

# ONCURATING.org

Issue 20 / October 2013

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# Total Abstraction

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Tommy Støckel

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# Contents

04

## **Editorial**

Amber Hickey, Dorothee Richter,  
Lindsey V. Sharman, and Silvia Simoncelli

07

## **Abstract Possible: The Zurich Test**

Amber Hickey and Lindsey V. Sharman

13

## **Nature of Abstract Art**

Meyer Shapiro

25

## **Abstract**

Liam Gillick

29

## **Tommy Støckel**

interviewed by Marina Lopes Coelho

34

## **Wade Guyton**

interviewed by Silvia Simoncelli

38

## **Carte Blanche**

Damian Navarro with a text  
by Véronique Ribordy

42

## **Power and Necessity of Abstraction in Marx**

Roberto Nigro

47

## **New Markets and Forms of Capital in Art**

Dorothee Richter

62

## **Talking about Abstraction ...**

Maria Lind in conversation  
with Silvia Simoncelli

68

## **Beyond Reflection: Radical Pedagogy and the Ethics of Art Sponsorship**

Amber Hickey

73

## **Curatorial Outsourcing: Curate Local**

Lindsey V. Sharman

77

## **A Question of Funding**

Liam Gillick, Goldin+Senneby,  
Tommy Støckel, Stefan Wagner  
interviewed by  
Melanie Buchel, Marina Lopes Coelho  
and Silvia Simoncelli

87

## **Imprint**

# Editorial – Total Abstraction

## Amber Hickey, Dorothee Richter, Lindsey V. Sharman, Silvia Simoncelli

This issue of *OnCurating, Total Abstraction* began in 2011 as one of the manifestations of the Zurich episode of the exhibition project *Abstract Possible. The Zurich Test*, curated by Maria Lind mediated and produced by students of the ZHdK Postgraduate Programme in Curating, which was held at White Space in Zurich between May and June 2011. The exhibition project *Abstract Possible* intended to explore different key characteristics of abstraction – intended as formal, economic and as “withdrawal”. It travelled in a variety of forms to different venues, before arriving for its last episode in Stockholm between January 2011 and April 2012, where it was presented at Tensta Konsthall, Bukowskis Auction House and the Centre for Fashion Studies at the University of Stockholm. This issue began as a close cooperation of the students Lindsey V. Sharman (now art curator for the University of Calgary in the Founders’ Gallery at The Military Museum, Calgary) and Amber Hickey, (now PhD researcher at the University of California Santa Cruz). The material was then reviewed and discussed by Dorothee Richter and Silvia Simoncelli, both lecturers at the Postgraduate Programme in Curating, Zurich, alongside a workshop on “Curating and Art Market(s)” in September 2013.

Initially intended as strictly developing the topic of formal abstraction, which was addressed in the Zurich show by artists Wade Guyton and Tommy Stöckel, this issue of *OnCurating* has grown into a broader reflection, incorporating the urgent theme of funding, ethics, and precarity in the art world. As such themes are recurrent in Lind’s practice, she decided to openly challenge them when organising one part of the Stockholm project in the form of an exhibition, at Bukowskis Auction House, with the works of the participating artists to be sold at fixed prices and her fee for setting up the selection to be devolved to the funding of the book *Contemporary Art and Its Commercial Markets: A Report on Current Conditions and Future Scenarios*, which she edited with Olav Velthuis. A move which, while being consistent with Lind’s attitude of institutional critique, has generated much debate, including criticism, Bukowskis Auction House being affiliated with Lundin Petroleum, a controversial Swedish oil company. What Lind created was an almost paradoxical funding scenario, with artists offering their work for sale at the exhibition, and therefore funding the auction house directly and her project indirectly. While it had been devised as a critique on cultural policies – an attitude some observers, such as the culture blog *tsnoK.se*, recognised – Lind’s polemical gesture generated rather a debate on morals, which distracted the discussion and possibly negatively influenced its outcomes.

Lind’s gesture called for a deeper investigation on the side of those who had been involved in the Zurich episode. Exceeding the first reading of Lind’s move as a comment on the continued rise of corporate funding and other forms of private

sponsorship throughout Europe, the Stockholm episode urged us to widen the horizon of our commitment.

Abstraction showed its hideous face in the proceedings of the project: “money for Marx”, as Terry Eagleton explains, “is idealist through and through, a realm of chimerical fantasy in which all identity is ephemeral and any object may be transmuted at a stroke to any other.”<sup>1</sup> Capitalism estranges people and goods from any social bond and replaces social relations with abstract exchange value, up to the point where nothing is secure from these mechanisms, no artefact, no friendships, no working relations. According to this vision, Sven Lütticken defines abstract art, “as perhaps the (post-) modern art par excellence – its ‘windowless monads’ showing the abstract nature of society by refusing to represent its glimmering surfaces, or even its dark underside, giving back a blank stare rather than attempting to adjust traditional representation to a post-traditional world.”<sup>2</sup> While becoming the ultimate commodity, art includes and neutralizes critiques, with a *détournement* which is well explained by Terry Eagleton:

“The commodity as we have seen in the work of Marx, is transgressive, promiscuous, polymorphous; in its sublime self-expansiveness, its levelling passion to exchange with another of its kind, (...) Traversing with superb indifference the divisions of class, sex and race, of high and low, past and present, the commodity appears as an anarchic, iconoclastic force which mocks the obsessive rankings of traditional culture even as it in some sense depends upon them to secure the stable conditions for its own operations. Like much postmodernist culture, the commodity integrates high and low; but how progressive a gesture this is is radically ambiguous.”<sup>3</sup>

In this sense we would like to use this platform and argue that more than morals, what is at stake, is the position of culture in contemporary late capitalism and therefore the relevant question would rather be how the ambivalence could be (re)-presented and how a position could be formulated under the existing economic circumstances.

Being involved in one of the manifestations of a process of exhibition making that has addressed some key questions in cultural production and generated intense reactions, we too decided to take a closer look at the themes of economic abstraction, sponsoring in the arts and models of labour distribution. *Total Abstraction* explores these topics through a diverse collection of contributions: philosopher Roberto Nigro introduces the question of contemporary materialism in relation to abstraction, Dorothee Richter explores *Curating and Art Market(s)*, Amber Hickey brings the argument into an international context by reflecting on the Tate’s long-running acceptance of sponsorship from BP; Lindsey V. Sharman’s *Curatorial Outsourcing* is an insightful peek into a practice that is becoming increasingly common in the world of exhibition-making, where artists and curators follow rules of a post-Fordist neoliberal working situation, voluntarily or not.

Retrospectively, we got in contact with artists Tommy Støckel and Liam Gillick, both involved in the Bukowskis exhibition, and discussed with them funding strategies in exhibition making. We also decided to take a closer look at Switzerland by interviewing curator Stefan Wagner, reflecting on the present situation of funding for independent art spaces in the country. Finally, an interview with Maria Lind by Silvia Simoncelli discusses the whole scenario with some temporal distance.

The initial motivations for this issue are still present. Our long-term collaboration with Maria Lind to realize *Abstract Possible: The Zurich Test*, has generated the content presented in the first part of the issue: interviews with participating artists Tommy Støckel and Wade Guyton offer two comparatively formal perspectives on the topic of abstraction, Liam Gillick’s text *Abstraction* and Meyer Shapiro’s *The Nature of Abstract Art* present a twofold interpretation of the field, while Damian Navarro’s inventive *Carte Blanche*, contributes a rather *concrete* addition to this collection.

**Footnotes**

- 1 Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 1990, p. 201.
- 2 Sven Lütticken, “Editorial”, *Texte zur Kunst*, n. 69, Abstraction, March 2007.
- See also: <http://svenlutticken.blogspot.de/2008/03/texte-zur-kunst-69-abstraction.html>.
- 3 Terry Eagleton, cit., p. 374.



**Captions**

*Abstract Possible: The Zurich Test*, poster and flyer. Graphic Design Concept by Project Projects New York. Graphic Design *Abstract Possible: The Zurich Test* adapted by Jeannine Herrmann. Picture: Jeannine Herrmann.

# Abstract Possible

## Amber Hickey and Lindsey V. Sharman

*Abstract Possible*, a series of exhibitions realised in various locations, aims to investigate the many forms and manifestations of abstraction in contemporary art and culture focusing on three main themes: economic abstraction, withdrawal, and formal abstraction. The emphasis of the Zurich edition, *The Zurich Test*, was placed on the latter.

Paper, inkjet print, polystyrene, and styrofoam formed Tommy Støckel's *Exposed Superstructure*, one of only two pieces featured in *Abstract Possible: The Zurich Test*. Wade Guyton's work *Untitled* was a plywood construction, one centimetre high and painted glossy black, covering the entire floor of the gallery.

*Abstract Possible: The Trailer*, the first iteration of the project, was realised from November 2010 to January 2011 in Malmö Kunsthall, Sweden. *Abstract Possible: The Tamayo Take* took place at the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City from March to August 2011 and greatly expanded the discourse of the topic. The series features contributions by Doug Ashford, Claire Barclay, José León Cerrillo, Matias Faldbakken, Claudia Fernández, Liam Gillick, Goldin+Senneby, Wade Guyton, Gunilla Klingberg, David Maljkovic, Mai-Thu Perret, Seth Price, Walid Raad, Emily Roysdon, Salón, Bojan Sarcevic, Tommy Støckel, Ultra-Red, and Anton Vidokle.

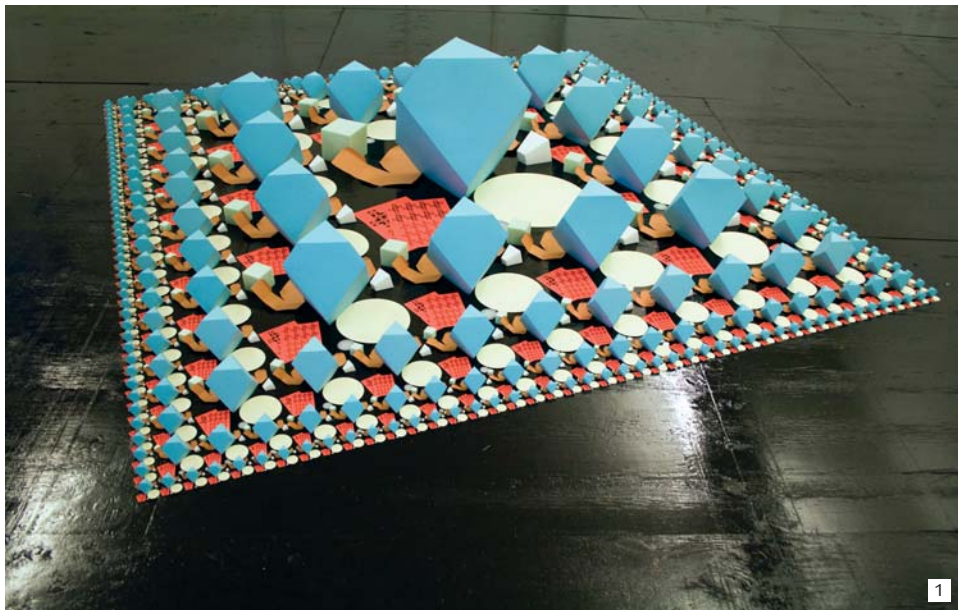
In his text *Cubism and Abstract Art*, which was pivotal to this exhibition, Alfred Barr outlined two main threads dividing abstract artists into two opposing approaches to abstraction. He describes abstraction as either "intellectual, structural, architectonic geometrical, rectilinear and classical in its austerity and dependence on logic an calculation" as illustrated by artists such as Cezanne, Seurat and the cubists and constructivists or "intuitional, emotional rather than intellectual," decorative, romantic, and irrational, as in the work of Kandinsky.<sup>1</sup>

With the rise in popularity of photography in the early 1900s other artistic practices were freed from mimetic imagery, and where the obvious "truth" was put forward by photographs, deeper, more hidden truths were explored by abstraction. Touting the possibilities of abstraction for artists, Ibram Lassaw exclaimed that "the artist no longer feels that he is representing reality, he is actually making reality... reality is something stranger and greater than merely photographic rendering can show."<sup>1</sup> For artists such as Wade Guyton and Tommy Støckel working with abstraction removes the dependence on the 'real' world, liberating art from its position as a mere practice of imitation. Abstraction does not need to draw from the reality of the natural world for inspiration, its depictions become autonomous rather than reproductions or forgeries of nature.

Beyond formal abstraction, as described by Barr and many artists and theorists from the turn of the twentieth century onward, withdrawal and economic abstraction were key readings of the term in the *Abstract Possible* exhibitions. The

fascination with abstraction has come into focus behind a movement towards absolute abstraction, or as Marx labelled it, capital, that which turns anything into a commodity, art included.

