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Foregrounding a Contemporary Mode of Realism: The Work of Santiago Sierra

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Foregrounding a Contemporary Mode of Realism:

The Work of Santiago Sierra

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by

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Abstract

The thesis seeks to locate Spanish artist Santiago Sierra (b. 1960) in the realist tradition and examine how his work renews and furthers the realist model in art and philosophy. It concentrates on issues of performance and representation, and their relation to the economic, social, and political reality of global capitalism. The study identifies and discusses the stakes of this contemporary mode of realism, the premise of which is not to simply mirror, but to actually enact instances of capitalist exploitation, thereby confusing the realms of aesthetic fabrication and real occurrence. While Sierra offers a mode of responding to the contemporary world by doubling it, the contention of the thesis is that this doubling is radically destabilizing. In exploring the fundamental instability of subject positions in Sierra’s work, the study demonstrates that the artist disrupts the often comfortable habits of art viewers, leading them to reassess the ways in which they relate to their social environment, and consequently unsettling art-viewing and art-making practices. The thesis posits that Sierra’s work of destabilization simultaneously performs and hypothesizes the logic of capitalism. By denaturalizing prevalent notions of capitalism, Sierra deconstructs these conceptions as self-evident reality and exposes their contingent character.
Contents

Acknowledgments...........................................................................................................v

List of figures...................................................................................................................vi

Introduction.....................................................................................................................1

Chapter 1 – Doubling and Destabilizing Reality:

The Place of Sierra’s Work in the Realist Tradition......................................................10

Chapter 2 – Suspending the Ethical:

Moral Conundrums in Sierra’s Work.............................................................................24

Chapter 3 – Exposing the Contingency of Reality:

Political Subversion in Sierra’s Work...........................................................................41

Conclusion.......................................................................................................................55

Figures.............................................................................................................................60

Bibliography...................................................................................................................70
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how important this project has been to me, and for giving me the strength to continue when I felt overwhelmed.
List of Figures


Figure 1: *160 cm line tattooed on 4 people.* El Gallo Arte Contemporaneo. Salamanca, Spain. December 2000.

Figure 2: *24 blocks of concrete constantly moved during a day’s work by paid workers.* ACE Gallery L.A., Los Angeles, United States. July 1999.

Figure 3: *100 hidden individuals.* Calle Dóctor Fouquet, Madrid, Spain. November 2003.

Figure 4: *Object measuring 600 x 57 x 52 cm constructed to be held horizontally to a wall.* Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich, Switzerland. April 2001.


Figures 7.a and 7.b: *Group of persons facing the wall and person facing into a corner.* Lisson Gallery, London, United Kingdom, October 2002.

Figure 8: *No in Carrara Marble and Vaseline.* Piazza Brucellaria, ex Montecatini, XIV Biennale Internazionale di Scultura di Carrara, Carrara, Italy. July 2010.

Figure 9: *10 people paid to masturbate.* Tejadillo Street, Havan, Cuba. November 2000.


Introduction

“The machine writes the sentence on the body of the condemned, recto and verso. Or rather, it cuts it into his body until he dies, bloodless.” This is how French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard describes the mechanism of the Harrow, a torture device that appears in Franz Kafka’s short story “In the Penal Colony.”¹ The Harrow is the instrument of the law, and it proceeds to a double execution: that of the law’s prescriptions and that of the body. More specifically, it executes the law’s prescriptions by executing the body. The body is the target of punishment because of its aesthetic character, its “sinful potentiality,” derived from our primal state of infancy.² To this “aesthetic” birth, Lyotard opposes the “ethical” birth, the moment of socialization and individuation. The law must redress the primordial fault, which persists in the body even after the ethical birth has occurred, by literally carving its prescriptions onto the body, making it bleed to death.

The Harrow, with its unflinching drive to defeat this excess of a primordial existence, stands for social domination, which also exerts itself on the body. 160 cm line tattooed on 4 people (2000) (fig.1), a piece by Spanish artist Santiago Sierra, born in Madrid in 1960 and working internationally, primarily in Spain and Mexico, vividly conveys this idea.³ This performance features four Spanish prostitutes, whom Sierra recruited to have a continuous line permanently inscribed across their backs:

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² Ibid., 179.
³ Santiago Sierra, 160 cm line tattooed on 4 people, displayed at El Gallo Arte Contemporaneo, Salamanca, Spain, December 2000.
Four prostitutes addicted to heroin were hired for the price of a shot of heroin to give their consent to be tattooed. Normally they charge 2,000 or 3,000 pesetas, between 15 and $17, for fellatio, while the price of a shot of heroin is around 12,000 pesetas, about $67.4

The artist’s needle corresponds to the harrow, in that it irreversibly carves and subdues the body. While the prostitutes participating in Sierra’s performance do not literally die, they still lose ownership of and agency over their own bodies, as they are not given the option to discuss the inscription with the artist before it indelibly marks their skins. This is reminiscent of the capitalist use of labor outlined by Karl Marx in his seminal text *Capital*, according to which workers are dispossessed of their bodies because the latter are entirely dedicated to the production of an object that the former do not get to enjoy. In addition, capitalism reduces workers to abstract and equivalent units of labor, canceling the specificity of their work.5 The continuous and linear pattern imprinted across the backs of the four prostitutes signals the process of abstraction described by Marx. Finally, the remuneration provided to the four women—a dose of heroin—only reinstates their marginal status, accentuating the sense of dispossession already experienced through labor.

With *160 cm line tattooed on 4 people* (2000), Sierra underscores structures of domination and submission evident in the current world order, which is characterized by its global dimension, as Italian and American political theorists Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt have stated in their influential book *Empire*.6 According to Hardt and Negri, the current world order takes the form of an Empire ruled by international political organizations and multinational corporations, its democratic element being secured by non-governmental organizations. Its

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imperialism stems from “the globalization of productive networks,” the “envelop[ing of] all power relations,” and the deployment of “a powerful police function against the new barbarians and the rebellious slaves who threaten its order.” The emergence, in Sierra’s work, of cases of domination, submission, and exploitation, which are emblematic of global capitalism, problematically raises the question of the role of art. In artworks such as 160 cm line tattooed on 4 people, the artist in turn becomes a perpetrator of exploitation and injustice, cornering his audience into a position of complicity. In fact, Sierra is known for his controversial work, often regarded as a series of exploitative actions, as it involves hiring socially marginalized people to have them perform futile tasks, such as, for example, moving heavy blocks of cement, repeat a sentence, or have their hair dyed blond, in exchange for an insignificant compensation. The “laborers” that Sierra recruits count among the disenfranchised of the world, including prostitutes, as we have already seen, but also illegal immigrants, homeless people, or drug addicts from various countries. The context in which Sierra’s work emerges, and which it reproduces, is that of global capitalism from Mexico City to New York and Berlin, and its manifestations comprise instances of class and racial exclusions as well as labor alienation.

In the sense that Sierra’s work produces actual social situations, I attribute a performative dimension to it. According to J. L. Austin, a speech utterance is performative (as opposed to constative) when it does not simply refer to a situation, but also makes it happen. Sierra’s work effects a similar phenomenon, considering that his artworks simultaneously represent and produce real instances of capitalist exploitation. It is, therefore, the real quality of Sierra’s

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8 For example: *24 blocks of concrete constantly moved during a day’s work by paid workers* (ACE Gallery, Los Angeles, USA, 1999); *Person saying a phrase* (New Street, Birmingham, UK, 2002); *133 persons paid to have their hair dyed blond* (Arsenale, Venice, Italy, 2001).

performances which endows them with a performative capacity. In the context of Sierra’s practice, I take the term “reality” (as well as its derivative nouns and adjectives such as “real-ness” and “real”) to refer to social dynamics, relations, and situations which are observable outside of the realm of art, independent of artistic construction. Sierra’s artworks function as performances insofar as they involve real individuals and their bodies executing a specific task. Because Sierra’s participants are not acting (the performance does not interrupt, but extends their laboring condition and social marginality) and are remunerated for their labor, performance pertains here to the “real-ness” of the artwork.

While I will refer to Sierra’s artworks as performances, I will also consistently call them installations and performance-installations, as most combine formal elements of both performance and installation. The performed tasks often require standing, sitting, or lying still, for instance facing a wall, holding a large and heavy piece of wood to a wall, or sit inside cardboard boxes for a duration of several hours. Conversely, when the performance does require movement, what the artwork viewed by the audience presents are the remnants of the performed activity. The presentation of remnants, which metonymically recall labor, is evident in 24 blocks of concrete constantly moved during a day’s work by paid workers (1999) (fig.2). In this work, performed at the Los Angeles ACE Gallery, Sierra asked ten workers of Mexican or Central American origin to:

continually move the 24 pieces [cement blocks weighing up to two tons] along the spaces of the gallery, while disregarding any resulting damage and using only metal bars as handles. The exposed result consisted of marks left behind by their work in the form of damage to the floor and walls of the gallery.

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10 For example: Hooded woman seated facing the wall (Spanish Pavilion, Venice, Italy, 2003); Object measuring 600 x 57 x 52 constructed to be held horizontally to a wall (Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich, Switzerland, 2001); 8 people paid to remain inside cardboard boxes (G&T Building, Guatemala City, Guatemala, 1999).
together with the tools and materials employed by the workers, the remains of food and drink and the concrete blocks.\textsuperscript{11}

Installation remains an important component of Sierra’s work, denoting its compositional aspect: whether the laboring body is invoked literally or metonymically, the artist provides instructions dictating the participants’ movements and/or motionless postures, turning the performances into sculptural pieces. This compositionality points to the ontological instability of Sierra’s work: the blurring of art and reality, more than their mere intersection which implies that one can still tell them apart.

By enabling the social and political realities of global capitalism to emerge within and through art, that is, through the artwork itself, Sierra eliminates the distancing often resulting from representation, favoring instead immediacy, and perhaps annulling the redemptive dimension that one usually ascribes to art. Instead, the artist delivers a vision of the world stripped of the veneer of social cohesion.\textsuperscript{12} If Sierra’s work offers little chance of emancipation, I contend that his practice aims at something radically different from this traditional conception of art, as it actively seeks to instill unease. In order to evacuate all sense of social cohesion, Sierra reinvents the rules of audience implication, rejecting both mere contemplation and full participation. Neither active participants (Sierra usually hires his participants from the social margins), nor passive spectators, viewers are involuntarily implicated in the artwork, which traps them in a definitive state of discomfort. The work confronts the viewers by exposing a crude instance of exploitation, which they witness as mere passers-by.


\textsuperscript{12} Arguably, because it abruptly modifies our perception of the world, Sierra’s art remains redemptive in some way, but negatively so. It does not permit emancipation per se, generating instead a discomforting awareness on the audience’s part.
The performance *100 hidden individuals* (2003) (fig.3), which consists of “100 unemployed individuals…hidden in different points of the street for a period of four hours,” is a fitting example of the involuntary and inescapable implication of the audience.\(^{13}\) The performance, originally set in Calle Dóctor Fourquet, a street in Madrid, makes Sierra’s unemployed, already marginalized participants literally invisible, contributing further to their marginality. However, its documentation in a twenty-minute film, which Sierra’s audience can watch in the gallery space, makes their invisibility conspicuous. The artwork thus doubles the urban setting by presenting a familiar environment while also estranging the audience from it, now that it is filled with this invisible yet overwhelming presence. Because it infiltrates the fabric of society, the artwork faces its unwitting audience with the reality of social marginalization. The viewers are directly implicated in the artwork and the reality that it conveys, through the tacit knowledge that they now share with both the artist (the culprit from whom this instance of social marginality stemmed) and the participants (the actual unemployed people who reiterated their own marginality by hiding their bodies in the street).

