Evental Aesthetics

Poverty and Asceticism

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Introduction

Joanna Demers

The distinction between poverty and asceticism is supposedly one of choice. Poverty afflicts while asceticism uplifts. A holy person is called to asceticism, but an unlucky person is drawn into poverty. But there are complications of course. Poverty can be willfully self–imposed. Mother Teresa spoke of the spiritual poverty of the West, an emptiness of the soul that luxury fails to fill. Likewise, asceticism can be forced on another: witness the Byzantine iconoclasts of the eighth century who forced image–less worship on their culture.

If the line between poverty and asceticism is blurrier than we might first think, perhaps we might at least agree that it is more difficult to be poor or abstemious than it is rich and epicurean. But again, there are complications. Peter Singer states that "whatever money you're spending on luxuries, not necessities, should be given away," and does so in an

article that so forcefully calls us out for spending money on luxuries that our restaurant food then tastes like ashes in our mouths, and our smart clothes hang on us like rags.[1] At their most convincing, moralists like Singer and Mother Teresa make poverty, or at least conscientious frugality, positively desirable, the only rational choice for a being who wants to be happy during her waking hours and sleep well at night. At a much more frivolous level, nothing is more fashionable these days than the aesthetic asceticism of minimalism–"lite": the sleek simplicity of Apple products, the no–nonsense swagger of sans serif fonts like Helvetica and its spawn, the renewed vogue of postpunk and conceptual art and spare couture like Comme des garçons.

In other words, we can't claim to know anymore whether poverty and asceticism are ours or someone else's or whether they are categorically difficult to endure. Yet this very statement can only come from someone in a privileged position who is able to parse out the finer elements in what billions on Earth must suffer with no choice. One of Argentine folk singer Atahualpa Yupanqui's most well–known songs is "Pobrecito soy," whose refrain laments, "How poor I am! I never say it. It's maybe because of this that I am so poor." Poverty is reinforced through silence, through inertia. And poverty only exists the moment that knowledge of poverty emerges, the moment that comparisons are made and that absence is acknowledged.

Perhaps, then, the only thing we can say with certainty about poverty and asceticism is that our judgments of these states ultimately reflect more about our subject positions than about the states themselves. Poverty is tolerable if we are not poor. Asceticism is noble when we have a choice not to be ascetics.

This issue profiles various attempts, both successful and fraught, to engage the divide between asceticism and opulence, between materialism and poverty. James Harvey–Davitt turns to contemporary Iranian director Jafar Panahi, whose work negates its status as film in order to assert its status as political communiqué. David Janzen similarly analyzes Santiago Sierra's "Line" photographs, which assume certain geometric limitations in exchange for increased aesthetic and political freedoms. Meanwhile, Martin Thomas enriches our understanding of Schopenhauer by means of Beckett's asceticism, a direct engagement with boredom and tragedy. In a short essay for EA's "Reading" section, Mandy–Suzanne Wong examines Giorgio Agamben's recent book *The Highest Poverty,* wondering if aesthetics might find a way to challenge the concept of ownership.

In the unthemed section of the journal, Renata Carmago Sá profiles John Constable's landscape paintings featuring clouds, objects that transcend earthbound nature to hint at a spiritual plane. And Jennifer Stob critiques Nicolas Bourriaud's misreadings of Situationist literature, thereby unfairly undermining its social import.

Notes

[1] Peter Singer, "The Singer Solution to World Poverty," *The New York Times Magazine*, 5 September 1999, 60-64. http://www.utilitarianism.net/singer/by/19990905.htm

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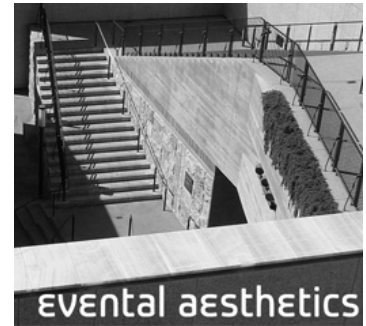
ABSTRACT

One of John Constable's highest achievements, his "skying" campaign of the summers of 1821 and 1822 in Hampstead Heath, connects the seventeenth-century approach to landscape to the modernist vision of it in a singular manner. This is the starting point of my investigation of Constable's cloudscapes, an investigation that aims to bring attention to their vanguard position in actually heralding the concept of "lifeworld," a concept that was to prove crucial to the development of Modernism. In connecting the Dutch quotidian approach to life with the impressionists' search for immanence, Constable's skies became an essential bridge in the history of modern art. His own very personal treatment of natural phenomena as manifestations of spiritual life represents the transition from the naturalist view of nature to a more human-focused – later to be called realist – view of the natural world.

KEYWORDS

John Constable, cloud sketches, British romanticism, landscape painting, Hampstead Heath

John Constable's Moving Clouds

Renata Camargo Sá

The most cogent evidence that the modernist investigation of the puissance of the world of senses had its beginnings with the Dutch quotidian approach to life, rather than in the optical researches of the impressionists, can be found in the "skying" campaign held by John Constable during the summers of 1821 and 1822 in England's Hampstead Heath. Constable's well-known admiration for the paintings by landscapist Jacob Van Ruisdael helps confirm my assumption of the decisive role Dutch art has played in the evolution of modern art.[1] In Ruisdael's canvases, Constable seemed to have discovered an alternative to the mind-based Latin interpretation of life, which, in turn, resulted in the development of his own personal narrative, a narrative that was to be decisive in the surpassing of illusionism by modern art. This article examines how the romantic sensibility and its affinity for nature conveyed by Constable's cloudscapes function as a thread that connects the Dutch interpretation of the lifeworld to the phenomenological inclinations of modern art.

"Skying" is what Constable used to call his studies of clouds.[2] The term's uncommon gerund form suggests that his observations were aimed at action rather than contemplation. To put it simply, he looked at the sky as a constantly moving phenomenon. As early as 1812, we find him expressing ideas about the dynamism of nature. On September 12, in a letter to his future wife Maria Bicknell, he writes, "I have not resumed my landscape studies since my return. I have not found myself equal to the vivid pencil that landscape requires."[3]

It can be said that it is the sky that best inspires the experience of dynamism summoned by the physical world. Thus, studies of clouds are always about volume, *the* most typical property of physical objects, and clouds moving in the sky tend to intensify our sensation of volume and space. At the same time, there is nothing like looking at the sky to evoke metaphysical speculations – to look at the sky is one of those characteristics of the human animal that most contributed to the gap separating Homo sapiens from the other animals. In the "sketches" of clouds, Constable seems to be taken by the ambiguity between physics and metaphysics that naturally evolves from our perception of clouds and skies. Such ambiguity received particular attention in Constable's time following the ideas and practices brought to the fore by the Enlightenment.

The romantic pathos blooming in Great Britain during the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century is generally attributed to the introduction of German idealism (Kant and Hegel) into its philosophical circles. Recent scholarship, however, shows that the tension between the so-called philosophy of common sense – from Scotland and "the way of ideas" from the continent – also played a very important role in shaping romanticism.[4] Therefore, the influence of Dutch landscape painting in Constable's studies of clouds must be seen in connection to the notion of truth that was flourishing within the insular culture of Great Britain. I am subscribing here to Martin Heidegger's premise that "the History of the essence of Western art corresponds to the change in the essence of truth."[5] For this reason, I am assuming that historic forces as obtrusive as industrialization and the Enlightenment – which brought about the collision of opposing values such as the material versus the spiritual or the work ethic versus the exploitation of nature and human beings – were also fundamental to the construction of the romantic perspective. The historic mood created by accelerating industrialization rekindled the old conflict between physics and metaphysics. Not coincidentally, this conflict is perfectly illustrated by the dual role that clouds play in our imagination.

Thomas Hobbes' old, famous statement that "everything that exists is matter or matter in motion" helps one understand the cultural tradition behind Constable's studies of clouds.[6] Although a similar atmosphere, dominated by a more empirical than mental inclination, also predominated during Ruisdael's time, his clouds never moved as freely as Constable's – instead being fastened to the earth in order to compose sceneries. Notwithstanding its privileged position in the composition, the sky in Ruisdael's canvases remains the combined part of a finished whole. It is fair to say that in Ruisdael an *idea* of clouds still precedes the actual experience of them. The tradition of landscape painting in the Netherlands set models for the depiction of clouds and skies, which, given the country's flat topography, became major themes of their artistic endeavors. Furthermore and more importantly, seventeenth–century Holland lacked the necessary mental framework for the emergence of the free–flowing spatial configuration that Constable succeeded in achieving.

The reason why Ruisdael's clouds fail to evoke the lack of constraint that one senses in Constable's work arises as a result of the weight that the material world had within Dutch culture. Specialists in Dutch art have agreed that this cultural and historical feature is connected to the compliance of their seicento art with the emerging Protestant and capitalist cultures. Their ethos reverberates in their aesthetics hence the emphasis in their painting on the physicality of such things as furniture, carpets, fruits, architecture, and garments. In Dutch art, sometimes even people can be depicted in a "commodified" manner.[7] It is widely recognized that there is a dialectical confrontation between this mundane aspect of their culture and the growing Puritanism that helped shape our modern economic system. In this sense, by substituting the sensual (and idealized) approach of most Italian and Spanish Catholic art with Puritan moral standards, the Dutch take on life at this time assumed an instrumental character, but it also anticipated, contradictions aside, what we in more modern times understand as *lebenswelt*.

This growing instrumental logic helped deprive, for example, the objectively described Dutch clouds of the kind of imagination that is derived from idealistic sensibilities, either classical or anticlassical. An anticlassical imagination is precisely what makes Constable's clouds the expression of the continuous transformation of entities. Despite my admiration for Ruisdael, I must say that one ought to be born a Johannes Vermeer or a Rembrandt to be able to transmute culturally inherent materialistic values into spiritual ones. Only in such rare cases can one find objects that have become invested with a spiritual meaning by way of

their proximity to the sitter's *spirituale*.[8] As far as clouds are concerned, however, the history of art had to wait for the next century for an emotional painter like John Constable to appear – someone who would make us sense a cloud's ethereal quality as vividly and realistically as we perceive its material properties. Presented as such, Constable's clouds seem to invite us to reenact some sort of epiphany.

The fact that they were taken as studies is also of capital importance to the type of freedom that the little paintings by John Constable evoke. In fact, their beauty is intrinsically dependent upon the lightness that we attribute to immaterial beings as well as to the freedom of the unfinished. This perception corresponds with another of Hobbes' intuitions – that the spirit is also matter in movement. This thread of thought leads us even further: it takes us to an oblique connection between the pure cloud sketches by Constable and the slaves by Michelangelo, sculpted almost three hundred years before.[9] This seemingly odd association is based on the idea, common to the art of both, that only through the experience of art can an ideal reality be envisaged. An ideal reality (as paradoxical as this expression sounds) is the very "realm of freedom," wherein all contradictions have been surmounted: soul and matter, good and evil, nature and culture. To these we can add the horrible social discrepancies that were produced by the then recently devised industrial processes of production. In the realm of freedom, all production processes would be alike artistic creation, unfolding thus from experience and imagination, never from the exploitation that is founded on inequalities. In such a realm, art's commonly held task of "redeeming" society would be made unnecessary.

The world that Constable brings out is slowly revealed before our eyes. By his use of the term "skying," we grasp that he experienced the "celestial" as processes of *revelation* of the empirical world. I must stress the apparent ambiguity between empirical reality and the idea of revelation because, to my eyes, Constable's skies demonstrate that matter is the abode of spirit (a view that significantly coincides with the empiricist tradition of English and Scottish thought). During the production of their works, artists rely on procedures that determine in great part the manner by which we behold them afterwards. Accordingly, Constable's cloud studies ought to be perceived as processes of revelation. In other words, rather than pure entities like ideas or mathematical formulas, they ought to be perceived as visions – therefore imperfect and incomplete.

Visual studies on perceptive processes became a hallmark of early modernity and are easily traced back to romanticism's rupture with the classical static models. In this sense, Constable's fleeting brushstrokes, unfinished surfaces, and faithfulness to vision rather than to concepts prompt to move the more stationary clouds by Ruisdael, prefiguring the empirical space that was later explored by impressionism. His conception of art thus complies with the nineteenth-century artistic tendency to question the predominant rationalist categories of the Enlightenment as much as those of neoclassical revisionism. Contrary to an adherence to established models, the paintings by Constable make art move ahead, anticipating the coming critiques of the humanist/metaphysical genesis of being that developed in parallel to the search by impressionists for immanence and everyday life. Above all, they confirm the paintings' homeland, their very identity with the land of empiricism *par excellence*. In so reasoning, one can conclude that only the unwary could suppose France to be the home of *peinture en plein air*.

It was only in the 1930s that the sketches by John Constable received some serious scholarly attention. To this day, his oeuvre is still not as popular as William Turner's, his only real counterpart in British painting. Constable's professional biography is not without frustrations, caused mainly by the public's and sometimes even his own peers' failure to understand his undertakings.[10] The fact that the small paintings that we are concerned with here were for a long time considered studies certainly helped delay their recognition. This fact must be confronted with a preoccupation voiced by Samuel Taylor Coleridge regarding the situation of poetry in his day. For Coleridge, the growing masses of literate people did not correspond to an increase in lettered individuals. This made him afraid that their lack of taste, as he perceived it, would mean a continued desecration of literature itself.

The situation Coleridge saw in literature was also felt within the visual arts. Motivated by the decline of aristocratic patronage, both the iconography and the quality of artworks slowly began to rely upon the taste of a less cultivated public, a public that might have been indifferent to the more dashing and cutting-edge works produced by John Constable.[11] Although it is risky to assert that "lack of taste" alone led to the prolonged indifference towards the sketches of clouds, some of Constable's commissioned works attest to a certain taste for the conventional, which very likely imposed itself upon him. This circumstance, added to the fact that the sketches were never exhibited during his lifetime, could have

reduced the chances for them to have been appreciated as finished and autonomous cloudscapes as we see them today.

These "skying" ventures and their indifferent reception prove the idiosyncrasies of art history as well as our myopia. Their vanguard position is continuously revealed anachronistically by more recent art works. Surely works by the impressionists but even paintings as recent as Jackson Pollock's make us recognize that the alleged incompleteness of Constable's studies was due to his advances towards something as new to his contemporaries as realism.

A passage in an 1812 letter from his friend John Fisher reads as follows:

> I am now looking at it [a painting Constable presented him]. It is most pleasing when you are directed to look at it; but you must be taken to it. It does not solicit attention; and this I think true of all your pictures, and the real cause of your want of popularity. I have heard it remarked of Rubens, that one of his pictures illuminates a room. It gives a cheerfulness to everything about it.[12]

His friend's appraisal proves that his vanguardism was being really misunderstood. The sentence "it does not solicit attention" implies that the general taste was more inclined to the Arcadian opulence of idealized, panoramic views of nature, such as Claude Lorrain's for example, than to Constable's immanent vision and therefore quotidian rendering of the theme of nature. Considering also Rubens, the example given by Fisher as the correct model to emulate, the reader is informed of the type of grandeur the public of the day wanted to see portrayed in art.

Constable was aware of this, and in another letter to Maria Bicknell, he wrote:

> There is room enough for a natural painter. The great vice of the present day is bravura, an attempt to do something beyond the truth. Fashion always had, and will have, its day; but truth in all things only will last, and can only have just claims on posterity.[13]

At the time the cloudscapes were made, those works that Constable considered finished enough to be exhibited consisted of commissions for portraits and landscapes depicting buildings, most often churches. As we

look at them today, it is almost undisputable that their quality is inferior to the series of pure clouds. Ironically, the paintings by John Constable today reach the highest prices for all British art.

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In my understanding, the greatest value of Constable's paintings of clouds lies in their ability to reconcile universal with particular categories, manifesting a primary aspect about the ontology of art. Likely, this aspect is art's hardcore, the only of its features that remained unchanged throughout its history. I am referring to art's persistent refusal to be defined, its rejection of an identity against which other identities can be confronted. In order to be closer to what art could actually be, we first have to give up subjecting its being to the principle of propositional truths, accepting that its very actuality depends upon the embodiment of other beings.

I am focusing on the series of clouds because I think the series represents Constable's masterpieces – and I take masterpieces to be those works that better unveil the enigma of art. Therefore, following Heidegger's tendency to universalize from particulars, I would assert that if *Dasein* is the being that thinks the truth of beings, masterpieces are works that best unveil the truth about the being of art. And they do this without recurring to any immutable essence but by allowing truth to overflow from the transit of historical time.

Since historical time is a human construction, the truth that is unveiled by art can only be cultural. The paintings by Constable unveil truths that were forged by what we have labeled romantic. Above all, by way of such a sensibility, the works unveil the period's artistic resistance to the dominant belief in the harsh separation between culture and nature. The Enlightenment's treatment of nature as object deepened the subject's suspicion of it, widening a separation that many consider false. Constable's empirical studies of the cloud formations of Hampstead Heath suggest the idea of humanity's oneness with nature. Because the viewer sees himself immersed in clouds, he naturally *believes* in what he sees, which makes him reject the Cartesian methodic doubt. A word to the wise is enough: such a feeling suffices to clear out the stale debate over whether Constable's rendering of clouds had been determined by his

readings of Luke Howard's *Essay on the Modification of Clouds* of 1803 or Thomas Forster's *Researches about Atmospheric Phaenomena* of 1815. Interesting as these may have been to him, it is obvious that they were not an *a priori* to his paintings of clouds.[14]

The sketches of clouds can never be reduced, as earlier interpretations attempted, to the annotations found on their back about the weather, the direction of clouds and winds, etc. The emotional content of Constable's clouds is paralleled only by the poetry of his contemporaries: "I wandered lonely as a cloud" wrote Wordsworth; and William Cowper's famous line: "God made the country, and man made the town."[15] Therefore, to force the relationship between John Constable's "skying" and the recently founded science of meteorology is not simply a gross misunderstanding of art but of the whole cultural environment that allowed for the emergence of a certain sensibility that dreamed about the reconnection of the human being with nature. Instead, we should be seeing these paintings as poetic expressions about the encounter of a spiritual being (man) with nature.[16] Through art, Constable's very personal experience of the sky is universally comprehended and shared. By the same token, this typically universal entity, the Sky, when drawn so close to us, acquires the airs of a parochial, almost local and, characteristically, English phenomenon.

Because empirical modalities of knowledge are conditioned by particular apprehensions, themselves determined by a number of historical, social, and psychological factors, it is precisely in perception where the gap between Constable's clouds and impressionist art can be found. The concern of impressionists with the optical impression of phenomena under specific lighting is clearly secondary for Constable, who was preoccupied instead with the problem of how paintings embody our apprehensions of the world. Constable realized that these apprehensions are spiritual, thus, determined by the feelings and reasoning that the world prompts in us to live. In grounding his works in spirit rather than in sense stimulus (like optical impressions for instance), Constable heralded Cézanne's quest for the intelligence inherent in our visual capacity. His *Stroke at Nayland* of 1810–11 at the Metropolitan Museum in New York tacitly endorses this point. Cézanne's quest, as we know, represented a new beginning, one that impelled art away from the impressionists' more optical than visual preoccupations.[17]

In the visual arts, it is upon this very difference that the problem of knowledge ultimately rests. The difference between visual perception and

optical reception guards the huge gap separating the idea of universal that defines the life of the spirit from the particularity of sensorial life – in other words, the difference between empirical knowledge and sensual stimuli.

The clash between universal and particular categories was a theme of major importance in the first decades of the nineteenth century. As mentioned, the studies of clouds appeared in the early days of the first Industrial Revolution, an epoch marked by the rising contradictions of instrumental reason. In contemplating this historical conjuncture, one needs to both consider the ancient duality between *poiésis* and *techné* that lies at the starting point of art theorization and resume the old question about the relevance of art to humanity (as in Coleridge's preoccupation above).

Art's productive force contrasts so dramatically with the emerging industrial processes that since the days of the industrial age, it came to represent the only alternative to the oppressive drive of the new economic model – a model that deeply altered the traditional system of cultural, moral, and ethical values. Constable's biography and correspondences reveal that he was much more engaged in the artistic developments of his time than in its political or economic turmoil. Nevertheless, given the dramatic social conditions that prevailed in England in the early nineteenth century, it is hard not to look at Constable's small pictures of clouds as representing a form of resistance, if only subliminal, to the new forces of production. However, great works of art never debase themselves in vain representing humanity's unreasonableness and inhumanness. So instead of lamenting the alienating rationality that was ruling the still incipient industrialism, Constable's clouds show us ideal forms of life, forms of life whose central principle is freedom. In this sense, the kind of political engagement of the next generation of painters such as Jean–François Millet and Honoré–Victorien Daumier seems almost anti–artistic. Constable's cloudscapes show that art and by extension freedom have nothing to do with political pamphleteering. Art expresses by the simple fact that it exists, a kind of spiritual truth that only unopinionated and nonutilitarian phenomena are able to express. In Theodor Adorno's impeccable line, "[art] criticizes society by merely existing."[18]

Art's spirituality demonstrates that its praxis surpasses all efforts that the incipient industry could possibly take in order to reach its standards of quality. The contradictions entailed by the exploitation, typical of the power relations found in the modern production system, are

above all anti-aesthetic. Power is anti-aesthetic since it presupposes and entails disharmony and disequilibrium. Therefore the contradictions in the industrial system of exploitation permeate even the best products that industries can possibly bring forth. Their inherent irrationality is diametrically opposed to the *promesse de Bonheur*, where art's rationale is rooted.