Spawned by the Great Depression, John Maynard Keynes articulated the main features of what came to be known as Keynesian Economics in his 1936 book entitled, *The General Theory of Employment, Business and Money*. In contrast to Marx's work related to the value of products, which focused on the idea that value is based on the costs of raw materials and the cost of labour, Keynes indicated that value is decided solely by the consumer; the popular demand of the product. As Keynesian Economics gained influence in the Western world, particularly in the United States and Great Britain, economic value became increasingly abstracted.<sup>2</sup> Although the recent economic recession has undoubtedly pushed the instances of monetary abstraction 'into relief,' as a backdrop to *The Zurich Test*, Zurich's financial industry guards a 'healthy,' although not fully 'recovered,' culture of economic abstraction.



Abstract, coming from the Latin *abstrahere* (to draw away from) quite literally means to withdraw. In art this often refers to artists' rejection of the accepted institutional framework of creation and display. This can trigger the formation of self-run initiatives which function against or parallel to gallery and museum systems. Artists for many generations have seen the traditional gallery or museum space as restrictive of their work and many see its structure as completely contradictory to their ideals. While not only restrictive, these accepted institutions are also simply incapable of housing, controlling, or displaying certain projects. Many artists abjure from this system and believe they can function more effectively on its peripheries. This form of abstraction is often encountered within manifestations of both formal abstraction and economic abstraction when accepted artistic or commercial practices are rejected.

*Abstract Possible: The Zurich Test* withdrew in many ways from the accepted models of exhibition making and art making. The curatorial process was abstracted, and even the artistic processes themselves were subjected to withdrawal. Wade Guyton had almost no part in the production of his artwork and only saw the piece through images. It was funded and manufactured by the twelve students of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating who facilitated the entire exhibition, serving as remote studio assistants' for Guyton and fundraisers for the show.



The collaborative methods practiced during the preparation for *Abstract Possible: The Zurich Test* were strikingly suited to the title of the project, which involved two artists exhibiting, Maria Lind acting as a curator, and a group of post-graduate students (Amber Hickey, Lindsey V. Sharman, Candida Pestana, Marina Lopes Coelho, Silvia Simoncelli, Jeannine Herrmann, Corinne Rinaldis, Milena Brendle, Garance Massart-Blum, Melanie Büchel, Catrina Sonderegger, Sonja Hug) acting as producers, mediators, writers, organizers and fundraisers. This model of frequent role-reversal and uncertainty is perfectly in line with the topic of abstraction. Typical hierarchies within many art world working conditions were fluid - at one moment confirmed and at the next broken down. Perceptions of power held by the worker, apprentice, or outsourcer were often boiling below the surface. Stability was non-existent but, rather than hindering the project, these features seemed to feed it.

Tommy Støckel's work drew the viewer into the space, and rested on Guyton's floor using it as a pedestal while at the same time requiring its support. At first, Støckel's work may look like a 3D rendition of a game of Tetris, but behind his complex geometric forms are concerns that far surpass geeky fascination with video games. Støckel readily admits his weakness for science fiction novels from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but he is equally concerned with modernist thinking, subverting the axioms associated with creation, and using nature as inspiration and as a theme of his artistic practice and discourse.<sup>3</sup> This fascination with the human-made and the natural informs his works and results in a unique presence of both influences, with neither overpowering the other, but rather engaged in a respectful, symbiotic relationship within the work. His complex geometric forms are quintessential examples of visual complexity within the seemingly simple. Støckel often refers to his work as *maquettes*, or unfinished models, rather than as fully fledged sculptures, highlighting the "DIY" aspects of his work.

Although *Exposed Superstructure* is one of Støckel's older works, originally shown in Charlottenburg in 2006, it accurately represents some of the most consistent values throughout his oeuvre. The piece, an arrangement of precise, geometric forms ranging in size, explores notions of how multiplicity and small adjustments of scale can drastically affect perception and reveal otherwise unapparent intricacies in form. The work features a key component of one of the most discussed prints in art history, *Dürer's Solid* in Albrecht Dürer's *Melancholia I*. The use of this component initiates an exploration of themes such as institutional structure under the guise of a playful experimentation in contemporary urban forms and references. *Dürer's Solid* is a 8-surface polyhedron, originally featured in the 1513 print. The shape, on which some of the 2191 pieces of *Exposed Superstructure* are modelled after, is an unsolved mystery in the world of art and mathematics, as the exact measurements of its eight sides have never been proven. Støckel uses the most widely accepted educated-guess of these measurements as the framework for his sculpture, at once hinting at the uncertainties that are commonplace within contemporary lifestyles. The title of the work references Støckel's own position in society, producing artworks that are an integral part of the growing superstructure of cultural output. The title furthermore hints at the influence of Marx and Althusser, although Støckel insists the connection was not intentional. When asked about the significance of the title, he stated that he was inspired by the title of a Star Wars cartoon, and had no intention of referencing Marx. He finds it over-evaluative when people place too much political significance on his work. Perhaps Støckel is distancing himself from manipulating the viewer and, like Hans Hoffman, believes that "burdening the canvas with propaganda or history does not make a painting a better work of art."<sup>4</sup> When the piece is situated on top of Wade Guyton's

*Untitled (floor piece)* the political connotations become evermore explicit as Guyton's floor directly addresses issues relating to economy and hierarchy.

Simplicity is also key to the work of Wade Guyton, who typically executes large scale artworks using modest materials. The piece he exhibited in *Abstract Possible: The Zurich Test* greeted viewers as they entered and forced them into interaction the entire time they stayed in the space. The work, modelled after his previous studio floor is a casual yet compelling nod towards the methods of production used during times of economic strain, and shows how these methods can themselves become forms. The floor, originally created out of necessity and determined by the young artists meagre finances, was made out of the most inexpensive materials he could find. It formed the very support of all work taking place in the artist's studio, and in Zurich the piece created the support for the entire exhibition. Previous manifestations of the floor have utilised it as a base for other works by Guyton. *Abstract Possible* exhibited *Untitled* independently of other works in the artist's oeuvre for the first time.

Each time *Untitled* is exhibited, it is to be reconstructed, subjecting it to the material and economic situations of each location and building complexity within the piece every time it is shown. Realising the exhibition in Zurich presented its own unique challenges for the work. A haven of wealth, security, and high standards of living that are difficult to reach for 'outsiders,' Zurich is not the location *par excellence* to make art happen on a low budget. Regulations and standards, rather than in-kind acts and improvisation, prevail. This situation offers a stark contrast to the conditions in which Guyton first showed this work. Due to its relatively low quality, the wood that Guyton usually sources for his 'floor piece' is not available for purchase in Switzerland. This resulted in the creation of a work that made explicit the monumentalisation of the floor when it becomes art, rather than the sum of the materials which created it.

It is difficult, not useless, to categorize Wade Guyton or his work within one medium. His work not only challenges accepted notions within the art world, but accepted notions of production. Guyton's concern is with the mode of material production, whether it be production with a printer, or production of materials such as pre-finished canvas, mass produced plywood, or dry wall. He uses these materials and plays with their irregularities, which, as claimed by their production methods, should be completely uniform. This self proclaimed 'lazy artist' often outsources his works and believes that other people or other mechanisms can create more compelling work than his own hands.<sup>5</sup> He acts as concept creator, not as builder and outsources not out of necessity but out of curiosity. When creating works he often only presents the concept and then allows, for example, the staff at a printing shop to interpret his colours and his intentions as they like. He indulges in the unknown and enjoys sharing artistic licence whether he is appropriating images, or letting his own ideas develop in the hands of others.

However, Guyton has a clear idea of how his work should be exhibited and plays a large role in its display. As noted, Guyton will often recreate the floor of his studio in galleries acting to connect the works with their place of production. The gallery space is also often outfitted with a printer that creates more printer paintings during the exhibition, allowing visitors to the gallery another view into the artistic process. The printer paintings fall from the printer onto the floor, itself a large monochrome. These two actions, paintings falling on the floor and visitors actually walking on and in essence 'destroying' an artwork, directly undermine accepted notions of the artist as genius and the artwork as sacred.

When examining the work of Wade Guyton one realizes all that he critiques is also perpetuated. He directly critiques the art market, while being very comfortably situated within it. Complex in its simplicity, even the concept of the death of painting is both championed and challenged in the work of Wade Guyton.

Formal abstraction is explored in Guyton and Støckel's works through both artists' attempts to shape their works through the exploration of basic materials, and methodical construction. Both artists' bodies of work depict what can not be seen by searching in the natural. Neither artist claims to be revolutionary. Both works in *Abstract Possible: The Zurich Test* do however have political undertones, and one can only speculate about the reasons the artists refrain from highlighting the politics of their work.

The many layers of abstraction in this project go much deeper than the surface level of the works presented. Formal abstraction, economic abstraction, and withdrawal are found in every level of the working conditions and collaborations that made *Abstract Possible: The Zurich Test* possible. The production and result of *The Zurich Test*, as in the works of Støckel and Guyton, is more compelling than a mere sum of its parts.



### Notes

1 Ibram Lassaw, "On inventing Our Own Art", first published in *American Abstract Artists' Yearbook*, 1938, reprinted in Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory. 1900-2000*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2003, p. 398.

2 This is debatable, depending on whose definition of economic abstraction one references. For instance, David Graeber would argue that the abstraction of economic exchange existed far before the 1900s (David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, Melville House, 2012).

3 "Tommy Støckel's Art of Tomorrow." <http://futuresologyprogramme.org/tommy-st%C3%B8ckel/>. Accessed 13.03.2011.

4 Hans Hoffman, "On the Aims of Art", first published in *The Fortnight*, Campbell, CA, vol. 1, no. 13, 26 February 1932, reprinted in Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory. 1900-2000*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2003, p. 373

5 Linda Yablonsky "Artifacts: Wade Guyton's Monument to Epson", *T Magazine*, *New York Times Blog* May 6, 2010, accessed April 6, 2011. <http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/05/06/artifacts-wade-guytons-monument-to-epson/>.

### Captions

1 Tommy Støckel, *Exposed Superstructure*, 2006. Paper, inkjet print, polystyrene, styrofoam, 45 x 230 x 230 cm. Installed on Wade Guyton's Untitled (floor piece) at *Abstract Possible: the Zurich Test*, Whitespace, Zurich 2011. Photo: Marina Lopes Coelho.

2 *Abstract Possible: the Zurich Test*, exhibition opening, curator's talk. Photo: Amber Hickey.

**Amber Hickey** is an artist, organizer, educator, and PhD researcher at the University of California Santa Cruz. Her research focuses include art activism and the visibility of violence. She has lectured at Scripps College Claremont, the California Institute of Integral Studies, and UC Santa Cruz, among others. Amber is a founding member of the UCSC Global Nuclear Awareness Coalition and on the editorial board of their forthcoming *Working Papers Series*. She recently received the UCSC Dean's Award for Excellence in the Arts, which funded research regarding the visual records and social history of nuclear weapons in Los Alamos, New Mexico. She is the editor of *A Guidebook of Alternative News* and is currently working on an interactive archive that will expand the content of the project by facilitating contributions from the public, which was part of her MAS Project in the MAS Curating, Zürich, [www.curating.org](http://www.curating.org).

[amberhickey.com](http://amberhickey.com) / [alternativenews.net](http://alternativenews.net)

**Lindsey V. Sharman** was born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (CA). Sharman has studied art history and curating in Canada, England, Switzerland, Austria and MAS Curating, Zürich, [www.curating.org](http://www.curating.org). Most recently, Sharman was appointed to a research position with the University of Calgary as curator of art for *The Founders' Gallery* at *The Military Museums* where she explores contemporary issues surrounding art and conflict.

# Nature of Abstract Art

## by Meyer Shapiro

Before there was an art of abstract painting, it was already widely believed that the value of a picture was a matter of colors and shapes alone. Music and architecture were constantly held up to painters as examples of a pure art which did not have to imitate objects but derived its effects from elements peculiar to itself. But such ideas could not be readily accepted, since no one had yet seen a painting made up of colors and shapes, representing nothing. If pictures of the objects around us were often judged according to qualities of form alone, it was obvious that in doing so one was distorting or reducing the pictures; you could not arrive at these paintings simply by manipulating forms. And in so far as the objects to which these forms belonged were often particular individuals and places, real or mythical figures, bearing the evident marks of a time, the pretension that art was above history through the creative energy or personality of the artist was not entirely clear. In abstract art, however, the pretended autonomy and absoluteness of the aesthetic emerged in a concrete form. Here, finally, was an art of painting in which only aesthetic elements seem to be present.

