

**ALL SYSTEMS
BLOW-
SELECTED
WRITINGS**

Lane Relyea

Edited by Normal Desires, 2011

I never met anybody who said when they were a kid, I
wanna grow up and be a critic.

Richard Pryor

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It sounds somewhat silly—and possibly a little too honest—to say that Normal Desires came out of love. But it's true. And not just the type of love that one person has for another—although that certainly is part of it—but in a larger sense it's a love of ideas and a love of Art. And if not exactly love for the community that binds it all together, then certainly a form of caring and a deep involvement. At some point in one's artistic development there is the realization that, while having a studio practice and looking at art are deeply rewarding activities, there is a level of dialogue and criticality that are essential for meaning to thrive. And so in some respect Normal Desires is not only a labor of love, but an act of civic responsibility.

In a global artworld in which individual gestures can become lost in the cacophony of spectacle and acts of rebellion, where new art is consumed at warp speed, silently neutralized or simply forgotten, one is often at pains to find, or even hear, the voices that truly inspire us. Lane Relyea is one such voice. In the

era of the socially networked artworld, where the number of friends matters more than the quality of your friendship, Lane's writings are a kick in the teeth. While it may well be that his take no prisoners approach and his fuck you attitude are why he is less known than he should be, it's for those very same reasons that his writings seem so indispensable and should, we think, be re-read today—if only for a reminder of how good criticism can be. Just how high the bar should be raised. While Relyea is certainly not a stranger to artists who came of age in the late 1980's and 90's, it is a genuine pleasure to introduce him to a new generation of readers.

Chris Dorland & Erin Knutson
Editors

Philip Vanderhyden

IF WHAT I SAY IS TRUE, THEN MAYBE I NEED TO GET A NEW JOB

Philosophy retains respect for systems to the extent to which things heterogeneous to it face it in the form of a system.

—Theodor Adorno

I found Lane Relyea's writings the same way many people of my generation did, in art school. At that moment, in the late nineteen-nineties, art-criticism was as alive as it could be to someone who was reading it for the first time as an undergraduate. Lane Relyea, who had spent the better part of his adult life writing it, didn't seem to share my optimism. I remember the last line of a lecture he delivered on it as a visiting critic: "If what I say is true, then maybe I need to get a new job."

The lecture described the situation at the time: popular art criticism was in full cable-news-style intellectual regression, evidenced by the praise

being heaped on populist critics like David Hickey by professors tired of teaching graduate art theory to bored classrooms. In the minds of those who measured the viability of a discourse in book sales, this was good news.

Lane found fault with this writing in ways only someone familiar with it could: in fact, he knew the origins of this approach intimately. His earliest writings sympathized with voices like Howard Hampton, Gary Indiana and Donald Barthleme: their irreverent and fragmented presentation, dispersed signifiers and sometimes breathless run-on sentences put the experiences of scatter and slacker-art, dream pop, and the pictures generation within reach to readers for whom the idea of a disinterested voice smacked of invisible (and therefore more dangerous) hierarchies.

Yet now, with the art it best described far removed, these gonzo voices seemed quaintly out of touch and ill-equipped to take on an art world colonized by curatorial studies programs, masters and PHD degrees in art and art criticism on its own terms. Critical voices had bifurcated and people who hadn't thrown parties to publicly burn their copies of October Magazine were digging in their heels and cordoning themselves off into increasingly specialized academic fields.

Lane responded to this and in so doing, his voice changed. He recaptured a singularity other writers of his generation had cast off. But instead of concentrating on—as a modernist critic might—the unified object, he folds in the

object's eerily organized and unified surroundings. The descriptions Relyea gives his readers have always sprawled outward from the object toward the culture it draws from, but this increasingly gestures towards a contentious relationship between the experiences art is capable of offering and the responsive, dematerialized, networked and well funded world, waiting with baited breath to instrumentalize it.

Beneath Lane Relyea's criticism runs the productive suspicion that his work may be part of the very problem he yearns to describe. One senses a persistent melancholy in Relyea's work, born of his desire to see the wider promises of criticism fulfilled—even as he watches it wrestle with the specialized world within which it operates.

His lucid sense of the role of professional risk echoes through the best passages of his writing; in particular, the recent work outlined by this book. If the pages that follow have at times left me uneasy, it was never because I didn't agree with what they said. This rare feeling reminds me of the best experiences I've had with criticism. Lane Relyea reminds us why criticism exists in the first place: his writing can convince its readers to continue, in spite of almost everything it presents.

Lane Relyea

ART IN THE BOX

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MODERNISM, WE ARE TOLD, IS FINISHED. And whatever goes on in the interim, we really are only biding time while waiting for its bill to fall due. Today, so the story goes, artworks have by and large outlived themselves. They come to us in an already postmortem state—or rather, a postmodern one—a zombie-like state of historical drift without a sense of destination to guide them. They have nowhere to take us, no goal to reach, and subsequently both they and us are said to do little more than stand idly by while some other force takes command, some alien wind that continues blowing pages off the calendar despite the fact that no schedule has been written, no agenda set. These are different times, they say, even though few can agree on exactly what time this is. Most, however, will tell you it's late. Very late.

Modernism stands as only one term on a long list of the recently deceased. Painting has also been declared dead. So too have history and ideology.⁽¹⁾ If this tells us anything about our present state of affairs, it's perhaps that death isn't what it used to be. Or rather, maybe what has passed away is the finality of death. Despite the

many proclamations, or even because of them, painting remains the art world's medium of choice, and history is now loudly evoked at every turn. But the history that fills much recent art—its revivals of historical style, its historical figures and historical quotes—is not so much a history made or a history continued. That would require a belief in the notion of progress, and that notion has also been said to have withered away. Rather than claim to make history, the new art postulates what history has made of us. And again, what history is said to make us, more than anything else, is late.

New image, neo-expressionism, neo-surrealism, neogeo, post-pop—none of the “isms” of the last decade assume the tenor of movements, nor does the art—described variously as “post-media,” “post-industrial” and “post-natural”—seem to even move, to show much of a pulse. It instead lies hinged on a moment lost, in a position of fixed detachment, just outside or in the wake of something and given over to its memory. If this sounds like mourning—and it should—there is nevertheless something celebratory about the manner in which the past is presently being exhumed, a kind of ecstatic free-play to which it lends itself. Lacking the moment and the meaning to which it was once transparent, history is now recovered only as style, opaque and emptied out, and made open, as it were, to suggestion. The nouns of history, its by-product emblems and forms, are recruited anew for us to use like adjectives, like fashion or ornament, something to graft onto the present so as to calibrate it

with status, affectation and accent. German expressionism dresses up Julian Schnabel's yuppie angst in the look of timelessness and universality, not unlike the way in which the superimposition of the founding fathers onto the contras seals the image of the latter beneath a gloss of unquestionable morality. Books are now to be judged by their covers. Not that style has simply replaced substance, but rather it seems style counts more when it comes to selling ourselves and our ideas. So we increasingly turn to the vast inventory of historical styles like a wardrobe from which we pick out the right dress for the right occasion. This many hold as evidence of our total conversion from a productionist society to a consumerist one, the fact that we now choose to express ourselves primarily through the way we shop the past.

Shopping and death. These then are to be the tyrannical parents lording over our postmodern age. It might seem far-fetched, or at least a bit overwrought—our social field characterized as something of a cross between the wax museum and Bloomingdale's. Then again, it might prove fairly accurate. Either which way, it makes for rather dizzying and hyperventilated theory, which when applied to specific artworks proves unable in its broad generalizations and paralyzingly bleak prescriptions to cope with their peculiar “here-and-now-ness,” their specific materiality and formal construction. But there does exist a formal element, what seems a dominant motif in art since the fall of high modernism—from minimalism

on—in which the themes of shopping and death do actually intersect. This doubled figure—at once both package and casket, display case and tomb—is the recurring image of the box.

They come in many different shapes and sizes, in a wide assortment of colors and materials. Boxes were particularly big among minimalists: there are Tony Smith's black boxes, the rigged or irregularly shaped boxes of Robert Morris, Donald Judd's repeated cubes, the box-frame progressions of Sol LeWitt, Richard Artschwager's squared-off furnishings, the translucent glass caskets of Larry Bell. Pop put together its share of square deals as well: among them, Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes, the treasure chests of Lucas Summaras and the closet-like combines of Robert Rauschenberg. And now a whole new wave of crate builders has arrived on the scene, the most publicized of whom include Jeff Koons, Ashley Bickerton and the Alan McCollum of the "Perfect Vehicles" series. To this last group can be added those recent painters who work on what appears more like boxes than canvases, such as Peter Halley, Meyer Vaisman and, lately, Jack Goldstein.

Within all these boxes there can be said to lie certain shared contents. Firstly, all boxes contain the very idea of containment. At bottom, a box is used for storage, providing things with a place for safe-keeping, serving as a form of defense (against loss, against the elements). But it also acts as something of a legislative device, standing in the way, drawing a line between inside and out, exempting and suspending things by literally

taking them aside. The box preserves and protects things, and by isolating them, it lends to whatever resides inside it the prestige of separateness. The box, or at least the glass boxes of showrooms and museums, cuts out from the surrounding traffic an inviolate space in which objects are shown to stand apart, held as distinct, exemplary or indexical, not so much themselves as signs of themselves and things like them. Such a box makes a special case of things—it's a form of promotion by which an object is elevated to the level of an emblem, a privileged term, a sufficient, singular item. By both presenting and protecting things, the box plays a pivotal role in the standoff between want and ownership, providing a perfect context for the placement of merchandise (keep sakes) and the handling of property: some prime examples would be the display case, the safe-deposit box, the treasure chest—those boxes fitted with lock and key.

But there's another side to the box, so to speak. That is its air of secrecy, its concealment. The presence of the box, its outward appearance, presupposes or prefigures the question of its inside and the possible contents withheld there—held, if not out of sight, then at least out of reach. Both a cover-up and a partial disclosure, the box lets it be known that there is always more to know, always something more to it than just itself. Its secrets, then, are of an obvious sort, its privacy a matter of public display—whatever does lay inside the box is literally, physically couched and plainly hidden. This is the banal, secular mystery that the

box makes of its contents, and why perhaps the box is such a widely-used device in what passes today for ritual, such as on game-shows, where quest and discovery are replaced by chance and sudden disclosure. The box on Let's Make a Deal—the box “in front of which Carol Merrill is now standing,” as host Monty Hall would say—serves for contestants and home-viewers much as it once did for the mythical character Pandora, as the literal symbol of deferral and frustration, an impenetrable shell that both announces and withdraws the object of desire.

It may seem a bit harsh to suggest, but the box that stands at the center of present-day ritual—the box on game shows, the gift-wrapped box, the glass boxes in museums and showrooms—can perhaps be seen as having adopted certain attributes once said to be those of art objects before the advent of modernism. It was in ritual, for example, that Walter Benjamin, in his 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” located the original “use value” of art.(2) The box shares what Benjamin says is an essential characteristic of the worshippable art object—namely, its ability to effect an irrevocable distance between itself and its viewer. Whereas the ritual artwork, according to Benjamin, evoked this distance by way of its authenticity—that is, by maintaining its own, separate history, a unique “presence in time and space” by which it became elevated, or rather, as Benjamin puts it, “embedded in the fabric of tradition”—the box institutes a physical distance, imposing itself as a

literal barrier. And while certainly more mundane, the box achieves a somewhat similar result—like Benjamin’s authentic artwork, the pose it strikes is impervious, at once charged and obscured, observable yet inaccessible. No matter what in fact lies inside it, it at least holds our fascination, and thereby gains a certain power over us. Or rather, it holds, or is invested or inhabited by, precisely the mystery that we project into it, something we imagine lies outside us, beyond our grasp, something we can’t get or can’t, in a sense, know. And in this respect, its objecthood is what’s crucial—as Benjamin says about the ritual works of the past, “what mattered . . . was their existence, not their being on view.” For Benjamin, worshippable objects—such as the mosaics, frescos and statues he cites—must not only house the ideals of the tradition to which they belong, but must share their endurance and permanence as well, to physically demonstrate their firm anchoring. And more than that, they must protect and cloister them—mystify them—by staking out an unencroachable domain where they are both enshrined and secreted away. Benjamin writes, as if foreseeing the boxlike shell enveloping the art of ritual, that “today the cult value would seem to demand that the work of art remain hidden.”

All the same, Benjamin goes on to say that it’s precisely art’s role in ritual that falls under threat in the modern era. “To bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly . . . to pry the object from its shell”—this is what Benjamin claims is the desire of the modern masses. And assisting them in the re-

alization of their goal are the modern technologies of reproduction. Against the worshippable art object, Benjamin pits the photograph—that which has no property and therefore nothing to hide. “Uniqueness and permanence,” he says, “are as closely linked in the former as transitoriness and reproducibility are in the latter.” Whereas the object is able to remain somehow always distant, retaining something which our act of viewing cannot completely get at, something that eludes or exceeds seeing, the photograph, on the other hand, peels from the object that which can be readily surrendered to us, the image that exhausts itself in our reading of it. With the help of photography, an artwork could now be made presentable to us, rather than us having to present ourselves to it. For Benjamin, photography took a final step in the secularizing of art by splitting it between object and image, or, more precisely, between the artwork’s ritual function and what Benjamin calls its “exhibition value,” its transmissability and presentability. Which is to say, its popularity and publicness.

Looking back now over the past half-century since Benjamin’s essay first appeared, there doesn’t seem much evidence around to support his claim that photography promised the emancipation of art from ritual. The air of authority and aloofness surrounding most art since—its “aura,” as Benjamin called it, which was to be precisely what “withers in the age of mechanical reproduction”—has, if anything only grown more prevalent, more thick. Especially when you think of

most high modernist abstraction employed during the late '50s and early '60s by such painters as Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitiski, and by such sculptors as Anthony Caro. "Elitist" artworks, as people tend to brand it, championed by "elitist" critics like Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. One would never expect to find that here, in exactly this type of artwork and this type of criticism, there survives even the slightest trace of what Benjamin portrayed as the emancipated artwork, an art free from ritual. And yet, surprisingly, there does.

As Benjamin did some thirty-odd years earlier, Michael Fried, in his 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood," also splits the modernist artwork between object and image. And like Benjamin, he too places himself on the side of the image and against the object. According to Fried, modernism's fervent campaign is, or was, a struggle to reveal truth, to bring art out of its hiding. Its demand was that an artwork never appear incomplete, but instead exist "at every moment . . . wholly manifest."⁽³⁾ To do this, Fried says, "modernist painting has come to find it imperative that it defeat or suspend its own objecthood." The same even holds true for modernist sculpture—according to Fried, it too had to erase any discrepancy between what it appeared to be and what it was. But Fried's aspiration for the modernist artwork—that it be, like Benjamin's photograph, purely visual, weighted fully on the side of viewing and presentability—didn't mean that it would therefore surrender itself easily into the hands of its viewer. Just the

opposite, in fact; by existing all at once and on the surface, appearing at every moment self-evident, the modernist work, in Fried's eyes, only came more into its own. It not only managed to imbed itself in its own tradition, but, according to Fried, was able to reveal that tradition's essence. And it therefore secured a claim on authority that Benjamin's photograph could never make. By the end of his essay, Fried turns Benjamin's "exhibition value" into something like a religious vision, a revelation—"as if," he says, "a single, infinitely brief instance would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it." In his last line, he in fact divines the instantaneous, wide open work of art: of its unique state-of-being, he writes, "Presentness is grace."

While "Art and Objecthood" may offer a rather stirring sermon on what's now called formalist painting and sculpture, Fried actually intended his essay to serve more as a defense—to defend formalism's openness and clarity, its truthfulness, against the threat posed to it by a type of art he saw looming on the horizon. Fried's counterattack has in its sights the art of minimalism. Minimalism's success, Fried argues, contradicts that of modernism—it relies not on sincerity, but on concealment and coercion. And to bear this out, Fried points to a couple of minimalism's boxes—Tony Smith's *Die* from 1962 and Robert Morris' *Untitled* made three years later. The strange presence of these works, Fried says, is gained through their effecting the look of "non-art," by

appearing as neither painting or sculpture. It is, in other words, precisely through their strident objecthood that they place themselves outside the tradition of the visual arts. And, according to Fried, “quality or value . . . are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts. What lies between the arts is theater.” Fried writes that, like theater, the minimalist artwork has no intrinsic truth, no essence or self, to reveal. Unable to exist in its own right, to know itself, it instead must turn its attention in the other direction—it must seek out an audience. The minimalist object, says Fried, must stage itself, must resort to the insincere means of theater and acting—distancing itself from the viewer but also playing to him, drawing his attention but also suspending, or dramatizing, it—in order to be taken seriously. This, Fried is quick to point out, is what betrays minimalism’s insufficiency—like an actor on the stage, he says, a minimalist work “depends on its beholder, is incomplete without him.”

Whatever the merit of Fried’s argument, it seems curious to find that in his attack on the minimalist object he both retraces and at the same time inverts Benjamin’s case against the object of ritual. What Fried praises about the image—its ability to exist on its own, indifferent to its audience—echoes what Benjamin opposes in the object. And what Benjamin applauds the image for Fried cites in his denouncing of the object—namely, its catering or playing to a public. Or even, as Fried casts it, its preying on them.

Still there’s a link, a fairly short step from

Fried's notion of theater and its audience to Benjamin's notion of ritual and its cult. In fact, minimalism's theatrical object can be seen as proceeding from an art made during the '50s that phrased itself as an instrument of ritual. It's been argued by the critic Howard Singerman that the work of many post-war abstractionists—Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman most prominent among them—was conceived as an attempt to restore art's ritual function, to reinstate its authority within society and rejuvenate its aura. (4) Indeed, both Rothko and Newman demanded for their work a certain degree of distancing and hiddenness—crossing Fried's concept of the modernist mission, they demanded on the objecthood of their paintings. In their work, both artists weld image to object and make the two inseparable. Rothko, for instance, is often noted as having insisted on the objectness of his paintings by painting on their sides, thereby guaranteeing that they'd never be framed. Instead, his paintings hang like thick tablets, things anchored or stationed on the wall. And his images, too, seem to insist on the paintings as objects—looking ground down, faded and worn, they seem in fact to want to be their object's equal. So too with Newman—the shapes in his work, his zips, never float independently but rather emphasize the painting as object by clinging onto its edge. But moreover, as Singerman contends, the image that both Rothko and Newman paint seems to illustrate precisely what Benjamin says is the distinguishing characteristic of the ritual object—its aura.