In light of the foregoing, the term "landscape painter" seems hardly appropriate to describe an artist like John Constable. The word "landscape", originating from the Dutch *landskip*, designates a stretch of cultivated field. Similarly to the French *paysage*, it refers to cultivated land rather than to the wilderness. Inherent in the expression "landscape" and in the French *paysage,* one senses the skeptical distance between subject and object that is absent from his canvases. In the cloud studies, above all, not only does he refuse models of any kind so that nature cannot be confined to any Neo-Platonic formulae, but he also rejects the domesticated nature found in rococo art. For Constable, nature is only accessible through perception, thus, determined by random encounters, surprises, and bedazzlement.

I firmly believe that the best way to critically assess a work of art is by grasping the manner by which it conveys the relationship that humans had with nature at the cultural moment the object was created. After all, nature is by far the most challenging aspect of human existence. Furthermore, nature's immediacy and therefore muteness is provocative to articulate beings like us. Among other things, the search for planarity in Modern art, whose beginnings Clement Greenberg claimed to have been Édouard Manet's achievement, can also be described as an effort to understand how humanity participates in nature's vitality beyond the rational explanations of the Enlightenment. I assume that this vitality (or the lifeworld) is the thread connecting previous perspectives, such as the Dutch vision of nature, and the more conspicuous realism of impressionist and post-impressionist art. To overcome illusionism – the goal that modern art imposed on itself after Manet – is but a part of unraveling the mystery behind the vitality connecting all things. Illusionism allows viewers to escape from nature's incommunicability and to return to it as it wishes through a vanishing point. As the world became more mediated (i.e., as nature became domesticated by science), the possibility of escaping became feebler and illusionism ever more retrograde.

When the Dutch portrayed nature and the objects of daily life from that dynamic and incarnated standpoint so typical of the modern

photographer, they announced the markedly "studied" indifference that came to characterize the passerby attitude of the modern *flâneur*. This change in the history of visual perception was occasioned by the growing association of objects (the seen) with the notion of commodities, which are basically objects whose semantics are restricted to their interchangeability and therefore emptied of content. Constable's moving clouds figure as a turning point in the history of our belonging to and at the same time our estrangement from nature.

Notes •

[1] See my "Espiritualidade Mundana: O Trabalho como Construção do Real," *Viso: Cadernos de Estética Aplicada,* no. 5 (2009), http://www.revistaviso.com.br/visArtigo.asp?sArti=41; Constable's admiration for Jacob Van Ruisdael dates back to 1797. He actually owned three etchings of the Dutch artist by the time of his death and, on a number of occasions, the press has associated his work with Ruisdael's. In his letters, Constable praises the Dutch artist's accomplishments, confirming that he had copied many paintings by Ruisdael in order to study his approach to nature. See C. R. Leslie, R. A., *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable, Esq. R.A: Composed Chiefly of His Letters* (London: Longman, 1845). https://archive.org/details/memoirsoflifeofjoolesluoft.

[2] Louis Hawes, "Constable's Sky Sketches," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute*, no. 32 (1969): 349. Hawes believes the term is likely to have been adopted by Constable in reference to the expression *skoying,* used by Willem Van de Velde de Younger, to designate the type of cloud observation that he too used to do in Hampstead Heath.

[3] Leslie, *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable,* 37.

[4] Gavin Budge et al., *Romantic Empiricism: Poetics and the Philosophy of Common Sense 1780-1830* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007).

[5] Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Basic Writings from Being and time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964),* edited with general introduction and introductions to each selection by David Farrell Krell, foreword by Taylor Carman (New York: Harper & Row, 2008): 206.

[6] Raymond Bayer, *História da Estética* (Lisboa: Editora Estampa, 1995): 151-2.

[7] See for instance the rendering by Gerard Ter Borch the younger of the theme of the presentation, in the painting of c.1600-1664, titled *An Officer Making His Bow to a Lady*.

[8] This is particularly perceptible in three examples. Firstly, in the whitewashed walls behind the front bench in Vermeer's *Street in Delft*. Here, the dirt from the continuous use conveys a sort of life *veritas* that is confirmed by the actions of those who populate the picture. Secondly, in the shabby clothing of the prodigal son in Rembrandt's painting, which becomes *spirituale* by the simple delicacy of love with which the father's hand touches it. Occasionally, Frans Hals achieves this kind of mastery. In his *The Procuresses*, for instance, at the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem, the arrangement of the hands evokes the subtle relations of power among the sitters, as well as their psychological features. These instances demonstrate how spiritual truth can be conveyed through the relationship between the gestures of sitters and the physical objects that surround them. For the use of the term *spirituale* see *Leonardo: On Painting; An Anthology of Writings by Leonardo da Vinci with a Selection of Documents Relating to His Career as an Artist,* ed. Martin Kemp (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001): 315.

[9] Although Giulio Carlo Argan does not make explicit the relationship between Constable and Michelangelo, he does indeed mention the influence Michelangelo has had upon the romantic movement of the early nineteenth century. "Matéria e Furor," *Clássico e Anticlássico* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1999): 311-318.

[10] Perhaps, the best example of this is revealed by the famous condemnation of Constable's oil sketch *Water-meadows near Salisbury* as "a nasty green thing" by the critics of the Royal Academy. This sad episode is said to have occurred in 1929, when Constable, already a Royal Academic, was sitting as a counselor in this very committee that, unknowingly who the author was, castigated the painting he submitted. As a consequence, he withdrew the work from the competition. The embarrassment that

surrounds the story of this particular painting helped to make of it an extremely desired work by collectors.

[11] William Vaughn agrees with my position; c.f. "Constable Englishness," *Oxford Art Journal*, no. 2 (1996): 23.

[12] Leslie, *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable,* 16.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Louis Hawes, "Constable's Sky Sketches", 344-365. Hawes traces the whole genealogy of Constable's studies of clouds, in order to prove that his interest and rendering of clouds dates much before his contact with Luke Howard's *Essay on the Modification of Clouds.*

[15] William Wordsworth, *Poems, in two volumes*. (London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1807); William Cowper*, The Poetical Works of William Cowper, Esq.: with a Memoir of the Author* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Company, 1857): 197. https://archive.org/details/poeticalworksofw00cowprich

[16] For a contrasting viewpoint; c.f. John Thornes, "Constable's Clouds," *The Burlington Magazine*, no. 920 (November, 1979): 697-699, 701-704. Or something as unpalatable as the following assertion: "Rosenthal also makes clear how in the latter part of Constable's career the artist is constantly seeing himself battling against storms, and how he is at the same time introducing hints of hope in the rainbows." This overly psychological, almost risible, interpretation was made by Michael Rosenthal and quoted by William Vaughan. "Constable's Englishness," Oxford Art Journal, no. 2 (1996): 23-24.

[17] As for beginnings, in Western art, Heidegger observes: "The beginning already contains the end within itself. A genuine beginning, however, has nothing of the neophyte character of the primitive. The primitive, because it lacks the bestowing, grounding leap and head start, is always futureless. It is not capable of releasing anything from itself because it contains nothing more than that in which it is caught. A beginning, on the contrary, always contains the undisclosed abundance of the awesome." *Basic Writings from Being and time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*: 201.

[18] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedeman, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998): 226.

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decades, curator Nicolas Bourriaud has drawn significant inspiration for his writings on contemporary art from the theories of the Situationist International (SI), an avant-garde group in existence from 1957 until 1972. Mischaracterizing the SI's concepts of the situation, *détournement*, and the *dérive*, Bourriaud claims to update these concepts with concepts of his own: relational aesthetics, *detourage*, and radicant aesthetics. This article identifies such misrepresentations and highlights the differences between Bourriaud's paradigms and those of the SI. This contextual restitution also provides an opportunity to examine Bourriaud's general methodology of substituting conceptual formalism for art historical theory. Bourriaud's publications repeatedly claim a historical materialist perspective on aesthetics, only to eventually eliminate this perspective; his use and abuse of Situationist theory is the foundational example for this pattern. More than the artworks showcased in Bourriaud's exhibitions and referenced in his publications, his artistic paradigms describe and delineate his own philosophical sleight of hand.

KEYWORDS

Guy Debord, Nicolas Bourriaud, relational aesthetics, Situationist International, Walter Benjamin

The Paradigms of Nicolas Bourriaud: Situationists as Vanishing Point

Jennifer Stob

B ourriaud is back. A much-discussed curator, art critic and formalist theoretician, Nicolas Bourriaud is one of several influential cultural figures who framed the global reception of contemporary art in the late 1990s and early 2000s. After his curatorship at the Tate Modern and a brief administrative stint in the French Ministry of Culture, Bourriaud has most recently assumed the directorship of the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. *L'ange de l'Histoire / The Angel of History* is his most recent exhibition, mounted in the spring of 2013 at the Palais des Beaux Arts. Along with the text he contributed to its catalogue, this exhibition marks the resumption of his curatical activities and the continuation of his philosophical trajectory, which he has laid out in five books to date: *Formes de vie: L'art moderne et l'invention de soi* (1999), *Relational Aesthetics* (2002), *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World* (2002), *The Radicant* (2009), and now *L'ange de L'histoire* (2013).

Bourriaud's presentation of contemporary art over these last two decades has hinged on the concept of service. This is most explicit in his hotly debated *Relational Aesthetics*, of which the 2002 English translation introduced global audiences to Bourriaud's writing. According to this collection of essays, artists like Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Carsten Höller and others render "little services" [1] by creating

"moments of sociability," "objects of sociability," and the entire "relational context" these moments or objects entail.[2] If the constellation of artists on which Bourriaud focuses has changed somewhat since the early 2000s, his notion of "service" as a load-bearing ideological structure has remained fundamentally the same. Unsurprisingly, "art as service" has therefore been the prime target for critics of his curatical and conceptual designs. In "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," Claire Bishop contests Bourriaud's claim that the art he calls "relational" offers a viable alternative to capitalist economic models.[3] She and Stewart Martin suggest that like "the commodified friendship of customer services" found in big-box stores, the services offered by relational aesthetics merely compliment and reinforce conventional transactions based on supply and demand.[4]

Nonetheless, what Bourriaud presents in *Relational Aesthetics* is considered one of the defining aesthetic debates of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Bishop writes that Bourriaud's book helped "render discursive and dialogic projects more amenable to museums and galleries," and indeed, Bourriaud launched the careers of many artists who have since been the subjects of museum retrospectives and scholarly publications.[5] Taught in contemporary art seminars worldwide, often juxtaposed with its rejoinders, *Relational Aesthetics* has contributed to the institutionalization of participatory art in the form of MFA programs and artists' prizes, and provoked "a more critically informed discussion" of the practice.[6]

Given such canonization of relational aesthetics and relational art, this article argues that it is crucial to examine the origins, composition and implications of these concepts. Relational aesthetics must be contextualized alongside the paradigms, neologisms and vocabularies that Bourriaud has subsequently developed for the discourse surrounding contemporary artistic creation. Readers and viewers of Bourriaud's work should understand that regardless of the artists he situates in these evolving, interrelated, conceptual frameworks, he is his own best and most prototypical aesthetic "service provider." He views his paradigms as creative interventions – "theoretical tools" and "kick starts" for art makers, viewers and philosophers.[7] If what Bourriaud calls his "theory of form" is now serving in an art historical context, it is essential to situate his publications in a historical discursive tradition, and to understand the tradition in which Bourriaud would situate himself.[8]

Bourriaud's paradigms have evolved to a large extent from the crucial tune-ups he has given to the theory and history of the Situationist International (SI), a postwar avant-garde group in existence from 1957 until 1972. A composite of three smaller avant-garde groups, the SI described itself as a "workers' union of an advanced cultural sector."[9] The group called for the replacement of traditional forms of art and politics with communal councils, self-governance, and the direct and constant friction of unexpected encounters. This revolutionary social life would defy capitalism's standard system of weights and measure. Unbound from the arbitrary and obsessive calculations of value required by financial and temporal transactions, life would be lived in unquantifiable, atmospheric and emotional units called "situations." The SI was adamant that the social life they envisioned was not a nostalgic reconstruction, but could in fact be glimpsed every day in the present, underneath capitalism's colonizing of the social. Until that ulterior present could be fully unearthed, the Situationists — chief among them Guy Debord — were committed to exposing in their writings and actions the experiential poverty of contemporary society, especially the increasing intensity with which images were arbitrating or replacing human interrelations.

Owen Hatherley argues that Bourriaud's writings and curation constitute "a depoliticized version of Situationist attempts to disrupt consumption and spectacle," and that they actively obscure the project from which they have drawn inspiration.[10] Bourriaud's depoliticization of the Situationists is also a dehistoricization: his texts service this postwar avant-garde group in the same way one might have a vehicle serviced (replacing older parts under the hood with newer ones) or a building restored (gutting the building's interior while maintaining the historical façade). Whether this is strategic or naïve, it is clear that, as Tom McDonough remarks, Bourriaud's writings establish a "seamless continuity" between contemporary artists and the SI.[11] Yet this continuity does not provide a basis for historical comparison; it is rather a pretext for a series of artificial discontinuities. In other words, smoothing over the contextual rupture between the SI and relational art practice enables Bourriaud to naturalize false contrasts that are necessary to his paradigm construction, and to his promotion of contemporary artists.

Several art historians have already addressed Bourriaud's failure to acknowledge public, collective, improvisational, and participatory artworks that were created before 1990.[12] The present article takes a different critical approach, tracing a series of mis-acknowledgments evident in Bourriaud's work and arguing that the concepts of relational aesthetics,

postproduction, and radicant art are proffered as "new and improved" versions of the Situationist raw material from which they have been assembled: the situation, *détournement*, and the *dérive*. In Bourriaud's theoretical writing, these concepts constitute a methodology founded upon a logic of "before" and "after," where events and practices in between the points of comparison are elided.

I • From Perspective to Vanishing point: *Formes de Vie*

In his 1999 book, *Formes de Vie / Life Forms*, Bourriaud first explicitly declares his intention to borrow from and amend the Situationists. He goes on to recommend the same activity to his readership. "Alas," he writes:

> if Situationist theories profoundly nourish contemporary art, they have today become a historical reference, even an item of nostalgia. Their critique of the art object as "star merchandise," their salutary call for the radical surpassing of artistic specialization deserve better: they deserve to be used.[13]

The French idiom here is worth particular attention, as the nuance of precipitated ownership it conveys gets lost in the English translation: "*elles méritent qu'on s'en serve*," he writes – "they [Situationist theories] deserve that one helps oneself to them."[14] Relational art is then one manifestation of the way in which contemporary artists help themselves to Situationist thought. According to the conclusion of *Relational Aesthetics*, such art "updates Situationism and reconciles it, as far as it is possible, with the art world."[15]

Here, another telling word choice highlights Bourriaud's own hand in this process of updating: his use of the term "Situation*ism*" signals his interest in transforming the SI's project into a clearly delineated and allocable ideology. The Situationists themselves repeatedly rejected the suffix throughout the 1960s in order to avoid just this sort of semantic limitation. They considered "Situationism" to be a wildly inaccurate – even antipodal – descriptor for their diverse collective activities.[16] Most readers of *Relational Aesthetics* will miss the sentence's anachronism and with it

an important detail of the SI's self-identification. More seriously, Bourriaud's rhetoric of updating and reconciliation assumes an obsolescence of Situationist theory without corroboration of that assumption. It begs the misleading question of Situationist efficacy, falsely implying that the Situationists themselves wished to reconcile their project with the art world but did not manage to do so. The sort of historical and theoretical intervention taking place in this key sentence – one which grandly but too vaguely signals its ambition, an ambition that is neither precisely stated or substantiated – is symptomatic of Bourriaud's treatment of art's history and art history.

Bourriaud's main thesis in *Formes de Vie* is that the fundamental concern of twentieth-century creation was effectively self-centered: the imperative to "make your life a work of art."[17] He emphasizes neither the collective life-work of each avant-garde group, nor the attempts by individual artists to address past, present, and future socio-cultural conditions or supersede the circumstances of a past avant-garde. Instead, he pairs or clusters artists according to modernist "domains of reference," such as dandyism or alchemy.[18] In this way, diverse creative figures (some from pre- and postwar avant-gardes, some contemporary artists) are arbitrarily matched according to imaginary categories, regardless of their procedural or philosophical differences. Using the dandy as an aesthetic archetype, for example, Bourriaud proposes that the blue of Yves Klein, the stripes of Daniel Buren, André Cadere's rods, and the felt and coyote of Joseph Beuys, in his performance *I like America and America likes me* (1974), are all "visual tools" that produce unexpected sensual experiences, like the flourish of a dandy's cravat.[19] Yet who amongst the group above would not protest that by zeroing in on the compositional elements in their artworks, Bourriaud overlooks their choice of exhibition environment and the social conditions in each?

This neglect has repercussive effects as Bourriaud moves on to address modern art through a Marxist lens. Modern artists, he writes, extended the concept of production in the modern economic sphere to include their own "transformation of nature and consequently transformations of the self."[20] In this way, the Marxist concept of the division of labor "corresponds point for point to the program of artistic modernity as dandyism would announce it and as the avant-gardes from Dada to Situationism would carry it out."[21] It is likely that Bourriaud's thinking here has been influenced by a reading of the first two "Theses on Cultural Revolution" that the Situationists published in the first issue of their eponymous journal in 1958:

> Situationists consider cultural activity … as an experimental method for constructing daily life that can be permanently developed with the extension of leisure and the disappearance of the division of labor (beginning with the division of artistic labor). Art can cease to be a report on sensations and become a direct organization of higher sensations. It is a matter of producing ourselves, and not things that enslave us.[22]

Here, then, is another instance of art historical comparison, contrast, and backdating extrapolated from a misreading of the theory of the SI. As the quote illustrates, the division of artistic labor was a parenthetical issue for the Situationists, a first step towards a larger project of liberating daily life. Likewise, the ideal transformation of self brought about through the construction of situations was *neither* "making your life a work of art" *nor* making works of art into life, but rather seizing control of the means of living, regardless of aesthetic substrate.[23] This constitutes another separation of an even more radical order between the Situationists and the artists whom Bourriaud sweepingly identifies as sharing their "domain of reference" in the modern project.[24]

In *Formes de Vie* and subsequent writings, Bourriaud accompanies his inversion of form and formalism with an inversion of a historical materialist perspective. He claims that the transformation of historical understanding into "a vanishing point or element of suspense" is a fundamental characteristic of contemporary art, but more compelling evidence exists that this inversion is a fundamental characteristic of his own writing and curation.[25] Above and beyond the description or display of artists' creative works, his texts and exhibitions are themselves creative works that either knowingly or unknowingly reverse the directionality of communication and interpretation without signaling explicitly that such reversals are part of Bourriaud's theoretical agenda.

To transform history from a perspectival infrastructure into a vanishing point is logically impossible, Guy Debord has argued. Long after the dissolution of the Situationist International, he revisited and amended his *Society of the Spectacle* from 1967. The result was his own "update" of Situationist theory, one that Bourriaud does not take into consideration. 1988's *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle* holds that texts like Bourriaud's no longer communicate in the most basic sense of the word because they lack a historical perspective that establishes the shared horizon necessary for discourse.[26] For example, although his grouping of the artists Yves Klein, Daniel Buren, André Cadere and Joseph Beuys is

situated within the broader art historical parameters of European visual culture, this grouping ignores both extant differences in postwar national milieux and the rapid changes those environments experienced during the nineteen sixties. The service Bourriaud offers as critic and curator is to situate both his own thinking and the projects of contemporary artists in lineage with these and other artists, but this gesture remains gestural, with no sort of historical control variable (language, philosophy, time span, material, process) that could establish the actual line in his proposed lineage.

