the following genealogy will show the basis for his comment. This genealogy provides a historical account of New Institutionalism, a history drawn from the combination of recent institution practices, biennials and the realm of Conceptual Art. In addition to a close look at exhibitions by Szeemann, this account also pays particular attention to Maria Lind because, as Claire Doherty writes, “Lind has spearheaded a more performative, authorial, curatorial position, which has become the touchstone of new institutional practice particularly in Europe, and rightly so in many ways.” The work by Lind and other curators and artists associated with relational art and New Institutionalism evolves out of and in association with Szeemann and the biennial exhibition model. Overall, the examination here is ground for further assessment in the following chapters of the role, efficacy and future of a critical art in relation to the exhibition form and the complex conditions of the industry of contemporary art that have led to Groys’s observations.

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5 Boris Groys, “Marx after Duchamp, or The Artist’s Two Bodies” in Going Public Boris Groys (Berlin: Sternberg, 2010), 127.
Curator in Charge: This is Harald Szeemann’s Documenta

Documenta’s position in a history of New Institutionalism is vital, on one hand, because of Harald Szeemann’s presentation of the fifth edition of Documenta in 1972. But, on the other, its own early history as a model for using art and the exhibition to improve the economic and social wellbeing of a city are worth considering within this context. Founded in 1955, Documenta is organized every five years. It was conceived after World War II as part of postwar reconstruction efforts to improve Western-German knowledge about art and to improve the economy of Kassel. The stimulation of the local economy and the elevation of international prestige for Germany were central to its mission. Its ideological focus on only art of the West was administered until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, when broader interests were extended to artists from around the world. Documenta began with the intent to rehabilitate the image of postwar Germany by transforming the ruined city of Kassel into a cultural destination and center of the art world. While today the architectural makeup of the city remains rather devoid of character and although spotted with radical postwar architecture, having been eighty percent destroyed during the war, Documenta’s economic impact on the city has been extraordinary. The number of visitors has grown from 130,000 in 1955 to almost 750,000 at the most recent Documenta 12 in 2007, one-third of which came from outside Germany.7

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The painter Arnold Bode and art historian Werner Haftmann founded Documenta. The first Documenta, called *European Art of the Twentieth Century*, however, was not organized with the contemporary moment in art in mind. In fact, contemporary art in Germany in 1955 was still reeling from the dismal period when a swath of modernism had been deemed “degenerate,” thus inaccessible, under the discrimination of the National Socialists in the late 1930s. Bode and Haftmann presented inside the monumental, bombed-out shell of the 1779 neo-classical Museum Fridericianum, the first public art museum on the European continent, a genealogy of what they believed informed that particular moment in Western contemporary art. They traced or “documented” modern art concentrating on the course of the past 20 years with 670 artworks by 148 artists from 6 nations.⁸

In April 1970, when Harald Szeemann was invited to become General Secretary of Documenta 5, he had just finished an eight-year tenure as director of Kunsthalle Bern.⁹ His tenure ended in a maelstrom of controversy and his resignation over the groundbreaking exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form: Works, Concepts, Processes, Situations, Information*. To make this exhibition, in the spring of 1969 he invited sixty-nine artists from the United States, Italy, Germany, France, England, Belgium and Switzerland to come together in Bern to turn the Kunsthalle into a workshop. The exhibition was organized without an overall theme, instead placing emphasis on the physical presence of the artists and the making of actual work on-site within the context

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⁹ The lofty title was a move by Szeemann to project a level of political authority as a means to lure the East, including Soviet Union and China, to participate. It did not work.
of the city and museum spaces. Each artist essentially took up residence inside or around the museum. With their squatter-cum-studio spaces in the galleries, the comprehensive result was a chaotic undertaking in which one might find Joseph Beuys making a grease corner titled *Fettecke (Fat Corner)*, Richard Serra splattering hot lead against an interior gallery wall calling it *Splash Piece*, Daniel Buren arrested for hanging without permission his striped posters throughout the city, Walter De Maria waiting on the line to speak with anyone who chose to lift the receiver of a telephone on a gallery floor in the work *Art by telephone* and a large demolition ball smashing to bits the sidewalk in front of the Kunsthalle in Michael Heizer’s *Bern Depression*.

While the exhibition was criticized for a lack of coherence, Szeemann defended the discursive nature of the works in his foreword to the catalogue: “Certainly, the majority of artists exhibiting here might be seen as part of an artistic development to which the pre-experienced workprocess of Duchamp, the intensity of Pollock’s gesture, and the unity of material, physical exertion and time in the Happenings of early ’60s also belong.”\(^\text{10}\) Instead of borrowing works and shipping them to Switzerland, Szeemann commissioned the artists and brought them and their ideas to Bern. His delight with all the activity and arrival of all the artists to Bern is noted in his diary in March 1969:

March 19: Arrival of Anselmo, Merz, Zorio, Sperone, and Ricke. The coming and going begins. The Kunsthalle becomes a construction site.

March 20: The more artists come, the less gets done. The Kunsthalle becomes a meeting place and forum. Sargentini, Kounellis, and Boetti arrive; Beuys is the last to arrive late in the evening.

\(^{10}\) Szeemann quoted in Harald Szeemann—*with by through because towards despite: Catalogue of all exhibitions 1957–2005* (Zurich: Edition Voldemeer, 2007), 225.
March 21: Beuys smears the Fettecke (Fat Corner). Arrival of Ruthenbeck, van Elk, Dibbets, Boezem, Flanagan, Louw, Buthe, Weiner, Kosuth, Artschwager, Kuehn, Sarkis, Jacquet, and Lohaus; also Seth Siegelaub, Ileana and Michael Sonnabend, and there’s no sign of stopping. 11:00 p.m.: The galleries are cleared. Cleaning under the direction of Mrs. Dibbets.11

Szeemann’s initial proposal for Documenta 5 attempted to mimic the frenetic activity in When Attitudes Become Form in 1969. His plan was to augment and extend the event quality of that exhibition by evacuating altogether the interiors of the Museum Fridericianum and the Neue Galerie and turn the entire city of Kassel into the backdrop, or mise en scène, for the exhibition. Referring to Documenta’s slogan “100 Day Museum,” Szeemann declared,

The slogan of the past two Documentas, ‘The 100-Day Museum,’ is to be replaced by ‘The 100-Day Event.’ The terms ‘museum’ and ‘art’ imply the idea of viewing objects and material property, then confirming, transporting, and insuring the goods. In contrast, for Documenta 5 we can expect that all the events will be prepared and staged at Kassel, and that the organization will focus on projecting events rather than the judging and transporting of objects. Documenta 5 is not, in the first instance, a place for a static accumulation of objects, but a process of events that refer to one another.12

Instead of embedding a critique of the museum site through invitations to artists to physically assault it as he did in Bern, Szeemann alternatively schemed to abandon altogether the museum and leave it in a kind ruinous state throughout the duration of Documenta 5. These ambitious plans called for a giant tent city of artists on the Friedrichsplatz, a mile-long road in the Auepark intended to be a “meeting point, an action and demonstration area,” and The Visitors’ School, a public school-as-exhibition

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11 Ibid., 256.
that would supply written didactic information and use, according to Szeemann, “the exhibition visitor as an active agent in the dialogue with artworks and this dialogue as work.”

While *The Visitor’s School* was in fact realized, the rest of Szeemann’s grand plans for a sprawling communal studio throughout Kassel were scrapped because of drastic reductions in the Documenta budget. Since funds were unavailable for an entire evacuation of the museum and gallery spaces, Szeemann’s alternative, radical reversal called to restrict all activity inside or immediately around the exhibition buildings. This turn, however, did not lessen his critique of the institution by returning to its interior. The new plan incorporated both conceptually and physically that space, its historical weight and its influence on the making, experience and determination of art.

*Questioning Reality—Image Worlds Today* is the title of Documenta 5 that was eventually realized, opening June 30, 1972. It was a thematic exhibition that presented art as a variety of social experiences and scenes, initiating questions about what is serious art and what is entertainment, and dissolving differences between the two realms. Anticipating the practice of placing cultural artifacts alongside fine art like Group Material did in the 1980s, Szeemann included objects ranging from political propaganda, caricatures, comics, commercials and supermarket art to pornography, science fiction, social realism, paintings by the mentally ill and Conceptual Art. Presenting material from everyday life on equal ground with what was generally considered fine art was viewed by

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14 5.6 million Deutschmarks had been promised initially. 3.5 million were available in spring 1971. See Hans-Joachim Müller, *Harald Szeemann: Exhibition Maker*, 41.
many artists as a thematic straightjacket and degradation of the exhibition they had originally agreed to participate in. They protested. Robert Smithson, as discussed in Chapter 1, wrote his statement “Cultural Confinement” against Szeemann’s imposition on the limits of the exhibition and expansion of the role of the curator. But Smithson was not alone. In addition to him, Carl Andre, Hans Haacke, Donald Judd, Barry Le Va, Sol LeWitt, Dorothea Rockburne, Fred Sandback, Richard Serra and Robert Morris signed a statement against Documenta 5 that was published in May 1972 in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. They demanded the right to determine the artworks included, the form their participation took and the context in which their art was read. In Szeemann’s thematic model that integrated objects from different cultural realms and used the museum galleries for different theatrical contexts, he usurped the conceptual underpinnings and critique inherent in the work of some of these artists.

Robert Morris flat out refused to participate. He wrote a letter to Szeemann that deserves to be fully cited here.

I wish all work of mine withdrawn from the forthcoming Documenta. You may post the following statement. I do not wish to have my work used to illustrate misguided sociological principles or outmoded art historical categories. I do not wish to participate in international exhibitions which do not consult with me as to what work I might want to show but instead dictate to me what will be shown. I do not wish to be associated with an exhibition which refuses to communicate with me after I have indicated my desire to present work other than that which has been designated. Finally, I condemn the showing of any work of mine which has been borrowed from collectors without my having been advised.¹⁵

While Morris withdrew his participation, Buren did participate but not without reservation and condemnation of Szeemann’s exhibition approach. He wrote in February 1972, “More and more, exhibitions are ceasing to be exhibitions of artworks and exhibiting themselves as an artwork instead.”  

Both Smithson’s and Buren’s texts were published in the catalogue for Documenta 5 and paradoxically acquired the character of works, contributing to the overall critical discourse that Szeemann provoked. The catalogue reflects Szeemann’s panoramic notion of the exhibition. It includes criticism, information and documentation, which today would be categorized under the widening realm of knowledge production in art.

Other artists, however, were amenable to the thematic frameworks. Szeemann asked artists to create their own museums for a section he called Artists’ Museums. Claes Oldenburg juxtaposed found and designed objects in his Mouse Museum. Herbert Distel offered small, identical-size spaces in the drawers of a sewing cabinet, which included work by 500 artists. The exhibition in his Museum of Drawers took a pragmatic approach to presenting the art in the chronological order in which it was received, allowing no room for judgment based on aesthetic value. Instead, according to Szeemann, “That museum thus embodies the standard type of the museum, in which stockpiling is more important than a presentation according to artistic intensities and the appreciation of value is subordinated to the principle of equality.”  

Marcel Broodthaers’s Musée des

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16 Daniel Buren’s text Exhibition of an Exhibition was reproduced in the catalogue for Documenta 5. It is quoted in Gabriele Mackert, “At Home in Contradictions: Harald Szeemann’s Documenta,” 259.

17 Harald Szeemann quoted in Harald Szeemann—with by through because towards despite: Catalogue of All Exhibitions 1957–2005, 316.
Aigles focused on the image of the eagle and its portrayal throughout history, from high and low culture and in different varieties of media.

Joseph Beuys embraced the retooling of the classical exhibition site and had no problem working within the thematic limits of Documenta 5. He utilized political debate as a medium in Bureau for Direct Democracy, through Referendum, an office he situated inside one of the galleries on the ground floor of the Museum Fridericianum. Beuys applied the grassroots process of the people’s referendum to remind exhibition visitors of the power of inserting public debate into the political process in West Germany. Bureau for Direct Democracy collected ideas and propositions from visitors throughout the course of the 100-day exhibition. The proposition took the form of discussions about social and political issues of the moment. Beuys was present daily in the office to prompt these discussions with visitors.

The small office had several blackboards with the word “man” written on each and a desk with a long-stemmed rose next to stacks of handbills. On the wall hung a blue neon sign that read “Office of the Organization for Direct Democracy through Referendum.” He equated the communicating—speaking, thinking, writing—individual with a producer of art and viewed the opinions expressed and discussed as the medium for the work. Bureau for Direct Democracy was a counter-institutional initiative first introduced by Beuys at the art academy in Düsseldorf. It took subsequent forms at Documenta 5 in 1972 and then the 1977 and 1982 editions. Along the lines of Szeemann’s vision, Beuys transformed the exhibition site into a place for discourse about political and social change, such as the right to free education, and a discussion about the
degree to which art maintains an autonomous position within the realm of social interpretation. Some of the political changes proposed by **Bureau for Direct Democracy** were adopted by the grassroots political party The Greens and thus actualized Beuys’s desire to extend the work of art beyond the art-world perimeters in order to enact referendums from the conversations with visitors.

Documenta 5 marks the beginning of Harald Szeemann’s influence on generations of curators where the vision and identity of the curator is emphasized. Paradoxically, today as more artists work in social engagement, or what is often referred to as social practice, their identities can become less pronounced in collaborative projects that reduce hierarchies between art and spectator. These situations can set a stage for antagonistic struggles for the source of criticality that continues to resonate. Morris’s and Buren’s responses to Szeemann’s work speak to these struggles, as does Smithson’s statement “Cultural Confinement.” Where is the outlet for their critical voice if the institution has taken on that critique as part of its agenda?

**The Venice Biennale: Yesterday and Today**

A recent work by the British artist Liam Gillick made for the 2009 edition of the Venice Biennale indicates the precarious position artists face today for maintaining that outlet, while critiquing the deep-seated history of nationalism embedded in the origins of the Venice Biennale. Founded in 1895, the Venice Biennale was the first large-scale, biennial exhibition and has occurred fifty-four times to date. While Documenta and numerous current, more peripheral biennials promote and improve the economic and social prestige of the city in which they occur, Venice was conceived on the model of the
national pavilion, or world’s fair, which sought to promote the superiority of the nation-state with a political agenda to showcase the cultural and economic excellence of participating countries. Venice originated to put nationhood on a competitive world stage in which participating countries select their most outstanding and innovative artists to represent them every two years. The competition at Venice, and it is exactly that, has a first-place prize. The Venice Biennale is an institution and empirical force in legitimizing the careers of artists and curators. The bi-annual factor and the desire to bring the art world to a particular city are the major overlaps between Venice and most of the biennials functioning today. Most biennials today do not have prizes. Instead they focus on the economic and cultural prominence (and promise) of the region in which they take place.

Venice, however, is frequently renouncing its emphasis on national identity, partially for reasons of political correctness, distancing itself from the imperialist hegemony of its founding premise, and partially due to the global peripatetic habits of artists who might be born in one country but call another (or many others) home. Liam Gillick is one such artist. His participation in 2009 signals this change. The curator of the German Pavilion, Nicolaus Schafhausen, selected Gillick, who is neither German nor lives in Germany on a full-time basis, to represent the country at the 53rd Venice Biennale. Gillick chose to address the architecture of the German Pavilion. Built in 1909 and remodeled in 1938 by architect Ernst Haiger under the direction of the Nazi regime and according to National Socialist ideals, its imposing façade and monumental interior spaces impress visitors upon entry and influence the exhibition of artworks. For his
contribution, *How are you going to behave? A kitchen cat speaks*, Gillick removed all the interior doors between rooms and all the exterior doors so the entire building was freely accessible, recalling the comparable action by Michael Asher at Pomona College in 1970. Gillick then disrupted the classical, symmetrical interior by installing a sprawling network of kitchen cabinets and countertops made of pine that meandered through the open interior doorways. An animatronic cat sat atop one of the cabinets. The cat spoke a circular story about totalitarian architecture, failed models of globalization and whether or not “It is buildings like this that steal people’s breath.”

All the spaces of the pavilion were therefore punctuated by this kitchen architecture and sound of the speaking cat.

Part of Gillick’s practice includes critical research into the failure of post-industrial, modernist social models. *How are you going to behave?* is based on the concept and design of the Frankfurt Kitchen by the first female Austrian architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, also an activist in the Nazi Resistance movement. Between 1926 and 1930, the simple wood kitchens were installed in more than ten thousand public housing units in Frankfurt. The kitchens became a modernist icon whose functional form sought to optimize household chores by doing away with unnecessary movements and coordinating corporeal form with functional design to make the most labor- and time-effective interior design possible. That optimization of form and function are pillars of modernist, utopian philosophy. But Schütte-Lihotzky had more in mind for her kitchen design than just time-saving labor for the female’s domestic chores. She had hoped for

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the kitchen to become an “emancipatory tool facilitating the participation of women in professional life beyond the home, as opposed to serving the housewives’ lobby, which wanted simply to raise the value and appreciation of household work.”

Gillick set up a dialectic that juxtaposed the rationales of the dysfunctional interior design of the German pavilion with the functional design (but ultimately unrealized intention for social change) of Schütte-Lihotzky’s kitchen. The combination of unrealized architectural, social and design potentials of both the National Socialists and the Frankfurt Kitchen, however opposite their ideologies, are part of a history of modernism that Gillick presents in his exhibition at the German Pavilion. The content of his work is built into the site of exhibition. It does not exist without the German Pavilion. And, as the title How are you going to behave? suggests, the spectator is confronted with uncertain and countless possibilities for experiencing and understanding the work. Spectators walk freely through the doorless façade, then ambulate throughout the interior and around the wood kitchen installation, which collectively transforms the pavilion, according to Schafhausen, into “a location for endless self-circulating histories that—in the end—represents our history as well.” In the immersive experience of this work, the spectator must stitch together disparate signs and sounds to formulate meaning that is uniquely their own.

By all accounts Gillick’s How are you going to behave? is an important work. But, we should be aware that a curator initiated the critique it posed. Schafhausen’s

invitation to Gillick determined from the onset the overall intent to question the principles upon which the Biennale is based by inviting a British artist to represent Germany. Schafhausen’s selection is an antagonistic move against the institutional framework of the Venice Biennale and by extension an interrogation of its modernist ideals symbolized by the German Pavilion. As part of the critically reflexive character of New Institutionalism, through his invitation, Schafhausen, a German, set up a situation for the possibility of a double critique given the knowledge of Gillick’s artistic practice and interests. The selection confronted the weighty political symbolism in both the architectural and social history of the national pavilions. That decision is indicative of broader activities of using artists as part of critical forms that derive from what we saw with Szeemann and in recent activity of New Institutionalism, of which Schafhausen is a forerunner. Gillick is generally not unaware of it. Talking in 2005 generally about his practice in relation to the changing conditions of production in contemporary art, he contends,

My involvement in the critical space is a legacy of what happened when a semi-autonomous critical voice started to become weak, and one of the reasons that happened was that curating became a dynamic process. So people you might have met before, who in the past were critics were now curators. The brightest, smartest people get involved in this multiple activity of being mediator, producer, interface and neo-critic. It is arguable that the most important essays about art over the last ten years have not

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22 Schafhausen was director of Künstlerhaus Stuttgart during the 1990s. Between 1999 and 2005 he was director of Kunstverein Frankfurt. From 2006 to 2011 he was director of Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam. Schafhausen was the curator of the German Pavilion for 52nd in 2007 and 53rd in 2009 Venice Biennale. His experimental curatorial activity with these institutions could be situated under New Institutionalism. See Maria Lind and Alex Farquharson, “Integrative Institutionalism: a Reconsideration,” in The New Administration of Aesthetics in The New Administration of Aesthetics, eds. Tone Hansen and Trude Iversen (Oslo: Torpedo, 2007) and Farquharson “Bureaux de change,” Frieze, vol. 101 (September 2006).
been in art magazines but they have been in catalogues and other material produced around galleries, art centers and exhibitions.\textsuperscript{23}

\textbf{24/7 Biennial: Context is Everything}

The kind of intricate attention to social and architectural contexts found in Gillick’s work at the Venice Biennale has become routine in critical practices since the early 1990s. The exhausting number of large-scale, international exhibitions organized around the world contributes to this situation. Cities that host a biennial—in some cases triennial—include Athens, Auckland, Berlin, Brisbane, Bucharest, Buenos Aires, Busan, Cairo, Dakar, Dhaka, Gothenburg, Gwangju, Havana, Istanbul, Johannesburg, Liverpool, Luanda, Lyon, Montréal, Moscow, Perth, Prague, Quebec City, Riga, Santiago de Chili, São Paulo, Shanghai, Sharjah, Sydney, Taipei, Tijuana, Tirana, Turin, Valencia, Venice, Vilnius, Yokohama, Zagreb, among others. There are 80 to 140 biennials scattered around the world at any given moment.\textsuperscript{24} The art biennial has become more prominent and more spectacular as private sponsors, city managers and politicians co-opt it into a veritable machine for promoting their city as a cultural destination, realizing its connections to stimulating stagnant economies and marketing the culture of their region. This quality of cultural tourism is particularly important for peripheral, provincial cities that are not capitals or major centers of interest but seek to raise economic revenue and cultural cachet. No longer does the world go only to Venice to see the best and brightest of participating nations. The audiences are invited to the country of origin in order to consume art and culture on their terms. The art of biennials frequently takes shape in

response to guidelines and themes determined in association with city and other
government agencies. Even the nomadic biennial Manifesta, which I discuss below,
anoins every two years a different city in Europe for its location. It has the characteristic
of site built into its very makeup.

Biennials intertwine and utilize both art and local conditions for generating
cultural and economic capital. Simon Sheikh considers this practice a case of the
exhibition as commodity. He says,

The uniqueness of a particular place and culture is not only a question of
nationalism and of nation building, though, but it is also a means of
establishing a niche market and attracting an international audience, to
generate cultural capital as well as increased revenues through (art) tourism.²⁵

Biennial exhibitions are conceived, produced and experienced with the site-specific
contexts of a city or a particular region—“niche markets”—in mind. The economy
Sheikh speaks of transpires when the experience of the city and the experience of the
exhibition combine to elevate the biennial into a single global marketable commodity.

Artists are caught up in this cycle. In a 2006 Artforum article, Claire Bishop
discusses the increasing tendency of artists and curators to involve social constituencies.
She believes,

The unprecedented expansion of the biennial is one factor that has
certainly contributed to this shift (thirty-three new biennials have been
established in the past ten years alone, the majority in countries until
recently considered peripheral to the international art world), as is the new
model of the commissioning agency dedicated to the production of
experimental engaged art in the public realm.²⁶

²⁶ Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents,” Artforum, vol. 44, no. 6 (February
The biennial wants artists and curators on-site to make experiences in association with the spectators and therefore tangibly connect to the location. Sheikh explains, “Biennials are, in this way, part of the experience economy, with the whole experience of the city and the exhibition being the commodity rather than the singular works of art, as is, presumably, the case with art fairs.”27 The brand of the biennial exhibition and its emphasis on context-based art are increasingly instrumentalized into one overall consumable entity.

While the context of a city or geographic region is important for art of the biennial, there are historic precedents that prove that site affects the production and experience of art. Parallels can be drawn between the largely exterior and social contexts of the biennial exhibition and the encapsulated, interior contexts of the modernist white cube. In the United States, the white cube emerged around 1929 when Alfred J. Barr imagined a new kind of sparse space with a single-row hang of artwork in the galleries of the Museum of Modern Art. Influenced by a trip to the Folkwang Museum in Essen, Barr had walls of the museum painted white upon his return to New York. Over time he transformed other exhibition spaces at MoMA so they too became neutral, devoid of exterior noise, windowless and without any semblance of the outside world. The artwork is experienced on its own aesthetic terms within that space, removed from the social,

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political, geographical, economic and temporal circumstances that may affect how one sees it.²⁸

This sterile space is what provided Michael Asher the context and inspiration for his work at Pomona. The neutral space of the gallery was necessary for Michael Fried to devise his critique of Minimalism in 1967. Continuing to explore these ideas, Brian O’Doherty wrote his series of articles that appeared in Artforum in 1976. In “Notes on the Gallery Space,” he observed, “In this context a standing ashtray becomes an almost sacred object, just as the fire hose in a modern museum looks not like a fire hose but an esthetic conundrum.”²⁹ The legitimization assigned to an artwork (or a fire hose) by the ideological space of the modern museum caused commercial galleries to follow suit. Since the mission of a commercial gallery is to market and sell artwork, and one of the means by which to do so is to inscribe an artwork’s legitimacy, it only makes sense to present it in a museum-like space. The white space of a modern museum of art that Barr envisioned set the course for how art would be produced, evaluated and marketed.

The history of the white cube has been well rehearsed by O’Doherty, Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, Andrea Fraser, Group Material, Robert Smithson and many other artists and critics. I briefly address it in the context of the economies of space because over the course of the past fifteen years the biennial exhibition has become another kind of impetus for artists and curators who utilize context-specificity, the spectator, the city

²⁸ Elena Filipovic’s account of the evolution of the white cube is useful for the relationship she draws between the modernist gallery and the biennial exhibition. See Elena Filipovic, “The Global White Cube,” in The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe, Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic, eds. (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2005), 63.
and the exhibition as part of their practices. The experience economy Sheikh discusses is devoted to context. And that context is now the expansive social and physical realms of a city or region instead of the extreme, insular conditions of the modernist gallery.

**Relational Art: Values of Encounters**

Expectations are high for biennials. They are often charged with addressing and repairing beleaguered finances and images of cities and regions through the tourist and cultural capital they generate. To do so, they promise a unique experience to the spectator that relies on the specific conditions of a city or region. Those conditions draw on the social or geographic scenarios that allow the city to brand its biennial like none other because it addresses topics only pertinent to it. Simon Sheikh remarks again,

> [B]iennials have to brand themselves differently and specifically in order to achieve not only cultural hegemony, but also to extract monopoly rent, in terms of both symbolic and real capital. They must be, on the one hand, recognizable as a certain format, a festival of art, and, on the other hand be specific, *this biennial*, not *that one*. With *these* specific properties and attributions, in *this* specific place, city, region and country. The branding of the biennial is thus twofold: partly the city as attraction and allure giving context and value to the biennial, and partly the glamour and prestige of the biennial branding and upgrade the non-descript or even negative image of the city, region or country.  

The investment by cities in the biennial as a means for social and economic change is examined in the first edition of the Office for Contemporary Art Norway’s journal *Verksted* in 2003. As I mentioned, this edition of *Verksted* focuses on New Institutionalism. It included three essays that examine complementary qualities of New

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Institutionalism in order to give a portrait, or sort of status report. Curator Eivind Furnesvik’s essay “Phantom Pains” in Verksted studies the economic promises of the biennial exhibition with an examination of the 1995 and 1997 editions of the Johannesburg Biennale. Furnesvik’s analysis of Johannesburg reveals the difficult predicament for art when biennials integrate the social and economic character of the cities in which they occur. The director’s forward to the catalogue of the ’95 edition introduces the exhibition as first and foremost a political project.

South Africa’s challenge to emerge from its recent history, heal its wounds and play a role in the affairs of the world is one which is being taken up in all aspects of human endeavor. The visual arts is no longer exception and Africus: Johannesburg Biennale is the vehicle through which a start has been made to begin a process of reconstruction and development through artistic interchange and exploration.