It is important to consider here the fact that other, more traditional artworks share this reliance on paid labor, for example many of Edouard Manet’s paintings. The difference that I want to emphasize, though, is how direct the encounter between the paid participants and the audience is in Sierra’s work, since it is less mediated by representation. Sierra’s performances qualify as artworks and therefore there remains a degree of representation. Nonetheless, the degree of representation is diminished by the fact that the social fabric in which the artwork is grounded is literally present, not re-presented. As a result, while the viewers of Manet’s paintings may still decide to ignore the fact that real people were paid to serve as models in their

actual condition of laborers—I’m thinking here of the waitress depicted in *A Bar At The Folies Bergère* (1882)—Sierra’s audience becomes hostage to this knowledge. Inescapably aware of the social dynamics triggered by capitalism, the audience experiences no relief, only unshakable unease, which extends beyond the gallery space to the street where the invisible presence of social marginality has been established.

Sierra’s work causes dissensus, to borrow French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s term. Abandoning all didactic pursuits, Sierra allows for the viewers to step out of their comfort zone and try out different social positions, often complicit with exploitative gestures, as is the case with *100 Hidden Individuals*. As American art historian Claire Bishop notes in her essay “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” this type of participation differs from other forms of relational art, such as the work of British artist Liam Gillick for example. In *(The What If? Scenario) Dining Table* (1996), displayed at Robert Prime Gallery in London, Gillick invites the audience to activate the artwork by offering them the playful opportunity to make any use they wish of a ping-pong table located in the center of the gallery room. Without a net, and with glitter scattered throughout its surface, the table becomes a site of gathering for play, discussion, or even feasting, as the title suggests. Far from inducing unease, the piece aims to produce interactions that renew the social consensus instead of disturbing it.

*100 hidden individuals* is not disturbing simply because of the reality that it allows the audience to experience. Its radicality originates from the ineluctable feeling of vacuity with which it leaves us, as if it were impossible to maintain a firm grasp on the reality that surrounds us. Sierra’s artworks contaminate our social environment to the point that they irreparably

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challenge our habitual perception of it. After viewing Sierra’s work, reality appears as a malleable dimension, the perception of which is never definitive, but rather subject to upsetting changes. It is precisely because it dislodges our comfortable ways of relating to our social surroundings that Sierra’s work is radical. His work resembles in many ways that of Danish artist Jens Haaning, who created a series of projects consisting of jokes broadcast in Turkish and Arabic via loudspeakers in the streets of major Western cities, such as Athens, Oslo, or Bordeaux (1994 and 1996). This “jokes” series is unsettling because it estranges unwitting listeners from their familiar environment, underlining critical issues such as xenophobia and the segregation of ethnic communities. My contention is that Sierra’s practice is inscribed in, and significantly contributes to this important trend of contemporary art seeking to destabilize reality, that is, the way that we perceive the society in which we live.

To the extent that Sierra does not simply depict the social and political reality of capitalism, but actually produces instances of it, his artistic practice foregrounds a contemporary mode of realism. The first chapter of this study will trace the evolution of the concept of realism since the nineteenth century in order to clarify the aesthetic continuity in which Sierra’s art is inscribed, emphasizing his indebtedness to several realist traditions. It will emphasize Sierra’s inflection of the unsettling character of realism, as it doubles reality in a destabilizing manner, causing the viewers to relate uncomfortably with their immediate social environment. The second chapter will tackle the ethical conundrums generated by Sierra’s work, imprisoning each and every one of us in a state of guilt and powerlessness. Sierra’s resolution to exit the ethical paradigm, that is, his refusal to take a clearly identifiable ethical stance in the face of capitalist exploitation because it only serves the system in the end, takes artistic participation at a whole new level, making it impossible to dissociate oneself from what one witnesses. Finally, the third
chapter will focus on the political subversion that Sierra’s work paradoxically effects through its reaffirmation of the system. This subversion eventually results in a destabilizing picture reducing reality, or rather, our perception of it, to a void. The nothingness at the core of Sierra’s work—the fundamental futility and absurdity of his performances and installations—matches the vacuous and contingent character of reality, which is irrevocable only insofar as we perceive it to be so.
Chapter One:

Doubling and Destabilizing Reality: The Place of Sierra’s Work in the Realist Tradition

I try to do things that are the most natural in the world. At the moment I do the work of an interior or an organizer of exclusive events for the cultural elite. What I do is refuse to deny the principles that underlie the creation of an object of luxury: from the watchman who sits next to a Monet for eight hours a day, to the doorman who controls who comes in, to the sources of the funds used to buy the collection. I try to include all this, and therein lies the little commotion about remuneration that my pieces have caused.

It is with this surprisingly lucid description of his own practice that Santiago Sierra responded to Mexican artist Teresa Margolles’ inquiry whether his pieces are intended to chronicle reality and society. In this statement, Sierra makes several important points about the relationship between art and reality in contemporary art. He stresses the fact that art and reality are inextricably intertwined, insofar as art is embedded in the prosaic cycle of labor and consumption dictated by capitalism. Showcasing his work in a museum amounts to designing an interior space, or planning an event, for the enjoyment of a targeted group of people. Therefore, the art world functions according to the same principles as the rest of society, establishing relationships between individuals following the supply and demand schema outlined by capitalism. And Sierra envisages the artwork as a setting for the replication and exposition of such principles leading to instances of exploitation through labor.

Precisely because art is not exempt from the logic of capitalism, it becomes, for Sierra, an ideal conduit for social commentary. The capitalist logic is all the more conspicuous when it appears in the artwork or in the museum, because audiences do not anticipate seeing it unfold in such settings. The shock of witnessing cases of exploitation and consumption subsequently leads us, the viewers, to reflect on the instances that are, supposedly, happening outside of art, in our everyday lives. The value of art, in Sierra’s case, is to make visible unsuspected aspects of the

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15 Santiago Sierra, interview by Teresa Margolles, *BOMB*, Winter 2003/2004: 62-69. The interview takes the form of a discussion between two artists who share similar interests in the crossing of social reality and art, as well as in the results of capitalism such as marginalization, if not exclusion, based on class, gender, or race.
reality in which we dwell, and to make us question the contingent status quo upon which society rests.\(^{16}\) The processes of capitalism are upsetting, not simply because they take place in a sphere that we presume to fence against the turmoil of prosaic life, but because of their exploitative nature. It follows then that if such processes are upsetting in the artwork, they should be upsetting outside of it, in the social realm, as well. By creating discomfort, Sierra’s pieces stir us from our usual complacency towards capitalist processes that have come to appear natural or normal because of their pervasive character. According to Marx, the perception of reality as a natural entity is a consequence of ideological discourse. Against “a cult of the law, a cult of the State…dogmas and belief in dogmas,” Marx advocates instead what he calls historical materialism, the notion that politics should stem from and connect with material surroundings.\(^{17}\) Sierra’s art does not change the situation in practice, but it unsettles the way we think about and perceive our social surroundings. It inflects a long tradition—of which it is both a part and continuation—of calling into question the self-evidence of reality.

In order to better understand how Sierra’s artistic practice destabilizes our perception of the social and economic reality that we inhabit, and therefore foregrounds a kind of contemporary realism, it is necessary to turn to other, preceding modes of realism. I will demonstrate to what extent Sierra’s art is indebted to such traditions, and to what extent it also departs from them. It is also important to stress that realism, as an aesthetic philosophy, has the capacity for radical politics: it aims to reveal the truth about political processes, by highlighting forms of social and economic oppression, generally from a Marxist standpoint, as I will show.

\(^{16}\) This is not to say that art viewers are not already aware of injustices pervading society. Sierra’s art, by exacerbating the pervasiveness of injustice, helps reassert it so that one can no longer remain indifferent to it (or pretend to do so).

Here. Such capacity for critique is in fact a common thread that can be traced from the paintings of French artist Gustave Courbet in the 19th century to contemporary work like Santiago Sierra’s.

Courbet’s famous piece, *Stone Breakers* (1849-1850), is indicative of the painter’s relentless attack on the bourgeoisie of his time, and on the capitalist logic that it fostered. Courbet, an anti-monarchist and advocate for social justice, is known for making bold statements in his work as a whole, and this painting in particular epitomizes art’s capacity for political critique, as it vividly portrays labor and poverty, hinting at the scanty condition of workers. *Stone Breakers* depicts two men engaged in what looks like strenuous physical labor: breaking and carrying basket-loads of stone in the heat. The men’s bodies, visually arrested in uncomfortable postures, battling with an almost infrangible material, signal the tediousness of their labor. Interestingly, these bodies resemble machines, in that they seem to infinitely reproduce the same gestures. What is more, their faces are not visible, either turned away from the viewer or overshadowed by a hat, which reinforces the sense of dehumanization emanating from the painting. Such depiction of labor illustrates the Marxist notion of alienation, according to which the laboring body becomes a mere cog in the mechanical chain of capitalist production.

Because it recalls capitalist processes and the effects that they have on the laboring body, Courbet’s painting has an important political dimension. British art historian T.J. Clark has pointed to this political aspect of Courbet’s realism and to the resulting influence of historical context in the making of art.\(^\text{18}\) He insists, however, upon a reciprocal influence, as art also shapes the historical context from which it arises: the work of art “may become intelligible only within the context of given and imposed structures of meaning; but in its turn it can alter and at times disrupt these structures.”\(^\text{19}\) Thus, during the nineteenth century, as evidenced in Courbet’s realist


\(^{19}\) Ibid. 13.
paintings, the intertwining of art and reality is already taking place. The depiction of actual workers’ bodies is undeniably crucial in that respect. Bodies are the vehicles through which political discourse is disseminated in Courbet’s paintings, rendering capitalist processes more proximate to the viewer. British art historian Michael Fried has commented on the materiality of bodies in Courbet’s paintings. In looking again at the bodies in *Stone Breakers*, the sharp contours and well-defined shapes gesture towards such materiality. These bodies are almost tangible, their movements merely suspended, almost about to continue their course. Such materiality parallels Sierra’s use of real bodies in most of his performances, as they are essentially put to work, made productive. But it is the combination of absorption and theatricality that places Sierra’s work in the continuity of 19th century realism most pertinently.

Fried distinguishes two fundamental approaches to painting in its relation to the beholder. According to the first approach, the audience must be ignored, as if non-existent or irrelevant, which results in what he calls “absorption.” In this schema, the subject matter, the “dramatis personae,” to borrow Fried’s words, must be engrossed, or absorbed, in her or his activity, demonstrating complete obliviousness to the fact of being contemplated. According to the second approach, which Fried calls “theatricality,” the subject matter poses, evincing awareness of being looked at. To adopt Fried’s terminology, realist painters, while differing in their approaches to absorption and theatricality, tended to favor the absorptive model as the most effective means of achieving aesthetic illusion, that is, of suspending the disbelief of the viewer. Therefore, while the painting relies on the subject matter’s obliviousness to the beholder, it is

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21 Fried relies on the writings of French philosopher Denis Diderot, calling absorption the “Diderotian project.” Theatricality is posited as fundamentally different from drama, which constitutes the compositional unity thanks to which the world of the painting is sealed off from that of the beholder, achieving complete discontinuity between the two, thereby reinforcing the absorptive character of the painting.
successful only when, thanks to the absorptive technique, the beholder is led to believe in the veracity, or likelihood, of the scene depicted in it.\textsuperscript{22}

Sierra’s artworks involve a combination of absorption and theatricality that follows from and yet also complicates the realist model developed in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{23} In a work such as \textit{Object measuring 600 x 57 x 52 cm constructed to be held horizontally to a wall} (2001) (fig.4), displayed at Gallery Peter Kilchmann in Zürich, Sierra hired political exiles in Switzerland to lift “an object made of material like wood and asphalt,” according to these instructions: “One end rested on a wooden socket on the wall of the gallery, the other end was supported by four workers – two workers at a time.”\textsuperscript{24} The workers are absorbed in their task, insofar as they devote all their energy and attention to its completion, in exchange for money. At the same time, however, a sense of theatricality emanates from the performance because of its futility. Since their task is pointless, Sierra’s recruits betray the artistic stakes of the performance and the fact that it addresses an audience. Unlike Courbet’s stone breakers, there is no final product to these men’s labor, except for the performance itself, which is artistic as much as it is laborious. This indeterminacy is quite provocative, as it disorients the viewers, who can no longer “locate” the performance: is it an actual, outrageous case of labor exploitation, as the physical absorption that it demands seems to suggest? Or is it an artwork that simply mirrors cases of capitalist exploitation in a multinational context in order to denounce them?