Texts that forego a historical perspective relate laterally to their subject matter. Their authors explicitly address neither the circumstances of the issue they are treating nor the circumstances in which they are writing. Without these parameters of historical analysis, such texts cannot *reason*. In their analytical impotence, Debord charged, "they resemble the *facsimile* of a famed weapon where only the firing pin is missing."[27] As with many of Debord's denunciations, this one may initially strike us as too severe; after all, texts that address their subject matter obliquely are often rich in creative tangents, associations, and novel displacements of categorical thought. Yet an oblique perspective is still quite different than a vanished one, which fails to adequately sustain parallels, contrasts or comparisons between its initial subject and other subjects introduced. It is this latter kind of writing that Debord identified as "lateral critique."[28] Texts that skim their subject matter without fixing an origin, describing their rationale for such a beginning, or mapping a conceptual route for others to follow provide a limited service indeed: they make it very easy for their readership to wholly adopt, append or reject the ideas they contain, but very difficult to debate, subtract or amend them.[29] The result in *Formes de Vie* is neither a real comparison nor a real contrast but a parade, a *Die Welt ist schön / The World Is Beautiful* of avant-gardism.[30]

II • Before and After the Situation in *Relational Aesthetics*

Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* directly followed *Formes de Vie*, first appearing in French in 1998. In *Relational Aesthetics*, Bourriaud continued to rely on the Situationist International to produce what Debord would call a lateral critique in the service of contemporary art. *Relational Aesthetics* posits relational art as a non-revolutionary equivalent of "situations," the experimental relationships between individuals and their

environment that the Situationists believed must supercede art and its increasingly meaningless, commodified context. Bourriaud negatively compares the SI's rejection of the art world in favor of the construction of situations to his own belief that one can indeed "generate relationships with the world" from within the realm of representation.[31] He assumes that Debord viewed the art world as a mere "reservoir of examples of what had to be tangibly 'achieved' in day-to-day life."[32]

From the numerous texts that Debord and other Situationists contributed to the SI's eponymous journal, published between 1958 and 1969, it is clear that this is not true. Their complaint with the art world went well beyond any discontentment with artistic underperformance or the hope that art's reservoir contained unrealized potential latent in it. In their view, art's formal and moral reservoir was utterly and irreparably empty due to the "total ideological decomposition" of both bourgeois and Marxist thought in the 1950s.[33] Like the avant-garde group of artists known as CoBrA, two members of which went on to join the Situationists, Debord felt artistic creation should be collective, its wellspring located in the common.[34] Because Debord no longer felt artworks were capable of stimulating interpersonal connection or collective renewal, he didn't see within them any social achievements waiting to be transposed, as Bourriaud contends. Rather, as a result of social and political revolution, the SI proposed that art should be restored to a continuum with other everyday activities.[35] "One could say," Debord wrote in 1957, "that in a society without classes, there will no longer be painters, but Situationists who, among other things, will paint."[36] Debord's ideal is founded on no aesthetic servants and no aesthetic masters, therefore starkly contrasts with Bourriaud's fixation on aesthetic service.

The SI concluded in 1961 that, until this society was achieved, Situationists must resolutely prioritize activism over art making. As SI member Attila Kotányi put it:

> We are against the reigning conditions of artistic inauthenticity. I don't want to say that anyone must stop painting, writing, et cetera. I don't want to say that those things have no value. I don't want to say that we could continue to exist without doing those things. But at the same time, we know all of that will be invaded by society, to be used against us.[37]

Not long after taking this ambivalent stance, the SI began to exclude members who were principally artists and architects, a process completed

by 1964. Despite these exclusions, the group remained seriously invested in various kinds of image making as well as in the contemporary discourse on artistic production.[38]

Bourriaud skirts the question of this complex relationship between art and the everyday, instead arguing in favor of relational art's superiority by criticizing the Situationist concept of a constructed situation. One of the bases of the SI's revolutionary program, a constructed situation was described in their articles as a collective, somewhat organized, somewhat spontaneous, ephemeral, non-commemorated experience of no particular duration.[39] Bourriaud finds that in comparison to relational art, the concept of a situation is lacking in what he calls conviviality:

> The fact is, the idea of situation does not necessarily imply a co-existence with my fellow men ... does not necessarily involve a relationship with the Other ... [and] does not necessarily correspond to a *relational world*.[40]

Yet several Situationist texts clearly state that constructed situations realized in a post-revolutionary moment, as well as provisionary, pre-revolutionary situations, are founded upon the co-existence and cooperation of individuals.[41] If Situationist situations did not correspond to or resemble a relational world, it was because the utopian notion of situations was fundamentally at odds with the abstract concept of "resemblance." Situations were intended to be *of* the relational world itself, arising from it, not distinct from and merely similar to it. Furthermore, the SI never intended to "decode" or "outline" situations, tasks that Bourriaud explicitly assigns himself in regard to relational art.[42] What it meant to participate in a situation, and how subjective and collective power might manifest in it were complex issues that ultimately remained queries rather than dictates.[43]

If the SI left the definition of situations quite open-ended, they were adamant that the interactions taking place within them were concrete but not discrete – in other words, they were not symbolic or symptomatic of any experience outside of themselves and they had the potential to continue evolving indefinitely. In contrast, relational art is always an allegory of the interactions that compose it; no event that takes place as relational art can ever pry itself loose from its representative frame and form. The reluctance or the inability to distinguish between experience and

its allegory in Bourriaud's text forms the basis for the most contentious assertion in *Relational Aesthetics*: that relational art generates modest forms of resistance to inauthenticity and alienation – modest, and yet purportedly more successful than those hoped for by the Situationists themselves. Bourriaud writes that the spectacle "can only be analyzed and fought through the production of new types of relationships between people," a fact that Situationist theory "overlooks," but the group never "overlooked" the situation as a tactic for resisting spectacle; they simply didn't believe that it could or should be.[44] Instead, constructed situations were positioned as the result of a series of more concrete resistances – strikes that sought to disrupt regulated labor, or distributional freezes on the circulation of money and goods.[45] If Debord's 1967 book describes spectacle's formidable powers of replacing human relationships with images, *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle* suggests that the spectacle's mediation has advanced to a point where it can hardly be countered at all. "[T]he agora, the general community no longer exists," he wrote, "no place where the debate on truths concerning those things could in any lasting way break through the crushing presence of media discourse and the different forces organized to relay it."[46] Although *Relational Aesthetics* is well-intentioned promotional material for art of counterculture – again, more countercultural in rhetoric than many of the artworks it references – it does not begin to delve into the complexity of embodied sociality and embodied aesthetic experience in a quotidian saturated by medial flows from the late 1990s onwards. Bourriaud's subsequent publication, which treats the subject of new media, art and the relational, likely resulted from his having come to the same conclusion.

III. • *Détournement* and Reprogramming in *Postproduction*

Although he never discusses the term in *Relational Aesthetics*, the concept of *détournement* suffuses Bourriaud's 2001 publication, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*. *Détournement* is a kind of updating and reconciling that, contrary to Bourriaud's methods, has the ambition of revealing both the historical system which governs it and its own attempts to subvert, invert or suspend this system at the same time. If situations were not the resistant tactics that the Situationists deemed essential to revolutionary strategy, the practice of *détournement* – the creative use of expression against its original or conventionally intended use – was. Although they didn't invent the concept, the

Situationists were great advocates of its use, especially in its most radical form.

As Debord explained it in 1956's "User's Guide to *Détournement*," co-authored with his friend and fellow avant-gardist Gil J. Wolman, *détournement* could range from "minor" to "excessive."[47] A random element of undetermined meaning set into a specific context and thereby given a fixed meaning constitutes "minor" *détournement*. In "excessive" *détournement*, an element with a strong connotative meaning is forcibly stripped of its original context and a new connotation formed.[48] In *Postproduction*, Bourriaud characterizes *détournement* as a supposedly outmoded precursor to the various forms of appropriation he identifies in contemporary art. He introduces a counter-term, *detourage*, that designates the transplanting, grafting, and decontextualizing of forms and ideas after *détournement*'s supposed obsolescence.[49]

Detourage is billed as an evolution in appropriation: it is liberating because it blurs the distinction between producers and consumers and even "tends to abolish the ownership of forms, or in any case to shake up the old jurisprudence."[50] However, this notion that artists can "shake up the old jurisprudence" of the ownership of forms in a highly speculative art market under global capitalism is as absurd as Bourriaud's earlier notions that clustering artists together by artistic sympathies is art historical theory or that allegorized conviviality is resistance to spectacle. Whether or not Bourriaud's exemplary artists are all really practicing this *detourage* is unclear; many of those heralded as relational aestheticians are now positioned as artist-DJs in *Postproduction*. What is certain, however, is that Bourriaud's own methodological approach to art's conceptualization and curation is the penultimate example of the selective rewriting of history, which he refers to as using culture as screenplay, postproduction or reprogramming.[51]

As in *Relational Aesthetics*, Bourriaud opens *Postproduction* by likening contemporary artists to service providers: the "little services rendered" by postproductive art compliment relational art on a virtual plane, matching database to social base.[52] Like the editors and enhancers who alter recorded material in the postproduction stage of television shows and films, the work of artists in the twenty-first century is principally to re-fashion the artworks of others as well as the information and products of popular culture. Bourriaud suggests that in their reliance on appropriation, their creative process is akin to "the set of activities linked to the service industry and recycling" rather than "the production of

raw materials."[53] In contrast to the world of play the Situationists envisioned, Bourriaud suggests that appropriation as reprogramming allows these artists to "play the world."[54]

According to Bourriaud, the Situationists employed *détournement* with the goal of stripping meaning out of a work of art and "impassioning everyday life."[55] This account is selective at best and disingenuous at worst; with it, Bourriaud once again rewrites history, using a Situationist concept as a vanishing point for his narrative of contemporary art instead of placing contemporary art in historical perspective. Bourriaud makes no mention of *détournement*'s programmatic application and its end goals. For the SI, the passion *détournement* brings to everyday experience was not its destruction of conventional meaning per se, but its discovery of conventional meaning's ulterior use on the part of both appropriator and audience. *Détournement* is a way of thinking strategically and systemically at the same time, and moreover, it can also be a way of acting upon this strategic and systemic thought.

Bourriaud repeatedly frames *détournement* as a uniquely artistic application, but this is only one of numerous ways that *détournement* can translate into action. From Debord and Wolman's 1956 "User's Guide" to the celebration of Paris's May 1968 social revolt in the 1969 issue of the *Situationist International*, members of the SI wrote of *détournement*'s utility in a wide range of non-artistic circumstances.[56] "[A]ll elements, taken from anywhere" are fair game for the practice, as are all media — the spoken word, painting, newspaper collage, or even physical acts, such as wildcat strikes, distributional freezes, and institutional occupations.[57] Bourriaud claims that contemporary reprogramming updates *détournement* because this appropriative practice amongst his select contemporary artists is a "neutral, zero-sum process" not intended to "devalorize the work of art but to utilize it."[58] Again, he bases his characterization of contemporary art on a mischaracterization of the Situationists, who actually believed that devalorization of words or images produced the same result as "neutral" or "zero-sum" appropriation. Situationist *détournement* in text and image, on flyers, posters, postcards and in graffitti was in contrast motivated by a dialectic of devalorization and revalorization: it teaches that every homage has the potential to be an insult, and every theft a gift.[59]

Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe's project, *No Ghost, Just a Shell* (2000) is an oft-cited example of *detourage* or reprogramming that explores the very ambiguities of the practice self-reflexively instead of

employing the appropriation to subvert or contest its subject material. The project consists of a series of short animated videos featuring a minor manga character named Annlee; having purchased the rights to her story and image, Parreno and Huyghe make her muse upon her liberated but unfree condition as an avatar without qualities. They subsequently offered her up for other artists' use. Tom McDonough has summarized that which Bourriaud termed Parreno's and Huyghe's "zero-sum process" thusly: "*No Ghost, Just a Shell* does not appropriate the figure of Annlee as a means, but through a process of purification (of what Sartre called '*décrassage*') places it before us as an end in itself, strangely autonomous and independent of human will."[60]

Bourriaud claims that that the novelty in the 1990s and 2000s of "neutral" appropriation, or reprogramming, lay in its "problematics of the use of cultural artifacts."[61] If this means that artists today are willing and able to share material more extensively than ever, Bourriaud has a valid point. Yet this point would be strengthened were he to acknowledge and discuss the SI's juxtaposition of *détournement* to appropriative strategies in contemporary art and film that were philosophically and ideologically ambivalent in 1966. In an article called "On Alienation: An Analysis of Several Concrete Aspects: The Role of Godard," the SI skewered the filmmaking of Jean-Luc Godard as a "combinatory use of neutral and indefinitely interchangeable elements," then added their own venomous assessment that his film artistry was "devoid of negation, devoid of affirmation, devoid of quality."[62] In this sense, the real difference to highlight is that in 1966, the Situationists condemned self-reflexive, zero-sum processes at the heart of reprogramming in visual culture, whereas in 2002 Bourriaud promotes it.

Curiously, Bourriaud never directly addresses the technologies, processes or possible ontology of the digital, although many of the artworks he discusses employ it as a medium, and although the endlessly dovetailing "network of contiguous forms" that he hails as a feature of contemporary practice seems to be founded upon its material logic.[63] If reprogramming is unique to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in degree only, the use of digital technology as an artistic medium is a genuine novelty of this period. Because digital media is relatively inexpensive to produce and can be accessed, transcoded and distributed with relative ease, it invites and facilitates reprogramming. Likewise, digital artworks may at first seem ill-suited to *détournement* because their sounds and appearances can be manipulated easily and non-visibly, complicating their communication of whatever interventions have

been performed upon their material — a communication that all *détournement* requires. The fact that digital media facilitates reprogramming cannot be mistaken for an obligation, however. Neither reprogramming nor *détournement* are medium-specific, and both approaches are only as meaningful as their audience's reception. In any medium, *détournement* requires a belief on the part of its creators that anything undesirable contains in part the key to its own makeover, and its practice will only increase in relation to a desire to engage with overwhelming social complexity in a manner that goes beyond illustration. This desire for social engagement allows one to struggle, as Giorgio Agamben has written, with "*one's own impotentiality*, to be in relation to one's own privation."[64] If indeed contemporary artists and contemporary art critics like Bourriaud want to serve their audiences, the most substantive way to do so would not be to create workarounds for this struggle, making it into an artwork's constitutive "element of suspense," but rather to evidence past struggles with individual and collective impotentialities in a new and compelling fashion.[65]

IV. • The *Dérive* in Altermodernism and *The Radicant*

Bourriaud's most recent curatorial paradigms have been markedly more ambitious than those put forward in *Relational Aesthetics* and *Postproduction*. They propose a model not only for how contemporary art navigates cultural ecosystems around the world, but also how this global navigation in composition and form might still be relevant to the philosophical goals of the modernist era. Bourriaud's exhibition catalogue for the fourth Tate Triennial at the Tate Britain in 2009, his booklet, *The Radicant*, published the same year, and his 2013 exhibition and catalogue for L'École des Beaux-Arts entitled *L'ange de l'Histoire / The Angel of History* equip readers with a whole new set of neologisms for their cultural *detourage*. Inspired by the mash-up of modernism and post-colonialist theory that he perceives in contemporary art,[66] Bourriaud has extended his ideas on the relational and the reprogrammable to include a "radicant"[67] aesthetic of alterity and renewed modernism: "altermodernism."[68]

Contemporary artists, he claims, catapult themselves "out of the postmodern period and the (essentialist) multicultural model from which it is indivisible,"[69] and into motion as radicants — organisms that do not root

themselves in one spot but rather advance across a surface, constantly growing new root systems and adapting to the terrain crossed.[70] The artworks they create "unravel themselves along receding lines of perspective," and the line they create "is more important than the points along its length," including the vanishing point to which the historic avant-garde has been relegated.[71] They synthesize modernism and post-colonialism, postmodernism and nomadism and weave out of temporality "a complex network stripped of a centre."[72] In a remarkably even-handed review of *Altermodern*, David Cunningham writes: "The branding is inevitably somewhat stronger than the product it has to sell."[73] He concludes that the exhibition's problem is "not the 'theory' per se, but the failure of such theory in this instance to come even close to meeting the demands made by the forms of cultural analysis that Bourriaud seems determined now to pursue."[74]

On the contrary, the problem is very much Bourriaud's "theory," and the quotation marks around it speak volumes, exposing its minor cheats and major obfuscations. *The Radicant*, for example, models the restless offshooting of its namesake: the text offers metaphor on top of metaphor for a rambling creative subjectivity. Artists are described as "*semionauts*, inventors of pathways within the cultural landscape, nomadic sign gatherers;"[75] "the surveyors of a hypertext world that is no longer the classical flat space but a network infinite in time as well as space ;"[76] "the prototype of the contemporary traveler, *homo viator* ;"[77] "the figure of the *exote*."[78] Markedly absent amidst these invocations of wandering, journeying and nomadism is a kind of drifting called the *dérive* that the Situationist International cultivated as a specific experiential practice. This omission reveals itself as an important parapraxis. Bourriaud is quite familiar with the *dérive* and discusses it in *Postproduction* ; it seems that this SI practice is the history he turned into a vanishing point in order to repostulate trajectory as an aesthetic form in *The Radicant*.[79]

The Situationists and the smaller avant-gardes from which they were constituted published multiple accounts of *dérives*: willfully unresolved pilgrimages taking place mainly in urban environments.[80] The *dérive* can be characterized as a nomadism of one, that may acquire a community of fellow drifters and random acquaintances as it goes along.[81] Debord intended the *dérive* to become an integral part of every imaginable human interaction; when this was achieved, he suggested, situations would no longer be isolated exceptions to conventional existence, but could become collective and continuous.[82] Predictably, this is not the service that drifting provides in Bourriaud's account. Trajectories in altermodernist

art purge the embodiment from movement.[83] Their importance lies in the shapes that they ultimately suggest and in their substrates, not in the sensory experiences that they proffer. What matters is not the terrain, encounters and ambiances, but the "journey-forms" that remain.[84] The displacement constitutive to what once was the *dérive* has become in Bourriaud's conceptualization "a method of depiction."[85] He identifies the "journey-form" in *Tabernas Desert Run* (2004), a conceptual artwork in which Simon Starling painted a watercolor from the engine water of a moped he had ridden around southeastern Spain, and in the series of walks or *paseos* undertaken in cities since 1991 by Francis Alÿs.[86] Gabriel Orozco is another "artist of the precarious world," according to Bourriaud, who "regards the urban environment as a container from which to separate fragments," snapping photographs of global lunch eaters in an ongoing series entitled *Middle of the Day*.[87]

Bourriaud claims that when artworks that either are or were trajectories are exhibited, they give their audience "a positive vision of chaos and complexity" and a "positive experience of disorientation" encapsulated in a trip to a museum or gallery.[88] The complexity to which Bourriaud here refers is never qualified or quantified. Yet if, as Owen Hatherley reports, the focal point of Bourriaud's curation remains the objects and installations on gallery or museum surfaces, then neither the art buyer nor the art maker, neither the indigenous community nor the country of exile, neither the artist nor the curator himself are set in complex relation to one another.[89] Rather, all are set in relation to an art commodity, an orderly and time-honored transaction. Without locally produced dialogue, without an exhibition's critique of its own institutionality, "chaos, complexity and disorientation" on the global scale have little chance for "positive" articulation in the art world or beyond. Therefore the complexity invoked here is drastically different from the kind that sets humans in relation to their own privation – the complexity referenced earlier and outlined by Agamben.

When the Situationist International finally surfaces in *The Radicant*, the group is yet again the *démodé* counter-example. Describing them as "radicals" rather than radicants, Bourriaud explains that the SI is hopelessly affixed in the modernist past because of their nostalgia for earlier forms of art production and their ideological purity.[90] As he develops his argument, however, it becomes clear that the distinction between the SI as radicals and contemporary creators as radicants is not a question of dynamism in the present or fixity in the past, but rather of conformism to dominant geo-political and social conventions. "The

radicant develops in accord with its host soil," Bourriaud writes. "It translates itself into the terms of the space in which it moves."[91] This is indeed a marked contrast to the Situationists, who aimed to be unyielding to their era. Despite this resistance, they were engaged with the cultural and political debates surrounding them, analyzing them meticulously in order to propose alternatives in images, words and actions to the geo-political and social conventions that they judged unsound and unjust.

The thoroughness of the analysis that the SI performed on culture is missing in Bourriaud's analysis of contemporary art he considers "a mode of resistance against the generalized imposition of formats and a kind of formal guerilla warfare."[92] Artists who conform to and extend the gestures of artifice and precarity instantiated by capitalist society are in no way freedom fighters — conceptually or formally. Rather, they are counterfeiters, creating forms and images from within conventional society that adhere to its conventions while at the same time exploiting their difference from it.[93] Counterfeiters attempt to turn a profit by introducing an artificial, unauthorized replicant into a system of artificial, authorized exchange.

Counterfeiting undoubtedly has potential subversive effect; in this sense, Bourriaud is not wrong to suggest that radicant art might accommodate a countercultural ethic. Perhaps counterfeit money has the potential to speed inflation and do serious damage to an economy; perhaps art that does not explicitly oppose the globalized capitalism which surrounds it, choosing instead to match that system's artificiality with its own, could likewise do damage. On the other hand, as is the case with fake luxury items, counterfeiting may simply strengthen the hierarchies of money and power already in place in worldwide society, speeding the diversification of alienated labor and alienated sociality.