This biennial was intended to confront traumas of South Africa’s history and to lift Johannesburg out of an economic and social slump by inserting it into broader international contexts. These are ambitious goals for an exhibition. It is difficult and beyond the scope of this study to measure the success of such intentions with regard to Johannesburg. The point here, however, is that Africus is an example of the significant level of investment placed in art and the spectator to produce economic, social and cultural change. The interest in the context of South Africa was used as both a marketing

31 The other essays were “Harnessing the Means of Production” by critic and curator Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt who discusses the transitional phases major art institutions find themselves in as they try to adjust to new process-based and collaborative practices. And, critic and scholar Julia Bryan-Wilson examines in her essay “A Curriculum for Institutional Critique, or the Professionalization of Conceptual Art” the history of institutional critique in relation to institutions today that invite that very critique as part of their exhibition programs and academic structures. These perspectives on the economic, institutional and historical dimensions provide a basic foundation about the shift in institution practice at that moment in 2003.

agent for drawing visitors and artists and a tool for raising funds from international and local sources. Furnesvik contends,

The idea of using art to combat these problems is understandable, even if such strategies tend to meet with skepticism among professionals. Not only was the first Johannesburg Biennale subject to such political objectives, it was even hosted directly by Johannesburg’s Metropolitan Council, which was also an indispensable source of finance.\(^\text{33}\)

Clive Kellner, a curator for both the '95 and '97 editions, supports Furnesvik’s assessment of the economic need to connect the art to a determined social effect,

It’s hard, if not impossible, to receive funding today without linking your project to social issues, whether it be related to housing, anti-poverty, anti-unemployment, anti-crime or anti-AIDS campaigning. From a political viewpoint there hardly exists an interest in visual arts in itself.\(^\text{34}\)

I refer to Johannesburg because it underscores the predicaments that can occur if the biennial is relied upon too strongly to take up the role of economic and social agent for slacking city and national governments. Johannesburg is an easy target for unfurling problems with the biennial. Both editions promised economic and social stimulus to the local economies and both over-invested enormously in art’s ability to single-handedly transform the social and cultural landscape of a country. Biennials that assign a determined causal effect to the outcome of the exhibition inherently assume art has a capacity for political change and, whether it does or not, places that responsibility on it.

*“learning to inhabit the world in a better way”*

Relational art and New Institutionalism developed in parallel with one another in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The involvement of the spectator defines a wave of


contemporary art that emerged in the 1990s around the time of the Johannesburg biennials. Nicolas Bourriaud's influential book *Relational Aesthetics* is a collection of essays published in French in 1998 and English in 2002. It attempted to offer analytical tools for gauging the quality of work by a cadre of artists whose common hallmark was “relational” forms like eating, drinking and playing that directly engaged the spectator. Bourriaud’s theory of relational aesthetics was the first attempt to come to terms with an art that challenged the usual artistic activity occurring inside a gallery. For example, when Rirkrit Tiravanija makes Thai soup for visitors in a gallery in Cologne, within which discipline does one slot that activity: performance, installation, sculpture? And, if one can decide on a discipline, how is its aesthetics assessed within the modernist doctrines of historical determinism, immediate visuality and medium specificity? Relational art’s defiance of the tenets of modernism more than its sociability and use of human relations, for Bourriaud, was the paradigm shift it signaled. It represented new possibilities for producing art and thinking about its aesthetic efficacy. This critique of the legacy of modernism is intrinsic to the form of relational art.

In *Relational Aesthetics* Bourriaud asks, “How are we to understand the types of artistic behavior shown in exhibitions held in the 1990s, and the lines of thinking behind them, if we do not start out from the same situation as the artists?”35 The situation to which he refers is the agreement to assess differently the aesthetic merit of contemporary art and dispense with modernist criteria because “a certain aspect of the program of modernity has been fairly and squarely wound up. […] This completion has drained the

criteria of aesthetic judgment we are heir to of their substance, but we go on applying them to present-day artistic practices.\textsuperscript{36} With a new value placed on the bodily experience of the spectator in a work of art, the modernist emphasis on visual immediacy and medium specificity as the singular set of criteria for assessing art was challenged early on by Smithson and Minimalist artists. These new considerations of the spectator as a function of art opened new ways of thinking about the exhibition as an arena of exchange through social relations. Working through his theory of relational aesthetics, Bourriaud sought to understand the artistic practices of the 1990s’ inheritance of this rupture in late Modernism as they began to draw on concrete human relations for their work. In fact, art like Rirkrit Tiravanija’s, along with Maria Lind’s approach to making exhibitions, which I examine below, intensified those critiques by questioning how the art institution was supposed to behave in relation to its public and the expanding limits of what constitutes an exhibition.

The curator Alex Farquharson and Lind discussed the parallel development of relational art and New Institutionalism. In 2007 they reflected on the unclear distinctions between the two forms of artistic activity. Farquharson observes that New Institutionalism arose,

\[\ldots\] from the so-called Relational art of the 90s on the one hand, and the initiatives of independent curators on the other around the same time, before many of them moved to positions inside institutions. To me, Liam Gillick, Jorge Pardo, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Philippe Parreno, for example, are neither object makers nor installation artists. The medium is the

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid. 11.
exhibition. That, rather than social engagement, will come to be seen as their most distinctive contribution to art history.\textsuperscript{37}

Relational art and New Institutionalism make a very clear connection with the exhibition and therefore the operation of its activity within the realm of art. This activity does not try to evacuate art to unite with everyday life. It relies upon and utilizes the exhibition form and the critical potential art possesses. Bourriaud champions this activity and its connection with the spectator because he views it as compromising the modernist project. He believes artists working with relational forms saw it as an opportunity to “spread their wings.”

This ‘chance’ can be summed up in just a few words: \textit{learning to inhabit the world in a better way}, instead of trying to construct it based on a preconceived idea of historical evolution.\textsuperscript{38}

Unfortunately, “learning to inhabit the world in a better way” has encouraged a profound misreading of Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics. The experiments with basic human behaviors in the exhibition form quickly became a locus for a deteriorated, fragmentary and misunderstood—or “caricatured vulgate”—form of art that uses any kind of social engagement in activities and exhibitions occurring inside and outside the institution.\textsuperscript{39} Socially engaged and participatory work now occurs in city streets, grassy fields or markets without a desire for recognition by the institution and its discourses. Art that generally falls under “social practice” has developed out of this conflation of a desire

\textsuperscript{37} Maria Lind and Alex Farquharson, “Integrative Institutionalism: a Reconsideration,” in \textit{The New Administration of Aesthetics}, eds. Tone Hansen and Trude Iversen (Oslo: Torpedo, 2007), 111.
\textsuperscript{39} “The success of this essay which—alas—has at times generated a sort of caricatured vulgate (‘artists-who-serve-soup-at-the-opening,’ etc.), stems essentially from the fact that it was a “kick start” to contemporary aesthetics.” See Nicholas Bourriaud, \textit{Postproduction} (New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2002), 7–8.
to make the world a better place and ideals of using the spectator to do it. It does not always have or want the context of art to gauge its capacity—as art. As Pablo Helguera writes in his study of socially engaged art,

> The term “social practice” obscures the discipline from which socially engaged art has emerged (i.e., art). In this way it denotes the critical detachment from other forms of art-making (primarily centered and built on the personality of the artist) that is inherent to socially engaged art, which, almost by definition, is dependent on the involvement of other besides the instigator of the artwork. It also thus raises the question of whether such activity belongs to the field of art at all.  

Social practice tries hard to unite art and everyday life and, by doing so, often foregoes its potential to possess a politics of aesthetics, even though its rhetoric claims otherwise. Artists, curators and institutions have misinterpreted *Relational Aesthetics* in drastic ways by forcing art to make determined economic and social change.

> Indeed, social practice promises something, but more often its products are limited to dilettante social studies experiments that in the end leave spectators with little more than a day’s worth of entertainment. It is precisely the entertainment value that capital has colonized, transforming the spectator into a consumer of experience. This is what the major industry of contemporary art, like biennials and the Guggenheim Museum and New Museum, has siphoned from the remains of the criticality relational art once possessed. And Carsten Höller’s exhibition *Experience* all but signals the end of what relational art originally aspired to. *Experience* is a representation, or time capsule, of what this critique looked like but no longer buoyed with critical efficacy because the logic of advanced capitalism has absorbed it. Not just museums, but cities, and biennials

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have co-opted the encounter Bourriaud prized. They have turned experience into a commodity and transformed it into many things, including the kind of entertainment machine Walter Benjamin warned of and Lind’s *European Cultural Policies 2015* predicts. New Institutionalism develops out of these complex, overlapping and contradictory intersections with relational art, Conceptual Art, economics, the curatorial strategies of Harald Szeemann and the biennial exhibition.

**Manifesta: Anti-Biennial as New Institution**

I want now to turn to look at Manifesta, European Biennial of Contemporary Art, and the characteristics of New Institutionalism that have emerged from it. Manifesta was conceived in 1991 at a time when political and social identities in Europe were in states of transition, just two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It was founded for a number of reasons. The most important was to pose an alternative to the usual biennial exhibition model, such as Documenta and Venice. As such, it was positioned as a New Institution, originating as an alternative to the large-scale biennial exhibition model. By the early- to mid-1990s, this model had become institutionalized in its behavior of anointing a curator who in turn selects other participants—both artists and curators—who together use the well-oiled and well-connected names of these participants to raise money from public and private resources. When organizers were developing ideas for what Manifesta could become, the existing large-scale international exhibitions were viewed as inadequate to the rapidly changing conditions in Europe after 1989. Manifesta positioned itself as a critique to the institution of the biennial. Its nomadic quality, first and foremost, was meant to communicate a fluid, open and continually responsive framework to situations
in politics, society and aesthetics and their overall intersections with contemporary art and location.

Initiated by the cultural department of the Foreign Ministry of the Netherlands, Manifesta sought to showcase a Europe full of change, optimism and unity. Its mission was to expand the dialogue between contemporary art and other fields of cultural production, such as design, literature and architecture, and to reach out to artists and curators in regions in Eastern Europe, formerly neglected by the art of the West. Manifesta was conceived as a roving international exhibition, every two years taking on various incarnations in different cities and territories across Europe. As an alternative to Documenta and Venice, the organizers hoped it would fill a void left by the Paris Biennial that came to an end in 1985. Paris was a loss to emerging artists because it had been devoted to presenting the energy and experimental spirit of younger generations of artists (including non-European), like Gordon Matta-Clark, residing in Europe. With emphasis on the emerging, as opposed to the established, the name “Manifesta” was given to describe an art event that was intended to do exactly that—manifest art.

Manifesta is unique in relation to Documenta and Venice. The exhibition’s itinerant character is one of its defining hallmarks. Since the first edition in 1996, eight cities or regions have been designated host: Rotterdam, Luxembourg City, Ljubljana, Frankfurt, Donostia-San Sebastián, Nicosia, Trentino and the Region of Murcia, Spain. Manifesta 9 takes place in Genk, Belgium, in 2012. While Manifesta is not based on national representation, like Venice, its widespread nomadic quality and interest in giving

many European cities the “chance to host the biennial at least once” convey a sense of overall nationalism for what was in the early 1990s a newly formed European Union. As it ages, Manifesta in theory marks and thus affects the economic and cultural conditions of many parts of the Continent.

The organizers understand its economic and cultural marketing value and the potential for wealthier Western cities to outbid—or buy—an edition. According to its executive director Hedwig Fijen, host cities,

[... ] see Manifesta as a tool in their own cultural marketing, and they attempt to outbid the competition with higher and higher starting budgets. Manifesta is aware of these machinations. So it has become proactive, seeking sites that display an extra, conceptual framework to further distance the biennial from the European Cultural Capitals project. Manifesta looks for places (cities and regions) that may not have a strong infrastructure or offer massive funding, but have an artistic breeding ground in which small communities are experimenting with new ideas.

The economic and cultural prestige that accompanies Manifesta and the need for significant finances to mount it can still prevent less financially stable former Eastern Bloc countries from participating. Manifesta curators, therefore, have consciously tried to compensate for this situation by making sure that works by artists from many regions across Europe are included.

Manifesta also differentiates itself from more established biennials by exchanging a centralized thematic scope for a more collaborative, discursive approach to providing context. Manifesta 1, for example, took place in Rotterdam in 1996. Its guiding structure drew on collaborations between artists, curators, representatives of different disciplines

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43 Ibid.
and the general public to determine a basic organizing platform. In the months leading up

to the opening, the curatorial team held a series of “open” and “closed” meetings in
twelve different cities across Europe. Local arts professionals and the public in each city
were invited to participate. Event attendees were asked to discuss topics and issues they
felt the biennial should address and incorporate into the concept of the exhibition.

Manifesta 1 ended up including work by more than seventy artists from twenty-five
European countries installed in thirty-six public spaces and twelve institutions throughout
Rotterdam. Words like “language,” “territory,” “network,” “belonging” and “transition”
punctuate descriptions of the biennial in attempts not to submit the artwork to a driving,
overall theme but simply seeking to describe and showcase discursive trends in
contemporary practices at the time.44

These series of meetings organized by Manifesta 1 were viewed as a way to
reduce the hierarchy of the biennial institution, collaborating with communities about
what would be addressed by the exhibition. But in this attempt to relax the
instrumentalization of art by opening up and democratizing the process of exhibition
making, Manifesta actually further fixed the investment and reliance on art for economic
and social change—via the exhibition medium. In other words, by involving “everyone,”
they staked a sweeping claim that the exhibition could and would address issues brought

44 Manifesta 1, Foundation European Art Manifestation, “Press Release 6 May 1996,”
forward by the general public. The exhibition itself is the form through which this manifestation takes precedence.

For the first few editions of Manifesta, teams of young curators were hired and then deployed throughout Europe to gather ideas and data. They were charged to collaborate with one another and with local constituencies, travel across the new Europe to meet with artists and arts organizations and devise platforms for the exhibitions. The organizers insisted on inviting the participation of countries from the former East. Manifesta 1 included a curatorial team with members from Hungary and Russia to help draw in and connect artists and arts organization from those countries. The role of the curator and the curatorial model was prioritized in this framework for the biennial. Although Manifesta is a biennial about showcasing work by young, emerging artists, it is also a launching point for curators who are given opportunities to put together a biennial exhibition with substantial budgets and ultimately initiate what often become successful curatorial careers. They have influenced the focus of institutions, large and small, and over the course of past decade determined the development of New Institutionalism. For example, Hans Ulrich Obrist was a co-curator for Manifesta 1 in 1996. He is currently Co-director of Exhibitions and Programs and Director of International Projects at the Serpentine Gallery in London and arguably the most important person in contemporary art today. Francesco Bonami was a co-curator for Manifesta 3 in 2000. Bonami went on to become the curator of the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003 and a co-curator for the 2010

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Whitney Biennial. Mária Hlavajová was a co-curator of Manifesta 3. She is director of BAK in Utrecht and is also a faculty member at the Center for Curatorial Studies (CCS) at Bard College in New York.

**Manifesta 2: The Non-Thematic, Thematic Exhibition**

In 1998, Maria Lind was part of the curatorial team for Manifesta 2, which also included Robert Fleck of Austria and Barbara Vanderlinden of Belgium.46 Her career after Manifesta 2 reflects a curatorial practice engaged with socially based and site-specific artist commissions and a reflexive and deeply critical interest in the role of the institution and the exhibition. She has initiated new ways of learning through art and engendered wider interest in understanding the exhibition as a form of significant cultural production. I want now to look closely at her work with Manifesta 2, and subsequently with Moderna Museet in Stockholm and Kunstverein München. By isolating and concentrating on this activity, we have a cross-section of some of the curatorial and artistic characteristics of New Institutionalism.

Lind and her colleagues decided Manifesta 2 would be the result of extensive field research about the range of contemporary art practices taking place across Europe. Responding to the initial wave of interest in the art of Eastern Europe immediately following the fall of the Berlin Wall, Manifesta 2 was intended to be a thorough, unifying platform about art in all European countries. It took into account the relatively newly

46 Maria Lind is currently director of Tensta Konsthall, located just outside of Stockholm. Prior to Tensta, she was director of graduate studies at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College from 2008 to 2010. From 2005 until she took her post at Bard, she was director of the International Artists Studio Program in Sweden (IASPIS) and before that from 2002 to 2004 she was director of the Kunstverein München. From 1997 to 2001, she was a curator at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm where her work included twenty-nine artist commissions inside and outside the museum.
inaugurated cross-border sharing of knowledge and skills that had taken place in the
almost-decade-old European Union by 1998, and it sought to reignite interest in the
artistic production of a united Europe. “Art after Communism,” the biennial’s repeated
phrase but unofficial theme, was the leading mantra for those investigations.47

Manifesta 2 occurred in Luxembourg. Its presentation was centered around
something the curators called Info Lab. Info Lab was a research headquarters. Its many
functions included a workshop, seminar space and library. The library had available the
numerous catalogues, personal notes, press materials, brochures, maps and folders about
all the artists, art academies, exhibitions and institutions the curators had visited over the
course of their two-year exploratory exhibition research. This work included seeing
hundreds of artist’s studios in thirty-five countries.48 Info Lab opened up the curatorial
process to the general public by exposing this research activity and giving visibility to the
range of work on the Continent without doing the impossible of bringing it all to
Luxembourg. It was a way to give transparency to the extraordinary amount of artistic
production taking place across Europe, especially in the former Eastern European
countries. Instead of an office or classroom, Info Lab was located inside the galleries of
the Casino Luxembourg–Forum for Contemporary Art, the main hub of the biennial. In
addition to its role as library and research center, the gallery became a place for debate

47 Robert Fleck, “Art after Communism?” reprinted in “After ‘Art after Communism’,,” in The Manifesta
Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe, eds. Barbara
Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2005), 259–263.
48 Robert Fleck states he made these visits. It can be assumed the other curators had comparable investment
in time and research for preparation of the exhibition. See Robert Fleck, “After ‘Art after Communism’,,” in The Manifesta
Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe, 258.
and discussion in seminars and workshops. This headquarters and community space disrupted the more formal use of the gallery for displaying art.

In Manifesta 2, forty-seven artists exhibited and produced work inside and outside four institutions in Luxembourg. Artists came from Budapest, Bratislava, Vilnius, Prague, Belgrade, Ljubljana, Bucharest, Berlin, Helsinki, Milan, among other cities. Venues included the Casino Luxembourg, History Museum of the City of Luxembourg, the National Museum of History and Art, the Center for Artistic Production and Creation and numerous outdoor venues. The works selected were not intended to be united under a central theme. But, as Lind observes in her essay for the catalogue, certain ideas emerge and overlap.

All these works are in a sense specific to a place. But rather than harking back to the socio-institutional or the discursive, site-specific art of the last two decades, they are linked to the 1960s and 1970s minimalist phenomenological specificities. As was the case then, the experience of the bodily here and now is decisive for the contemporary ambient installations. With large and small means the artists capture and intensify the feeling of a place and create almost cinematic atmospheres.49

The Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan’s untitled installation probably speaks most literally to these ideas. It is an enormous olive tree situated atop a six-foot cube of exposed earth and roots contrasted surprisingly with the refined, neo-classical interior of the museum. The enormous work, plopped down inside the gallery, recalls Tony Smith’s Die of 1962, which comparatively, also six-feet cube, disrupted the expectations of the spectator. Cattelan reinvigorated and inserted a bit of humor into the Minimalist debate as

organic matter and a tree overtake a form the same shape and size as Smith’s work, suggesting, perhaps, that Minimalist works are biomorphic as Smith once contended.\(^5\)

Other works were sited throughout the city. They included *Juice Bar* by the Ljubljana-based artist Apolonija Šušteršič. *Juice Bar* explored the effects that different kinds of buildings and their uses have on the everyday life of a neighborhood. Šušteršič designed and operated a juice bar in the newly created Center for Artistic Production and Creation. The building was formerly the home to a fruit and vegetable market in the heart of the city. *Juice Bar* drew on the original function of the building to simultaneously acknowledge that history and to welcome people into the space, mediating the sometimes-uneasy relationship that forms between a new arts center and its surrounding neighborhood.

The Spanish artist Alicia Framis offered her services as a “dreamkeeper.” City residents and exhibition visitors were invited to call Framis to arrange a chat in the evening before they fell asleep in their home or hotel. She watched over the individuals as they slept, video-recording and taking notes about their movements and sounds during these typically unknown and intimate moments in people’s lives. And, German artist Tobias Rehberger’s *Within View of Seeing* was a discreet gesture. Opposite the Casino Luxembourg, he transformed what was a conspicuous concrete platform into a flower garden. He turned an otherwise unwelcome architectural non-space into a usable place for calm and rest—an opportunity to relax on a bench in the greenery.

\(^5\) In his interview with Samuel Wagstaff, Smiths says “The biomorphic forms that result from the construction have a dreamlike quality for me, at least like what is said to be a fairly common type of American dream.” Quoted in Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 1967, in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), 156.
The combined breadth of documentary material available at Info Lab and the survey of artworks produced and exhibited are more akin to the pre-Szeemann editions of Documenta. That approach was based on broad selections of art that provided an overall sense of what was happening at a particular moment in contemporary art. The selection of works, disparate in many ways, speaks to the non-themed approach of Manifesta 2, which tried to give an all-encompassing window into contemporary cultural production in Europe. The committee of curator-organizers also recalls the early organization format of Documenta before single artistic directors, like Szeemann, were appointed. The impetus for the Manifesta team to analyze art after communism was to propose that a typical Eastern European art no longer existed in the homogenized cultural field of a unified Europe where everyone has the same access to the same information and images.\footnote{Camiel van Winkel provides an excellent critical account of this situation. See Camiel van Winkel, “The Rhetorics of Manifesta,” in The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe, 224.} It used the exhibition form as a means to generate sociopolitical criticism through a multiplicity of mediums, disciplines and activities that intended to reflect the vast range of artistic production of a newly unified Europe. It relied on the conditions and context of place—even if that meant all of Europe—as the primary framework. As the curators write in their introduction to the catalogue,

For the last fifteen years, street aesthetics and mass communication have indeed undergone a process of homogenization that even the Situationists could not have foreseen. From Tallinn to Lisbon, passing through Istanbul, one finds the same TV stations, similar shop windows in the city centers, the same computers and the same materials. Simultaneously, the concepts of center and periphery have become highly relative. Former European peripheries, ranging from Bulgaria to Ireland, from Norway to Poland, are no longer remote, at least in terms of infrastructure and the possibility of
exchange. Unlike during the 1960s, an artist today no longer needs to emigrate to become international.52

In what appears as a rush to smooth over deep-seated lines once dividing the East and West, the curators argued that the art exhibited by the generation of young artists who matured in a united Europe was no longer a product of the communist political situation. Manifesta 2 unintentionally imbued the exhibition form with heavy sociopolitical rhetoric and a seeming urgency to prove a sweeping argument that globalization had reduced the impact on local difference. This is tricky territory, art after communism, in 1998, just nine years following the fall of the Berlin Wall. In his catalogue essay, Robert Fleck discusses the post-Wall generation of artists.

They studied in a post-communist society. The same advertisements, the same television channels, and the same social values and dreams as in the West, were for them the only concrete experience.53

Referring to the works on display, he continued,

[… ] in Manifesta 2, even for the well-informed visitor, it is not easy to determine the geographical origins of the individual artists from the phenotype of their works. That is incidentally no news, but a return to the normality of this century.54

While arguments and debates ensued across Europe in response to the accuracy of Fleck’s essay, the point of addressing it here in the context of New Institutionalism is to show the extent to which the exhibition was used as an agent for political change and commentary by 1998, exemplified by this edition of Manifesta. This activity implied the exhibition had the viable means to clean decades worth of scars in one rhetorical swipe.

54 Ibid.
Although a thematic approach like that posed by Szeemann was avoided in order to present a range of work, and a committee of curators gathered to remove the egocentricity of the singular curatorial voice, Manifesta curators actually politicized the exhibition by claiming, for example, “Whereas in the 1980s some major centers still set the trend, the artistic production has today become of equal value from one end of the Continent to the other, particularly as a new generation of young artists who have not experienced communism are emerging on the international scene.”\(^5\) The reliance on the exhibition to take on these claims, instead of perhaps a single artist or collective, reveals the degree of investment in the exhibition as a critical form by the biennial institution and its curators, and signals the shortfalls and challenges through which New Institutionalism was working by the later 1990s.

**The Lifestyle Package**

In 2000, as curator at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, Maria Lind organized the exhibition *What If: Art on the Verge of Architecture and Design*. The exhibition evolved out of a collaborative process between Lind, Liam Gillick, other participating artists and the public. Prior to the exhibition opening and as part of the preparatory research for it Lind organized a series of three informal symposia, or “listen-ins,” at the museum in the exhibition area. The listen-ins were means for discussing the broad ideas of the exhibition and what kind of specific forms works in it could take to reflect them.

The exhibition was “filtered” by the artist Liam Gillick. He staged the layout of works by the artists in a visually seductive and compelling design and architectural arrangements with alternating zones for relaxation and stimulation, both intellectually and physically, not unlike the advanced marketing techniques used by commercial environments. Work by most of the thirty participating artists was incorporated into tight geometric clusters, evoking the gridded layout of a city on an expansive field, or a pseudo-shop or bazaar, depending on the spectator’s frame of reference. The remaining artists had use of the rest of the building. Lighting for the exhibition was a constantly changing cycle simulating morning, afternoon, evening and night; twenty-four hours compressed into half-hour rotations. This scheme mimicked artificial lighting used in retail spaces of some casinos in Las Vegas.

These intricate arrangements reflected how our spatial experience—from the layout of cities to the display of commercial goods—is highly coded by architecture and design to appeal to our consumer lifestyle choices. In the past, religion brought people together; then it was work. Today it is shopping that is the social form that unites us through our continuous consumption. In 2008 as Maria Lind reflects on the exhibition, “Design as a concept led into clothing design, fashion and style, which in turn leaned towards lifestyle and its individual interpretations. All this also connected with consumer society’s flood of new products and their packing […] as they wash over all of us.”

Also at the heart of this staging was a critique of the shop-model formula that is often applied to the thematic group exhibition at museums, art fairs and biennials. This model puts the experience of art at the mercy of its design, arrangement and architectural environment. As Alex Farquharson points out in his assessment of What If?, “These two gestures [lighting and arrangement] would have come across as an abuse of power had the curator done them. As an artist operating in the grey area between art and curating, however, Gillick had a special kind of license.”

Lind outsourced the curatorial responsibilities that alleviated the appearance that the institution had over-stepped its organizing domain.

But staging is absolutely integral for curators of thematic-based, group exhibitions. In fact, just that kind of language is used by Ralph Rugoff in 2005 when he writes about the making of exhibitions.

For better or worse, our experience of art is not exempt from our susceptibility to the power of packaging. And a themed exhibition is ultimately a type of packaging. But it is a form that, unlike the packaging of commercial products, is not solely concerned with grabbing our attention or arousing our desires (though if exhibitions do neither of these they are failing us). While the themed show inevitably influences the way we make sense out of the works that it packages, it can also provoke us not to simply consume but to question the experience on offer.

In What If, Gillick points his critique at exactly this kind of trend in curating, which he foresaw overtaking curatorial practice as early as 2000. Gillick understands that exhibitions and works of art are experienced and judged through a designed visual reality, akin to the way capital lures and seduces consumer desires for a particular lifestyle.

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Rugoff’s repeated use of the term “package” and even concluding his paragraph with the phrase “experience on offer” concedes to this mode of thinking about the relationships between the thematic exhibition and the shop floor. But, it also speaks to the way the thematic exhibition sometimes positions a work of art to fit within a context determined by the curator. The meaning of the work can change based on the environment in which it is installed and the other works against which it is juxtaposed.

For *What If*, Gillick arranged disparate artworks into a coherent spatial scheme—from small wood houses by Rirkrit Tiravanija and displays of shoes by Sylvie Fleury to a tropical atmosphere of light made by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster. Instead of employing a didactic, top-down exhibition model that would explain the way art, architecture and design unite to create a culture industry with capitalist marketing strategies (there were no labels, only a map), Gillick simultaneously enacted that critique by using its form to position things, including the spectator, in relation to one another.