Imbedded deep in the canvas and receding from the viewer, Rothko's dimly glowing fields of color work to literally "mist-ify" his paintings, while Newman's colored panels, on the other hand, appear to part like elevator doors, affording a glimpse inside his objects, a view of the light or the aura that they possess and yet hold back.

What perhaps links theater to ritual is just such an image of "the other side." But separating them is the difference in what this image commands. The power which a minimalist object is said to exert over its beholder is a secular rather than spiritual one—believing an actor's performance is not the same as believing in him. Minimalism's conversion, then, of the work from the chapel to the stage marks a deliberate fall from grace. But a secular image of the beyond is rendered not only by minimalism but by plenty of art that followed abstract expressionism. Perhaps the earliest transgression can be found during the infancy of Pop, in the form of Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed* from 1955, wherein the sacred and impervious nature of Rothko and Newman's work is made into metaphor—and into something of a joke as well. *Bed* turns inside-out the private retreat, the spiritual interiority of abstract expressionism—it recasts it as a public "figure," an all-too-readable cultural sign. More recent art has also taken to discrediting the notion of painting as a private sanctuary, though its tone has grown more pernicious and crude. Meyer Vaisman's paintings, for example, come off as a simple tease, veiling themselves in an abrasively blatant way—Vaisman

covers his work with an image of precisely what covers them, a photo blow-up of canvas. In addition, his paintings hang stacked out from the wall two or three at a time—more paintings means we see less. Peter Halley too effects a small, petty mystery in his work. His boxy supports, thickly textured with coats of stucco, are literally covered up—hidden—by the Day-Glo paint he uses, a type of paint that actually radiates light. Looking at one of his works is like staring into a lamp while it's turned on—one's eye can never quite reach the object.

Much of the new art then—Halley's and Vaisman's, but also Koon's and Bickerton's—steps up Pop's attack on the idea of a spiritually empowered, self-important artwork. The new work shares Pop's commercial slang, its blunt showmanship, its emblematic banality. But it also borrows equally from minimalism and, more precisely, has appropriated minimalism's boxes. If minimalism can be said to have converted the ritual artwork into the theatrical object, translating the work's aura into something like stage presence, then the new art goes this one step further—it transposes the work from the stage to the showroom. It seeks to effect the low come-on of display; more than just seeking attention, it aggressively panders and solicits. By grafting Pop iconography onto minimalist boxes, the new art comes up with the ritual object at its most jaded and most debased. What results is the gallery or museum as game show, and the work of art as “the box in front of which Carol Merrill is now standing.”

Harold Rosenberg once wrote, "The archetypal creation of the media is the package, whether it contains cornflakes, a 240-horsepower motor or a retrospective exhibition of the paintings of Jackson Pollock." (5) Co-opting Rosenberg's line, we might say that the media package serves as the ritual object of our times. Through it, we involve ourselves in the ritual of consumption, a game of unfulfilled promises—a guessing game of sorts, or rather, a waiting game. The image of "the other side" that such a package presents to us is the great beyond of hype, an ever receding vanishing point of material demand—it is hype that pressurizes the media package, the promo box, and that pumps up the products inside. But hype concerns only the building up of our expectations—it doesn't address our realizing them. At once a come-on and a cold shoulder, the box in which things are put on display offers both more and less than what meets the eye—never anything really, it offers everything imaginable. It renders what can be taken as an image emblematic of our culture, and of its current, paralytic state—a picture of the product not yet assigned to everyday use, its portrait as pure potentiality, or, moreover, as potential profit. It's no wonder then that much recent art has been kept fascinated by this kind of box. Because in its air-tight confines, floating in suspended animation, our hopes and dreams are stashed away, kept on hold as well as kept out of our hands. Perhaps it's time, then, that we turn our attention to considering ways by which we take them back.

1. For a further discussion, as well as a fairly comprehensive list, of recent deaths, see Yve-Alain Bois, "The Task of Mourning," *Endgame*, Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 1986.
2. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books, 1955. All Benjamin quotes are from this source.
3. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Minimal Art, A Critical Anthology*, edited by Gregory Battcock, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968. All Fried quotes are from this source.
4. Howard Singerman, "Rothko's Ghost in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," a lecture sponsored by Foundation for Art Resources, Los Angeles, November 1983. Singerman's reading of Benjamin's essay, in which he emphasizes the split between object and image, is indispensable to this essay.
5. Harold Rosenberg, "Art and Its Double," *Art and Packaging*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969.

YOUR ART WORLD: OR, THE LIMITS OF CONNECTIVITY

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FOR STARTERS, CONSIDER THE LOUNGE.

What exhibition today is complete without one? A good example was provided by «Be Creative! Der kreative Imperativ,» a show that opened at Zürich's Design Museum in late 2002. Participants ranging from artists and designers to architects and theorists contributed projects, research data, software and commentary devoted to the themes of neoliberal economic policy, flexible business management and immaterial labor. To get a sense of the show's layout, think hip dotcom startup. Or, in the words of its curator, the Swiss artist Marion von Osten, «a modern space for living and working, ranging from the loft to the open-plan office, alternating production and regeneration, and using game tables, advisory literature and chillout zones.»¹

Now compare this to the more recent «Make

Your Own Life: Artists In & Out of Cologne” at the Philadelphia ICA, a show with a similar sounding title, also phrased in the imperative—only, rather than “be creative,” its command, following the marketing trend ignited by the popularity of websites such as MySpace and YouTube, was to customise and personalise, to be self-creative. (“Our,’ ‘my’ and ‘your’ are consumer empowerment words,” notes Manning Field, senior vice president for brand management at Chase Card Services.²) Whereas the Zürich show openly worried over the post-Fordist production protocols it critically mimed—“this idea of economics,” according to Osten, “based on talent and initiative, [in which] cuts in social and cultural spending are legitimized under the paradigm of the self-sufficiency of (cultural) entrepreneurs”—the Philadelphia show stressed more the liberating promise which the creative personality holds out to society. Rather than flexibility, it talked about autonomy; rather than fret over neoliberal appropriations of the artist as an idealization of entrepreneurial subjectivity, it pondered “the possibilities of artistic agency . . . artists creating themselves.”³ It, too, featured a lounge.

Who relaxes in these things? Who doesn’t instead feel a strong ambivalence, if not irritation, when happening upon the lounge? Of course, the irritation is the best part. Contradictions bottleneck here. Whether lounge, reading room or “chillout zone” (the one in Philadelphia came outfitted with turntable, CD player, library of choice recordings and couch), typically such a

place is meant to signify a progressive artistic or curatorial approach to exhibitions, one that privileges context and process over discrete objects, that turns away from static commodity display in favor of a more dynamic environment of ongoing, interactive meaning production. The lounge demonstrates how “meaning is fugitive . . . beyond the object or image as such . . . complexly wound up with social dynamics,” to quote curator Bennett Simpson from the “Make Your Own Life” catalogue. Or, as phrased in the press release for the group show “When Artists Say We” at New York’s Artists Space last spring, “art—made individually or as a collective—is constituted from within such exchange.”

But the lounge as organic social oasis sprouting in the middle of the staid institution answers other agendas as well. With the spread of instrumentalized and instrumentalizing communications technology, social exchange is increasingly ensnared within the logic of commodity exchange. The lounge descends from that hybrid architectural offspring of the New Economy, what Starbucks founder and chairman Howard Schultz famously calls “the third place,” a casual multi-use site mixing home and office, business and leisure, private and public, production and consumption, a space equally amenable to group brainstorming, websurfing and poetry readings. Businesses adopt it as workspace as do retailers for peddling goods. Ample La-Z-Boys, errant reading material, background tunes and palpable ambiance now come standard in not

only the new project-oriented office configurations but also in what's called "community-centric retailing"—from the small lounge-ish satellites of big-box outlets like Best Buy to redesigned bank branches that serve espresso drinks and offer yoga classes.⁴

This isn't just a matter of conjuring "parallels" between superstructure and base. As surplus value grows frothier around such intangible and instantly obsolete commodities as events, services, affective experiences and word-of-mouth buzz, and as business practice increasingly relies on networking, on the accumulating and maintaining of contacts and the ability to access and move nimbly between myriad social circles, art institutions as well scramble to find ways, in the words of Anthony Davies and Simon Ford, "to formalize informality . . . [to] provide what are essentially convergence zones for corporate and creative networks to interact, overlap with one another and form 'weak' ties. The prominence that events such as charity auctions, exhibition openings, talk programs and award dinners have attained demonstrates how central face-to-face social interaction is to the functional capacity of these new alliances."⁵

No question the lounge is part of a trend—but toward what? More creative social spontaneity or more chronically intermittent employment with longer "immaterial" work hours and no benefits? Are we witnessing the fulfillment of that long-sought avant-garde dream of merging art and life, or is this merger more corporate than utopian,

more the implementation of neoliberal strategic goals for a fully freelance economy, one staffed by highly motivated, underpaid, short-term and subcontracted creative types for whom, in Osten's words, "artists and designers are taken as the model?"⁶ Is the public sphere being refashioned in the image of intense and intimate artistic collaboration, or is it being further fragmented by the narcissisms and nepotisms of ego-casting and in-clubbing, paved over by the privatizations and exclusions of controlled-access cyber-socializing. Given the business class's new mantra of "network or perish," is the lounge a glorious expansion of freedom or the new key to capitalist survival?

As the Zürich and Philadelphia shows illustrate, discussion of this topic appears to have unfurled somewhat asymmetrically on the two sides of the Atlantic. Many artists and critics, especially in Europe, do in fact pay heed to the emerging characteristics of the New Economy, or what ex-Al Gore speechwriter Daniel Pink envisioned as "Free Agent Nation" and the Tony Blair government pithily calls "The Talent Economy," although little analysis has been devoted to how such macro-trends specifically interact with developments internal to art practice.⁷ On the other hand, when focus stays trained on such art innovations as service-oriented projects and relational aesthetics, or the re-emergence of collectives and multiple or fictive identities, these developments tend to get talked about as if they were transpiring under the Old Economy. Despite vague references to the "chaos of

global culture in the information age,” artists still garner applause for the sheer feat of avoiding categorization and not making objects.⁸ But given the contemporary art world’s complex realities, with its vast institutionalization, its more diverse, “collaborative” forms of patronage, its mixed public, private and corporate revenue streams, and its decisive influence on the global jockeying of municipal and even regional economies, critical reckoning has more on its hands than just finger-wagging at the cash purchase of stretched canvas. Mobility, fluidity, flux and unpredictability have been catechisms of corporate managers for at least the past decade. And yet these very same words were used repeatedly to not only pitch this year’s Whitney Biennial but vouch for its “criticality.” Curators Chrissie Iles and Philippe Vergne likened the show to a big “cabaret,” as if to suggest a kind of mega-lounge, the “third place” writ spectacularly—but of course their intended point of reference was instead Cabaret Voltaire and the avant-garde interventions of nearly a hundred years ago. The other Biennial theme, about collectives and pseudo-identities, the curators described as “a way of creating a space outside the market: a space where things can’t be pinned down so easily and exchanged . . . so that the artist isn’t directly accessible.”⁹ Tell that to John Kelsey, a critic for Artforum and, as co-founder of the Bernadette Corporation and director of Reena Spaulings, a Biennial participant twice over. “In part because of ‘this mystique around the collective,’” the Wall Street Journal

quotes Kelsey in an article on the Spaulings Gallery's part in the pseudonyms fad, "at a recent show, works sold quickly."¹⁰

Staking a position outside and opposed to "the system" is definitely no cinch these days—especially when the system feeds off segmentation and diversification (if not diversity), collapsing a sense of inside and outside, as attempts to participate result in isolation while renunciations and refusals are recouped as participation. Nor is mounting some purge of all forms of artworld complicity a solution—if only because not much of interest would be left. What would help, though, is a thorough transvaluing of critical art discourse and its objects, starting with a reassessment and reproblematicizing of the current situation and its determinants from a more up-to-date and relevant perspective. This at least would overcome the hypocrisy of basing claims for the superiority of relational and performative art forms on a static, reified caricature of their conditions. At the same time, analysis needs to go beyond general social processes, beyond even such artworld infrastructure as kunsthallen and galleries and their mixed economic support; it needs to engage art practice itself, its material, structural and genealogical specificities, so as to avoid the kind mechanistic account of cultural forms as predestined by causes firmly planted elsewhere. The point is to not reduce art but hopefully lay some necessary groundwork for elaborating whatever options it may still have available.

Only the briefest attempt at such a genealogy

is possible here. To wit: Much art practice today can be seen as developing from an apparent reconciliation of two separate but related trends that dominated the 1980s. On the one hand, there was the prevalence of art rooted in the street cultures of hip-hop, punk and new wave, as well as in DIY and activist politics, all of which conformed to the sociologically grounded, Gramscian arguments about signifying practices and bricolage put forward by people like Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige and Michel de Certeau. At the same time, much art production and reception was also framed within a more philosophical-minded, totalizing Frankfurt School portrayal of culture as monolithic, dictatorial and pacifying, according to which floating signifiers, usually in the form of glass-encased media images and isolated statuesque commodities, colonized and privatized social relations within an industrially-produced mass spectacle.

By the end of the '80s, this latter trend seemed to recede behind the Cultural Studies paradigm and its focus on everyday practice, as well as what Hal Foster has called “the return of the real”—the re-emergence, that is, of the situated and material body, of Otherness and abjection. But interest in the body didn't so much reject as make more material the previous notion of media, thickening it and also making it more local. Media came to reference as much fanzines, protest flyers and other empowerments of the corner copy shop as it did multi-million-dollar Madison Avenue propaganda campaigns. Appropriation

was folded into bricolage, or what Claude Levi-Strauss called “the science of the concrete”; it entailed handling, adapting and piecing together things. Heterogeneity, which signaled channel-surfing schizophrenia in David Salle’s paintings, a decade later stood for a healthy and welcoming capaciousness in Laura Owens’s canvases—as if she undertook painting the way one might collect records, as a (sub?)cultural practice. Or compare Richard Prince’s early-’80s media appropriations with Elizabeth Peyton’s later renderings of celebrities, or Barbara Kruger’s media scripts with the handwritten pedestrian communiqués facilitated by Gillian Wearing. Or, more simply, juxtapose Peter Halley quoting Baudrillard in 1983 and publishing *Index* magazine in 1996. In the work of Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw, shopping segued into thrifting; with Wolfgang Tillmans, thrifting turned fashion into street fashion. What seemed at the beginning of the ‘90s as an opposition between the apparitions of spectacle and the opacities of embodiment and trauma soon disappeared as artists instead embraced a middle ground between the two—the realm of everyday life and common cultural exchange. Not superstar celebrities or abject flesh but people wearing clothes, eating food and hanging out with friends.

Such a synopsis hews closely to several accounts already written of the ‘90s, especially the one canonized by Nicolas Bourriaud in his books *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) and *Postproduction* (2001). The notion of artistic practice that comes to the fore here has supposedly little to do with

the stereotype of the lone genius who transmutes raw matter in the isolation of the studio. Rather, it's about intervening in everyday materials that are themselves continuous and interwoven with larger communities and cultures; and it's also about identity as an ongoing construction always inclusive of and open to larger systems of exchange. Under these terms, subjectivity is shown to be performed rather than accreted individually or adopted and reproduced passively. At the same time, "artists who insert their work into that of others," as Bourriaud explains, "contribute to the eradication of the traditional distinction between production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work."¹¹ The antithesis pitting creative hero against conformist consumer is thus transcended in the figure of the bricoleur—or, to list Bourriaud's favored exemplars, the DJ, programmer and web surfer, all "'semionauts' who produce original pathways through signs."¹² With the appearance of the programmer or semionaut, consumption is no longer seen as such an evil, or even much of a problem. Indeed, it suddenly becomes redemptive, not just a part of practice but a special labor in itself, a providential skill, a form of artistic know-how that encompasses the whole of daily activity, the cobbling together of the information bits that temporarily constitute one's "self" and one's "community." Signature style gives way to signature code.

As described by Bourriaud, signifying practices grow more general and abstract during the

course of the '90s, less anchored to the specific politics of local semiotic skirmishes. Instead, "the market become[s] the omnipresent referent for contemporary artistic practices."¹³ In Bourriaud's christening of the market as master paradigm, it's possible to recognize the return from exile of forces that had formerly gone under the names of spectacle and culture industry. Sign production now back peddles away from Levi-Strauss's bricolage to approximate more closely than ever Baudrillard's simulation. The "homologies" artists string together are less about the coherence of subcultural politics than about the aesthetics of integrated end-to-end product design—design as a "total way of life." And while practice remains beholden to an additive rather than subtractive mode, it's less about reckoning with sculptural materiality than about sequencing articulated differences so as to manipulate and exploit signification. "Artists today program forms more than they compose them," exclaims Bourriaud, "they remix available forms and make use of data . . . [they] surf on a network of signs."¹⁴

This is where activity in the arena of art begins to produce certain unquestioned analogies with developments in other spheres, to affirm and be affirmed by, say, official economic and political policy. During the '80s, Thatcher and Reagan provided art with plenty of handy tropes about the tyranny of the all-powerful image, while Evil Empire foreign policy and culture-wars domestic policy were met with what many worried was an over-politicization of culture. In the '90s, however,

as much post-Cold War politics encouraged instead the economization of culture, an oppositional art becomes harder to discern. Or at least as portrayed by Bourriaud, '90s practices—in which resourceful DIY artists nurture myriad forms of convivial exchange—can be seen to complement the euphemisms of entrepreneurial initiative and individual responsibility used to sell the agendas of the Clinton and Blair regimes, namely their placating of business and financial markets by rolling back state assistance programs and “ending welfare as we know it.” The recent “social turn” in art has had as part of its context neoliberal policies that are at base anti-social.