Toward the end of *The Radicant*, Bourriaud himself realizes that of all his mixed metaphors for radicant art and radicant artists, the most apt would have been currency.[94] He admits in a tortured formulation that radicant subjectivity is indeed "the spitting image of the ultimate objective of global capitalism."[95] It remains to be seen whether artworks that construct "alternative maps of the contemporary world and processes of filtration" can manifest themselves as something other than markers, memorials and facilitators of global capitalist transactions — something other than counterfeit currency, or other than gambling tokens in the game of art fair roulette, than stock market shares in the global exchange of

auction houses and private sales, or other than storefronts behind which money is surreptitiously laundered.[96]

Charging the SI with a teleological attitude, Bourriaud paints the group with far too broad a brush, prematurely declaring their political modernist obsolescence and himself creating a false teleology where the "old" is proved to be an aftereffect of a prognosticated "new." This unfortunate disregard for the particulars of an important twentieth-century discourse on politics and aesthetics exacerbates the non-relation of politics and formalism in Bourriaud's writing. His argumentation is transcoded, flickering and blurred, like the characteristics of the precarious aesthetics that he enumerates, but this blurring is of little service to his readership. [97]

V. • Vanished Dialectics in *L'ange de l'Histoire*

L'ange de l'Histoire, Bourriaud's most recent critical and curatorial project, derives further from the *dérive*, this time with historical thought itself as the ground for "journey-forms." Here, the "spitting image" of radicant subjectivity is located in Paul Klee's 1920 watercolor and etching, *Angelus Novus*.[98] As interpreted by Walter Benjamin in his collected theses from 1940, "On the Concept of History," the heraldic image of the exhibition is a staring, open-mouthed witness of history, blown helplessly toward the present by progress. To Benjamin's Angel of History, the past appears as "one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet."[99] Bourriaud adapts this reading to his own needs: he positions contemporary artists as angels and the omnipresent motif of global history in their artworks as the ruins before them.[100] He writes:

> If we assume rubble to be the mental form where today's artists develop, grappling with general overproduction, cultural and historical globalization, the absence of a positive vision of the future, then the fragile appearance of the Angel of History becomes a model: rubble implies a special *approach* [*démarche*], one necessitating detours, non-linear trajectories, uncertain steps.[101]

Playing on the multivalent meaning of *démarche* ("gait" as well as "approach" or "procedure") in his essay, Bourriaud overlooks the fact that Klee's and Benjamin's Angel of History flies rather than walks. This is only a minor modification in the telling of Benjamin's historical materialist theory, yet Bourriaud also perpetrates major misrepresentations of Benjamin's theory by incompletely explaining the concept of the "dialectical image," lumping this concept together with the theories of other modernist intellectuals and presenting the result as the postdated rubble heap amidst which contemporary artistic practice develops. In other words, he once again vanishes the historical perspective of his subject at hand and creates from its absence a new paradigm for discussing artistic production that most reliably serves as a descriptor for his own approach to art historical theory.

Benjamin's contributions to historical materialism emphasize that the creation and explication of "dialectical images" trouble the smooth surface of history that dominant cultural and political regimes have established.[102] "Dialectical images" are found and made when a viewer is able to grasp in a representation "the constellation into which his own era has entered, along with a very specific earlier one."[103] *Angelus Novus* is exemplary here; in it, Klee has combined the themes and formal vocabulary from a series of satirical drawings he had made of Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm with images he had seen in Hans Prinzenhorn's collection of artworks by the mentally ill. Through this combination and the tragic irony of his chosen title, Klee critiques the mad, militaristic frenzy Kaiser Wilhelm had helped to stir across Europe that led to the First World War.[104]

Further enriching the image's meaning, Hal Foster argues that the figure in Klee's watercolor is monstrous because of the horrific vision of modernity it represents, yet is also a figure of monstrance: in other words, a vessel that channels and enhances spiritual vision in a way resonant with the opulent monstrances used for centuries in Roman Catholic ritual.[105] Benjamin's reading of the watercolor takes this dialectical relation of themes and time periods even further. Juxtaposing the catastrophe of the Second World War to that represented by the First, he suggests that the artwork's spiritual intensity be understood as a desire to "make whole what has been smashed," a desire thwarted by the terrible storm of what passes for progress in capitalist society.[106] Klee's *Angelus Novus* accommodates all of these meanings and, just as importantly, solicits others.

Bourriaud's catalogue essay for *L'ange de l'Histoire* argues that this building block of historical materialist history – Benjamin's "dialectical image" – is in fact continuous with George Kubler's theory of signals across time in art history, which in turn is identical to Aby Warburg's theory of the dynamogram and emblematized by W. G. Sebald's use of uncaptioned images amidst text.[107] The reader is swiftly and unhelpfully tangled in all of this unexplained connectivity, which Bourriaud bases on a jointly held belief that imagistic knowledge is delivered by "sparks" or "illuminations."[108] In fact, Benjamin was primarily concerned with the *structure* of transmissions of culture, power and knowledge across time, unlike Kubler, whose unconventional theory focused on the transmissions of artistic *form* across cultures and eras.[109] Benjamin's historical materialist approach had neither the degree of intimacy, nostalgia or postmodern remove that typifies the novelist, essayist, and poet W. G. Sebald's treatment of images, nor art historian Aby Warburg's emphasis on the ritualistic, regenerative nature of emotive formulas over time.[110] The writers are therefore grouped together to our and their disservice, in the aim of locating historicity in contemporary art.

Bourriaud claims that artworks are "dialectical images" *par excellence*, and that all the contemporary artworks in *L'ange de l'Histoire* create these conceptual sparks by reformulating, reflecting and redistributing the past.[111] Yet he also asserts that artists have now become "*search engines*" rather than savants in their creative process, and this characterization directly conflicts with Benjamin's definition of dialectical images, which hinges on an increasingly masterful knowledge of the interaction of historical periods.[112] Whether or not Bourriaud's assertion applies to the artists in the exhibition must be considered on a case-by-case basis; for example, Haris Epaminonda's statement on her untitled, framed, found photographs organized in wall groupings certainly aligns with Bourriaud's paradigm of artist search engines. In her artistic project, she explains, she seeks to reestablish our link to existing objects and images by emptying them of "knowledge and historical information on their origins."[113]

Decidedly, however, the exhibition as a whole misses its opportunity to create dialectical sparks in kind. Its parts are spatially discrete, with all contemporary artworks on the main floor of the exhibition space, selected paintings of Brazilian artist Glauco Rodrigues on one wing of the second floor, and prints, paintings and architectural models from the Beaux Arts' archives on the other. More disappointingly, the exhibition introduces artworks to viewers in the limited parameters of

similarity, atemporality and the *picturesque* instead of giving some sense of their diverse socio–aesthetic and institutional context. Army photographs of places of worship destroyed in the Great War, photographs by Jean Jules Andrieu of Paris in ruins after the suppression of the Commune in 1871, and Albrecht Dürer woodcuts damaged in a fire during the last days of the Commune are amongst the works on view from the school's collections.   Benjamin's theory makes it clear that the ultimate dialectical image doesn't belong to any visual or experiential order, per se: it is made in the moments of revolution which mark the spirit of class struggle, moments that could have been foregrounded with the aid of these archival documents.[114]

Nowhere in the catalogue or the wall text of the exhibition does Bourriaud or his curatical team create a space for viewers to ask the questions that any dialectical image would provoke: what are the different ways in which these images testify to revolution, to utopia? Where might the logic of their narrative and composition compliment and contradict one another? Whose history do they tell? Where can we see the present in these images? Where do we experience that which they communicate in our present? This confirms that, unlike the analysis Benjamin performs on Klee's *Angelus Novus*, *L'ange de l'Histoire* does not recognize the present day of which it is a part as implicated in any of the images it exhibits. Benjamin wrote that this ignorance aids the disappearance and irretrievability of historical images, a troubling consequence for an exhibition that originates within a historical materialist trope, and that does not seem to realize the extent of its departure from that trope.[115] Benjamin would assert that Bourriaud "pokes about in the past as if rummaging in a storeroom of examples and analogies,"[116] and that if the paradigm put forward in *L'ange de l'Histoire* is invested in a still undefined future, it displays no understanding of how the future is historically determined, "no inkling of how much in a given moment depends on [the given moment] being made present."[117]

Collecting together cultural figures, critical theory, a painting retrospective, archival holdings and contemporary art is not enough for an exhibition which takes history, its ruins and its angels as a theme – above all within an institution of higher learning. Such a project necessitates a methodology for art history and art theory that historicizes and theorizes in relation to the present, rather than simply providing the paradigm for its own description. Bourriaud could begin by filling in the blanks in his exhibition catalogue: it opens with a double–page spread of portraits of Benjamin and other white, Western cultural figures whom Bourriaud

considers to be angels of history: Marcel Duchamp, Michelangelo Antonioni, Robert Smithson, Jürgen Habermas and others. Guy Debord is pictured on the right, as a sort of avatar for the Situationist International in general. Bourriaud has helped himself plentifully to his and their theory, but the black lines which connect Debord to the other thinkers and to Klee's *Angelus Novus* betray no system or directionality, and therefore cannot suggest any relation except a lateral one.

Bourriaud has provided significant inspiration for a postmodern generation of artists trying to revive a tradition of participatory art, but how much more significant it would be if he were to truly contextualize the many ideas upon which he has relied – in particular, the ideas of the Situationists. Bourriaud is now a "key thinker" in contemporary art,[118] one whose writing is anthologized alongside the writings of the Situationist International, which he has updated and turned into a vanishing point.[119] His contribution to the debates surrounding contemporary art must be contextualized with the Situationists' concepts of the situation, *détournement* and the *dérive* if his project's professed adherence to and departure from historical materialism is to be fully comprehended.

Envoi

Two concurrent exhibitions at Paris's Palais de Tokyo and Centre Pompidou are a fitting epilogue to this examination of Bourriaud's ongoing project. Held in the winter of 2013–2014, these are solo shows dedicated to Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe respectively, two Frenchmen whom Bourriaud has championed as archetypal relational artists, reprogrammers, and altermodernists. Both chose to use the institutional space accorded to them as a porous connective tissue for artworks. Parreno's exhibition is called "Anywhere, anywhere, out of the world," and the blinking neon lights he has installed throughout the Palais de Tokyo (*56 Flickering Lights*, 2013) draw visitors' attention to the cavernous art venue, built in 1937 for Paris's International Exhibition of Art and Technology in Modern Life. The explicit incorporation of architecture into the exhibition is further emphasized by electronic tablets that are used as informational wall labeling for nearby artworks, but that also sporadically display other musings, several on the nature of the building and the environment it cultivates (*Flickering Labels*, 2013). Huyghe's eponymous show in the Centre Pompidou's south gallery is displayed amidst the disused decor of the Mike Kelley exhibition that had previously been installed in the space.

The messy undergirdings of art display – scuffed partitions, floor tape and empty socles – highlight the exhibition's impermanence.

A residue of relational aestheticism is still evident in both retrospectives, albeit in the form of mingled virtual and non-virtual realities. For example, Parreno pairs his video *Anywhere Out of the World* (2000) with Tino Seghal's performance artwork *Annlee* (2011). Both artworks make use of aforementioned manga character Annlee, which Parreno and Huyghe bought in 1999 for their ongoing art project, *No Ghost, Just a Shell*. In Parreno's video, a virtual Annlee addresses the audience and asks them to think through her strange existential plight. In between showings, Seghal's performance work *Annlee* features young women who enter the video projection space to question spectators about their over-scheduled existence: "Are you always busy? Would you rather have too much to do or too little to do?" the affectless performer-as-Annlee asked during my visit. At the Pompidou, people costumed as characters from Huyghe's videos, performances and photographic series (*La Toison d'Or* [1993], *The Host and the Cloud* [2010]), mingle silently with exhibition-goers in the south gallery. These performers-turned-mascots are the only people who manage to pet the painted dog darting nervously through the galleries as a part of the installation, *Untilled* (2011–2012), that Huyghe debuted at Documenta 13.

This relationality is of the most dissociated variety, as sporadic as the flickering LED marquees of *Danny La Rue* (2013) that Parreno exhibits. Museum-goers perambulate as noncommittally as they would in any number of large, anonymous recreation centers, waiting for things to flash, play music or move. The shows are extraordinary in their unhesitating pursuit of a non-positivist artistic trajectory. They give us radicant ecosystems and art as compost (Huyghe's *Zoodram* aquarium artworks from 2010 and 2011), automated pianos (invited artist Liam Gillick's 2007 *Factories in the snow*), and angels of history who have lost their agency (Huyghe's *Blanche Neige Lucie* from 1997). In this manner, Parreno's and Huyghe's exhibitions represent hallucinations of the contemporary that, compared to the mildly-worded daydreaming about contemporary art in Bourriaud's publications, are potent and deeply unsettling.

In a 2006 interview with George Baker, Huyghe plowed through a series of metaphors for his work in a manner similar to Bourriaud's writing: he explained that his creations were scores, screenplays, *ritournelles* and time-scores.[120] Eventually, Huyghe accepted Baker's suggestion that he

had created a situation in the Situationist vein with *Streamside Day Follies* (2003) but then quickly reframed his works as representing "the fold of a situation"[121] and then a "hologram image of a situation."[122] Finally, he settled on the declaration that the point of the art he practices is "to take spectacle as a format, and to use it if the need presents itself."[123] Huyghe and Parreno are now vital avant-gardists of spectacle as format, using their retrospectives as a laboratory phase for the kind of sociality and sensory experiences that will soon be constructed and standardized by the systems of global media and markets that shape our everyday lives. If this is not yet the language in which the artists would describe their installations, we need only wait expectantly for this particular metaphor to appear in the descriptive chain they will create for us.

Were Bourriaud to reverse his self-proclaimed alignment with historical materialism and its legacy, and explicitly affirm the ways in which his *oeuvre* performs a series of creative half-*détournements* of such theories, his interventions would surely attain the significance and controversy of Huyghe's and Parreno's. Taking him at his word, however, it would be more accurate to speak of his texts and exhibitions as keys to thinking rather than the work of a key thinker; each should be taken as the impetus for a critical and even praxis-based response to contemporary artistic theory's fungible discourse. Of course viewers and readers must serve themselves to the past in visual culture, but not to the disservice of the past, present or future. As an alternative to servicing, historical materialism proposes an ethic of explicit gift and theft, one it shares with *détournement*.

The university might be a good place to restart. It is, after all, the site that Bourriaud has himself selected for future paradigmatic intervention. In a commentary on *Art Review*'s 2013 "Power 100" list of art world figures, he declares, "the art school can become a major player in the international artworld, on the condition that it moves towards the model of the art centre, placing art and artists at its heart, by opening itself up further."[124] Might his transformation of the École des Beaux-Arts into "an art complex oriented towards education" mirror the kind of pedagogical platforms that were institutionalized after Okwui Enwezor's curation of Documenta 11 in 2001? Inspired by the work of artists like Theaster Gates, might Beaux Arts students spearhead a transformation of collective educational space? Might the changes to which Bourriaud alludes signal instead that the Beaux Arts will become a business complex "oriented towards education" as many institutions of higher learning in the United States are debating?[125] We'll find out with the next "little service."[126]

Notes •

[1] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*. Translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with the participation of Mathieu Copeland. (Paris: Les presses du réel, 2002), 36. My thanks to Jenni Wu for the initial introduction to Bourriaud's work and the lively discussion of its implications.

[2] Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 33.

[3] Ibid., 52.

[4] Stewart Martin, "Critique of Relational Aesthetics," *Third Text*, vol. 21, Issue 4 (July 2007), 379.

[5] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. (New York: Verso, 2012), 2.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction, Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*. Translated by Jeanine Herman. (New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2002), 7, 4.

[8] Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 19.

[9] Guy Debord, "Message de l'Internationale Situationniste," (1959). *Œuvres*. Edited and annotated by Jean-Louis Rançon in collaboration with Alice Debord. (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 469.

[10] Owen Hatherley, "Post-Postmodernism?" *New Left Review*, Issue 59 (September-October 2009), 154. My thanks to John MacKay for bringing this article to my attention.

[11] Tom McDonough, "No Ghost," *October* 110 (Fall 2004), 122.

[12] For texts which examine this Bourriaudian problematic, see amongst others Anna Dezeuze, "Everyday Life, 'Relational Aesthetics' and the 'Transfiguration of the Commonplace,'" *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 5:3 (2006) 143-152; Martin Patrick, "Unfinished Filliou: On the Fluxus Ethos and the Origins of Relational Aesthetics," *Art Journal* 69:1 (Spring/Summer 2010), 45-61; Gillian Sneed, "From Happenings to Conversations: Allan Kaprow's Legacy in Contemporary 'Relational' Art Practices," *Art Criticism* 25:1 (2010), 73-89; Judith Rodenbeck, *Radical Prototypes: Allan Kaprow and the Invention of Happenings* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011) and Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. (New York: Verso, 2012).

[13] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Formes de vie: L'art moderne et l'invention de soi*. (Paris : Denoël, 1999), 81. All translations mine unless otherwise noted.

[14] Ibid.

[15] *Relational Aesthetics*, 85.

[16] See "Encore un effort si vous voulez être situationnistes," *Potlatch* (June 29, 1957). Reprinted in Guy Debord, *Œuvres*. Established and annotated by Jean-Louis Rançon in collaboration with Alice Debord. (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 349; "Définitions," *Internationale Situationniste*, June 1958. Reprinted in *Internationale Situationniste, Édition augmentée*. (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1997), 13.

[17] *Formes de Vie*, 17.

[18] *Formes de Vie*, 37.

[19] Ibid., 45.

[20] Ibid., 61.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Guy Debord, "Thèses sur la révolution culturelle," *Internationale Situationniste 1* (June 1958). Reprinted in *Internationale Situationniste : Édition augmentée*. (Paris : Librairie

Arthème Fayard, 1997), 20-21. Translation accessed at http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theses.html.

[23] *Formes de Vie*, 17.

[24] Ibid., 38.

[25] Ibid., 17.

[26] Guy Debord, *Commentaires sur la société du spectacle* (1988). Reprinted in *Œuvres*, 1638.

[27] Ibid. Debord's italics.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] *Die Welt ist schön*, Albert Renger-Patzsch's photographic compilation from 1928 presents collections of industrial, natural, and domestic objects together in a common mythology of aesthetic perfection and harmony. Differences in accessibility, meaning, and use are repressed to the advantage of formal likeness.

[31] *Relational Aesthetics*, 9.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Guy Debord, "Rapport sur la construction des situations et sur les conditions de l'organisation et de l'action de la tendance situationniste internationale" (1957) *Œuvres*, 316.

[34] "Ce que sont les amis de 'CoBrA' et ce qu'ils représentent" *Internationale Situationniste 1* (June 1958). Reprinted in *Internationale Situationniste, Édition augmentée*, 37-38.

[35] "Thèses sur la révolution culturelle," *Internationale Situationniste 1* (June 1958), *Internationale Situationniste, Édition augmentée*, 20.

[36] Debord, "Rapport sur la construction des situations," 327.

[37] "La cinquième conférence de l'I.S. à Göteborg," *Internationale Situationniste 6* (August 1961). Reprinted in *Internationale Situationniste, Édition augmentée*, 267.

[38] For example, Debord's publication of *Contre le Cinéma* in 1964, René Viénet's influential article, "The Situationists and the New Forms of Action Against Politics and Art" in 1967, the numerous *détourned* comic strips and postcards the group produced in 1966, 1967 and 1968, and of course the ongoing graphic design of *The Situationist International*.

[39] "Rapport sur la construction des situations," 326-327.

[40] *Relational Aesthetics*, 85. Bourriaud's italics.

[41] See, for example, "The constructed situation is necessarily collective in its preparation and its sequence of events," "Problèmes préliminaires à la construction d'une situation" *Internationale Situationniste 1* (June 1958). Reprinted in *Internationale Situationniste, Édition augmentée*, 12.

[42] *Relational Aesthetics*, 7, 9.

[43] See the question posed concerning spotaneity and artifice in situations in "Théorie des moments et construction des situations," *Internationale Situationniste 4* (June 1960). Reprinted in *Internationale Situationniste, Édition augmentée,* 119. Translation accessed at : http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/moments.html.

[44] Ibid., 85.

[45] See the descriptions of May 1968 that were discussed in terms strikingly similar to a situation in "Le commencement d'une époque," *Internationale Situationniste 12* (September 1969), *Internationale Situationniste, Édition augmentée*, 571-602.

[46] Debord, *Commentaires sur la société du spectacle*, 1604.

[47] Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, "Mode d'emploi du détournement," *Les Levres Nues* no. 8 (May 1956). Reprinted in *Œuvres*, 223-224.

[48] Ibid.

[49] *Postproduction*, 10.

[50] Ibid., 35.

[51] Ibid, 46.

[52] *Relational Aesthetics*, 36.

[53] Ibid., 13.

[54] *Postproduction, Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, 69.

[55] Ibid., 36.

[56] This occurs again in Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, 150.

[57] Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, "Mode d'emploi du détournement," 222.

[58] *Postproduction*, 37.

[59] "De l'aliénation: examen de plusieurs aspects concrets : Le rôle de Godard," *Internationale Situationniste* no. 10 (March 1966), *Internationale Situationniste, Édition augmentée*, 471.