Abstract art had therefore the value of a practical demonstration. In these new paintings the very processes of designing and inventing seemed to have been brought on to the canvas; the pure form once masked by an extraneous content was liberated and could now be directly perceived. Painters who do not practice this art have welcomed it on just this ground, that it strengthened their conviction of the absoluteness of the aesthetic and provided them a discipline in pure design. Their attitude toward past art was also completely changed. The new styles accustomed painters to the vision of colors and shapes as disengaged from objects and created an immense confraternity of works of art, cutting across the barriers of time and place. They made it possible to enjoy the remotest arts, those in which the represented objects were no longer intelligible, even the drawings of children and madmen, and especially primitive arts with drastically distorted figures, which had been regarded as artless curios even by insistent aesthetic critics. Before this time Ruskin could

say in his *Political Economy of Art*, in calling for the preservation of medieval and Renaissance works that "in Europe alone, pure and precious ancient art exists, for there is none in America, none in Asia, none in Africa." What was once considered monstrous, now became pure form and pure expression, the aesthetic evidence that in art feeling and thought are prior to the represented world. The art of the whole world was now available on a single unhistorical and universal plane as a panorama of the formalizing energies of man.

These two aspects of abstract painting, the exclusion of natural forms and the unhistorical universalizing of the qualities of art, have a crucial importance for the general theory of art. Just as the discovery of non-Euclidian geometry gave a powerful impetus to the view that mathematics was independent of experience, so abstract painting cut at the roots of the classic ideas of artistic imitation. The analogy of mathematics was in fact present to the minds of the apologists of abstract art; they have often referred to non-Euclidian geometry in defense of their own position, and have even suggested an historical connection between them.

Today the abstractionists and their Surrealist offspring are more and more concerned with objects and the older claims of abstract art have lost the original force of insurgent convictions. Painters who had once upheld this art as the logical goal of the entire history of forms have refuted themselves in returning to the impure natural forms. The demands for liberty in art are no longer directed against a fettering tradition of nature; the aesthetic of abstraction has itself become a brake on new movements. Not that abstract art is dead, as its philistine enemies have been announcing for over twenty years; it is still practiced by some of the finest painters and sculptors in Europe, whose work shows a freshness and assurance that are lacking in the newest realistic art. The conception of a possible field of "pure art"—whatever its value—will not die so soon, though it may take on forms different from those of the last thirty years; and very likely the art that follows in the countries which have known abstraction will be

affected by it. The ideas underlying abstract art have penetrated deeply into all artistic theory, even of their original opponents; the language of absolutes and pure sources of art, whether of feeling, reason, intuition or the sub-conscious mind, appears in the very schools which renounce abstraction. "Objective" painters strive for "pure objectivity," for the object given in its "essence" and completeness, without respect to a viewpoint, and the Surrealists derive their images from pure thought, freed from the perversions of reason and everyday experience. Very little is written today—sympathetic to modern art—which does not employ this language of absolutes.

In this article I shall take as my point of departure Barr's recent book<sup>1</sup>, the best, I think, that we have in English on the movements now grouped as abstract art. It has the special interest of combining a discussion of general questions about the nature of this art, its aesthetic theories, its causes, and even the relation to political movements, with a detailed, matter-of-fact account of the different styles. But although Barr sets out to describe rather than to defend or to criticize abstract art, he seems to accept its theories on their face value in his historical exposition and in certain random judgments. In places he speaks of this art as independent of historical conditions, as realizing the underlying order of nature and as an art of pure form without content.

Hence if the book is largely an account of historical movements, Barr's conception of abstract art remains essentially unhistorical. He gives us, it is true, the dates of every stage in the various movements, as if to enable us to plot a curve, or to follow the emergence of the art year by year, but no connection is drawn between the art and the conditions of the moment. He excludes as irrelevant to its history the nature of the society in which it arose, except as an incidental obstructing or accelerating atmospheric factor. The history of modern art is presented as an internal, immanent process among the artists; abstract art arises because, as the author says, representational art had been exhausted. Out of boredom with "painting facts," the artists turned to abstract art as a pure aesthetic activity. "By a common and powerful impulse they were driven to abandon the imitation of natural appearance" just as the artists of the fifteenth century "were moved by a passion for imitating nature." The modern change, however, was "the logical and inevitable conclusion toward which art was moving.

This explanation, which is common in the studios and is defended by some writers in the name of the autonomy of art, is only one instance of a wider view that embraces every field of culture and even economy and politics. At its ordinary level the theory of exhaustion and reaction reduces history to the pattern of popular ideas on changes in fashion. People grow tired of one color and choose an opposite; one season the skirts are long, and then by reaction they are short. In the same way the present return to objects in painting is explained as the result of the exhaustion of abstract art. All the possibilities of the latter having been explored by Picasso and Mondrian, there is little left for the younger artists but to take up the painting of objects.

The notion that each new style is due to a reaction against a preceding is especially plausible to modern artists, whose work is so often a response to another work, who consider their art a free projection of an irreducible personal feeling, but must form their style in competition against others, with the obsessing sense of the originality of their work as a mark of its sincerity. Besides, the creators of new forms in the last century had almost always to fight against those who practiced the old; and several of the historical styles were formed in conscious opposition to another manner—Renaissance against Gothic, Baroque against Mannerism, Neo-classic against Rococo, etc.

The antithetic form of a change does not permit us, however, to judge a new art as a sheer reaction or as the inevitable response to the spending of all the resources of the old. No more than the succession of war and peace implies that war is due to an inherent reaction against peace and peace to a reaction against war. The energies required for the reaction, which sometimes has a drastic and invigorating effect on art, are lost sight of in such an account; it is impossible to explain by it the particular direction and force of the new movement, its specific moment, region and goals. The theory of immanent exhaustion and reaction is inadequate not only because it reduces human activity to a simple mechanical movement, like a bouncing ball, but because in neglecting the sources of energy and the condition of the field, it does not even do justice to its own limited mechanical conception. The opposite-ness of a reaction is often an artificial matter, more evident in the polemics between schools or in the schemas of formalistic historians than in the actual historical change. To supply a motor force to this physical history of styles (which pretends to be

antimechanical), they are reduced to a myth of the perpetual alternating motion of generations, each reacting against its parents and therefore repeating the motions of its grandparents, according to the "grandfather principle" of certain German historians of art. And a final goal, an unexplained but inevitable trend, a destiny rooted in the race or the spirit of the culture or the inherent nature of the art, has to be smuggled in to explain the large unity of a development that embraces so many reacting generations. The immanent purpose steers the reaction when an art seems to veer off the main path because of an overweighted or foreign element. Yet how many arts we know in which the extreme of some quality persists for centuries without provoking the corrective reaction. The "decay" of classical art has been attributed by the English critic, Fry, to its excessive cult of the human body, but this "decay" evidently lasted for hundreds of years until the moment was ripe for the Christian reaction. But even this Christian art, according to the same writer, was for two centuries indistinguishable from the pagan.

The broad reaction against an existing art is possible only on the ground of its inadequacy to artists with new values and new ways of seeing. But reaction in this internal, antithetic sense, far from being an inherent and universal property of culture, occurs only under impelling historical conditions. For we see that ancient arts, like the Egyptian, the work of anonymous craftsmen, persist for thousands of years with relatively little change, provoking few reactions to the established style; others grow slowly and steadily in a single direction, and still others, in the course of numerous changes, foreign intrusions and reactions preserve a common traditional character. From the mechanical theories of exhaustion, boredom and reaction we could never explain why the reaction occurred when it did. On the other hand, the banal divisions of the great historical styles in literature and art correspond to the momentous divisions in the history of society. If we consider an art that is near us in time and is still widely practiced, like Impressionism, we see how empty is the explanation of the subsequent arts by reaction. From a logical viewpoint the antithesis to Impressionism depends on how Impressionism is defined. Whereas the later schools attacked the Impressionists as mere photographers of sunshine, the contemporaries of Impressionism abused it for its monstrous unreality. The Impressionists were in fact the first painters of whom it was charged that their works made as little sense right side up as upside down. The movements after Impressionism take different directions, some

toward simplified natural forms, others toward their complete decomposition; both are sometimes described as historical reactions against Impressionism, one restoring the objects that Impressionism dissolved, the other restoring the independent imaginative activity that Impressionism sacrificed to the imitation of nature.

Actually, in the 1880's there were several aspects of Impressionism which could be the starting points of new tendencies and goals of reaction. For classicist painters the weakness of Impressionism lay in its unclarity, its destruction of definite linear forms; it is in this sense that Renoir turned for a time from Impressionism to Ingres. But for other artists at the same moment Impressionism was too casual and unmethodical; these, the neo-Impressionists, preserved the Impressionist colorism, carrying it even further in an unclassical sense, but also in a more constructive and calculated way. For still others, Impressionism was too photographic, too impersonal; these, the symbolists and their followers, required an emphatic sentiment and aesthetic activism in the work. There were finally artists for whom Impressionism was too unorganized, and their reaction underscored a schematic arrangement. Common to most of these movements after Impressionism was the absolutizing of the artist's state of mind or sensibility as prior to and above objects. If the Impressionists reduced things to the artist's sensations, their successors reduced them further to projections or constructions of his feelings and moods, or to "essences" grasped in a tense intuition.

The historical fact is that the reaction against Impressionism came in the 1800s before some of its most original possibilities had been realized. The painting of series of chromatic variations of a single motif (the *Haystacks*, the *Cathedral*) dates from the 1890's; and the *Water Lilies*, with their remarkable spatial forms, related in some ways to contemporary abstract art, belong to the twentieth century. The effective reaction against Impressionism took place only at a certain moment in its history and chiefly in France, though Impressionism was fairly widespread in Europe by the end of the century. In the 1880s, when Impressionism was beginning to be accepted officially, there were already several groups of young artists in France to whom it was uncongenial. The history of art is not, however, a history of single willful reactions, every new artist taking a stand opposite the last, painting brightly if the other painted dully, flattening if the other modelled, and distorting if the other was literal. The reactions were

deeply motivated in the experience of the artists, in a changing world with which they had to come to terms and which shaped their practice and ideas in specific ways.

The tragic lives of Gauguin and Van Gogh, their estrangement from society, which so profoundly colored their art, were no automatic reactions to Impressionism or the consequences of Peruvian or Northern blood. In Gauguin's circle were other artists who had abandoned a bourgeois career in their maturity or who had attempted suicide. For a young man of the middle class to wish to live by art mean a different thing in 1885 than in 1860. By 1885 only artists had freedom and integrity, but often they had nothing else. The very existence of Impressionism which transformed nature into a private, unformalized field for sensitive vision, shifting with the spectator, made painting an ideal domain of freedom; it attracted many who were tied unhappily to middle class jobs and moral standards, now increasingly problematic and stultifying with the advance of monopoly capitalism. But Impressionism in isolating the sensibility as a more or less personal, but dispassionate and still outwardly directed, organ of fugitive distinctions in distant dissolving clouds, water and sunlight, could no longer suffice for men who had staked everything on impulse and whose resolution to become artists was a poignant and in some ways demoralizing break with good society. With an almost moral fervor they transformed Impressionism into an art of vehement expression, of emphatic, brilliant, magnified, obsessing objects, or adjusted its coloring and surface pattern to dreams of a seasonless exotic world of idyllic freedom.

Early Impressionism, too, had a moral aspect. In its unconventionalized, unregulated vision, in its discovery of a constantly changing phenomenal outdoor world of which the shapes depended on the momentary position of the casual or mobile spectator, there was an implicit criticism of symbolic social and domestic formalities, or at least a norm opposed to these. It is remarkable how many pictures we have in early Impressionism of informal and spontaneous sociability, of breakfasts, picnics, promenades, boating trips, holidays and vacation travel. These urban idylls not only present the objective forms of bourgeois recreation in the 1860s and 1870s; they also reflect in the very choice of subjects and in the new aesthetic devices the conception of art as solely a field of individual enjoyment, without reference to ideas and motives, and they presuppose the cultivation of these pleasures as the highest field of free-

dom for an enlightened bourgeois detached from the official beliefs of his class. In enjoying realistic pictures of his surroundings as a spectacle of traffic and changing atmospheres, the cultivated *rentier* was experiencing in its phenomenal aspect that mobility of the environment, the market and of industry to which he owed his income and his freedom. And in the new Impressionist techniques which broke things up into finely discriminated points of color, as well as in the "accidental" momentary vision, he found, in a degree hitherto unknown in art, conditions of sensibility closely related to those of the urban promenade and the refined consumer of luxury goods.

As the contexts of bourgeois sociability shifted from community, family and church to commercialized or privately improvised forms—the streets, the cafes and resorts—the resulting consciousness of individual freedom involved more and more an estrangement from older ties; and those imaginative members of the middle class who accepted the norms of freedom, but lacked the economic means to attain them, were spiritually torn by a sense of helpless isolation in an anonymous indifferent mass. By 1880 the enjoying individual becomes rare in Impressionist art; only the private spectacle of nature is left. And in neo-Impressionism, which restores and even monumentalizes the figures, the social group breaks up into isolated spectators, who do not communicate with each other, or consists of mechanically repeated dances submitted to a preordained movement with little spontaneity.