\textsuperscript{22} Absorption and theatricality remain, for Fried, artistic modalities, with an ultimately fictional character.

\textsuperscript{23} Fried believes that Manet, whose work was produced in the wake of Realism and announces Impressionism, combined absorption and theatricality as well.

\textsuperscript{24} Santiago Sierra, “Object measuring 600 x 57 x 52 cm constructed to be held horizontally to a wall,” \textit{Santiago Sierra}, accessed February 2014, \url{http://www.santiago-sierra.com/200102_1024.php}. Referred to as \textit{Object held horizontally to a wall}. 

Performance art of the 1960s and 1970s is in fact an important predecessor to the performance pieces created by Sierra. In those decades, the focus was on the artist and the centrality of her or his physical implication in the artwork, a feature not emblematic of Sierra’s own practice. Sierra’s work relies more heavily on the staging of participants and their interaction with the audience. Nonetheless, whether the artist’s body is involved or not, the performances emphasize the making of an artwork, rather than the end product itself, as well as the scenario, which unfolds in space and time through the audience’s engagement with the artwork. The influence of performance art on Sierra’s work is not limited to these formal features, however. More importantly perhaps, it is the doubling of reality that performance art often assumes that informs Sierra’s pieces the most. For example, American artist Mierle Ukeles’s *Maintenance Art Series* (1973-4) bespeaks her artistic engagement with the material realities of daily life, as she performs chores such as maintaining and cleaning streets and sidewalks. In her performances, art does not simply mirror reality; it doubles it, making the two ubiquitous, therefore indistinguishable, because while Ukeles is making art, she is also cleaning. Interestingly, as Sierra’s does, her work also accents labor, its repetitive character, and its infiltrating the confines of the artistic realm.

Performance art effects a doubling of reality insofar as it involves actual bodies. Performance clouds the real-ness of the body, whose presence is nonetheless required. As the body offers its full presence, it also simultaneously takes on an artificial identity. The act of performance initiates a metonymic process reducing the body to its own presence. As American scholar of performance Peggy Phelan has noted, “in employing the body metonymically, performance is capable of resisting the reproduction of metaphor…which upholds the vertical
hierarchy of value through systematic marking of the positive and the negative.”\textsuperscript{25} A metaphorical use of the body tends to perpetuate cultural norms by ascribing a negative value to gender, sexual, ethnic, and social differences that do not accord with the phallo- and Euro-centric model. By virtue of the body’s presence, performance reveals difference as it is, thereby breaking the normative cycle of cultural reproduction. However, Phelan also maintains that “in the plenitude of its apparent visibility and availability, the performer actually disappears and represents something else – dance, movement, sound, character, ‘art’."\textsuperscript{26} Sierra hires his participants to perform their own social roles: laborers earning wages for the completion of a given task. Their body presence therefore enacts and makes visible their laboring condition. In so doing, this presence crucially exposes a difference, that of social marginality, jarring with the privileged social position of many art viewers. At the same time, the metonymic character of performance implies that their real bodies are subsumed under the artistic quality of the piece in which they participate. Neither completely real, nor completely artificial, their bodies signify both their condition as laborers and their condition as performers.

Drawing from the tradition of performance art, Sierra’s practice thus continues to pose the question of the separation of art and reality. It effectively blurs the contours of both, underlining their permeability. As much as the real-ness of his work is undeniable, it would be inaccurate to say that Sierra renounces aesthetics entirely.\textsuperscript{27} Rather, instead of conceiving of art and reality as two self-contained spheres that may intersect, but always remain distinct, Sierra’s art relies on a doubling of reality, so much so that in viewing his performances, the audience is


\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 150.

\textsuperscript{27} I use the term “real-ness” to refer to the fact that the situations in Sierra’s artworks are fundamentally undistinguishable from situations occurring outside of art.
unable to distinguish one from the other. A different installation-performance involving workers hired to accomplish a demeaning task exemplifies this doubling of art and reality: *12 workers paid to remain inside cardboard boxes* (2000) (fig. 5.a and 5.b), performed at the New York ACE Gallery. The persons recruited for this performance, mostly women of African American or Mexican origin, sat inside cardboard boxes for four hours per day during fifty days. In such circumstances, it is difficult to decide whether their labor falls under the category of art or not, as the actual exploitation to which they are subjected is intricately tied to the aesthetic dimension of the performance.

Visually, with its twelve cubic, unembellished cardboard boxes arranged in a row in the gallery space, the work displays elements of Conceptual art and Minimalism. Both movements showed affinities with Marxism, insofar as they respectively stayed away from a conception of the art object as precious, and their artistic manifestations recalled the factory setting along with capitalist processes of production. Sierra definitely builds upon and accentuates these Marxist elements, as several critics have already noted. For instance, German curator Eckhard Schneider contends that Sierra utilizes the formulaic system of Minimalism to address the exploitative logic of capitalism in his work. According to Schneider, “it is this economic, social, and political reality that [the artist] now pours into the stylized and idealized art container that has frozen into form.” This statement clarifies the function of the cardboard boxes as artistic forms revealing capitalist processes. Put differently, with artworks such as *12 workers paid to remain inside cardboard boxes* and *Object held horizontally to a wall*, Sierra identifies as an artist who


produces social dynamics. The artistic form becomes, intrinsically, the very place where social processes unfold.

To the extent that it generates actual social situations, the contemporary kind of realism that Sierra foregrounds achieves something different from mere documentation, which characterizes the “ethnographic turn” in art examined by American art historian Hal Foster.\textsuperscript{30} While Foster emphasizes the importance of siting – the fact that art no longer occurs only in the museum space, but also in cultural, social, and political contexts – ethnographic realism documents aspects of social realities arising in specific contexts. From this perspective, the artist locates and documents situations, repercussions of late capitalism and globalization for instance, as exemplified by the work of American photographer and director Allan Sekula.\textsuperscript{31} Sierra’s installation-performances, by contrast, constitute new sites in the midst of which social processes happen: they allow for the emergence, within and through art, of social processes related to capitalism, rather than simply documenting such processes. This new form of siting confirms that the artwork and the social situation are no longer two separate, self-contained spheres that occasionally intersect, but in fact double each other, which renders them indiscernible from one another.

Citing psychoanalysis, Foster also identifies another type of realism in the serial photography of Andy Warhol, one that uses repetition to simultaneously thwart and open up trauma.\textsuperscript{32} In this “traumatic” kind of realism, Foster contends that reality is located in what modern subjectivity represses. Therefore, it is not directly apparent, but only returns by piercing

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{31} See for instance \textit{The Forgotten Space} by Allan Sekula and Noel Burch, 2012.
\end{footnotes}
through the subject’s consciousness. Visually, the repetition of the same image effects this return of the real, by at once screening and pointing to the traumatic content. As Foster puts it, the real “ruptures the screen of repetition.” While Sierra’s performances do not simply permit a return of the real, but actually yield the real, their formal qualities are informed, in some way, by a logic akin to that of traumatic realism. In a work such as 12 workers paid to remain inside cardboard boxes, the twelve boxes arranged in the gallery space simultaneously conceal and reveal the exploitative character of labor in capitalism. The invisibility of the workers hidden in the boxes serves an ambiguous purpose: while seemingly alleviating the shock of being confronted with a case of labor exploitation, it exposes this instance of injustice in literal terms.

What Sierra’s performance-installations achieve is the setting-up of real situations to be experienced without mediation by the audience. This is an artistic practice that has been prefaced by relational artists in the 1990s, and to which Sierra is considerably indebted. French curator Nicolas Bourriaud, who theorized the aesthetics of relational art, uses the phrase “operational realism” to describe the fact that, in relational artworks, art unfolds in real space and time, through the carrying out of activities in which the audience, real individuals who intervene as themselves and not as actors, participates. One prominent relational artist is Rirkrit Tiravanija, whose practice relies on interaction with the public and improvisation. His work Untitled 2002 (he promised)(2002) consists of a structure envisaged as a platform for visitors to share experiences through common activities, including Thai massages, film screenings, panel talks, and DJ shows. The truthful quality of such “situations” arises from the fact that they do not disrupt the everyday flow of the visitors’ lives, creating situations that are fundamentally similar to what they would experience outside of the gallery. Indeed, the situation is modeled on the life

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of the consumer, hinting at the contemporary shift to a service economy. The goal of relational art, Bourriaud informs us, is to invent ways of inhabiting the here and now in communal and harmonious ways, instead of seeking future, utopian solutions to a disconcerting present.

Sierra’s performances are relational to the extent that they also plunge the viewer in the here and now of a situation. However, they do so in disturbing ways, by favoring discomfort at the expense of conviviality. Claire Bishop stresses the antagonistic character of Sierra’s work, as opposed to the “feel-good,” inclusive and open-ended pretensions of relational art, which assumes that every participant will be able to relate fully, even if only for a short time, to everyone else. Bishop argues that Sierra’s work demarcates contexts, such as immigration or illegal work, in order to highlight the social divisions that they enforce, but without any kind of reconciliation. It disrupts the audience’s comfort and sense of identity, founded on unspoken racial and class exclusions. Furthermore, Bishop continues, it exposes how all human relationships are riven with such social exclusions and inequalities, that which is repressed in order to sustain a semblance of social harmony. Thus, as Bishop demonstrates, Sierra’s realism is confrontational, as it destabilizes the delusional harmony and togetherness implied by relational art.

How, then, does Sierra’s realism destabilize our perception of the world? The artworks that he creates uncover mechanisms with which we are familiar, but in a way that is disturbing, because it doesn’t fit our habitual perception of them. For instance, in a piece titled *A person paid for 360 continuous working hours* (2000, fig. 6.a and 6.b), shown at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in New York, Sierra disturbs our common notion of what working as a museum watchman entails. The artist uses the following words to document his piece: “A hall known as Kunsthalle in P.S.1 was divided with a brick wall, leaving a person secluded on the other side.

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This person was given food through a hole in the middle of the wall at ground level. He remained there for 360 continuous hours, i.e. 2 weeks, for which he earned 10 dollars per hour.\textsuperscript{35} In this description, Sierra does not refer to the watchman by mentioning his title; rather, he refers to him as a “person,” using the most neutral and least specific designation possible, which tends to dissociate the individual from his work. Similarly, the emphasis on labor time and its time-based remuneration recalls Marx’s discussion of abstracted labor.\textsuperscript{36} Sierra also evacuates the positive elements typically associated with the watchman: we may for instance consider his protective and authoritative roles, towards the art displayed in the gallery and the visitors respectively. What this omission indicates, however, is that such qualities are only surface aspects (what museum goers may perceive when visiting a gallery) that mask a deeper, less visible structure, in which human labor is actually reified.