This institutional performativity created an all-enveloping aesthetic experience, an atmosphere not unlike that which capital offers, giving the consumer immersive environments that mirror a commodity package. The placement of the visitor physically and psychologically into a market arena-cum-exhibition, whether they know it or not, is the strategy that plays out in an Apple Store or an Anthropology or Hollister boutique where people are put into a situation that speaks of the aesthetic—the lifestyle in totality—they desire to formulate for themselves and present to the public. The immersive scenario that Lind and Gillick set up with *What If: Art on the Verge of Architecture and Design* turned the museum into a reflection of the experience economy
where the value of the art was communicated through Gillick’s spatial arrangement, not on an object-by-object basis but by the desire to become a part of that style, to project the total perception, and thus affect the capital ultimately generated by that experience and make the spectator uncertain if they are seeing art or commodities.

This model of the artist and institution collaborating to use the exhibition as critique of the uneasy relationship between art and economics occurred in 2009 at the Venice Biennale. The Office for Contemporary Art Norway gave funding for an unprecedented form of participation in the 53rd Venice Biennale that challenged the usual format of the exhibition at Venice. Instead of selecting an artist or collective living in the country to represent it, Norway and Denmark, whose pavilions are situated next to one another in the Giardini, teamed up to commission the artist duo Michael Elmgreen of Denmark and Ingar Dragset of Norway.\textsuperscript{60} It was the first time in the history of Venice that two pavilions had teamed up to make one exhibition.

Elmgreen and Dragset conceived an alternate approach for their participation that finds its origin in the work of Group Material in the 1980s and even more recently Lind and Gillick at the Moderna Museet in 2000. Elmgreen and Dragset expanded these approaches in the exhibition they called \textit{The Collectors}. The Danish Pavilion is a neoclassical building designed by Carl Brummer in 1931.\textsuperscript{61} The Norwegian Pavilion is a 1960s modernist structure by Peter Koch. Elmgreen and Dragset re-envisioned these architectures as two domestic settings for the presentation of a variety of works in a

\textsuperscript{60} The Danish and Nordic Pavilions include Denmark, Norway and Sweden.
\textsuperscript{61} As part of the work the artists declared that both pavilions were for sale. A “For Sale” sign was placed in front of the Danish Pavilion.
variety of mediums owned by two fictional collectors. Melding art, design and architecture, Elmgreen and Dragset had part of the interiors physically altered into homes—complete with kitchens, bathrooms, studies and living rooms. They gathered together installations, performances and objects by twenty-four artists and designers whose work when comprehensively installed in the space became fictional settings of lived-in domestic interiors. It was all there—the things we live with each day—the coffee pots, designer chairs, paintings, music and appliances. And in totality, it communicated, among other subjects, the way the wealthy, Western world lives and consumes. The Collectors addresses the psychology of and desire for owning beautiful objects, the immersion of our beings into totally designed lifestyles, and ultimately what living with objects in a private home means in contemporary art and culture. Western consumerism is no longer focused on simply owning objects that individually convey a message about who we are but on the totality and importance of our environments, topics comparable to what Lind and Gillick examined in the exhibition What If: Art on the Verge of Architecture and Design.

The minimalist qualities of the Nordic Pavilion with its extraordinary walls of glass windows, wood ceiling beams and modernist furniture was particularly intriguing, especially because at its entrance a bloated male rubber figure lay face down in a reflecting pool. The scene was an odd juxtaposition with the hoards of Biennale visitors milling around and sitting on nearby steps, many already accustomed to and ignoring it. Once inside the Koch building spectators walked through the living room, kitchen and bathroom; they could handle books, sit on furniture and touch objects to help them draw
up a narrative from the clues and detritus of the everyday lives of the fictional characters. The home was evidently that of a gay bachelor with a penchant for young men. Elmgreen and Dragset strategically placed the photograph *FKK/naturists* (2008) by Wolfgang Tillmans of heavily endowed young men lounging together. Nearby a group of young men were hanging out and watching television in a PK 80 daybed by Poul Kjaerholm from 1957. Other parts of the house included ubiquitous homosexual drawings by Tom of Finland, probably from the late 1980s and a work called *Butterflies* (2009) by an artist and design duo called Han and Him. *Butterflies* was a collection of male swimwear of ex-lovers. A performance conceived by Elmgreen and Dragset included a naked man lounging on a Wegner Ox Chair with a pair of headphones listening to an iPod. Through careful walking, viewing and inspecting, spectators could eventually decipher from other clues and performances that these men were waiting for the owner, Mr. B., who was in fact laying face down in the pool. The kind of cinematic quality that Maria Lind described in her assessment of the work in Manifesta 2 is in full flower in *The Collectors*.

Elmgreen and Dragset intervened on a number of levels in the Biennale’s typical exhibition format, first, by making a provocative statement against what might be viewed as an outmoded, imperialist determination of a single (identifiable) artist from a single (identifiable) country, ideas that resonate with Gillick’s critique of the German Pavilion with *How are you going to behave? A kitchen cat speaks* in the same edition of the Biennale. Secondly, the duo curated an exhibition as their work of art, comparable to what Group Material did for their exhibitions of collections of objects from disparate parts of culture and even the curious combination of slag, text and snapshots that Robert
Smithson spliced together in his *Non-Sites*. The arrangements of objects and text in their exhibitions provided some information but never enough to literally speak about something specific, never an instantaneous or singular experience or understanding of the work-as-exhibition. In a similar vain, *The Collectors* asked the spectator to do some work in this theatrical scenario.

**Kunstverein München: Invisible Orbits with Visible Change**

In 2002, Maria Lind became director of the Kunstverein where she developed a project called Sputnik, an integrated collaborative framework intended to re-shape the institutional functions of the museum. The initiative is an example of the kind of behind-the-scenes, critically reflexive work of New Institutionalism that can take place over a longer period of time. Sputnik—taking its name and concept from the Russian word meaning “traveling companion” or “partner”—was a group of visiting artists, curators and writers who were invited to engage in the long-term planning processes of the institution. Their objective was to evaluate its inner workings and recommend interventions-as-artwork in response to how the institution functioned. Over the course of three years, the artist-advisor Sputniks accompanied Lind and the Kunstverein in the production of content, the direction of the institution’s programming and other intricate aspects, many related to architecture, design and communication.

The mission statement for the Sputnik Project explains:

[Sputniks] will be contributing to the shape and character of the Kunstverein with their questions, critiques, advice and ideas over the next three years. Any one of these relationships may develop into one or any number of additional projects. In these relationships, complete flexibility is of key importance with respect to the particular form any of these potential projects may take. They may take the form of an exhibition,
symposium, publication, event or some unplanned format. Whether the project selected should be restricted to a particular time frame or accompany the work of Kunstverein München over a longer period is also to remain flexible. The projects may literally become part of the existing structures and infrastructures of the Kunstverein, thereby exercising an influence on the design and form of the institution itself and contributing anything which might be considered lacking. We would also like to utilize the Sputniks' experience and ideas as a means of discovering how an institution can best operate for artists and for visitors.\(^2\)

The project’s fourteen Sputniks included artists and curators of various ages, experiences and backgrounds, from around the world, such as Carey Young, Lynne Cooke, Matts Leiderstam, Bik Van Der Pol and Liam Gillick. Going practically unnoticed, the semi-private nature of Sputnik made it difficult for the visiting public to easily discern the initiative, as the work of the Sputniks was interwoven into the day-to-day operations of the institution without always identifying a particular artist.

The redesign of the Kunstverein foyer is one example of how the Sputnik initiative manifested in the museum. This work by artist Apolonija Šušteršič originated out of the intent to activate the museum’s entryway by encouraging longer, more sustained social possibilities for the underused space. Šušteršič found and arranged couches and comfortable chairs for visitors to relax on, a simple gesture that immediately engendered a friendlier atmosphere than the vacant space that originally existed at the entrance. Since 2003, the space has continually evolved and become increasingly activated as a site for informal artist talks, short film screenings and a general gathering place. In addition to these uses, a growing archive of the Kunstverein’s publications, videos and other materials about contemporary art have accumulated and have turned it

into a quasi-reading room, always accessible to museum visitors. Šušteršič’s work established a tone of conviviality and openness at the immediate entrance of the institution in an attempt to represent the general experience to be had in the entire museum. In so doing, this new “site” and alternative concept runs counter to the austere quietude of some traditional institutions. Šušteršič transformed the long-term use of that space by activating it on an ongoing basis, as opposed to making an installation on view in an exhibition for a limited duration.

Another example is Liam Gillick’s intervention. He organized a platform to disseminate more widely the knowledge and information produced by the Kunstverein. To address the lack of translations in contemporary art contexts, he proposed to make available in English all the information communicated by the museum. This effort was realized through a series of workshops involving the museum staff and the public. The workshops were organized to discuss how to change the communication frameworks of the institution, from a practical standpoint with regard to digital technology and printed matter as well as conceptually with regard to the role of the English language as a midway point between different languages in the East and West.

Gillick’s workshops addressed the impact of the project on the Kunstverein’s staff and working methods, which needed to be reorganized in order to shift to a bilingual communication format. His work as a Sputnik significantly affected the virtual and physical realms, from the Kunstverein’s website to the printed handouts and way-finding signage inside the building. Today, museum communications, including the website, are bilingual. Gillick’s and Šušteršič’s interventions are the kind of sustained institution
initiatives that New Institutionalism produces, with objectives that are divergent from routine exhibitions (i.e., pre-conceived temporal parameters, documentation catalogues, wall labels and adjunct educational programs involving museum visitors). Each Sputnik was paid a fee for their participation.

New Institutionalism questions the general operation of the art institution and its policies, a critique that is initiated, as exemplified by Lind’s Sputnik Project, from within its own borders. We will consider in the following chapters whether this kind of behind-the-scenes work by Gillick and Šušteršič, for example, is effective or if it is possible to evaluate it. New Institutions place value on flexibility and collaboration toward goals that are often determined along the way among an array of institutional and visiting voices. When they were invited to participate in the Sputnik Project, the artists and curators did not know yet exactly what they would do. The process of determining this along with the institutions was part of their participation. That level of flexibility even marks an alternative to the usually tightly scheduled exhibition program with education, marketing and public relations staff intertwined in the timeline that can be set sometimes years in advance. New Institutionalism also embraces these long-term interactions with individuals, like between the Kunstverein and Gillick and Šušteršič, who might inhabit the programming over the course of a number of months or even years. Curators often work with the same artist on a number of occasions so that working collaborations become more familiar and refined with each new project and institution. This approach is most evident in the ongoing connections that Lind has had with Gillick and Šušteršič at the different institutions where she has worked.
The intimacy and long-term dedication between artist and curator, however, could prove detrimental to the artistic autonomy of the artist who over time might rely too much on one or two curators to give not only an outlet for his work but as a source for economic livelihood. The exhibition form, as has become clear over the course of this study, is the central device for the dissemination of ideas by the artists working within these models. In a highly-integrated working processes with a curator, such as those posed by facets of New Institutionalism, the voice becomes partially eclipsed. Gillick makes it clear when discussing his experience with Lind at the Kunstverein that,

[…] there are moments where artists don’t have a fellow critic, as it were, as might have been the case for artists in the late modern period who developed alongside a critical double. My critical double might be the director of the Kunstverein in Munich one week, who next week, might be going to do something else. So she is not really my critical double in the sense of classic autonomous critical play. Something more multiple is happening instead which means that we both take on certain roles through pragmatism.63

Unlike the critical alliances once seen between artists like Anthony Caro and Michael Fried and Jackson Pollock and Clement Greenberg, artists today might not have that same champion for their artistic autonomy. The critic is now a multiplicity of things including curator, director, writer, fundraiser and sometimes artist. The guiding force is almost always the art institution and the economy. The comment by Boris Groys referred to earlier when he says “artist is more often hired for a certain period of time as a worker to realize this or that institutional project” resonates more closely now. Liam Gillick was paid by the Kunstverein München for his service as a Sputnik, as he should

63 Liam Gillick quoted in Mick Wilson, “Curatorial Moments and Discursive Turns,” in Curating Subjects (London: Open Editions), 211.
be. The curatorial framework of New Institutionalism lends a hand not only in the way that art is conceived, produced and experienced in the contexts of specific locations and situations. It also builds long-term and intimate working conditions with artists that can instrumentalize their careers and livelihoods through their commitment to a particular institution (like Kunstverein München) and a particular curator (like Maria Lind). That deep interweaving of the artist into the institution shapes their practice, through accommodating and even growing according to the programming of the institution and the curator, just as if the artist were a hired hand.

**The Future is Now**

We return, as this chapter began, to Maria Lind’s prediction of the future. The report *European Cultural Policies 2015: A Report with Scenarios of the Future of Public Funding for Contemporary Art in Europe* is the outcome of the rejection by Frieze of the initial proposal that IASPIS submitted for their participation in the art fair.64 Lind and her colleagues at EIPCP submitted a new proposal for a research-based text that took the form of this hypothetical report from the future. In her introduction to *European Cultural Policies 2015*, Lind summarizes,

That the Frieze Foundation (which lies behind the Frieze Art Fair) receives public funding from, amongst others, the English Arts Council and the London Development Agency is no secret. Neither is the fact that in addition to the commercial galleries, publicly financed institutions like Portikus, Stedelijk Bureau, Sala Rekalde and Project in Dublin participate in the Frieze Art Fair which is occurring yearly. To invite well-reputed public institutions and organizations is indeed an established practice in several art fairs. What is novel with this one lies rather in the kind of

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64 Lind says: “As a ‘lead partner,’ Frieze Foundation has the right to decline project proposals which the ‘partners’ submit. This happened to IASPIS’s first proposal, which was rejected on the grounds that one of the two suggested artists had already been invited to carry out one of Frieze Foundation's own projects.” See http://eipcp.net/policies/2015/lind/en.
collaboration: the Frieze Foundation has entered into a formal collaboration with the public institutions involved in the fair and together applied for—and the Frieze Foundation received—large sums of money from EU’s cultural fund, Culture 2000. So in fact, the activities of the Frieze Foundation and the Frieze Art Fair seem to be forebears to the type of Private Public Partnerships which the report claims will increase drastically in the next decade.\footnote{Maria Lind, “Introduction,” in European Cultural Policies 2015, http://eipcp.net/policies/2015/lind/en.}

Because of the willingness of the state to fund a commercial art fair, Lind’s major question is whether or not the art fair today has taken over for the museum and the non-profit arts organizations as the primary site for experimentation—solely because the art fair has the funds from both private and public resources to do so. The problem with the funding structure for the Frieze Art Fair has to do with the fact that it partners with non-profits, especially non-profits with “well-reputed” experimental programs and reputations. The Frieze Art Fair garners capital from public sources via the Frieze Foundation because of its associations with experimental, non-profit spaces. In this odd circular logic, the Frieze Foundation in turn disperses funding to those same non-profits for projects that they must propose and for which they must receive approval by Frieze as far as the form their participation takes at the art fair.

As Lind points out, “As a ‘lead partner,’ Frieze Foundation has a right to decline project proposals which ‘partners’ submit.”\footnote{Ibid.} That was the case with IASPIS’s first proposal, which happened to include an artist the Frieze Foundation had already earmarked for one of their own projects. The scenario is such that a publicly funded contemporary arts institution is at the mercy of a commercial enterprise with regard to what they present at a publicly funded event for which they actually help raise money.
The Frieze Foundation has leveraged them to achieve that intellectual and experimental prestige, a cachet—or package—that is needed to obtain the funds to disperse. There are overlaps between the perceived credibility, and we can read “style” here, akin to the situation that Lind examined in her exhibition *What If: Art on the Verge of Architecture and Design*. Frieze garners funds based on its connections to reputable, experimentally charged non-profits, and Frieze’s connection to that style leads to economic gain. Culture is a marketing instrument, whether it manifests in the shape of international art exhibitions, a world’s fair or simply the experience commodity of cultural tourism.

The report *European Cultural Policies 2015* was accepted by Frieze, reluctantly, according to Lind. The point of this report was to make an assessment of future cultural policies by projecting scenarios of economic and cultural situations in relation to contemporary art into the year 2015. It presented texts by eight authors, who consider critical writing part of their practice. They include Oslo-based artist and writer Tone Hansen, Helsinki-based critic and curator Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt, Berlin-based philosopher and cultural theorist Gerald Raunig, Moscow-based artist and critic Oleg Kireev and Hamburg-based artist and writer Cornelia Sollfrank. Their predictions address future repercussions for art should the funding strategies of 2005 continue ten years onward. Lind writes that “an undeniable red thread in all of them is that art is becoming more and more instrumental, especially in terms of national/European identity and as an economic stimulant.”

For example, in her essay “Don’t Look Back in Anger,” Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt warns against applying the model of Public Private Partnership common

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67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
in health care and transportation to the arts in England. In doing so, according to Nesbitt, it would allow the private market to drive certain types of art production that would limit and eventually diminish art that is critical and challenging to the status quo.

Cornelia Sollfrank addresses Berlin’s drive to create an appearance as the cultural capital of the region in her essay “The Future of Cultural Production in the ‘Cultural Nation’ of Germany.” She gives an account of the political motivation behind the partnership between the public institution Hamburger Bahnhof and the Friedrich Christian Flick Collection. The museum agreed to display the collection of 2,000 works by 150 leading contemporary artists from Europe and North America for a total of seven years, through 2011. The partnership increased the value of the collection while also increasing revenue for the museum. At the same time, Berlin continues to give less than one percent of public subsidies for art directly to artists. Revenue gains for both public art institutions and private sources are prioritized over grants to artists (a less instrumental approach to cultural production) because the economic benefit is not immediately discernable in the cultural tourism industry. In his introduction to the publication, Gerald Raunig writes that what is at stake in a situation like this is “the danger of a further loss of autonomy in the content of art production, cultural work and cultural policies, of the political in art increasingly being taken over and of a greater scarcity of funding for democracy-political and critical aspects in cultural policies.”

Maria Lind’s 2007 essay “The Future is Here” is a continuation of the ideas, workshops and meetings around European Cultural Policies 2015. Her outlook for what the future holds for the artistic and critical autonomy in art in 2015 is more positive. She discusses the importance of self-organization for artists and arts organizations in order to alleviate reliance on private and public funding as well as institutions for the dissemination of their work. She cites several concrete examples of initiatives that are models operating against full-on instrumentalization of art and its ideas.

16 Beaver and e-flux in New York are two clear examples of artists who have survived with integrity in art’s capital of commerce, through rental fees and the distribution of information, respectively. EIPCP (European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies) in Vienna has succeeded in seeking and obtaining sufficient amounts of European cultural subsidies to run an independent transnational, research-related program in which generous space is given to critical discourse. EIPCP is moreover one of the few organizations engaged in publishing important texts on the Web, and in several languages. One could also mention Pro qm, a thematic bookshop in Berlin dealing with cities, architecture, art, design, pop, politics and theory by selling books, publishing, doing projects and other public events. Each of these initiatives produces ideas and projects rarely encountered within either the publicly funded or commercial spheres of art.

The way she sees it based on the examples here, drawing on mixed and more common capitalist frameworks helps maintain levels of economic autonomy without the compromise usually needed by artists and curators who gather funds exclusively from public, private and institution resources.

This examination of European Cultural Policies 2015 is useful for two reasons in this account of New Institutionalism. On one hand, the report’s critique speaks directly to

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70 Maria Lind, “The Future is Here,” 2007, in Selected Maria Lind Writings, ed. Brian Kuan Wood (Berlin: Sternberg), 75–76.
the predicament in which artists and institutions find themselves as far as funding strategies that demand compromise in the level and kind of criticality their work can attain. On the other hand, the report is a self-published observation on the future of contemporary art, distributed freely and widely at the very source of its critique. It has all the merits of a politically effective technique, the quality of which was prized by Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht. It is a work that made sweeping investigative claims into an array of institution behaviors by respected philosophers, theorists, architects and critics, such as Sollfrank, Nesbitt and Raunig, who often contribute to symposia and edited volumes. The report represents a turn toward “knowledge production,” indicative of the changing course of New Institutionalism by 2005. In Chapter 4, I examine this trend of knowledge production within broader activity that uses the exhibition as a form of education. But, before doing so, in Chapter 3 we need to equip ourselves with the analytic tools for evaluating the critical efficacy of art and exhibition that involve the spectator in spatial and temporal experiences.

71 It is also available free online at http://eipcp.net/policies/2015.
Chapter 3: The Efficacy of a Critical Art

The Critical According to Jacques Rancière

This chapter is an analysis of the exhibition as a critical form. It includes a study of Jacques Rancière’s philosophy of art and politics, which provides a basis to reflect upon the criticality of work discussed in previous chapters and to assess the art of Thomas Hirschhorn and Anton Vidokle. Rancière’s philosophical project includes, among other writings, the publications *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004), *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (2009), *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009) and *Dissensus* (2010).¹ This work is dedicated to uncovering the potential for art to alter authority by creating aesthetic experiences that oppose it. He explores how a change in the sphere of appearances can disrupt the aesthetic "distribution of the sensible," which, according to Rancière, governs how we make sense of the world and even our behavior.

This chapter has three overlapping intentions. Through the lens of Rancière I develop an assessment of the aesthetics of critical art and how criticality connects to the political. I then utilize these tools to examine the changing role of the spectator as an active agent of art paying particular attention to the exhibition form. Interwoven within

¹ *The Politics of Aesthetics* was originally published in French in 2000. *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* was first published in French in 2004. *The Emancipated Spectator* was originally published in French in 2008. *Dissensus* was published simultaneous in English and French in 2010.
this work is an analysis of the problems associated with assigning specific responsibilities to art to generate tangible change through determined, cause-effect scenarios.

Jacques Rancière’s philosophy argues that our social and political system is organized by an aesthetic order. This order is based on what he calls a “distribution of the sensible,” which determines how we make sense of and negotiate a shared social order—a community. This social order contains dual senses that include concrete knowledge and human perceptions. The organization of these senses is governed by what Rancière calls the “police.” He writes,

Generally one employs the term politics for the totality of processes through which the unification and agreement of communities, the organization of powers, the distribution of offices and functions, and the system of legitimation of this distribution take place. I propose that this distribution and the system of these legitimations be given another name. I propose they be called the police.²

The police is a symbolic constitution of the social. It is widely influential in determining how we make sense of things and situations. It assigns behaviors to occupations such as professors, civil servants, bankers, factory workers and farmers. It determines intellectual domains of disciplines like art, philosophy and biology and delineates historical periods including Romanticism, modernism and postmodernism. The police also defines the places in which all of this transpires. Rancière’s philosophical aim is to emphasize these conditions and,

[...] break down the great divisions—science and ideology, high culture and popular culture, representation and the unrepresentable, the modern and the postmodern, etc.—to contrast so-called historical necessity with a

topography of the configuration of possibilities, a perception of the multiple alterations and displacements that make up forms of political subjectivization and artistic invention.³

The delineations—or the police—are boundaries that guide and enforce a distribution of the sensible.

Building on Kant, Rancière assigns an aesthetics to a priori forms—cognitive factors and empirical knowledge—that condition human existence. These forms determine how things appear to sense experience. They are the basic structure of space and time, no matter if it is visible or invisible, speech or noise. According to Rancière these forms are what assign politics to experience because “politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak.”⁴ Any discussion of being and doing, saying and thinking, the visible and invisible, pleasure and displeasure is governed by a consensual social structure that constitutes how saying, thinking, being and pleasure take place. This cognitive consensual structure is one part of a distribution of the sensible. Its empirical value determines our ability to make sense of the most common contexts because of already-assigned systems of divisions that create meanings and connections using sensibilities associated with experience. That experience is knowledge derived from living. It determines how we participate in a social order and consequently affects the second part of a distribution of the sensible, which is connected to sensual qualities of feeling, which humans innately possess. These senses are unpredictable intuitive responses contingent

upon conditions set up by the first part. A distribution of the sensible is a certain relation between these two parts. It functions on a twofold basis: the first sense recognizes forms of legitimation through which the apprehension of a second sense—perception, thought, sight—makes possible the interpretation of a given context. In this dual model of sensation one of the sense faculties often takes command over the other to determine how we make sense; cognition can trump feeling or vice versa.

A new dimension of aesthetics rests between these two poles of sense apprehension. Rancière uses Kant to develop his theory of the distribution of the sensible and its relationship to a politics of aesthetics. He departs from Kant, who theorized in *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and *Critique of Judgment* (1790) that intuition is based on a combination of faculties of signification of space and time and judgment based on faculties of human sensation. At the end of the eighteenth century humanity put reason to use to question long-established modes of governing, including the church, the monarchy, taxes and the military, all given contexts that influence our knowledge of how to act. Rancière’s conceptualization of a distribution of the sensible extends from Kant to prioritize non-hierarchical relations between these two faculties of perceiving and making sense of contexts. A non-hierarchical situation occurs when neither part reigns over the other. The spectator does not allow formal, ingrained knowledge or intuitive desire to drive how they make sense of something. In this case the spectator’s response to a particular situation equalizes the two opposing sense faculties. Rancière’s theory of a politics of aesthetics is dependent on this equality. He views this space as uncertainty, and therefore a space ripe with possibility. He sees it, in fact, as politics—a politics
embedded with critique that is able to depart from historical determination of how to interpret a situation. This third space is key to his theory of a distribution of the sensible because it becomes the “political interpretation of the aesthetic experience as the neutralization of the opposition between the formal drive and the sensible drive.” The political—and therefore critically effective—dimension of aesthetics involves this experience, an experience that is malleable and unpredictable. It is an experience latent with potential. This third part is identifiable as neither drives and it is where a new aesthetics of the political operates. He contends,

What is at stake here is the specificity of a distribution of the sensible that escapes the hierarchical relationship between a high faculty and a low faculty, that is, escapes in the form of a positive neither/nor.

A positive neither/nor is a supplement where an opposition to the police, a challenge to the inequality ingrained in social order, can surface to reconfigure a distribution of the sensible into a more egalitarian position. This reconfiguration discredits the delimitations assigned through the institutions of a common social world. The rupture of a common political regime of aesthetics depends on this uncertainty, and that is what most appeals to Rancière. Uncertainty can bring about a new distribution of the sensible and thus a new aesthetics of the political. He summarizes,

What I call the aesthetic dimension is this: the count of a supplement to the parts that cannot be described as a part itself. It is another kind of relation between sense and sense, a supplement that both reveals and neutralizes the division at the heart of the sensible.

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 3.
Within the context outlined so far, I want to consider general representations of protests, activists, police brutality, revolutionary banners, slogans and public interventions in art. These representations can take form in photography, text, video, installation or a combination thereof and are often assigned a critical capacity as political art. The meanings they suggest include the consequences of totalitarian regimes, ideologies of democratic values, tragedies of war and so forth. These interpretations are governed by consensual knowledge. There is no uncertainty or play at work in how to respond. There is no aesthetic value of a new political order because the spectator is already conditioned with an understanding of how to interpret these images. At a very young age we are informed by different governing structures, such as school, media, family, church and museums, about what these kinds of representations mean. For example, images of the pain of others—death, destruction, tragedy and despair—are repeatedly produced and circulated, the abundance of which dilutes the intended political effect.

This has been the case in society since Matthew Brady’s photographs of the battlefields of the American Civil War began to circulate. In recent memory repeated televised scenes of 9/11, the Iraq War and the death of Osama bin Laden intensified this insatiable desire for images. For instance, recall that the public believed bin Laden’s assassination was a lie, completely unfathomable until a photograph of his deceased and tattered body was released and circulated by the media. The world did not want to rely on the word of the United States government or its president. Only an image viewed on the legitimizing outlet of televised media and the Internet would confirm such a momentous
event. While basic representations of war and death were once charged with a politics, today these kinds of representations do not possess an aesthetics of the political. They are read too literally. Even though the field of art charges them forward as instruments for social and political change, they are in fact diluted by the massive surplus of representations circulated. Capitalism assigns them a value because their continual circulation attracts more viewers and in turn attracts more advertising dollars.