In terms of economics, another change in the surrounding context of art production is the revamping of business models in response to the impact of new information technologies on marketplace dynamics. That consumers have grown less passive with the replacement of television's few big networks by desktop interface and the web is certainly not headline news anymore. Marketers have long turned their gunsites on their own version of the bricoleur, what they call the “prosumer”—customers who no longer feel hostage to standardized commodities, who instead customize the design specifications of online merchandise, who invent their own idiosyncratic flavors at DIY ice cream parlors like Cold Stone, who subscribe to cable rather than watch ad-based broadcast television, who even subscribe to ad-free satellite radio; customers who download and sort through MP3s and personalize

TV programming using TiVo, who publish writing, photography and more on blogs and personal websites. “The market today,” writes Douglas B. Holt, Professor of Marketing at Oxford’s School of Business, “thrives on . . . unruly bricoleurs who engage in nonconformist producerly consumption practices.”¹⁵ Product differentiation is no longer purely a manufacturing and retail strategy, a staple of planned obsolescence and the staving off of overproduction—rather than forced on consumers, it’s now demanded and implemented by them. Increasingly value is encoded in practices not objects, and it’s consumer practices that take over much of the value-adding for the market. That this is very much still a matter of highly structured markets, not some romantic form of off-the-books subcultural barter, gets harder to deny everyday. Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, for example, has redrawn its entire corporate strategy around its recent acquisition of MySpace, while such music behemoths as EMI and Universal now debut CDs that include software encouraging customers to remix tracks (the recent Billy Joel \$60 box set comes encoded with a program called UmixIt).¹⁶ It’s as if the pronouns Barbara Kruger assigned to authoritarian media images in the ‘80s had switched sides. Give credit, then, to Sony BMG Music Entertainment for “challenging authorship.” Even Charles Saatchi has caught the wave, “subverting” the dealer system by launching the website YourGallery.com.

All of which is to say that, as with every other form of labor under the New Economy, so too has

value production in the consumer marketplace become relational, dialogical, networked. The commodity, like the postmodern artwork, has relaxed its former pretenses to autonomy. The bricoleur, or what Bourriaud fancies the “programmer,” encounters a landscape of ever more responsive, yielding, programmable commodities. Fewer and fewer objects appear as if fully formed on supermarket shelves, where they lie in wait for a mass audience to which their mass-produced, prepackaged meaning can be dictated. Now the meeting between product and customer, entertainer and entertaineé, creation and connoisseur happens as if directly and individually, one-to-one, with each side demanding immediate interface and feedback. Outright acceptance or rejection may have been options appropriate for the closed object, but what’s required now is constant negotiation, vigilant involvement. In other words: consumption as a more dynamic environment of ongoing, interactive meaning production. In this way, contemporary market transactions find a quite suitable counterpart in those artworld forms that are said to supercede the studio and museum—namely, all those laboratory-like kunstverein, those project rooms and, yes, ubiquitous lounges, as well as all the prosumer art that appoints them.

If the studio and museum stood for the lamentable division between the spheres of production and consumption, the lounge counters this with a space of fluid interchange between objects, activities and people, a connectivity to

mend the split. What the lounge “exhibits” is networking itself. And yet this too can be seen as a conciliation to the New Economy. The network is, after all, the exemplary figure of post-Fordism, compared to which all the former static, box-like arenas—the factories and unions, disciplines and vocations, parties and ideologies, all the bounded forms that had mediated the space between subjects and objects, securing the sense of stable interiority required for the projecting and investing of meaning from the one onto the other—have proven not nearly flexible enough. Such former “molds” of enclosure now give way to what Gilles Deleuze has called “modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point.”¹⁷ Ergo the network, with its one-to-one connections and additive, combinatory logic replacing the organization’s former pyramidal hierarchy and hard external shell. The network privileges casual, weak ties over formal commitments so as to heighten the possibility of chanced-upon associational link-ups that lead outward from any one communicational nexus or group. As dot-com startups were among the first to prove, this is the new formula for success, in business as in culture: namely, a loose collection of intimates whose cryptic projects attain global buzz, thus optimizing the structural capacities of constellated, overlapping networks, where production of authentic intensity is always already exteriorized as signification within the sprawling

exchange system that motivates it. Or, put another way, practice as no longer isolated but always inclusive of and open to larger systems of exchange. Think of the YBAs and the “Swinging London” phenomenon, or L.A.’s fabled Chinatown art scene, or the Cologne milieu adored by “Make Your Own Life,” all examples of how the production of localness that such place-names imply is dependent upon its exportation for international consumption, and thus upon the abolition of the local as such. The same with fictive identities or other alluring logos—all gain definition only as functions within a larger, comprehensive set, as values emanating from a system.¹⁸

Here again the rage for conviviality in art gets expressed in the face of a larger crisis concerning social cohesion. As network connectivity obliges that objects lose their set boundaries to become more responsive, so too do subjects shed long-term loyalties and identifications to become better operators who mesh transparently with the system’s mobile operations. With the rise of the network, the labor market fills with its own version of responsive commodities, as across-the-board pay scales are replaced by more personalized jobs—that is, by differentiated contracts laden with incentive clauses and bonuses based on individual performance expectations (much like insurance contracts that set premiums by tabulating a spectrum of personal data—credit rating, driving record, family health history, etc.). One competes against oneself. To work at home and be your own boss means setting not only your

own work hours and dress codes (like an artist!) but also performance criteria and production levels. The result is that the definition and value of labor becomes less social and more private, more abstract and intransitive. The goal of work is now to bulk-up one's resume and gather more contacts in anticipation of the inevitable layoff and need to once again find new employment.

Given this context, it's hard to see how the networked forms of recent art, from relational aesthetics to multiple and fictive artist-identities, can be taken as inherently oppositional. On the contrary, at least on the level of form, they seem to not oppose the dominant system but "surf" its leading edge, where they romanticize and idealize current conditions and thus serve as an ideological asset rather than a critique. Indeed, to claim the authenticity of a position "outside" no longer automatically translates into resistance. As with subjects and objects, so too does the distinction between inside and outside get voided by the network structure. To be "inside" the network already means being outside—or, as Harvard management guru John Kotter advises his students, it's now better "to be on the outside rather than the inside" of organizations and institutions.¹⁹ It's better, that is, to be a business consultant, or perhaps an "infomediary" like Martha Stewart or Oprah Winfrey. Likewise, Anthony Davies and Simon Ford note the emergence of the "culturepreneur"—"a new 'artist' . . . that claims professional status as a 'broker'; a mediator rather than producer."²⁰

Is this what's become of the bricoleur? Has that "jack of all trades" matured into a fragmented, maneuverable subject able to flit from one job or social circle to another, adopting whatever called-upon behavior the situation requires, the self as diversified portfolio, as corporate enterprise? Is the bricoleur now merely a euphemism for today's "flexible personality," the name Brian Holmes has coined for the form of subjectivation mandated by the New Economy—"a new form of social control . . . a distorted form of the artistic revolt against authoritarianism and standardization"?²¹ Holmes quotes Paul Virno on the cynicism and "unbounded opportunism" that characterize this new subject, "who confronts a flux of interchangeable possibilities, keeping open as many as possible." An ornithologist among birds, the flexible personality is "into" many things, but refuses to say what exactly he or she "is" or "does." Identity itself is approached opportunistically. Calculation becomes the practice of everyday life, and social life becomes yet one more object of practice, a constantly recoded network of potentially valuable contacts and associates, so many articulated differences to exploit for signification. One vigilantly works the scene. "The true opportunist," Holmes concludes, "consents to a fresh advantage within any new language game, even if it is political. Politics collapses into the flexibility and rapid turnover times of market relations."

All of the above should not be taken as an argument against the need for artists to adapt to changes in their lived situation, for

them to learn how to work the new terrain and expropriate its resources. In a recent interview, the New York-based artist Aleksandra Mir, who has tracked aspects of the New Economy in her own work, summed up many of the practical issues confronting artists today. “Only the last two years of my 15 years of practice,” Mir says, “I have developed relationships with galleries, museums and the art market, but I still don’t depend on it. I still use the basic entrepreneurial skills I had learned from earlier practices: How to do something from nothing, how to drum up resources on sheer enthusiasm, how to find exchange values in everything from favors, swaps to corporate sponsorships, how to execute a ton of various tasks single handedly There is no clear-cut formula ever of what will happen, but there is a steady continuum in this incoherence.”²² What I’ve tried to add to such a description is simply a vantage from which to problematize this terrain to a degree appropriate to the aims of art. That recent expressions of those aims—fluidity and indeterminacy, shared creativity, freedom within community, utopia— often get phrased in the transactional terms and figures of market relations proves just how boundless is the current reach of economic reasoning. Once we’ve completely disabused ourselves of the fiction of artistic autonomy, is the market really the only arena imaginable in which to enact “free” subjectivity? Does the entrepreneur only model subjects who “freely” instrumentalize themselves? If so, which artistic acts are still able to ground themselves in a

recognition of such conditions?

Perhaps it's true that, as has been argued from different political corners of late, what most characterizes our historical moment is nothing less than the end of the social.²³ If so, this itself could open certain opportunities—specifically, a chance to rethink the meanings and possibilities of community over society. In such a project the role of art, especially certain developments associated with relational aesthetics, could be incalculable. But given that such work has hardly gotten off the ground, and that, until it does, the grip of the market continues to tighten, many of the values currently promoted by the art world—spectacular but hollow identity, loose and numerous affiliations, hyper-mobility and circulation, opportunistic interventions as if in any situation or ensemble anywhere, the recombining of “data” indefinitely—all these risk romanticizing the reigning logic of exchangeability and the very real dangers of our increasing vulnerability to the moment-to-moment fluctuations of global capital. “Do you have a corporate mission for the company ‘Aleksandra Mir’?” interviewer Kimberly Lloyd asks at one point. A bit baldly put, perhaps, but not a bad question. And questions like that are not a bad place to start.

1. Marion von Osten, “Be Creative! Der kreative Imperativ: Project Summary,” <http://www.k3000.ch/becreative/summary.html>, accessed: 2 July 2006. Osten's title recalls Christopher Dreher's review in Salon (6 June 2002) of economist Richard Florida's popular book *The Rise of the Creative Class (And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, and Everyday Life)*, which details the dire economic consequences for cities that are unable to attract

- young technology workers. The title of Dreher's review? "Be Creative—or Die."
2. Quoted in Stuart Elliott, "Advertising: Nowadays, It's All Yours, Mine or Ours," *New York Times* (2 May 2006) Section C: 1. "A turning point may have come in 1996," Elliot writes, "when Yahoo introduced a personalization service called My Yahoo. It has grown to about 55 million unique users each month."
 3. Bennett Simpson, "Make Your Own Life," *Make Your Own Life: Artists In & Out of Cologne* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2006), 11. Both *Business Week* and *Wired* magazines have recently reported on the popularity in U.S. policy circles of Joseph Schumpeter, a contemporary of John Maynard Keynes who developed and advanced theories of entrepreneurialism along with the view of capitalism as a process of "creative destruction," a less sanguine description than Adam Smith's stabilizing "invisible hand." Frank Rose, "The Father of Creative Destruction: Why Joseph Schumpeter is suddenly all the rage in Washington," *Wired* 10 no. 3 (March 2002): 93; and Charles J. Whalen, "Today's Hottest Economist Died 50 Years Ago," *Business Week* (December 11, 2000): 70-72.
 4. Gary McWilliams and Steven Gray, "Slimming Down Stores," *Wall Street Journal* (29 April 2005), Section B: 1, 4; Jane J. Kim, "A Latte with Your Loan?" *Wall Street Journal* (17 May 2006), Section D: 1, 3. On trends in workspace design, see Malcolm Gladwell, "Designs for Working," *The New Yorker* (December 11, 2000): 60-70; and Warren Berger, "Lost in Space," *Wired Magazine* 7, no. 2 (February 1999): 76-81.
 5. Anthony Davies and Simon Ford, "Culture Clubs," *Mute* 18 (September 2000): 23-24. See also Carol Kino, "It's Time For Artists To Give Till It Hurts," *New York Times* (28 May 2006), Section 2: 1; and Eric Wilson, "Using a White Shirt As Their Canvas," *New York Times* (11 May 2006), Section G: 6. Countering Robert Putnam's alarm in *Bowling Alone* about withering "social capital," Richard Florida argues in *The Rise of the Creative Class* that the young creative types hotly sought by the New Economy favor weak over strong social ties; see Florida's essay and Melinda J. Milligan's response in *City & Community* 2, no. 1 (March 2003), 3-26.
 6. Osten, "Be Creative!." See also Andrew Ross, *No-Collar: The Humane Workplace and Its Hidden Costs* (New York: Basic Books, 2003) and Richard Lloyd, *Neo-Bohemia: Art and Commerce in the Postindustrial City* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
 7. Besides the projects and writings of Osten and others involved in the "temporary coalition" k3000 (www.k3000.ch), see Jan Verwoert, *Die Ich-Ressource: zur Kultur der Selbst-Verwertung* (Munich: Kunstverein Muenchen, 2003), with english translations available at http://www.kunstverein-muenchen.de/?dir=02_archiv_archive%2F2002%2Fexchange_transform; Angela McRobbie,

- “Everyone is Creative’: Artists as New Economy Pioneers?,” *openDemocracy* (30 August 2001), http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts/article_652.jsp: accessed 2 July 2006; and Aleksandra Mir, *Corporate Mentality: An Archive Documenting the Emergence of Recent Practices Within a Cultural Sphere Occupied by Both Business and Art* (New York: Lukas & Steinberg, 2001). Tellingly, volume 5 of the British journal *de-, dis-, ex-* devoted to the theme of “immaterial labor” had been compiled and edited by Melanie Gilligan and Marina Vishmidt in 2004 but never made it to press due to lack of funds. In the U.S., it was a British critic, Claire Bishop, who greatly expanded discussion of this trend with the publication in October 110 (Fall 2004) of her “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” (although, other than a passing reference to B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore’s *The Experience Economy*, Bishop’s argument fails to mention rising entrepreneurialist propaganda and policy and worries that the socializing currently fetishized by the art world is overly homogenous, its ties too strong rather than too weak—which, however, interestingly does not invalidate antagonism as a counter-measure).
8. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002), 7.
 9. Quoted in Tim Griffin, “Cabaret License,” *Artforum* 44, no. 5 (January 2006): 94–96.
 10. Jacob Hale Russell, “The Invisible Artist,” *Wall Street Journal* (31 December 2005–1 January 2006), Section P: 3.
 11. Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, 7.
 12. *Ibid.*, 12.
 13. *Ibid.*, 22.
 14. *Ibid.*, 11, 13.
 15. Douglas B. Holt, “Why Do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 29, no. 1 (June 2002): 88. See also Holt’s *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2004). For a history of the decline of authoritarian mass-marketing practices starting in the 1960s, see Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
 16. John Jurgensen, “Record Labels Say: Mess with Us,” *Wall Street Journal* (31 December 2005–1 January 2006), Section P: 3.
 17. Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (Winter 1992): 4.
 18. A single functioning social network, excluding the other various networks it links to, supposedly includes on the average 125 members; the maximum is around 155. The introduction to the novel Reena Spaulings reports that “150 writers, professional and amateur . . . contributed to” its writing, while most of the works exhibited in the exhibition “When Artists Say We” at Artists

- Space were wall diagrams charting roughly a hundred or so names. See Bernadette Corporation, *Reena Spaulings* (New York: Semiotexte, 2004); R. A. Hill and R. I. M. Dunbar, "Social Network Size in Humans," *Human Nature* 14, no. 1: 53-72; and Mark S. Gronovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (May 1973): 1360-80. Could this help explain the current fascination with MFA programs, which systematically churn out such networks, collections of young artists who share not a common cause or ideology or even cultural obsession but are only always loosely affiliated by weak ties? Of course, the contradictions of this situation are figured acutely every year in end-of-the-term MFA thesis exhibitions, for which students who've mortgaged the future on loans invariably stage clever twists on relational art's free-wheeling utopias while expressing anxiety about landing teaching jobs immediately upon graduation, no doubt for the security and health benefits.
19. Kotter quoted in Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998): 25.
 20. Anthony Davies and Simon Ford, "Art Capital," *Art Monthly* 213, (February 1998): 4.
 21. Brian Holmes, "The Flexible Personality," *Hieroglyphs of the Future* (Zagreb: Arkzin, 2003), online at www.geocities.com/CognitiveCapitalism/holmes1.html. Andrew Ross in *No-Collar* (152-53) presents the example of Vivien Selbo, a digital artist as well as web designer and consultant who carries with her eight different business cards to choose from when pitching clients.
 22. Kimberly Lloyd, "Interview: Aleksandra Mir," *M Publication* 3 (Frankfurt) (2004): 166.
 23. "The End of the Social" is famously the name of a chapter in Jean Baudrillard's *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983). For more upbeat formulations, see Jacques Donzelot, "The Promotion of the Social," *Economy and Society* 17, no. 3 (August 1998): 395-427; Nikolas Rose, "The Death of the Social? Re-figuring the Territory of Government," *Economy and Society* 25, no. 3 (August 1996): 327-56; Miami Theory Collective, ed., *Community at Loose Ends*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991; and Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1996), especially chapters 10 and 12.

ART OF THE LIVING DEAD

Originally published *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992), 33-43

“In a society where no one can any longer be recognized by others, every individual becomes unable to recognize his own reality. Ideology is at home; separation has built its world.”

—**Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle***

“To induce a collective content for the imagination is always an inhuman undertaking, not only because dreaming essentializes life into destiny, but also because dreams are impoverished, and the alibi of an absence.”

—**Roland Barthes, *Mythologies***

“Los Angeles, it should be understood, is not a mere city. On the contrary, it is, and has been since 1888, a commodity; something to be advertised and sold to the people of the United States like automobiles, cigarettes and mouth wash.”

—**Morrow Mayo, *Los Angeles***

KNOCK KNOCK. It's two in the morning on Sunday, August 10. 1969; Charles Manson stands

at the front door of a house in the Los Feliz district of Los Angeles. The residents; Leno and Rosemary LaBianca, who returned home from vacation less than an hour earlier, are still awake, reading the newspaper in their living room.