Thus, Sierra lays bare this deeper structure of exploitation that undergirds the job of a watchman in the capitalist system. The artist contends that “we all work for a machine,”\textsuperscript{37} hinting at the fact that our daily activities have implications that feed this deeper structure, that contribute to the reification of human labor. For example, by going to the museum and ignoring the fact that a watchman essentially sits or stands for hours for very little remuneration, we are complicit in the machinery of capitalism, even though we do not realize it. Thus, Sierra’s performance-installation is disturbing because it makes us aware of processes that otherwise


\textsuperscript{36} As theorized by Marx in \textit{Capital} (1867), labor is represented by the monetary value of its product, and labor-time is represented by the magnitude of that value (more labor time will increase the monetary value of the commodity). The thing (a commodity that is the product of human labor and meant to be exchanged for money) dominates at the expense of the private human labor that constitutes it. Labor thus reified leads to alienation, as the worker is dispossessed from his own work. He does not have any control over the product of his labor, which is not assessed according to its specificity, but in terms of uniform time units.

remain invisible, or to which we have ceased to pay attention: because we do not see them, we
do not question them. The formal play on visibility and invisibility in this piece (and many others
by Sierra) is crucial in this respect.

In *A person paid for 360 continuous working hours*, the watchman’s body is invisible, as
he is concealed behind a wall. Sierra, referring directly to this performance, expresses his firm
belief in the power of invisibility as a means to stir audiences from perceptual numbness:

> When you hide something instead of teaching or revealing it, you provoke a response in the imagination of
> the spectator. For instance, the museum watchman I paid to live for 365 hours behind a wall at P.S. 1 in
> New York told me that no one had ever been so interested in him and that he had never met so many
> people. I realized that hiding something is a very effective working technique. 38

On one level, the literal invisibility of the watchman’s body matches the abstract mechanisms
that sustain his job and that effectively mask the specificity and properly human aspect of labor.
On another level, it also makes this aspect visible, because it draws our attention to those very
mechanisms, which are usually so abstract that they are not immediately perceptible. Therefore,
in Sierra’s pieces, it is reality in its naked form that emerges: the very reality that surrounds us,
but this time stripped of its envelope. In his work, Sierra exposes the internal mechanisms of
situations we experience every day. He opens, dissects, and exposes the machine of capitalism,
thereby forcing us to look at it differently.

Sierra’s artistic practice foregrounds a contemporary kind of realism that makes us
experience reality directly through the artwork, but only to destabilize our common perception of
it. In that sense, Sierra’s realism inflects the un-grounding of reality that has characterized the
realist tradition. It makes it an unstable dimension, one that we no longer understand fully, and
that we are compelled to regard and experience in different, less comfortable ways. What
Sierra’s art accomplishes is an uncanny doubling of reality, a phenomenon however
foreshadowed by other realist traditions explored in this chapter. Therefore, if Sierra’s

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installation-performances cause realism to culminate in an unavoidable destabilization of the audience’s perception of their everyday surroundings, his practice is indebted to and builds upon the strategies used by previous modes of realism.
Chapter 2:

Suspending the Ethical: Moral Conundrums in Sierra’s Work

One common reaction to Sierra’s work is the urge to pinpoint what makes it ethical or unethical. As many reviews of his shows indicate, the moral component of his practice, or conversely the lack thereof, is what strikes audiences and critics the most. Viewers will commonly assess the quality of his work according to how ethically involved it is. Tellingly, the following excerpts – taken from two reviews of an exhibition held at the Lisson Gallery in London from November 2007 to January 2008 – both focus on the moral dimension of Sierra’s practice, whether approvingly or critically. American visual culture and performance studies scholar Jennifer Doyle wrote that “the outrageousness of [his] work grows from the banality of the crime at its core: the ideological submission of the consumer who implicitly accepts the inevitability of these forms of inequity,” eventually describing the artist as “a moral trickster” whose practice is unethical until it reveals the unethicallness of the viewers’ own everyday activities. She adds:

How can you get mad at Sierra for using the undocumented or indigent to hide inside crates on which you sit at an art opening, or to work as human canvases onto which he tattoos lines or sprays toxic foam, when you accept much more violent forms of exploitation every time you buy a cup of coffee, drive to work or put your shoes on?39

By contrast, British art critic Richard Dorment shares his annoyance at Sierra’s indulgence in what he deems to be “gratuitous guilt,” claiming that “it is so damn easy to make middle-class British people feel bad about a million things that go on in the Third World and that we can’t do much to change.”40 Considering Sierra’s work as an attack on a supposedly innocent and


powerless audience, Dorment negates the value of Sierra’s intervention, arguing instead that it only spreads misery further.

In both cases, what brings attention to Sierra’s artworks is their (un)ethical aspect, and how it affects the viewers. Sierra’s work is disturbing because it unavoidably prompts viewers to reflect on their implicit responsibility in the instances of exploitation that they witness. Therefore, the shock that his installation-performances effect is more tied to the positioning that they demand than to the gruesome content that they display. American art historian Grant Kester argues that this type of shock is largely punitive, and therefore fails to raise political awareness, because it steers audiences away from, instead of engaging them with, the issues at stake:

Shock, disruption, or ontic dislocation are accorded an intrinsically liberatory power in the tradition of avant-garde art…However, the actual forms of reception and affect set in motion by the experience of disruption or dislocation are considerably more complex, and potentially ambivalent [as] the pedagogy of shock often confuses critique or revelation with punishment. [Indeed] why should the projective aggression evident in a range of avant-garde practices necessarily induce greater insight or self-transformation on the part of the viewer rather than simple defensiveness?41

Thus, according to Kester, Sierra’s work only causes viewers to feel guilty for unpleasant situations that in fact escape them completely. Kester’s views indeed center on the dialogical qualities of artworks designed to spur conversation with and between communities. His argument therefore fails to address what is most valuable in Sierra’s work: his refusal to resort to art as a means to transcend social conditions and relations and practically bring about social changes.

In his analysis of Sierra’s art, Kester stresses what he considers to be an ineffective use of shock, which he attributes to the artist’s projection, onto the viewer, of “his own feeling as a

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Kester contends that not only does Sierra categorize the audience as one monolithic group composed of “unknowing member[s] of the culture world who [seek] only escapism and hedonistic denial – of poverty and suffering – through art,” but he also reduces his participants to representative types of social marginality, thereby granting them no agency and disseminating images of victimization only. To Kester, then, Sierra is guilty of abstracting the individuals of and to whom he speaks through his artworks, ultimately “reiterating, not challenging, exploitation, on the basis of an ill-conceived notion of both audience and critique.”

It is this important aspect of Sierra’s intervention that I will explore in this chapter: an intervention that his detractors, such as Kester or Dorment, have described as reiterative rather than challenging. I will investigate the ethical reasons why Sierra refuses to take on the role of the redeeming artist, and how powerful his work proves to be after all.

What sort of ethics, implied in Sierra’s project, simply recapitulates a social status quo to assert that it is unacceptable? What keeps Sierra from attempting to transform the social relations embedded in this unsatisfying status quo? The artist fully recognizes that his art does not serve to emancipate the disenfranchised individuals who participate in it. In the interview with Margolles, he underlines how “negativity is the only coherent reaction one can have in a society where the battle’s already lost. [He] re-create[s] those battles, which is sometimes more dangerous than poetic.” Sierra’s negativity is imbued with danger precisely because of its reiterative rather than redemptive agenda. It formalizes an erasure of the human component, normally at the heart of

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42 Ibid., 166.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
social relations, which the capitalist system tends to engender. For example, a performance such as *Group of persons facing the wall and person facing into a corner* (2002 at the Lisson Gallery in London) (fig.7.a and 7.b) is resolutely ambiguous, at once offering and questioning the possibility of resisting anonymity. This work involves seven persons who are paid to stand still, facing a wall or a corner (as opposed to the audience), for one hour per day, every day, for the duration of three weeks. The interruption of social communication marked by the withdrawal of human faces may indicate the active stance of refusing to contribute to the status quo. At the same time, this interruption also eliminates the human part of social relations in the manner of the capitalist reification of labor: unidentified “persons” sell their time and bodies, which are eventually abstracted to equivalent labor units, for the making of an artwork.

A series of projects titled “NO” that Sierra carried out across different sites echoes the negativity that underscores *Group of persons facing the wall and person facing into a corner*. Projected above the Pope in Madrid, drawn in a harvest field in the south of France, sculpted in marble in Carrara, Italy (fig.8), or displayed on a traveling cart in prominent cities of the world such as Berlin, London, and Washington, the word “NO” dramatically occupies both the physical space of the city and the semantic space of democratic liberalism. The large size of the two capital letters, in addition to the prohibitive message that they deliver, suggests that there is no room for any more utterances. Sierra explains that “a multi-contextual piece like the ‘NO’ … came in mind when [he] considered the society we live in, the political system, and its whole framework. So a big ‘NO’ was the right answer. And [he] also liked the big ‘NO’ because it’s the

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only language that you can have against power.” 47 However, as Spanish curator and critic Paco Barragan has noted, the “NO” is “visually very strong but semantically open,” hinting at the fact that the target of this negation remains undetermined. 48 Repeating the ambiguity at the core of Group of persons facing the wall and person facing into a corner, the “NO” series enacts both an oppositional gesture and the suppression of identity caused by capitalist abstraction.

Sierra’s work seems to utter an emphatic “NO” in the face of abstract capitalist processes, while simultaneously replicating the status quo, thereby annulling the possibility of opposing it. Ultimately, it establishes abstract social relations and human labor as a “fait accompli.” In that sense, Sierra also hints at the systemic aspect of multinational capitalism, which implies that it cannot be transformed on an individual basis. Put differently, it is not up to one single, isolated artist to fundamentally overturn the logic governing society. Rather, what an individual artist can do is occasionally and momentarily alter – perhaps even alleviate – the manifestations of capitalism, but its underlying logic remains intrinsically the same. Consequently, in the face of a system, “the battle’s already lost,” Sierra himself reminds us. 49 This sense of doom is precisely what Slovenian cultural critic Slavoj Žižek stresses when developing the notion of “systemic violence,” which he defines as follows:

[I]t is the self-propelling metaphysical dance of capital that runs the show, that provides the key to real-life developments and catastrophes. Therein resides the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism […]: this violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their ‘evil’ intentions, but is purely ‘objective,’ systemic, anonymous. 50


48 Ibid.


Capitalist abstraction, Žižek explains, has led to a critical absence of an identifiable culprit for the economic exploitation of disenfranchised populations, subsequently making the situation appear natural and immutable.

Sierra purposefully formalizes systemic violence in his artworks, emphasizing shock and scandal over reconciliation and appeasement, because if he were to provide relief from the dreadful situations his pieces present, he would be stressing his own generosity. Such a self-congratulating gesture would be a delusion, as it would not really change the workings of the capitalist logic, but only temporarily attenuate some of its manifestations. His art therefore raises an ethical dilemma: either redeeming the social context of his artistic practice, or acknowledging the limitations of what he can actually achieve as an artist. He claims that “a person without money has no dignity. Whenever you pay for your dignity, you put your body and your time in the hands of a third party. By saying these few things in my work, I think that as an artist, I’ve achieved enough.” Sierra’s conception of his role as an artist is justified by the “fake sense of urgency that pervades the left-liberal humanitarian discourse on violence” and the “hypocritical sentiment of moral outrage” that underlies it, as Žižek puts it. The assumedly redeeming aspect of art is similar to charity, which, according to Žižek, is “the humanitarian mask hiding the face of economic exploitation.” Charity, and for that matter so-called redemptive art, provide relief against social and economic crisis at a superficial level, but in fact prove co-responsible for the perpetuation of the misery on which they thrive.