It should be clear here that there is an aesthetics in these kinds representations. They are part of what Rancière calls a distribution of the sensible in that appearances of the world have an aesthetics that govern our behaviors and feelings. But they do not possess a politics of aesthetics that changes the spectator’s comprehension of existing realities. A new dimension of aesthetics with potential to disrupt current aesthetic regimes does not show its hand so easily to spectators with straightforward representations of shock, horror and atrocity. In fact, “This aesthetics should not be understood as the perverse commandeering of politics by a will to art, by a consideration of the people qua work of art.”


Now Is Our Time: Martha Rosler, Josephine Meckseper and Levi’s

In his writings, Rancière frequently remarks on Martha Rosler’s photomontage series *Bringing the War Home* made from 1967 to 1972, photocopies of which were originally distributed through underground publications and at antiwar rallies in New York and California. *Bringing the War Home* juxtaposes images of comfortable American home interiors cut from popular magazines like *Life* with journalistic
photographs of the Vietnam War. *Balloons* has a black-and-white photograph of a Vietnamese man carrying a wounded child. It is combined with a color image of an orderly modernist interior from a home décor magazine about living well. The only visual cues suggesting the journalistic photograph originated in a Southeast Asian jungle are to be found amid the potted plants, floral-print furniture, rattan deck chair and verdantly landscaped yard of the décor magazine image. Writing about Rosler’s Vietnam War collages, Rancière reminds us that “the connection between the two images was supposed to produce a dual effect: awareness of the system of domination that connected American domestic happiness to violence of imperialist war, but also a feeling of guilty complicity in the system.”

Another work, *Cleaning the Drapes*, shows a smiling housewife vacuuming curtains while she casually pulls them aside to reveal a black-and-white image of two American soldiers in a bunker. The woman presents the scene as if it is a showroom full of commercial goods. In these works Rosler utilized a dialectical form of critique by juxtaposing the images of bunkers, dying children and fire-ravaged landscapes with cozy, domestic bliss and suburban quietude. The juxtaposition disrupted the spectator’s expectations of what the scene before them was supposed to mean. It impeded their ability to easily decipher (and come to terms with) the conflictual representations of war and domesticity. This form of critique was effective in the late 1960s and early ’70s because it generated a feeling of guilt in the spectator and an awareness of their complicity in the devastating misery of an imperialist war that had American capitalist

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consumerism at its source. The spectator was acquainted with both kinds of images from popular magazines, but not their uncomfortable conflation. The composite representations reveal a reality they recognized, but they did not want to acknowledge this within the context of desire for the commercial goods and lifestyle advertised in the pages of home interior journals.

Rosler utilized the same dialectical critique and visual vernacular developed for the Vietnam War series in recent works from 2004 and 2008. But instead of the Vietnam War, these works addressed the Iraq War. Unlike the photocopy-ready dissemination of her earlier collages, these recent photomontages are large, digitally produced glossy prints. They are nicely framed and intended for presentation inside a gallery, thus limiting their audience. *Invasion* (2008) shows an army of young male models dressed in form-fitting black suits marching across a bombed-out, desert-brown field and desolate city street. They walk alongside a parade of military tanks. While the pencil-thin suits recall those of the 1960s, in the lower-left foreground a small sign written in Arabic informs the viewer this is not *that* war but *this* war, the war of the Bush era, the one set in the Middle East. Fashion and war are both cyclical consumer trends, so it is hard to tell the difference. The handsome army strides confidently forward moving away from the exploding bombs and fires that recede in the distance. Like America they are unimpeded by the disaster around them. They, too, are united under the aegis of consumerism, fashion and military prowess and, most of all, by oil.

Another work, *Point and Shoot* (2008), has a beautiful bride staring alluringly at the spectator. She holds a Polaroid camera and poses on a Baghdad street amidst
American combat troops. A soldier pops out of a tank and aims his machine gun at Iraqi civilians. Lastly, *Photo-op: Bringing the War Home; House Beautiful* (2004) shows a young woman attired in a tight pink dress holding a cell phone with the laughing face of an admiring young man in its small screen. The woman’s image is duplicated and recedes. The scene is a contemporary home interior where a deceased child and woman lie on Eames chairs. Fire, tanks and silhouettes of soldiers are seen in the distance through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

These collages follow suit in a long history that not only includes Rosler’s Vietnam War series of forty years earlier but classic *détournement* tactics of Guy Debord and, before him, artists like Richard Hamilton and Dada artists John Heartfield and Hannah Hoch. Their work comes from other politically tumultuous periods when the conflation of images from disparate sources possessed a critical capacity. Today those tactics for the purpose of political critique are largely ineffective. They rest within what Rancière refers to earlier as “historical necessity,” lacking a new “configuration of possibilities.”

History is part of a distribution of the sensible. It is a component of the given that defines what is apprehended by perception. What is the new aesthetic dimension of the political in Rosler’s recent montages? Nothing. This is not to say Rosler’s practice is not critical. It certainly is and potently so in many other facets and works. The point here is to show how this form of collage does not carry a *de facto* critique for producing the same political consciousness it did in the 1920s, ’50s and ’70s, 

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simply because it possesses heterogeneous images of another war juxtaposed with those of another era of American consumption.

Rancière would describe this instance as working within historical delimitations already prescribed and allowing those prescriptions to affect the production of critical work. What has changed? The contemporary spectator’s response is not the same because the knowledge and awareness of this form of critical technique is widespread. Global capital delivers to us a constant stream of images from diverse sources. Communication technologies have leveled our political experiences into one realm—one consumable world—resulting from the ease of production and circulation. The Internet, Facebook alone, delivers surprising and incongruent juxtapositions ranging from pictures of cats and babies to police riots at Occupy Oakland and pepper spraying of UC Davis students, all in a single scroll. We are numb to what Rosler is putting forward as politically engaged art. There is no rupture, no uncertainty that opens a space of possibilities, because our awareness of the complicity of the photographic image and the deeply integrated nature of its role as a marketable commodity are already known. Rosler’s recent collages demonstrate that a distribution of the sensible, which takes various forms of capital, is amorphous, continually in flux and changing in response to the accumulated experiences of the spectator, the power of the media, dilution of the image and changing nature of what constitutes the police.

Rancière summarizes,

The struggle against the “society of the spectacle” and the practice of détournement still feature on all agendas and are supposed to be conducted in standard forms such as parodies of promotional films; reprocessed disco sounds; advertising icons or media stars modeled in wax; Disney animals
turned into polymorphous perverts; montages of “vernacular” photographs showing us standardized petty-bourgeois living rooms, overloaded supermarket trolleys, standardized entertainment or the reuse of consumerist civilization, and so on and so forth. These devices continue to occupy many of our galleries and museums with a rhetoric assuming that they help us discover the power of the commodity, the reign of the spectacle or the pornography of power. Given that nobody is unaware of these things, the mechanism ends up revolving around itself and capitalizing on that undecidability.\textsuperscript{11}

The recent “collage” work of another artist, Josephine Meckseper, is important to consider within this context. Meckseper’s career as a photojournalist for the German media launched her artistic practice, which employs photography and installation intended to reflect critically on war and capitalism. Her installations incorporate objects, images and texts culled from an array of consumer and media sources, juxtaposed in presentation tactics reminiscent of glossy shop-floor showcases and lighted window displays. Objects range from mannequins, perfume bottles and toilet brushes to pictures of Karl Marx, fancy bottles of gin, designer automobile insignias, underwear boxes and political slogans stamped onto posters and clothing. These disparate collections are arranged on mirrored and shiny black plinths or inside glass vitrines in the same manner as fashion retail outlets.

The installation \textit{Marx} (2011) features a slatted mirrored wall akin to those installed inside H&M, Forever21 and Levi’s stores to display handbags, belts, scarfs and other fashion apparel. In this case, however, Meckseper places two small canvases, one in the upper-left and another in the lower-right corners. The lower canvas includes a rudimentary painting of a garbage can on which hangs a chrome automotive-style

\textsuperscript{11} Rancière, \textit{The Emancipated Spectator}, 76.
insignia, “Marx.” Adjacent to it are four crushed aluminum soda cans—Coca-Cola and Pepsi—aligned neatly atop one another to form a red-white-and-blue vertical column. On the other canvas a distorted photorealist painting of a prewar building is the backdrop for a tacked up U.S. flag and another crushed Diet Coca-Cola can. In the other corners, a black-stockinged-clad mannequin leg is juxtaposed with a newspaper rolled into a cone. It evokes the shape of the hooded costume of the Ku Klux Klan and the internationally famous image of the hooded prisoner of the Abu Ghraib debacle in 2004. On the lower-left a glass water bong has a Pepsi can fitted tightly inside the tube. A small, tattered U.S. flag projects out of it.

An earlier work America 1492 Iraq 2003 (2006) uses similar retail display tactics. It is an enclosed glass case with spotlights recessed in the ceiling and mirrors on the back and flanking sides. The buttocks section of a female mannequin is front and center, wrapped in white lace panties and situated on a chrome plinth. On the right is a black-and-white photograph of a protest picturing a black man carrying a sign. It reads “America 1492 Iraq 2003.” On its left is a small porcelain statuette of a KKK figure, dressed in the organization’s signature white garment emblazoned with the insignia of a white cross in a red circle indicating a knight of the Brotherhood of Klans. Small placards are placed to the left of the mannequin. One reads “Please Excuse Our Appearance”; another is written in Arabic. Also populating the case are another female mannequin leg covered with sheer white hosiery and a package of women’s lingerie with the brand name “Intimidea.” The name has a dual meaning. On one hand it refers to the intimate quality of the apparel. On the other, it is a word that conjures more readily in English: Intimidate.
These installations by Meckseper have an aesthetics of both protest and mass consumerism, but they fail to possess an effective politics of aesthetics that produces a rupture in the spectator’s expectations. They are, in fact, too close to the real thing. Spectators are familiar with glossy displays and disparate arrangements of objects in a single commercial setting. One need only wander the streets of New York City during the weeks of Occupy Wall Street in fall 2011 to see how savvy retailers constructed window displays that simultaneously communicated their support of the Occupy Movement and desire to sell it. Fishs Eddy—the purveyor of dinnerware and glassware on Broadway—presented cups, saucers and plates inside stacked wood crates with signs that read: “Gifts for the 99%,” “The People Are Too Big To Fail!,” and “Occupy Everything. While Fishs Eddy seemed quick to draw revenue on the movement, McNally Jackson.” Books on Prince Street made an “Occupy” window display and conveyed support for it. Faux protest banners with quotes from social-movement icons like Jacob Riis and Alexander Herzen were placed next to placards with statistics of U.S. taxpayers and average incomes of New Yorkers. These elements were situated amongst books with such titles as *The Violence of Financial Capitalism, Germinal, Rich People Things, This Time is Different* and *Chavs: The Democratization of the Working Class.*

Shops like Fishs Eddy and McNally Jackson are just cursory examples of the commodification of counterculture and protest aesthetics that eclipses the intended critical positions of Meckseper and Rosler I describe earlier. Media and corporations are enthralled by the spectacle of protest, and their widespread influence and distribution
reach well beyond the window displays of New York shoppers or Meckseper’s installations, which are viewed by an insular coterie of art-world insiders.

A final example here that demonstrates the cooptation of a political aesthetics is the Levi’s video commercial “Now Is Our Time.” It is the latest installment in the corporation’s global campaign “Go Forth.”\textsuperscript{12} Levi’s launched the video in June 2011, and at this writing it has been viewed on Levi’s YouTube channel by almost 3,500,000 people. This extraordinary number does not include views on numerous other sites where it is uploaded or the televised outlets in North America, Europe and Asia-Pacific where it is aired. “Now Is Our Time” is a one-minute video that opens with a series of shots of a young woman, arms raised high, wearing a black-feathered cape and standing above an urban setting. The sun is rising in the distance. Her winged arms reaching up are reminiscent of a modern-day Nike of Samothrace, an icon long referenced by artists for its metaphorical associations of struggle and perseverance. Subsequent shots include close-ups of denim-clad legs and feet stomping across cobblestone streets in an unidentified European city as well as crowds of people walking slowly but uniformly down a narrow boulevard. In another shot the crimson-colored smoke of tear gas floats gracefully across a street. And, finally, a young man dressed completely in dark denim marches confidently forward to face a barricade of riot police. These shots are rapidly intercut with scenes of young people dancing, swimming, making out, running around campfires and bouncing repeatedly against walls. The frenetic energy is both titillating

\textsuperscript{12} The campaign was not just limited to video. Levi’s store had corresponding in-store and window displays with the words “Now” “Is” “Our” “Time” scrolled on separate black placards and placed behind mannequins wearing Levi’s apparel.
and evocative of an unstoppable youth culture on the verge of achieving something. So
Levi’s wants us to believe—and feel. Against the backdrop of these scenes we hear the
voice of a male narrator calmly reciting the poem “The Laughing Heart” by Charles
Bukowski, published in 1996. It goes like this:

Your life is your life
don’t let it be clubbed into dank submission.
Be on the watch.
There are ways out.
There is a light somewhere.
It may not be much light but
it beats the darkness.
Be on the watch.
The gods will offer you chances.
Know them.
Take them.
You can’t beat death but
you can beat death in life, sometimes.
And the more often you learn to do it,
the more light there will be.
Your life is your life.
Know it while you have it.
You are marvelous
the gods wait to delight
in you.

The composite collage that makes up “Now Is Our Time” includes these words,
the images of protests and youth culture and part of the musical score “Anjos,” which
means “angels” in Portuguese. The song was written by the American recording artist
Julianna Barwick and released in 2009. The slow sounds of piano and wind instruments
are ethereal and light. They intensify as the video progresses. Barwick’s music acts as an
undercurrent that combines with the images to sweep the one-minute video into an
intensely energetic crescendo that reminds spectators “the gods wait to delight in you,”
final words that bookend the vision of the Greek goddess Nike—“Winged
Victory”—shown in the opening sequences. “Go Forth” was produced by the Portland, Oregon-based advertising agency Wieden+Kennedy; their website describes the campaign:

“Go Forth,” a rally cry to create positive change in the world, taps into modern consumer sentiment that these are not easy times, but they are our times—“Now Is Our Time.” This global campaign spans 24 countries across the Americas, Europe and Asia-Pacific regions.13

While Josephine Meckseper’s work emits political commentary, it does not have a politics of aesthetics, the kind that Rancière ascribes with capacities for disrupting our expectations. It does not create a third space of uncertainty for the spectator, precisely because of our familiarity with works like the Levi’s commercial and the window displays in New York. Our lifestyles are the result of capital aestheticizing politics. As Julia Bryan-Wilson remarks, “Occasionally Meckseper’s targets can appear too broad: protest culture is full of contradictions, but asserting that politics are subject to the market is not an especially far-reaching insight. Some of her conjunctions—photographs of flag-draped coffins next to Hugo Boss boxes—lean on thin irony and mild shock.”14

Our knowledge and experience of the vast intersections of commodity, media and politics are too sophisticated to easily generate a new aesthetic order of the political through the simplistic means deployed by Meckseper or Rosler. Their efforts could be mistaken as capital’s conflations of mass consumerism and antiwar protest. This is made boldly apparent when corporations like Levi’s take up the mission “to create positive change in the world” on their own terms and with “consumer sentiment” in mind. Yet the

complexity with which the image is commodified and circulated, and the erudition of the contemporary viewer, have changed. Rancière confirms this point: “Meckseper’s ‘collage’ […] is predicated on homogeneity: the world of consumption is no more alien to the world of the struggle. The anti-war protest brings war home, in its way, but it brings it in a space where it is at home in a space of struggle that is itself a territory of consumption.”¹⁵ Theorist and critic Boris Groys astutely clarifies that the pervasiveness of images in our contemporary world is the reason for the lack of necessity for the artist to deploy more vernacular representations as part of a critical practice. He summarizes for us:

> Every important political figure and event is immediately registered, represented, described, depicted, narrated, and interpreted by the media. The machine of media coverage does not need any individual artistic intervention or artistic decision in order to be put into motion. Indeed, contemporary mass media has emerged as by far the largest and most powerful machine for producing images—vastly more extensive and effective than the contemporary art system. We are constantly fed images of war, terror, and catastrophe of all kinds at a level of production and distribution with which the artist’s artisanal skills cannot compete.¹⁶

How, then, does critical art compete?

**Thomas Hirschhorn: A Guilty Pleasure**

Thomas Hirschhorn’s exhibitions are architectural environments that occupy entire gallery spaces or evacuate them altogether to draw spectators to built works situated on urban fringes. He refuses to classify his work in a specific medium. He often uses the word “display.” In 2001 he told curator Francesco Bonami:

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¹⁵ Ibid.
I can’t and I won’t inscribe my work somewhere specific, and I don’t care where my work is inscribed in the history of sculpture. [...] I want to make non-hierarchical work and I want to work without the will to intimidate. The sculptures that people make to be held up in political marches, in union demonstrations, in gay-parades or carnival floats, have an explosive energy. They are made with engagement, careless of aesthetics.\textsuperscript{17}

Because of his refusal to assign the work to a single medium (including “installation”), I believe his work—inside and outside the institution—is best described as exhibition. In written statements Hirschhorn commonly uses the word “exhibition” to describe his art, references to which I cite in the following.

Within the past ten years or more his art has developed into a brand of large makeshift, temporary exhibitions made of inexpensive and disposable materials, such as cardboard, plastic wrap, photocopies, packing tape, plywood, linoleum, aluminum foil, mannequins and thrift-store furniture. Using these common materials, he likes to work in rudimentary techniques like papier-mâché, graffiti, scratching, taping and Xeroxing. He purposely directs attention away from the value of the work in terms of quality to discourage “exclusion,” alternatively focusing on the “energy” in it.\textsuperscript{18} There is an urgency and anxiety in the appearance of his exhibitions, which look as if they are hastily tossed together. This signature process has been applied to works with paradoxically quasi-serious academic titles, such as \textit{Bataille Monument}, \textit{24h Foucault}, \textit{Deleuze Monument},

\textsuperscript{17} Francesco Bonami, “Thomas Hirschhorn: energy yes, quality no,” \textit{Flash Art}, vol. 34, no. 216 (Jan./Feb. 2001): 90.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid. Hirschhorn believes that the appearance of quality is how art separates itself from the spectator, immediately situated as that thing finely crafted and therefore art. He says it speaks to the way high art wants to “separate us, divide us.” See Benjamin Buchloh, “An Interview with Thomas Hirschhorn,” \textit{October}, vol. 113 (Summer 2005): 89.
Robert Walser-kiosk and The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival, dedicated to these refined thinkers.

Hirschhorn’s work shares an affinity with the legacy of philosophical and critical writing by these figures and others who show a commitment to social good and public welfare. His works are realized at major institutions, biennials and galleries, including Documenta in Kassel, Palais de Tokyo in Paris, Venice Biennale, São Paulo Biennial, Gladstone Gallery in New York and Open Source in Amsterdam. Some of the works at these locations have been situated outside the confines of the art institution and art-world center. Bataille Monument, for example, was made for Documenta 11 in 2002 and sited in a peripheral Turkish quarter of Kassel. Comparable to how Robert Smithson redirected attention away from the institution with his Non-Sites and the remotely located Spiral Jetty, Hirschhorn continues to test the willingness of the international art world to traverse unchartered urban fringes and put time and effort into experiencing his works. This process has a dialectical critique comparable to the one Smithson makes between public space and the rarified space of the institution. Once visitors arrive at these peripheral outposts, art-world insiders are transposed into quasi-outsiders because of the local community that forms in these works. Hirschhorn makes this kind of provocation because he knows spectators will follow. He is not unaware of his extraordinary position as a superstar artist, working with high-profile institutions and galleries with substantial exhibition budgets. He uses that position to explore, expand and exploit what is possible within the context of the industry of contemporary art. Indeed, his critique is generally
launched against that industry’s fixed assumptions of what art is, where its potential lies, who can make it, who it is for and what can be done within its realm.  

Hirschhorn’s immersive gallery environments and socially engaged public platforms employ expanded forms of ad hoc collage techniques that implicate the spectator in the production and criticality of the work. He culls representations—texts, images and objects—from the vast reservoirs of those produced and circulated by the media, advertising and consumer society. He does not point, however, to what is wrong, politically and socially. Instead, he stirs the spectator—and their senses—from a complacent position of looking to a new position of feeling, a position in which they are absorbed through a complicity in the meaning of the work. Unlike two-dimensional framed collages or three-dimensional commercial displays, Hirschhorn’s works are spatial, temporal and sensorial experiences that utilize the exhibition to stimulate a rupture latent with political potential, indeed, the very potential Rancière assigns to the third productive space of uncertainty in his theory of the aesthetic distribution of the sensible.

In this artistic activity Hirschhorn does not attempt to obscure his role as the artist. He does not attempt to merge his work with reality or make it function. He understands that its position as art promises the possibility for political potential, as Rancière contends: “The politics of aesthetics […] encloses the political promise of

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19 In a 2004 conversation with Alison Gingeras, Hirschhorn talks about his position in the art market: “I realized that, as an artist, I’d have to show my work in museum and galleries. But I also tried to show it in public spaces or in alternative galleries or in squats, in apartments, in the street. I wanted to be responsible for every side of my work. That’s what I call ‘working politically,’ as opposed to ‘making political work.’ I wanted to work at the height of capital and the height of the economic system I’m in. I wanted to confront the height of the art market with my work. I work with it but not for it.” See Alison M. Gingeras, Thomas Hirschhorn (London: Phaidon, 2004), 21.
aesthetic experience in art’s very separation, in the resistance of its form to every
transformation into a form of life. [...] To repeat, there is no art without a specific form
of visibility and discursivity which identifies it as such.”\textsuperscript{20} The insistence on keeping the
work within the realm of art is where Hirschhorn’s work differs from that which has been
categorized as social practice or other artists like Jorge Pardo whose interiors sometime
operate as design. Unlike this art that seeks to unite art and everyday life by assigning
particular use values and functions to it or collaboratively producing it so that authorial
status is blurred, Hirschhorn is emphatically insistent on defining the work as art.

Apolonija Šušteršič’s lobby project at the Kunstverein in Munich, which was
analyzed in Chapter 2, intentionally obscured detection of its author. She redesigned the
foyer of the museum to make it a more comfortable space for meeting and reading.
Šušteršič believed the original space did not represent the inviting ethos of the museum
and wanted to portray it in a friendlier, more convivial manner. The identity of the artist
and the fact that the foyer was an artwork went unnoticed. While the spectator of the
work is very much a part of it, the aesthetic engagement with it, even though it occurs
inside a museum, becomes difficult to assess because the work cannot be recognized as
art. It therefore does not possess a capacity for the politics of aesthetics or the ability to
rupture the distribution of the sensible, as Rancière defines it.\textsuperscript{21}


\textsuperscript{21} Other examples include \textit{Juice Bar} by the Ljubljana-based artist Apolonija Šušteršič, which was made for
Manifesta 2 in 1998. It removed the role of the artist and the designation of the work as art. An example of
working collectively is the 2000 exhibition \textit{What If: Art on the Verge of Architecture and Design} curated by
Maria Lind and “filtered” by Liam Gillick at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm that I describe in Chapter
2. Lastly, the lobby renovation of Dia Art Foundation’s building in New York City included Jorge Pardo’s
\textit{Project} (2000). Taking the form of colorfully tiled floor and columns, spectators were unable to distinguish
its role as art from the center’s interior design.
**Presence and Production: The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival**

Thomas Hirschhorn’s *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival* occurred from May 2 to June 28, 2009, in a borough called the Bijlmermeer (meaning Bijlmer Lake) in the southeastern suburbs of Amsterdam. The Bijlmer complex was conceived and built on the utopian principles of Le Corbusier’s Radiant City. But unlike this modernist vision of the city of the future that used efficient spatial configurations and provided necessary amenities, such as shops, cafes, gymnasiaums and schools, the developers of the Bijlmer omitted everything but parks, highways, garages and flats. With the first unit completed in 1968, the Bijlmer eventually comprised 31 high-rise housing blocks organized in hexagonal plans with about 400 flats per block. Separated by wide expanses of green space, a system of footbridges connected the building blocks with a series of interior streets. Traffic flow was organized on a dual-level plan to accommodate the increased demand for automobile ownership. Motorized vehicles moved on a roadway elevated above the ground in order to separate them from pedestrian and bicycle traffic. By the time the buildings were finished in the early 1970s, however, the tastes and values of the Dutch middle-class had shifted and the Bijlmer was considered too big, too homogenous, too isolated and too expensive. The value of the apartments quickly dropped. With rents cheap, the Bijlmer attracted a large number of low-income residents. Following the independence of Suriname in 1975, the Dutch government encouraged Surinamese to move to the Bijlmer. While the socioeconomic conditions of the borough are changing, with people of increasingly diverse age, class and nationalities calling it home, the
Bijlmer is still known as the first ghetto in Amsterdam. All of these social, economic, urban and architectural conditions make up the multifaceted portrait of the Bijlmer today.

_The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival_ by Hirschhorn took place in this setting. It was part of the first edition of Open Source Amsterdam that today is called The Bijlmer Art International. In 2009 Open Source used the Bijlmer as “the main source of inspiration” and also included commissioned works by Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, Pascale Marthine Tayou, Jennifer Tee and Michael Beutler. Hirschhorn’s exhibition comprised a pavilion situated next to a running track, lake and elevated railway with the tower blocks hovering overhead. The pavilion included a raised wood podium on top of which rested a gigantic sculpture replica of Benedict de Spinoza’s book _Ethics_ (1677). The pavilion was the site of a program of daily lectures, performances and workshops throughout the course of the two-month exhibition. The complex included a library of books by and about Spinoza. It had an exhibition space with archival photos and

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22 It is also famous for the site of a tragic plane crash in 1992 that destroyed two high-rise blocks, killing forty-three people.
24 Hirschhorn and critics use the word “pavilion” to refer to this structure in _The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival_. The use of the word connotes a satellite space, an auxiliary to a main building. It is a space associated with pleasure and freedom from the rules of everyday life. The word has been used elsewhere to describe other works by Hirschhorn situated on the periphery like _Bataille Monument_ (2002) as part Documenta 11, which was located in a working-class Turkish neighborhood away from the Museum Fridericianum in Kassel. The term has come into parlance for describing these kinds of satellite works by Hirschhorn, perhaps intentionally, in order to co-opt its association with the Venice Biennale and its nationalistic pavilions in the Giardini, often challenged for their deep-seated political history.
25 My discussion of the timeline and the engagement with the Bijlmer residents before Hirschhorn began constructing his project is indebted to the interviews Claire Bishop conducted with six participants. The solicitation and durational involvement of these spectators, who became actively charged agents in the production of the work, is one of the underlying bases for my analyzing the work as possessing a politics of aesthetics. Bishop’s groundwork is valuable because of its insight into Hirschhorn’s working process. While the interviews are limited to only six individuals and do not provide a comprehensive portrayal of the work, Bishop’s work reflects one of the first significant attempts by a serious critic to gather responses in order to begin to analyze the aesthetics of participatory art. See Claire Bishop, “‘And That Is What Happened There’: Six Participants of _The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival_,” in _Thomas Hirschhorn: Establishing a Critical Corpus_ (Zurich: jrp Ringier, 2011), 14–45.
documentation about the history of the Bijlmer and a newspaper production office in
which the “Daily Newspaper” was printed. An “Internet Corner” and “Spinoza Bar” were
the sites of lively activity. The “Spinoza Car” was placed nearby. A worksite for a
visiting art historian was also part of the complex. The pavilion was accessible twenty-
four hours a day. Comparable to Michael Asher’s investment in the concept of a
continually accessible museum space to critique the dividing effect of the art institution,
Hirschhorn, too, purposefully leaves his large-scale works made in public accessible so as
to allow the art’s continuous integration into the surrounding community. It does not
represent his intent to remove the work’s position as art. He does it in order to minimize
the usual boundary drawn between an art space and a public space, which inherently
makes that space more rarified than its exterior.26

The pavilion of The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival was made with Hirschhorn’s
signature construction process and materials, primarily plywood, plastic and tape,
resembling something of an organically formed, accumulative squatter domain rather
than anything organized or designed. Many of its spaces were simultaneously inside and
outside, with open structures covered with clear plastic sheeting. Spaces needing more
protection from the elements were shielded with colorful tarps. Hirschhorn’s ubiquitous
use of brown packing tape was a predominant feature. It was used for many purposes: to
hang posters, cover chairs, secure Plexiglas vitrines and frame pictures. As is typical with

26 Hirschhorn discusses this intention in relation to Bataille Monument, made for Documenta 11 in Kassel
in 2002. He responds to Benjamin Buchloh’s questions about that work’s open access and its susceptibility
to vandalism and theft. Hirschhorn says, “What interests me, after all, is precisely not to distinguish
between public space and the museum or some other private space. What interests me is that it is always
the same potential public, only the proportion is different.” See Buchloh, “An Interview with Thomas
Hirschhorn,” 98.
Hirschhorn’s environments, the tape seemed amoebic and metastasizing, finding its way on, around and over almost every surface. The overabundance of these cheap artificial materials not only conjures the sense of urgency I describe earlier but also speaks to the wastefulness of a throwaway society whose commodities are increasingly impermanent while longevity remains desirable.