“Who’s there?” Perhaps for a split second, far in the back of the LaBiancas’ minds, somewhere behind all the suspicion and fear automatically aroused by such an unexpected midnight visit (remember, too, the paper the couple was reading at the time blared the story of Sharon Tate’s butchering just the night before)-perhaps in their minds a faint mix of excitement and curiosity stirred. After all, doesn’t the prospect of human encounter still inspire hope? Isn’t that what makes living in society still tolerable- the idea, though less and less corroborated by experience, that meeting other people opens the way to endless possibilities, that it represents a bottomless resource of knowledge and adventure, that it promises an ever-unfolding of the world?

The door to the LaBiancas-world swung open that night, but what ensued only doomed the members of that particular meeting to remain strangers for eternity. Who knows what the LaBiancas thought of Manson (it’s hard to say if they even recognized him as their murderer; as he tied them up he repeatedly assured them they wouldn’t be hurt). Manson, on the other hand, made clear what he thought of the couple. Not that he recognized them- on the contrary, he obviously saw them less as strangers than completely estranged. Removed; in his eyes, the LaBiancas

belonged to a different species. Moreover, they typified that species; to Charlie they were no more than display animals in the wax museum society presented itself as, only abstractions, examples' to be used in the delivery of his crude poli-sci lectures. And so his pupils, as instructed, turned the LaBiancas' bodies into writing tablets, their blood into ink.

Ironically, Manson's actions consigned the lifetime vagrant to an exactly inverted fate. He too-suffered being misidentified, being reduced and abstracted, having his radical differences with society reconciled for him. But his metamorphosis entailed no intimacy or specificity, and not a drop of blood-in fact, he personally wasn't that much involved. Manson wanted to make society pay for not understanding him; society retaliated by showing that it did. Thus Manson was subjected to a shallow, commercial acceptance, at once inflated and impoverished through public consumption. As his profile came into focus, he grew both more recognizable and yet more strange, more two-dimensional and opaque. Some officials, including prosecuting Deputy D.A. Vincent Bugliosi, fashioned him a junior Hitler (in Helter Skelter, Bugliosi observes that "both were vegetarians; both were little men")¹. Some thought Manson worse, a pure, virile form of evil, infecting the vulnerable youth who flocked to his side. Others argued that he himself was too impressionable, a zombie brainwashed by years in prison, stints in Scientology (Manson graduated "theta-clear") and the Church of the Final Judgement, by hippie

aphorisms, LSD, the Beatles. A few tried splitting the difference: according' to them, after "Helter Skelter" co-songwriter John Lennon declared the Beatles more popular than Jesus, Manson, who fancied himself the Son of God, naturally felt compelled to follow orders.

Still others recognized Manson as a tortured soul, himself a victim of society's abuses. Just as Norman Mailer discovered in convicted bank-robber Jack Abbott a spokesperson for the oppressed² (Abbott, after Mailer's praise helped leverage-his parole, contradicted the Pulitzer prizewinner by promptly stabbing a New York waiter to death), Yippie activist Jerry Rubin, fresh, from visiting Manson in jail, reflected that "Manson's soul easy to touch because it lays quite bare on the surface." Manson was elected a fellow countercultural hero by Bernardine Dohrn, who told a Students for a Democratic Society convention, "Offing those rich pigs with their own forks and knives and then eating a meal in the same room—far out! The Weathermen dig Charles Manson." And so on. Manson clones lurked everywhere (according to hippies who complained to the New York Times, hitchhiking was' among Manson's many victims-no one dared pick up long-haired kids anymore). Mobilizing some of the most fundamental ideas Puritan America held about itself, Manson was catapulted to prominence not just on the merit of his acts but on his manner, too—he was the counterculture's counter-moralist, star of the American Dream's nightmare flipside, transgressing the model of the

self-made preacherman who ambitiously ventures the dusty frontier fanning word of apocalypse and salvation. In short, Manson had a message. But as a preacher, he was both effective and mute: it was not his words but his picture in the paper that grabbed people. Manson, his fans and assailants agreed, was “charismatic.” In fact, being both expressive and photogenic (much more so than the many other mass murderers this country boasts, including poker-faced Ted Bundy) is what qualified Manson to become such a sensation, to gain full-on celebrity status. Even he seemed to anticipate his eventual superstardom: while walking en Venice Beach after leaving the LaBiancas’ home, Manson was stopped by two unwitting policemen and asked what he was up to. His alleged reply was: “Don’t you know who I am?”

Transformed from a-mass murderer into a mass phenomenon, Manson came to-symbolize merely the notion of hedonistic blood-thirst and generational clash, his ecstatic facial expressions the catchy packaging on whatever anybody wished to make of such-issues. Mostly what people made was money. In test, the real effect of the Manson craze was anything but divisive and threatening; rather, it unified and soothed. Bringing the country together in a debate that was largely beside the point. But such recuperation of ‘60s upheaval was not limited to Manson; it advanced on many fronts, as love-ins turned into Laugh-In and Love Boat, liberation into alternative lifestyles, altered consciousness into an industry of New Age counseling and self-help. Over the following years

Manson would resurface in person (e.g., his recent interview with Tom Snyder), but each time his presence seemed to dim. Like the Wizard of Oz, here was this huge facade, formidable yet hollow, and behind it the man himself, a small, stammering idiot.

Of course, at this point we're no longer really talking about Manson's fate; in a sense, we're talking about our own. Upon' his makeover into a commodity and the extinguishing of his threat through acceptance, Manson the monster-the "mad dog devil killer fiend leper", as he described his own public image-swept the culture, but in so doing glossed over him personally and the dark significance of his murderous deed. In Charlie's place we were presented with a new and improved zombie, this one infinitely more presentable and sociable, a grimacing puppet sent back out to proselytize the masses anew. Only now he mouthed softcore platitudes that sold papers, fashionable sociology, repressive police campaigns. But it wasn't Manson who suffered this reform; we did. Before we could establish a direct relationship with his terrorism and reflect upon the introduction of such deep, impassioned despair and madness into knowledge and doubts about the world, Manson was integrated for us, slotted all too quickly and easily into contemporary history's cast of characters. Or, rather, that history's mediated likeness, a parade of emptied, hypnotized robots who together peddled alienation by pretending to experience and interpret our needs and desires for us. Manson was reformed

all right: he was now a hired mercenary, a loyal soldier in the army of ghosts that occupied social life. Watching Manson's odyssey, we too couldn't help but suffer a morbid demise, from being witnesses of a crime to being the audience of a spectacle. Here Manson stood before us, an empty shell, a crater marking the site of a once diabolically rich substance now completely stripmined could he inspire us to madness or scare us to death. Now he only bores us stiff.

Such is life, or the lack of it, in the mass marketplace. If the sardonic grins of murderers and lunatics still muster a trace of fear within us, it's because their recklessness threatens not our already decimated moral order but the mechanized daily routines whose very emptiness structures our lives. If they arouse a mix of fascination and contempt, it's not because we find their perversions so incomprehensible; rather, it's because their baroque and violent detachment from society mocks our own, more run-of-the-mill and passive remove. Exile isn't what it used to be. It no longer seems so epic, a dramatic choice or cruel punishment; it's become instead an ordinary fact of life. We're all individuals, all unique—this is the sales pitch unceasingly beaten into our brains. But the air-conditioned, unaffecting isolation we find ourselves confined today bears only a faint resemblance to the noble loneliness ingrained in the myths of our pioneer roots, or the profound solitude fabled in such books as Thoreau's *Walden* or Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In these accounts the act of severing one's ties to the

social apparatus carries a sublime consequence—floating out beyond human contact, outside history, one is brought face to face with the eternal and the universal, the result of which is to have one's ultimate beliefs either affirmed or obliterated forever. We, however, don't experience the exhilaration or horror of independence, the divine Light or unfathomable Darkness; what we feel is alienation, not from losing touch with society but from joining in with it, from the very mode by which we exchange things with one another. Today, we typically feel lost even when standing in a crowd.

As the expansion of the marketplace proceeds, so too does the occupation of social life, and with its advance we are herded further and further away from a direct understanding of our own reality, as if consigned to distant grandstands overlooking the shadowy animation we no longer quite recognize as the world we've made. If, as Merleau-Ponty has said, "we see as far as our hold on things extends," then under the present regime, where it's mandatory to sell away our time, energy, and the fruits of our labor, blindness is the price we pay for survival. Is it any wonder that we react with horror to the knock at the door? Switch on the TV, open the paper: out pour a stream of zombies—new appliances, travel packages, fantasies of excessive luxury—all of which are meant to dodge our recognition, to appear new and wondrous, and yet beneath whose innocence we can still detect traces of flesh and blood, of living, breathing history, whether it's that of the factory workers who produced the merchandise, or of the citizens

whose town or country is rented to tourists, or of the ruling class that safeguards its privileges by encouraging absolutely everyone to dream about them. Welcome to the horror show we call a free society, in which we're watchdogged twenty-four hours a day by sweet-talking Frankenstein monsters, inert matter brought to life by our very sweat and misery, only now the beasts have turned against us, and as our masters they demand we recognize their concerns—their relative status, their novelty and transience—as our own.

Yet, as all-encompassing and permanent as this twisted social arrangement seems, cracks do emerge in it, unrest trickles through the grandstands, and occasionally voices rise to denounce the tyranny of alienation, to call the grisly puppet show by its real name. “The spectacle in general, as the concrete inversion of life is the autonomous movement of the nonliving.” So bellowed Guy Debord, an exemplary, albeit rhapsodic heckler, in *Society of the Spectacle*¹⁴. From Marx on, chroniclers of our shopping-mall afterlife have observed that commodities, although by products of our desire to create things for ourselves and each other, end up reflecting only their relation to other commodities. Cleansed-of their histories, of the evidence that they've in fact been fabricated, they undergo a seemingly magical transformation, from owing their appearance to the actions of others to becoming actors themselves. Socializing and interfacing, competition and cohesion—all are aspects of their world, not ours; we sit as if a captive audience, envying these

vampires whose lives, though sustained by our blood, seem more whole and adequate than ours will ever be. Even worse, we end up losing sight of our communal stakes in the acts of creating, giving, and reciprocating. Hence the path of exploitation and control today is marked not just by actual carnage—by the wounds suffered from having the tokens of social exchange ripped from us—but by what follows, namely the lies and cover-ups, the blindspots and lapses of memory. This is where authority and profiteering now reside, in the yawning invisibility, the spreading disconnectedness, the massive forgetting and erasure that characterizes contemporary experience. Commodification sucks the world of life, then turns around and promotes the falsehood that only ghosts truly live. As dissatisfied spectator Roland Barthes details in *Mythologies*, it's a process that "has turned reality inside out. It has emptied it of history and filled it with nature, it has removed from things their human meaning so as to make them signify a human insignificance . . . it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a hemorrhage; or perhaps an evaporation, in short a perceptible absence."¹⁵

Sounding like Boris Karloff with a Ph.D., Barthes here appraises more than just the bodysnatched lifeforms found on supermarket shelves; he's referring also to the morbid figures of speech that dwell inside our heads, emerge from our mouths, crowd our national debates, populate opinion polls, and emcee our mass entertainment. Since our ability to produce a sense of ourselves

is among the powers we sell away in order to get by, it, too, is something we recover only by buying it back. We look to the marketplace, its walking-dead stereotypes and fashion plates, for sales tips on how to fit in, on which identities, opinions, acquaintances, habits, etc., will open doors for us, make us popular, keep us employed. But the more we orient ourselves toward the dead, the more we open up our liveliness to their invasion, and the better able they are to fend off exhaustion and oblivion. As Barthes describes it, bodysnatched speech, or “myth,” is “a language which does not want to die: it wrests from the meanings which give it its sustenance”—namely, our moments of real passion, insight, rage—“an insidious, degraded survival, it provokes in them an artificial reprieve in which it settles comfortably, it turns them into speaking corpses.”

Speaking corpses—what a fitting metaphor, just gruesome and icy enough. It seems especially appropriate when you consider the gray pall coloring most of our nation’s recent political and cultural debates, particularly those leading characters—say, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Willie Horton—were, at the time they were being discussed, either dead or imprisoned. All the better to eviscerate them, to scoop out of them their particular histories, everything in their lives that made them authentic beings, that molded and marked them in distinct ways, that distinguished them from the wax dummies in shopping store windows. Once hollowed out, they could then be assigned new roles, their

heads filled with imported ideas. And those performing the surgery, who unflinchingly turned the techniques of commodification on human lives, of course wiped their hands clean, feigned innocence; it's assumed that, like all commodities, Mapplethorpe and Horton belong to no history, are not complex constructs, but rather just appeared out of nowhere with one, simple message to deliver: "Yes, freedom of expression should be restricted for certain people, especially gay men"; or "Yes, government entitlements should be rolled back and police repression increased for the Black underclass," Swung out for display as if hung by their feet, Mapplethorpe and Horton are pointed to not, as pawns, as planted evidence in ideological inquisitions, but rather as the plotting masterminds behind such inquiries, as the very instigators of the discourses that directly oppress them.

It's a dirty trick, everyone knows that, but saying so matters little. You can't blow the whistle on the spectacle. Sure, you can try, but rebellion, like all gestures, is gladly recognized by society—only what's recognized is merely the hotly sought luster of the thing, its exchange value; the core meaning from which that luster radiates is considered beside the point. Even instances of blunt honesty ultimately seem dishonest, since all that counts is the appearance of truth. "In a world which really is topsy-turvy," Debord sighs, "the true is a moment of the false." Theft, blackmail, bald-faced lying, "the autonomous movement of the nonliving"—these things can no longer be

isolated and confined. Sadly, what can be isolated today are the “heat and depth of our significant moments, those fleeting, unexploitable snatches of real meaning glimpsed now and then on the periphery of our experiences—when exchanging secrets between friends, when shooting glances, when sharing intimacies. But we glimpse such things seldomly, whereas we witness their erasure always. If, as Debord tells it, the spectacle “is the sun which never sets over the empire of modern passivity,” “the guardian of sleep,” then what is eclipsed by the one dream we’re all subjected to is not an underlying reality so much as that reality’s forced disappearance. What we occasionally perceive on the margins of the dream is something lost; we intuit the lives we’ve surrendered, feel the distance between them and what we now settle for. In short, we become conscious of our blindness. And this realization weighs on the shiny images, it strains at the dream’s newborn facade. So that in those odd moments when the spectacle hesitates between distractions, and we find what appears as a crack in the dream, what comes pouring through at us is not some shining light pointing toward escape, but more likely an unbelievable panic, incredible resentment, a sense of profound dispossession. The dark emptiness of the dream becomes apparent, it fills with horror, and we find ourselves all alone, cut off, in the midst of a raging nightmare.

KNOCK KNOCK. “Who’s there?” It’s Tony Smith, the Minimalist sculptor, packed in a car with three of his students from Cooper Union,

driving at night down the New Jersey Turnpike. Only it's some time in the early '50s and the construction of the turnpike isn't finished yet. The road is unmarked and unlit, completely abandoned, with no lines or railings, just fresh asphalt unblemished by wear and tear, winding endlessly into distant nothingness, a pristine, alien landscape possessing what critic Peter Plagens once listed as the main characteristics of "the L.A. Look"—youthful cleanliness, spatial expanse, industrial prettiness, and, "most vaguely and most importantly," optimism¹⁶—except here all the lights are turned off, as if this were the dark side of a happy-face moon: "The experience on the road," Smith recalls, "was something mapped out but not socially recognized. I thought to myself, it ought to be clear that's the end of art. Most painting looks pretty pictorial after that. Later I discovered some abandoned air strips in Europe—abandoned works, Surrealist landscapes, something that had nothing to do with any function, created worlds without tradition. Artificial landscape without cultural precedent began to dawn on me."²⁷

Enthralled by this vision of a dawning, unprecedented new world, in which art and artificiality shed their boundaries as they absorb all of life, Smith bids only a faint shrug to the passing of the former world, in which art and life were practiced separately. (Debord, an ocean away, simultaneously nods, though more mournfully, "Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.") Numerous reports were issued at the same time, all claiming

to have witnessed this death, as though the planet had suddenly, almost imperceptibly started spinning backwards and everything from then on appeared to be standing on its head. Not everyone, though, shared Smith's glee; some saw in this passing more than just a victory for art. In his essay "Art and Objecthood," Michael Fried, the leading champion of high-modernist painting during the early '60s, in fact argued that art, too, had vanished along with everything else. And he cites Smith's remarks about his midnight pleasure cruise as if they were the words of the confessing murderer.

The case Fried makes against Smith and his Minimalist cohorts—Robert Morris, Donald Judd, et al.—rests almost entirely on the boxes they made. In these stark, hollowed-out containers, Fried finds evidence of multiple crimes. For one thing, their very emptiness proves that what was previously considered the central concern of visual art—its long history of grappling with pictorialism, which constituted the heart of its tradition, its very "essence"—had been purged, stolen away. According to Fried, being hollow is how Minimalist boxes achieve the look of "non art." And looking like "non art" only proves them to be imposters and frauds, since, the alarmed formalist gravely intones, "quality or value . . . are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts."

Fried also alleges a cover-up, stressing the fact that the vacant interiors of these boxes are quite literally sealed off from the viewer. This he sees as an attempt to replace art's

historical interest in visibility with a new interest in invisibility, to re-route aesthetics away from frankness and coherence toward anticipation and emptiness. Hoping to ward off this apparent threat to art's integrity, Fried makes a desperate plea for the old order: art, he declares, should be "at every moment . . . wholly manifest . . . as if a single, infinitely brief instance would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it." He then turns an accusing finger at Morris and Smith, whose works rely on the denial rather than the affirmation of art's essence, on art's demise and resurrection as a ghost. Caretaker Morris is quoted by Fried as saying, "More and more I've become interested in pneumatic structures . . . [they] have a dreamlike quality for me, at least like what is said to be a fairly common type of American dream." And from Smith, Fried coaxes this spooky admission: "I didn't think of [my artworks] as sculptures but as presences of a sort."

"Something is said to have presence," states Fried as if passing sentence, "when it demands that the beholder take it into account, that he take it seriously—and when the fulfillment of that demand consists simply in being aware of it." He concludes that the sole objective of Minimalist artworks is merely to gain attention. And to do this, they invariably stoop to deceit. Rather than an honest account, what they present to viewers is a secret; the very function of Minimalist boxes is to raise the question of their hidden insides.