The French artists of the 1880s and 1890s who attacked Impressionism for its lack of structure often expressed demands for salvation, for order and fixed objects of belief, foreign to the Impressionists as a group. The title of Gauguin's picture—"Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?"—with its interrogative form, is typical of this state of mind. But since the artists did not know the underlying economic and social causes of their own disorder and moral insecurity, they could envisage new stabilizing forms only as quasi-religious beliefs or as a revival of some primitive or highly ordered traditional society with organs for a collective spiritual life. This is reflected in their taste for medieval and primitive art, their conversions to Catholicism and later to "integral nationalism." The colonies of artists formed at this period, Van Gogh's project of a communal life for artists, are examples of this groping to reconstitute the pervasive human sociability that capitalism had destroyed. Even their theories of "composition"



-a traditional concept abandoned by the Impressionists—are related to their social views, for they conceive of composition as an assembly of objects bound together by a principle of order emanating, on the one hand, from the eternal nature of art, on the other, from the state of mind of the artist, but in both instances requiring a “deformation” of the objects. Some of them wanted a canvas to be like a church, to possess a hierarchy of forms, stationed objects, a prescribed harmony, preordained paths of vision, all issuing, however, from the artist’s feeling. In recreating the elements of community in their art they usually selected inert objects, or active objects without meaningful interaction except as colors and lines.

These problems are posed to some extent, though solved differently, even in the work of Seurat, whose relation to the economic development was in many ways distinct from that of the painters of the Symbolist and Synthetist groups. Instead of rebelling against the moral consequences of capitalism he attached himself like a contented engineer to its progressive technical side and accepted the popular forms of lower class recreation and commercialized entertainment as the subjects of a monumentalized art. From the current conceptions of technology he drew the norms of a methodical procedure in painting, bringing Impressionism up to date in the light of the latest findings of science.

There were, of course, other kinds of painting in France beside those described. But a detailed investigation of the movement of art would show, I think, that these, too, and even the conservative, academic painting were affected by the changed conditions of the time. The reactions against Impressionism, far from being inherent in the nature of art, issued from the responses that artists as artists made to the broader situation in which they found themselves, but which they themselves had not produced. If the tendencies of the arts after Impressionism toward an extreme subjectivism and abstraction are already evident in Impressionism, it is because the isolation of the individual and of the higher forms of culture from their older social supports, the renewed ideological oppositions of mind and nature, individual and society, proceed from social and economic causes which already existed before Impressionism and which are even sharper today. It is, in fact, a part of the popular attraction of Van Gogh and Gauguin that their work incorporates (and with a far greater energy and formal coherence than the works of other artists) evident longings, tensions and values

which are shared today by thousands who in one way or another have experienced the same conflicts as these artists.

The logical opposition of realistic and abstract art by which Barr explains the more recent change rests on two assumptions about the nature of painting, common in writing on abstract art: that representation is a passive mirroring of things and therefore essentially non-artistic, and that abstract art, on the other hand, is a purely aesthetic activity, unconditioned by objects and based on its own eternal laws. The abstract painter denounces representation of the outer world a ... mechanical process of the eye and the hand in which the artist’s feelings and imagination have little part. Or in a Platonic manner he opposes to the representation of objects, as a rendering of the surface aspect of nature, the practice of abstract design as a discovery of the “essence” or underlying mathematical order of things. He assumes further that the mind is most completely itself when it is independent of external objects. If he, nevertheless, values certain works of older naturalistic art, he sees in them only independent formal constructions; he overlooks the imaginative aspect of the devices for transposing the space of experience on to the space of the canvas, and the immense, historically developed, capacity to hold the world in mind. He abstracts the artistic qualities from the represented objects and their meanings, and looks on these as unavoidable impurities, imposed historical elements with which the artist was burdened and in spite of which he finally achieved his underlying, personal abstract expression. These views are thoroughly one-sided and rest on a mistaken idea of what a representation is. There is no passive, “photographic” representation in the sense described; the scientific elements of representation in older art—perspective, anatomy, light-and-shade—are ordering principles and expressive means as well as devices of rendering. All renderings of objects, no matter how exact they seem, even photographs, proceed from values, methods and viewpoints which somehow shape the image and often determine its contents. On the other hand, there is no “pure art,” unconditioned by experience; all fantasy and formal construction, even the random scribbling of the hand, are shaped by experience and by nonaesthetic concerns. This is clear enough from the example of the Impressionists mentioned above. They could be seen as both photographic and fantastic, according to the viewpoint of the observer. Even their motifs of nature were denounced as meaningless beside the evident content of romantic and classicist art. In

regarding representation as a facsimile of nature, the abstract artist has taken over the error of vulgar nineteenth century criticism, which judged painting by an extremely narrow criterion of reality, inapplicable even to the realistic painting which it accepted. If an older taste said, how exactly like the object, how beautiful!-the modern abstractionist says, how exactly like the object, how ugly! The two are not completely opposed, however, in their premises, and will appear to be related if compared with the taste of religious arts with a supernatural content. Both realism and abstraction affirm the sovereignty of the artist's mind, the first, in the capacity to recreate the world minutely in a narrow, intimate field by series of abstract calculations of perspective and gradation of color, the other in the capacity to impose new forms on nature, to manipulate the abstracted elements of line and color freely, or to create shapes corresponding to subtle states of mind. But as little as a work is guaranteed aesthetically by its resemblance to nature, so little is it guaranteed by its abstractness or "purity." Nature and abstract forms are both materials for art, and the choice of one or the other flows from historically changing interests.

Barr believes that painting is impoverished by the exclusion of the outer world from pictures, losing a whole range of sentimental, sexual, religious and social values. But he supposes in turn that the aesthetic values are then available in a pure form. He does not see, however, that the latter are changed rather than purified by this exclusion, just as the kind of verbal pattern in writing designed mainly for verbal pattern differs from the verbal pattern in more meaningful prose. Various forms, qualities of space, color, light, scale, modelling and movement, which depend on the appreciation of aspects of nature and human life, disappear from painting; and similarly the aesthetic of abstract art discovers new qualities and relationships which are congenial to the minds that practice such an exclusion. Far from creating an absolute form, each type of abstract art, as of naturalistic art, gives a special but temporary importance to some element, whether color, surface, outline or arabesque, or to some formal method. The converse of Barr's argument, that by clothing a pure form with a meaningful dress this form becomes more accessible or palatable, like logic or mathematics presented through concrete examples, rests on the same misconception. Just as narrative prose is not simply a story added to a preexisting, pure prose form that can be disengaged from the sense of the words, so a representation is not a natural form added to an abstract design. Even the schematic

aspects of the form in such a work already possess qualities conditioned by the modes of seeing objects and designing representations, not to mention the content and the emotional attitudes of the painter.

Then the abstractionist Kandinsky was trying to create an art expressing mood, a great deal of conservative, academic painting was essentially just that. But the academic painter, following older traditions of romantic art, preserved the objects which provoked the mood; if he wished to express a mood inspired by a landscape, he painted the landscape itself. Kandinsky, on the other hand, wished to find an entirely imaginative equivalent of the mood; he would not go beyond the state of mind and a series of expressive colors and shapes, independent of things. The mood in the second case is very different from the first mood. A mood which is partly identified with the conditioning object, a mood dominated by clear images of detailed objects and situations, and capable of being revived and communicated to others through these images, is different in feeling tone, in relation to self-consciousness, attentiveness and potential activity, from a mood that is independent of an awareness of fixed, external objects, but sustained by a random flow of private and incommunicable associations. Kandinsky looks upon the mood as wholly a function of his personality or a special faculty of his spirit; and he selects colors and patterns which have for him the strongest correspondence to his state of mind, precisely because they are not tied sensibly to objects but emerge freely from his excited fantasy. They are the concrete evidences, projected from within, of the internality of his mood, its independence of the outer world. Yet the external objects that underlie the mood may re-emerge in the abstraction in a masked or distorted form. The most responsive spectator is then the individual who is similarly concerned with himself and who finds in such pictures not only the counterpart of his own tension, but a final discharge of obsessing feelings.

In renouncing or drastically distorting natural shapes the abstract painter makes a judgment of the external world. He says that such and such aspects of experience are alien to art and to the higher realities of form; he disqualifies them from art. But by this very act the mind's view of itself and of its art, the intimate contexts of this repudiation of objects, become directing factors in art. Then personality, feeling and formal sensibility are absolutized, the values that underlie or that follow today from such attitudes suggest new formal problems, just as the

secular interests of the later middle ages made possible a whole series of new formal types of space and the human figure. The qualities of cryptic improvisation, the microscopic intimacy of textures, points and lines, the impulsively scribbled forms, the mechanical precision in constructing irreducible, incommensurable fields, the thousand and one ingenious formal devices of dissolution, punctuation, immateriality and incompleteness, which affirm the abstract artist's active sovereignty over objects, these and many other sides of modern art are discovered experimentally by painters who seek freedom outside of nature and society and consciously negate the formal aspects of perception—like the connectedness of shape and color or the discontinuity of object and surroundings—that enter into the practical relations of man in nature. We can judge more readily the burden of contemporary experience that imposes such forms by comparing them with the abstract devices in Renaissance art, especially the systems of perspective and the canons of proportion, which are today misunderstood as merely imitative means. In the Renaissance the development of linear perspective was intimately tied to the exploration of the world and the renewal of physical and geographical science. Just as for the aggressive members of the burgher class a realistic knowledge of the geographical world and communications entailed the ordering of spatial connections in a reliable system, so the artists strove to realize in their own imaginative field, cyan within the limits of a traditional religious content. The most appropriate and stimulating forms of spatial order, with the extensiveness, traversability and regulation valued by their class. And similarly, as this same burgher class, emerging from a Christian feudal society, began to assert the priority of sensual and natural to ascetic and supernatural goods, and idealized the human body as the real *locus* of values-enjoying images of the powerful or beautiful nude human being as the real man or woman, without sign of rank or submission to authority—so the artists derived from this valuation of the human being artistic ideals of energy and massiveness of form which they embodied in robust, active or potentially active, human figures. And even the canons of proportion, which seem to submit the human form to a mysticism of number, create purely secular standards of perfection; for through these canons the norms of humanity become physical and measurable, therefore at the same time sensual and intellectual, in contrast to the older medieval disjunction of body and mind.

If today an abstract painter seems to draw like

a child or a madman, it is not because he is childish or mad. He has come to value as qualities related to his own goals of imaginative freedom the passionless spontaneity and technical insouciance of the child, who creates for himself alone, without the pressure of adult responsibility and practical adjustments. And similarly, the resemblance to psychopathic art, which is only approximate and usually independent of a conscious imitation, rests on their common freedom of fantasy, uncontrolled by reference to an external physical and social world. By his very practice of abstract art, in which forms are improvised and deliberately distorted or obscured, the painter opens the field to the suggestions of his repressed interior life. But the painter's manipulation of his fantasy must differ from the child's or psychopath's in so far as the act of designing is his chief occupation and the conscious source of his human worth; it acquires a burden of energy, a sustained pathos and firmness of execution foreign to the others.

The attitude to primitive art is in this respect very significant. The nineteenth century, with its realistic art, its rationalism and curiosity about production, materials and techniques often appreciated primitive ornament, but considered primitive representation monstrous. It was as little acceptable to an enlightened mind as the fetishism or magic which these images sometimes served. Abstract painters, on the other hand, have been relatively indifferent to the primitive geometrical styles of ornament. The distinctness of motifs, the emblematic schemes, the dear order of patterns, the direct submission to handicraft and utility, are foreign to modern art. But in the distorted, fantastic figures some groups of modern artists found an intimate kinship with their own work; unlike the ordering devices of ornament which were tied to the practical making of things, the forms of these figures seemed to have been shaped by a ruling fantasy, independent of nature and utility, and directed by obsessive feelings. The highest praise of their own work is to describe it in the language of magic and fetishism.

This new responsiveness to primitive art was evidently more than aesthetic; a whole complex of longings, moral values and broad conceptions of life were fulfilled in it. If colonial imperialism made these primitive objects physically accessible, they could have little aesthetic interest until the new formal conceptions arose. But these formal conceptions could be relevant to primitive art only when charged with the new valuations of the instinctive, the natural, the mythical as the essentially human, which

affected even the description of primitive art. The older ethnologists, who had investigated the materials and tribal contexts of primitive imagery, usually ignored the subjective and aesthetic side in its creation; in discovering the latter the modern critics with an equal one-sidedness relied on feeling to penetrate these arts. The very fact that they were the arts of primitive peoples without a recorded history now made them all the more attractive. They acquired the special prestige of the timeless and instinctive, on the level of spontaneous animal activity, self-contained, unreflective, private, without dates and signatures, without origins or consequences except in the emotions. A devaluation of history, civilized society and external nature lay behind the new passion for primitive art. Time ceased to be an historical dimension; it became an internal psychological moment, and the whole mess of material ties, the nightmare of a determining world, the disquieting sense of the present as a dense historical point to which the individual was fatefully bound—these were automatically transcended in thought by the conception of an instinctive, elemental art above time. By a remarkable process the arts of subjugated backward peoples, discovered by Europeans in conquering the world, became aesthetic norms to those who renounced it. The imperialist expansion was accompanied at home by a profound cultural pessimism in which the arts of the savage victims were elevated above the traditions of Europe. The colonies became places to flee to as well as to exploit.