A plywood stage was located at the front of the pavilion. Like clockwork, the stage hosted a schedule of performances, workshops and lectures. The workshop “Child’s Play” occurred at 4:30 p.m. Local children learned to re-stage classic performance art pieces, which were performed on Saturdays for the public. The philosopher Marcus Steinweg gave lectures in a kind of stream-of-conscious philosophical blather at 5:30 p.m. By 7 p.m. the “Spinoza Theatre,” a play written by Steinweg, directed by Hirschhorn and performed by area residents, was under way. This schedule was rigidly adhered to every day. Claire Bishop recalls her experience of the “Spinoza Theatre.”

I should stress that the play was completely incomprehensible and lacked characters, plot and narrative. All the performers read from a handheld script and spoke their lines faltering while using gym equipment (working on the treadmill, boxing a punch bag, weightlifting an oversized cardboard copy of the Ethics) or retreating to the tall box to announce the edict that banished Spinoza from Amsterdam in 1656. Throughout the performance an elderly gentleman in an electric mobility chair, his face laced with various tubes for breathing, wheeled backward and forward across the stage. These images were unforgettable: nonsensical, painful, hilarious and moving.27

In Hirschhorn’s large-scale exhibitions like The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival the politics of this art are derived from how the work is made not from what it is about. Part of this process includes Hirschhorn’s recognizable identity as the artist. That identity was

made clear and reinforced by his constant presence at the site of exhibition. He explains why this is important.

I believe that only with presence—my presence—and only with production—my production—can I provoke through my work, an impact on the field. “Presence and Production” is fieldwork, it means confronting reality with the real. “Presence and Production” is the form of a commitment toward myself but also directed toward the inhabitants. “Presence and Production” is the key to initiate a relationship based on equality—one to one—with the unexpected. “Presence and Production” allow me to come in contact with the Other if I give something from myself—first. I know what this means, I know what it demands and I know what I must do in order to achieve this. “Presence and Production” are forms of implication towards the neighborhood through the fact of my presence and my production. A project such as *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival* is only possible because of the three months of presence and production, not only my presence and my production, but also thanks to the presence and production of Marcus Steinweg, the philosopher with his daily lectures, the presence and production of Vittoria Martini, the art historian, with her daily implication as “Ambassador” and thanks to the presence and production of Alexandre Costanzo, the editor with his production of the Daily Newspaper.28

“Presence and Production” reflects Hirschhorn’s unwavering commitment to be present on-site where his exhibitions that involve the spectator in the public realm are produced. He takes authoritative command over the making and operation of these temporary, durational interventions. In the case of *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival* he was on-site every day throughout the course of its two-month run.

The Crystallization of a Micro-Society

The value Hirschhorn assigns to this quality of presence and production filtered into every part of the making of *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival*. He intentionally engaged

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in a lengthy and intimate process of initiating different levels of collaboration and spectatorship that actually began one year prior to the construction of the pavilion and the performances. In spring 2008 he visited the Bijlmer to give a series of public talks. One of these talks was located on the running track and included a group of local adults and teenagers. He showed videos, photographs and books from comparable projects he made in Paris and Kassel. Another talk was more intimate. It included about seven female residents from the Bijlmer tower blocks and was organized for Hirschhorn by the director of one of the housing corporations. Many of the residents attending these talks and meetings were interested in and excited about the prospect of becoming a part of something, helping to build and contribute to the festival.

This preliminary engagement between the community and Hirschhorn was crucial. It was the moment when the artwork began and the spectator became an implicated part of it. At this early stage he was able to make contact with many individuals who eventually became key parts of the work. But, even more importantly, he made connections with a small group of dedicated persons who were deeply involved in the working process. As one resident, Sammy Monsels, recalls after the first meeting, “Thomas can level with you on the lowest level, and he knows what’s going on there. And that’s very important for the kids. We could feel it, because right after he left I spoke with these kids, and everybody gave his opinion about Thomas, and everybody said, ‘Well, he is one of us, he can inspire us to do something.’” These individuals were not only assistants responsible for certain aspects of running the festival, they also took on

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roles of ambassadors for Hirschhorn. They spread news and information, dispersing his ideas and plans into the community in a manner akin to a marketing team.

People with responsibility for producing the work were paid. It is unusual for an artist to pay individuals who contribute to socially engaged projects, as Claire Bishop points out a number of times in her interviews with the residents. Hirschhorn’s payment was necessary in order to keep the work within the realm of his authorship and thus the realm of art. Unlike social practice art that generally disperses authorship among participants, payment for the work allowed Hirschhorn to retain definite responsibility for the direction of *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival*. These intentions make his art distinctly different from art with open invitations to participate, because Hirschhorn takes responsibility for the outcome of their actions.

In these strategies Hirschhorn set up a complex milieu of individuals, including the local residents as well as other collaborators, who all played different roles in the festival. While residents were moved from the position of simply viewers to invested spectators in the day-to-day operations and performances, Hirschhorn also invited outside collaborators to provide additional content for the schedule of activity. The philosopher Marcus Steinweg lived in one of the flats for the duration of the festival and each day performed his philosophical reading-rants. The art historian Vittoria Martini was in residence. She had her own research center and study inside the complex. The philosopher Antonio Negri visited and gave a series of public talks, and the poets Manual Joseph and Alexandre Costanzo gave a series of readings and produced the “Daily Newspaper,” respectively.
If this vast juxtaposition of individuals from different class, education and ethnic backgrounds, set amongst a makeshift squat-cum-theater-workshop-bar structure near a running track under an elevated railway in an outer borough of Amsterdam, sounds complicated, from all accounts it was. Bishop recalls

[…] its unimaginable eccentricity, its crazed and relentless production of activity, and the combination of nonsensical, absurdist language with philosophical abstraction and everyday activities. Through the newspapers, the lectures, the workshops, the bar, and the nightly play on exercise equipment, the pavilion became a machine, relentlessly producing in all directions for two months.30

Returning to my earlier discussion of the collage technique, Hirschhorn utilized it in *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival* by inviting spectators directly into this cacophony. They became active agents staged within a dense matrix of juxtaposed images, objects, knowledge and performances. Local residents were not asked to be involved in order for Hirschhorn to help them with a social or economic problem. To the contrary, he set up productive scenarios of confusion and uncertainty within this charged atmosphere. The energy is intentional. Hirschhorn says he does not “know what artwork with quality means, but I can seize energy in it. Energy yes, quality no, means to make an active work, which can bring a new and non-exclusive audience to art through multiple access.”31

Rather than point to the value of difference and heterogeneity in a community, for example, he made everyone from everywhere perform it, every single day for two months. The political in the work is not its theoretical underpinning to Spinoza, or the combining of highbrow ideas of the philosopher with a low-grade architectural setting.

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30 Bishop, “‘And That Is What Happened There’: Six Participants of *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival*,” 51.
31 Bonami, “Thomas Hirschhorn: energy yes, quality no,” 93.
Very few individuals had heard of Spinoza and, if so, one could not easily interpret a philosophy of the multitude within the context of the nonsensical, machine-like activity that formed.\(^{32}\)

While the concept of the multitude originates with Spinoza, theorist Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have within the past decade vigorously enlivened and reinterpreted it within the context of the global circulation of capital, information and labor. They describe the multitude as a social body or even a mass that is constantly producing because that is what global capital demands of it.\(^{33}\) It is not associated with a particular nation or class. With this in mind, rather than describe a contemporary philosophy of the multitude, Hirschhorn enacted the process. At the pavilion the content of the lectures did not matter; the comprehension of the play did not matter; the fact that there might be nothing new to print every day in the newspaper did not matter. What mattered was the formation of this new community and its continual work within a regime of relegated tasks and duties laid out by the artist. Thomas Hirschhorn was the person—the artist—who demanded that those duties be carried out according to schedule,

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\(^{32}\) My assessments are based on comments made by interviewees in the discussions Claire Bishop conducted with the residents. See Bishop, “‘And That Is What Happened There’: Six Participants of The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival,” 14–45.

\(^{33}\) Benedict de Spinoza’s concept of the multitude has been influential for contemporary theorists such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. They use it to theorize a new form of resistance against global capitalism in their publications *Empire* (2000), *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004) and *Commonwealth* (2009). Hardt and Negri view the multitude as an active social agent, which is not constituted by class but conceptualized as a force that is always productive and always in motion. This force represents how all of society is put to constant work, often immaterial and knowledge-producing, to create profit. But it is also a force latent with a form of resistance by decentralizing power. The concept of the multitude denounces class or nation as a way to categorize this production. The value of the contemporary working mass is that it is one world-making machine, the shape of which could alternatively be determined by the multitude, not global capital.
rain or shine and even if the audience did not show. Hirschhorn set in motion a microcosmic version of the multitude in his exhibition in the Bijlmer.

The collage technique Hirschhorn utilizes extends beyond that of Rosler and Meckseper, and in fact, rather than the discontinuity cited in their work, he emphasizes continuity in a singular community working together even though its boundaries and delineations are apparent. This community reflects characteristics of the multitude, one world-making machine no longer easily delineated by class, race or nation but determined by capital. The contradictions, limitations and restrictions of this community are what Rancière calls the “police.” The police, as I analyze earlier, is that which teaches us to understand and interpret given contexts and eventually become accustomed to them. It has an appearance that we quickly associate with war, racism, poverty, inequality and sexism. Hirschhorn’s awareness of this world, this police that divides and partitions, is the outstanding factor that separates the critical efficacy of his art from others. Not unlike the relationship Group Material forged with the Latino community in the East Village in the early 1980s, he reduced the effects associated with art, race and class by acknowledging they exist but not allowing the behaviors—limits—already assigned to them to take control of what can be done.

In the Bijlmer district, he created what Rancière referred to earlier as a “topography of the configuration of possibilities.”34 This topography emerged partially out of Hirschhorn’s identification as the artist, the importance of which is emphasized by his word “Other” when describing his presence in the Bijlmer. This word is not

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insignificant for Hirschhorn within this combination of social factors. In order for the possibilities of a new community to surface, it was critical that Hirschhorn retain his position as an outsider, his temporal place within these social circumstances and the Bijlmer’s long and convoluted history of urbanism, alienation and immigration. He is not a resident of Holland; he is not a black immigrant from Suriname. The open acknowledgment of difference allows his place as the artist to be a more fruitful source of production—both antagonistic and congenial.

Hirschhorn formed this configuration by creating a non-hierarchical space of uncertainty in the determination of the functions of the pavilion. The idea of the pavilion and its nonsensical but continual operation became a new space unconditioned by preconceived notions of engagements between class and race, between what art is and what it should do. Hal Foster observes, “Like all acts of generosity, [Hirschhorn’s] projects are charged with ambivalence, mixing as they do ‘the neighbor’ and ‘the stranger,’ yet this mixing is undertaken precisely so that a different sort of micro-society might crystallize, if only momentarily.”35 The formation of a micro-society is where a new aesthetics of the political rests in this work. Boundaries were acknowledged then dissolved, and the unsteady position of the work became something full of possibilities, open to interpretation, reconfiguration and therefore loaded with potential for the spectators to interpret as they felt, not as they were instructed. Another Bijlmer resident, Jan van Adrichem, describes Hirschhorn’s work.

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His project brought together all sorts of people. All of a sudden, people that you knew from the museum or gallery circuit would be in the Bijlmer, but also people I sometimes registered when I was shopping in my neighborhood. Some of these last I now met so often there that it led to contacts and talks I had never had before. It was a completely different mix of society I was chatting with, like people who managed the bar, or the kids on the computers.\(^{36}\)

Sammy Monsels, the Bijlmer resident I refer to earlier, agrees: “All the people who were coming during the festival became friends with each other. Not only the people who were working at the festival, but visitors, people from the flats, the buildings on the left and right side, were going there. It was tremendous.”\(^{37}\) Hirschhorn and his outside collaborators maintained the uneasy balance that defined the work as art while simultaneously allowing it to be porous in other factors of operation. As Rancière claims, this is what brings on the potential for a new aesthetics of the political, a new social order of community and a redistribution of the sensible.

Aesthetic experience has a political effect to the extent that the loss of destination it presupposes disrupts the way in which bodies fit their functions and destinations. What it produces is not rhetorical persuasion about what must be done. Nor is it the framing of a collective body. It is a multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world they live in and the way in which they are “equipped” to adapt to it. It is a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible. As such, it allows for new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation. However, this political effect occurs under the condition of an original disjunction, an original effect, which is the suspension of any direct relationship between cause and effect.\(^{38}\)

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\(^{36}\) Bishop, “‘And That Is What Happened There’: Six Participants of The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival,” 34.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^{38}\) Rancière, The Emancipated Spectator, 72–73.
The suspension between cause and effect is important within the context of analyzing *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival*. Hirschhorn kept the work from becoming a means for generating a prescribed effect. He did not go into the Bijlmer community with an aim to improve social conditions. The gargantuan undertaking of the pavilion and the rigorous routine of performances became more a call for help, as Hirschhorn explains:

“I’m the one—the artist—to have a project and to need help in order to carry it out! I cannot do it alone, I cannot do it without your help!”

He did not try to integrate himself within the community in order to create social change. This is important, because it is this kind of intent where much of social practice art that professes to be politically engaged lacks an aesthetic dimension that is critical and sometimes fails in its rigid insistence on context specificity and over-determination. As Hirschhorn says,

*The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival* could have taken place in a different neighborhood than the “Bijlmer.” This work could have been built in another city, another country or another continent. Because Art can provoke a Dialogue or a Confrontation—from one to one—Art can do this everywhere, in the Bijlmer, but anywhere else as well. And because my work is mentally transplantable, it aims to experience its universality.

**One Immersive World**

Unlike *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival*, which took place outside in a suburban area of Amsterdam, Thomas Hirschhorn’s exhibition *UTOPIA, UTOPIA = ONE WORLD, ONE WAR, ONE ARMY, ONE DRESS* occurred inside galleries at two different locations. *UTOPIA, UTOPIA* was first shown at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston from September 21, 2005, to January 16, 2006, and then at the Wattis Institute for

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39 Birrell, “The Headless Artist: An Interview with Thomas Hirschhorn on the Friendship Between Art and Philosophy, Precarious Theatre and *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival*.”
40 Ibid.
Contemporary Arts in San Francisco from March 15 to May 13, 2006. At the Wattis Institute, which is the venue I examine here, Hirschhorn used both floors of the institution’s 5,000-square-feet of gallery space.\[^{41}\] **UTOPIA, UTOPIA** was the artist’s response to the pervasiveness and proliferation of camouflage in fashion and design. But comparable to *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival*, which was not an exhibition about Spinoza per se, **UTOPIA, UTOPIA** was not an exhibition about camouflage. Hirschhorn employed an enveloping, puzzling design with his signature collage tactics to make a series of spatial and visual experiences that viscerally assaulted spectators with an unsettling awareness of the extraordinary omnipresence of camouflage—a costume of war—in everyday life. Hirschhorn views this work as an exhibition. In the publication for **UTOPIA, UTOPIA**, he writes,

\[
\text{UTOPIA, UTOPIA = ONE WORLD, ONE WAR, ONE ARMY, ONE DRESS}
\]

is an exhibition. Making an exhibition means to exhibit something, to exhibit a project, an idea, a problem, a plan, a will. Making an exhibition means to work in necessity, emergency and complexity. I like making exhibitions. I understand art as an assertion of forms. As an artist I have to make theory confront practice and transform a two-dimensional thought into the third dimension. I want to translate my brain map into a three-dimensional form without thinking about volume. I want to give space for time. Time for dialogue, confrontation and involvement.\[^{42}\]

The exhibition design included large crimson and evergreen amoebic shapes painted on cardboard and linoleum, which covered every inch of the gallery walls and floors. These amoebic shapes were also used in three-dimensional forms to make mobiles.

\[^{41}\] My analysis of **UTOPIA, UTOPIA** is focused on the version installed at the Wattis Institute. I was deputy director of the institution at that time. I worked with Hirschhorn, his crew and the Wattis staff to present the exhibition.

that hung from the ceilings. Numerous female and male mannequins representing various
ages were widely dispersed throughout both floors of the exhibition. Some of the
mannequins were clothed in the typical camouflage apparel—hoodies, dresses,
underwear, bras, parkas and pants—worn by the civilian population. Many of the
mannequins were nude except for odd tumor-like growths made of camouflage packing
tape, disconcertingly stuck onto the sides of faces, stomachs, legs and heads. These
growths took over their bodies in cancer-like, cellular forms. Clusters of mannequins
were placed on raised, circular platforms akin to those used at automobile or trade shows.
They formed little micro-communities, compact and sharing the same kind of camo
extrusions. Some of them were positioned alone, such as a child figure, nude expect for
the tape and camo-covered sneakers. This figure was found at the end of a long, narrow
corridor. Behind it, the text “The hyper-critical world” was taped haphazardly to the
wall.43

Hirschhorn designed a rambling, confusing labyrinth through which the spectator
had to navigate, negotiating a massive tangle of images and objects impeding
perspectives and movement. While some spaces took on the architectural lines of the
gallery, there were many cardboard walls dividing the galleries; the walls were
precariously constructed and reached to the ceiling. On one hand, the mannequins
supplied the visual grounding for why camouflage exists in the first place: to conceal the
body during times of conflict. They complemented the inexhaustible collection of

43 Several factors in the exhibition, including the mobiles, corridors and mannequins, are references to
twentieth-century art history. One thinks, respectively, of Alexander Calder, Bruce Nauman and the avenue
of mannequins in the infamous 1938 Surrealist Exhibition in Paris. These factors are not accidental, as
Hirschhorn intentionally situates the work’s place within a history of twentieth-century art.
photographs and video taken from fashion, home, design, architecture, music, film, television and news sources. Any and all imaginable text, image or object with a hint of camouflage was included.\textsuperscript{44} \textit{UTOPIA, UTOPIA} also prominently featured a large number of maps and globes grouped together on a wall of shelves or placed independently, all covered with the tumor-like growths of camouflage tape. An enormous fuselage made of cardboard and decorated with the crimson and evergreen shapes was crammed uncomfortably into the upper-floor gallery, leaving spectators bewildered (by the time they reached the second floor, exhausted) about how such an object could be situated inside there.\textsuperscript{45} This excessive accumulation of images and materials in the displays mimics, as Benjamin Buchloh observes about Hirschhorn’s work, “the actual governing principles of overproduction and the technologies of incessantly multiplying meaningless images.”\textsuperscript{46}

Fragments of the philosophical essay “WORLDPLAY,” commissioned from Marcus Steinweg, were photocopied, enlarged or reduced and mounted indiscriminately on any surface or object. These fragments spotted the exhibition like Twitter feeds—short, isolated and out of context: “The thinking of / origin. It points,” “politics of the dream / thus does not make itself” and “reduced to / order of / able to leave.” The essay in

\textsuperscript{44} In November 2005 the Boston fire marshal shut down \textit{UTOPIA, UTOPIA} when it was installed at the ICA, Boston, citing reasons of density and lack of clear paths. A few adjustments were made in consultation with Hirschhorn and the exhibition reopened, but not without an attendant from the fire department stationed full-time inside the exhibition throughout its duration at the ICA. The possibility of the San Francisco fire marshal closing the Wattis venue loomed large during the exhibition. At the Wattis, Hirschhorn insisted on installing cardboard wall covering and other objects all the way to the ceiling. Fire code requires a twelve-inch break between material and ceiling. The code was not observed but the exhibition was not cited.

\textsuperscript{45} The upper gallery of Wattis has a large exterior window/door that opens completely for installing such large objects. Hirschhorn covered that window with cardboard to fully enclose the space, contributing to the spectator’s confusion about how the fuselage arrived in the space, making the gallery claustrophobic.

\textsuperscript{46} Buchloh, “An Interview with Thomas Hirschhorn,” 93.
its entirety was included in the exhibition’s publication. This booklet also featured essays by Pamela M. Lee, Hirschhorn and the curators Ralph Rugoff and Nicholas Baume. Thousands of free copies were stacked and available in the exhibition.

Hirschhorn generated a feeling of hypnotic confusion in *UTOPIA, UTOPIA* through this overabundance. As he explains to curator Francesco Bonami, “Confusion interests me because it is energy that is not controllable. It is unguided energy. I want to create confusion. Confused, I have more possibilities to start thinking than when I am stabilized.”

Spectators were certainly destabilized. They wandered in, around and through these spaces. Their bodies amongst the forest of mannequins became absorbed and implicated in Hirschhorn’s chaotic collage. The strategy proved particularly effective when, for instance, a visitor was coincidentally wearing camouflage: a coat, pants, shirt, scarf, backpack or jacket. This coincidence was possible, quite likely, as Hirschhorn proved with the proliferation of camouflage apparel and design in the exhibition. He makes these immersive environments such that spectators are completely unable to step back from the work in order to take it in. As he says, “I want people to be inside my work, and I want spectators to be a part of this world surrounding them in this moment. Then they have to deal with it. That is why it looks the way it does.”

**Harnessing the Means of Exhibition**

Not unlike *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival, UTOPIA, UTOPIA* was an endurance performance for the spectator. Hirschhorn deployed the same level of energy and force he did in Amsterdam. In Boston and San Francisco, however, he concentrated that energy in

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47 Bonami, “Thomas Hirschhorn: energy yes, quality no,” 90.
48 Buchloh, “An Interview with Thomas Hirschhorn,” 95.
the onslaught of images and objects that confronted the spectator. If at first this approach might seem excessive, it is in fact a tactic that responds effectively in a media-saturated society where the excesses of advanced capitalism, overproduction, overdesign and overconsumption are deeply ingrained in the spectacle of everyday life. How to rouse the spectator from a complacent position within all of it? How to effectively jolt them with something that overshadows what mass media, advertising and the Internet do?

Hirschhorn’s work does not attempt to replicate reality or bring actual social forms into an institutional context. He seeks to go beyond it. He utilizes the context of art, comparable to Michael Asher’s built interventions, Robert Smithson’s *Non-Sites* and Group Material’s exhibitions, which began more than forty years ago, to frame a disruption of what the visitor to an art gallery or museum expects to see inside it. For his works that take place inside a gallery like *UTOPIA, UTOPIA*, he first and foremost utilizes the walls and physical architecture as a starting point. Secondly, through the extraordinary volume of objects and representations of camouflage, he puts into motion the experience of the exhibition space in order to generate a productive fatigue that causes spectators to feel uncomfortable physically (in the overwhelming amount of images and objects) and mentally (in a guilty awareness of the meaning of the work). In doing so, he performs a radically novel process to engender a community in this exhibition, one that reveals a singular shared world connected through the circulation and consumption of images and products. At one point or another, most of us have donned the design pattern that symbolizes and propagates one worldwide culture of violence, all
marching in unison and dress to one capitalist war machine. After experiencing *UTOPIA*, *UTOPIA*, the spectator cannot regard the camouflage design in the same way as before.

To move the spectator from a comfortable position, Hirschhorn uses the totality of the exhibition site. His layouts are planar without particular emphasis on scenes or a chronology to follow. He discourages an attempt to form a narrative when walking through the space.\(^{49}\) Lighting is an important factor in this process. He insisted on high-wattage lights like those used at construction sites in order to evenly coat the entire exhibition space of *UTOPIA, UTOPIA*. He explains why lighting is crucial.

I do ask for “a lot of light” so that my work is strongly lit, because there isn’t anything to hide. Everything is made to be shown clearly and in the same strong light. I hate soft light, museum spots that point out art work in the dark, erasing the surrounding space. I hate “atmosphere light” meant to create intimacy. I don’t think that obscurity in galleries, and darkness in museums impress anymore. I like the very bright light of Laundromats, nothing is to be hidden there, because a lot of light is necessary. In my work, there is no chronology, no time span, every thing has the same actuality, the same importance. Here and now, everything must be visible at any time, in the same space-moment, fragmented, no overlooking. I don’t want to give the possibility of an overview. I want to break codes and scales. I try to multiply the angles.\(^{50}\)

The frame of the institution is simultaneously the vehicle through which the work is disseminated as well as the symbolic boundary, which Hirschhorn dismantles in order to realize this work and reach into the spectator. As Rancière writes, and I would argue Hirschhorn knows quite well, “It is always a question of showing the spectator what she does not know how to see, and making her feel ashamed of what she does not want to see, even if it means that the critical system presents itself as a luxury commodity

\(^{49}\) Group Material applied similar tactics in their exhibition *Americana* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, equating, for instance, the “quality” of a Maytag washer and dryer with a work by Barbara Kruger.

\(^{50}\) Bonami, “Thomas Hirschhorn: energy yes, quality no,” 90.
pertaining to the very logic it denounces."\(^{51}\) The politics of aesthetics Hirschhorn forms in *UTOPIA, UTOPIA* is comparable to what Martha Rosler did with her collages of the late 1960s and early ’70s when she presented the spectator with incongruent images, making it impossible to immediately understand what they meant. The conflation of images was so far removed from the experience of reality that it moved spectators to a knowing awareness of their role in the complex relationship between American consumerism and the Vietnam War. Hirschhorn utilizes the collage technique, but his tactic is intensified, ramped up and pushed toward the outer fringes of experiential reality into fantastic and unbelievable formations. Hirschhorn’s interpretation of utopia is the universal dress of both civilian and soldier operating in synchronicity in one shared world. It is a perverse interpretation that is actually a dystopic nightmare should the community of sameness blindly governed by global capitalism continue.

The complexities of *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival* and *UTOPIA, UTOPIA* are often reasons why the experience of Hirschhorn’s art and working processes defy explanation and spectators use words like “crazy,” “ridiculous” and “exorbitant” to describe them. They simply do not have the vocabulary to say what it is. They have not learned how to categorize or identify it and therefore respond to it in ways that are already governed by our common social order. Hirschhorn openly exploits this uncertainty, and within it he implicates the spectator in an art that poses a new aesthetics of the political, one that expands our awareness of the conditions of the world in which we live.