And the persistence of this question—the fact that an answer never follows, the moment of truth never arrives—is how these works sustain their beholder's interest. Standing before such a box, one encounters less the thing itself than a premonition of something more, something held in view but out of reach; one experiences a sense of anticipation, of hype. This is how Minimal art captivates an audience, a phrase that appropriately suggests a cunning trick, entailing both charisma and control.

The curtain rises, the new world dawns. And Fried's words, like the art they were summoned to defend, eventually hollow into echoes and fade like ghosts. The band strikes up a lullaby; life goes on, but it does so seemingly outside our control, something we contemplate rather than experience directly, something held in view but out of reach, like a drama enacted on an inaccessible stage, whose characters are strung like puppets to a spotlight, the "sun which never sets" over the show that never ends, a moonbeam forever illuminating a world turned upside-down. We concede the stage and take our seats, empowered only to applaud or heckle-what continues in our wake, this afterlife, history unfolding as a dream, "the autonomous movement of the nonliving." Of course, unfolding along with it is a new art history, one forged by a pioneering generation of young artists. American Dreamers who realize the unique task facing them—how to represent a society that has already been flattened into a representation, how to portray a way of life that, in existing

foremost as an image, has already had all its life squeezed out of it.

This is the grim crusade to which both Pop art and Minimalism devote themselves. If Pop artworks generally seem preoccupied with consumerism's hyperbolic grammar—how its logos, slogans, and stereotypes interact as a vocabulary—then Minimalism concerns how this language relates to us. Both make solicitation their top priority; turning their interests out toward the audience, these works literally prey on their viewers, like circus barkers trying to drum up business. Pop does so on the level of imagery; it boasts the same enticements that Smith attributes to the unfinished turnpike and Plagens claims for L.A.—namely, a glistening pleasurescape that suggests youth, techno-exoticism, adventure, optimism. Yet Pop's approximation of consumerism, just like consumerism's approximation of life, doesn't completely conceal the deadly banality, the system of standardization and boredom, that undergirds its otherwise fiery facade.

No doubt, the expressionless caskets and tombs of Minimalism are much more explicitly depressed, yet on the level of physical display they are, as Fried discerned, also more aggressively pandering than Pop's advertisements. In the end, both types of art mingle spectacle with monotony, titillation with repetition (think of Lichtenstein's dots, Warhol's and Judd's ordered curiosities). It makes sense, then, that succeeding generations of artists would take the next logical step and splice

the two genres together, imposing Pop imagery onto Minimalist structures. Ergo, Jeff Koons places vacuum cleaners inside oversized Larry Bell-like display cases, Haim Steinbach arranges discount merchandise on Judd's wallbound forms, and Allan McCollum exhibits identical urns ordered in rows, the only difference between each vessel being the color it's painted.

Much art made today still employs this formula, a mix of lecherous winking and mechanical routine, wild slapstick and ice-cold salesmanship. Indeed, it's a description that fits the majority of the works in this exhibition. Llyn Foulkes's paintings, for example, are exemplary slices of American afterlife, balancing giddy pathology and paralyzing detachment, shameless sensationalism and-matter-of-fact simplicity. However, there are some big differences between consumer aesthetics then and now. For one thing, though Pop's influence continues to be strongly felt, its vibrancy is fading (perhaps the reason stems from a change in the nation's economic condition: back in the '60s we generally consumed on earnings, whereas today we consume on debt). In recent neo-Pop artworks—say, by Richard Prince, Christopher Wool, Cady Noland—Pop's original optimism is gone, its youthful energy spent. What instead characterizes such contemporary references to consumer culture is recycled waste, insulting good-ol'-boyishness, a fuck-you attitude, extremism (hence the images of militants, bikers, porno stars). There's also the example of Cindy Sherman's photographs, which

have gone from cataloging stereotypes of women to envisioning horrific hags, witches, and deflated rubber sex-dolls. Ditto Jenny Holzer's art, in which her aphorisms have grown increasingly private and morose. Overall, the come-ons we encounter in today's art are more sardonic, grotesque, defeated, blackmailing. We are still the spectacle's captive audience, but there's now something rancid in the blood it sucks from us; now our very resentment and panic at watching social life invaded and colonized, not to mention having its vitality sold back to us, is showing up in the commodities themselves.

Minimalism's legacy also extends into the present, and it too finds expression today in morbid and depressing art. For proof, you again need only look at the output of the artists in this show—a majority have, at one point or another in their careers, either made actual caskets or prominently featured them in their paintings and drawings. Included in this category are Paul McCarthy's sealed boxes in which he's stored videotapes of his performances, as well as various sculptures by Liz Larner and Charles Ray. For instance, in *Ink Box* (1986), Ray took the top off a large steel box and filled it with printer's ink; in a similar piece, he filled a marble box with Pepto Bismol. As for Larner, her *Used To Do The Job* (1987) is a huge solid block of congealed gunk—wax, ash, tar, weird chemicals, you name it. Larner's piece is both a wink and a gross-out, a display case advertising total mayhem, a commodified chainsaw massacre. But like Ray's

works, what really makes Laner's grim cube bewitching is the fact that it appears sealed off, packaged; it's haunting precisely because it's only a virtual disaster, not a real one.

Although Minimalism and Pop art share a preoccupation with their audience, at the same time they exhibit a certain imperviousness to it as well—both offer not dialogue so much as echoes, reflections of the world that look mechanical and dead. But then, how else do you capture the distinctive features of our hyperalienated society? Robbed of the time of our lives, we in turn try to recuperate that time through commodified leisure, as if such metered, quantified fun could truly make up for the vacuousness of our metered, quantified toil, as if one absence could compensate for another, their accumulation somehow rendering the world whole again. An art of echoes offered to amputated viewers, Pop and Minimalist works supply the final term in an equation of permanent dependency—they look like how we feel, inadequate, incomplete, needy. Indeed some of the most poignant pieces to emerge in the wake of Minimalism are rooms with basically nothing in them: Lucas Samaras's *Mirrored Room* (1966), Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972), Chris Burden's *White Light/White Heat* (1975), Bruce Nauman's *Room With My Soul left Out/Room That Does Not Care* (1984). A similarly evacuated site in this exhibition, Richard Jackson's *Big Time Ideas* (1986-91) is occupied only by a sense of time passing, although here time is organized like a massive military parade, alien history marching on, the

clock faces as resolute and impassive as death masks. As with the other rooms, Jackson's leaves viewers feeling neither alone nor accompanied, but rather stocked by a premonition, a presence that preys on their isolation yet at the same time can't be confronted directly.

The ghosts that haunt these empty chambers, as well as those Fried claims inhabit Minimalist boxes, materialize far more fully in another genre that followed Minimalism, performance art. In his 1977 essay "Pictures," Douglas Crimp argues that performance provides a crucial link between Minimalism and the neo-Pop of Sherman, Prince, et al.; in fact, Crimp describes this progress as an ever-intensifying of Fried's worst nightmare. "What disturbed Fried about minimalism!" Crimp writes, "was not only its 'perverse' location between painting and sculpture, but also its preoccupation with time—more precisely, with the duration of experience . . . And in this, too, Fried's fears were well founded. For if temporality was implicit in the way minimal sculpture was experienced, then it would be made thoroughly explicit—in fact the only possible manner of experience—for much of the art that followed."¹⁸

Crimp points out that what was said about Minimalist works—that they "required the presence of the spectator to become activated," that in this way they privileged the audience over the artist, that you literally "had to be there"—is doubly true for performance pieces. Yet Crimp stops short of arguing that this sudden emphasis on the viewer precipitated a new era of artistically

conducted direct address and dialogue. Quite the opposite; in the end, according to Crimp, even “performance-becomes just another way of ‘staging’ a picture.” Or rather, just another way of picturing alienation—although rendered in real flesh and blood, performance art still retains the structure of separation that characterizes theater; it actually emphasizes, in a Brechtian sense, the barrier between the artwork and its onlooker. Performance pieces generally prove that when taking the stage, no matter how urgent or reasoned your message, it’s impossible not to make a spectacle of yourself. Indeed, much in the same way Larner and Ray view the display case as a torture chamber, for many performance artists the stage represents something like the twilight zone—Crimp even describes performances by Robert Longo and Jack Goldstein as having “that odd quality of holograms, very vivid and detailed and present and at the same time ghostly, absent.”²⁹

This nightmarish quality, the unreal realness Crimp describes, gets rephrased several times over by the art in this show. For instance, Ray’s two mannequins, *Self Portrait* (1990) and *Male Mannequin* (1990), appear human only to the extent that they seem mummified. They resemble the artist in very different ways: one is naked and looks stripped of identity, like a typical dummy except for a conspicuously realistic crotch and penis; the other, fully clothed, is nearly indistinguishable from the real-life Ray. These zombies split the artist in two, separating

his public and private appearances—he comes across as part Clark Kent, part Superstud. But the mannequins also make Ray out to be all robot, a simple fashion statement underneath which is just another dick. Evoking a similar kind of tension—between life and its mysterious disappearance—Meg Cranston's *Jane and John Doe* (1991) mourns the deaths of Angelenos whom the county morgue can't identify. It may seem callous, this prosaic tallying of the monthly body count, but how else do you weigh the loss of already absent lives?

Three artists in this show—Chris Burden, Mike Kelley, and Paul McCarthy—have spent much of their careers creating performance pieces, and in these works it's been what Crimp perceives as the genre's ghostly reality that gets pushed to the limit. Whether it's Burden's harrowing self-mutilations, or McCarthy's gooey self-debasements, or Kelley's associative reveries, tantrums, and screeds, viewers are presented with the human body and mind placed under the most demanding situations, all enacted up-close and for real, in the flesh and in our faces. But even with our noses pressed against the glass, we can't help but recognize the visceral events on stage as alien, ghostly not only in the sense that they exist as hollow representations, but also in that they represent what's missing in our experience of them. Confronted with these massive expenditures of energy, what's most striking is how disconnected they seem, bottled and abstracted; in turn we feel bottled ourselves, immobile and anxious, the kind of anxiety associated with

dreaming—the anxiety of wanting to act, to wake up, and not being able to.

Images of the stage and staged events figure prominently in other works by artists included in this exhibition. McCarthy's *Garden* (1991), like his *Bavarian Kick* (1987), presents a slapstick theater of mindless actions executed by faceless actors, in which sexual abandon gets choreographed as a crude comedy routine (heavy emphasis on the routine). There are also Megan Williams's drawings, which are frequented by puppets, clowns, cartoon characters, and the like, usually lost in some manic, spotlight activity. In fact, they are literally lost, legible only as wisps and swipes and various body parts like eyeballs and fists, as if Williams were trying to capture the impossible, nonstop tumult of children's cartoons in each of her single, static images. The drawings end up accommodating two seemingly opposite qualities—they appear at once furiously animated and delicately remembered.

Images remembered from childhood—or, more precisely, from adolescence form another conspicuously repeated component of this show. Particularly in the work of Victor Estrada, Raymond Pettibon, Jim Shaw, and Robert Williams, dispossession and alienation are pictured in terms of a dysfunctional relationship with the adult world of responsibility, rules, seriousness, commitment, etc. Adolescents really have no place in society—having outgrown the heavenly grace and innocence of childhood, they lounge in a purgatorial state, angled toward but not yet

delivered into adult life. They have yet to choose the roles, stances, and professions that must be adopted in order to get accepted and fit in. On the outside looking in, adolescents are forced to weigh consumer society's Faustian bargain, whereby independence is won through submission to the market, visibility gained by recognizing yourself as just another commodity.

For Estrada, Pettibon, Shaw, and Williams, the adolescent mind represents—as the stage does for Burden and McCarthy, and the display case for Ray and Lerner—a place wherein things get overheated and explode. Attracted only to consumer culture's techno-gadgets and fashion plates, and not to the discourse by which such things are rationalized, the teen imagination grasps these zombies straight on, mutating them from bloodless life-forms into galloping monsters. Hence the comic carnivals rendered in these artists' work—Estrada's screaming heads, wide-eyed naifs and elastic clowns; Pettibon's hard-boiled dicks and moles, hard-luck cases and bloodthirsty strangers, Shaw's jingoistic hippies and cult leaders; Robert Williams's cowboys and bimbos, flaming hot rods and science projects run amok.

Where these artists part company is over how each views his juvenile-behavior. On the one hand, Robert Williams's art approaches teen delinquency from the vantage of pop-culture magazines, movies. etc., where it's been made over into a marketable, seamless identity. Thus, for all their turbulent, bad-boy subject matter, formally his paintings are very tight and deliberately

rendered (despite his ill manners, Williams gets an A for effort). This marriage of right and wrong gets pictured differently by Pettibon and Shaw, whose art is characterized less by gloss and mere disruption and doubt. Pettibon's drawings, for example, evoke teen sensibility by looking literally awkward and overwrought; not only are his pen-and-ink pulp hipsters stiffly rendered and overworked, but they're given captions that teeter uneasily between melodramatic cliché and looping nonsequitur. It's by trying too hard to maintain their cool that Pettibon's images lose it, but it's also through this failure that his art succeeds. Neither tracing his figures correctly nor getting their lines right, Pettibon puts his finger on the restless-anxiety underlying adolescent experience.

Shaw's art, like Pettibon's, seems to represent the viewpoint of a kid who suffers from his impressionability, who is overly vulnerable to society's manipulations of both his desires and moral inclinations, who ends up feeling torn between knowing what he likes and knowing better. Here an open mind proves easy prey for our culture's endless sales pitches—and what's being sold, it turns out, is everything from furniture to fascist world-views. To the credulous youth looking for some orientation in a society without any, culture comes across as inseparable from education, and education as inseparable from ideological recruitment. Shaw's works enlist in various belief systems, but all end up victims of the same bad trip, sharing the same look of dumbfounded intoxication, whether they're

under the influence of maniacal headgames, twisted conspiracy theories, sexy utopian visions, phony religions, or mortifying morality tales. Like Pettibon's stabs at acting hip, Shaw's desperate attempts to find a moral order that call bring the world into focus are rendered-poignant precisely by their being doomed to failure. No wonder that in his latest series of works, a dark curriculum titled "My Mirage"(1986-91), there emerges here and there the ghostly presence of Prof. Charles Manson, disaffected youth's Mr. Rogers, the ultimate mindfucker.

The adolescent sensibility that pervades this show seems significant not only for what it conjures—dispossession, anti-social behavior, susceptibility—but also for what it sets itself against, namely leadership and expertise, not to mention their shared institution, school. Tellingly, one of the most salient characteristics of today's art world is the pivotal role played by schools as technical training grounds for artists. Nearly every artmaker nowadays is an MFA-brandishing, accredited professional; all eyes are on the blackboard. A straightforward relationship now exists between learning in school and succeeding in the marketplace—what an artist knows ends up determining whether he or she is in or out. This, perhaps, is one of many things the darkness in this show addresses: the commodification of books, of learning, of what passes for intelligence. Countering the notion of art as an educational tool, higher learning's highest achievement, the art collected here opts for the unschooled, for riot

over reason, dirty jokes over smart answers. In the context of this exhibition, books are seen as just one more bad dream, an image of adequacy and completeness that, like the display case and the stage, turns out to be empty, scary, a lie. This is perhaps what people mean nowadays when they complain about the tyrannical importance assumed by “critical thinking” in contemporary art; Perhaps they’re imagining something like the swarming, cloudy, foul nightmares on display here when they condemn theory, when they say that it’s all just a load of bullshit.

On the other hand, to describe the art mentioned thus far as juvenile, detached, solicitous, needy, etc., is not the same as saying that it is disengaged or regressive. Actually, the opposite seems true: much of the work discussed—especially Minimalism, performance, and what I’ve been calling neo-Pop work—has not distanced but rather brought art closer to social issues, at times aligning it with recent progressive struggles to change the status quo. Yet it’s also true that, as art nears the heart of our society’s problems, it’s more likely to run up against the specter of commodification and dispossession, because these are the processes tearing apart the kind of social coherence needed to communicate directly and effectively with one another, to build trust and understanding, to organize. How do you talk about change when interaction itself has become so mediated and disconnected? How can we speak on our own behalf when our lives have become so fragmented—between

work and leisure, home and office, privacy and professionalism—that it's nearly impossible for us to recognize ourselves and our interests?

The image of “helter skelter” could be used to describe both our suffering and our overcoming of alienation. Indeed, the phrase has been taken to mean all things chaotic, from apocalyptic warfare to rocking-good fun, from a violent purging of the social order to a festive triumph of society over order, from running scared to running wild. To a certain extent, just as the expressions of mayhem vary in this show, so do our experiences of it, vary in our day-to-day lives; the problem, of course, is that the more oppressive kind tends to be accepted as business as usual, what makes the world go ‘round, while the liberating kind typically belongs to the scattered, underground history of our most meaningful moments. Reporting the worst of the bad news, Nancy Rubins’s and Manuel Ocampo’s art movingly portrays the kind of brutal helter skelter that characterizes current events, city life, the nightly news, this country’s official domestic and foreign policies. Displayed here are the charred remains, the path of broken lives and cultural debris, left in the wake of colonial conquest (colonization being a process active both at home, and abroad). The emptiness in this work is haunted by large, collective ghosts, the victims—whole communities, their beliefs and ways of life—sacrificed to today’s ever-consolidating economic, political, and religious World Orders (“antikultura” is the tagline appropriately given this campaign in many of Ocampo’s paintings).