The new respect for primitive art was progressive, however, in that the cultures of savages and other backward peoples were now regarded as human cultures, and a high creativeness, far from being a prerogative of the advanced societies of the West, was attributed to all human groups. But this insight was accompanied not only by a flight from the advanced society, but also by an indifference to just those material conditions which were brutally destroying the primitive peoples or converting them into submissive, cultureless slaves. Further, the preservation of certain forms of native culture in the interest of imperialist power could be supported in the name of the new artistic attitudes by those who thought themselves entirely free from political interest. To say then that abstract painting is simply a reaction against the exhausted imitation of nature, or that it is the discovery of an absolute or pure field of form is to overlook the positive character of the art, its underlying energies and sources of movement. Besides, the movement of abstract art is too compre-

hensive and long-prepared, too closely related to similar movements in literature and philosophy, which have quite other technical conditions, and finally, too varied according to time and place, to be considered a self-contained development issuing by a kind of internal logic directly from aesthetic problems ... ears within itself at almost every point the mark of the changing material and psychological conditions surrounding modern culture. The avowals of artists—several of which are cited in Barr's work—show that the step to abstraction was accompanied by great tension and emotional excitement. The painters justify themselves by ethical and metaphysical standpoints, or in defense of their art attack the preceding style as the counterpart of a detested social or moral position. Not the processes of imitating nature were exhausted, but the valuation of nature itself had changed. The philosophy of art was also a philosophy of life.

1. The Russian painter Malevich, the founder of "Suprematism," has described his new art in revealing terms. "By Suprematism I mean the supremacy of pure feeling or sensation in the pictorial arts ... In the year 1913 in my desperate struggle to free art from the ballast of the objective world I fled to the form of the Square and exhibited a picture which was nothing more or less than a black square upon a white ground ... It was no empty square which I had exhibited but rather the experience of objectlessness" (Barr, pp. 122-23). Later in 1918 he painted in Moscow a series called *White on White*, including a white square on a white surface. In their purity these paintings seemed to parallel the efforts of mathematicians to reduce all mathematics to arithmetic and arithmetic to logic. But there is a burden of feeling underlying this "geometrical" art, which may be judged from the related paintings with the titles *Sensation of Metallic Sounds*, *Feeling of Flight*, *Feeling of Infinite Space*. Even in the work labeled *Composition* we can see how the formal character of the abstraction rests on the desire to isolate and externalize in a concrete fashion subjective, professional elements of the older practice of painting, a desire that issues in turn from the conflicts and insecurity of the artist and his conception of art as an absolutely private realm. Barr analyzes a composition of two squares (Fig. 1. Kasimir Malevich, *Black Square & Red Square*, 1915), as a "study in equivalents: the red square, smaller but more intense in color and more active in its diagonal axis, holds its own against the black square which is larger but negative in color and static in position." Although he characterizes this kind of painting as pure abstraction to distinguish it

from geometrical designs which are ultimately derived from some representation, he overlooks the relation of this painting to a work by Malevich reproduced in his book—*Woman With Water Pails*, dating from 1912 (Fig. 2 Kazimir Malevich, *Woman with Water Pails: Dynamic Arrangement*, 1912-13). The peasant woman, designed in Cubist style, balances two pails hanging from a rod across her shoulders. Here the preoccupation with balance as a basic aesthetic principle governing the relations of two counterpart units is embodied in an “elemental” genre subject; the objects balanced are not human, but suspended, non-organic elements, unarticulated forms. Although the human theme is merely allusive and veiled by the Cubist procedure, the choice of the motif of the peasant woman with the water pails betrays a sexual interest and the emotional context of the artist’s tendency toward his particular style of abstraction.

The importance of the subjective conditions of the artist’s work in the formation of abstract styles may be verified in the corresponding relationship between Cubist and pre-Cubist art. Picasso, just before Cubism, represented melancholy circus acrobats, harlequins, actors, musicians, beggars, usually at home on the fringes of society, or rehearsing among themselves, as bohemian artists detached from the stage of public performance. He shows in one picture two acrobats balancing themselves, the one mature and massive, squared in body, seated firmly on a cubic mass of stone shaped like his own figure; the young girl, slender, an outlined, unmodelled form, balancing herself unstably on tiptoes on a spherical stone (Fig. 3 Pablo Picasso, *Acrobat on a Ball*, 1905). The experience of balance vital to the acrobat, his very life, is assimilated here to the subjective experience of the artist, an expert performer concerned with the adjustment of lines and masses as the essence of his art—a formalized personal activity that estranges him from society and to which he gives up his life. Between this art and Cubism, where the figure finally disappears, giving way to small geometrical elements formed from musical instruments, drinking vessels, playing-cards and other artificial objects of manipulation, there is a phase of Negroid figures in which the human physiognomy is patterned on primitive or savage faces and the body reduced to an impersonal nudity of harsh, drastic lines. This figure-type is not taken from life, not even from the margins of society, but from art; this time, however, from the art of a tribal, isolated people, regarded everywhere as inferior and valued only as exotic spectacles or entertainers, except by the

painters to whom they are pure, unspoiled artists, creating from instinct or a native sensibility. In the light of this analysis we can hardly accept Barr’s account of Malevich’s step to abstraction: “Malevich suddenly foresaw the logical and inevitable conclusion towards which European art was moving” and drew a black square on a white ground.

2. In his book *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, published in 1912, the painter Kandinsky, one of the first to create completely abstract pictures, speaks constantly of inner necessity as alone determining the choice of elements, just as inner freedom, he tells us, is the sole criterion in ethics. He does not say that representation has been exhausted, but that the material world is illusory and foreign to the spirit; his art is a rebellion against the “materialism” of modern society, in which he includes science and the socialist movement. “When religion, science and morality (the last through the strong hand of Nietzsche) are shaken, and when the outer supports threaten to fall, man turns his gaze away from the external and towards himself.” In his own time he respects, as interests parallel to his own and similarly motivated, occultism, theosophy, the cult of the primitive and experiments of synesthesia. Colored audition is important to him because perception is then blurred and localized in the perceiver rather than identified with an external source. His more aesthetic comments are usually of a piece with these attitudes. “The green, yellow, red tree in the meadow is only ... an accidental materialized form of the tree which we feel in ourselves when we hear the word tree.” And in describing one of his first abstract pictures he says: “This entire description is chiefly an analysis of the picture which I have painted rather subconsciously in a state of strong inner tension. So intensively do I feel the necessity of some of the forms that I remember having given loud-voiced directions to myself, as for instance: ‘But the corners must be heavy’. The observer must learn to look at the picture as a graphic representation of a mood and not as a representation of objects” (Barr, p. 66). More recently he has written: “Today a point sometimes says more in a painting than a human figure ... Man has developed a new faculty which permits him to go beneath the skin of nature and touch its essence, its content ... The painter needs discreet, silent, almost insignificant objects ... How silent is an apple beside *Laocoon*. A circle is even more silent” (*Cahiers d’Art*, vol. VI, 1931, p. 351).

3. I will now quote a third avowal of artists

tending toward abstraction, but this time of aggressive artists, the Italian Futurists who can hardly be charged with the desire to escape from the world. "It is from Italy that we launch ... our manifesto of revolutionary and incendiary violence with which we found today *il Futurismo* ... Exalt every kind of originality, of boldness, of extreme violence ... Take and glorify the life of today, incessantly and tumultuously transformed by the triumphs of science ... A speeding automobile is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace" (Barr, p. 54).

Barr, who overlooks the moral, ideological aspect in Malevich and Kandinsky, cannot help observing in the Italian movement relations to Bergson, Nietzsche and even to fascism; and in analyzing the forms of Futurist art he tries to show they embody the qualities asserted in the manifestos. But if Futurism has an obvious ideological aspect, it is not a pure abstract art for Barr. It is "near-abstraction," for it refers overtly to a world outside the canvas and still retains elements of representation. Yet the forms of "pure" abstract art, which seem to be entirely without trace of representation or escapist morbidity—the Neo-Plasticist works of Mondrian and the later designs of the Constructivists and Suprematists—are apparently influenced in their material aspect, as textures and shapes, and in their expressive qualities of precision, impersonal finish and neatness (and even in subtler informalities of design), by the current conceptions and norms of the machine. Neither Futurism nor the "purer" mechanical abstract forms can be explained, however, as a simple reflection of existing technology. Although machines have existed since ancient times and have had a central place in production in some countries for over a century, this art is peculiar to the last twenty-five years. In the middle of the 19th century when the machines were already hailed as the great works of modern art, superior to the paintings of the time, the taste of progressive industrialists was towards a realistic art, and Proudhon could celebrate as the real modern works the pictures of Courbet and the newest machines. Not even the personal preoccupation with machines necessarily leads by itself to a style of mechanical abstract forms; the inventors Alexander Nasmyth, Robert Fulton and Samuel Morse were fairly naturalistic painters, like Leonardo, one of the fathers of modern technology. The French art of the period of mechanistic philosophy, the 17th century, was dominated by idealized naturalistic human forms. And the conception of man as a machine current in France during the predominance of the unmechanical rococo style was

identified by its defenders and critics with a matter-of-fact sensualism. The enemies of La Mettrie, the author of *Man the Machine*, were pleased to point out that he died of over-eating. More significant, however, is the fact that in recent times the advanced industrial countries with the most developed technologies, the United States and England, did not originate styles of mechanical abstraction; they are also the most backward in functionalist abstraction of forms in architecture. On the other hand, the development of such arts takes place in Russia, Italy, Holland and France, and only later in Germany. Hence the explanation of the arts as a reflection of existing machines is certainly inadequate. It could not explain, above all, the differences in "machine-styles" from place to place at a moment when technology has an international character. In Detroit, the murals of machines by Rivera are realistic images of the factory as a world operated by workers; in Paris Leger decomposes the elements of machines into Cubist abstractions or assimilates living things to the typical rigid shapes of machines; the Dadaists improvise a whimsical burlesque with robots or reconstructed men; in Holland the Neo-Plasticists construct their works of quasi-architectural units; in Germany the Constructivist-Suprematist forms ape the drawings and models of the machine designer, rather than the machines themselves. And the Futurists, in distinction from all these, try to recapture the phenomenal aspect of moving mechanisms, of energy and speed.

These differences are not simply a matter of different local artistic traditions operating on a common modern material. For if this were the case, we should expect a Mondrian in Italy, the country of Renaissance tradition of clarified forms, and the Futurists in Holland and England, the pioneer lands of Impressionism. A similar criticism would apply to the corresponding derivation of abstraction in art from the abstract nature of modern finance, in which bits of paper control capital and all human transactions assume the form of operations on numbers and titles. Here again we observe that the United States and England, with the most highly developed financial capitalism, are among the last countries to produce abstract art. Mechanical abstract forms arise in modern art not because modern production is mechanical, but because of the values assigned to the human being and the machine in the ideologies projected by the conflicting interests and situation in society, which vary from country to country. Thus the modern conception of man as a machine is more economic than biological in its accent. It refers to the human robot rather than to the human animal, and

suggests an efficient control of the costly movements of the body, a submission to some external purpose indifferent to the individual-unlike the older mechanistic views which concerned the passions, explained them by internal mechanical forces, and sometimes deduced an ethics of pleasure, utility and self-interest.

Barr recognizes the importance of local conditions when he attributes the deviations of one of the Futurists to his Parisian experience. But he makes no effort to explain why this art should emerge in Italy rather than elsewhere. The Italian writers have described it as a reaction against the traditionalism and sleepiness of Italy during the rule of Umberto, and in doing so have overlooked the positive sources of this reaction and its effects on Italian life. The backwardness was most intensely felt to be a contradiction and became a provoking issue towards 1910 and then mainly in the North, which had recently experienced the most rapid industrial development. At this moment Italian capitalism was preparing the imperialist war in Tripoli. Italy, poor in resources yet competing with world empires, urgently required expansion to attain the levels of the older capitalist countries. The belated growth of industry, founded on exploitation of the peasantry, had intensified the disparities of culture, called into being a strong proletariat, and promoted imperialist adventures. There arose at this time, in response to the economic growth of the country and the rapid changes in the older historical environment, philosophies of process and utility—a militant pragmatism of an emphatic antitraditionalist character. Sections of the middle class which had acquired new functions and modern urban interests accepted the new conditions as progressive and “modern,” and were often the loudest in denouncing Italian backwardness and calling for an up-to-date, nationally conscious Italy. The attack of the intellectuals against the provincial aristocratic traditions was in keeping with the interest of the dominant class; they elevated technical progress, aggressive individuality and the relativism of values into theories favorable to imperialist expansion, obscuring the contradictory results of the latter and the conflicts between classes by abstract ideological oppositions of the old and the modern or the past and the future. Since the national consciousness of Italy had rested for generations on her museums, her old cities and artistic inheritance, the modernizing of the country entailed a cultural conflict, which assumed its sharpest form among the artists. Machines as the most advanced instruments of modern production had a special attraction for

artists exasperated by their own merely traditional and secondary status, their mediocre outlook in a backward provincial Italy. They were devoted to machines not so much as instruments of production but as sources of mobility in modern life. While the perception of industrial processes led the workers, who participated in them directly, toward a radical social philosophy, the artists, who were detached from production, like the *petit bourgeoisie*, could know these processes abstractly or phenomenally, in their products and outward appearance, in the form of traffic, automobiles, railroads, and new cities and in the tempo of urban life, rather than in their social causes. The Futurists thus came to idealize movement as such, and they conceived this movement or generalized mobility mainly as mechanical phenomena in which the forms of objects are blurred or destroyed. The dynamism of an auto, centrifugal motion, the dog in movement (with twenty legs), the autobus, the evolution of forms in space, the armored train in battle, the dance hall—these were typical subjects of Futurist art. The field of the canvas was charged with radiating lines, symbolic graphs of pervading force, colliding and interpenetrating objects. Whereas in Impressionism the mobility was a spectacle for relaxed enjoyment, in Futurism it is urgent and violent, a precursor of war.