[60] McDonough, 116.

[61] *Postproduction*, 9.

[62] "De l'aliénation: examen de plusieurs aspects concrets : Le rôle de Godard," 471.

[63] *Postproduction*, 20.

[64] Giorgio Agamben, "On Potentiality" (1986), *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Translated and with an introduction by Daniel Heller-Roazen. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 183. Agamben's italics.

[65] *Formes de Vie*, 17.

[66] Nicolas Bourriaud, ed., *Altermodern* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2009), 12.

[67] *The Radicant*, 22.

[68] Ibid., 19.

[69] *Altermodern*, 12-13.

[70] Bourriaud is crucially influenced in *The Radicant* by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's philosophical model of the rhizome; see Gilles Deleuze and Féliz Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). Bourriaud explains that a radicant differs from a rhizome in that it is not a multiplicity but rather "movement that ultimately permits the formation of an identity" *The Radicant*, 55.

[71] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Altermodern*. (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), 13, 14.

[72] Ibid., 12.

[73] David Cunningham, "Returns of the Modern," *Journal of Visual Culture* 9:1 (2010), 124.

[74] Ibid., 129.

[75] *The Radicant*, 39. Bourriaud's italics.

[76] Ibid., 184.

[77] Ibid., 113. Bourriaud's italics.

[78] Ibid., 21. Bourriaud's italics.

[79] *Postproduction*, 36.

[80] The Lettrist International (1952-1957) and the London Psychogeographical Association (1957).

[81] See, for example, "36 rue des Morillons," *Potlatch*, August 10, 1954, reprinted in *Potlatch 1954-1957*, 60-61 ; Jacques Fillon, "Description Raisonnée de Paris : Itinéraire pour une nouvelle agence de voyages," *Les Levres Nues* no. 7 (December 1955), 39 ; Guy Debord, "Deux Comptes Rendus de Dérive," and "Position du Continent Contrescarpe," *Les Levres Nues* no. 9 (November 1956), 10-13 and 38-40.

[82] Guy Debord, "Rapport sur la construction des situations et sur les conditions de l'organisation et de l'action de la tendance Situationniste Internationale" (1957), reprinted in Guy Debord, *Œuvres*, 325.

[83] *Altermodern*, 13.

[84] *The Radicant*, 22.

85 *Altermodern*, 14.
86 *The Radicant*, 96, 126.
87 Ibid., 95-96.
88 *Altermodern*, 13.
89 Hatherley, 158-159.
90 *The Radicant*, 46.
91 Ibid., 51.
92 *The Radicant*, 131.
93 George Baker focuses on the other end of this "fraudulence," in relational aesthetics, suggesting provocatively to Huyghe that his open artworks should be understood as symbolic tax shelters. George Baker, "An Interview with Pierre Huyghe," *October* 1:10 (Fall 2004), 94.
94 This is the same metaphor Peter Osborne proposed for cultural production as a panelist for "Global Modernities" event held in conjunction with the Altermodern exhibition at the Tate Modern. See Cunningham, 128.
95 *The Radicant*, 125.
96 Ibid.
97 Nicolas Bourriaud, "Precarious Constructions: Answer to Jacques Rancière on Art and Politics," *Open* No. 17, 2009, 33.
98 *The Radicant*, 122.
99 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" [1940], *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 4*. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 392.
100 Nicolas Bourriaud, "L'ange et le signal: fragments historiques et pieces à conviction dans l'art du XXIe siècle," *L'ange de l'Histoire*. Edited by Nicolas Bourriaud. (Paris: Palais des Beaux-Arts Editions, 2013), 16-17.
101 Ibid., 21. Bourriaud's italics.
102 Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History" [1940], *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 4*. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 403.
103 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 397.
104 Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 226.
105 Hal Foster, "Blinded Insights: On the Modernist Reception of the Art of the Mentally Ill," *October* (Issue 97, Summer 2001), 12.
106 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 22, 24, 26, 28.
107 Nicolas Bourriaud, "L'ange et le signal: fragments historiques et pieces à conviction dans l'art du XXIe siècle," 26.
108 Ibid.
109 See George Kubler, *The Shape of Time*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962.
110 See Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance (Texts & Documents)*. Edited by David Britt and Kurt W. Forster. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1999 and W. G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*. Translated by Michael Hulse. New York: New Directions, 1997.
111 Nicolas Bourriaud, Kathy Alliou and Armelle Pradalier, "L'ange de l'Histoire 2.0," *L'ange de l'Histoire*, 42-43, 45, 49.
112 "L'ange et le signal: fragments historiques et pieces à conviction dans l'art du XXIe siècle," 22. Bourriaud's italics.
113 Haris Epaminonda, "Interview with Léa Bismuth," *L'ange de l'Histoire*, 56, 60.
114 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 395.

[115] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 391.

[116] Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History," 405.

[117] Ibid.

[118] See Bourriaud's profile in *Art: Key Contemporary Thinkers*. Edited by Diarmuid Costello and Jonathan Vickery. New York: Berg, 2007.

[119] See *Participation*. Edited by Claire Bishop. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006.

[120] Baker, 84.

[121] Ibid., 92.

[122] Ibid., 97.

[123] Ibid., 104.

[124] Nicolas Bourriaud, "An Anatomy of Power," *Art Review* November 2013. Accessed at http://artreview.com/features/november_2013_feature_an_anatomy_of_power_by_nicolas_bourriaud/

[125] Ibid.

[126] *Relational Aesthetics*, 36.

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Poverty
and
Asceticism

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics,* the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.

ABSTRACT

This Collision examines photographs of Santiago Sierra's "Line" installations, discovering in these works a unique formulation of the tension between the social and formal aspects of contemporary art. Developing the philosophical implications of this formulation, this essay connects divergent trajectories embodied by the work (i.e. trajectories initiated by the material elements of the works, the body and the line) to divergent trajectories in contemporary aesthetic theory (i.e. the trajectory that emphasises the socio-political possibilities of artistic representation versus the trajectory that emphasises a distinction between the formal aspects of art and the political effects of art).

Developing the socio-political approach, I draw on recent work by Claire Bishop who, emphasizing the distinction between consensus and antagonism, argues that Sierra's work enacts a democratic politics more rigorous than that of "relational art." Developing a specifically aesthetic understanding of Sierra's installations, I understand the works in relation to the constructivist interrogation of the nature of the line. Drawing in part on the philosophies of Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière, I suggest that, whereas a social aesthetic tends to limit art to a didactic function, a geometric aesthetic enables a more rigorously materialist experience of the work without reducing the potential political force of the work.

KEYWORDS

COLLISION

Poverty/Line: Aesthetic and Political Subjects in Santiago Sierra's "Line" Photographs

David W. Janzen

In a series of installations, contemporary artist Santiago Sierra remunerated marginalized people to have a single black line tattooed across their backs. Captured in medium-close up, black and white photographs, documentation of the works places the inked line horizontally and slightly askew across the middle of the frame. The grainy sobriety of the photos renders textures that resemble police documentation, an aesthetic matched by the works' factual titles: "Line of 30 cm Tattooed on a Remunerated Person" (1998),[1] "250 cm Line Tattooed on Six Remunerated People" (1999)[2] and "160 cm line Tattooed on 4 People" (2000).[3] Accompanying descriptions offer basic details about the individuals in the photographs and the immediate economic situation surrounding their participation, gesturing at the poverty — economic but also subjective — of the participants.[4]

Critical accounts emphasise the way in which these works produce an ambiguous social and ethical experience: an immediate discomfort with the ethical transgressions enacted by the works collides with, and is exacerbated by, the viewer's recognition of his or her own complicity, as viewer, in the violence. Such socio–experiential accounts, however, largely overlook the significance of the fact that the tattoo — the material remainder of violence — takes the form of the line. Since the early twentieth century the line has been central to the artistic struggle to destroy any immediate relation between, on the one hand, artistic *presentation* of forms and, on the other, existing modes of *representation*, the latter understood both as mimetic representation and, more broadly, as the aesthetic structures or categories by which perception is ordered.

Using both oppressed human subjects and the linear form, Sierra's "Line" photographs intervene in two distinct spheres: the social sphere of economic marginalization and the artistic sphere of aesthetic form. Within these photographs these two elements are not reconcilable but remain in contradiction. Through this contradiction, Sierra's work poses the question of the potentially dialectical relation between the law–bound structures of representation and the site of material presentation; or, more concretely, between an experience of the artwork as mediated by social categories and identities (class, poverty, labor, and so on) and an account of the artwork as mediated by aesthetic categories (most fundamentally, those of space and time).

On the most immediate level, the "Line" installations present this duality as a tension between two basic elements — the body and the line — both of which potentially become the figure reducing the other to ground. In considering this tension, my guiding hypothesis is twofold. First, the tension between body and line constructs separate and irreducible trajectories: one in which the presentation of human subjects (the bodies and their incumbent lumpen qualities) takes priority; and another in which the geometric form of the line takes priority. Second, I suggest that these trajectories demarcate a more general problem for experiencing and understanding art — a problem that requires a decision between the primacy of the social world and the primacy of geometric forms. In short, the "Line" installations pose a critical and timely question: whither artistic presentation? Do we ground artistic presentation in the socialized body or in geometric form? Within which mode of abstraction do we situate our experience of the artwork? The task, herein, is to develop the critical and philosophical implications of these questions as they are posed by these works.[5]

Within the social aesthetic, which I'll develop through the work of theorist and critic Claire Bishop, the subject of the "Line" photographs appears as a set of objectified bodies that bear particular qualities: both social characteristics (including the biographical details that accompany the photographs) as well as the material characteristics of the bodies themselves. On the other hand, within a geometric aesthetic, which situates the work within an aesthetic trajectory, the subject of the "Line" photographs emerges from an interrogation of the form of the line itself. While this latter trajectory incorporates a diverse set of works and ideas — among them, Joan Miró's horizon, Barnett Newman's zips, and Margaret Bourke–White's photographs of bread lines come immediately to mind — the primary aim herein is to explore how Sierra's installations recover and reconfigure the implications of an artistic event that finds its most focused instantiation in Soviet constructivism: specifically, the recognition of the line as the essential aesthetic form that marks the minimal, abstract difference between ground and form.[6]

I suggest that a social–aesthetic interpretation tends to reduce the work of art to a didactic representation determined by an extrinsic discourse. In demonstrating this limitation, I argue that Bishop liberates artistic presentation from ethical representations only to subsume presentation all too immediately under political representation. On the other hand, a geometric–aesthetic account provides a foundation for the appearance of the singular idea of the work while, albeit less immediately, maintaining the extrinsically political implications of the work. In this sense, a geometric aesthetics structures an understanding of artistic presentation that develops a more rigorously material encounter with the work.

• Antagonism in a Social Aesthetic •

In an *October* article, Claire Bishop compares Sierra's "Line" installations to prominent examples of what Nicholas Bourriaud names relational aesthetics, arguing that, if the relational artists have enacted a shift from the production of artistic objects to the production of social relations, they have thus far failed to address the question of the quality of social relations produced.[7] Taking up this question, Bishop suggests that whereas relational artists tend to construct ephemeral and artificially

harmonious relations Santiago Sierra's "Line" installations reveal: "how all our interactions are, like public space, riven with social and legal exclusions."[8] This revelation is substantiated, for Bishop, by contemporary conceptions of radical democracy. Drawing on the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantel Mouffe, Bishop argues that the politics of social institutions cannot be understood in terms of consensus. Rather, social contexts are formed through the antagonistic delimitation of categories, the demarcation of spaces, and the determination of inclusion and exclusion within these categories and spaces.[9] Moreover, Bishop demonstrates, Sierra's work does not merely produce ephemeral relations, it intervenes in actual institutions (those of marginalized labor and prostitution, in particular); in doing so, Sierra's work enacts "a kind of ethnographic realism, in which the outcome or unfolding of [Sierra's] action forms an indexical trace of the economic and social reality of the place in which he works."[10]

The most immediate question emerging from Bishop's analysis is: what, specifically, is the relation between the evaluation of a works' politics and the evaluation of the artwork itself? Is an artwork – its function and value – determined by the politics it produces in its immediate context? Bishop seems to think so. She writes:

> The tasks facing us today are to analyze how contemporary art addresses the viewer and to assess the quality of the audience relations it produces: the subject position that any work presupposes and the democratic notions it upholds, and how these are manifested in our experience of the work.[11]

This assertion is symptomatic of a broader movement in contemporary theories and practices of art. It raises the question of whether an emphasis on the production of relations leads to a transfer of, rather than a challenge to, the knowledge/power structures that govern artistic production and consumption. Indeed, current artistic movements – relational art, but also more recent developments like Object Oriented Curating – do tend to replace artists and critics with curators and philosophers without fundamentally altering the hierarchies of the institution.[12] More immediate to the discussion at hand, conceived in terms of the social context of the work, an emphasis on relationality may undermine the political force immanent to the art object itself. In Bishop's account, a work is evaluated on the basis of an extrinsic discourse or

abstraction – that of political theory. Moreover, this extrinsic discourse describes the social "effects" of the artwork, not the artwork itself. While Bishop's analysis rightly identifies the way in which the artwork aims to present the lack in, and falsity of, the idea of consensus, her account immediately re-inscribes this lack in an alternative mode of representation – i.e. the reality of the socio-political situation as described by the discourse of political theory. Thus understood, art becomes an essentially didactic practice: it may teach us something about the current socio-political situation. It may even teach us something new about how to enact democratic relations. But the artwork cannot, as an artwork, intervene in the actual *material* relationality in which objects are encountered.[13] In other words, in spite of claims regarding the politics of art, there is an important sense in which Bishop's account accepts at face value the kinds of social identifications produced by a given situation and is content merely to describe these relations or, at best, the lessons that emerge out of such relations.

• Inexistence in a Geometric Aesthetic •

A geometric aesthetics places Sierra's installation within an artistic trajectory, one that includes the interrogations conducted by Russian constructivist artists into the nature of the line. Initiated by the work of Malevich, Rodchenko and Popova, constructivist praxis demonstrates that, in the logic of classical and romantic art, both material and form are subsumed under representation; the potentiality of particular materials and essential forms are valued and understood only insofar as their properties can be actualized in a figurative rendering of the world, in a replication of what we see in the world. Negating this logic, constructivist art sought to emancipate both form and materiality by stripping away modes of abstraction until they arrived at what they discovered to be the most foundational aesthetic element: the line. As Rodchenko writes:

> The perfected significance of the line was finally clarified – on the one hand, its bordering and edge relationship, and on the other – as a factor of the main construction of every organism that exists in life, the skeleton, so to speak (or the foundation, carcass, system) .... The line is the path of passing through, movement, collision, edge, attachment, joining, section.

Thus, the line conquered everything and destroyed the last citadels of painting – color, tone, texture, and surface.[14]

In short, as an essential form the line is both destruction and generation. Malevich pushes this idea further, suggesting that the line is also the form that leverages new modes of aesthetic consciousness. He writes: "It was through the conscious line – through being conscious of the line before focusing consciousness on the object – that the artist could cognize not the object itself but what lay within that object: the non-objective forces that give structure and movement to it, to the world of space and time as such."[15]

This mode of aesthetic consciousness implies two assertions that are relevant to our discussion. First, it asserts the aesthetic consciousness of non-objective forces over the externalized object. Thus, the question of the nature of objects themselves remains relevant, not for its own sake but because objects instantiate more essential categories – i.e. the categories that determine what appears in the world and how.[16] The work of art, in this understanding, is not primarily engaged in representing what appears in the world. Rather the work of art presents the relational conditions of its own appearance, conditions that might include the socio-economic situation in which the artwork emerges but are grounded, more fundamentally, in the aesthetic categories of "space and time as such."[17]

To give these assertions greater specificity, we ask: what happens when the line, with its destructive and generative capacities, is marked on human bodies? In the most immediate sense, it remains significant that, in the "Line" installations, the bodies of prostitutes and marginalized laborers are out of place, not only in the museum where they are photographed, but also more generally in the situation of the contemporary west, wherein to be identified as a prostitute or migrant laborer is to be excluded from the representative structures of the law, society and the state. In this sense, the situation of marginalized surplus labor under capitalism is an essential element of the work. However, understood in relation to constructivist interventions and interrogations, the line does not merely pose a question regarding the legitimacy or contingency of such exclusion, it re-grounds this out-of-placeness in a more foundational form of relationality. The question is posed anew at a level of abstraction that cannot be immediately co-opted by ideological Liberal discourse about job-creation policy, immigrant labour, and so on.

The line initiates the subtraction of these bodies from any immediate social determination. This idea involves a kind of logical separation. It is obvious enough that in one sense the linear form cannot exist without material support, which in this case is provided by the set of bodies. But, as Alain Badiou suggests, there is a more significant sense in which the background against which marks, lines or forms take place does not exist – the background (again, in this instance the set of bodies) is constituted by the lines as empty or open space. Thus, the marked bodies persist as inexistent.

The presentation of precarity and non-belonging is thereby doubled: the bodies that already do not appear literally dis-appear in the presentation of the art object. To put it in more processual terms, the invisibility of marginalized labour *dis*-appears in the making of the art object, i.e. in the formation of aesthetic value. The very appearance of the belaboured bodies already contradicts the structure in which they appear; with the presence of the line the belaboured bodies disappear under the new contradiction between the drawn line and the disappearing background.

An emphasis on the aesthetic logic of the work of art – as opposed to the socio-political representations of the work – doesn't circumvent the relevance of the artwork to its political situation. Indeed, the Constructivists were adamant that their art derived its formal problems from the situation of industrialization. What changes in the move from an aesthetics of the socialized body – such as the account developed by Bishop – to an aesthetics of geometric form – like the one I've gestured toward here – is the specific relation between artistic presentation and political re-presentation. To call for a more rigorously formal or geometric aesthetic is not to retreat from politics, but to affirm that the world remains, in spite of the reductive forces of capitalism, essentially heterogeneous and, subsequently, to acknowledge that a rigorous interrogation of our situation is not reducible to any single sphere of examination, intervention or action.

Notes •

[1] Santiago Sierra. "Line of 30 cm Tattooed on a Remunerated Person" (1998). http://www.santiago-sierra.com/982_1024.php Link used by permission.

[2] Santiago Sierra. "250 cm Line Tattooed on Six Remunerated People" (1999). http://www.santiago-sierra.com/996_1024.php Link used by permission.

[3] Santiago Sierra. "160 cm line Tattooed on 4 People" (2000). http://www.santiago-sierra.com/200014_1024.php Link used by permission.

[4] Ibid. The description for the 1999 work reads: "Six unemployed young men from Old Havana were hired for $30 in exchange for being tattooed." The 2000 work reads: "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 … for fellatio, while the price of a shot of heroin is around 12,000 pesetas."

[5] See: Jacques Rancière. "Notes on the Photographic Image," *Radical Philosophy* 156 (July/August 2002). Unless specified, "works" refers, in this essay, to both the photographs and the installations. Implicitly, I'm contending with Rancière's claim that photography "presents itself as the rediscovered union between two statuses of the image that the modernist tradition had separated: the image as representation of an individual and as operation of art" (8-9).

[6] See: Cornelia H. Butler and M Catherine de Zegher. *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010). This book provides an art-historical survey of the line in twentieth-century art.

[7] Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Peasance & Fronza Woods (Paris: Les Presses du Réel,1998), 113. Bourriaud defines Relational Aesthetics as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context." For Bourriaud and Bishop, primary examples of this movement include works by Rirkrit Tiravanija, Liam Gillick and Pierre Huyghe.

[8] Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (2004): 73-4.

[9] Ibid, 72.

[10] Ibid, 70.

[11] Ibid, 78.

[12] Bishop is certainly aware of this risk; the question, though, is whether or not her emphasis on antagonism provides any leverage against such a risk. See also Hal Foster's "The Artist as Ethnographer," in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).

[13] The tendency to reduce art to a didactic function is described by Alain Badiou (see *Handbook of Inaesthetics*) and in Jacques Rancière's conception of "aesthetic regimes" (see, in particular, "The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes").

[14] Aleksandr Rodchenko, "The Line," *Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Essays, Letters, and Other Writings*, ed. A. N. Lavrentiev, trans. J. Gambrell (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 113-114. Emphasis added.

[15] Kazimir Malevich. *The Non-Objective World* (1927), quoted in the exhibition "A Century under the Sign of Line: Drawing and its Extension (1910-2010)" in *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century*, 47-48.

[16] This understanding of the connection between aesthetic categories and politics is developed in Rancière's theory of the distribution of the sensible. See for example *Aesthetics and its Discontents*.

[17] See Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* trans Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). Adorno writes: "[I]n artworks the element that precedes their fixation as things constantly breaks through the thing-character" (99).