52 Ibid., 65.
54 Ibid., 19.
The shocking aspect of Sierra’s art derives from the exposure of instances of socio-economic fracture without offering any signs of reconciliation. His artworks are controversial to audiences because they formalize the unacceptable, making it more proximate and less avoidable. Spanish Curator Pilar Vilella Mascaro believes that this shock effect arises from the “real” element in his work – real workers, real immigrants, real drug addicts, real homeless people – and she assesses this real element as “reality in a relation of exclusion from ‘art.’”\textsuperscript{55} She argues that “the kind of visibility acquired by the ‘reality of the situations’ came about because they were presented as art,” not so much because of their real-ness: if these elements had not been part of an artwork, they would not have had such shocking repercussions; they would perhaps have been deemed outrageous, but in a banal or commonplace manner, as if they were unavoidable, therefore prompting less of an ethical judgment. Mascaro concludes that “[w]hat [Sierra’s] works do is present the judgment without offering a stable position for the subject to occupy. The deed has been done, and there is no question about its injustice, but who is the victim and who is to blame?”\textsuperscript{56} Mascaro’s point illuminates the stakes of Sierra’s contemporary realism, which entails a strategic use of real bodies in order to confuse the viewers’ pre-conceived understanding of how they relate to these bodies in the broader social context.

The goal of Sierra’s practice centers on problematizing what it means to take an ethical stance, rather than on actually passing judgment on the situations presented. His work is one of destabilization. It disrupts the way that we habitually perceive our environment, bringing to prominence events, or occurrences, that otherwise remain unnoticed or do not seem remarkable enough to be commented on if not acted upon. Sierra thus plays with the notion of repression.

\textsuperscript{55} Pilar Vilella Mascaro, \textit{7 Trabajos / 7 Works: Santiago Sierra}, (London: Lisson Gallery Publication no. 47; 2007), 17.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 33.
Directly linked to the binary opposition between visibility and invisibility, the concept of repression helps explain the ethical illusion that causes us to no longer notice outrageous instances of exploitation. Žižek insists on the fact that we are less sympathetic to misery when it is not directly witnessed, that is, when the subject of misery is removed from our immediate physical and/or emotional surroundings. It does not mean that removed subjects of misery are less worthy of attention; it means that because we do not feel connected to their situation, our compassion is not activated, which is what constitutes an ethical illusion.

We thus tend to repress the unacceptability of given situations because we do not directly relate to them. Sierra’s work is disturbing because it makes this unacceptability so conspicuous that we have to acknowledge it when we encounter it. In a work such as *10 people paid to masturbate* (2000) (fig. 9), performed in Havana by Cuban men, the viewers are placed in a discomforting position, as they have to witness a sexual activity that is commonly considered intimate and pleasurable. However, the formal qualities of this piece negate both of these elements. The men hired by Sierra are asked to masturbate in front of a video camera. Although they masturbate privately (gallery visitors do not get to watch the sexual act as it is happening), the delayed viewing of the recording inside of the gallery space eventually cancels the solipsistic character of masturbation. For that reason, sexual activity comes to function as sex work: the participants’ sexual performance is designed to be enjoyed by the viewers. In addition to denying privacy to the masturbating subject, however, *10 people paid to masturbate* also causes unease for the audience. Indeed, the act of watching pornography (or to indulge in sexual activities with prostitutes) is culturally imbued with a sense of intimacy and is usually not envisaged as an

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activity meant to be shared among strangers. The lack of privacy on both ends of the piece –
production and reception – alters our habitual approach to such a sexual activity as masturbation.

The work formalizes the unacceptable availability of repressible content by casting the
audience in an ambiguous position, one that irresolutely stands between enjoyment (in that it is
reminiscent of watching pornography) and disgust (in that it forces us to witness an intimate
moment in public). Moreover, this indeterminacy is discomforting because it graphically calls
attention to the capitalist exploitation of human bodies. The men recruited by Sierra are actually
at work when they masturbate in front of his camera, as signaled by the small sum of money with
which they are compensated. The type of work that Sierra asks them to achieve in this
performance hints at the violation that labor causes, depriving the subject of agency over her or
his own body. This privation is symbolized by a lack of intimacy, which pervades the work: the
act of masturbation in public allows for a transfer of the body from the masturbating subject to
the viewing recipient. As always in Sierra’s work, visibility plays an important part, but this time
in a different way: the camera becomes a conduit for transfer, turning the act of viewing into a
form of appropriation (of the other’s body). Ultimately, the performance is an epitome of labor
alienation, when the product of labor is dissociated from the one who produced it. The pleasure
of masturbating no longer belongs to the masturbating subject. It does not even belong to the
viewing subject, because of the indeterminacy to which s/he is subjected. The capitalist figure,
embodied by Sierra himself in this context, owns it.

Masturbation is a prime example of an activity exiting the capitalist cycle of production
and consumption, in the sense that it is performed without a purpose, for its own sake. According
to French philosopher Georges Bataille, “humanity recognizes the right to acquire, to conserve
and to consume rationally, but it excludes in principle *non-productive expenditure.*” In Baudrillard’s economic theory, there are two categories of consumption: sustenance, which constitutes the condition of productive activity, and unproductive expenditures, which “have no end beyond themselves.” Sexual activity, as well as art, belongs to the second category. Sierra is not the first artist to integrate sexual pleasure to his art. American performance artist Vito Acconci’s *Seedbed* (1971) is an important predecessor to Sierra’s *10 people paid to masturbate*, in that as it involves a man (the artist himself) masturbating underneath the gallery floor. The visitors could hear Acconci during the act of masturbation, mostly expressing fantasies about the audience walking above him, through loudspeakers. Acconci’s performance equally disrupts intimacy, turning a usually private activity into a public spectacle, and is a fitting example of unproductive expenditure.

With *10 people paid to masturbate*, however, the outpour of excess energy, which Baudrillard deems irrecuperable, is instrumentalized and loses its purposelessness. Like sex work in general, it becomes a form of sustenance, insofar as it provides the performer with a wage. Sierra denies his participants the luxury to expend, that is, to indulge in activities that momentarily remove them from the routine of productivity. As Baudrillard aptly remarks:

> human poverty has never had a strong enough hold on societies to cause the concern for conservation which gives production the appearance of an end – to dominate the concern for unproductive expenditure. In order to maintain this pre-eminence, since power is exercised by the classes that expend, poverty was excluded from all social activity.

Sierra’s work likens the masturbating body to a laboring body, thereby replicating structures of exploitation and domination typical of global capitalism. Sierra subjects his participants to the

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59 Ibid., 169.

60 Ibid., 172.
ultimate form of alienation, which consists in an extreme form of dispossession, as he denies them the ability to use their bodies on their own terms.

If Sierra the artist is indistinguishable from Sierra the capitalist, the innocent viewer is also indistinguishable from the appropriating viewer. Similarly, the self-determined worker is indistinguishable from the helpless worker, who did agree to perform this task, even though that decision was one of necessity, in order to survive. In Sierra’s work, we are then faced with an endless list of such conundrums that cannot be resolved, insofar as the ethical proves impossible to locate. The ethical dimension of his practice is a puzzle which amounts to a total suspension of ethical standards. Sierra’s work does not simply violate established standards but it confuses their relevance, pointing to the ultimate impossibility of ethics – of holding an ethical stance – in the context of capitalist exploitation, because of its systemic character and the fact that everyone, willingly or not, consciously or not, contributes to exploitation. In other words, there are no more ethical standards by which to abide or on which to rely. Since ethical standards (the notion of what is ethical or unethical) are the ultimate means to which society resorts in order to regulate its own dynamics, how are we to defend ourselves against social, political, and economic abuses? The radical aspect of Sierra’s work resides neither in its heavily activist tone, nor in its unashamed use of shock. Rather, it resides in the revelation of our ultimate powerlessness in the face of the status quo in which we dwell. In a way, his pieces function as mirrors that bring audiences face-to-face with their own limits, not only as viewers of art, but also as members of society.

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61 This point further undermines Kester’s contention that Sierra typologizes his participants under the category of helpless victims, as it points further to the fact that nobody is exempt from responsibility.
The reflexivity involved in Sierra’s artworks is all the more shocking that it bypasses the identification usually at stake in representation. What viewers witness here is not misery that remains exterior to their personal experiences, and with which they may perhaps momentarily empathize. Instead, what they witness is their own implication in social dynamics that exceed them. Precisely where we may locate the shocking, unbearable aspect of Sierra’s work is also where the ethical dimension vanishes. It must be clearly stated, however, that the ethical dimension in question here is not limited to Sierra’s work per se, but extends to the material with which his work is built: the capitalist logic of abstraction and its effects on the bodies of workers. Indeed, through Sierra’s installation-performances, we encounter the crude reality of capitalism, a reality that tends to abstract human relationships to the highest degree.

The abstract processes of capitalism damage the workers’ bodies for many reasons already listed, including labor alienation, suppression of identity, and loss of agency. These bodies enduring the processes of abstraction lose materiality, both in Sierra’s artworks and in their usual workplaces outside of the artistic space, becoming anonymous and invisible. Since the real-ness of Sierra’s performances matches the real-ness of society at large, then his artworks’ assumedly unethical dimension should apply to social mechanisms as well. However, Sierra’s work reveals that capitalist abstraction totally invalidates ethical standards altogether, precluding the possibility of taking a wholly tenable and justifiable ethical stance. Therefore, while Sierra’s installation-performances may seem to be unethical, they in fact only reflect the impossibility of holding ethical standards amidst capitalist processes. His work testifies to an unflinching “suspension of the ethical,” which is necessary in the face of capitalism, as any ethical stance would prove fallacious.
The phrase “suspension of the ethical” is borrowed from Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard’s theory of ethics and used to describe the act of faith in the Christian tradition. Kierkegaard regards ethics as belonging to the realm of human laws, serving to supervise society. He asserts that, by contrast, faith obeys other, higher powers, which require a total disregard of ethical (human) standards. Kierkegaard’s argument relies on the example of the Biblical figure of Abraham, who must sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham’s genuine and unflinching inclination to do so is evidence of his repudiation of social norms in favor of faith, which, Kierkegaard insists, occurs upon the recognition that one is no longer acting according to human laws, but acting in accordance with godly precepts. As he is about to sacrifice his son, Abraham believes that he is justified in his murderous deed. It is only in that instant that a ram comes into sight to supplant Isaac in the sacrificial act. Abraham’s situation and his response to it are extremely cruel because, as British theologian and academic George Pattison underlines in his commentary on Kierkegaard’s text, “the murder he intends is that of his own son to whom, over and above the general prohibition on killing, he owes the active duties of care and protection.” The sacrifice of Isaac is the epitome of what Kierkegaard names the “teleological suspension of the ethical,” that is, the notion that there can be exceptions to universal moral precepts.

Although secular, Sierra’s art resembles Abraham’s gesture in that it entails a similar kind of cruelty. For the installation 3 people paid to lay still inside 3 boxes during a party (2000) (fig. 10.a and 10.b) created in Cuba, Sierra hired three women “to remain inside a wooden box during a party [which] took place during the celebration of that year’s Havana Biennial.”

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women were paid thirty dollars to conceal their bodies, while the people attending the party, who were not explained what the boxes contained, simply sat on them. This installation, which performs a visual occultation of bodies, exemplifies the violence that Sierra inflicts on his participants. The work is also emblematic of the violence exerted by the capitalist world at a global level against non-Western populations and cultures. It is indeed significant that this work should have been shown at the Havana Biennial, an event primarily known for promoting non-Western art. In infiltrating a space of resistance, insofar as it is reserved for what the West deems as “other,” the Spanish artist perpetuates the dissemination of Western structures of domination. The visual obliteration of the women’s bodies that the work entails therefore marks Sierra’s reluctance to abide by ethical standards which the Western part of the world both advocates and betrays. This obliteration, all the more striking as it occurs in a highly social, even festive context, prevents the participants from moving freely and effaces them from the social horizon that they still witness: they are in the party, but not a part of it.