Contrasting the show's mainly sinister tone, Lari Pittman is the only artist to deliver something like unabashedly good news. Rather than elaborate the nightmares' that result from our being forced to only dream about our lives, Pittman sees a world in which we suffer and enjoy the consequences of living our dreams. Granted, there, are plenty of dark images in his work—of graves, houses ablaze, rotting plants, animals weeping, couples squabbling. But overall these represent only inevitable, even desired elements of larger wholes, moments that perpetuate ongoing cycles. Balancing them are images of light, growth, escape, love, and reception. It could even be argued that Pittman's paintings stand apart from the show's other work by actually measuring up to Fried's requirements for a healthy picture, looking "at every moment . . . wholly manifest, as if a single, infinitely brief instance would be long enough to see everything; to experience the work in all its depth and fullness." Yet Pittman's work accomplishes this on its own terms, without the standoffish, universalizing abstraction and the tenor of timeless, immutable truth that distinguished '50s painting. Not only are his images specific and partisan, but they're rendered in an explicitly unheroic, popular language" in motifs and conventions seemingly borrowed from architectural drawings, hotel lobby décor, technical illustration, cocktail napkins, etc. While these tired symbols appear reawakened by the protean convulsions of Pittman's universe, their accessibility in turn keeps the paintings, open

and friendly, even flirtatious. Against the forever arrested come-ons of the commodity, Pittman's art, glimpses breathy, swirling outbreaks of social contact, in which seduction, rather than being an empty promise, carries serious consequences: people have sex, argue, break up; wandering eyes suddenly fixate, wink, begin to cry; questions beget more questions; romance dies and is reborn. The world of separation melts away; in these bittersweet melodramas, life unfolds kaleidoscopically, unraveling and reopening with each and every encounter.

Sounds utopian? Perhaps. Yet we sense such a polymorphous world exists; we visit it whenever we find ourselves lost in thought or in conversation, guessing and joking, having what we know more challenged than confirmed, being led to discover and doubt things about ourselves and each other, feeling like we could be led to believe anything. We recognize this world as ours because we continue to make it; in turn, we see in things and in each other not lifeless certainties but living possibilities. The end of the spectacle is not the end of the world. Out beyond the reach of the spotlight, where the frozen images that dictate the meanings of what we and do begin to thaw, our fears and desires are brought to life, not put to rest. Here is a world in which everything is possible and nothing predestined, in which we not only produce meaning but also play with its indeterminacy, a world without separation as the world without end—curiosity satisfied not by answers but by clues; lies remedied not

by truths but by questions; blindness cured by envisioning not how things are but how they might be. Imagine it: the effort to get to know others taking on the air of a tireless adventure. Imagine social life transformed from a police line-up into a masquerade ball. Someone approaches you and inquires, "Who's there?" Searching for an accurate response, you find yourself thinking up a million answers instead of just one.

1. Vincent Bugliosi with Curt Gentry, *Helter Skelter* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1974). All quotes by or about Charles Manson are from this source.
2. See Norman Mailer's introduction in Jack Henry Abbott, *In the Belly of the Beast* (New York: Random House, 1981).
3. Actually, Manson clones appeared almost instantly. Rather than draw a direct connection between the murders of Sharon Tate and the LaBiancas, police initially hypothesized that the latter was committed by "copycats" inspired by the former. Real copycats did show up, including doctor and ex-Green Beret captain Jeffrey MacDonald, who eventually was convicted of slaughtering his wife and two kids in 1970. MacDonald's story to police was that the crime was carried out by four acid-zonked hippies who broke into his house chanting "Kill the pigs." See Joe McGinniss, *Fatal Vision* (New York: New American Library, 1983).
4. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1977). All quotes by Debord are from this source.
5. Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972). All quotes by Barthes are from this essay.
6. Peter Plagens, "The LA. Look," in *Sunshine Muse* (New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1974).
7. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in Gregory Battcock, ed. *Minimal Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968). All quotes by Fried, Smith, and Robert-Morris are from this essay.
8. Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984).
9. Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism." October 15 (Winter 1980)
10. For a full discussion of adolescent sensibilities in recent art, see Howard Singerman, "The Artist as Adolescent." *Real life Magazine* 6 (Summer 1981).

ALL SYSTEMS BLOW THE RISE OF DIY ART SCHOOL

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BAUHAUS, BLACK MOUNTAIN, BEUYS. These vaunted precedents adorn the recent parade of magazine articles, books, symposia and exhibitions dedicated to art education. Personally, I remember 1988 as the moment when schools first appeared as a conspicuous blip on the art world's radar. That year students from Art Center and CalArts inaugurated the exhibition space Bliss in a rented house in Pasadena, while in London Damien Hirst and 15 of his Goldsmiths cohorts mounted the show Freeze in a dockland warehouse. The Renaissance Society opened "CalArts: Skeptical Beliefs," a survey of the school's many notable alumni, with participating artist Stephen Prina handling the exhibition's layout by deliberately configuring the walls in the exact manner of the nearby Chicago Art Fair. Also that year Howard Singerman, a decade before

publishing his *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University*, puzzled in an interview over why “educational institutions . . . are left out of the picture of the national art scene,” even though “art around the United States is becoming more and more like art made by university graduates.” A couple of months later, at the Philadelphia Museum, Andrea Fraser performed in the character of docent Jane Castleton, her costume consisting of a double-breasted wool jacket, nerd glasses, and pulled back hair, the spitting image of the stereotypical school marm.

In all these instances schooling still implied revelation, discovery. Except that in Fraser’s performance, where institutional critique reached its final frontier in the museum’s education department, emphasis was on confession, as art lessons were prosecuted for concealing ideological crimes. Meanwhile, in London, emphasis shifted to a different sort of revelation—not confession but promotion, as fresh-faced classmates debuted themselves as hot new commodities. Figured here are perhaps the two main outcomes we expect from an art education, or education in general: on the one hand the development of critical thinking, including the capacity for self-criticism; and on the other, a more how-to vocational training that relays the practical ins-and-outs of a given profession. Perhaps the modern art school has always been caught in the crossfire of these two tasks, simultaneously demanding disenchantment and hoping for renewal.

But now a third option has leapt to the fore. It approaches the intimate relationship between school and the professional art world not as an occasion for vehement critique (though it does adopt a righteous tone) nor as a fat commercial opportunity to exploit (though its manner remains pragmatic). It instead sees in education a means of reform rather than reproduction, a social instrument to seize and turn against society itself, a pocket of resistance sustained from within the status quo through idealistic conversation and warm group vibes. The basic idea involves the earnest, progressive collaboration of seminar-table back-and-forth, although it can take many forms: from studious (New York-based 16Beaver and Munich's ghostAkademie) to enterprising (Edinburgh's Proto-academy and Art2102 in L. A.) to punky (Hamburg's Akademie Isotrop, founded in 1996 by Situationist scholar Roberto Ohrt) to neo-hippie (Sundown Schoolhouse, a Southern California geodesic dome where owner Fritz Haeg hosts study of "gently radical design, literary, performing and visual arts") to casually hip (the Mountain School, which chats it up in the back of Jorge Pardo's Mountain Bar in L.A.'s Chinatown). All these outfits are recently established (within the last 10 years), small (averaging roughly 20 participants) and take their organizational model not from staid civic institutions so much as hectic student lifestyle: they're itinerant, makeshift, and often temporarily housed in friends' lofts and neighborhood haunts—or, increasingly, hosted in the manner of exhibitions or residencies by

established galleries, museums or larger “real” art schools. Indeed, even more traditional academies and university art departments are lately striking a pose of casual idealism, underplaying the commercial firepower of their celebrity faculty or the rigorousness of their critiques in favor of how well they manage to formalize informality and package openness, invention, and effervescent sharing. (“Artists and students from other schools were invited to stay in our studios,” enthuses Daniel Birnbaum, since 2000 the rector of Frankfurt’s Stadelschule, in a recent issue of *Artforum*. “We all met, cooked, ate and talked for a week.”)

No longer “the hidden center of the art community,” as Singerman claimed 20 years ago, schools are now the fully acknowledged center. It’s commonplace for major movers-and-shakers to leave top curatorial positions for art school posts or vice versa (e.g. Birnbaum, Okwui Enwezor, Charles Esche, Ute Meta Bauer, Larry Rinder, to name only a few), while more and more schools sprout their very own world-class kunsthallen (Frankfurt Stadelschule’s Portikus, UCLA’s Hammer Museum, CalArts’s RedCat, CCA’s Wattis Institute). Not long ago curators and post-studio artists had reached agreement that exhibition was the ultimate site of art’s realization. Now everyone thinks that art is actually about transmission to audiences and constituencies; thus the turn to—or anxiety to appear as—educators. “The art academy seems to me to be an extraordinary institution with potentially the greatest relevance to current

art practice of any in the art world—whether museum, kunsthalle, commercial gallery or studio workshop,” proclaims Esche, who in 1998, while on a research fellowship at the Edinburgh College of Art, initiated the Proto-academy with a collection of his post-graduate students there. As a curator in Glasgow in the mid 1990s—where he gained notoriety for his innovative programming at Tramway and for co-founding the Modern Institute—and since leaving Edinburgh in 2000 to work as a museum director, first at the Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art in Malmö, then at Eindhoven’s Van Abbemuseum, the peripatetic Esche has long been interested in models of exhibition that recall less the elite art museum than the populism of community art centers. Both at Malmö and at the 2002 Gwangju Biennial, which he co-curated with Hou Hanru, Esche included the Proto-academy and other alternative art schools into the exhibition programming. “The gallery or museum as simple showroom is no longer an adequate response to the work of current artists,” Esche sums up. “All are, in different ways, shifting towards creative, productive and discursive spaces for the ‘community.’”

Some of the new DIY educational outfits are based in or closely aligned with existing institutions (like the Proto-academy and ECA), while others feed more loosely on the local establishment. For example, Richard Jackson and Paul McCarthy are ex-teachers of UCLA grad and Mountain School co-founder Eric Wesley, and consequently agreed to his requests to

lecture there for free. Some of these schools are set up as small businesses, others as non-profits to lure grants, while a few forego any legal identity whatsoever. Besides volunteered labor and equipment, many support themselves with donations as well as money from subletting space to artists-in residence (as does 16Beaver). A few charge tuition, like Sundown Schoolhouse (\$2400 for 12 12-hour sessions, although this can be discounted in exchange for help around the dome). Akademie Isotrop was supposedly started by Ohrt to get more Monday-night business into the Hamburg club where he worked at the time as a bartender. Along with residencies, some host exhibitions. But rather than play-up these offerings, the new schools portray themselves first and foremost as conversations and collaborations, group endeavors, a bunch of people gathered around a seminar table, an all-night bar, a hot meal. (This contrasts sharply from the bigger, more established schools, or at least from the way they are typically portrayed—looking back at the articles on the graduate art programs at UCLA and Art Center from the late '90s that ran in Spin and Artforum, it was students' individual studios that were showcased.)

The historical roots of these new DIY schools, while branching in many directions, are by and large entwined with the explosive growth of the contemporary art world since the 1960s, when private art schools as well as studio and contemporary art history degrees in universities proliferated through out the West, paralleled by

increased foundation and government funding at the local, regional and national levels, all of which meant more and more professionally savvy, ambitious young artists cropping up in more and more diverse locales, all requiring support in some form—residencies, commissions, stipends, teaching jobs, whatever. As with many artist-run exhibition spaces in the '80s and '90s, so too have many of the recent alternative schools originated out of a group of friends who first met in graduate school. At the same time, the art world, as yet another major industry transformed by globalized communication and exchange, has become increasingly dispersed and decentered while achieving an ever-higher degree of functional and organizational integration and coherence. Every one of the alternative schools emphasizes this—how well it responds to today's urgent need to stay in touch, to gather and distribute information, to network and communicate. "We cannot be in all places at all times," declare the organizers of 16Beaver. "In order to help create a more interesting future, we need to be connected."

Given the art world's recent fascination with Relational Aesthetics and its claims to finally merge art and life, it might seem ironic that so many are calling for a retreat to the academy. And, to a certain extent, retreat it is. Esche, for one, invokes the school as a relatively autonomous preserve, a "halfway house" and "shelter for artists." Likewise, last summer's aborted Manifesta 6 was suppose to reinvent the biennial as a three-month-long school where, in

the words of Mai Abu EIDahab, one of the co-curators, “cultural production [would] maintain and defend its autonomy as a space where the freedom to experiment, to negotiate ideological positions and to fail are not only accepted, but defining.” Yet Esche, EIDahab and many others also stress continuities between the new schools and Relational Aesthetics in terms of their shared stress on face-to-face conviviality and everyday practicalities. “An art school is not concerned solely with the process of learning, but can be and often is a highly active site of cultural production,” writes Anton Vidokle, a Manifesta co-organizer with EIDahab who transplanted his ideas for that project into unitednationsplaza, an “exhibition as school” he recently opened in Berlin. “Producing tangible results that move beyond commentary requires research, groundwork and a continuous process of involvement and production.” But if Relational Aesthetics is indeed accommodating itself to such classroom-based models and methods, this only confirms a more fundamental shift in art school curriculum generally—whether traditional or alternative—away from the humanities and toward the more “practical” regions of the campus like architecture, design, new media, engineering, even business. The Mountain School, for example, offers classes on professional practices by lawyers as well as by ex-Gagosian Gallery director Robert Shapazian (this despite the school likening itself to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century revolutionary societies). Many of the DIY art academies, no matter how

political their interests, prioritize the various organizational skills required to stage discussions over the discussions themselves. (The topic of an Art2102 event this last summer—"How can we share resources, create networks and develop opportunities for the exchange of ideas and projects internationally?"—is typical.)

Emphasizing "tangible results" is one way the new schools measure their distance from the kind of institutional critique practiced by Fraser, Hans Haacke and the like. "It is about skepticism and enthusiasm, affirmation and critique all at the same time," explains sympathetic avant-curator Maria Lind. This relates to another distinction, which is the over-the-top utopian rhetoric these alternative schools permit themselves (what in the '60s would have been called premature triumphalism). Obviously a heady brew results from the combined sense of autonomy and real-world agency—indeed, what motivates many of these groups is nothing short of the vision of collaboratively hammering out bridges between theory and practice, analysis and organization, under conditions that are relatively self-determined, all without state accreditation or the official pat on the head of a diploma. Problematically, though, such an uplifting goal takes for granted assumptions about art's unique and superior capacity to positively influence society, and in that respect doesn't threaten but in fact reaffirms the ideology of the most traditional art institutions. Furthermore, what these schools consider "autonomy" can end up being a

euphemism for insider conferencing, an exchange between fellow professionals transacted in the currency of “concern,” “politics,” “local community” and other such conversation topics. These groups tend to also over-estimate the virtuousness of education per se, thus leaving unacknowledged the crucial role that education plays in reproducing unequal social relations.

For example, many have correctly traced pedagogical ideas like “open” curriculum back to the ‘60s and ‘70s, but only to idealistic student movements then, not to the rise of a more flexible, immaterial economy and its demand for a workforce more adept at communication and adjusting to rapid turnover than at prescribed, supervised tasks. This was the heyday of widespread educational reforms that shifted priority away from product toward process, and that sought to replace an authoritarian pedagogical approach of dictating set content by way of fragmented exercises with a more holistic view of the teacher as facilitator who encourages the student’s self-expression and his or her negotiating open-ended and collaborative situations. As many left-leaning social scientists have argued, such classroom adaptations have run the risk of rewarding higher-income kids more at home with working outside or between categories, whose parents have already predisposed them to seek out not delimited skills so much as a more general ability to master process, especially as that feeds into the ultimate process of becoming “self-made individuals.” Students of

such an education are more likely to possess the entrepreneurial moxie to match the needs of a job market in which salaried or unionized labor has been increasingly converted into temporary, subcontracted work. As a recent New York Times article titled “What a College Education Buys” advises, “In recent decades the biggest rewards have gone to those whose intelligence is deployable in new directions on short notice, not to those who are locked into a single marketable skill . . . it’s best not to specialize too much.” Indeed, policy advisors and business analysts (like Daniel Pink, author of the famous “The MFA is The New MBA” article as well as the book *Free Agent Nation*) have recently pointed to art schools as models for the training of inventive and mobile professionals, people adept at working across categories and under conditions of uncertainty and risk.

When it comes to the particulars of art schools, the tendency toward “opening up” curriculum and letting discussion and peer interaction predominate has been a glaring feature of graduate study for some time. It’s a point made repeatedly in all the recent studies and symposia on art education. *Métier*, *medium*, *art history* have all but disappeared; the curriculum now entails simply the transmitting to individual student-clients nothing less than a grasp of the whole art world, a map or database of the entire multinational field of professional art-related practices and their various connections and affiliations. It’s the kind of map that gets redrawn

monthly in the lists of names and locations that have overrun column-space in the art press, and that also gets figured in the Visiting Artist rosters by which most schools—even the new alternative ones—advertise themselves. “The mechanisms of contemporary art, rather than the results, could be a field of academic knowledge,” James Elkins has declared. “Instead of studying works and canons, we would study processes and strategies.”

It’s not so much the case that art schools today view object-making or even the topics of classroom discussions as completely irrelevant. Rather (to paraphrase Robert Morris’s response when asked if minimalism had rendered the art object unimportant), such things are now considered only less self-important. What encourages the emptying out of art schools is not quite the artist’s irrepressible urge to subvert and innovate. More so it’s the requirement of a new communicational paradigm, the pervasive mandate today to vigilantly research, discuss, categorize, editorialize and otherwise refine and enrich raw information so as to yield high-grade knowledge products. Art schools have been undergoing much the same transformations as museums, where static object display has been replaced by proliferating information platforms. And schools are predisposed to this development: they already have what the Proto-academy’s Esche calls “the infrastructure,” the diversity of media equipment and wiring to easily disseminate and access content, the re-arrangeable, multi-use spaces, as well as a general adeptness at assimilating

art to a switchboard of audience feedback, professional tips and scholarly exchange, or, as Esche puts it, “the means to organize talks, discussions, exhibitions and other activities on a more or less equal level.” Indeed, Goldsmiths professor Irit Rogoff envisions that pedagogical and museological scenes will soon merge into a new dominant hybrid, “partly university and partly museum.”