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——. "250 cm Line Tattooed on Six Remunerated People," installation and photographs, 1999 (Espacio Aglutinador, Havana). http://www.santiago-sierra.com/996_1024.php

——. "Line of 30 cm Tattooed on a Remunerated Person," installation and photographs, 1998 (51 Regina Street, Mexico City). http://www.santiago-sierra.com/982_1024.php

ABSTRACT

In this paper I will explore Samuel Beckett's significant, yet overlooked, contribution to the study of asceticism and ascetic thought. I will present a reading of Beckett's seminal play, *Waiting for Godot,* so as to illustrate the way in which Beckett utilizes and develops numerous aspects of Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophical system. As I understand it, the Beckettian asceticism manifested in the tragedies of Beckett's middle period not only utilizes aspects of Schopenhauerian asceticism, it also incorporates broader, non-ascetic aspects of Schopenhauerian thought – namely that of *boredom*, and the aesthetic theory of the *dynamically sublime*. In contrast to Schopenhauerian asceticism, which focuses on bodily deprivation, Beckettian asceticism impoverishes not only the body but also the mind. Through the medium of tragedy, Beckett presents a unique ascetic method that centres on impoverishing the mind by preventing the formation of useful, or actionable, representations.

KEYWORDS

Arthur Schopenhauer, Samuel Beckett, asceticism, tragedy, the dynamically sublime

Schopenhauer, Beckett, and the Impoverishment of Knowledge

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In the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation* the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer lists the thinkers and historical figures with whom he believes one should become acquainted so as to better understand the practice of "quietism" or "the giving up of all willing."[1] This list of ascetics includes St Francis of Assisi, Blaise Pascal, the Buddha Sakya Muni, Meister Eckhart, and Madame de Guyon. A revised list of quietist thinkers, one that incorporates the quietists who lived and worked after the death of Schopenhauer, would be incomplete if it did not include the name of the Irish playwright, Samuel Beckett. In this paper I argue that the tragic works of Samuel Beckett should be listed alongside the works of Schopenhauer as some of the most significant contributions to the study of asceticism as ethical practice.

This, however, is not the way that Beckett's work is presently understood in the philosophical realm. Unlike other disciplines that engage with the work of Samuel Beckett, philosophy has yet to consider the implications of Beckett's now well documented sustained engagement with Schopenhauerian thought, particularly the life-denying aspects of that thought.[2] Instead, Beckett's work is presented as a manifestation of Nietzschean and post-Nietzschean aesthetics.[3]

There are essentially three premises that fundamentally shape the present understanding of Beckettian tragedy in the field of philosophy. The first premise appertains to the role of art. To date, Beckettian prose and tragedy has been positioned as an ultimately life-affirming endeavour. For thinkers such as Alain Badiou, "All of Beckett's genius tends towards affirmation."[4] The second premise, which builds upon the first, is that the import of Beckettian art is its refusal to give in to "nihilism," here understood as the attribution of "meaning" to existence:

> Solitude, emptiness, nothingness, meaninglessness, silence – these are not the givens of Beckett's characters, but their goal, their new heroic undertaking .... These states are, rather, "infinite tasks."[5]

In the post-Nietzschean reading of Beckettian aesthetics, Beckett refuses to ascribe meaning to life. This refusal promotes an acceptance of life, including its negative aspects. The third premise is that Beckettian art promotes a saving alterity. To quote Nussbaum,"Beckett's antinarrative is too many-sided, too ironic, to leave us with any simple comfort."[6] Beckettian tragedy, then, affirms life through its refusal to present the audience with material that allows it to say for certain that something either is or is not the case.[7]

In contrast to this line of thinking, in the present work I will explore Beckett's significant, yet overlooked, contribution to the study of asceticism and ascetic thought. In particular, I will present a reading of Beckett's seminal play, *Waiting for Godot,* as a means of illustrating the ways in which Beckett utilizes and develops numerous aspects of Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophical system. As I understand it, the asceticism which is manifested in the tragedies of Beckett's middle period not only utilizes aspects of Schopenhauerian asceticism but also incorporates non-ascetic aspects of Schopenhauerian thought – namely the latter's thinking

on *boredom* and his aesthetics of the *dynamically sublime* – in the generation of an ascetic method that focuses on the deprivation of habitual, painless knowledge.[8]

The characters on Beckett's stage enact a unique form of asceticism, one which deprives them not only of physical comfort, but also of the comfort of habitual knowledge and certainty. Whilst both Schopenhauerian and Beckettian asceticism promotes the impoverishment of the body in the form of self–mortification, celibacy, etc., the Beckettian ascetic also promotes poverty of thought by refusing to generate actionable representations either in space and time or in the form of concepts.

As well as this, Schopenhauer and Beckett envisage different roles for ascetic practice insofar as it may initiate as well as sustain a state of quietism. Whereas Schopenhauer understands asceticism as a process of deprivation that one consciously undertakes once one appreciates the nature of existence – and for Schopenhauer, existence is suffering born of striving – Beckett employs ascetic practice as a means to provide the will, the part of oneself that strives, with knowledge of ubiquitous suffering. That is, the Beckettian intellect understands the ceaselessly striving will or will–to–life as the cause of suffering, and uses ascetic practice to convey this knowledge to the will. In short, whereas Schopenhauer argues that knowledge leads to asceticism, Beckett argues that asceticism leads to knowledge.

• Schopenhauerian Asceticism •

For Schopenhauer asceticism "is denial of the will–to–life," the "intentional mortification of one's own will."[9] In an introduction to Schopenhauer, Janaway writes:

> In "denial of the will to life," one turns against the particular manifestation of the will to life found in oneself, which means turning against the body, and against one's own individuality. Thus one ceases, as much as possible, to strive for one's own egoistic ends, ceases to avoid suffering or to seek pleasure, ceases to desire propagation of the species, or any sexual gratification – in short, one looks down on that

willing part of nature which one is, and withdraws from one's identification with it.[10]

The will-to-life is central to Schopenhauerian ontology. In simple terms, the will is the inner nature of human beings and the "inner nature of all things in the world," "the kernel of reality itself."[11] The fundamental nature of the will, the way it manifests itself, is as *blind, ceaseless striving*.[12] However, in addition to being will, human beings also possess "intellect." In the Schopenhauerian conception of the self, the intellect is the "servant," "a mere slave and bondman of the will," the role of which is to generate representations of the world which permit the willing subject to act in a manner that ensures the survival of the species.[13]

By generating the intellect that in turn generates the world as representation, Schopenhauer argues that the will, which would otherwise exist in darkness, has "kindled a light for itself."[14] The intellect also has the ability to present the will with a different kind of knowledge, that is, knowledge of its true, suffering, nature.[15] In Schopenhauerian thought, human beings have the unique capacity to counteract the part of the self that blindly strives, and can thus bring suffering to a halt.

For Schopenhauer, the purpose of strict ascetic practice is not to break or quiet the will – for as I will discuss shortly, the will can only be broken by the *knowledge* that all that exists is essentially one, undifferentiated entity – but rather to ensure that the will, which has already been quieted by such knowledge, does not spark back to life and assert itself once more.[16] Asceticism, then, can be understood as an attempt to *maintain* the will's quieted state by depriving oneself of the means to strive; thus ascetic practice takes such forms as chastity, poverty, fasting, self-castigation, and self-mortification, which are all methods designed to inhibit the will's ability to spark back to life by depriving it of the motivation to do so.[17] To better understand the role that asceticism plays in quieting the will, one must first understand how the will is broken.

• The Role of Knowledge •

For Schopenhauer only *knowledge* can lead to resignation and the desire to practice asceticism: "The will itself cannot be abolished by anything except knowledge."[18] Specifically, the intellect must provide the willing aspect of the self with a particular kind of knowledge: namely "the most perfect knowledge of its own nature";[19] that is, one becomes conscious "of the identity of one's own inner being with that of all things, or with the kernel of the world."[20] Schopenhauer describes the awareness that all is one as the state of "mysticism."

Typically, knowledge serves to motivate the will.[21] When the intellect represents the world in terms of the principle of sufficient reason – that is, in terms of space, time, and causality – the will understands itself as an individual in a world which is populated by innumerable individuals who are in constant competition with one another for limited resources. When the intellect represents the world in terms of the principle of sufficient reason it presents all objects as potential motives for action.[22] In short, the intellect affirms the will, and by doing so encourages suffering in the form of personal anxiety and the infliction of harm upon others. In contrast, "knowledge of the whole becomes the quieter of all and every willing."[23] By representing the world as "one," the intellect provides a disincentive for action. As Singh states:

> A person who is not totally immersed in egoism and is able to see through the *principium individuationis* [principle of individuation] realizes his kinship with everything that exists around him. The whole world seems as close to him as his own person seems to the egoist. Endowed with a holistic knowledge, and overwhelmed with empathy with all living things, such a person finds the nature of this world and its sufferings unacceptable, and no longer wishes to chase the motives of his selfish projects through endless willing.[24]

Schopenhauer argues that there are two "paths" which lead the individual to such an understanding of life.

• Two Paths to Asceticism •

Schopenhauer contends that the knowledge that phenomenal life is essentially one, undifferentiated entity dawns on a person in one of two ways: through an awareness of the suffering of others or through personally felt suffering.[25]

The first path to breaking the will, the path taken by the "magnanimous person" or "saint," is described as a "rare exception."[26] Such a person appropriates the sufferings of the whole world,[27] and thus leads a life of virtue: understanding *intuitively* that all is one, the virtuous or compassionate person attempts at all times to alleviate the suffering of others, for he or she understands this suffering as his or her own:

> If that veil of Maya, the *principium individuationis*, is lifted from the eyes of a man to such an extent that he no longer makes the egoistical distinction between himself and the person of others, but takes as much interest in the suffering of other individuals as in his own ... then it follows automatically that such a man, recognizing in all beings his own true and innermost self, must also regard the endless sufferings of all that lives as his own, and thus take upon himself the pain of the whole world.[28]

For Schopenhauer, however, virtue is only the penultimate step on the path to "salvation."[29] The highest good consists in "denial of the will."[30] The move from virtue to asceticism begins when the virtuous person understands the ubiquitous nature of suffering, and that the "ceaseless efforts to banish suffering achieve nothing more than a change in its form."[31] Recognizing that the world is "full of misery" because the essence of the world – the will – generates such misery by its very nature of ceaseless striving, the compassionate person ultimately understands that the only truly compassionate stance is one of complete indifference.[32] In metaphorical terms, to borrow from Beckett, the only true "painkiller" is the refusal of painkillers.[33] As Julian Young argues in a discussion of Schopenhauer:

with this insight comes a transformation of the way in which one's identification with the transcendental self expresses itself. Previously it expressed itself in the triumph over egoism ... now, however, one "shudders at," "renounces" life, realising it to be irredeemably worthless ... one ceases to identify with *anything*....[34]

Schopenhauer describes this lack of identification with anything as "the greatest indifference to all things."[35] Merely *knowing* about the suffering of others is enough to cause one to resign from the life of striving, and to practice will-suppressing asceticism.

The second path that leads to the understanding that all is one, which then inspires ascetic practice, is that of personally experienced suffering. Schopenhauer defines suffering in terms of one's continuing to lack something which one continues to want: "We call its [the will's] hindrance through an obstacle placed between it and its temporary goal, *suffering* ... For all suffering is simply nothing but unfulfilled and thwarted willing."[36]

Schopenhauer believes that this sense of frustration tends to encourage those who find themselves drawn to asceticism. "In fact, suffering is the process of purification by which alone man is in most cases sanctified, in other words, led back from the path of error of the will-to-life."[37] Such a person experiences so much loss and distress, anxiety and disappointment, that they are ultimately "crushed by fate."[38] The individual ceases to strive, and conducts himself or herself in a manner that precludes further striving.

It is my contention that Beckett guides his characters and audiences along Schopenhauer's "second path," on which personally felt suffering leads to the fundamental knowledge that humans are essentially striving beings, and that striving is the cause of suffering. However, unlike Schopenhauer's individual, who inadvertently suffers to such an extent that he or she turns his or her back on life, Beckett's individual suffers deliberately. Having appreciated that its own will is the cause of suffering, the Beckettian intellect then deliberately inflicts suffering upon the will in an attempt to break it. I will discuss Beckett's utilization of this understanding shortly.

I will now expand upon my earlier claim that Schopenhauer primarily sees asceticism in relation to bodily deprivation.

• Ascetic Methods •

Schopenhauer describes the ascetic as "a sick man who applies a painful cure."[39] In this section I will discuss the ascetic *methods* that according to Schopenhauer one must apply or endure in order to preserve the state of resignation brought about by the knowledge that all is "one." Maintenance of the resigned condition requires vigilance on behalf of the embodied individual, for the body is the last vestige of the will-to-life. As long as the body remains it is possible for the will to resurface in the form of instincts and desires.[40]

Though Schopenhauer discusses a number of ascetic methods, there are essentially five core tactics, which may be simultaneously employed to maintain the denial of the will. These are celibacy, poverty, fasting, self-castigation, and self-torture.[41]

Schopenhauer sees celibacy as the "first step in asceticism."[42] Celibacy is asceticism's "central point," as "voluntary and complete chastity ... goes beyond the individual life, and thus announces that the will, whose phenomenon is the body, ceases with the life of this body."[43] In essence, celibacy ultimately denies the will-to-life the very fuel with which to strive, and thus to cause suffering.

The purpose of "voluntary and intentional poverty" is to prevent the will from "backsliding."[44] Unlike the compassionate person who gives away property with the intention of alleviating the suffering of others, the ascetic renounces property with the intention of causing his or her own suffering, and in the hope of denying the will the means to strive, "so that the satisfaction of desires, the sweets of life, may not again stir the will, of which self-knowledge has conceived a horror."[45]

Similarly, fasting, self-castigation, and self-torture are posited as ways for the ascetic to ensure that his will cannot "reignite." The ascetic nourishes the body "sparingly lest its vigorous flourishing and thriving should animate afresh and excite more strongly the will of which it is the mere expression and mirror."[46] At the same time that the ascetic barely maintains his or her physical life, he or she also continues to make the will suffer through the means of psychic harm (self-castigation) and physical suffering (self-torture).

It should be noted that Schopenhauer tones down his views on ascetic practice in the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation*. In Chapter XLVIII, "On the Doctrine of the Denial of the Will-to-Live," Schopenhauer claims that self-mortification is most likely unnecessary for the sedation of the will. He also replaces self-castigation with humility.[47]

In the next section I will show that Beckett systematically incorporates many of the abovementioned methods of ascetic practice into his dramatic work. In *Waiting for Godot* we witness the practice of poverty, celibacy, self-mortification, and self-castigation amongst other ascetic procedures. In *Endgame* Beckett's ascetic intellects practice self-castigation, fasting, and celibacy amid an array of ascetic methods. Similarly in *Happy Days* the audience observes celibacy, self-mortification, and a vow of silence as part of a sustained attempt to break the will. It is important to note, however, that whilst Schopenhauer sees asceticism as a technique of holding the will in check *after* the knowledge of "oneness" and ubiquitous suffering has dawned upon it, in Beckettian tragedy ascetic practice is employed to break the will. In Beckettian tragedy, asceticism *leads to* knowledge of ubiquitous suffering. It is for this reason that the practice of asceticism one finds in Beckettian tragedy is, if anything, more vehement than that found in Schopenhauerian thought. Schopenhauer's reappraisal of the need to self-mortify is challenged in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* by the character of Lucky who forever burdens himself with a heavy load, and does nothing to salve the open wound on his neck.[48] And whereas Schopenhauer ultimately suggests that humility and not self-castigation is the key, in Beckettian tragedy self-castigation plays a pivotal role in breaking the will by making the will understand the part it plays in the generation of suffering.

• Beckettian Asceticism •

In this section I will elaborate upon Beckett's utilization of the ascetic method of deliberately inflicted bodily suffering. I will also discuss the *uniquely* Beckettian response to the suffering that accompanies striving: namely, the intentional exacerbation of the experience of *boredom*, which

is brought about by the deliberate generation of *uncertainty*. Beckettian tragedy not only evinces the more "traditional" methods of ascetic practice discussed in the previous section, such as fasting and self–mortification, but also evinces a unique form of psychic self–harm.

This Beckettian method of generating and perpetuating mental torment, or *anguish*, is Beckett's considerable contribution to ethical thought. The deliberate generation of anguish is an *ethical* approach to life because such suffering is inflicted with the ultimate intention of bringing suffering to an end. Beckettian tragedy is ethical, then, not because it ennobles the human condition after the death of God,[49] nor because it is an affirmative response to difference.[50] Neither is Beckett's work an affirmation of existence in general, an awakening to the reality of the "other" and the possibility of "love,"[51] or a revelation of the repeated attempt and subsequent failure to entirely negate life itself.[52] Rather, Beckett's work is ethical because it proposes a *cure* for the life of suffering: a method for the destruction of the part of oneself that strives and by striving causes suffering.

• Beckett's Deployment of Schopenhauerian *Boredom* as an Ascetic Method •

Whereas Schopenhauer is the first Western philosopher to systematically establish asceticism as *the* legitimate response to ceaseless internal drives, Beckett is the first explicitly post–Schopenhauerian thinker to not only incorporate Schopenhauerian ascetic thought into his own work but also to build upon it.[53] Beckettian tragedy is not merely the reiteration of Schopenhauerian asceticism in theatrical form but a systematic response to another system of thought, a response that ultimately devises its own method for denying and breaking the will.

At the heart of this method is the state of unrelieved boredom, which is generated by the intellect's refusal to present a clear motive for action. In Beckettian terms, boredom is pain, and a motive for action is a "painkiller":

HAMM:	Is it not time for my pain-killer?
CLOV:	No.

HAMM:	This is slow work. (Pause.) Is it not time for my pain-killer?
CLOV:	No.

HAMM:	Give me my pain-killer.
CLOV:	It's too soon.

HAMM:	Is it not time for my pain-killer?
CLOV:	(violently.) No!

HAMM:	Is it not time for my pain-killer?
CLOV:	No![54]

In this passage, Beckett utilizes the mechanistic boredom first elucidated in Schopenhauerian thought as the mind minus a motive, experiencing the full force of willing.[55]

For Schopenhauer the experience of boredom is an important mechanism for ensuring that the individual continues to strive. Boredom is a key aspect in the *cycle of striving*, wherein the individual constantly transitions from one desire to the next. For Schopenhauer, boredom is the state experienced in the moments between the attainment of one desire, and the inevitable pursuit of another. In boredom one experiences the "pressure of the will," but since it has no "motive" on which to fix, an "inner torment" results. The individual experiences the pain of longing *per se*, that is, longing without any definite object towards which one's energies and attention can be directed.[56] Thus it is that Schopenhauer describes boredom as a "fearful emptiness."[57]

It is important to note that Schopenhauer limits his discussion of boredom to an understanding of its effects and its purpose: boredom ensures that human beings are never satisfied, and thus continue to strive. But whereas Schopenhauer leaves his discussion of boredom at the level of description, Beckett goes further by utilizing the effects of boredom in ascetic practice. In Beckettian tragedy, boredom is a "perilous zone" of "fearful emptiness" which the Beckettian ascetic enters and refuses to leave: [58]

LUCKY: On the other hand... but not so fast... but not so fast...[59]

By incorporating boredom into ascetic practice, Beckett is the first thinker to depict boredom as an aspect of human experience that possesses ascetic potential. Beckett utilizes the human capacity to experience the feeling of the most frightful desolation and emptiness."[60]

We see this understanding of boredom mirrored in the austerity of the Beckettian tragic setting. In this context, the barrenness of Beckett's landscapes and interior spaces may be understood as the experience of *boredom* :

POZZO: What's it like?

VLADIMIR: (*looking around*). It's indescribable. It's like
                nothing. There's nothing.[61]

We may compare Vladimir's description of his experience in *Waiting for Godot* with the later settings for Beckett's ascetic tragedies. First in *Endgame* :

Bare Interior.

Grey light.[62]

And later in *Happy Days* :

> *Expanse of scorched earth rising centre to a low mound .... Very pompier tromp-l'oeil backcloth to represent unbroken plain and sky receding to meet in far distance.*[63]

In addition to Schopenhauer's conception of boredom, Beckett draws on an important aspect of Schopenhauerian aesthetics in his ascetic method, namely Schopenhauer's two-part conception of the *dynamically sublime,* wherein the intellect holds the will at bay so that it may come to appreciate a scene which it would ordinarily flee for fear of harm.[64] The dynamically sublime is vital to an understanding of the two-stage process through which, in his dramas, Beckett inflicts suffering upon the willing aspect of the self. His ascetic reinterpretation of Schopenhauer's aesthetic theory unfolds in the following manner.