Several of the Futurist devices, and the larger idea of abstract and interpenetrating forms, undoubtedly come from Cubism. But, significantly, the Italians found Cubism too aestheticized and intellectual, lacking a principle of movement; they could accept, however, the Cubist dissolution of stable, clearly bounded forms. This had a direct ideological value, though essentially an aesthetic device, for the stable and clear were identified with the older Italian art as well as with the past as such.

Outside Italy, and especially after the World War, the qualities of the machine as a rigid constructed object, and the qualities of its products and of the engineer’s design suggested various forms to painters, and even the larger expressive character of their work. The older categories of art were translated into the language of modern technology; the essential was identified with the efficient, the unit with the standardized element, texture with new materials, representation with photography, drawing with the ruled or mechanically traced line, color with the flat coat of paint, and design with the model or the instructing plan. The painters thus tied their useless archaic activity to the most advanced and imposing forms of modern production; and precisely

because technology was conceived abstractly as an independent force with its own inner conditions, and the designing engineer as the real maker of the modern world, the step from their earlier Expressionist, Cubist or Suprematist abstraction to the more technological style was not a great one. (Even Kandinsky and Malevich changed during the 1920s under the influence of these conceptions.)

In applying their methods of design to architecture, printing, the theatre and the industrial arts they remained abstract artists. They often looked upon their work as the aesthetic counterpart of the abstract calculations of the engineer and the scientist. If they admitted an alternative art of fantasy-in some ways formally related to their own-it was merely as a residual field of freedom or as a hygienic relaxation from the rigors of their own efficiency. Unlike the Futurists, whose conception of progress was blindly insurgent, they wished to reconstruct culture through the logic of sober technique and design; and in this wish they considered themselves the indispensable aesthetic prophets of a new order in life. Some of them supported the Bolshevik revolution, many more collaborated with the social-democratic and liberal architects of Germany and Holland. Their conception of technology as a norm in art was largely conditioned, on the one hand, by the stringent rationalization of industry in post-war Europe in the drive to reduce costs and widen the market as the only hope of a strangling capitalism threatened by American domination, and, on the other hand, by the reformist illusion, which was especially widespread in the brief period of post-war prosperity during this economic impasse, that the technological advance, in raising the living standards of the people, in lowering the costs of housing and other necessities, would resolve the conflict of classes, or at any rate form in the technicians habits of efficient, economic planning, conducive to a peaceful transition to socialism. Architecture or Revolution! That was in fact a slogan of Le Corbusier, the architect, painter and editor of the magazine *L'Esprit Nouveau*. With the approach of the crisis of the 1930s critics like Elie Faure called on painters to abandon their art and become engineers; and architects, in America as well as Europe, sensitive to the increasing economic pressure, though ignorant of its causes, identified architecture with engineering, denying the architect an aesthetic function. In these extreme views, which were shared by reformists of technocratic tendency, we can see the debacle of the optimistic machine ideologies in modern culture. As production is curtailed and living standards reduced, art is renounced in the name of technical progress.

During the crisis the mechanical abstract styles have become secondary. They influence very few young artists, or they tend toward what Barr calls "biomorphic abstraction," of a violent or nervous calligraphy, or with amoeboid forms, a soft, low-grade matter pulsing in an empty space. An antirationalist style, Surrealism, which had issued from the Dadaist art of the 1917-23 period, becomes predominant and beside it arise new romantic styles, with pessimistic imagery of empty spaces, bones, grotesque beings, abandoned buildings and catastrophic earth formations.

### Notes

1 Alfred J. Barr, Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York 1936). 248 pages. 223 illustrations. It was published by the Museum of Modern Art as the guide and catalogue of its great exhibition held in the spring of 1936.

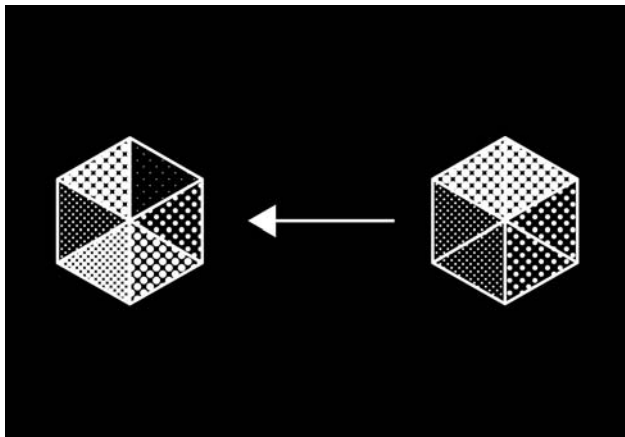
*"Nature of Abstract Art"* was firstly published in *Marxist Quarterly* 1, no. 1, January-March 1937, pp. 77-98.  
<http://abstractpossible.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Nature-of-Abstract-Art-Schapiro-i.pdf>



# Abstract

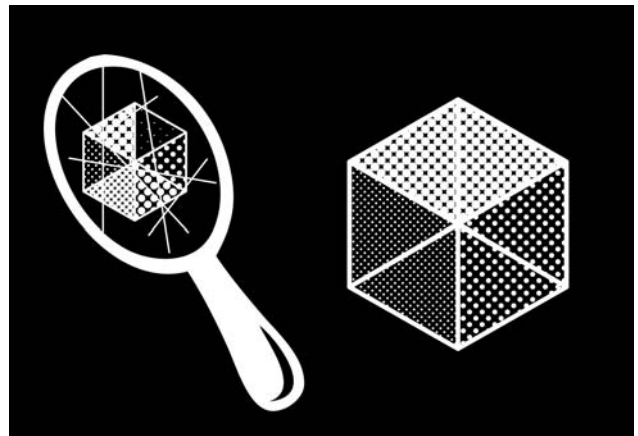
## Liam Gillick

By making the abstract concrete, art no longer retains any abstract quality, it merely announces a constant striving for a state of abstraction and in turn produces more abstraction to pursue. It is this failure of the abstract that lures and hypnotises—forcing itself onto artists and demanding repeated attention. The abstract draws artists towards itself as a semi-autonomous zone just out of reach. It produces the illusion of a series of havens and places that might reduce the contingent everyday to a sequence of distant inconveniences. It is the concretisation of the abstract into a series of failed forms that lures the artist into repeated attempts to “create” the abstract—fully aware that this very act produces things that are the representation of impossibilities. In the current context this means that the abstract is a realm of denial and deferment—a continual reminder to various publics that varied acts of art has taken place and the authors were probably artists.



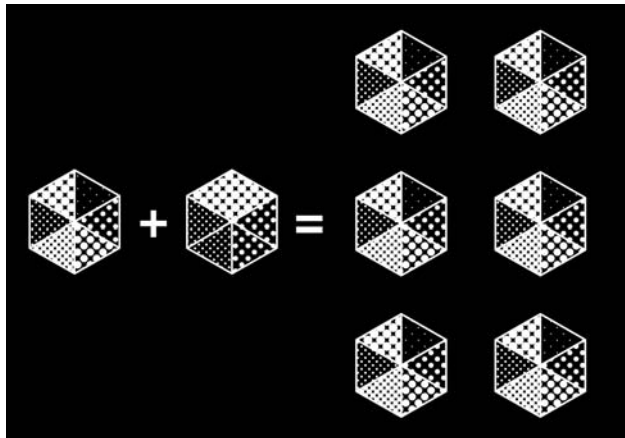
The creation of an art of the abstract is a tautology. It cannot be verified independently. We have to accept that the concretisation of the abstract is a record of itself. It points towards something that cannot be turned into an object. But there—in front of us—is this non-existence. Even further, this non-existence in concrete form can take up a lot of space, supposedly pure colour and variegated form. The grander the failed representation of the abstract becomes the more striking the presence of failure—at the heart of which is a very human attempt to capture an unobtainable state of things and relationships to

the unknowable. The abstract in art is a process of destruction—taking that which cannot be represented and forcing it into an incomplete set of objects and images which exist as a parallel lexicon that form a shattered mirror to that which cannot be represented. There is nothing abstract about art that is the result of this destructive desire to create an abstraction. It is a process of bringing down to earth that which continues to remain elusive. It is this search that connects the desire to create abstraction with utopias and is at the heart of its neo-romantic ideology. It is the basis of the symbolic politics of abstraction and its parallel course as marker of hope and ultimate failure. It is the process of attempting to reproduce the abstract that causes the truly abstract to retain its place just out of reach.



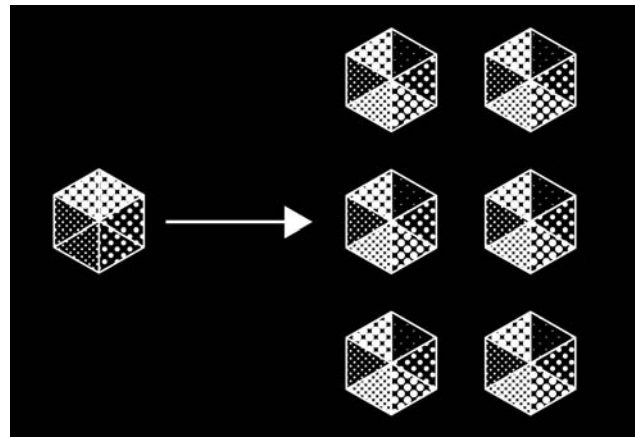
The abstract therefore—in the current aesthetic regime – always finds form as a relational backdrop to other activities, terrains and interactions. By destroying the abstract via making it concrete, the ambient and the temporary are heightened and become an enduring associative abstraction that replaces the lack in the artwork. The abstraction that is produced by abstract art is not a reflection of the abstraction at the start of the process. The making of a concrete structure produces further abstraction—the art object in this case is merely a marker or waypoint towards new abstraction. Tackling the job of producing something concrete through a process of abstraction neither reproduces abstraction nor does it provide us with anything truly autonomous. It produces a lack

and points towards further potentially endless processes of abstraction. It is this potential endlessness—that remains productive while reproducing itself—that is the key to the lure of abstract art. The procedure of producing abstract art does not fill the world with lots of abstraction—despite appearances to the contrary—instead it populates the space of art with an excess of pointers that in turn direct attention towards previously unaccounted for abstractions. This is at the heart of the lure of the abstract—this explains why artists keep returning to the elusive zone. Abstraction is not the contrary of representation—a recognition of which is the key to understanding the complete failure of Gerhard Richter’s work for example—rather abstraction in art is the contrary of the abstract in the same way that representation is the contrary of the real.