Among advocates of the new schools, the more politically minded will often acknowledge the problems of embracing flexibility and mobility as challenges to the system when these are the very attributes the system itself so loudly promotes. Esche, for one, admits that, while the ultimate goal is resisting current capitalist imperatives in favor of a world “imagined otherwise,” his reformist plans mean that on a certain level the art school will come to “imitate the fluidity of capitalism.” Thus the trend he foresees is “away from manual labor towards computer literacy, networking and organizational skills.” The operative word here is “networking.” As with artworks today, artists themselves are increasingly valued for the number of functions and connections they enable, for the diversity and richness of the information or the resources that they access and cross-reference. This fact as much as anything helps explain the current attraction that art schools hold as a model for today’s artists and curators, since they systematically churn out such networks, yearly admitting in and graduating out collections of young creative types who share not a common

cause or ideology or even cultural obsession but are always only loosely affiliated within a dispersed yet coherently defined professional field. It takes nothing away from the earnestness and intensity of student interactions to point out that the more highly regarded schools—whether traditional or alternative—are also the more well-connected, the ones with the most recognizable names among their faculty, alumni and visiting artist rosters. Given today's hyper-mobile business climate, where survival depends on access to resources and opportunities, what all students seek (and this goes for higher education across the board) is to come away from their time at college with a choice network of contacts, a dispersed social circuitry from which to gain job tips, project ideas, important social introductions, data that's as far-flung as possible while remaining professionally relevant. A bunch of interesting and well-connected people—that's what the new art schools share with that other current artworld phenomenon, artist collectives, and also why in the end the Akademie Isotrop or the Bernadette Corporation, for all their Situationist-inspired political posturing, are not all that different from, say, the London ICA's Cultural Entrepreneurs' Club.

With the Bologna Process well underway, by which graduate education in Europe will become more standardized along the lines of the Anglo-American model, and with skyrocketing tuition and textbook costs especially in the U.S., not to mention the many ways a corrupt private banking and lending industry here has taken advantage

of dwindling public subsidies to heap mountains more debt onto the student population—given all this, the emergence of art schools that charge only a nominal fee or nothing at all can't help but be welcomed. By also downplaying individual studios and not awarding official credentials, perhaps these schools will foster some type of stronger bond or greater solidarity among their students, something more than just peer validation of one another's artistic and professional identities. But the results so far aren't promising. Mostly the new schools seem to extend the current system by which artists make contacts, enter support networks, get into shows, generate publicity, and otherwise achieve mobility and success as full-fledged artworld operators. Indeed, the alternative schools are often used by their alumni as a selling point on their applications to the bigger, more traditional schools; Ohrt, for example, has acknowledged that his Akademie Isotrop eventually became "a feeder programpractically guarantee[ing] acceptance to the state-run art school." The eight-foot-square exhibition space used by Isotrop students, known as Nomadenoase (or "oasis of the nomads"), was recently recreated as an autonomous object and now tours to various kunsthallen around Europe and the States. Likewise 16Beaver, Proto-academy, ghostAkademie, and other DIY schools are increasingly being treated like artworks and curated into larger and more glamorous museum shows. And why not? For institutions charged with promoting society's reigning values, there's

plenty here to like: earnest student-like idolatry of art, preservation of an autonomous sphere of creativity, post-welfare reliance on volunteerism, staged displays of seemingly spontaneous everyday democracy. By embracing the figure of the artist as well-informed consultant who conducts nonhierarchical exchange with other sovereign and disembedded actors in an open marketplace of ideas, art schools both traditional and alternative, as well as the museums that increasingly exhibit and emulate them, provide current neoliberal policy with not only a fixed institutional form but a fully ideological one as well.

AFTER CRITICISM: MAGAZINE AND DATABASE

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LIKE OTHER MAJOR BUSINESS sectors undergoing globalization, the art world over the last 20 years has grown increasingly dispersed and decentered while at the same time achieving ever greater organizational and professional coherence. Since the early 1990s, with the sudden rise of the London, Los Angeles and Berlin art scenes, and with close to 40 different cities worldwide establishing new international bi- and triennials, the art world no longer resembles a pyramid with one city at its apex. It is now a horizontal matrix. And more than any single city or exhibition or art event, prestige now accrues to the lines between, the routes of distribution and circulation connecting various centers and gatherings.

Likewise, art itself has grown increasingly networked. More and more art practices manifest

themselves as codes or programs through which already existing objects, sites and discourses are “repurposed,” the aim being to access and link various databases and platforms (not just those in the art world but beyond, from social acquaintances to research archives to personal libraries to pop-culture inventories like old record collections to the intimately biographed yet anonymous cast-offs accumulated in thrift stores). Just as no single TV show or pop song is as hot today as the TiVo boxes and iPods that manage their organization, so too with art it’s the ease and agility of access and navigation through and across data fields and sites and projects that takes precedence over any singular, lone objet. The sovereign, self-centered, self-anchored object or artist subject or art site or show or art center is no longer what exudes aura; rather it’s the ability to shuttle along the pathways, to partake of the network’s scaffolding of spokes and nodes, that incites real competition.

All this goes for criticism as well. Take *Artforum*. In 1993 the magazine introduced as part of its monthly format a “contributors page” immediately following the table of contents. Not only does the page personalize the month’s articles, tying each to a singular and unique origin, but it also opens those articles out by using the authors—or rather their 100-word blurbs, the bureaucratic CV written out in prose—as a sort of hyperlink to myriad other professionals, publishers, institutions and projects. To the twin developments of growing dispersion and

anonymity on the one hand and increased interconnectedness on the other, the contributors page responds with a standardized professional form of written introduction and disclosure and, on the other, a heightened sense of direct address and personalization gained through the accompanying thumbnail head-shot of the author's face. Other innovations in the magazine, like increased use of roundtable discussions and multi-authored features, represent, over and above the specific topics being addressed, the connectedness and "liveness" of communicational interface. Art writing today is being replaced by something closer to talk, which is more exteriorized and socialized, addressed and about transmission. Through such tendencies the art press begins to loosen its allegiance to an older print culture and the techniques of silent reading, crucial to ideas of individual autonomy and interiority, of critical distance and thinking as an isolated, independent act, and instead aligns itself more with the practices and effects of user interface and instantaneous electronic communications.

Also, whereas up until the late '80s Artforum refused to run anything but art ads, limiting the few product advertisements that were accepted to the very back of the magazine, over the course of the '90s more and more product advertising appears—for clothes, liquor, mints, eyeglasses, restaurants, bars, airlines, hotels, even financial services—and these get placed up front, interspersed with the gallery announcements. And whereas formerly

the ad section and the editorial content had been strictly segregated, now they co-mingle, alternating page to page. This mingling helps to disarticulate and fragment the editorial content and allows for more flexibility and diversification, as short “think pieces” by intellectual-columnists are now interrupted by upcoming exhibition “previews” and various types of news reporting—on art institutions and their intertwined affairs, on the comings and goings of curators, etc. There are more lists (“Hot List,” “Top Ten”) which function as straightforward information, underlining the ability of the magazine to serve as a database. Many of the new sections in Artforum (“Openings,” “Thousand Words,” “Top Ten,” etc.) also appear regularly, punctually. Which means that, not only does the magazine take on a broader, more diverse institutional art system as its subject matter, but the magazine itself, as it becomes more diverse, more disarticulated and fragmented, also becomes more systematized, more templated, accommodating only those changes in content that don’t exceed its structure’s built-in flexibilities. And finally there is more emphasis on practical information, on news and the art world’s general functionality, which makes the magazine more a resource and guide and less a venue for criticism. It could be argued that this is indicative of a larger tension in art today— between an emphasis on practice and practicality on the one hand, on the everyday and design and even activism, and the supposed continuing need on the other hand for criticism with its refusals and

negativity and its tearing things down. The annual “best and worst” section in Artforum, introduced in 1994, had the “worst” half permanently deleted only three years later, in ‘97.

Like Foster’s characterizing of canon as a ruins or OE & DB discussion (guggenheim social night foto), discussion of AF bringing in more ads casts today’s situation in a narrative structure about capitalism, commercialism that’s all too familiar: everything turns to crap: the market, spectacle. The narrative has a nose-diving shape, there’s not much future they leave open. But today’s market is different; spectacle too, if you look at the typical xmpl, Hollywood, investment & profit taking are shifting away from production to bldg libraries.

976-WOOL

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RICK'S CAFE AMERICAIN, circa the endlessly smouldering twilight of the 20th century. It's a typical evening at this popular underground cabaret, an enormous warehouse space which juggles a variety of recreations – assorted 12-step meetings, political fundraisers, S/M mud wrestling – each attended by a clientele of off-duty bureaucrats and black marketeers, ordinary civilians by day who retreat here after hours to tour the more shady side of their double lives, to seek out fellow informants, spooks, missing kids, contacts with whom they can share some decaf, swap confessions. Actually, the only thing this crowd ever really shares is the void they feel dominating their existence, which is why they sit so inert, silent, the slack in their attention getting picked up by the rock steady beat of the Lee Atwater Experience, the nightly entertainment, with Axl Rose's banshee vocals politely complimented by Bubba Clinton's lugubrious saxophone, the band's heart-rending covers barely audible over the sound of army gunboats etching French curves overhead. Nightlife during wartime. Occasionally celebrities will parade through the rapt mob like decorated officers, the Leisure State's finest. The

buzz tonight is over leading man Rush Limbaugh, dressed as Sidney Greenstreet, inspecting newcomer talent in a corner booth. 'It's funny,' a whisper wafts like contraband cigarette smoke from out of the shadows, 'how people so hungry for the meaningfulness they've had stolen from their lives will deem almost anything fit for their cultural consumption, even the most oppressive, craven ideology.' Pause. 'Especially the most craven ideology.'

In a model of grace under pressure, the walls of this nightmare oasis are spruced up with an impressive assortment of fine art: brooding expressionist corporate logos next to portraits of government officials and comic book heroes, a calendar pin-up girl or stricken poster boy thrown in here and there, all hung in rows like autographed mug shots in a deli, the death masks of a self-hating, collaborationist culture. What an all-star line up! INSOMNIAC, PESSIMIST, COMEDIAN, AMNESIAC, HYPOCRITE. Of the lot, it's safe to say those works by Christopher Wool best capture the club's trademark atmosphere of clenched-teeth bravado and vampire charm, each an uncanny likeness of howling poverty charading as regal austerity. His is a gangster aesthetic: grim, business- like, poker-faced, blunt. Yet despite their impersonal, all-caps delivery, Wool's flat declarations harbour a trace of insincerity, hesitation, even panic, as if lurking behind their tight-lipped facades were something like a wink, a tip-off to viewers of some colossal unfolding scam. This is art with a gun in its back.

Which only means Wool's paintings address a universal experience – that familiar feeling of being interrogated and blackmailed. PRANKSTER, CHAMELEON, TERRORIST, SPOKESMAN. A portrait of the con artist as a young man. Wool approaches his subjects with a nasty blend of defensiveness and aggression, as if with each painting he were entering into a cutthroat deal, quick to point the finger at suspicious behaviour, introducing us to characters we both easily recognise and feel terribly uneasy being around. The resulting body of work evokes a cross between a social gathering and the F.B.I.'s most wanted list. It's a composite picture of human relations in a world organised around exploitation, in which trust and intimacy have all but disappeared, having been hounded into the most remote crevices of private experience, leaving guardedness and paranoia as the leitmotifs of all exchange, in which every conversation follows the course of a petty swindle, as secrets are no longer shared but bought and sold, acts which themselves constitute a form of self-betrayal. Are we having fun yet?

Forget about trying to pin down the source of this racket, to isolate its operations and smoke out its henchmen – it's hegemonic, synonymous with our Darwinian political economy, and has the entire snarling system poised at its disposal. But you can still define what kind of effect it registers, how it intrudes on experience, extorts a percentage, leaves behind an absence. Shallowness, emptiness, inadequacy – these

are the signifiers of dispossession that say it all for us, summing up life as we're allowed to only vaguely know it. Every spark-producing instance of commingling, interaction and merger has been invaded and colonised, reorganised into a sprawling network of divisions and separations, chasms into which the fluid give-and-take of social life collapses, only to have resurrected in its place a reified likeness, to be converted into an autonomously controlled inventory of name-brand personality disorders, self-help programmes and chart-topping pathologies. These all seem to relate more to one another than to us, mere talkshow fodder, painted-on tears and service-economy smiles locked in a battle for higher ratings. Thus social experience gets cloaked in the same mystery as that of the commodity – appearing from one side as something we produce yet sell, from the other as something we're estranged from yet desire. Seduction shrivels under these terms into an empty promise, a lie which benefits not sender nor receiver but rather some anonymous third party, a mediator, manager, profiteer. And yet this system captivates us all the same, holding in our view (but out of our reach) our sense of who and where we are in the world, keeping us in a state of perpetual anticipation, like a horizon line above which things never appear more than half way. A world that never turns, in which we go nowhere.

Along with everything else, art too has been caught up in this interminable runaround between production and consumption, only it

boasts a certain prestige, operating on the level of something like a shuttle diplomat. As Herbert Read tells it in his 1953 book *Art and Industry*, the Cops-and-Robber Barons of yore, the manufacturers who ran mid-19th century English society, developed their appreciation for fine art in reaction to disappointing sales figures. Having focused too narrowly on perfecting machinery ('a monster', Read scolds, 'devouring raw materials at one end and turning out at the other the finished article') these businessmen pondered whether the excesses and indulgences they were so intent on eradicating from the assembly line couldn't in fact be made to serve their interests after all. 'The finished article must appeal to the potential purchaser by its elegance, its decoration, and its colour. Art, the capitalists of that age already realised, was a commercial factor.' What people were denied at the workplace, where they were treated as animated slabs of meat, energy sources to be strip-mined, the marketplace promised to restore – but at a price. And so art, being identified with the human capacity for delectation, appreciation, reflection, with our tastes and satisfactions, in turn provided the ideal bait for the two-bit solicitations, the hustling and con games of commodification (or, as a 1988 painting by Wool comments on this collapsing together of aesthetic gratification and salesmanship, 'Please, please, please, please, please, please'). This, then, is art's job in the new social order: tutoring industry on how to sell consumers the pleasures they are forbidden to

produce for themselves.

Smelling a rat, artists over the years have refused to be bought out by such a contract. Especially in the US, a typical response has been to sever all links art might possibly entertain with leisure, blinding it to everything save the world of work. This was the approach of artists such as Thomas Eakins and Robert Henri, of the critic Thomas Craven in his book *Men of Art*, of the painter/illustrator John Sloan, friend of Duchamp while both lived in Greenwich village, who once described the American artist as 'the unwanted cockroach in the kitchen of frontier society.' Abstract Expressionists were particularly anxious about their paintings' consumption, cursing the idea of 'public acceptance', vilifying the uncaring and under-equipped eyes that constituted their audience. 'Their isolation is inconceivable, crushing, unbroken, damning,' screeched Clement Greenberg of the self-exiled New York School, as the ranks of post-war consumer society swelled around them. 'What can 50 do against 150 million?' Nothing, presumably, except resign themselves to toiling anonymously in their studios, their microfactories, going about producing a sense of themselves no longer within society but in isolation from it.

These artists, though, have enjoyed more than ample consolation – namely, the pre-eminence, the immutable authority that the dominant ideology bestows upon labour in its binary opposition to leisure. 'We have to simply, calmly, methodically reassert American civilisation,'

conspires recently anointed cultural Commissar Newt Gingrich, 'And I believe that starts with the work ethic.' Circulated on every level of society, this belief system dictates that the satisfactions gleamed during free time are ultimately hollow, guilt-ridden, even punishable. Real, honest gratification is never immediate, only delayed; true happiness is gained through commitment and career. In the end, sacrifice is held up as the ultimate pleasure.

Wool's images, with their strict formal economy and stoic personae, actually share a certain family resemblance to the output of at least one of Action Painting's dedicated workaholics, Franz Kline. But Wool musters none of Kline's signature individualismo; on the contrary, his paintings are damaged, not ennobled, by their loneliness – by turns ingratiating, deceitful, pleading, they seem desperate for, yet incapable of, companionship. At the same time, because of their mode of address, their hectoring, they also evoke the consumer come-ons of Pop art, looking like unenhanced, unmentholated versions of Robert Indiana's graphic designs, even like some of Andy Warhol's factory-made titillations (party animal Wool seems particularly schooled in Warhol's 1962 Dance Diagram). There's a sense in which day-labourer Kline and adman Indiana can be seen to join forces in Wool's art, to bring together an inward concern for the self and an outgoing knack for promotion. And yet theirs ends up a thoroughly unhappy union – each stands as the other's bad conscience. As rendered

by Wool, the result of their collaboration are representations of a desperate, vulgar kind of self-promotion; depictions of selling out.

Tellingly, when Wool's floral, wallpaper-like imagery is taken into consideration, the ancestry of his work seems to extend back most directly to the craft-works and visual diaries of 70s feminist art, and beyond that to the handmade books and textiles of the late-19th century Arts and Crafts Movement. For the artists in these movements, as for Wool, the handmade object stands as a symbol of the interconnection between private and professional life, toil and leisure, art and utility, mind and matter. But the aspiration of such art then – to mend a subjectivity that had been unequally divided – Wool now renders as a bad debt, a promise his art can't make good on. Stencilled and stamped onto aluminium supports that, unlike canvas, have no sense of touch, that can't absorb, can't breathe in, Wool's ornamentation remains blatantly prosthetic, an applied art. Like cosmetic surgery, it's an inadequate compensation, restrictive rather than expressive, paralytic rather than flowing.

Perhaps this explains the sickness that seems to incapacitate Wool's paintings: the fact that they harbour a once empowering idealism gone totally rancid. Harking back in confused reverence to both the rigid 50s and the recreational 60s, Wool's art gets twisted by the same contradictions that lie at the stone heart of our post-Reagan era. Reaganism, after all, is not so much a denial of the consumer culture that blossomed like so

many plastic flowers around mid-century; rather it's a rehabilitation of it, a nip-and-tuck job in the style of Frankenstein's monster. Its premise isn't that the controlled consumption of the 60s was entirely evil, just that it wasn't controlled enough. The surplus value that brought new shoppers into the expanded marketplace gave the mistaken impression that there was enough of everything for everyone, leading people to indulge wild ideas – about free time, free love, free spirits; in short, unlimited abundance and instant gratification. Something like the work ethic had to be re-established. Unemployment had to be allowed to rise so that shit jobs would be coveted rather than spat on; social programmes were cut back and underfunded so as to open up pockets of need everywhere. Most importantly, abundance had to be replaced by debt, which, in the place of earnings, became what everyone, from government to business to private citizens, consumed on. Surplus want and fear now washes over the culture like a cold sweat, policing desire and enforcing obedience; and we as cultural subjects are made to feel like indentured servants, at once bitter and grateful, because of our participation in the service economy – bitter that our pleasures are so hard to come by, grateful that they can still be had at all.