First the intellect holds the will at bay by refusing to provide a *clear* motive for action, that is, a representation situated in space and time.[65] This denies the individual will the painless experience of habitual consciousness. Habitual consciousness is knowledge of one's existence that is delimited by the *a priori* filtering mechanism of the mind, which situates information about the world in space and time for the benefit of the striving will. Habitual consciousness is painless, then, because the will is, as it were, anaesthetized by the information it receives. When held in what Beckett calls the "perilous zone" between moments of habitual perception, where, because of the intellect's refusal to perform its anaesthetizing function, the individual will experiences the "suffering of being," the individual will suffers in two distinct ways.[66] First, the will suffers the pain of lacking an object towards which it may direct its energy – or, in Schopenhauer's words, the will experiences unalleviated "boredom".[67] And, second, it suffers from the knowledge it receives instead of habitual consciousness, namely knowledge about the ubiquitous nature of suffering.[68] Denied painless habitual consciousness, where a limited, filtered, version of the world is perceived, the individual will is instead revealed to itself, via an "involuntary" or "unwanted" memory, either as a being that has suffered, or as a being that has caused others to suffer.[69] This sudden awareness of past suffering is itself a cause of suffering. Ultimately, in ascetic practice, such suffering is deliberately generated for the purpose of having the individual will resign from life.[70]

It is this complex method of ethical self-destruction that I will now discuss in detail through a reading of *Waiting for Godot*.

• Beckett's Couples: How the Intellect Places the Will in an Impoverished State of Boredom •

In *Waiting for Godot* we are presented with two sets of Beckettian couples, pairs of characters that in this reading represent aspects of the individual self. The first couple, the down and out Vladimir and Estragon, loiter by the side of a country road where they wait for a message from the mysterious Godot. The other couple, Pozzo and Lucky, a wealthy landowner and his slave, are perpetual travellers along the same road. In Schopenhauerian terms, Vladimir and Pozzo perform the role of the tireless will, whereas Estragon and Lucky perform the role of intellect. Each intellect is defined by his understanding of, and his approach to, the subject of boredom: the ascetic, Lucky, takes every opportunity to exacerbate the experience of boredom. I will shortly discuss Lucky's use of boredom and other ascetic methods. Estragon, on the other hand, attempts to alleviate boredom by responding to Vladimir's demands for relief from the pain of endless waiting by providing a motive for action, and by so doing performs the role of the typical intellect that assists the will to escape its self-generated pain. [71]

Similarly, towards the end of the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer distinguishes the behaviour of the person who attempts to avoid suffering from that of the person who generates suffering, that is, Schopenhauer distinguishes the vast majority of humanity from the ascetic practitioner. Most people, in their attempts to ensure a "secure and pleasant existence" "chain" their will "ever more firmly to life, thus ensuring their suffering continues." In contrast, ascetics "deliberately make their life as poor, hard and cheerless as possible, because they have their true and ultimate welfare in view."[72] The *behaviour* of the ascetic announces to the world that suffering can only end if one refuses to alleviate it, or in Beckettian terms, the intellect fails to provide a "painkiller."

I believe that this understanding regarding a person's approach to suffering — that one is either an ascetic or a non-ascetic — is a productive

way of understanding both intellects in *Waiting for Godot*. Whilst Estragon seeks a "secure and pleasant existence" for himself by begging for food and money, and by seeking to leave for a more salubrious location, Lucky "deliberately" makes life as "poor, hard and cheerless as possible" by refusing to provide relief.[73] In short, the two intellects, Estragon and Lucky, provide very different *knowledge* to their respective wills regarding the essential nature of the world and of suffering. The former informs its will that suffering can be avoided. The latter intellect communicates to its will the knowledge that suffering is essential to its very nature. I will therefore focus my attention on the ascetic character of Lucky, "a sick man applying a painful cure."[74]

• Lucky's Traditional Asceticism: Poverty of the Body •

Before I proceed to Beckett's unique approach to asceticism – generating suffering through the creation or non-cessation of uncertainty – I will first set out what one might refer to as Lucky's utilization of "standard" or "traditional" means of breaking the will, as described by Schopenhauer.[75] In his persistent attempts to make his willing aspect, Pozzo, suffer, Lucky carries out a wide array of ascetic acts, including acts of self-mortification, fasting, and self-castigation. As a form of self-mortification, Lucky burdens himself with a heavy bag, which at the end of Act II we discover is filled with nothing but sand.[76] In addition, Lucky does nothing to alleviate the running sore that has formed on his neck where the rope with which Pozzo controls him has rubbed him raw.[77] In Act I, Lucky also refuses sustenance by refusing the chicken bones to which he is entitled.[78] These ascetic acts are undertaken with one purpose in mind: "that by constant privation and suffering, he may more and more break down and kill the will that he recognises and abhors as the source of his own suffering existence and of the world's."[79]

That Lucky's objective is to break his will is announced by the will itself. In response to Lucky's behaviour – his refusal of sustenance, his refusal to provide physical relief, and the way he now "thinks" in such a way as to deny certainty about the world – Pozzo declares that Lucky is "killing" him.[80]

• Lucky's Unconventional Asceticism: Inflicting Boredom (Poverty of the Mind) •

Lucky's "traditional" ascetic gestures may help us understand other self–destructive aspects of his behaviour, for instance that which Pozzo describes as Lucky's "thinking." Whereas Lucky had once thought "very prettily," providing Pozzo with a great deal of abstract knowledge about the world, his objectless thoughts are now said to make Pozzo "shudder":[81]

> POZZO: (*groaning, clutching his head*). I can't bear it... any longer... the way he goes on... you've no idea... it's terrible...he must go... (*he waves his arms*) ... I'm going mad... (*he collapses, his head in his hands*)... I can't bear it... any longer...[82]

Lucky's way of "thinking" is a form of psychic self–harm. While "traditional" ascetic gestures deprive the body of the energy it needs to strive, Lucky's thinking deprives the will of the *information* it needs to strive; it deprives the will of certainty about the world. Deprived of "certainty" and of a clear motive for action, the will is left in a frustrated state. Lucky's way of thinking causes the will to suffer by depriving it of painless, knowledge, "painless" because it permits the will to act. I will shortly provide textual examples from *Waiting for Godot* to support this claim.

Deprived of a *clear* or usable representation the individual will cannot discharge its energy towards a target or goal. This accumulation of energy causes the will to suffer, as an inability to strive causes pain.[83] I refer the reader back to an earlier discussion of the two "paths" by which Schopenhauer believes the will is led to resign from life. In particular, I refer to the second path to resignation: that of personally felt suffering. I believe that Beckett is employing Schopenhauer's understanding of suffering, which "is simply nothing but unfulfilled and thwarted willing," to break the will.[84] That is, I believe that Lucky, by deliberately refusing Pozzo the knowledge he needs to be able to act, is *deliberately* inflicting the kind of suffering that comes with ongoing irresolution. [85] Here

Beckettian meaninglessness is not a goal as it is argued in the work of Cavell and Critchley, it is a tactic used by the intellect in its attempts to break the will.

This reading of Beckettian tragedy, one that is alive to Beckett's exploration of quietism, understands Beckettian indeterminacy not as an end in itself but as a *means to an end*.[86] The existing literature on Beckettian uncertainty appears to exclude the possibility that Beckett *does something* with uncertainty, namely that he seeks to achieve a particular outcome. It is my contention that the deliberate generation of uncertainty is merely a penultimate step in Beckettian ascetic practice. In Beckettian tragedy, the *tactic* of uncertainty is a key method of asceticism used by the intellect in its attempts to achieve the goal of will-lessness.

This is the first part of the two-part Beckettian ascetic method of psychic self-harm: *the non-provision of a motive for action*. I will now elaborate upon this particular understanding of Lucky's behaviour.

What, then, does Lucky "think" when Pozzo orders him to think for everyone's entertainment?[87] Lucky thinks nothing; that is, Lucky provides the appearance of reasoned thought, with the standard features of argument, counter-argument, qualifications, and so on. However, in essence Lucky's speech provides only the *form* of such an argument, minus the *content*. Lucky provides merely the appearance of "thinking." Lucky's "tirade"[88] in Act I of *Waiting for Godot* is a complex process of refusing to provide Pozzo with what Schopenhauer would call a "judgement," which is formed by logically applying one concept to another.[89] Instead of knowledge about the world, Lucky ultimately provides Pozzo with a series of endless qualifications and professions of uncertainty. In the following excerpt from the play, I shall emphasise this tactic by isolating Lucky's professions of uncertainty :

On the other hand with regard to... with some exceptions for reasons unknown... for reasons unknown... but not so fast... labours left unfinished ... beyond all doubt all other doubt than that which clings to the labours of men... but not so fast for reasons unknown... left unfinished for reasons unknown... left unfinished... for reasons unknown... for reasons unknown... for reasons unknown... approximately by and large more or less... for reasons unknown... in light of the labours lost ... the light of the labours lost... in the year of their Lord six hundred and something... for reasons unknown... but not so fast... for reasons unknown... the labours abandoned left unfinished... abandoned unfinished... unfinished....[90]

Here we witness the first aspect of Beckettian asceticism in action: the generation of uncertainty through the refusal to provide a judgement. It is however, not a refusal to provide a motive *per se*. Beckettian asceticism appears to be an exaggeration of the human capacity for reason, and the indecision that necessarily stems from this capacity to behave in a non-reflexive, or non-instinctive manner.[91] In Beckettian epistemological terms, Lucky refuses to represent the world "habitually," that is, Lucky refuses to present Pozzo with information that permits him to "know" and to "act" upon this knowledge. In effect, Lucky's way of thinking prevents the will from reaching a decision.[92] The effect that this has upon Pozzo is clearly stated in the stage directions that accompany Lucky's "thinking" :

> Pozzo dejected and disgusted ... Pozzo's sufferings increase ... Pozzo more and more agitated and groaning.[93]

By refusing to provide a motive — a definite object, on which Pozzo can "fix," and towards which his energies can be directed —Lucky is intentionally generating a key feature of Schopenhauerian boredom: "a feeling of — eventually acute — frustration." [94]

• Lucky's Unconventional Asceticism: The Beckettian Dynamically Sublime •

It is at this point in the process, as Pozzo endures the frustration of uncertainty and irresolution, that Lucky then proceeds to the second part of the Beckettian ascetic method of psychic self-harm. Having opened up a "perilous zone," a "period of transition that separates consecutive adaptations" from one habitual state to the next where Pozzo is allowed to experience the "suffering of being," Lucky then proceeds to the ascetic method of self-castigation.[95]

As a form of ascetic practice, self-castigation is intended to mortify the will. The individual verbally accuses himself or herself as a form of

penance. Self-castigation is essentially a pronouncement of one's own misdeeds, an attempt to disabuse oneself of self-misperception. As an example of self-misperception, Pozzo declares his nature to be "liberal."[96] Thus although Pozzo is a landowner with many slaves, he perceives himself as one who is broad-minded, generous, tolerant, and so on. By preventing Pozzo from lapsing into habitual thought – where he may once again understand himself as one who is benevolent – Lucky is able to present Pozzo with an understanding of his true nature, an understanding that would otherwise go unheard. This non-habitual knowledge is presented during Lucky's tirade in Act I.

Pozzo is unable to understand why his countrymen and -women are starving and miserable, given that society has made such "strides" in the study of "alimentation and defecation." Despite all that has been achieved, they continue to "waste and pine waste and pine," and to "shrink and dwindle."[97] To the best of Pozzo's knowledge they should be fit and well, given the "strides of physical culture the practice of sports such as tennis football running cycling swimming...."[98] In short, Pozzo appears to have no real awareness of the suffering of others. He assumes that all, like he, have access to food, sanitation, and time for recreation. Essentially this is the version of the world that habitual, will-centred, consciousness has presented to Pozzo: his version of the world – where, as a wealthy man, he has all he wants and needs – is the only version. Given this, the terrible side of life is inexplicable. People die *despite* all the improvements that had been made to living standards. This, then, is how Pozzo understands past events.

However in his tirade, Lucky finally breaks through. We know that Lucky is trying to "kill" Pozzo by "the way he goes on."[99] Whilst holding the will at bay by refusing to provide a clear motive for action, Lucky accuses Pozzo of culpability, of causing suffering:

LUCKY: ... in a word the dead loss per caput since the death of Bishop Berkeley being to the tune of one inch four ounce per caput approximately by and large more or less to the nearest decimal good measure round figures stark naked in the stockinged feet in Connemara in a word for reasons unknown ... the skull ... the tears ... the skull the skull the skull the skull in Connemara in spite of the tennis ... the skull the skull in Connemara in spite of the tennis the skull ... [100]

Whereas people were once seen to "waste and pine" despite improvements in "alimentation and defecation," that is, death itself was sanitized, the version that Lucky now presents to Pozzo of the same events focuses on the sheer horror of starvation and the sheer indifference of those who, as landowners, did nothing to alter the situation, indeed allowed it to happen. Thus whilst Lucky refuses Pozzo a motive for action, he rather presents him with knowledge of ubiquitous suffering, and with it an incentive for inaction. Whereas thinkers such as Badiou view Beckett's recognition of the "Other" as a life-affirming event, it is my contention that the recognition of the other in Beckettian tragedy results in the will's resignation from life.[101] The recognition of the "Other" in Beckettian thought is recognition of the other whose suffering one has caused by striving, and whose suffering one can end by ceasing to strive.

Beckett signifies Pozzo's resignation, which occurs in response to the knowledge presented by Lucky in his tirade, through the motif of sightlessness. Pozzo, who once had "wonderful" sight, is now, after understanding the suffering of others, as "blind as Fortune."[102] In resignation, the "light," which the will has "kindled" for itself in the form of the intellect,[103] which in turn generates the world as representation, goes out. It is extinguished because once the will resigns, the intellect, which is merely part of the striving will, is simultaneously cancelled out: "No will: no representation, no world. "[104]

• Conclusion •

In this paper I have shown that once one removes the key premise that underpins Beckettian interpretation, namely that art affirms existence, one may also challenge the other premises that presently shape the philosophical understanding of Beckettian tragedy. Whereas interpreters such as Adorno, Cavell and Critchley posit "meaninglessness" as an anti-nihilistic feature of Beckettian tragedy, I have alternatively argued that Beckettian meaninglessness — when examined in the light of Schopenhauerian ideas — is a life-denying tactic, one where the intellect refuses to furnish the individual will with actionable information. And with regard to the premise that Beckettian art is life affirming because its indeterminacy encourages an appreciation of alterity, I have argued that in

Beckettian tragedy an awareness of the suffering "other" provides the willing subject with the requisite motivation to resign from life.

In my reading of *Waiting for Godot*, I have argued that the Beckettian intellect employs asceticism – deliberately inflicted self-harm – to break its own will. Lucky employs "traditional" methods of ascetic practice – namely, fasting and self-mortification and self-castigation – but also employs the unique ascetic method of irresolution and uncertainty, which leads to a painful state of boredom and an inability to strive. This unique Beckettian method of ascetic practice incorporates and reformulates several aspects of Schopenhauerian thought.

Notes ●

[1] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E.F.J Payne. (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), Vol. 2, 613-615.

[2] Ulrich Pothast, *The Metaphysical Vision*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 12-16.

[3] See Theodor Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," in *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 1. ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 241-275; Simon Critchley, "Lecture 3: Know happiness – on Beckett," in *Very Little … Almost Nothing* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 142.

[4] Alain Badiou. *On Beckett*, ed. and trans. by Alberto Toscano and Nina Power. (London: Clinamen Press, 2003), 44.

[5] Stanley Cavell. *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 156. See Adorno and Critchley, cited above.

[6] Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 305.

[7] See for example Shane Weller, *A Taste for the Negative: Beckett and Nihilism*, (London: Legenda, 2005); Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature,* edited by Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992).

[8] Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber, 1956); *Endgame* (London: Faber, 1958); *Happy Days* (Grove Press, London, 1961).

[9] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* Vol. 2, 615, 613.

[10] Christopher Janaway, *Schopenhauer: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2002), 111.

[11] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* Vol. 1, 349, 351.

[12] *Ibid.,* Vol. 1, 148-9.

[13] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* Vol. 1, 176, Vol. 2, 212.

[14] *Ibid.,* Vol. 1, 150

[15] *Ibid.,* Vol. 1, 180.

[16] *Ibid.,* Vol. 1, 391.

[17] *Ibid.,* Vol. 1, 380-2.

[18] *Ibid.,* Vol. 1, 400.

[19] *Ibid.,* 233, 307-8

[20] *Ibid.,* Vol. 2, 613.

[21] *Ibid.,* Vol. 1, 334, 379, 397.

[22] John E. Atwell, *Schopenhauer on the Character of the World* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1995), 154.

[23] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* Vol. 1, 379.

[24] R. Raj Singh, *Schopenhauer: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2010), 133-4.

[25] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* Vol. 1, 379, 394, 397.

[26] Atwell, *Schopenhauer: The Human Character* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 191.

[27] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* Vol. 2, 638.

[28] *Ibid.,* Vol. 1, 378-9.

[29] *Ibid.,* Vol. 2, 608, 634.

[30] *Ibid.,* Vol. 1, 362.

[31] *Ibid.,* Vol. 1, 380, 315.

[32] *Ibid.,* Vol. 1, 380.

[33] Beckett, *Endgame,* 14, 16, 23, 34, 46.

[34] Julian Young, *Willing and Unwilling: A Study in the Philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 124. The internal quotations are from Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* Vol. 1, 379.

[35] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* Vol. 1, 380.

[36] *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, 309, 363.

[37] *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, 636.

[38] John E. Atwell, *Character of the World*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 159.

[39] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* Vol. 1, 397.

[40] *Ibid.,* 391-2.

[41] *Ibid.,* 380-2, 388.

[42] *Ibid.,* 380.

[43] *Ibid.,* Vol. 2, 625, Vol. 1, 380.

[44] Young, *Willing and Unwilling,* 1987, 125.

[45] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* Vol. 1, 381- 382.

[46] *Ibid.,* 382.

[47] *Ibid.,* Vol. 2, 607.

[48] Beckett, *Waiting for Godot,* 1956: 25.

[49] Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1961).

[50] Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

[51] Badiou, *On Beckett,* 44, 4

[52] Shane Weller, *Beckett, Literature, and the Ethics of Alterity* (Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke, 2006), 193

[53] Julian Young, *Schopenhauer* (Oxford: Routledge, 2005), 246.

[54] Beckett, *Endgame,* 1958: 14, 16-17, 23, 28, 34.

[55] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* Vol. 1, 364.

[56] Young, *Schopenhauer,* 212 citing Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* Vol. 1, 364.

[57] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* Vol. 1: 312.

[58] Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues with George Duthuit* (London: John Calder Publishers, 1999), 18.

[59] Beckett, *Waiting for Godot,* 42-3.

[60] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* 164, 312, 364.

[61] Beckett, *Waiting for Godot,* 86-7.

[62] Beckett, *Endgame,* 11.

[63] Beckett, *Happy Days,* 1.

[64] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* Vol. 1, 204.

[65] *Ibid.,* Vol. 1, 202, 364.

[66] Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues with George Duthuit,* 18-19.

[67] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* Vol. 1, 164, 312, 364.

[68] *Ibid.,* 315, 397.

[69] Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues with George Duthuit,* 72-3.

[70] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* Vol. 1, 285.

[71] See for example Beckett, *Waiting for Godot,* 17, 63, 65, 75, 76.

[72] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* Vol. 2, 638.

[73] Beckett, *Waiting for Godot,* 1956, 27, 39, 81.

[74] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* Vol. 1, 397.

[75] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* Vol. 1, 380-2, 388.

[76] Beckett, *Waiting for Godot,* 21, 88.

[77] *Ibid.*

[78] *Ibid.,* 27.

[79] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation.,* 382.

[80] Beckett *Waiting for Godot,* 34.

[81] *Ibid.,* 39.

[82] *Ibid.,* 34.

[83] *Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation* Vol. 1, 364.

[84] *Ibid.,* 363.

[85] *Ibid.,* 309.

[86] See Chris Ackerley, "Perfection is not of this World: Samuel Beckett and Mysticism," *Mystics Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 1/2 (March/June 2004), pp. 28-55; and Ackerley, "Samuel Beckett and Thomas à Kempis: The Roots of Quietism." *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui* 9 (2000): 81-92

[87] Beckett, *Waiting for Godot,* 42.

[88] *Ibid.*

[89] Schopenhauer, "On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason," trans. by E.F.J. Payne (Chicago: Open Court, 1974), 154-156.

[90] *Ibid.,* 42-45.

[91] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* Vol. 1, 205-6.

[92] *Ibid.,* Vol. 2, 207.

[93] Beckett, *Waiting for Godot,* 42.

[94] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* Vol. 1, 364 and Young, *Schopenhauer,* 2005, 212; see also Beckett, *Waiting for Godot,* 42.

[95] Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues with George Duthuit,* 18-19.

[96] Beckett, *Waiting for Godot,* 39.

[97] *Ibid.,* 43.

[98] *Ibid.*

[99] *Ibid.,* 34.

[100] *Ibid.,* 44-5.

[101] Badiou, *On Beckett,* 4.

[102] Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 86.
[103] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. 1: 150.
[104] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. 1, 411.

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COLLISION

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics,* the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.