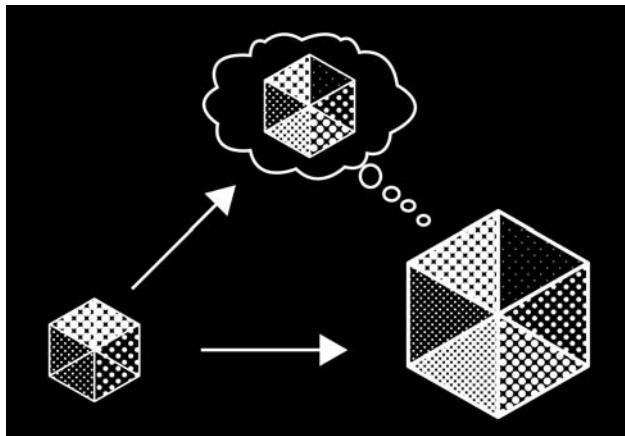
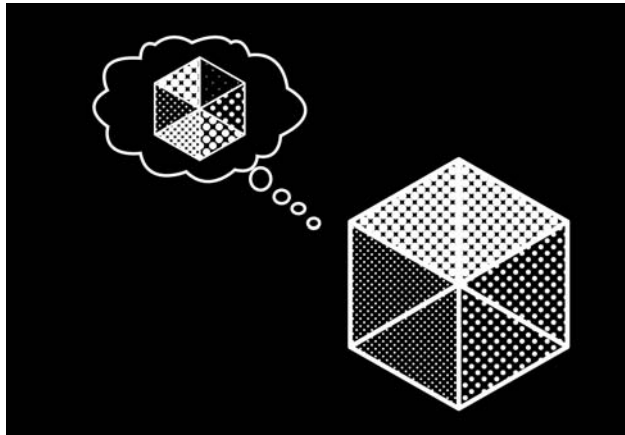
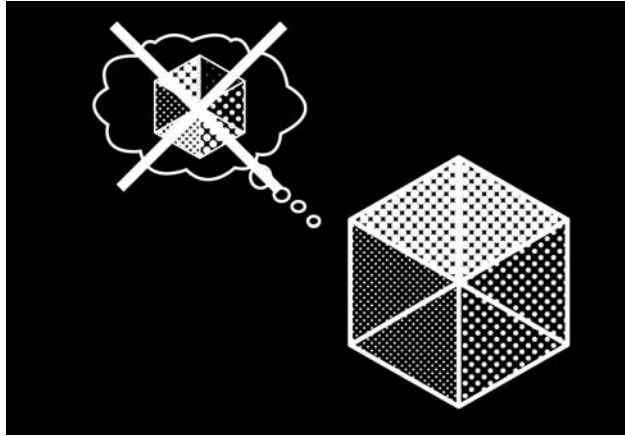
Concrete structure in this case also lacks. It does not hold a functional role within the culture beyond its failure to be an abstraction. The concrete structure becomes a marker that signifies art and points to all other art as structures that contain excessive subjectivities. Abstraction in this case has little to do with minimalism or formalism. Yet it can easily become either of these things with just a slight tweak in any direction. The intention to create a minimal or reductive gesture, object or environment requires a suppression of abstraction towards the deployment of materials that may or may not be in balance or sync with their objectness. This is not the same as the creation of an abstract artwork. The desire to develop a minimalist practice is a denial of the abstract and an attempt to concretise the concrete. Through this process there is the demonstration of a desire to ignore and go past the failure of abstraction. It is through minimalistic gestures that artists attempted to cut out abstraction’s failure of transformation and invited us instead to focus on what we imagine is a material fact or set of facts

about a material within a given context. The emergence of an identifiable minimalist practice more than forty years ago, while attempting to avoid the problem of abstraction, failed to truly trouble the problem of abstraction. Minimalism highlighted evasion. The minimal created a series of half-facts all of which continued to allude to the abstract of art. This explains the spiritualisation of the minimal in the contemporary context, its interchangeability and absorption into the aesthetic of the wellness centre and the kitchen and the association of truth to materials with truthy relationships to cosmic, pick and mix spirituality.



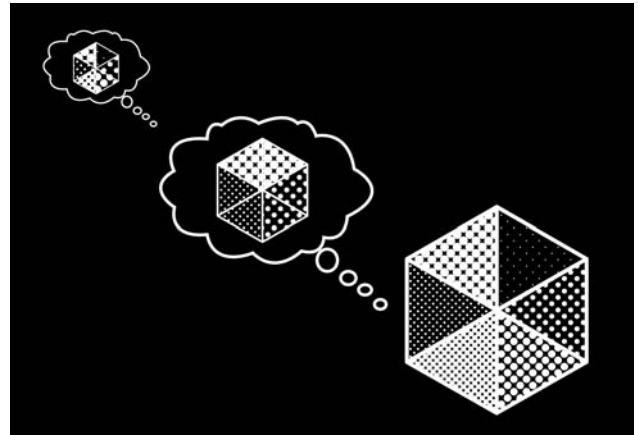
The failure at the heart of the abstract is its enduring critical potential. The demonstration of the concrete brings down metaphors, allusions and other tools that can be deployed for multiple ends to a set of knowable facts. Any attempt to represent through art will always deploy a degree of artifice—this is not a moral judgment, just a state of things. The failed abstract reproduces itself. It does not point to anything other than its own concrete form. Its concrete presence replaces the attempt to pin down the abstract and becomes a replacement object that only represents the potential of the abstract. This process of looking at replacement objects is one of the most provocative aspects of some art in the twentieth century. The presence of replacement objects as key markers within the trajectory of twentieth century modernism is what provokes confused and sublime responses. It is not the forms themselves that have this essential quality. The search for ever more “true” abstraction merely created and continues to create more replacement objects that scatter the globe as reminders of the failure of the concrete in relation to the abstract. This replacement function explains why the concrete in relation to the abstract is so vulnerable to being deployed for ends other than the progressive and neo-transcendental. The earlier concreti-

sation of the abstraction of corporate identity via the creation of logos and smooth minimal spaces can be viewed in parallel to the failure of the abstract in the late modern period—particularly in the US.



So the endurance of abstraction is rooted in this desire to keep showing the impossibility and elusiveness of the abstract. At the same time it reveals the processes of manipulation that take place within unaccountable realms of capital—the continual attempt to concretise abstract relationships and therefore render them into a parallel form that can be

more easily exchanged. Where in the past the concrete was created from the abstract of the corporate now these processes of concretisation have moved into every realm of the “personal”. The abstract art produced alongside such a period is a necessity. Forming a sequence of test sites to verify and enable us to remain vigilant about the processes of concretisation that take place around us in the service of capital. The transformation of relationships into objects via a mature sensitivity to a process of concretisation is tested and tracked when the most vivid current artists deploy what appears to be abstract but is in fact a conscious deployment of evasive markers.



**Text**

Liam Gillick, “Abstract”, Courtesy of the artist

**Images**

Liam Gillick © Liam Gillick, 2011

**Liam Gillick** is an artist based in New York. Solo exhibitions include *The Wood Way*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2002; *A short text on the possibility of creating an economy of equivalence*, Palais de Tokyo, 2005 and the retrospective project *Three Perspectives* and a short scenario, *Witte de With*, Rotterdam, Kunsthalle Zurich, Kunstverein, München and the MCA, Chicago, 2008-2010. He was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2002 and the Vincent Award at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 2008. Many public commissions and projects include the *Home Office* in London (2005) and the *Dynamica Building* in Guadalajara, Mexico (2009). In 2006 he was a central figure in the free art school project *unitednationsplaza* in Berlin that travelled to Mexico City and New York. Liam Gillick has published a number of texts that function in parallel to his artwork. *Proxemics (Selected writing 1988-2006)* JRP-Ringier was published in 2007 alongside the monograph *Factories in the Snow* by Lilian Haberer, JRP-Ringier. A critical reader titled *Meaning Liam Gillick*, was published by MIT Press (2009). Liam Gillick was selected to represent Germany for the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009. He has taught at Columbia University in New York since 1997 and the Centre for Curatorial Studies at Bard College since 2008.

# Tommy Støckel

## interviewed by Marina Lopes Coelho

*With simple materials and hand made geometrical compositions, Tommy Støckel reinvents minimal art tradition, with an eye to Dürer and a taste for Las Vegas' anachronistic architectural ruins.*

**Marina Lopes Coelho:** When observing your work one sees a dichotomy. On one hand, there is the preciseness and high-technological aspect of the geometrical shapes and its computer-generated calculations for mathematical growth and fractal patterning. On the other hand, there is the simplicity of the material utilized, such as paper and cardboard, which are usually used for temporary models, added to its manual execution, which also presents a hand-craft or DIY aspect. Would you like to talk about your relation to technology and the reasons for your preference of using these particular materials?

**Tommy Støckel:** I like that the works are actually very human, that they have a handmade quality. In the beginning, when my works started being very geometric, they were relating a lot to Minimal Art. I actually tried to do something, which had exactly the same finish as those classical artworks from the sixties and the seventies. But soon I realized that it was not really a practice that I would like to have myself. If you want to obtain a result similar to those – similar for instance to Donald Judd or John McCracken – then you need to have a completely different workshop, you need to work in a very different way. Then the artist would be removed from the process of making the artwork, and through this removal of the artist in the process, you also remove, or create a distance to, the viewers.

I started working with materials from the model-making world because it was something that I really could work with, controlling the outcome. It was important to have a level of precision in the work, but only in terms of what is possible to do as a human being. I thought of types of works that the viewers could be able to see how they had been made and also their small imperfections. I used the materials as I acquired them, not really processing them

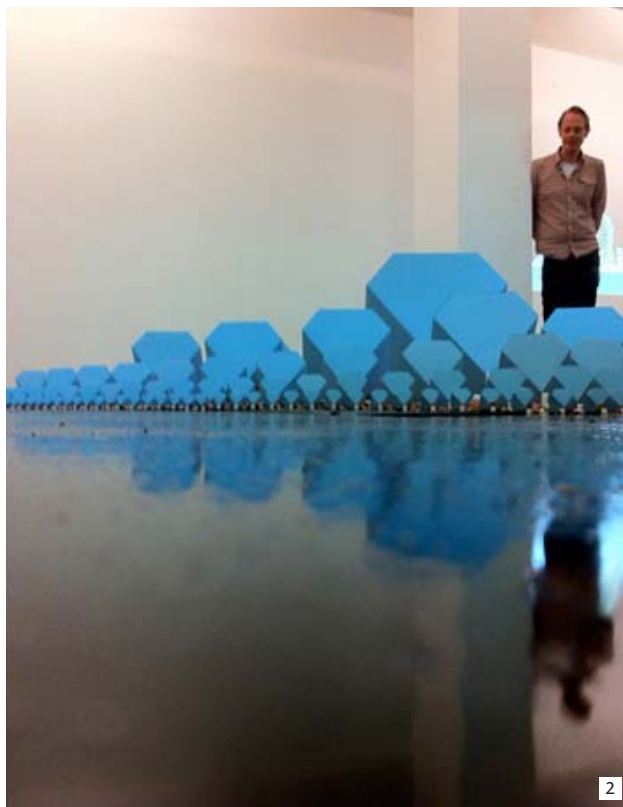
more than just cutting or assembling. They became more and more like ready-made materials. It was also important for me that the viewer could identify both with the processing of the materials and that they came from the local art supply shop. It also became an interest for me that the work at a slight distance would look completely artificial, but when you would get closer to it, you would notice that they do have small imperfections and they are really handmade in my studio and not fabricated in China, completely perfect, made in bronze or in marble.



**MLC:** Most of the titles of your former exhibitions such as *The Shape of Things to Come* (Charlottenborg Udstillingsbygning, Copenhagen, 2005), *Even Great Futures Will One Day Become Pasts* (Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco, 2006), *When Pasts and Futures Meet* (The Nordic Embassies, Berlin, 2008), *Tommy Støckel's Art of Tomorrow* (Arnolfini, Bristol, 2009), make reference to the concept of time, in both optimistic and melancholic ways. Your works present an optimistic concept of time, when alluding to a futuristic visuality in a undefined future, and at the same time, a nostalgic and apocalyptic sense of decay and destruction with no possibilities of things to come.

What is your relation with this concept of time that you develop in your work?

**TS:** When I started working with sculpture, I was working with the spatial aspect of the sculptures, with different sorts of distortions of space and distortions of the materials. After some time I needed another challenge, and another aspect I could add was the idea of time having an influence on the work, as they have this temporary quality because, even though they seem solid and permanent, they are actually very fragile and temporary. I started making sculptures, which had been finished at some point but then had been left somewhere to decay by themselves, or to be vandalized. I tried to come up with the most interesting and exotic ways that the sculptures could have broken, or could have decayed: someone knocked it over, or the surface would peel off and other materials would appear underneath. I also invented the idea that when they would break, other things would appear from inside the plinth. Slowly, I started to develop the sculptures as installations, with cardboard walls, which appeared to have fallen down, as a way of trying to work with a very traditional romantic idea of decay.



This very romantic idea of decay was inspired by many different things. First of all, the romantic idea of the anticipated ruins of the English gardens

from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Inspired by thoughts of why people would have these gardens where they would create small ruins of antique temples hidden somewhere within. Also, it was inspired by science fiction, especially the idea of apocalypse, and the fictions that I would imagine: cities and continents that we know today in a state where everything would be destroyed. I am interested in these descriptions of imagining what we recognize in our everyday in a different state. And it was also inspired by post-modern architecture of the seventies, specifically an American architectural group of the seventies and eighties who created buildings in the shape of fake ruins, but also through experiencing decay in Berlin today.

**MLC:** About the exhibition at Smart Projects Space, 3 Sculptures: There you dealt with time in the opposite way. You were showing something that was happening during the setting up of the exhibition with the photographs on the walls.