Wool's paintings return to the Pop landscape if only to discover how much things have changed over the intervening years. Not that the overriding sense of deceit is anything new – the best of Pop always managed to register the

lie of consumerism, how private consumption could only allow us to envision but never actually attain membership within communities bound by tastes, preferences, passions. Today, though, the commodity no longer needs to beckon with the false promise of community – it has found a more effective means of persuasion through straightforward terrorism. As Wool captures in his film noir remakes, consumer society is now blanketed in pessimism, distrust, fatalism, shaky allegiances and petty motives. What's worse, even the moral self-reliance that girded the Philip Marlow-like protagonists of film noir – and that gave painters such as Franz Kline their sense of anchoring – has been revealed as no more than an arrogant delusion, another lie. The choice offered to consumers today is as simple as noir's black and white: either one takes or gets taken. That, as they say, is showbiz.

The director yells cut; the scene grinds to a halt. Another take. The camera zooms in on an untitled painting from 1989, made up by Wool to look rugged yet elegant, like Bogart in *Casablanca*, dressed in an imperial tux (or is it a prison uniform?), illuminated as if by a harsh spotlight. We are about to witness an interrogation; we are about to be entertained. The artwork tries to articulate some final observations on the current sorry state of consumer affairs. Its message seems heartfelt, the wording precise and deliberate – just two letters, each pronounced twice: 'HA' then 'AH'. Combined here are the simple sounds of human wonder and appreciation,

the picture appearing to gasp in recognition and delight. And yet no matter how many times you read it, it fumbles the delivery, choking on whatever emotion it's trying to express, a grimace interrupting its look of surprise. It seems a joke has been played, a punchline reached. But the tension in the air only grows thicker. Confused, desperate, the painting in the end can't make up its mind. Which is it? Work or play, laughing or crying, the carrot or the stick.

HI-YO SILVER: CADY NOLAND'S AMERICA

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ON THE ROAD TO DISCOVER AMERICA, our hero makes a quick stop and disembarks from his vehicle, a turbo-charged bird of prey aptly named The Eagle —symbol of freedom as flight, and of flight as both sovereignty and exile. “One small step for man,” he says, looking at his boots, “one giant leap for mankind.” It’s his mystery that makes this character so recognizable: dressed in white, he’s the good sheriff, yet he’s also a masked man, never removing his motorcycle helmet, keeping its visor down. He’s the Michelin Man as a latter-day Lone Ranger —a man on the move, the man on the moon. He’s the ultimate Hell’s Angel, a model citizen of God’s country who roams half in hopes of finding a home in heaven’s kingdom on earth, half in fear of succumbing to the desolation in which the fallen land. He stays just long enough to survey this sublime silver frontier, in which he

plants an American flag. And as the flag freezes in mid wave, time appears to stop: our cosmic biker stands on the threshold of eternity, yet he perceives only the same nagging contradiction —paradise at once found and lost, a world perched at both the beginning and the end of history, a garden of dust.

So goes the climactic scene from one of this country's all-time classic road movies. Alongside another, in many ways complementary highway epic released only months later, Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*, the moon landing headed a decade-long convoy of social crusades and cultural experiments, its mission: to scout the mythic territories the '60s had opened up, to confirm the many recent sightings of the promised land that America has always claimed to be. Yet the reports that came back helped confirm deep-rooted suspicions as much as anything. Faith in the American Dream had inspired the journey, but couldn't make the dream come true; in fact, the nearer it grew the more miragelike it became. The promise of deliverance remained a promise not delivered on, a carrot dangling from the end of a nightstick. "We've made it," space cadet Billy sighs at the end of *Easy Rider*, to which copilot Captain America replies, "No man, we blew it." It's a fitting finale to a search for the land of opportunity, a search that seems at once culturally essential and inherently doomed, since such a land lies in the future, in what could be, and therefore can never be reached in the present. Which is why the best way to experience this land is to head down a road

that never ends, a road to nowhere.

It's down this very road that Cady Noland travels. Since the mid '80s, her installations, sculptures, and wall-bound assemblages have featured seemingly haphazard arrangements of, among other things, a wide variety of transportation equipment –not only car parts (headlights, license plates), but also rubber runners, horse saddles, exit signs, and open gates. In several installations Noland mounts metal pipes waist high between floor stanchions or along walls, as if to suggest handrails, hitching posts, and retail racks. In the corners of a couple of her rooms, entangled four-legged walkers collect like errant metal tumbleweeds. Disparate accessories such as bungee cords and monkey wrenches are often found dumped here and there among small piles of empty beer cans. Everything by Noland resembles an abandoned construction site, as if it hadn't been completed yet. She makes terminal works in progress.

Though a can-do spirit seems to run through all Noland's art, the work runs scared, both away from and headlong toward impending breakdown. Take for example a series of sculptures from 1989, each consisting of a wire basket filled with non sequitur supplies, collected appendages –camera cases, jumper cables –severed from the endeavors they're meant to aid. Each basket appears like a cross between a toolbox and a trash can (the reference to homelessness here is made more direct in an early work from 1986, which employs not a basket but a shopping cart). Though

drawing mostly on new, functional hardware, Noland's industry nevertheless seems doomed to failure, in part because she uses only auxiliary items and replacement parts, a vocabulary of temporary solutions and makeshift repairs. She seems intent on fixing something that can never work, staying on the job when there is no job to do. What we're left with is the material expression of hope against hope.

Dominated by things ancillary and portable, Noland's work still conveys a sense of monumentality, of scale and expansiveness. The incomplete networks of handrails, the gates, the occasional units of chain-link and fencing, all combine to recall the horizons and vistas of big-sky country. The installations feel as archaic as they do ephemeral, like vast landscapes seen from the window of a passing car. This is especially true of those installations in which Noland stacks hundreds of Budweiser six-packs along the walls, erecting sheer cliffs at the base of which shorter rows and pyramids of beer cans are ordered. Presented here is an image of overwhelming intoxication and, at the same time, incredible waste, the whole mighty edifice destined to be chugged and pissed away; and, behind that, another image, that of the eroded canyons of the American West.

The landscapes these works evoke have been made symbols of America's majesty —freshly clawed landscapes such as the Grand Canyon, providing everlasting proof of His hand in the creation of this country, even as the erosion that

crafted them promises eventually to turn them to dust. Recent art linked with these landscapes would include Robert Smithson's entropic earthworks and, before that, the energetic canvases of Abstract Expressionism. Noland somehow manages to entwine the contrasting characteristics of both in her installations, so that they appear at once fossilized and protean. She too superimposes the geological and the cultural, but the landmarks she seems most enthralled by are more secular: her prime referent is the crash site.

Actual photos of car wrecks and airline disasters have begun to crop up in Noland's latest metallurgy. This is where the road to nowhere ends, where the biker's journey is neither completed nor given up on but rather cut down in midstride, a terminal work in progress. Off course and out of control, locomotion no longer serves as a means toward an end but becomes an event in itself, a fiery crescendo of unbridled expenditure. To burn up the road, to die behind the wheel—these are the cherished images by which our culture pays its final respects to the fated pioneer. (Think of the turbo-incineration of the Challenger astronauts, whom then-president Ronald Reagan eulogized as having, at the moment of death, "touched the face of God.") The accident site is the one mark the speed demon leaves behind, and Noland treats it as a quintessential national monument. American flags fly throughout her work, though they're never raised high, appearing instead folded on rails or draped over hardware

—Old Glory at half-mast, decorating both a celebration and a funeral, an accomplishment and a sacrifice.

Among the things Noland seems determined yet unable to fully construct is an updated mythology of the frontiersman, shuffling into her jigsaw-puzzle artwork wayward props, stock characters, bits of costume, and written anecdotes pertaining to the Wild West. On the many aluminum panels and sheets of paper heaped into her rooms, she prints pictures of fatal joyrides, of lone cowboys and deserted log cabins; there are texts about the history of guns, references to Vietnam. Tossed into the pile of tripods and other paraphernalia that make up *Celebrity Trash Spill*, 1989, is a copy of *The New York Post* blaring news of Abbie Hoffman's suicide. Each piece of information reads like an outtake from a once ambitious project gone awry, a crusade that marches on zombielike without the idealism that once guided it. Noland seizes on two zombie crusaders in particular—in a number of installations Patty Hearst and Lee Harvey Oswald strike confrontational poses, Hearst shown in a black beret, leveling a machine gun in front of a Symbionese Liberation Army banner, Oswald at the moment of his assassination, hunching forward, fists raised like a prizefighter. Both represent implosive centers of attention, broken compasses leading the rebel charge—they're media figureheads even though they face the camera like deer staring into oncoming headlights. Twisted and two-faced, at once heroes and victims,

Hearst and Oswald are action figures who've lost control of their actions. (Indeed the more they act, the larger the web of puppet strings to which they seem attached.)

Dream-seekers on an increasingly aimless pilgrimage through a landscape of rapidly decaying symbols—such is the portrait Noland renders of life in America. It's as if she had taken Smithson's esthetic of decay and applied it like a vacuum hose to the brave new commodity world of Pop art, sucking the latter's recreational visions (with which Noland shares her cars, flags, and beer) of its youthful optimism and athletic physique. But there's another, earlier body of images Noland's work more strongly recalls. In 1958, beatnik shutterbug Robert Frank published *The Americans*, a book of photographs in which he, like Noland, sketched a world centered around the road and its attendant pit-stop culture. Everything in Frank's book appears angled toward some unreachable horizon, people looking away from each other into the distance, as if there were some place they all needed to get to, or away from, even though their mobility only seems to worsen a pervasive sense of waiting, either for the day when they actually do beat the odds or, more likely, when the odds catch up. Like Noland, Frank documents a social twilight zone, a life spent in permanent exile, oblivion as our Manifest Destiny.

Combining the two artists' projects is not just the road but the excruciating grayness they cast over all their work. As Vince Leo notes in a recent catalogue essay, Frank made his photographs on

overcast days, which “replaced the possibilities and eventful drama embodied in directional light with an ambient grey visibility.”(1) Like the space through which Frank’s characters orbit, Noland’s rooms are dominated by a silver pall, by chrome plating and aluminum. Such decor conjures up a purgatorial state between the light of day and the dark of night, in which nothing is able to emerge into the one or recede into the other, everything trapped in a seemingly endless hall of fogged mirrors.

Chrome and aluminum are perhaps America’s richest symbolic materials, more capable than stone, brick, or steel of grounding our culture’s myths. The matter-of-fact reality of these metals appears to have been transformed into something more indeterminate: chrome bestows the glossiness of eternal youth, turning heavy metal into speed metal, its surface miraculously wiped clean of the marks and stains of history. Little wonder then that the culture of the road is covered in chrome —on hubcaps, bumpers, handlebars, gas tanks, exhaust pipes; on truckstop lunch counters, spurs, gun barrels, jackknives. Or that aluminum panels bracket one of the most emblematic of Pop art’s mythscapes, James Rosenquist’s *The F-111*, from 1965. To a certain extent, it’s possible to see Pop’s vivid projections as placed between mute gray parentheses, between Frank’s sunless roadsides and Smithson’s eroded dirtworks. “They bring to mind the Ice Age rather than the Golden Age,” Smithson once wrote of his art and that of his peers. Which recalls yet another classic road

movie, also pivoted around a Technicolor promised land and circumscribed by conflicting feelings of longing and resignation, by an endless road and gray skies —a movie called *The Wizard of Oz*.

In the dim voids of Noland's silver panoramas, it's possible to detect the promises America finds itself clinging to even as it knows they're empty. We're back in Kansas, under the dark clouds of the Ice Age, but we still insist on looking off into the distance, imagining what lies at the sunny end of the endless road. It's as if Noland were trying to depict in her work what she sees on that far horizon —as if she began with the same aluminum paneling as Rosenquist did, but can't seem to find any dreams that'll stick to its surface. In excavating *The Good Life*, she arrives at something closer to the survivalist's gray bunker.

That she keeps trying is significant, though. Pop art might have come and gone, but we remain a society of controlled consumption, the main difference being that consumption's become all the more controlled. That was the agenda of the '80s, of Reagan/Bush: to make our service economy more like military or religious service, a goal achieved through the official sanctioning of runaway economic injustice, increased unemployment, decreased entitlements, resegregation, union busting, urban oblivion, etc. Not to mention the creation of inconceivable debt in every sector, which has condemned the citizenry to a seemingly unfulfillable symbolic contract, an endless obligation. The lush futurism that characterizes much of Pop art has come to reveal

an underside of surplus lack and dead ends. And so the classic American road movie, a story of getting ahead and getting what you want, appears in Noland's art as a bankrupt production. Its symbols, heroes, and settings have all but faded away, leaving behind perhaps the most sublime American landscape of all: a blank silver screen, the void behind the promise, a desolate highway on which we imagine ourselves lost, searching, running on empty, yet still running.

1. Vince Leo, *Funf amerikanische Fotografen und Edward Hopper*, eds. Georg-W. Koltzsch and Heinz Liesbrock, exhibition catalogue (Essen: Museum Folkwang Essen, 1992), 162.



SCENE & HERD

RECENT | ARCHIVE

- Linda Yablonsky at a gala for LA MoCA
- Elizabeth Schambelan on Kutlug Ataman at Istanbul Modern
- Keelen Wilson-Goddie on Former West
- David Velasco at Phillips de Pury, Sotheby's, and Christie's evening sales
- Linda Yablonsky at an opening for John Currin and Performa's Red Party
- Keelen Wilson-Goddie on "Speak Memory" at Townhouse

Art Los Angeles Contemporary



How the West Was Won

LOS ANGELES 11.19.10



Left: Collector Eli Broad with artist Doug Aitken. Right: A compuncher at the LA MoCA gala. (All photos: Linda Yablonsky)

WHERE HAVE ALL THE BOHEMIANS GONE? Not to Los Angeles, a city once so jeans and T-shirt casual that it always felt like summer camp. Now even its artists are starting to look as if they live in New York. Those attending last Thursday's opening for Doug Aitken at Regen Projects—including Cathy Opie, Walead Beshty, Laura Owens, and Thomas Demand—appeared only slightly less style-conscious or prosperous than the barbered and bejeweled collectors around them. Aitken, on the other hand, was attired in a bright madras plaid shirt with a label that said, HELLO, MY NAME IS DOUG stuck onto it.

During the reception, he stayed in the hallway under his new terrarium SEX sign, talking to friends and supporters such as Jeffrey Deitch, whose obvious weight loss since becoming director of LA's Museum of Contemporary Art he attributed to daily uphill runs in Griffith Park, not anxiety. (That would be too New York.) So, Aitken didn't see all the stilllife-hueled women nick their way through the enliterated ruins of his

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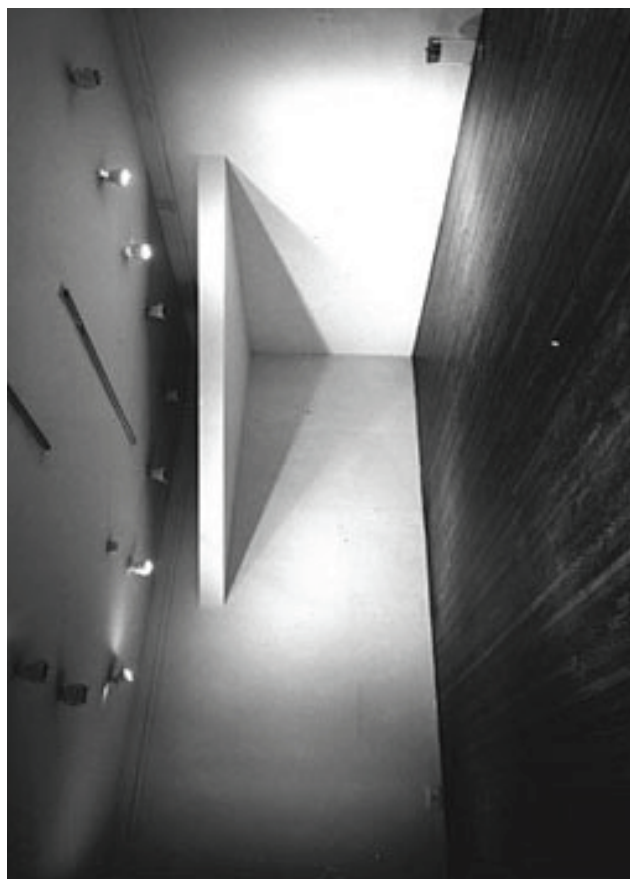
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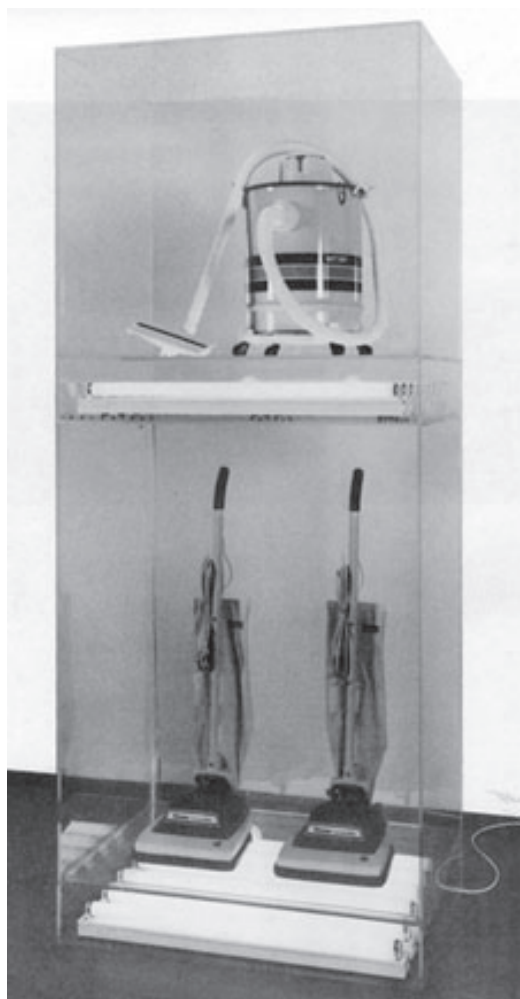
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