This simultaneous absence and presence functions as what French philosopher Jacques Derrida calls a “trace,” a concept which he developed in his groundbreaking book *Of Grammatology.* The trace, in Derrida’s deconstructionist theory, refers to the concomitant presence and absence of meaning in language. The trace signals the erasure of meaning, the fact that it is fundamentally unstable, as it carries the potential of its own impossibility. Erasure, according to Derrida, encapsulates both the necessity of presence and the elusiveness of absence: a word’s meaning “must make its necessity felt before letting itself be erased.” Put differently,

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66 Ibid., 62.
a word must first be stated or written for its meaning to eventually collapse. In *3 people paid to lay still inside 3 boxes during a party*, the concealed bodies are subject to a similar kind of erasure, at a visual level. Their absent presence bespeaks social and cultural marginalization, a necessary consequence of economic and geopolitical exploitation, as implied by global capitalism. These eclipsed bodies function as the necessary counterparts to the dominant Western bodies, and for that reason, they must both remain and disappear.

What Sierra’s work reveals is the inadequacy of these women’s non-Western bodies to the norms established by the liberal ideology. These bodies are inadequate because they mark an irreducible difference, which must either be silenced or translated (and therefore distorted) into the idiom of the West. Indian post-colonial scholar Gayatri Spivak argues that what defines the subaltern condition is this very inability to speak: in order to express, and even know his or her own experience, the subaltern has to adopt and conform to the Western paradigm.67 This logo-and ethno-centrism results either in the appropriation of difference (it becomes relatable from a Western point-of-view), or in its erasure (it becomes a necessary yet occulted presence in the Western social and political landscape). Sierra’s work is not an attempt to give a voice to the silent Other, or to fill in his or her “inaccessible blankness,” because doing so would amount to replacing the subaltern’s voice, to speak for him or her.68 Instead, Sierra’s “interventionist work…is…a task of ‘measuring silences’,” to borrow Spivak’s phrase.69 In his work, Sierra accounts for what the subaltern cannot say, rather than what he or she refuses to say. *3 people paid to lay still inside 3 boxes during a party* reveals the silencing strategy deployed by the West,


68 Ibid., 294.

69 Ibid., 286.
its liberal culture and economy, which tend to marginalize, if not entirely obstruct, the Other’s
difference.

While 3 people paid to lay still inside 3 boxes during a party does not lead to literal
death, it is still a work of suppression. Sierra’s depriving individuals of their right to own their
bodies and be integral parts of society parallels Abraham’s decision to deny his son the right to
live. Sierra thus relinquishes the ethical norms advocated by social authority in the self-
congratulating regimes of Western democracy, which prescribe an absolute respect for human
dignity, and his work reveals that this prescription is in fact a fallacy, as it is never fully enacted.
While the motivations behind his gesture and that of Abraham are not identical, they parallel
each other in important ways: far from being self-assertive, they are both committed to
obedience. Pattison notes that while Abraham obeys God’s command, political realists may often
act “on the basis of a mystical morality [according to which] one must become … cruel … and
thus violate” what are often deemed universal principles.70 Sierra’s practice, then, does not
simply seek to shock audiences by generating unethical situations. More importantly, it attempts
to exit the ethical schema altogether. Sierra’s work is a patent demonstration of the fact that
ethical pursuits prove ineffective, because they align with social expectations that solidify the
system under attack, instead of truly thwarting it.

From seemingly “unethical” to truly “non-ethical,” Sierra’s practice follows a trajectory
leading to a lucid abandonment of ethical standards in order to expose, through art, the
mechanisms undergirding the capitalist logic. In fact, this trajectory corresponds to the journey
on which the spectators to Sierra’s work embark. The disturbance caused by Sierra’s
performance-installations stems less from the cruel forms of exploitation which they perpetrate

than from the viewers’ realization that they are not as innocent and uninvolved in these injustices as they would like to believe. Confusing beyond reconciliation all subject positions, Sierra refuses to play the game of redemption. Noting the limited, because temporary, success of a redemptive practice, he chooses instead to use art as a means to bring to light the non-apparent, yet very real, social dynamics that help perpetuate the capitalist system promoted by the West.
Chapter 3:

Exposing the Contingency of Reality: Political Subversion in Sierra’s Work

Not only showing how powerless we are in the face of global capitalism, but also manifesting no will or effort towards emancipation, Sierra’s practice may appear to be pessimistic or self-defeating. It is relevant, however, to point out that the lack of effort to emancipate betrays the intrinsic lack of a possibility to emancipate. Sierra’s work could be summarized by the following question: why try to emancipate if such efforts are doomed to fail? For that reason, his artworks are not designed to make the world a better place, or to provide relief from excruciating social realities. Rather, they expose these realities, making them more proximate and more palpable, thereby stressing their pervasiveness, that is, the fact that no realm, not even that of art, is exempt from the rule of capitalism. Sierra’s work thus reflects the notion that art does not achieve anything different, and operates as unfairly to its participants as any other social practice would. By replicating the detrimental effects of a global economy, however, Sierra also rethinks the relationship between art and politics. Instead of attempting to change social mechanisms from without, his work subverts them from within. This subtle subversion is precisely where the artist’s identification with the master figure (in this case, the capitalist figure) comes into play and proves crucial. It allows Sierra to infiltrate the logic of global capitalism in order to debunk it by identifying and exposing it as it is, offering a severe and unabashed political diagnosis. In the gallery setting, his work ambiguously re-deploys the power of capitalism and globalization which already governs society, while simultaneously playing against it.
The subversive aspect of Sierra’s work is apparent in a work titled *Wall enclosing a space*, which he conceived for the Spanish Pavilion at the 49th Venice Biennale in 2001 (fig. 11.a and 11.b). A brick wall blocked the front entrance, so the exhibition space was accessible only through the back. In addition to offering no exhibit, leaving the space bare and empty, Sierra’s controversial installation also denied access to visitors who could not present a Spanish passport, as Sierra’s own description of the work stresses: “only the Spanish public were allowed entry, on showing their identity card, passport, or other legal identification.” The installation introduces a friction in the assumed free flow of globalization (the process by which the world is homogenized, with the reduction of geographical and cultural distances, in conformity with the liberal standards established by the West) by demonstrating how global capitalism (the economic exploitation resulting from globalization) simultaneously includes and excludes, liberates and obstructs. Sierra’s perspective, embodied in this installation, is that while globalization fosters free circulation of people and goods, it does so in a closed circuit formed by richer, more powerful countries, leaving out other nations that don’t enjoy the same resources. It is worth mentioning that *Wall enclosing a space* is a high-profile work serving to represent Sierra’s country, Spain, at a major international art event. The work’s prestigious status dramatizes it and its effects all the more that it could easily be interpreted as a discreditable lack of appreciation.

Sierra considers that his installation for the Spanish Pavilion makes explicit the unspoken tenets that undergird prestigious Western art festivals such as the Venice Biennale. In that sense,

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72 The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines the phenomenon of globalization as follows: “globalization refers to the fundamental changes in the spatial and temporal contours of social existence, according to which the significance of space or territory undergoes shifts in the face of a no less dramatic acceleration in the temporal structure of crucial forms of human activity. Geographical distance is typically measured in time. As the time necessary to connect distinct geographical locations is reduced, distance or space undergoes compression or ‘annihilation’.” Accessed February 2014, [http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/globalization/](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/globalization/).
it does nothing more than fulfill, without disguise, what it is expected to accomplish. Sierra says himself:

[i]n the context of the biennial we are all playing at national pride, and [he] wanted to reveal that as the principal system of every pavilion [because] you can’t forget that the countries that participate in the Biennale are the most powerful ones in the world. [For instance], there’s no pavilion for Ethiopia.73

He continues: “the Spanish press took it as a provocation, when it was simply a reflection.”74

Sierra’s installation, by unveiling the exclusionary logic of national pride, which is at the core of an increasingly global world where nations do not simply share, but must also compete against each other, accounts for the injustices that events relying on such a logic commit. Interestingly, *Wall enclosing a space* reproduces the logic that it is indicting. More specifically, it reproduces this logic in order to indict it, a strategy of identification and appropriation allowing for the powerful subversion of a system from within.

Sierra’s tactic of identification calls to mind a strategy adopted by the art collective Neue Slovenische Kunst (New Slovenian Art, also known as NSK) which was formed in 1984 just before the demise of the Soviet regime. The NSK’s strategy consists in the recycling of symbols and ideas developed by official institutions and used dogmatically by governments to gain and maintain a hegemonic control over society. The punk rock band Laibach, part of the NSK, provides a striking example of this aesthetics. Not only does the band’s name refer to the Nazi appellation for the Slovenian capital, Ljubljana, but their use of multiple cross symbols is reminiscent of the Nazi emblem. Their overall military style evokes totalitarian regimes, both left and right wing. German art historian Sylvia Sasse and curator Inke Arns have examined this strategy, calling it “subversive affirmation”:

74 Ibid.
Subversive affirmation is an artistic/political tactic that allows artists/activists to take part in certain social, political, or economic discourses and to affirm, appropriate, or consume them while simultaneously undermining them. With affirmation there is simultaneously taking place a distancing from, or revelation of what is being affirmed. There is always a surplus which destabilises affirmation and turns it into its opposite.  

Tracing the strategy of subversive affirmation back to Moscow Conceptualism, as seen in the paintings and installations of Russian-born artist Ilya Kabakov, Arns and Sasse argue that it consists of a meticulous “repetition of totalitarian practices,” and they conclude that “when speaking of subversive affirmation we are not dealing with critical distance but are confronted with a critique of aesthetic experience that – via identification – is about creating a physical/psychic experience of what is being criticized.” In fact, “over-identification” constitutes the paroxysm of subversive affirmation, as it “makes explicit the implications of an ideology and thus produces such elements that may not be publicly formulated in order for an ideology to reproduce itself.” Close identification with the official discourse thus results in the exposure of even its most shameful components.

Arns and Sasse draw on the writings of Slavoj Žižek, who aptly comments on this appropriative technique to underline its subversive stakes and effects. In an interview included in the documentary Predictions of Fire (1996), which outlines the controversial methods of the NSK, the Slovenian philosopher contends that the alternative between a conformist, as opposed to an ironic attitude toward the system is a fallacious one. If either compliance or disobedience

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76 Ibid.

77 Ibid., 446.

78 Ibid., 448.

79 Michael Benson, Predictions of Fire, directed by Michael Benson, (1996; Slovenia and USA: Kinetikon Productions), film.
are the only available options, the alternative offers no viable way out of the system. The system actually expects its subjects to defy it through irony or transgression. For that reason, according to Žižek, there is nothing truly subversive in transgression, because it is merely the system’s inherent counterpart, always defined in relation to it. Far from being subversive, then, transgression may in fact be a conformist gesture, fueling the order that it is attempting to challenge. The only way to be subversive, Žižek argues, “is not to develop a critical potential, but to take the system more seriously than it takes itself.”

Žižek’s points here to the internalization of critique within the dominant ideological discourse, which annuls the efficiency of an overtly critical position against power.

In an essay dedicated to Laibach and the NSK, Žižek puts forth the idea that the band’s appropriation of totalitarian regalia undermines “the system (the ruling ideology) precisely insofar as it is not its ironic imitation, but over-identification with it – by bringing to light the obscene superego underside of the system, over-identification suspends its efficiency.”