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ABSTRACT

Iranian national cinema is showing the scars of artistic persecution. The aesthetic landscape of this national cinema has become one of stark confines – both in its thematic allowances and its aesthetic possibilities. However, these confinements, both physical and technological, have not merely been passively affected by ideological constraints but have also been active in affecting ideological discourse, answering back as it does within imposed limitations. What we are seeing in contemporary Iranian cinema, I believe, is a complex movement of aesthetic novelty, provoking some important questions regarding the relationship between politics and aesthetics. The relatively high-profile instance of which I am concerned here is Jafar Panahi's *This is Not a Film* (2011): a work that denies its ontological category and, in turn, furthers its medial possibilities. Panahi's confinement is an example of enforced asceticism: an asceticism of necessity, groundbreaking in its approach. So much potential arises from this "non-film" – too much to find any answers here. However, this Collision presents the perfect space for briefly outlining some of the questions emanating from a film that is "not a film". I raise some striking similarities between what occurs with Panahi and the politico-aesthetic ideas of Jacques Rancière in order to contemplate Panahi's use of asceticism to political effect.

KEYWORDS

Panahi, Rancière, asceticism, political-aesthetics, Iran

"Non-Film": A Dialogue between Rancière and Panahi on Asceticism as a Political Aesthetic

James Harvey–Davitt

The persecution of Iranian artists during Ahmadinejad's regime has been well publicised but rarely dissected in Western journalism. Some striking illustrations of the effects can be seen in its national cinema, the aesthetic landscape of which has become one of stark confines – both in its thematic allowances and its aesthetic possibilities. However, these confinements, both physical and technological, have not merely been passively affected by ideological constraints but have also been active in affecting ideological discourse, answering back as it does within imposed limitations. What we are seeing in contemporary Iranian cinema, I believe, is a complex movement of aesthetic novelty, provoking some important questions regarding the relationship between politics and aesthetics. The relatively high–profile instance of which I am concerned here is Jafar Panahi's *This is Not a Film* (2011): a work that denies its

ontological category and, in turn, furthers its medial possibilities. Panahi's confinement is an example of enforced asceticism: an asceticism of necessity, groundbreaking in its approach. So much potential arises from this "non-film"– too much to find any answers here. However, this Collision presents the perfect space for briefly outlining some of the questions emanating from a film that is "not a film". In these few paragraphs, I will raise some striking similarities between what occurs with Panahi and the politico-aesthetic ideas of Jacques Rancière.

Panahi's film begins with the mundane realities of a person in the home. He wanders from his bed to the kitchen (via the bathroom) and makes a call during breakfast. As we will learn from this telephone conversation, he is imprisoned in this apartment: pending trial, awaiting prosecution, fearing restriction from his vocation. The person in question is not a character, and he is not an actor. Moreover, he is not "not an actor" in the sense of the "non-professionals" of his prior films: he is neither the little girl who walks out halfway through *The Mirror*,[1] nor is he the desperate oath of *Crimson Gold*.[2] He is not playing any role other than Panahi himself. What follows is an explanation (many details are omitted with the expectation of prior knowledge on the spectator's part) of the scenario: not the situation of Iranian artists in general but that of the very recent termination of the production of Panahi's latest film. He tells us that he will use this video as a way of telling the story he wanted to make into a film. However, midway through this telling, he exclaims (and this is a major question at the furiously beating heart of this film), "If we could tell a film, why make a film?" The purposes of the images that unfold before the spectator are henceforth undermined. *Why is he doing this?* If the ontological character of "film" has been in question since the title's negating statement, what can be achieved by denying the existence of a film, through a "non-film"?

If *This is Not a Film* is indeed not a film, then what is it? To begin with, it is surely a plea: what Panahi himself refers to as an "effort". In one conversation, he and his camera operator, Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, discuss the importance of making efforts to oppose the persecution of artists. External aid is one such "effort", he claims; but internal "efforts" are vital for progress. In other words, Panahi's video-diary is as much concerned with state-politics as it is with not being a film. This is a useful starting point from which to begin to understand *This is Not a Film*: one that resituates dialogues on the intersection between art and politics. Such a task has been at the heart of Jacques Rancière's work for some time now. Interviewed on the contentious idea of a "suitable political art" (which

fulfils the desires and duties of both politics and art in equal measure without obliteration of either), Rancière states:

> Suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double-effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification. In fact, this ideal effect is always the object of negotiation between opposites, between the readability of the message that threatens to destroy the sensible form of art and the radical uncanniness that threatens to destroy all political meaning.[3]

Putting art and politics into dialogue is such a challenge since it concerns two "opposites". Art is a sensible form in danger of didactic communication; politics is an urgent event, potentially undermined by the abstraction of art. Imagining the possibility of such a thing as "suitable political art" without demanding the Brechtian distancing or Artaudian immersion of the spectator necessitates negotiating the binary so that both artwork and politics remain unharmed, complementary, agonistic. What Panahi refers to as a "double effect" is the paradox at the heart of *This is Not a Film.* Simply by making his film, Panahi produces, according to Rancière's logic in *Disagreement*, an instance of politics.[4] The police order, which is in this case an actual police-state, sets up these limitations restricting Panahi from making films. However, acting upon a "heterogeneous assumption" that asserts the fundamental "contingency of the order", Panahi also produces a work of art.[5] It is not that he simply "breaks the law". Rather he shows up the contingency of law, not by making a film but by making "not a film". In other words, Panahi rejects his sentence yet manages to do so within the terms of the sentence.

> The politics of art ... is determined by this founding paradox: art is art insofar as it is also non-art, or is something other than art ... There is a contradiction that is originary and unceasingly at work. The work's solitude carries a promise of emancipation. But the fulfilment of that promise amounts to the elimination of art as a separate reality, its transformation into a form of life.[6]

Rancière states that the tension between politics and art too often descends into the outweighing of one over the other. There are three

important points to make on his thesis on "non-art", which might then inform a thesis on Panahi's "non-film". Firstly, the art of "non-art" reconfigures that which is and is not art, and through this reconfiguration, politics is a latent and immanent element of art. Secondly, "non-art" is still art as much as it is also something else — namely, a political discourse. It is not more or less than art, just something else as well. Thirdly, being a political discourse does not destroy its status as art — it merely defines it as a particular kind of art.

In Panahi's case, his "non-film" is both a political act and a work of art. His negational title is testament to *This is Not a Film*'s status as both more and less than a film. It is more in the sense that it is also a political action. However, it is also less since within it, he is merely "telling" a film. This is the political function of asceticism in *This is Not a Film*. His intention in *This is Not a Film* is to show the scarcity of resources at his disposal, and the violence done unto his agency because of this: he is not able to make a film, or, as is the case in the video we see, he is only able to make "not a film". By showing "not a film"— by not showing the film he wanted to make, not a film set, not a scripted story — Panahi does nonetheless show *something:* a halfway point between fiction and documentary — at times showing self-consciousness, at times simply recording the quotidian. The spectator is confined to this apartment with Panahi. As others visit, we stay and hear the profound journal entry of the prisoner as he revisits his previous films and gazes from his balcony at the world outside. In this sense, *This is Not a Film* is comparable to Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*.[7] Confinement has been enforced from above; a text is made as a necessity in response to the situation; the outcome is a unique new form, produced through and because of these limitations via interaction with the minimal surroundings, memory, and introspection.

The asceticism deriving from the denial of access to the cinematic apparatus from above is both challenged and turned into a style all of its own. The persecution of artists is developing a distinct new cinema, identifiable through its ascetic aesthetic as well as its thematic social urgency. This dialogue between Rancière and Panahi is imperative in this case since *This is Not a Film* demands to be taken seriously as art as much as it does protest. In his accompanying note to the Berlin Film Festival, Panahi spoke of cinema as a dream which he refused to give up. Signalled as early as the publication of his doctoral thesis and its exploration of the working class's aesthetic intelligence, Rancière has made it his duty to proclaim the egalitarian potential of understanding aesthetic experience as a universal quality. [8] His political-aesthetic writings offer a way of

negotiating this relationship between the idealism of art and the urgency of freedom: a privileged vantage point from which to understand the taut relationship between aesthetic appreciation and political necessity in Panahi's film.

To conclude, while one must hope for the free movement of these artists in confinement, the works that have come as a product of their confinement must not be simply written off as desperate in their enforced asceticism. Rather, I suggest, the limitations within which Panahi finds himself confined actually offer some profound insights into the possibilities of film in general.

Notes

[1] *The Mirror,* directed by Jafar Panahi (Iran, ICA Projects, 1997).

[2] *Crimson Gold,* directed by Jafar Panahi (Iran, Rooz Film, Kino Video, 2003).

[3] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics,* trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2006), 63.

[4] Rancière, *Disagreement,* trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999)

[5] Ibid., 30.

[6] Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents,* trans. Steven Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 36.

[7] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* trans. Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Laurence and Wishart, 1998).

[8] Rancière, *The Nights of Labour: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France,* trans. John Drury (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

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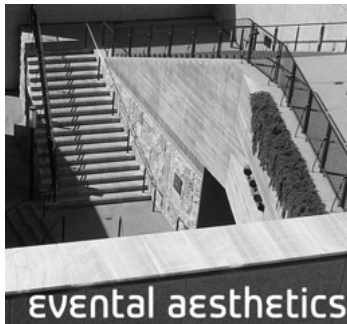——. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Translated by Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum, 2006.

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Reading

Reading is an affective and reflective relationship with a text, whether it is a new, groundbreaking monograph or one of those books that keeps getting pulled off the shelf year after year. Unlike traditional reviews, the pieces in this section may veer off in new directions as critical reading becomes an extended occurrence of thinking, being, and creation.

THE BOOK

The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life.
by Giorgio Agamben
Stanford: Stanford University, 2013.

Aesthetics, Ownership, and Form of Life in Agamben's *The Highest Poverty*

Mandy-Suzanne Wong

Can humans live a form of life in which we survive with and through other things without appropriating them? Can we do without the kind of domination guaranteed by ownership and still live by the things that sustain us? Such questions are indispensible in the midst of ecological, economic, and political crises. How might aesthetics help us to develop a form of life without ownership?

Agamben's *The Highest Poverty* places me at the mercy of such questions. The book is not an aesthetics but an installment in Agamben's *Homo Sacer* series, which examines historical paradigms for political problems. But as aesthetics struggles to find a place in a world that clamors with cries for action, driven to panic by the too–real promise of extinction, Agamben's work seems to suggest a way in which aesthetic practices may respond to the bellows whilst remaining critical of their ideologies. The suggestion is oblique, and sometimes I wonder if it is really there at all, but it is still worth extrapolating.

For Agamben, a *form of life* is "a life that is linked so closely to its form that it proves to be inseparable from it."[1] Such a condition is neither a life nor a rule but a "third thing" that emerges from the "reciprocal tension" between "form" and "life."[2] It goes by awkward and inadequate names like *forma vivendi, forma vitae, vita vel regula;* the only way to begin to articulate it is by example. In Agamben's book the cenobitic form of life of early Christian monks serves as a paradigm.

At several points in his account, Agamben seems to understand form, life, and form of life as aesthetics. His discussion of the monastic habit is perhaps the clearest example. In most monastic orders, Agamben observes, each article of clothing undergoes "a process of moralization that makes each of them the symbol or allegory of a virtue and way of life."[3] The hood and mantle signify humility, simplicity, and innocence. The ropes beneath the monk's arms demonstrate his readiness for manual labor. The shortened sleeves of his tunic indicate his severance from worldly affairs and his eschewal of elegance. Since the invention of clothing (perhaps in Eden), bodily coverings have indicated social and moral status; but "it is only with monasticism that one witnesses a total moralization of every single element of dress."[4]

Only in the monastery does a mode of being translate into and become a way of looking, an aesthetic. Wearing is a question of choosing, appearing, acting, being, and living a certain way; the adoption of a habit entails donning a particular article *and* committing to a way of life. It is both an aesthetic form and an implementation so thorough that form and implementation can no longer be distinguished and the implementation or practice of the form is all there is to living. In Agamben's words, "*habitus* — which originally signified 'a way of being or acting' and, among the Stoics, became synonymous with virtue ... seems more and more to designate the way of dressing ... which was in some way a necessary part of the 'way to

conduct oneself."'[5] Thus the aesthetic realm is also that of ontology, ethics, and politics.

There is a vital ambiguity here. Agamben's use of the word "synonymous" implies that the distinction between a being and its appearance, between a life and its form, is elided even though it is inevitable. Therefore the terms of the paradox, "form" and "life," are both called into question as are the defining aspects and relationships of aesthetics, ontology, and ethics. Furthermore it is not only that seeming is bound up with living but rather that they are the same *even as* they are two distinct aspects of a "third thing." "The distance that separates the two meanings of the term *habitus* [dress and way of life] will never completely disappear ... and will durably mark the definition of the monastic condition with its ambiguity."[6]

This ambiguity is apparent in the relation between poverty and dress in early monasteries. Poverty is implied and signified by the habit, thus embedded in it and issuing from it like meaning in and from a word (poverty is what is "meant," for instance, by the garment's coarse fabric and cropped sleeves); but at the same time poverty is a precondition that must be in place before a habit can become what it is, the clothing of a monk. In the moment that the would-be novice asks to join the monastery, he forfeits all his worldly goods to the order.[7] Long before he proves himself worthy of the habit, the monk-hopeful is destitute. Poverty is thus a form, an aesthetic form and a rule of the monastery, and actual impoverished living: a form of life.

Agamben underscores that monastic rules were generally not at all like juridical laws but were instead comparable to the tenets of an artistic practice:

> the whole monastic life and discipline [was] conceived, surprisingly enough, as the learning and exercise of an *ars sancta* ... [in] an analogous comparison with the model of the arts (with both the *artes in effectu,* which are realized in a work [or object], and the *artes actuosae,* like dance and theater, that have their end in themselves) .... In this sense, the monastery is perhaps the first place in which life itself – and not only the ascetic techniques that form and regulate it – was presented as an art. This analogy must not be understood, however, in the sense of an aestheticization of existence, but rather ... [as] a definition of life itself in relation to a never-ending practice.[8]

The Foucauldian notion of life as practice is of decisive relevance to the question of survival without appropriation. In the arts, to practice something is to do it with thoughtful deliberation according to rules or limitations that, whilst they may stem from conventions or instructions, are in the end upheld by choice: practicing tonal music, practicing ballet or photography. Hence to practice living as an art is to choose to live according to thoughtfully deliberated limitations. For instance, the decision not to smoke is the decision that the air in one's vicinity does not belong to oneself, it is not there for one to appropriate and use or abuse thoughtlessly or as one sees fit. Imposing such a rule upon oneself – allowing it to be not just something to obey but part of the way one is – entails deliberately practicing living, which is thereby distinct from mere existence. Even involuntary practices (of which poverty is a prevalent exemplar) can in many cases be averted by the chosen practices of others. Here in Bermuda as in the US, the corruption that ultimately wrought the current recession, which has thrown countless undeserving families into poverty, was a conscious decision by those in power, a decision that now needs to be counteracted and prevented from recurring. The consciousness involved in life as practice is therefore vital to the questions that began my ruminations.

However, I am most interested in what might happen when a practice that *does* entail aestheticization becomes a form of life: aestheticization in the sense of the "transfiguration" that denotes a thing or action to be more than it is, like the habit of a monk or Warhol's Brillo box. This is the oblique suggestion that I am tempted to extrapolate from *The Highest Poverty :* if aesthetics could be a form of life for monks, then could aesthetic practice also function as a secular form of life that ameliorates and critiques eco-social crises? What if deliberation and creativity, conscious limitation and critique, all of which are potentially intrinsic to artistic practice, became defining aspects of living?

The possibility of such a form of life remains a question. Would an aesthetic form of life be more of a happening (cf. Allan Kaprow) or a situation (Guy Debord) than a life? Would that necessarily be undesirable? Might it even be beneficial – ethically, politically, ecologically, and economically – to rethink "life"?

Agamben does not answer these questions; instead he opens a critical path towards their asking, which is perhaps more valuable than answers. He observes, for example, that when form and life become indistinguishable in the paradoxical manner he describes, they become

open questions – and as such they cease. They cease to be what they were; in a sense they come to an end. "A norm that does not refer to single acts and events, but to the entire existence of an individual, to his *forma vivendi*, is no longer easily recognizable as a law, just as a life that is founded in its totality in the form of a rule is no longer truly life."[9] So were art to become life, neither art nor life would remain. As Arthur Danto wrote in response to Warhol's *Brillo Box,* "once art itself raised ... the question of the difference between artworks and real things – history was over."[10] When art and non–art became indistinguishable, "art" and "life" ceased to exist as meaningfully distinct categories; the same fate befell "history" and "art history" as meaningfully distinct narratives of what has happened. Thus to permit life to become art is to give up on several valuable, longstanding, beloved, and authoritative distinctions without which only the most stubborn, fearless mind bent on critique above all else can imagine living.

Agamben therefore concedes that form of life requires "a level of consistency that is unthought and perhaps today unthinkable."[11] Even in monastic circles, the attempt to render form and life inseparable "has persistently approached its very realization and has just as persistently missed it."[12] Agamben's example is the failure of the Franciscan brotherhood, which was unable to relinquish the distinction between ownership and poverty.

For the earliest Franciscans, poverty was essentially communism: a Friar could make use of whatever he required, but none of those things would belong to him. The Friars were at pains to emphasize that this put them beyond the reach of juridical laws pertaining to property and in fact beyond all human laws. Agamben explains:

> property and all human law begin with the Fall and the construction of a city on the part of Cain ... [therefore] just as in the state of innocence human beings had the use of things but not ownership, so also the Franciscans, following the example of Christ and the apostles, can renounce all property rights while maintaining, however, the de facto use of things .... The *abdicatio iuris* [abdication from the law] (with the return that it implies to the state of nature preceding the Fall) and the separation of ownership from use constitute the essential apparatus that the Franciscans use to technically define the peculiar condition that they call "poverty."[13]

In the Franciscan rule, *altissima paupertas* — "highest poverty" — literally became synonymous with the Friars' "extraneousness to the law."[14] But for the Friars to declare themselves immune to any laws, they had to first affirm the existence and authority of those very laws, for they could not exempt themselves from something that had no real existence or power. Thus instead of creatively establishing a unique form of life on different and critical terms, the Franciscans maintained the terms of the extant Church and state and simply disobeyed.

Disobedience may be an aspect of critique, but it is not enough. As Agamben notes, the Franciscans were perfectly positioned to expose the very concepts of ownership, property, and appropriation as mere signs or "signatures."[15] Superimposed on things, these signs do confer a certain status, that of belonging to a particular person, which in no way alters the things: a frayed sandal remains the same sandal with the same attributes, regardless of who its owner is. In a form of life of which the form included the explicit critique of property and living occurred in an unheard–of way, not simply as a denial of conditions that in fact remained in place, the Franciscans could have brought the inessentiality of ownership to light.

> The force of the [Franciscans'] argument is in laying bare the nature of ownership, which is thus revealed to have a reality that is only psychological (*uti re ut sua,* intention to possess the thing as one's own) and procedural (power to claim in court). However, instead of insisting on these aspects, which would have called into question the very ground of property law (which ... loses all essentiality, presenting itself as a mere signature, even if an effective one), the Franciscans prefer to take refuge in the doctrine of the juridical validity of the separation of de facto use and right.[16]

And this was their undoing. The Friars Minor railed against human laws but affirmed the validity of the concepts at the basis of those laws, chief among them the distinction between ownership and the lack thereof, with the result that their cries were empty and left them defenseless against persecution by the Church.[17] While the Franciscan form of life was indeed a form of life, it fell short of the point that makes *habitus* so powerful: the critical point at which form and life are called into question.

Agamben cannot say what Franciscanism would have been like if it had reached that point. What life would be if it were no longer life seems in this moment unthinkable. But in my view the latter has largely to do

with ideologies underlying capitalism, specifically the notion that what's mine is mine and thus it must remain at every cost. Even environmentalism is marred by ideologies of ownership as well as by a deep-seated, insidious form of the idea that change is death: "sustainability" means nothing more than sustaining the kind of existence to which we are accustomed, the existence that we think of as "ours" and to which we are therefore entitled – even though this is precisely what cannot be sustained. (There is an echo here, I think, of the Franciscans' faulty insistence on certain deeply rooted notions.)

However, Agamben implies, and I agree, that we should still try to think of ways to live that do not just eschew but actively contradict destructive ideologies such as ownership. The role of aesthetics in such efforts would be not only to propose alternative forms of life but to *be* new forms of life, wherein critical perspectives are inherent. Again, how exactly these would look remains an open question. Agamben asks: How can "a relation to the world insofar as it is inappropriable – be translated into an ethos and a form of life? And what ontology and which ethics would correspond to [such] a life ...?"[18] And what aesthetics?

Notes •

1 Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form of Life,* trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), xi.
2 Ibid., xii.
3 Ibid., 14.
4 Ibid., 17.
5 Ibid., 13.
6 Ibid., 16.
7 Ibid., 14.
8 Ibid., 32-33.
9 Ibid., 26.
10 Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 113.
11 Agamben, xii.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 113.
14 Ibid., 122.
15 Ibid., 136.
16 Ibid., 138.
17 Ibid., 121.
18 Ibid., 144.

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