Anton Vidokle: It doesn’t have to be done like that

An electronic announcement service for contemporary art institutions is the easiest way to describe e-flux. Users can subscribe online, and each day they receive four email announcements about exhibitions and other activities, such as conferences, art openings, institution appointments, art fairs and biennials taking place around the globe. The announcements do not usually have a correlation in content other than their simultaneity of occurrence. Considered together on any given day, they are a cross section of the robust activity happening in international contemporary art. Take, for instance, the diverse geographic locations of institutions posted on February 6, 2012: SALT in Istanbul; MIT List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge; Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo; and the Collezione Maramotti in Reggio Emilia, Italy. Non-subscribers can view these announcements on the e-flux website. All of the content is free. The public and private art institutions that hire the service, however, pay for access to e-flux’s more than 100,000 daily subscribers and millions who view the website each month. Dispersed throughout the course of a day, their notices arrive in email inboxes, designed with clearly formatted text and a color image, akin to a more substantial press release.\footnote{E-flux does not write or edit the announcement text. It is the responsibility of the organization to provide edited copy and a digital image properly sized. This process puts the onus of labor onto the institution that is posting the announcement.} Announcements have links that take readers to the institutions’ websites for more information. On e-flux’s website the announcements become part of its archive, which dates back to 1999. E-flux has two other satellite services: Art&Education and Art-
Agenda. They operate similarly, distributing information about art-world activity in the education and news spheres, respectively.

While the easiest way to describe e-flux is as an electronic announcement service, it is much more than that considering its extraordinary reach of distribution, the accumulative quantity of announcements, its widespread effect on the availability of information about contemporary art and its unique position as a critical art. “Distribution” is a key factor for analyzing e-flux as such. As a distribution service, it has an unusual engagement with the exhibition form. On a basic level it is an edited platform that compiles and presents information about art and its ideas to the public, comparable to a twenty-first-century version of the art magazine (edited because not all institutions are permitted to make announcements). E-flux constitutes a platform of information about exhibitions that spectators know about but often never see in person. Readers can provide summary accounts akin to a press release in order to talk about this activity after dinner or over coffee. This knowledge allows them to be a part of the larger discourse on contemporary art without ever having viewed the exhibitions. Within this light, e-flux possesses a comparable quality of pointing toward an unattainable exterior site. Each announcement is an index that echoes Robert Smithson’s *Non-Sites*, where awareness, or knowledge, is substituted (sufficiently) for the actual lived experience. This platform, however, is simultaneously a lucrative (or at least effective) means for generating income from the exhibitions and other programs occurring at institutions worldwide.

Anton Vidokle is one of the artist founders of e-flux, and he uses the income as both the economic engine for and center of a critique of how art normally reaches the
public.\textsuperscript{53} His critical work takes the form of e-flux, as well as writing, films, exhibitions and projects that he often makes in collaborations. This work is produced and distributed by e-flux through other kinds of ventures, such as storefront spaces and publications. E-flux has a headquarters on East Broadway in Chinatown in New York. In the basement e-flux mounts temporary exhibitions, and upstairs it hosts a reading room chock-full of books on contemporary art and theory, all free for anyone to use on-site. Just around the corner on Essex Street it has a storefront space that operates as \textit{PAWNSHOP}, a service for artists to leave art in order to make some fast cash. It has a critique of the industry of the contemporary art market built into its makeup. E-flux is also a publisher and commissioning agent of new work. In essence it is much more complex than an electronic announcement service. It is a dynamic, multifaceted, new institution that functions in its own right as a critique of usual exhibition and institution practices.

The critique, however, is not transparent, meaning it does not openly point from an exterior periphery to entrenched ways of producing and exhibiting art. And Vidokle does not contend that he is above the fray of the industry of contemporary art either, which is evident in his involvement with contemporary art biennials and museums. But what I believe Vidokle has achieved with e-flux is to problematize the usual practices of the institution of art, destabilizing the consensus or, as Rancière calls it, the police. Vidokle engages critically with the rote system of boundaries that inscribe ways of

\textsuperscript{53} The company e-flux was originally started in 1998 by Vidokle, Julieta Aranda and a group of artist friends, including Adriana Arenas, Josh Welber and Terence Gower. Today it is run by Aranda and Vidokle.
making exhibitions and being institution, which functions overall through learned behaviors that determine what presents itself to sensory experience. Rancière writes,

The main enemy of artistic creativity as well as of political creativity is consensus—that is, inscription within given roles, possibilities, and competences.\textsuperscript{54}

The work of Anton Vidokle and the artistic and curatorial practices I examine are exceptions to the common conception, production and exhibition of art. Their work represents ruptures in conventional artistic and institution practice. These ruptures are reasons why I consider them beacons, incremental steps toward producing a new aesthetics of the political, because their work represents potential for engaging differently with the spectator and staying ahead of the encroaching grips of global capitalism. This potential, which I derive in part from studying Rancière’s philosophy of art, politics and aesthetics, is located in the efficacy of their critical position. The points and effectiveness of their critiques are mixed. They range from Robert Smithson’s challenges to the puritanism of Fried and Greenberg’s modernism; Group Material’s transformation of the Whitney Biennial into a critique of American culture, and how curatorial practice constructs a singular vision of American art; to Harald Szeemann’s frenetic activation of Kunsthalle Bern into a dynamic working studio, Nicolas Bourriaud’s attack on modernist aesthetics, and Thomas Hirschhorn’s cooptation of spectators into a single worldwide army. These artworks and ideas for the most part operate in the social structures and logic of the institution of art, meaning the hierarchies of producing, exhibiting and distributing art. While they have destabilized those channels, they have done so within prescribed

limitations of the exhibition and the art institution. When momentary fissures in these limitations form, a new aesthetics of the political emerges, as the work by these artists attests. This aesthetics is a space that allows the spectator to see the world with new meaning by creating a new perception and commitment to its transformation. It expands what we think is possible within the limits of art because it is removed from the aesthetics already conditioned in countless everyday representations, images and experiences.

E-flux is different. It enacts in its existence an altogether unique critique of the institution because its mere form takes on fully and continually the content of its critique. Its micro-economy, community and creative production give e-flux and Vidokle the opportunity to operate in an economically autonomous zone away from the governmentality of the art institution, to use Michel Foucault’s concept. It is, of course, still not a space free from authority. It is not a complete exodus from art; that would negate the possibility of destabilizing how things are done in the realm of art. The work of e-flux and Vidokle stands as a model for a another mode of governing that shifts relationships of power away from museums and exhibitions and into the hands of other governing agents, who operate differently.

**Michel Foucault: The Critical Attitude**

Michel Foucault’s 1978 lecture “What is Critique?” provides an important context for understanding why the work of Anton Vidokle, e-flux and the other artists I have presented in this study matter. There are parallels between what Foucault says about critique and what Rancière theorizes about the politics of aesthetics. Critique originally
developed in reaction to the formation of a society of governmentalization. Foucault writes,

[I]t seems to me that there has been in the modern Western world (dating, more or less, empirically from the 15th to the 16th centuries) a certain way of thinking, speaking and acting, a certain relationship to what exists, to what one knows, to what one does, a relationship to society, to culture and also a relationship to others that we could call, let’s say, the critical attitude.\textsuperscript{55}

Foucault argues that the early stages of governing are in the origins of the Christian church. The church directed individuals toward routes of salvation, initiating a process of governing that has its roots in \textit{technè}, which Foucault defines as “precisely the direction of conscience; the art of governing men.”\textsuperscript{56} Following the Reformation, the art of governing radiated well beyond the church into every sector of civic life, from education, politics and economics to families, cities and institutions of government and monarchy. Foucault refers to Kant to develop his theory of critique, specifically, Kant’s use of the word \textit{Aufklärung}. Meaning “enlightenment,” \textit{Aufklärung} is associated with the formation of the critical attitude, which emerged in modern humanity when people began to use reason to question existing authority. \textit{Aufklärung} is more than a pointed resistance. It is something a public does together on an ongoing basis. The concept is associated with the act of constantly inventing and reinventing techniques and strategies by a collective public body in relation to historical forms of governing.\textsuperscript{57} It is a tutelage that acts in

\textsuperscript{55} Michel Foucault, “What is Critique?,” in \textit{The Politics of Truth} (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2007), 42.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 43.
\textsuperscript{57} Foucault makes a point to remind readers that Kant’s text was a response to a question posed by a German newspaper asking its readers: \textit{Was ist Aufklärung}? See Michel Foucault, “What is Critique?,” 47–48.
response to the present and therefore continually challenges new forms of governing because they too eventually become sedentary.

While authority is deeply intertwined with the period of Enlightenment, it was not a particular historical event, moment or dates in the late eighteenth century that set Aufklärung in motion. Foucault makes a point to emphasize that the Enlightenment is a historical period that represents the culmination of “the formation of capitalism, the constitution of the bourgeois world, the establishment of state systems [and] the foundation of modern science.”⁵⁸ Those factors set the course for challenging forms of government, factors with which we continue to contend. Enlightenment as a critical attitude is a modern characteristic that evolved in response to the instruments society uses to oversee, police and regulate people. There is an aesthetics assigned to these instrumental forms of governing as we know from Rancière because they affect how we make sense of the world. Drawing on Kant, as mentioned earlier, Rancière describes this aesthetics “as the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience.”⁵⁹ The politics of aesthetics is the act of reframing the world of common experience determined by these forms that govern our senses.

Politics breaks with the sensory self-evidence of the “natural” order that destines specific individuals and groups to occupy positions of rule or of being ruled, assigning them to private or public lives, pinning them down to a certain time and space, to specific “bodies,” that is to specific ways of being, seeing and saying. This “natural” logic, a distribution of the invisible and visible, of speech and noise, pins bodies to “their” places and allocates the private and the public to distinct “parts”—this is the order of the police. Politics can therefore be defined by way of contrast as the

⁵⁸ Foucault, “What is Critique?,” 56.
activity that breaks with the order of the police by inventing new subjects.  

A new aesthetics of politics is what lies in the aftermath of this break of the common experience of the sensible. It represents the overturning of the police with an art that reconfigures sense experience. A politics of aesthetics that Rancière describes is what Foucault calls critique. To develop his theory of politics and aesthetics Rancière built upon Foucault but re-positioned Foucault’s argument on critique (inherited from Kant) within the context of post-1989 climate when neoliberalism began to govern.

Rancière looked toward the use of aesthetics in the nineteenth century and how museum audiences applied it to education and debate about culture, politics and society. What if this original role of aesthetics is applied today to another dissensual space and time to overturn contemporary governing forms? Art becomes a place to rethink the political and that is why Rancière appeals to some circles of contemporary art. The key, however, is to understand that an aesthetics of politics (in other words, what constitutes a new aesthetic regime after the rupture) can eventually take on the cast of the distribution of the sensible. It can evolve into routine ways of governing and “inventing new subjects.” Foucault draws on Kant’s concept of Aufklärung to argue for the necessity of critique to function on an ongoing basis. It is important to constantly refine and stake out a politics of aesthetics that stimulates a new rupture against governing authority. Otherwise, an aestheticization of politics forms, which is what must be avoided. If it does form—we

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know this is already the case with the work of capital in the Levi’s commercial—the efficacy of critical art is diluted, just as we find in the art of Meckseper and Rosler. Their art is accompanied by a cause-effect relationship: dead children = war is devastating; Coca-Cola combined with a chrome-plate “Marx” insignia = global capitalism is triumphant. Their art is determined to change human behavior and therefore operates within a politics of art, not a politics of aesthetics.

A politics of aesthetics must enact a partition in the consensus. Take for instance, the art of Michael Asher. It moves spectators out of the museum and into the city space of Münster, Germany. They traipse through avenues, alleys and fields in a manner that situates their experience beyond the exhibition site. Or, consider his art that invites the sounds, smells and moist nighttime air into the interior of a small collage museum in Claremont, California, which is freely accessible twenty-four hours a day. This is critical art that partitions the consensus. It does not tell the spectator: the museum is a closed-circuit system that tightly controls and determines the artist’s production and the spectator’s experience of art, and has done so for centuries. It is an art that opens up the space and enacts in coordination with spectators a new awareness that art and exhibition can be something other than what it is; it doesn’t have to be done like that.

Furthermore, critique is not a question of dissociating from being governed. The future that it poses is not utopic or fantastic, situated outside the parameters of contemporary society. Its existence is always in relation to something else, and it is spurred by an insatiable desire for knowledge and truth about how things can be and function differently. It is, therefore, latent with potential as “an instrument, a means for a
future or a truth that it will not know nor happen to be, it oversees a domain it would
want to police and is unable to regulate.”

Foucault continues,

[...]n this great preoccupation about the way to govern and the search for
the ways to govern, we identify a perpetual question which would be:
“how not to be governed like that, by that, in the name of those principles,
with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures,
not like that, not for that, not by them.”

**Assuming the Shape of the Work**

Responding to a questionnaire on “the contemporary” posed by *October* in 2009
to a selection of artists, curators and art historians, Anton Vidokle’s thoughts echo
sentiments on the critical attitude and being governed by existing institutional practices.

If an artist were to develop a kind of practice requiring a new institutional
configuration in order to manifest itself, it would seem pointless to try to
reform existing structures through critique or infiltration—to change them
from within—simply because these approaches only lead to a relationship
of dependency. An artist today aspires to a certain sovereignty, which
implies that in addition to producing art one also has to produce the
conditions that enable such production and its channels of circulation.
Consequently, the production of these conditions can become so critical to
the production of the work that it assumes the shape of the work itself.

I want to examine further e-flux’s unique, multifaceted position as a form of
critical exhibition. To do so, let us consider what Vidokle says in relation to both
Foucault’s definition of *techné* as “the art of governing” and Walter Benjamin’s attack on
political tendency in “The Author as Producer,” which I analyze in Chapter 2. In his 1934
text Benjamin discusses the difference between benign aspirations of political tendency
and the necessity to take control over technical apparatuses that account for the tactical

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62 Foucault, “What is Critique?,” 42.
63 Ibid., 44.
64 Anton Vidokle, “A Questionnaire on ‘The Contemporary’,” *October*, vol. 130 (Fall 2009): 42.
distribution of critique. E-flux is simultaneously a critical position and techné. By this simultaneity I mean that its existence fulfills what Benjamin said was absent in the revolutionary work of 1930s Leftist intellectuals and what Foucault defines as critique emerging in response to techné. The genesis of e-flux’s double articulation of the critical attitude arises, as Vidokle says above, when “the production of these conditions can become so critical to the production of the work that it assumes the shape of the work itself.”

A comparable situation occurred briefly in Group Material’s early years. Group Material began with the intention to assume both the form of the exhibition and the form of the institution. Its members sought not only to distribute a critical attitude about sociopolitical issues but also to control that distribution through its storefront space and its status as a non-profit organization. As Julie Ault writes, “It is precisely because of the power that exhibitions have in assigning or opening up meanings, in creating contexts and situating viewers, that standardized exhibition methods and formats as well as display conventions need to be critically rethought and potentially subverted.”

Recalling the early days of Group Material in 1980, she also says, “Despite not wanting such a formal structure, the group adheres to these procedures on paper in order to get incorporated.” Since Group Material faced challenges in collectively operating and shortages of time and money for maintaining the storefront, they turned toward making exhibitions with institutions to critically challenge the museum context in which they

were involved. This challenge staked from within did not lessen their critique at the time. It allowed the attitude to reach a wider audience, altering spectators’ expectations of what can be exhibited at major museums and how much control the artist can exert over the exhibition.

The technique of opening up an independent art space today, however, hardly constitutes a mode of definitive criticality. Alternative art spaces often mimic the form of the art institution so closely that they do not leave any space for experimentation or invention of new possibilities for how their behavior may take shape. This is precisely why, as Foucault argues, a constant working and reworking of critique must take place. A historical determination cannot prevail. E-flux, on the other hand, is able to sustain a critical attitude like this and be the outlet for its distribution of ideas. Since 1999 it acts increasingly more independent over, as Vidokle says, the “conditions that enable such production and its channels of circulation.” While Group Material assumed a non-profit model to leverage independence from the industry of art, Vidokle does so using a capitalist model to generate income from an information-based economy. In doing it differently he uses the content of contemporary art to produce an economy that recirculates by way of e-flux to enable, as Brian Sholis observes, “a robustly healthy ecosystem that grants him the opportunity to engage them selectively.”

Where does this economy go? As I mention earlier e-flux is a publisher and commissioning agent of new work. E-flux journal and its publishing arm (which, to date,  

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accounts for four books) reaches a great number of readers. The journal is a monthly publication that began in November 2008. Its editors are Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood and Anton Vidokle. It is available free online, downloadable in PDF and distributed in cheap photocopy versions at outlets near and far, including Printed Matter, Inc. in New York; The Power Plant in Toronto; BAK in Utrecht; and Traffic in Dubai. The many contributors include Boris Groys, Simon Sheikh, Grant Kester, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Martha Rosler, Brian Holmes, Nina Möntmann, Lars Bang Larsen and Paul Chan. The work of these practitioners crosses lines of curating, criticism, visual arts and education.

Titles of previous articles in e-flux journal range from “Politics of Installation” and “Manifestos for the Future” to “Museums and Universities,” “Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism” and “Positively Protest Aesthetics Revisited.” The monthly editions do not have particular focuses per se, but themes do emerge. Most recently these include responses to Occupy Wall Street, collectivism in art, art and economic sustainability, participation in art, intersections of art and design, and performance and the art object. The agility with which Vidokle and his contributors mobilize and produce content is astounding, and it is tacitly responsive and prescient—almost hyper-contemporary. Vidokle’s authorship is realized through the discourse he creates in collaboration with this broad milieu of artists, writers, thinkers and curators who make projects and publications under the e-flux stamp. His authorship, then, is denoted through

68 Since 2009 e-flux journal books has published four books: Are You Working Too Much? Post-Fordism, Precarity and the Labor of Art with contributions by various writers; Going Public Boris Groys by Boris Groys; What is Contemporary Art?, contributions by various writers; and e-flux journal reader 2009, also from efforts by various writers. Liam Gillick designed all the covers. Sternberg Press distributes the books.
these collaborations that fall under the corporate-sounding identity of e-flux, an identity absolutely tied to Anton Vidokle.
Chapter 4: The Industrial Art Complex

The Education Turn in Exhibition

E-flux is part of a long history of artists and curators who utilize writing as part of their critical practice. The roster includes those examined in this study, such as Robert Smithson, Michael Asher, Julie Ault, Liam Gillick, Maria Lind, Will Bradley, Martha Rosler, Thomas Hirschhorn and Anton Vidokle, whose texts represent an unwillingness to embed their practices exclusively in the visual. They utilize writing for many reasons. It allows easy and widespread distribution online and in print. It also exists as a document and an immediate articulation of their ideas. Writing and other kinds of knowledge-producing activity expand the concept of the exhibition into an educational model and change the relationship the exhibition has with the public sphere. To begin to consider this relationship between the public, education and exhibition, we can turn to Simon Sheikh’s observations.

Historically, exhibition making has been closely related to strategies of discipline and Enlightenment ideals, not as a contradiction or dialectic, but rather as a simultaneous move in the making of the “new” bourgeois subject of reason in Europe in the nineteenth century. Exhibition making marked not only a display and division of knowledge, power and spectatorship, but also the production of a public, a nation. The bourgeois class attempted to universalize its views and visions through rational argument rather than by decree. The bourgeois museum and its curatorial techniques could thus not express its power (only) through discipline, but also had to have an educational and pedagogical approach, present in the articulations of the artworks, the models of display of the objects, the spatial layout, and the overall architecture. It had to situate a viewing
subject that not only felt subjected to knowledge, but was also represented through the mode of address involved in the curatorial technique. In order for the mode of address to be effectively constitutive of its subjects, the exhibition and museum had to address and represent at the same time.¹

Sheikh’s description of the historical intersections of exhibition making and education is useful in light of the expanding realm in contemporary art called “knowledge production.” This production consists of critical writing but also encompasses many other activities such as lectures, panel discussions, symposia, research and film screenings. Whereas this activity was once peripheral to the exhibition, it is increasingly the main event. Paul O’Neill and Mick Wilson view this recent change as “rather a kind of ‘curatorialization’ of education whereby the educative process often becomes the object of curatorial production.”² The spectator plays a different role under these expanded pedagogical intersections with exhibition making. On one hand, they are subjected to knowledge, as with any exhibition. But, on the other, as Sheikh states above, they are “represented through the mode of address involved in the curatorial technique.” Attention is not arrested unexpectedly, as with some of the other exhibitions I study. In this technique it is apprehended and sustained in coordination with the spectator who produces knowledge with and for the institution.

**Unexpected Byproducts of a Failed Manifesta**

In 2006 Manifesta 6 was intended to pose an alternative to the usual format of the biennial exhibition by applying such approaches to knowledge production and the curatorialization of education. Curators Mai Abu ElDahab and Florian Waldvogel and

artist Anton Vidokle were the organizing team. They wanted to turn the exhibition into a temporary art school. Their intention was partially to critique the biennial model’s typical context-specific formats, generalizing themes, predictable roster of international participants and commercial satellite events. It was also motivated by a desire to actively engage the spectator in the exhibition form. Inspired by the learning environment at Black Mountain College in North Carolina in the 1930s, they considered the ideological model of an art school: a multifunctional site of discursive activity including criticism, research, experimentation, exhibitions, discussion, sharing, collaboration and film screenings. While these pedagogical qualities are often reserved for a private realm, the curators wanted to insert them into the exhibition form, which is essentially a public sphere. “If,” Vidokle and his collaborators asked, “the two models—temporary and publicly accessible exhibition; and potentially innovative and experimental but publically restricted school—were combined, perhaps a new, radically open school could provide a viable alternative to exhibitions of contemporary art and could reinstate the agency of art by creating and educating a new public.”

The Manifesta 6 School was scheduled to occur in Cyprus, a geographically and ethnically divided country. Greek Cypriots live in its southern part; its northern territory is populated mostly by Turkish Cypriots. Disputes run deep and long, driven by centuries of nationalist rhetoric, cultural differences and violence against minorities. Modern-day

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Cyprus became independent from Britain in 1960. That decade was subsequently filled with violent unrest between Greek Cypriots and minority Turkish Cypriots. After the Turkish Invasion of Cyprus in 1974 in reaction to Greece’s military government-sponsored coup, a ceasefire was declared between the two sides. Nicosia is the capital of the Republic of Cyprus. Since the early 1980s, it also functions as the capital of the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which is not recognized by international law. A UN-patrolled buffer zone known as the Green Line runs through Nicosia, which makes it both a geographic and political crossroads marking the furthest eastern reaches of the European Union. The physical barriers of this traumatic history have made it difficult to form citizen-based initiatives to ease the political deadlock.\(^5\) The separation affects not only the physical movement of citizens on the divided island but also the psychological conditions under which they live and work. The visible marks of political decisions made by previous generations pose challenges for envisioning peace for future ones.

Manifesta’s organizing agency, International Foundation Manifesta (IFM), intentionally stepped into this highly charged and complex political climate. In 2004 it chose Cyprus over other applicants as the location for the sixth edition of the itinerant biennial. IFM selected Nicosia for its “capacity to serve as a starting point in guiding Manifesta through a two-year period of investigation around the geographical and conceptual frameworks of Europe at large, [in] particular with regard [to] its relationship

to the Middle East and North Africa.” The Manifesta 6 exhibition-as-school that Vidokle and his curatorial partners envisioned was simultaneously reactive to the aging biennial model and responsive to the socially, politically and physically divided conditions in Nicosia, not unlike Thomas Hirschhorn’s often provocative decisions to work in peripheral, working class neighborhoods away from the usual hubs of contemporary art’s exhibition.

The plan for Manifesta 6 was that each curator would individually operate a “department” of the school. One department would be an online educational initiative and another a nomadic school that would take place at different locations throughout Nicosia, such as theaters and bars. The activity of these departments would involve citizens from both sides of the ethnic and political divide. Department 2 was Vidokle’s project. It was different. Vidokle made arrangements for it to occur in an old hotel permanently located in the Turkish Cypriot part of Nicosia. Over the course of the biennial’s three months, the hotel would serve as the scene for public education programs and residences for almost one hundred artists, writers, curators, musicians, designers and filmmakers from nearby and around the world who would contribute to the Manifesta 6 School. All the programming would be free and open to the public.

In June 2006, just months prior to the opening of Manifesta 6, the curators were dismissed. The local organizing agency, Nicosia for Art, which had been appointed to partner with IFM, and the mayor of Nicosia, Michael Zampelas, reasoned that ElDahab,

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7 Florian Waldvogel’s contribution was supposed to exist mostly online, whereas Mai Abu ElDahab’s was intended to be a nomadic structure. Details about their plans are in Notes for an Art School, eds. Mai Abu ElDahab, Anton Vidokle and Florian Waldvogel (Amsterdam: Manifesta 6 School Books, 2006).
Waldvogel and Vidokle had insisted the exhibition occur in the occupied Turkish territory of Nicosia. Vidokle recounts:

We were always under the impression that the biennial would take place in the entire city of Nicosia, in both Turkish and Greek parts. It was also written into our contract—the first thing that happened when we were appointed curators of Manifesta, when we first came to Cyprus, [was that] we were immediately taken to the Turkish side, I think on the second or third day of our trip.8

Manifesta 6 School was in fact intended to involve both parts of Nicosia, but Vidokle’s plan to hold much of its activity in the hotel was the crux of the problem. The plan would have required Greek Cypriots to cross the Green Line, and therefore have identifications checked by representatives of a state they do not recognize. While it appears Nicosian officials agreed at the onset to these plans, when concept met reality the situation was apparently untenable. No doubt Cypriot authorities originally viewed the award to host Manifesta as an opportunity to demonstrate to the European Union that tensions in the territory had eased. They would show that Cyprus’s recent entry into the EU in May 2004 was warranted. The plan backfired. It ultimately revealed that the political complexities of Cyprus remain strongly intact. Manifesta 6 was canceled.

An Exhibition-as-School Grows in Former East Berlin

Anton Vidokle and his collaborators, including Martha Rosler, Liam Gillick, Boris Groys and Tirdad Zolghadr, were committed to realizing a version of the exhibition-as-school. Once the cancellation in Nicosia was immanent (a fact not easily overlooked when curators found their offices locked), Vidokle went to Berlin. He leased

a small building on Platz der Vereinten Nationen (United Nations Plaza) in former East Berlin. Out of the fiasco of Manifesta 6 emerged Unitednationsplaza, which opened in October 2006. Unitednationsplaza, free and open to the public, served as both the name and address of a temporary art school that over the course of one year hosted a series of seminars, lectures, screenings and performances by dozens of artists, writers and curators. There was also a pay-what-you-wish bar in the basement run by the artist Ethan Breckenridge. Unitednationsplaza is a singular artwork that merged the qualities of a fixed timeframe and public sphere of the exhibition model with the intimacy, intellectual rigor, social engagement and critical reflection of the art school model. The content of Unitednationsplaza’s prolific and discursive activity was disseminated through a radio station, an online presence and in publications. An archive of texts and videos exists on e-flux’s website.

The situation with Manifesta 6 highlights the position that artists and curators face when tied to institutions of politics and art. This position is particularly precarious with biennial exhibitions where municipal agencies and art intermingle with the economic and political conditions and will of hosting regions. Unitednationsplaza is a byproduct of these conditions of integration. It formed from a combination of the ruins of Manifesta 6 and Vidokle’s ongoing investigations into the viability of artistic agency. E-flux provided the financial support for Unitednationsplaza. The major source of that support is the same announcement service Vidokle uses to operate PAWNSHOP in New York, e-flux journal and many other projects.9 Tirdad Zolghadr matter-of-factly attests to Vidokle’s (thus e-

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9 In an interview with Karl Lydén, Vidokle remarks that he applied for funding for Unitednationsplaza,
flux’s) imprint on the work in Berlin, recalling that unitednationsplaza “was discreetly framed as an Anton Vidokle artwork, and the institutional motto was ‘exhibition-as-school.”’