Using the psychoanalytic term “superego” to make sense of the law, which he understands to be public order, Žižek argues that the law needs to overlook certain acts of transgression since they serve to reinforce the cohesion of the social body. These acts of transgression strengthen the individual’s identification with the values of the community, but must remain unspoken at a public level. Žižek illustrates his point with two examples: lynching perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan in the American South and Nazi pogroms. In both cases, the acts of cruelty “[violate] the explicit rules of community life” while also maintaining a tacit order, the law’s “shadowy

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80 Žižek explaining Laibach’s strategy, a band part of the NSK. Accessed February 2014, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BZI85eVvA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BZI85eVvA).

double,” in which illegal barbarity is condoned, because, even though publically unacknowledged, it silently supports the official agenda.\textsuperscript{82} Žižek suggests that Laibach’s over-identification with the regime’s logic tends to expose its “hidden underside,” a guilty dimension which cannot be publically confessed.\textsuperscript{83}

Although the contexts in which Sierra and Laibach work are quite different (respectively liberal capitalism and totalitarian socialism), the artist and the musicians use the same strategy. They both identify with power rather than opting for a more overtly critical, rebellious, transgressive position.\textsuperscript{84} In Sierra’s \textit{Wall enclosing a Space}, the identification with the capitalist system is tangible, as the artwork itself faces visitors with a brick wall that they cannot cross, unless they happen to have the right nationality. Transgressing this rule would mean to trespass the wall and access the forbidden empty space behind it. However, trespassing would only reinforce the presence of the wall with its prohibitive prescription, which stands for the global economy and its implacable logic of controlled circulation. If the only way to bypass the established order is to do something unlawful, then it only points to how powerful and pervasive that order is. The wall embodies the rigidity of a system in which circulation is not as free as it seems, and in which circulating freely may in fact become an undesirable occurrence, if not an infraction. Through its reliance on the phenomenon of “solidarity-in-guilt adduced by

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{84} It is important to stress here the specificity of the liberal system of capitalism, in comparison to totalitarianism. Contrary to repressive totalitarianism, which prohibits critical views, capitalism invalidates them. As Arns and Sasse explain, it confronts us “with a new totality which excludes any possibility of an ‘outside’ position or distance” because of “the immediate and total recuperation and appropriation of critical viewpoints by the dominant political and economic capitalist system” which causes “the concept of critical distance …to be completely ineffective.” (455).
participation in a common transgression” to which Žižek refers, *Wall enclosing a space* sheds light on the abusive dimension of global capitalism.\(^{85}\)

Sierra’s identification with the power of globalization, evident in *Wall enclosing a Space*, tends to reproduce the system, and subsequently to perpetuate its logic. However, it is subversive precisely in how seriously it takes the order of late capitalism, and in how slavishly it materializes its dictates.\(^{86}\) The resulting experience for the audience, which includes government officials among its ranks, is a jarring collision with an order that suddenly feels less accommodating than it did from a privileged standpoint, outside of this artistic, almost exaggerated version of the system. By reproducing it so seriously, without irony, by applying such strict rules of exclusion, Sierra coincidentally causes those who usually hold power to be excluded, so that they are subject to their own regulations. Tellingly, Sierra reports that during the showing at the 49\(^{th}\) Venice Biennale, “[t]he only problems were caused by the ambassador, who wanted to enter without documentation.”\(^{87}\) Not only did Italy’s ambassador for Spain find himself excluded, but he also positioned himself on the illegal side of the wall erected by the artist, who “had told the guards that their salaries depended on him [the ambassador], so contrary to [Sierra’s] will and that of the patrons, he got in.”\(^{88}\) This situation testifies to the fact that Sierra refuses to choose one side or the other, obedience or rebellion. It is this ambivalence, the

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\(^{86}\) Arnas and Sasse stress the fact that NSK members, such as Laibach, have never publicly clarified where they stand, refusing to be labeled as subversive so easily, and maintaining an ambiguity that renders their strategy even more powerful, because even more baffling. (455).


\(^{88}\) Ibid.
resolutely undecidable posture that makes his work subversive. Sierra proves rebellious by way of obedience: embracing the system enables him to expose its cracks.

Yet, Sierra’s over-identification with the mechanisms of a global world and economy may after all appear as an instance of irony, and seem to fall in the category of overt criticism: with *Wall enclosing a space*, the ambassador was ironically made aware of the inequalities implied by official immigration policies in a context of globalization, as he was turned into the victim of the very rules for which he stands and that he is compelled to enforce. However, it is important to emphasize here that if the result of Sierra’s piece proves ironic, the process by which the piece is produced does not. If the installation intently imitates the official discourse and causes the latter to disprove its own tenets by accusing the artist of extremism, then it becomes clear that the system itself, not its artistic yet faithful imitation, is generating the irony. Because it leads the system to pinpoint its own inconsistencies, subversive affirmation is so powerful.

Sierra’s use of subversive affirmation is in fact instrumental in destabilizing our perception of capitalism as a self-evident reality. As he proceeds to suspend the ethical, Sierra also suspends the political, to the extent that he denies the seemingly irreversible character of the current world order. His artworks instill a sense of fragility, eventually making the audience doubt, if not question, the apparent inalterability of the reality in which they live. Instead of simply attacking capitalism with accusatory statements, Sierra’s work, as *Wall enclosing a space* exemplifies, weakens it through exposure, a process all the more powerful that it requires capitalism to unfold its own logic in a self-defeating manner. Sierra’s installations are not just an artistic reenactment of capitalism’s logic critically emphasizing its dysfunctional character. Rather, his installations are another site where capitalism itself showcases its own dysfunctions.
For example, when Sierra conceals the bodies of his participants, he highlights the way in which capitalism suppresses workers from the social landscape, by marginalizing them. Because Sierra unrepentantly conflates the social position of the artist with that of the capitalist figure, his artistic production consists of nothing else than pure capitalist instances. And yet his practice is subversive to the extent that it underlines the limits of the system that it also affirms. In so subverting capitalism, it presents its unsubstantiated character, as the system proves unable to ensure its own sustainability.  

The conceptual “nothingness” at the heart of Sierra’s work confirms capitalism’s critical lack of a natural foundation. Not only meant to be ephemeral, his installation-performances are also characterized by their uselessness, as they involve individuals accomplishing fruitless tasks. For instance, Sierra has asked his participants to hold or push heavy blocks of concrete, to stand motionless, or to gather as a crowd in order to fill an exhibition room. This ultimate nothingness is reminiscent of Kabakov’s conceptualism. His Shower Series (1965) depicts several instances of a man taking a shower, but receiving no water. The water is not non-existent and does flow, but its course always avoids the man’s body, rendering the showering process useless and absurd. According to the artist, this series of drawings “developed a number of metaphors, one which related to the person who is always waiting for something but never receives anything.”

As Sierra’s participants do, the man in the shower performs an activity with

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89 Marx pointed out the ineluctable obsolescence of capitalism, viewing as a stage in human political, economic, and social history, rather than an end.

90 For instance: 465 paid people (Museo Roffino Tamayo, Mexico City, Mexico, 1999), 7 forms of 60 x60 x 600 cm each, constructed to be supported perpendicular to a wall (Queensland Art Gallery, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia, 2010), Group of persons facing the wall and person facing into a corner (Lisson Gallery, and Turbin Hall, Tate Modern, London, UK, 2002 and 2008).

no substantial reward. Kabakov makes the social reality of the Soviet era appear as a void, a space in which individuals have no agency. Sierra achieves something similar: his artworks, in complete and systematic conformity with capitalism, expose its defects and obsolescence.

A lesser-known work by Sierra, *Burial of ten workers* (2010) (fig. 12.a, 12.b, and 12.c), which was performed in Calambrone, Italy, exposes the absurdity of the system quite blatantly. For this performance-installation, Sierra hired ten Italian workers to be buried in the ground, eventually concealing the entirety of their bodies. The workers stand on the ground of a sand beach, while a hole is dug under their feet, causing them to sink into the ground, until the hole is large enough to contain the entirety of their bodies. The photographic documentation shows workers at various stages of burial, highlighting the gradual loss of materiality, as the bodies disappear by increments. The progressive dematerialization indicates a suppression of the workers’ own physical strength, signaling a fundamental counter-productivity. The participants are identified as workers in the description provided by Sierra; however, the task that they are required to perform denies their working potential, as it obliterates the source of this potential, that is, their bodies. The workers are not actively putting their bodies to work; rather, they are completely passive, diligently waiting to be removed from their social environment. *Burial of ten workers* simultaneously follows the dictates of capitalism, in that it has individuals perform a specific task, and exposes its absurdity, as the utter fruitlessness of this task signals, not simply because of its non-existent end product, but also because it annihilates the very source of labor. This work therefore causes the same kind of frustration as Kabakov’s *Shower Series*, in that it is completely unproductive.

The “nothingness” apparent in Sierra’s artworks is subversive because it points to the incompleteness of the system, to the fact that it is only a work-in-progress, after all, and will
continue to remain so. Indeed, the absurd mechanisms, which lead laborers to destroy their own bodies, the very site of labor power at the core of the capitalist logic, indicate a level of incompleteness or imperfection. The ambivalence of Sierra’s pieces, both conformist and subversive, is symptomatic of the logic of capitalism (by affirming it), but also illustrative of the fact that it may fall apart (by exposing its failures). Therefore, the social reality that capitalism generates is not a given; rather, it is alterable. The very construction of this social reality – the fact that it is determined by political and economic processes, which could potentially be different – suggests that its deconstruction may also be possible. Sierra’s work, in which the fabric of the system becomes that of art and vice versa, points to the contingency of the current order, to the idea that capitalism is not the only possible reality.

Sierra’s work is indebted to the modernist emphasis on facture, the focus on the making of art rather than the end product itself. In fact, such emphasis on the process posits the end product as a contingent, if not incomplete, occurrence. In one of his lectures, Žižek addresses what he calls “the ontological incompleteness” of modern art.92 He describes modern ontology as “the idea of incomplete universe, the idea that reality is not fully, ontologically constructed, [that] the world is not fully out there.”93 Žižek grounds his theory in Jacques-Louis David’s The Death of Marat (1793), which he considers to be the first modernist painting, owing to its unfinished appearance. In the background, surrounding the figure, Žižek observes, there is “nothing, darkness.”94 To him, this blurry, confusing detail is the mark of a fundamental uncertainty at the heart of both David’s and Marat’s endeavors: both artistic and revolutionary

93 Ibid.
94 Ibid.
projects entail not knowing what the outcome is going to be, placing the artist, as well as the political activist, on “the edge of abyss.” Like Žižek, Sierra’s work implies that reality can never be fully constituted, as it is constantly elusive. His artworks present our social environment as being under (de)construction, thereby positing the social reality of capitalism as a fragile and contingent occurrence.

Between 2010 and 2012, Sierra created the film *Destroyed Word*, which consists of ten films set side-by-side on one screen and played simultaneously. Each film shows the physical destruction of one letter made of various materials and erected in one specific location around the world. The destructions are carried out by several individuals, with the use of instruments and machines such as sledgehammers, axes, or two trucks. The twenty-four minute film allows the audience to visualize the demolition of these letters, which, aligned as they are on the screen, form the word “Kapitalism,” a neologism reminiscent of the political and economic system that Sierra’s work both affirms and subverts. While the piece shows an act of destruction, as the title and images indicate, Sierra’s description of each situation starts with the term “constructed,” hinting at the fact that before demolition, there is always construction. For instance, the letter “K” is accompanied by the following description: “Constructed with brush fencing, destroyed by fire.” The descriptions, which also include the material out of which each letter was made, reinforce this insistence on construction, on the act of making, on the notion that the letters, literal metonymies of a system to which they refer, are artificially produced and not pre-existent

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95 Ibid.
96 Santiago Sierra, “Destroyed Word,” *Santiago Sierra*, accessed February 2014, [http://www.santiago-sierra.com/201206_1024.php](http://www.santiago-sierra.com/201206_1024.php). In his description of the work, Sierra lists all the locations where a letter was destroyed: Melbourne, Australia; Bretigny, France; Graz, Austria; Wewak, Papua New Guinea; Berlin, Germany; Hamilton, New Zealand; Reykjavik, Iceland; New Delhi, India; Tilburg, Holland; Visby, Sweden. Santiago.
97 Ibid.
to our social activities. Furthermore, the film opens with the spelling-out of the word “KAPITALISM,” thereby constructing it as a readable, visible, and physical reality.

Consequently, the work proves to be as much about the establishment of a certain reality, as it is about the eventual demolition of that reality by the same individuals – Sierra’s hired participants – who used to recognize it as their own.

Through the conflation of the verbal and of the visual, the reality of capitalism – often alluded to in abstract terms, as a system that nobody entirely comprehends – becomes a material object that is physically alterable. In fact, the combination of verbal abstraction and visual materialization is essential to Sierra’s project, because it also points to the isolation of each location in relation to the others: for example, while the “K” is located in Australia, the “T” and the “M” are situated in Germany and Sweden respectively. In each location, only one letter is constructed and then destroyed. Each location is only part of a wider system, failing to make it a totality. The demolitions therefore make sense only together, as a whole, but not individually. Precisely because its logic is never entirely apparent and only some aspects of it are visible at any given moment, capitalism appears as a natural, immutable reality. Sierra’s film exposes capitalism as a totality, by turning it into a tangible reality, thereby offering a better picture of it. This plays out through several elements, including the physicality of the letters, the assemblage of the letters on one screen to form one single word, in addition to the variety of locations and languages that this one word encapsulates.98 Interestingly, the film sums up Sierra’s strategy of subversion through exposure, insofar as it captures the whole logic of capitalism in one word.

98 Individuals in each film literally encounter capitalism in the form of a letter, even if that encounter becomes really clear when all the letters are put together. Eventually, the one word that they form together borrows from several languages, signaling the protean character of global capitalism.
Each film starts with one of the word’s constitutive letters, established and motionless as if immutable, before it becomes the target of modification and, eventually, destruction.

Sierra’s work subtly denaturalizes the current global order, not by blatantly attacking it, but by affirming it to the point of imminent disintegration. His practice derives its power from a capacity to reveal and weaken, to affirm and subvert, all at the same time. His political diagnosis is one that starts with the acceptance of the fact of capitalism, its pervasive and ungraspable aspects. Sierra’s work enacts the exposure of capitalism through a slavish reproduction of the system’s logic, which makes possible the harsh yet inevitable report that the reality of capitalism is neither flawless, nor irrevocable, that it is capable of undermining itself and can be altered. *Destroyed Word* does not end with a clear prescription for an alternative, which is symptomatic of the political indecisiveness regarding the current world order. Rather, his film ends with debris forming a fragmentary, almost unintelligible picture, which places Sierra on a continuum with both David and Marat, whose artistic and political efforts were guided by an ontological uncertainty.

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99 The film could be said to be an attack on capitalism, because it shows destruction. However, such destruction also employs the means of capitalism itself, that is, labor. Again, in this situation, the system reveals its own inconsistencies. Ultimately, Sierra’s film shows that any order, any reality, is not a given.
Conclusion

Santiago Sierra is an artist of disillusion, demystifying our common activist practices informed by an idealist belief system, and pointing out the futility of many acts of overt resistance:

I don’t like to manifest myself or participate in demonstrations, as that is a kind of secular procession in which instead of asking the Virgin for a miracle, we ask a guy with a tie to solve our problems. The guy with the tie is not there to solve anything; he is just there to maintain the status quo.  

Sierra’s statement reflects his belief, shared by many political theorists nowadays, such as Hardt and Negri for instance, that it is ineffective to oppose power directly, because power will respond to dissent by absorbing it, so that it will not really trouble the official order. In this thesis, I have paid attention to the strategies employed by Sierra, an artist who refuses compromise at all levels, and advocates for complete honesty and transparency in his reproduction of capitalist relations. Instead of an active criticism and denunciation of the system, his strategies revolve around a more ambivalent replication of it.

A very recent piece, *El trabajo es la dictatura* (2013) (fig. 13), which translates as “work is the dictatorship,” encapsulates most of the elements that compose Sierra’s subversive practice. An inverted reference to the Nazi motto that labor makes you free, this artwork involves thirty workers “hired for the minimum wage recommended by the National Employment Service to fill out one thousand note books by hand with a phrase taken from graffiti found in Madrid.”

Here, Sierra employs a form of quotation that is subversive for two reasons. Firstly, the phrase constituting the title of the work draws a parallel between the totalitarian regime of Nazism and democratic liberalism, implicitly and controversially equating the two. Secondly, the quotation

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extracts a rudimentary and anonymous form of expression from its original context (the graffiti in the streets) and reintegrates it to the very system that it condemns, in order to show the contradictions inherent in that system (capitalist productivity through labor). This piece in fact epitomizes all of the aspects of Sierra’s practice that I have examined so far.

At an aesthetic level, *El trabajo es la dictatura* is a work which exemplifies Sierra’s contemporary realism. Exceeding representation, it doubles reality instead of simply portraying it. The artwork reproduces the effects of the capitalist logic, functioning as a sample of the chain of production and consumption, with an emphasis on labor. Although they are contributing to an artistic project, the participants are also put to work, and are remunerated for it. What one can observe at the heart of Sierra’s artwork bears the same features as what one can observe outside of it, in the broader social realm.

In terms of subject positions, from which we derive the supposedly ethical or unethical character of the work, *El trabajo es la dictatura* is very confusing, since it refuses to clearly attribute responsibility. The artwork in fact makes explicit the relative implication of everyone in the system’s logic, which invalidates the idea that anyone can take a truly ethical stance in the face of exploitation. In this situation, as in many others, the workers themselves are compelled to help reproduce the system, by relying on their labor to get by. The artist who exploits them, as well as the audience who “consumes” the artwork, also contribute to the system’s smooth operation. “Who is the victim and who is to blame,” as Pilar Vilella Mascaro wonders, is a question without an answer.102 Sierra blurs the ethical paradigm, making it unclear where the truly ethical resides, if anywhere at all.

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At a political level, Sierra’s piece is subversive for its serious, non-ironic reproduction and subsequent affirmation of the system. Ultimately, this strategy of reinstatement underlines the system’s contradictions and inconsistencies. In this case, even though the workers could presumably refuse, they agree to perform their task, as it provides them with money, a vital resource in the capitalist context. However, as much as they comply with the system’s exigencies, their participation also stresses the contradictions of capitalism: labor, which supposedly rewards workers through monetary compensation, in fact enslaves them to a logic that they cannot escape. The repetitive aspect of the work, due to the endless inscription of the same sentence, suggests this idea of imprisonment. The liberal system of capitalism reveals its hidden facet when its prescriptions are executed unabashedly, as Sierra’s work demonstrates.

For all these reasons, Sierra’s artwork relates ambivalently to the capitalist reality, making it so proximate that it is both reinstated and hypothesized at the same time. Unsettling the habitual perception of its spectators, Sierra’s work exposes the contingency of any established order or regime, and the possibility of overthrowing it, in spite of its irrevocable appearance. In that sense, his practice functions as a shock effect, meant to stir us from the torpor of complacency and resignation, which may appear as an ethical ambition. However because he refrains from determining what the next step could be, thereby refusing to put forth a new ideal of social justice, Sierra cancels the possibility of imbuing his work with a moral dimension and leaves the viewer with a permanent sense of discomfort. Offering no resolution, his work betrays the fact that capitalism is hard to dismantle because nobody has a good prescription for an alternative.

This crucial indeterminacy signals that Sierra’s work is situated in the lineage of modernism. It is part of the larger context of modern art and its concern with the
“unpresentable,” as Jean-François Lyotard mentions in his famous essay titled “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?.” For Lyotard, “modernity…cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without the discovery of the ‘lack of reality’ of reality, together with the invention of other realities.” According to the French philosopher, modernism strives to “present the fact that the unpresentable exists,” while postmodernism takes the modernist project a step further:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable.

Following Lyotard’s definition, Sierra’s work proves to be baffling, not only because of what it presents, but also because of how it presents it.

Sierra’s presentation methods involve shocking the viewers and trapping them in a constant feeling of unease by, for instance, concealing the bodies of marginalized individuals into the “flesh” of the artwork and, incidentally, of society. Ultimately, these methods prevent any form of consensus over the meaning that his practice imparts. Sierra’s works remain at the threshold of resolution, but never fully yield it. They seem to deliver an activist message, but in fact they just crudely repeat mechanisms already at work throughout society, and therefore say nothing new. They imprison the viewers in the experience of total vacuity, shattering the reality that they know, yet replacing it with nothing new, nor comforting. His artworks constitute events of destabilization that do not “supply reality…but…invent allusions to the conceivable which

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104 Ibid., 77.

105 Ibid., 78.

106 Ibid., 81.
cannot be presented.” Instead of instilling a solid sense of reality, they reveal its fragility and elusiveness. Sierra’s practice is resolutely frustrating, never satisfying, since it stresses the unstable and incommensurate character of reality.

This insolent unfinishedness or lack of a resolution, as if Sierra were cynically withdrawing the “so what” element of his work, accords the art viewer a greater role and responsibility. Poised between performativity, insofar as it enacts the logic of capitalism, and theatricality, insofar as it demands an audience to witness and respond to this enactment, Sierra’s performance-installations compel viewers to determine and reflect on the meaning that they convey. The interruption of signification (what meaning does the piece convey?), coupled with formal instability (how does the piece convey meaning?), is precisely why Sierra’s work comes across as shocking: it both empowers us and leaves us powerless. As his work makes us aware of our imprisonment in the ideology of capitalism, it forces us to reflect on the possibility of a different situation, while also leaving us in the dark as to how we could make that change happen. The limbo in which Sierra leaves us constitutes the most crucial outcome of the contemporary realism that his practice is foregrounding.

\[107\] Ibid., 81.
Figures

Fig. 1: 160 cm line tattooed on 4 people. El Gallo Arte Contemporaneo. Salamanca, Spain. December 2000.

Fig. 2: 24 blocks of concrete constantly moved during a day’s work by paid workers. ACE Gallery L.A., Los Angeles, United States. July 1999.
Fig. 3: *100 hidden individuals*. Calle Dóctor Fouquet, Madrid, Spain. November 2003.

Fig. 4: *Object measuring 600 x 57 x 52 cm constructed to be held horizontally to a wall*. Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich, Switzerland. April 2001.
Fig. 5.a: 12 workers paid to remain inside cardboard boxes. ACE Gallery New York, New York, United States. March 2000.

Fig 5.b: 12 workers paid to remain inside cardboard boxes. ACE Gallery New York, New York, United States. March 2000.
Fig. 6.a: A person paid for 360 continuous working hours. P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center New York, New York, United States. September 2000.

Fig. 6.b: A person paid for 360 continuous working hours. P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center New York, New York, United States. September 2000.
Fig. 7.a: *Group of persons facing the wall and person facing into a corner.* Lisson Gallery, London, United Kingdom, October 2002.

Fig. 7.b: *Group of persons facing the wall and person facing into a corner.* Lisson Gallery, London, United Kingdom, October 2002.
Fig. 8: *No in Carrara Marble and Vaseline*. Piazza Brucellaria, ex Montecatini, XIV Biennale Internazionale di Scultura di Carrara, Carrara, Italy. July 2010.

Fig. 9: *10 people paid to masturbate*. Tejadillo Street, Havan, Cuba. November 2000.
Fig. 10.a: 3 people paid to lay still inside 3 boxes during a party. Vedado, Havana, Cuba. November 2000.

Fig. 10.b: 3 people paid to lay still inside 3 boxes during a party. Vedado, Havana, Cuba. November 2000.
Fig. 11.a: *Wall enclosing a space*. Spanish Pavilion, Venice Biennial, Venice, Italy. June 2003.

Fig. 11.b: *Wall enclosing a space*. Spanish Pavilion, Venice Biennial, Venice, Italy. June 2003.
Fig. 12.a: *Burial of ten workers*. Calambrone, Italy. February 2010.

Fig. 12.b: *Burial of ten workers*. Calambrone, Italy. February 2010.

Fig. 12.c: *Burial of ten workers*. Calambrone, Italy. February 2010.
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