Unitednationsplaza’s alternative approach to exhibition is significant of a decisive turn in contemporary art to reformulate a public sphere into the kind and quality associated with the high level of intellectual knowledge produced by the private realm of educational institutions. This interest responds in part to the desires of artists and curators to engage differently with the spectator. By differently, I mean this mode of exhibition making is an opportunity to engage the spectator in a more fully committed and immersive position in the curatorial technique. It is also a way to democratize the academy and disperse knowledge often available to only a select, paying few and insert it more widely into a public sphere. Not unlike what we found with Thomas Hirschhorn’s The Bijlmer-Spinoza Festival in Amsterdam or Group Material’s exhibition The People’s Choice (Arroz con Mango), the exhibition-as-school model transforms the spectator into an integrated and implicated component of the production of the work. Vidokle’s comments about unitednationsplaza below echo the general sentiments Simon Sheikh voices earlier in relation to this transformation where the spectator has a greater level of investment in the mode of address of the curatorial technique. Vidokle recalls,

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reflecting on the difficulty of acquiring funding if the work does not have a direct and tangible impact. “A few years ago I applied for funding for the unitednationsplaza project in Berlin, and from the questions on the application form it was pretty obvious that the main function of the funding organization was to create local jobs. These are economic/political interests that don’t have much to do with art, but when they are imposed on a project they do affect its formation.” See Karl Lydén, “Interview: Anton Vidokle of e-flux,” Dossier Journal (April 2009); http://dossierjournal.com/read/interviews/interview-anton-vidokle-of-e-flux/.

Inevitably, the program of *unitednationsplaza* demanded a lot of time from the audience and, even more importantly, it forced some members of the audience to articulate a position in relation to the project. Reciprocally, it offered all those who attended a stake in the project—a certain kind of ownership of the situation—in that everyone who came along could participate to the degree that they wished. I would argue that this enabled the kind of productive engagement that is still possible if spectatorship is bypassed and the traditional roles of institution/curator/artist/public are encouraged to take on a more hybrid complexity.

Instead of bypassing spectatorship, I believe this approach is better interpreted as a means to level the hierarchy between the spectator and other constituents involved in the work. The lessening of hierarchy can be achieved through what Vidokle calls a “hybrid complexity.” This complexity interweaves the spectator, institution, artist and curator to work together in a less hierarchical fashion. As with other exhibitions examined in this dissertation, the spectator at *unitednationsplaza* was moved from a static position of audience to an activated position of engagement. The repositioning of the spectator into the overall constellation of the work initiates a potential for community to form among the constituents involved. A comparable situation transpired in the early 1980s in the work of Group Material. The collective’s exhibitions at their East 13th Street storefront space formed a community outside of the relationships that usually exist between art and its public. *The People’s Choice* reduced hierarchy between class, race and economic background by integrating art from and by various constituents in the neighborhood. The exhibition was not a blatant critique. It did not make an obvious statement that a system of inclusion and exclusion pervades the contemporary exhibition-making industry, presenting art to the spectator. Instead, it enacted the critique by
showing the spectator that the exhibition can be porous and produced in accordance with them.

Before further analyzing the spectator’s role in the exhibition-as-school model, let us examine specific work at *unitednationsplaza*. A part of the program was the *Martha Rosler Library*. The artist lent 7,700 volumes of books and material from her personal collection. The subjects of the books are diverse, ranging from political theory, war, poetry, feminism and science fiction to art history, mystery novels, children’s books, colonialism, newspaper clips and maps. While the loan is arguably an extraordinary act of generosity, the wide range of topics is symbolic of Rosler’s long and critically engaged practice informed by research, study and continual learning from other disciplines and eras. In Berlin, the library was set up in a hybrid domestic-office space with bookcases, chairs, tables and a photocopier.¹¹ Visitors could peruse the collection, read and photocopy parts of the books. Reading groups were organized around titles selected by group leaders such as Molly Nesbit, Jan Verwoert, Tom Holert and Nina Möntmann. A complete catalogue of the library is available on e-flux’s website.

The library is also a singular critical statement, each book weighted with a particular meaning that when considered within the entirety of the collection becomes a political text available for public consumption. In other words, its double articulation is both literal and symbolic: the books can be read, while the nature of any private

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¹¹ The *Martha Rosler Library* was installed from June 2 to August 31, 2007 in Berlin. It was an expanded iteration that opened in November 2005 in an e-flux storefront “reading room” on Ludlow Street in New York. The library also traveled to the Frankfurter Kunstverein in Germany; Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp (in association with an artist-run space called NICC, or New International Culture Center); the Institut National de L’Histoire de L’Art in Paris; Stills, Scotland’s Center for Photography, in Edinburgh; and the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.
collection is an edited, political construct. This process of editing is comparable to Vidokle’s approach to e-flux. Through an editing process, he decides what information about contemporary art is inserted into the discourse of contemporary art; he distributes vast amounts of knowledge about exhibitions that are talked about but never seen. The act of selecting and pointing to art out there—somewhere—largely inaccessible by e-flux’s viewing public recalls similar tactics deployed by Robert Smithson in his Non-Sites that became indexical three-dimensional maps that pointed to areas likely never to be experienced by a viewing public. With regard to this process of editing for the Martha Rosler Library, Vidokle played a decisive role in selecting books. In an interview about the library, Rosler describes the project as a collaboration between her and Vidokle. She remembers, “When Anton and I put the collection together, we decided we’d have to make a large and fairly representative selection. It certainly wasn’t exhaustive; for instance, he was not interested in including cookbooks or gardening books!”

Other activity at unitednationsplaza was a series of rigorous, university-style seminars. These were a major part of the program. Boris Groys’s series “After the Red Square” was a two-week seminar. The suggested readings included his book The Total Art of Stalinism (1988), which studies the aesthetic pursuits of socialist realism in the Soviet Union after the death of Stalin. Seminar attendees also read the essay “The Man Who Flew Into Space from His Apartment,” which Groys wrote with the artist Ilya Kabakov in 2006. The essay was written in conjunction with Kabakov’s project about a

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12 “Martha Rosler and Bosko Blagojevic: A Conversation,” in Anton Vidokle: Produce, Distribute, Discuss, Repeat (New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2009), 75–76.
A fictitious character whose dream to fly solo into outer space is stirred by Soviet propaganda.

*Unitednationsplaza* also hosted pseudo-formal lectures combined with unusually informal follow-up discussions. Liam Gillick conducted short, thirty-minute lectures over five consecutive days. He paired each lecture with a “parallel project of drinking” in the casual atmosphere of the downstairs bar. He introduced the series by asking the question: “Are we enthralled to structures of the recent past that were not supposed to be a model for anything?” This introductory question, he explained, was part of a broader challenge to the legacy of postwar social and cultural projects that arose out of conditions specific to their moments but continue to resonate today. Gillick’s interests are rooted especially in questioning the lingering grips of modernism, as we found in his work for the Venice Biennale. Other visual work by him positions spectators among aluminum and colored Perspex screens that require their involvement in spatial and temporal contexts inside a gallery. These screens draw on the appearances of modernist architecture and Minimalist sculpture in order to problematize their impact on contemporary art and life.

**A Mode of Address in the Curatorial Technique**

At *Unitednationsplaza* Vidokle and his collaborators inserted the intellectual generating activity usually reserved for the private, paying realm of education into the

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13 Liam Gillick’s series was called “Five Short Texts on the Possibility of Creating an Economy of Equivalence.” In his introduction he explains the series is associated with “a parallel project of drinking.” See the video “The day before closure of an experimental factory”: [http://www.unitednationsplaza.org/video/19/](http://www.unitednationsplaza.org/video/19/). The factory reference is part of Gillick’s master myth about the closed and subsequently repurposed factory, which symbolizes a final transition from a Fordist to post-Fordist society.

14 See the video “The day before closure of an experimental factory” can be viewed at [http://www.unitednationsplaza.org/video/19/](http://www.unitednationsplaza.org/video/19/).
public sphere of exhibition. Drawing on the work of Jürgen Habermas, Simon Sheikh explains earlier that exhibition making is historically based in Enlightenment ideals, and the “articulations of the artworks, display of the objects, the spatial layout, and the overall architecture” reveal the educational function of the original purpose of the museum as a public sphere.\textsuperscript{15} The exhibition functioned at first as a public space for debate and discussion over art. The knowledge procured from these debates not only gave insight about art and aesthetics but also about related culture and politics. The exhibition signaled the cultivation of a bourgeois class as part of this public sphere. Through judgment, argument and conversation over art, spectators came to a consensus about the objects on display and their relationships to politics and society. This consensus was determined through a joint effort among spectators.

Today the forming of a consensus occurs, in many ways, through exhibition activity that homogenizes information about art. At large institutions labels and audio guides accompany exhibitions and give each spectator the same information about what they should know and even sometimes how they should feel, universalizing aesthetic experiences between art and its viewing public. As Jacques Rancière concedes with regard to this last point:

I think what allows the spectator to create his or her own poem is the existence of places and spectacles whose status remains more or less indeterminate. When people go to the museum now, they are in front of modes of exhibition and explanatory labels that tell them what they must see. It is different with forms of art that escape canonization.\textsuperscript{16}


Canonization and labels are part of a consensus that defines the distribution of the sensible, which Rancière ascribes to the overall aesthetics of politics. Over time, the forms of display, architecture and spatial arrangement of the art institution have assigned an aesthetics to the appearances of these governing forms. Paradoxically, these forms arose out of Enlightenment reason that originally sought to produce knowledge in the formation of a community (even if the bourgeoisie) as a means to critique governing authority in society.

*Unitednationsplaza* used the model of the exhibition-as-school in order to escape canonization and engage differently with the spectator. This alternative form of engagement creates a new public for art, reinserting the education aspect originally ascribed to that sphere. Its freely accessible pedagogical model is reactionary to the increasingly rarified space of the art institution, the partitioning of access to knowledge produced by the educational institution and the inability for art’s critique to easily manifest through its representations to a viewing public. Part of the reason for these challenges—in particular, for a critical art to engage its public—is based on what I discuss in Chapter 3. Recall, the works by Josephine Meckseper and the collages by Martha Rosler that I analyze possess a critical attitude and strong tendency to evoke a political message. But the transmission of their message to the spectator is lost because images of war, street protests and commodity culture are diluted through an overabundant circulation in media and advertising. Images no longer have the impact they once had because the logic of advanced capitalism has absorbed and inserted them into the flow of information capital. They are representations of a form of critical art of the past.
Within the context of this study of the exhibition as a critical form, Vidokle’s intention for Manifesta 6 and its subsequent realization in unitednationsplaza is a model of a curatorial technique that apprehends the spectator through its mode of address. The critical content in the seminars by Groys and Gillick was important; however, the politics of aesthetics, as we know from Rancière, is located in the form that generates a rupture in how critique is produced vis-à-vis the spectator. The thrust of unitednationsplaza was its ability to create and sustain a public, releasing spectators from the usual form of engagement with art and its ideas as well as expanding the form of the academy and its privileged access to knowledge production. We can turn again to Rancière to summarize these conditions related to the spectator, the museum and the role of education.

I think one important condition of the emancipation of the spectator is precisely the creation of places where works of art or performances of art are no longer restrained to a specific audience or a specific function. The creation of art museums at the end of the eighteenth century was important in that respect. Now, of course, the museum is often seen as an instance of the legitimization of high art, but for a long time it was a place of confusion, and many were worried about all those people coming into the museum and not being able to judge art. […] It was the same for the museum during the nineteenth century, the dispersion of all these people coming to the museum without knowing art. Over time, the new institution created a certain form of policy of the institution, more or less putting lay people out of the museum to have them reenter through educational programs.\(^\text{17}\)

In the context of what we learn from Rancière, the critical efficacy that Vidokle and his collaborators produce is dissensus. Dissensus lies in the one-year, temporary exhibition unitednationsplaza and its interchange of activity in private and public realms of education and art institutions, respectively. It is also the critical challenge posed to the

\(^{17}\text{Ibid., 292–93.}\)
institution of Manifesta, a challenge that essentially shut down a major biennial exhibition and, in the process, questioned the functions of such exhibitions and the efficacy of their deeply integrated positions with politics, culture and economics.

**New Institutionalism and Its Critics**

New Institutionalism attempts to accomplish on an extended basis what unitednationsplaza achieved temporarily. While maintaining a stake in the art institution as a locus for art, it uses that platform as a site for critical reflection on the role and function of the exhibition. Its exhibitions differ from traditional models of displaying contemporary art. They interweave curatorial and artistic strategies (sometimes difficult to differentiate) in order to involve the spectator in event- and process-based works. New Institutionalism’s debate about reform occurs not only inside the museum but also through an extensive network of knowledge production, such as seminars, lectures and writing. The totality of this discourse disperses more widely the structural questions it poses about the kind and quality of engagement the art institution has with its public.

These questions take shape at institutions when Maria Lind conceives the Sputnik Project at Kunstverein München and Apolonija Šušteršič redesigns its museum lobby into an active social space. They arise in Elmgreen and Dragset’s participation in the Venice Biennale when the artist duo is selected to represent both Norway and Denmark and use the exhibition as the singular form of their contribution. Maria Lind’s *What If? Art on the Verge of Architecture and Design* at the Moderna Museet disrupts the order of things when she organizes a series of public “listen-ins” prior to the opening of the exhibition and then hands over curatorial responsibility to an artist who “filters” it. And, these
questions surface when Manifesta curators organize a series of town-hall style meetings to explore with the public possible topics for a biennial. While this sampling of activity is complex and divergent in nature and tone, the essence of it speaks to New Institutionalism’s desire to redefine the contemporary art exhibition and its relationship with the spectator. Through this process it seeks to generate a form of dissensus, not unlike what Anton Vidokle stimulated with *unitednationsplaza*. This activity, however, has the potential to expand and, paradoxically, contract the public sphere in relation to the institution, which I comment on further below. The contradictory positions of its public and private activity raise questions about the efficacy of New Institutionalism, its ideologies, whether it is sustainable on a permanent basis or if longevity is even the most desirable outcome.

New Institutionalism’s critique manifests in many different ways in the exhibition form. Equally important, however, is the knowledge it produces through conferences, publications and writing. What we know about New Institutionalism is largely from its knowledge production, instead of the in-person experiences of its cross section of exhibition activity. Critical writing acts as a chronicl of this phenomenon, a conduit

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18 The following is a comprehensive selection of key texts, conferences and journals. In 2001 Charles Esche presents the talk “Can everything be temporary? Art, institutions and fluidity” at the conference “Networks, Contexts and Territories” at Goethe Institut in Buenos Aires. In 2003 the term New Institutionalism first appears in writing in the Office for Contemporary Art volume *Verksted #1*, edited by Jonas Ekeberg. It is the title and exclusive subject of this first issue of *Verksted*. In 2003 Alex Farquharson publishes two articles in *Arts Monthly*: “I curate you curate we curate” and “Curator and the Artist” critically analyze artistic and curatorial activity that is New Institutionalism without citing it by name. In 2003 Jens Hoffmann organizes *Institution Squared*, an exhibition and seminar at Kiasma in Helsinki. It examines work by ten contemporary art institutions in Europe. The 2003 edition of the Venice Biennale includes *Utopia Station* curated by Molly Nesbit, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Rirkrit Tiravanija. It is an inventory of new curatorial actions with the exhibition emphasizing process-based and discussion platforms. In 2003 Jens Hoffmann produces the e-flux project “The Next Documenta Should be Curated by an Artist,” which originates from a critique of Documenta 11 in 2002. He invites twenty-five artists and curators to respond
to a wider reading public and an integral part of its basic process. It is also an archive of the breadth and diversity of this activity, which is not easily discernable since it takes place among different institutions, locations, curatorial and artistic practices, and degrees of public and private realms. It is not the first time that writing about art has played a formidable role in the development of a public sphere. For example, we know from Habermas that writing gave rise initially to a critically thinking public during the eighteenth century when,

[...] museums institutionalized lay judgment on art: discussion became the medium through which people appropriate art. The innumerable pamphlets criticizing or defending the leading theory of art built on the discussions of the salons and reacted back on them—art criticism as to his provocation through comments and writing that are published on e-flux and in a book. In 2004 Claire Doherty publishes From Studio to Situations: Contemporary Art and the Question of Context. In 2005 Maria Lind organizes with Liam Gillick the symposium and publication Curating with Light Luggage at Kunstverein München. It presents a historical and contemporary account of experimental art institutions. In 2005 Maria Lind publishes European Cultural Policies 2015: A Report with Scenarios of the Future of Public Funding for Contemporary Art in Europe. The report is a collaboration between IASPIS and EIPCP on the occasion of the Frieze Art Fair. In 2006 Claire Doherty writes “New Institutionalism and the Exhibition as Situation.” Doherty’s account remains the most comprehensive critical assessment of New Institutionalism. Her article is a revised and expanded version of her 2004 text “The Institution is Dead! Long Live the Institution! Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism.” Alex Farquharson’s “Bureaux de change” is published in frieze in 2006; it is a status report for New Institutionalism at that moment. In 2006 Nina Möntmann published an edited volume Art and Its Institutions: Current Conflicts, Critique and Collaboration. In 2006 Jens Hoffmann publishes “The Curatorialization of Institutional Critique” in Institutional Critique and After, the accompanying volume to the symposium of the same title organized by John C. Welchman at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. In 2007 “Integrative Institutionalism: a Reconsideration” is a published transcript of a conversation between Alex Farquharson and Maria Lind reflecting on the work of New Institutions. This conversation is published in The New Administration of Aesthetics, the accompanying volume to a conference of the same title held in Oslo in 2006. Claire Bishop publishes the articles “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents” in Artforum in 2006 and “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” in October in 2004. While these texts focus on relational art, they cannot be overlooked in this catalogue because of the parallel developments in it and New Institutionalism. In 2008 the journal Art Lies dedicates an entire issue to the “Death of the Curator” with reflections on the relationship between curatorial and artistic practice. In 2009 Nina Möntmann publishes the essay “The Rise and Fall of New Institutionalism: Perspectives on a Possible Future” in Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique, edited by Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray. In 2010 Sven Lüttficken’s “Once More on Publicness: A Postscript on Secret Publicity” appears in fillip. On Curating is an online journal including writing by and about many of the individuals listed in the catalogue here. Since 2009 Hoffmann edits The Exhibitionist, a print periodical dedicated to what has become the expansive realm of the contemporary art exhibition.
conversation. Thus, in the first half of the eighteenth century the amateur éclairés formed the inner circle of the new art public.\textsuperscript{19}

New Institutionalism generates a vast amount of discussion, and this aspect is an important part of its work. It does not claim to create an entirely new public outside of art, but its dissemination of ideas about alternative functions of the art institution has sparked debate and activity that occupy prominent roles in the industry of contemporary art today. In 2003, recall, Office for Contemporary Art Norway (OCA) published *Verksted #1* dedicated solely to New Institutionalism. Taking the term from self-reflexive activity in the fields of economics and sociology, Ekeberg positioned the recent work at New Institutions within a history of Conceptual art and institutional critique. He no doubt counted OCA as part of this new institutional practice that “seemed at last to be ready to let go, not only of the limited discourse of the work of art as a mere object, but also of the whole institutional framework that went with it, a framework that the ‘extended’ field of contemporary art had simply inherited from high modernism.”\textsuperscript{20}

In the September 2006 issue of *frieze* Alex Farquharson continued where Ekeberg left off. Farquharson’s article “Bureaux de change” is a summary analysis of New Institutionalism. It includes a roster of formerly independent curators such as Maria Lind, Nicolaus Schafhausen, Nicolas Bourriaud, Charles Esche and Catherine David, whose

\textsuperscript{19} Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1989), 40.

freelance, experimental work was redistributed inside institutions on a permanent basis when they became their directors and curators. Institutions such as Kunstverein München, Palais de Tokyo, Rooseum and Witte de With in Rotterdam that take up this mode of institutional practice, Farquharson explains, face a difficult task in changing the relationships art institutions have with their public. These challenges are partially based on the impress the physical space of a museum holds, which echoes sentiments originally elucidated by Brian O’Doherty in the 1970s and subsequent artists of institutional critique. It also recalls the provocations Harald Szeemann made in 1972 with his edition of Documenta 5. The reigning influence and dismantling of such structures also seemed particularly urgent for practitioners of New Institutionalism. Farquharson observes, “New Institutionalism,” and much recent art, sidesteps the problem of the white cube altogether. If white-walled rooms are the site for exhibitions one week, a recording studio or political workshop the next, then it is no longer the container that defines the contents as art, but the contents that determine the identity of the container.  

Farquharson continues with specific references to the spectator as a crucial means for developing this new public for art. Reception, similarly, refutes the white cube ideal of the individual viewer’s inaudible monologue, and is instead dialogic and participatory. Discussion events are rarely at the service of exhibitions at “new institutions”; either they tend to take the form of autonomous programming streams, or else exhibitions themselves take a highly dialogic mode, giving rise to new curatorial hybrids.

If this sounds like relational art, it is. New Institutions to some extent not only redefined the concept and structure of the exhibition by embracing process-based and

22 Ibid., 157–58.
socially engaged art, they also performed it. As I discussed in Chapter 2, these complex overlaps and intersections of characteristics and behaviors of relational art and New Institutionalism speak to the parallel developments of these two critical forms of exhibition occurring mostly in Europe. They grew up in the same moment of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Both were originally interested in reconfiguring the exhibition of art inside the modernist gallery into something more active, democratic, open and egalitarian, other than just displaying objects. It has been a long and difficult march against the white cube and the authority of the art institution it symbolizes. Somehow practitioners of relational art and New Institutionalism believed it was finally possible to change it. Perhaps change seemed more plausible if the artist and the curator waged critique together on two fronts.

**An “Office” for Contemporary Art in Norway**

As Jonas Ekeberg noted, Office for Contemporary Art Norway is one of the earliest proponents and practitioners of New Institutionalism. Established in 2001, OCA is a foundation created by the Norwegian Ministry of Culture and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is a joint effort to provide support for contemporary art in Norway while increasing the nation’s international profile and prestige in global art and culture (OCA provided support to Elmgreen and Dragset in the 2009 Venice Biennale). The organization strengthens bonds among arts professionals and institutions within Norway and abroad through its multifaceted program that integrates visiting artists, writers and critics into local arts and education organizations in order to connect Norway with international arts communities. OCA also has an archival research center and
library. These studios, residencies, exhibitions and research facilities promote and produce culture specific to the region while attracting and exporting creative and intellectual artistic practitioners.

OCA has become a vital economic and marketing tool for Norway, raising the international profile of the nation’s arts and culture with these organizing principles. Its interweaving of municipal funding, administration, marketing and art characterizes the activity of New Institutionalism and is also cause for reservation by its critics. Its very name, “Office for Contemporary Art Norway,” prioritizes and unites administrative, or clerical, functions with art and nationhood. Each time the name is announced in public—orally and in print—“Norway” as the source of this cultural and economic work is advertised. Claire Doherty, in particular, has articulated general concern about the “corporatized” intersections of art, economics, advertising and consumerism.

New Institutionalism emerged as a new model for museum management and exhibition curating at a moment of increased corporatization for the art institution wherein the public are increasingly referred to as consumers and the institution’s activities are driven towards income producing targets and aligned with the interests of commercial entertainment industries. If New Institutionalism means an end to conventional programming and exhibition-making as we know it, how can that occur within an increasingly spectacularized and corporatized cultural context?²³

These are without a doubt important questions and challenges. While the integration of spectators into the production of knowledge about art and society are major characteristics of New Institutionalism, these efforts coincided with the globalization and corporatization of the museum industry. The expansion of the exhibition of contemporary

art is evident in the extraordinary number of biennials that have formed since the late 1990s and early 2000s. It is also evident in the rampant growth of museums, such as the Guggenheim Museum and its satellite branches in Venice, Bilbao and Abu Dhabi. These changes began when, paradoxically, smaller experimental institutions and independent arts organizations faced setbacks from cuts in public funding. Institutions learned to rely on private sources and partnerships to survive. Precarious financial situations inserted neoliberalist economic strategies into their overall operation in order to compensate for the loss of public support. The shifts in relying on private funding in turn increased the importance of the quantity of visitors. Institutions must account for expenses, and generally the best way to do it is not by generating a high level of critical content but attracting a high number of visitors. The blockbuster exhibition appears around this time with more frequency because of the market value associated with the spectator’s entertaining experience.

**Thinking Things Otherwise**

New Institutionalism arose from an interest to engage the spectator differently and the need to manage resources. The high priority it places on personal engagement is sometimes realized through intricately orchestrated, educational approaches. In his overview of New Institutionalism Farquharson noted the exhibition-as-education model as an emergent characteristic of New Institutionalism.

“New Institutions” are deeply interested in education in its widest sense: learning consists of equal exchanges among a peer group in which the ambitious level of discussion is not compromised. This contrasts with government-directed, top-down models of education prevalent in American and British art institutions, much of which is aimed at children.
with a view to supplementing, or compensating for the failings of, the state
school system.\textsuperscript{24}

While Anton Vidokle’s \textit{unitednationsplaza} was the outcome of a unique
coalesscence of events, people and timing, the moment around 2006 when it occurred and
when Alex Farquharson’s article appeared in \textit{frieze} marks a surge of activity in
contemporary art that sought to transform the exhibition into something else. That
something else occasionally entailed combining educational approaches with or as the
exhibition. The phenomenon of personalizing many things in order to give the individual
a unique experience is not isolated only to the arts. The early- to mid-2000s left us with
an unprecedented emphasis on the marketing of individual identity and the
personalization of digital personas. The corporate names (let alone functions) of
Myspace, YouTube and Facebook signal the placement of the individual above all else.\textsuperscript{25}

In our current predicament every word we write in emails and every post we make on
social networks are trolled and then analyzed in algorithms that supply and placate us
with consumer choices we have actually told information capital we want. Technology
constantlly tailors and refines our buying habits through the words we write and the things
we buy, watch and listen to online. One need also consider the number of artists whose
last names are followed by the suffix “.com” in website and email addresses and
inherently associate a commercial value to the identity of the artist. It should not be
surprising that similar trends to cater to the individual both from a marketing standpoint
and a mode of address begin to occur at this time in the exhibition of contemporary art.

\textsuperscript{24} Alex Farquharson, “Bureaux de change,” \textit{Frieze}, vol. X (September 2006): 158.
\textsuperscript{25} Myspace was launched in August 2003; Facebook was launched in February 2004; and YouTube was
created in February 2005.
As early as 2001 Charles Esche recognized,

Parallel to this huge political and cultural change has been growing demands from audiences for involvement and accountability as well as a new self-consciousness about the roles we wish to play in various social situations. The market is already developing these tendencies fast—from Levi’s new customizable clothes to Nike’s write your own logo on your shoes, corporations are attempting to provide us with more and more active choices within the confines of profitability.26

Charles Esche is the former director of the Rooseum in Malmö. Esche and the Rooseum were at the forefront in developing new institutional strategies that moved art into an active social arrangement with the spectator. In this process New Institutionalism adopted the corporate vernacular of industries such as media, corporate culture and science.27 “Construction site,” “laboratory,” “discussion platform,” “distribution channel” and “think tank” punctuate descriptions of this work. Esche advocated that new institutional spaces “have to be part-community center, part-laboratory and part-academy, with less need for the established showroom function.”28 Verksted, OCA’s periodical, is Norwegian for “workshop.” E-flux has a corporate ring to it. The overall adoption of language, such as discussion platform and think tank, however, could prove detrimental because it assigns an already-determined form of behavior to a supposedly new situation with art. Claire Doherty asks, “If the exhibitions and projects which have emerged through this discourse mimic the experience economy of the ‘real’ world, does this lead

to yet more coded patterns of behavior for visitors rather than potentially surprising or liberating points of engagement?“

Although New Institutionalism denounced the behavioral effects of the white cube, it risked reducing the possibility to negotiate freely in this different situation with art. Critics believed New Institutionalism moved too much in synchronicity with the changing modes of capital and its consumers’ desire for personalized experiences. The criticism is not unfounded given the benefit of our perspective over time. The requirement to participate in a specific way does not lessen the command an institution has over its public. This language threatens to define the site too rigidly, thus losing the critical potential that confusion and uncertainty often possess.

But it was more than just institutions and curators hailing these desires to alter activity inside the gallery. Recall that Nicolas Bourriaud wrote *Relational Aesthetics* in 1998; his book was a response and attempt to understand and articulate an art that began during that decade to utilize social forms as its medium. And, indeed, this was the nature of artistic practice that Charles Esche advocated the institution should accommodate with its part-laboratory, part-academy scheme. He believed that in order to support the turn in relational art, institutions also needed to change. Otherwise, he asks, “How can the public space of the art institution turn itself into a meeting place for contesting views and a place where ‘thinking things otherwise’ is made more possible than it is elsewhere.”

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Institutionalism and relational art emerged alongside one another within these complex conditions and with the art institution increasingly in a position of utilizing social forms in its institutional practices. Esche became as much a soundboard for this practice as a target.

**An Expansion of the Public Sphere**

In 2010 Office for Contemporary Art Norway organized the exhibition *Columns, Grottos, Niches: The Grammar of Forms* (*On Art Criticism, Writing, Publishing and Distribution*). The exhibition consisted of public events, presentations, installations and workshops that addressed the discursive roles that language, text, writing and publishing have in contemporary art. While it featured traditional forms of display, the objects were integrated with highly choreographed platforms for social interaction, attempting to create, as the institution’s press release states, “a public forum for learning, practice and exchange of knowledge and information, and further developing our [OCA] commitment to rethinking the relationship that a contemporary art institution can have to its audience.”


32 Ibid.

On their website and in printed materials, OCA informed visitors,

As a complement to this program of events, OCA will host a series of projects, including presentation of artworks and libraries of publications made available to the public for consultation and reading, further transforming OCA’s public space into a place for production and exchange of discourse.

The galleries were arranged not only for the visitor’s solitary contemplation of books and works of art but also became active learning sites within the institution. These spaces
encouraged physical interaction with objects and films. They also encouraged social connectivity among spectators, visiting artists and critics, many of whom sat on tiered bleachers placed inside the gallery where formal and informal discussions transpired.

To achieve these goals, in addition to the regular exhibition of its art and films, *The Grammar of Forms* consisted of thirteen events taking place over a period of six months. The events included a daylong series of presentations and discussions called “The Mind of This Death is Unrelentingly Awake’: A Workshop on Art, Criticism and the Institution of Critique.” Organized by the curator and critic Will Bradley, the workshop was divided into several sessions. For one, he hosted a conversation with visitors to talk about broad structural questions related to the intersections of art and critical writing. Questions included “How does critique take form?” “How does a text operate?” “What is the relationship between writer and text, text and reader?” and “How does a text reach an audience?” These kinds of questions were posed by artists in the 1960s and signal New Institutionalism’s genealogy in Conceptual art and institutional critique. But they also represent its move further into language and text as a technique for the dissemination of its ideas, a move away from concentrating on the visual and even the social and more on the production of its critical discourse through research and writing. As a description for one of Bradley’s workshops, the OCA website says, “Now, it is common for artists to also work as critics, and for artists to engage with contemporary

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33 OCA, “‘The Mind of This Death is Unrelentingly Awake’: A Workshop on Art, Criticism and the Institution of Critique,” http://www.oca.no/semesterplan/will_bradley.shtml.

34 Many examples could be drawn upon, but Maria Lind’s publication *European Cultural Policies 2015: A Report with Scenarios of the Future of Public Funding for Contemporary Art in Europe* in 2005 and her follow-up essay “The Future is Here” in 2007 are two related examples within the context of this study. They demonstrate the importance of critical writing and its distribution to these practices.
theory as an integral part of their practice, yet the institutional structures that mediate this discourse remain in place.\(^\text{35}\)

Another of Bradley’s workshops focused on the history of criticality in art. Films by a selection of artists associated with institutional critique were screened, including Hans Haacke, Michael Asher, Martha Rosler, Marcel Broodthaers and Andrea Fraser. (These films were also available for viewing independently on monitors placed inside the gallery.) In addition, at one event spectators read aloud a selection of critical texts by these artists. The approach to presenting the content of this work turned over the responsibility to a normally passive audience to realize it. In other words, the institution used this content as a basis to transform the exhibition into a performance, a performance devised by Bradley, the curator.

Will Bradley’s workshops were also accompanied by a suggested reading list of classic and contemporary texts, ranging from Robert Smithson’s “Language to be Looked at and/or Things to be Read” (1967) and Fredric Jameson’s “Symptoms of Theory or Symptoms for Theory?” (2004) to Claire Fontaine’s “Readymade Artist and Human Strike: A Few Clarifications” (2005) and Hito Steyerl’s “Institution of Critique” (2006). Bradley determined the list. Overall, the workshop was integral to *The Grammar of Forms*, not something constructed as an adjunct to the “main” exhibition happening elsewhere inside the institution. His workshops reveal the critically reflexive character of New Institutionalism that situates its own knowing position within the history of

Conceptual art and unites that position with forms of social engagement by inviting spectators to become charged agents through, in this case, the enunciation of the language of institutional critique.

Moreover, *The Grammar of Forms* reveals how OCA meticulously rearticulates the traditional exhibition site into an active platform where activity and ideas are produced in concert between the institution and the public. The tiered seating was important for this achievement. It was situated inside the gallery, amongst the objects on display. Its shape naturally encourages spectators to negotiate with one another as they adjust knees, backs, hands and feet into a temporary shared space. The form and location of this seating, combined with the responsibility the institution gave to otherwise complacent spectators, turned the entire exhibition site into an active space of spectators with works on display and ideas under discussion. This rupture is part of how Rancière rethinks the political to clear a path for acts of emancipation and to drive forward challenges to consensus. OCA used this dissensual approach to engage differently with ideas in art through processes of reducing hierarchies between spectator and institution. Its approach speaks to the politics of aesthetics embedded in a practice that, when successful, attains a redistribution of the sensible.

**What Ever Happened to New Institutionalism?**

*The Grammar of Forms* featured a display of artworks and films inside the gallery that spectators could view alone on their own terms. It was a communal space for them to linger on the tiered seating. It was also a site for organized, seminar-like discussions on topics related to and departing from the artworks on display. *The Grammar of Forms* was
many different things to many different visitors, achieving a balance that allowed multiple points of entry for experiencing the art and its ideas. Its multiplicity of possible functions and behaviors for both the institution and the spectator demonstrate the sensitivity with which OCA has learned to organize exhibitions with its public. While the overdetermination of activity about which Claire Doherty speculates is certainly an important factor for New Institutions to consider, *The Grammar of Forms* reveals the level of sophistication these critical approaches to exhibition making can achieve. The exhibition-as-education model that *unitednationsplaza* applied exclusively and *The Grammar of Forms* used selectively are just two examples of how pedagogical models are productively applied to the exhibition form.

The caution Doherty heeds about inscribing the exhibition with a specific kind of behavior, however, should not be underestimated. Practitioners of New Institutionalism are aware of this predicament, and so the terms “experimental,” “unpredictable” and “open-ended” are often used to describe it. The words attest to the ideological goals of essentially not becoming institution, of always maintaining a state of flux in the kind of engagement set up among spectator, institution and art. Charles Esche discusses this aspect of continually becoming institution. In his talk “Can everything be temporary? Art, institutions and fluidity” he advocates for transitory institutional activity. He theorizes the institution can be something temporary that does not take on a fixed identity and, consequently, a fixed behavior with it. By emphasizing the temporary (meaning, lasting only a few years), an institution in flux can continually pose new forms of resistance against the calcification of being institution. The temporary nature of *unitednationsplaza*
was in fact a beneficial asset to its overall success. What if, for instance, it operated on a long-term basis? Over an extended period, the intellectual rigor and commitment demanded from spectators could reduce it to the formation of a limited, micro community. As a long-term institution model the work could form an inclusive public sphere, instead of an expansive one.

Temporality is indeed both an asset and liability. The impetus to continually rethink the critical attitude resonates with what we know from Michel Foucault in his analysis of Kant’s *Aufklärung*. *Aufklärung* is more than just a pointed resistance; it is something a public does together on an ongoing basis to constantly invent and reinvent challenges in order to produce new forms of governing, because they too eventually become sedentary. Critique must move along and constantly reexamine itself.36 But the reality of maintaining a position of continual transition is a difficult task for any art institution, large or small. The long-term sustainability through the inscription of a fixed behavior is one of the problems that new institutions face. Nina Möntmann observes in her 2009 essay “The Rise and Fall of New Institutionalism: Perspectives on a Possible Future” that many new institutions like Rooseum in Malmö have not survived, or funding has been drastically cut.

What is not wanted, in short, is criticality. Criticality did not survive the “corporate turn” in the institutional landscape. This is not only due to the larger institutions that are run like branded global companies in an obvious way, like the Guggenheim, which provides the clearest example of how an

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36 Rancière writes, “The work of dissensus is to always reexamine the boundaries between what is supposed to be normal and what is supposed to be subversive, between what is supposed to be active, and therefore political, and what is supposed to be passive or distant, and therefore apolitical.” See Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey, “Art of the Possible: Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey in Conversation with Jacques Rancière,” *Artforum*, vol. 45, no. 7 (March 2007): 267.
institution is conceived and staged by politicians and sponsors. More and more this also applies to mid-size and smaller institutions.37

What ever happened to New Institutionalism? While the term never caught on, its activity is part of the general landscape of contemporary art today. Dispersed and atomized, it exists at small and large institutions and artist- and curator-run initiatives worldwide. Every day e-flux announces exhibitions with various experimental formats and programs that speak to the challenges New Institutionalism posed. In fact, e-flux’s existence enacts various new methods of engaging a public differently through the knowledge it produces and disseminates and the exhibitions it stages. Large museum programs are punctuated with variations on alternative modes of exhibition making. They can sometimes seem like New Institutionalism “lite,” or à la carte, quick to capitalize on the spectator as a consumer and their experience a commodity. Alas, as mentioned earlier, that situation is complex and part of broader circumstances faced by contemporary society, where neoliberal event economies cater to the visitor in ways that are simultaneously entertaining, educational and spectacular. While the galleries at large industrial museums are being charged with something else, whether using educational or social forms, this arena can still be a playground for a public who pays dearly for it. But, as Simon Sheikh observes with regard to this last point, it is not only the impetus of institutions but also a consuming public with an insatiable desire for spectacle.

The people, it is said, are not generally interested in something as particular as art, unless this art can be seen as part of the culture, or more accurately, the entertainment industry. The public sphere is here conceived

of truly populist terms: give the people what they want, which is always bread and circuses.\textsuperscript{38}

**Carsten Höller: Down a Slide**

Carsten Höller may not give spectators bread, but he entertains them with experiences akin to circuses, carnivals and amusement parks.\textsuperscript{39} In 2001 he told Hans Ulrich Obrist, “My objects are tools or devices with a specified use, which is to create a moment of slight confusion or to induce hallucinations in the widest sense. That is why I call them confusion machines.”\textsuperscript{40} Höller holds a PhD in agricultural entomology. He studied the function of scent in the attraction of insects to one another and to plants. He combines methods of scientific studies and experimentation that expand possibilities for art and artistic practice. His exhibitions-cum-test sites involve humans strapped into flying machines, put into spinning tops and spheres, seated under gigantic upside-down mushrooms, inhaling love-inducing hormones, suspended in harnesses for sexual coupling and cohabitating with other species such as mosquitos and pigs. He strives to shift art’s emphasis away from representation and contemplation of objects to intuitive behaviors and immediate perceptions. This world of Carsten Höller elicits confusion and doubt. But its uncertain ground is fertile for exploring the value of innate human reactions to different physical, visual, physiological and sensual encounters. “Perceptual


\textsuperscript{39} David Joselit refers to the use of the phrase “carnival-like” to describe Höller’s works in his review of *Carsten Höller: Experience*. See David Joselit, “Carsten Höller,” *Artforum*, vol. 50, no. 6 (February 2012): 219. In January 2012 the New Museum hosted a panel discussion titled “The Timid Should Stay Home”: Encountering the Funhouse,” a consideration of the phenomenon of the funhouse in the context of Höller’s exhibition. *Carsten Höller: Experience* was described on the New Museum’s website as transforming the museum into a “funhouse.” The description was subsequently changed, removing that word. His 2006 exhibition at MASS MoCA was titled “Amusement Park.”

instability and voluptuous panic,” as Hal Foster writes, “are precisely what the confusion machines of Doctor Höller work to induce.”

Tubular metal slides are one form of Höller’s confusion machines. Among the first, Valerio I and Valerio II were installed for the Berlin Biennale at the Kunst-Werke Berlin in 1998. Titles for these early slides refer to the yelping call “Valerio” that originated in Italy in the late 1990s. As the story goes, “a sound technician at a concert disappeared and someone in the audience pretended to know his name and shouted ‘Valerio!’” A synchronized chorus ensued calling for his return. The phenomenon spread across Europe at concerts and sporting events—anytime the entertainment spectacle in crowded arenas momentarily lapses. As far as its significance to the slides, Höller says, “There is something about the sound of this name that makes you want to shout it loud. You feel a little better after you’ve done it, just like after having traveled down a slide.”

Höller’s slides have been installed temporarily at numerous exhibition venues, including the Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb, Tate Modern in London, Kunst-Werke in Berlin, ICA in Boston, Kiasma in Helsinki and the New Museum in New York. Without a doubt the slides cause an immediate and momentary loss of oneself as spectators spiral down the chutes shouting loudly with joy, panic or fear. Often without a

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clear line of sight, spectators shed ingrained behaviors in an art institution. Missing are the objects and the ideas. Missing are the labels, everything that separates them and a supposed understanding of the artwork. The experience of Höller’s slides transpires inside spectators’ mind and body because they are the biological subject and object. Through this work, he attempts to re-territorialize the original function of the museum as a public sphere, a spatial situation reliant upon the individual or group as part of its curatorial technique. This technique, as we know from Habermas, involved spectators in its mode of address by initiating debate and conversation about art in accordance with and for them. The art did not address them through empirical forms and data that separate spectator, institution and object; spectators spoke about it as part of the function of the public sphere. Rancière summarizes these early functions of the museum in relation to human perception. In an interview he says,

[The museum] creates the possibility of new forms of perception that can also be implemented in the relation of people to their lived experience. And those new forms of perception in turn took part in the creation of new forms of social exchange and collective political subjectivization.⁴⁴

Höller’s slides and other devices and environments prioritize altered states and sensational lived experiences that are ontologically intrinsic to the spectator. These sensations do not and cannot exist without them, and thus the meaning of the work for Höller is in the fleeting experience.

The slides also have a practical purpose. At most institutions they serve as quick and easy connections to different floors of the exhibition venue. Since the first slides in

Berlin, they have become more elaborate and complex, appearing most spectacularly in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern in London. In the exhibition *Carsten Höller: Test Site* in 2006–2007, five different stainless-steel and polycarbonate slides ranging in size from 52 to 190 feet in length bridged the ground floor with the second, third, fourth and fifth floors. The Turbine Hall’s cavernous space does not have the same impress upon spectators as the white walls and cloistered galleries of a conventional museum, so the slides were less a challenge to the modernist gallery than an addition to the energetic atmosphere. The Turbine Hall once housed electricity generators for the former occupant, Bankside Power Station. Today it is the grand entrance and gathering point for museum visitors. One of the most visited museums in the world, Tate Modern is a frenetically charged social space. The museum received a record 5.2 million visitors in the year encompassing the period of Höller’s exhibition. Three-quarters of a million of them corkscrewed down his slides.45

In addition to five slides installed inside the Turbine Hall, *Test Site* included a feasibility study to determine whether “slides are, or could be, a beneficial and practical addition to the life and fabric of the city.”46 The study was produced by General Public Agency, a London-based creative consultancy working in urban and rural regeneration strategies through researches into social and cultural conditions of a public realm. The exhibition publication has a facsimile of a detailed and full report by General Public Agency, which includes research, information and assessments about the possibilities of

slides becoming a permanent fixture of urban life in London. The agency concluded that “slides do not fit neatly into preconceived notions of what public space contains. Their adoption would require a committed and experimental approach from a developer and local authority to creating a new form of public realm.” But Höller has already proven it is possible to transform the public sphere. Less than twenty years ago, slides would not have been an option for art inside a museum. Höller, alongside the changing conditions in contemporary art, has reconfigured that public sphere into something new. The use of the exhibition at Tate Modern was a literal test site to explore these possibilities for how people can move about within urban space.

Not unlike the installation at Tate Modern, Carsten Höller: Experience at the New Museum in 2011–2012 also featured a slide. In this career survey of the artist, spectators could move 102 feet from the fourth floor through the third floor and onto the second floor in a matter of seconds The clear plastic tubing allowed visitors in the third-floor gallery to catch a momentary glimpse of this activity. As Höller implies prior to the opening of the exhibition, it was all part of the experiment.

You will be able to see the madness in their faces for a split second, and then—zup—they will be gone. It’s a very odd thing with a slide; it’s quite an efficient way to go from place to place, but it is also like a barely controlled fall. It’s a very specific kind of madness to go down one.

Spectators had a rich sampling of the devices and environments by Höller, whether it was coursing down the slide; wandering aimlessly in the inverted world made

47 See Carsten Höller and Jessica Morgan, Carsten Höller: Test Site (London: Tate, 2006).
49 Randy Kennedy, “Is It Art, Science or a Test of People?,” New York Times, Arts Section (October 25, 2011).
by *Upside-Down Goggles* (2009/2011); relaxing on padded benches watching fish circle overhead in *Aquarium* (1996); floating naked in the sensory deprivation chamber filled with salinized water and heated to the temperature of the human body in *Giant Psycho Tank* (1999); rotating slowly on *Mirror Carousel* (2005); listening to the singsong of *Singing Canaries Mobile* (2009); or curiously wondering if the amphetamine-like substance in *Love Drug (PEA)* (1993/2011) took effect.

*Experience* presented works from the past twenty years that gave an overall cross-section of the range and scale of the artist’s work. But any exhibition survey can be challenging for the viewer and the art because sheer abundance can dilute it. For relational art such as Höller’s, whose confusion machines are premised upon unfamiliarity and doubt, overabundance can reduce unexpected perceptual encounters the art seeks to make. The exhibition had the unfortunate cast of a conventional modernist display of objects due to the number of works and the progression of spectators from one to another. There were no mediating labels informing spectators about each work. But warning labels posted throughout the galleries and waivers that visitors signed at the museum entrance thwarted some of the experimental uncertainty on which Höller’s art is predicated.50 These labels made sure spectators knew that discomfort could arise from flashing lights, adverse effects could occur by inhaling the love drug and the slide was off limits to those with back pain, susceptibility to bruising, heart conditions or pregnancy.

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50 David Joselit is highly critical of the extraordinary number of warning labels and waivers issued by the New Museum and their diminishing effect on the work. See David Joselit, “Carsten Höller,” *Artforum*, vol. 50, no. 6 (February 2012): 219.
The New Museum had no choice but to issue these warnings. In London, for example, a woman who sustained injuries to her right hand on the slides filed a claim against the museum. Apparently it was not the first incident, as a Tate representative is quoted as saying, “All of these injuries have been caused by visitors who have not followed the instructions for using the slides.”

While the New Museum sought to avoid trouble with the slide by requiring visitors to sign waivers, Giant Psycho Tank was problematic. It was originally intended to hold groups of six visitors. The New York Health Department, just days after the opening of the exhibition, cited that quantity as a violation of health code and determined that only one visitor at a time could enter. Some visitors eventually complained about ear infections after floating in Giant Psycho Tank. These hurdles, of course, are rooted in our litigious culture and the practical necessity to take precaution for public safety. In any case, they signify the difficulty of transforming the public sphere of a major museum into a site that involves the spectator so intricately in the function of works of art. This rang especially true in Höller’s case, where uncertainty prevails. It is not always something warmly welcomed by institutions.

Joselit interprets the waivers as a case where the New Museum simply transferred liability and cost to paying visitors. “This was really and truly relational aesthetics from the perspective of the 1 percent, with the New Museum channeling the neoliberal state by transferring liability (whether physical or financial) onto its ‘citizens’ (museumgoers). But unlike the United States, the New Museum isn’t afraid to raise its taxes—or in this case the price of admission, which has been ‘temporarily’ raised from twelve to sixteen dollars to ‘help it pay for the extra staff needed to shepherd museumgoers through Mr. Höller’s carnival-like pieces.’” See David Joselit, “Carsten Höller,” *Artforum*, vol. 50, no. 6 (February 2012): 219.

“The Tate Modern Sued over Injury on Höller Slide,” *Artforum* online, http://artforum.com/archive/id=12839 (February 27, 2007).
Conclusion

On the Road

In her 1990 essay “The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum,” Rosalind Krauss draws parallels between recent activity in contemporary art and Fredric Jameson’s theory of the logic of advanced capitalism. As part of her study, she summarizes a story told to her by Thomas Krens, former director of the Guggenheim Museum, about a drive he took on the German Autobahn.

It was a November day in 1985, and having just seen a spectacular gallery made from a converted factory building, he was driving by large numbers of other factories. Suddenly, he said, he thought of the huge abandoned factories in his own neighborhood of North Adams, and he had the revelation of MASS MoCA. Significantly, he described this revelation as transcending anything like the mere availability of real estate. Rather, he said, it announced an entire change. […] A profound and sweeping change, that is, within the very conditions within which art itself is understood.¹

This understanding, she continues,

[…] would forego history in the name of a kind of intensity of experience, an aesthetic charge that is not so much temporal (historical) as it is now radically spatial, the model for which, in Krens’s own account, was, in fact, Minimalism. It is Minimalism, Krens says in relation to his revelation, that has reshaped the way we, as late-twentieth-century viewers, look at art: the demands we now put on it; our need to experience it along with its interaction with the space in which it exists; our need to

have a cumulative, serial, crescendo towards the intensity of this experience; our need to have more and at a larger scale.²

As we recall, in the 1966 Artforum interview Tony Smith relayed a similar revelation about art while taking a drive—this one on the New Jersey Turnpike in the early 1950s. He told Samuel Wagstaff, “The experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized. I thought to myself, it ought to be clear that’s the end of art.”³ Minimalism may not have brought an end to art, but it introduced the spatial and temporal into making, evaluating and understanding it. It expanded perceptions of art beyond pure visuality to encompass bodily involvement, and that incorporation of the spectator disrupted Michael Fried’s aesthetic criteria based on medium specificity and visual immediacy. While the shift away from this criteria initiated a release from the grips of his orthodoxy, it consequently leveraged the spectator into a transformative function of the work of art and opened the door, as Rosalind Krauss observes, “to let that whole world of late capitalist production right back in,” eventually inserting it into another function—this one economic—of advanced capitalism.⁴

Not unlike Alfred Barr’s influential experience in a different German city in the late 1920s, the story Thomas Krens relays to Rosalind Krauss signals yet another major shift enacted by another major museum director on the future of artistic production and exhibition. Krens’s premonition anticipates the instrumentalization of the spectator in this long corporate turn in contemporary art and exhibitions. In this study I have attempted to

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² Ibid.
reveal how we arrived at this moment where the critique originally posed by artists, curators and institutions in their aim to rethink the exhibition as a critical form by engaging the spectator differently begins to function within the cultural logic of advanced capitalism. Their work becomes diluted and absorbed into a representation of the critique it originally posed and part of a new distribution of the sensible. Now, in addition to media, advertising and information circulating the once critical images of, say, war and protests, this new representation of a critique involving the bodily experience of the spectator intensifies, reinforces and feeds yet another form of production: the industry of contemporary art. Exhibitions like Carsten Höller’s come to us by way of this circular logic.

*Carsten Höller: Experience* at the New Museum reflects this evolution of contemporary art, economics, entertainment and spectatorship. The work of Höller and other artists and curators of his generation associated with relational art and New Institutionalism posed many different possibilities and futures for art and its institutions. They saw the exhibition as a viable form through which fluidity, unpredictability and instability in art could be inserted. This activity possessed an underlying critique that sought to redefine the contemporary art exhibition and its relationship with the spectator. Today, however, artistic and curatorial strategies like Höller’s that emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s find themselves in a contradictory predicament. Their use of social forms in exhibitions sought to break free from institutional constructs only to find themselves entangled in others: as fuel for the industries of museum and biennial entertainment, municipal economies and cultural tourism.
The newfound freedom from modernist aesthetics “undergirded” the rise of Minimalism, but it also introduced other problems for understanding and assessing the aesthetic qualities of this new art. When Robert Smithson extended the spectator’s involvement in art to encompass the spatial and temporal contexts of the gallery, he pushed further the function of the spectator initiated by Minimalism. In these complex conditions, capital has subsequently assigned a market value to lived bodily experiences. Still, Smithson and Minimalist artists, among others, brought the exhibition into a critical form, signaling a fall from one aesthetic regime. This release from the shackles of historical determinism did not, however, alleviate the need to hold art accountable for its fertile and critical position as art through yet other models of aesthetic assessment. Nicolas Bourriaud and Jacques Rancière understand that quite well, as is evident in their theoretical projects.

As we begin to historicize the art of the 1990s and early 2000s, and grapple with its genealogy, we realize the need to continually question the viability of critical forms of art—and march toward new ones. The work I examine in this study poses challenges to the consensual conception, production and exhibition of art. It represents ruptures in conventional artistic and institution practice. These ruptures are reasons why I consider these artists as beacons, producing incremental steps toward a new aesthetics of the political; their work reveals potential for engaging differently with the spectator and staying ahead of the encroaching grips of global capitalism.

This potential, which I derive in part from studying Rancière’s philosophy of art, politics and aesthetics, is located in the efficacy of their critical position. The points and effectiveness of their critiques are mixed. They range from Robert Smithson’s challenges to the puritanism of Fried and Greenberg’s modernism, Michael Asher’s assaults on the pristine architecture of a modernist gallery, Group Material’s transformation of the Whitney Biennial into a critique of American culture and how curatorial practice constructs a singular vision of American art—to Harald Szeemann’s frenetic activation of Kunsthalle Bern into a dynamic working studio, Nicolas Bourriaud’s attack on modernist aesthetics, Thomas Hirschhorn’s cooptation of spectators into a single worldwide army and Anton Vidokle’s control of technical apparatuses that distribute and support his work. These artworks and ideas, for the most part, operate in the social structures and logic of the institution of art, meaning the hierarchies of producing, exhibiting and distributing art.

While they have destabilized those channels, they have done so within the exhibition and the art institution. When momentary fissures in institutional limitations form, a new aesthetics of the political emerges, as work by these artists attests. This aesthetics is a space that allows the spectator to see the world with new meaning by creating a new perception and commitment to its transformation. It expands what we think is possible within the realm of art because it is removed from the aesthetics already conditioned in countless everyday representations, images and experiences. Art has the capacity to change the appearance of things, and that is what gives it the potential for a politics of aesthetics.
This work proposed alternative models for connecting art with its public. By building upon developments of the late 1960s, it led us to radically question the role and function of art and its institutions. Given the political exigencies of the age, a state of “grace,” to use Fried’s term, was neither a viable nor desirable option. Today, we are again at a crossroads and with the continued need to question, so that criticality remains alive, relevant and potent against new incursions. Through the work of artists, curators and institutions put forward in this dissertation, that challenge is carried to the present moment. Their work unequivocally signals dissensus, which is the crux of art’s critical capacity. We turn one last time to Jacques Rancière:

The fundamental question is to explore the possibility of maintaining spaces of play. To discover how to produce forms for the presentation of objects, forms for the organization of spaces, that thwart expectations. The main enemy of artistic creativity as well as of political creativity is consensus—that is, inscription within given roles, possibilities, and competences.6

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Bibliography


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