**TS:** The photographs actually showed the stage after the exhibition. They are photographs of the exhibition being taken down. This was again like trying to create a time paradox. When you would enter the exhibition you would see three big minimal sculptures, and at the same time you would see on the walls the documentation of the sculptures being taken apart. Underneath the quite boring conservative surface of the artworks, you would actually see completely different structures, which to me is where the real interesting sculpture was hidden. The materials were very important because the surface was made out of three colours of polystyrene: green, white, and yellow. You would see on the photographs that, when I took the sculptures apart, many of the materials broke, because they were so fragile and they had been glued together. And of course, many people, at first, think that I am showing the photographs of the construction of the work, and it was just being shown in reverse. But actually the photographs really show the process of taking the work down, and then I rebuilt them. I think it was also important that people saw that these materials could not be used again. They were standing right in front of the sculpture that should have been taken down. It becomes more convincing in the idea or question of “how can the sculptures be there if you already see the documentation of the sculptures being destroyed?”

**MLC:** You describe your sculptures and installations as scenarios, simulations of architectural ele-

ments and spaces. Sometimes these spaces are representations of real architectural spaces placed in the representational space of the gallery; as the works you presented in the fourth part of the show at the Frankfurter Kunstverein, *Isn't Life Beautiful?*, which represented the city's ancient Roman ruins, for example. At other times, they are simulations of fictitious spaces placed in real architectural spaces—as with the installation you have created on the terrace of the Felleshus/Pan Nordic Building of the Nordic Embassies, in Berlin, for the show *When Pasts and Futures Meet*, in 2008, which was a simulation of the remains of a previous wall. Could you talk a little about these different approaches of your work towards architecture and how they relate to the time concept we just talked about?

**TS:** I think that actually none of the architectural elements that I do actually relate to anything real. A couple of times, I have made these fake pillars, fake columns, and they would sometimes mimic the other columns that were in the space. But otherwise, something like the work for the Kunstverein, there is no architecture that looks like that. The architectures that I use are like stage sets. I try to give context and meaning to the materials when I work with them. In that way, I want them to really appear like stage sets for theatre or film. I would say they are all stereotypes as well. They are all kind of generic ideas of what a wall is, or what a ruin is, or what ancient architecture is.

I do find the fake ruin of the eighteenth century very inspiring as a fiction, and I do find a place like Las Vegas a very interesting place in terms of the unproblematic anachronism that the whole thing is. There is actually nobody who has any problem with building pyramids or rebuilding roman temples or building medieval castles in the middle of the desert right next to each other. Another thing, which also relates to some of my work—especially the polystyrene ruins, or the walls that I have done—is that, there is somebody in Virginia, in the United States, who was recreating a Stonehenge in full size in polystyrene. There are all these things which people just feel like doing, and they just do them using materials like polystyrene and cardboard. I want my work to be the same thing, to have this kind of temporary aspect.

**MLC:** The installation you have created for the show *Tommy Støckel's Art of Tomorrow* at Arnolfini in 2009, which is composed by different groups of equally shaped structures in diverse scales, might be

interpreted as a visual abstraction in geometrical forms and shapes of possible distinct systems of social hierarchical institutions and their power relations—the state, corporations, army, family, tribes, religion, and education. Could one say that this specific work is concerned with the abstract architectural forms of social organisation?

**TS:** *Tommy Støckel's Art of Tomorrow* was in a way trying to think of time, looking forward, but in a more rational way. It was for an exhibition where I was invited to do a work about futurology, the science of predicting the future. For that, instead of thinking of what futurology usually is about, I decided to bring it to a very personal level and try to predict how my own art production could possibly develop in the future. I tried to see logical ways in which my work could develop, not only the really good and interesting ways, but also the ways that you normally would not want if you are a young artist, or that you maybe would not respect an artist for moving into.



There you could see the idea of it developing into architecture, or into more minimal art, and through that into furniture design. There were other

branches that would show my work developing into Op Art, working with signs and language and diagrams, and also another branch in which I chose trash materials and ended up working with clay, something that I have never imagined myself working with. At one of the dead ends of this big diagram, there were these abstractions over a hand made in clay, which I think is something as far as possible from what I do now, or what I really want to do in the future.

They are all models in a way, generic models of something, or representations of something. I would say that it is a big diagram, which has the shape of a kind of cogs in a machine. They are all systems, which are interconnected at the outer edges of these wheels or circular systems. It is just a shape that I came up with. I wouldn't say that there is a hierarchical system at all. I would say that some of the circles are bigger, with more variations and maybe more presence in terms of time in the development. It is really based on very personal ideas of art and in terms of a general artistic career, and I hope that many of these things would not happen to me, that my work would not develop in those ways.

**MLC:** The work you will show at *Abstract Possible* in Zurich, *Exposed Structures* (2006), is also a composition of equally shaped and different sized structures, which are replicas of the truncated form in Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I* (1514). Could you say a bit more about the work and its relation to this famous engraving and its reference to geometry, architecture, mathematics, and time?

**TS:** The works that I had been making before this were almost exclusively sculptures that consisted of plinths and objects. When I made this work in 2006, I wanted to break with the idea of the presentation platform, and tried to make a work which was quite big and spread out on the floor. I chose some simple geometric shapes and repeated and reduced in size, again and again, so that it became like fractals, sculptures that grew like a fractal or mathematical trees. I basically have these objects randomly placed on the floor, with no real specific relationships to each other, loosely lying around. I saw them as building blocks for other sculptures that I could have been doing. But then, through the system of this sculpture, all these shapes exactly in that configuration would be copied and reproduced to half size and placed around and then again copied and reproduced half size and placed around, and again and again, becoming a very strict system.

The Dürer's solid—as I think it has been called—is basically just a really nice shape. I thought it would be very nice to use it because of the way that is kind of regular, but still looks out of balance, and of course it refers to art and mathematics—which also is a nice reference to make. But otherwise, I don't think that there is any other real meaning to the idea of using Dürer's solid. Also, the other objects in the work are parts of a process in the art work — like pieces of paper, which have been cut, cut and folded a bit. But they have not really been assembled to be proper solid, and there are some which are just printed on paper lying around ready to be cut out and assembled to shapes.

**MLC:** And ultimately, I would like to ask you if there are references to art history, such as works, artists, or theoretical essays and authors, that inspire you?

**TS:** I think I wouldn't say that I get my references only from the art world. Of course there are many interesting artists and many things influencing me, but generally inspiration comes from everywhere, as much from cheap fiction, as from high architecture or high art.

What has been influencing me recently is the oeuvre of Ronald Bladen, the minimalist sculptor, who came up with a way of making very large minimal sculptures, but somehow managed to keep a very human approach in terms of material and creation of the works. If you think about the "finished" quality of his contemporaries, how their works really look, you think that he is a hobby artist, compared to them. I think that it is really inspiring seeing somebody who managed to work in that way.

### Captions

**1** Tommy Støkel, *Exposed Superstructure*, 2006. Paper, inkjet print, polystyrene, styrofoam, 45 x 230 x 230 cm. Installed at Charlottenborg Udstillingsbygning, Copenhagen

**2** Tommy Støkel with *Exposed Superstructure* and Wade Guyton's *Untitled (the floor)* at White Space, Zurich. Photo: Marina Lopes Coelho.

**3** Tommy Støkel, *Exposed Superstructure*, 2006 (detail). Photo: Marina Lopes Coelho.



**Tommy Støckel** (\*1972 in Copenhagen, Denmark). Lives and works in Berlin. Graduated from The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Art, in Copenhagen. Among the exhibitions in which he participated are: the solo show *Ten Transports That Shaped The Work*, at *Jacob's Island Gallery* (2013), in London; *Conductivity*, at *Location One* (2012), in New York; *Abstract Possible – The Stockholm Synergies*, at *Tensta Konsthall and Bukowskis* (2012), in Stockholm; *Freilassung*, at *Museum Lichtenberg* (2012), and the solo show *When Pasts and Futures Meet*, at *The Nordic Embassies* (2008), both in Berlin; *Abstract Possible – The Zürich Test* (with *Wade Guyton*), at *White Space* (2011), in Zürich; *Dystopia*, at *CAPC Museum of Contemporary Art* (2011), in Bordeaux; the solo show *3 Sculptures*, at *SMART Project Space* (2010), in Amsterdam; the solo show *Tommy Støckel's Art of Tomorrow*, at *Arnolfini* (2009), in Bristol; and the solo show *From Here to Then and back again*, at *Kunstverein Langenhagen* (2008), in Langenhagen.

**Marina Lopes Coelho** was born in São Paulo, where she was trained in graphic design and photography. She has graduated at the MAS in Curating Contemporary Art at the ZHDK in Zurich. She works as a freelancer photographer and curator in Zurich and São Paulo. She is the founder and curator of the independent art space *Kunsthalle São Paulo*.

# Wade Guyton

## in conversation with Silvia Simoncelli

*Pushing the boundaries of painting practice, Wade Guyton has used ink jet printers to produce monochrome works and has included replicas of his studio floor in his shows. His works moves between chance and technological preciseness, in a search for reduction of the artistic production structures.*

**Silvia Simoncelli:** For *Abstract Possible* you welcomed the invitation of Maria Lind to contribute the black painted plywood floor that, since your 2007 show, at Petzel gallery, New York, has often been included in your solo exhibitions. How did you decide to include in this show a replica of the floor you had in your studio back then? Is there a shift in the meaning of this element for you, now that it has become an independent piece defining the space for other artist's works?

**Wade Guyton:** When planning my first show of a series of so-called black paintings, it was important for me to consider the installation, the space, and the mode in which they were produced. I was not in fact a painter, and I didn't want to pretend otherwise. These objects were made with a computer and my printer. They are dragged across the floor and often are piled up on the floor for weeks or months before being attached to stretchers. So the floor was always an integral part of their making—the scratches on the surface of the works, the dirt the ink would soak up from the floor—all of this. So it made sense for me to bring this floor into the gallery—to give the paintings a context and to connect all of them to each other. It was also the only painted surface in the room, so you would feel the painting through your feet. For all three of the black painting shows—in New York, Paris, and Frankfurt—the floor was installed. Maria asked if that work could be shown separately from the paintings and I agreed.

In each of my three black painting shows, the floor would adjust its shape to the confines of the room. So in New York it was shaped like a large square with a smaller square attached and an appendage the shape of a long hallway. In Paris, the shape had many more sides and in Frankfurt, it was

one large rectangle. So it had the effect of being a liquid that would adapt to the shape of its container. In Malmö, it was rather imperceptible—the room was smallish and one might have paid attention to the other works in the room more. In Mexico, I think the room is much more unusually shaped and rather large, so it might have a more dramatic effect. It's interesting for me to have this piece keep spreading, maybe now being more sculptural or architectural than conceptual or theatrical, because it's now unrelated to my studio works.

Maybe it becomes more and more like a painting, independent, self-referential, but it's hard to tell.



I have always been interested in letting my works go into foreign contexts or curated ideas that I might not immediately have an affinity to—what I mean is its good to let people use the works as tools, disrespect them a bit even and let the works go out into the world to do different jobs. Its like human socialization. Sometimes we need to be in situations or mix with people that we might not like or share beliefs with.

**SS:** Your earlier works included flat abstract sculptures made of black painted plywood structures, which were 3D renderings of forms you obtained by colouring black images of houses taken from architectural magazines. According to your description of the black painted floor as a liquid adapting to other pre-existing shapes and the reference you made to sculpture, do you see a relation between your floor piece and these earlier negative spaces?

**WG:** The works you describe from 2001-2003 were actually only one series of sculptures made from a series of drawings about one sculpture in the landscape. It was a photograph I took of a specific house then blacked out with marker and then taken apart visually and physically built into fragments and shown as objects that would point to a larger unfinished and unrealized sculpture—one the shape and size of a real house. A shadow of the house in a sense, but made out of plywood, painted black—there was also a mirrored version of this sculpture. This was early work by me—trying to bridge the physical, the architectural, and the photographic. Elements of this impulse then remain in later works—I gave up the hand-drawing parts, but the architectural fragments still echo in later works. The floor piece in Zurich is certainly related materially...

**SS:** Your practise is constantly challenging what can be defined as the “accepted categories” in art. You call your printed works on paper “drawings,” and your printed works on canvas “paintings,” giving to the support element the potential to define the status of the artwork itself. Besides practical reasons for preferring a technique among others to produce your works, do you have a specific interest in pushing the limits of these definitions further?

**WG:** What initially drew me towards art was the fact that it was engaged with language and that this language and these structures seem to always be in a state of fortification and dismantling. Growing up I was never good at art classes, and when I was younger I was often bored with the purely visual or the impulse to render images through drawing or painting.

While my interest hasn't been intentionally about challenging the contours of these categories—drawing, painting, sculpture—nevertheless the work has seemed to push a few boundaries, but only in a minor way. It seems that the history of modern or

contemporary art as we know it is itself a history of art defining its contours. So if my work makes any contribution to that it's merely an introduction of certain technology and simply maintaining a tradition of material or contextual self-awareness.



**SS:** I read in an interview that you once said “it is necessary to narrow things down to expand.” This is clearly an attitude dating back to Minimalism—to which the formal aspect of your work is often compared (I'm thinking of the zip in Barnett Newman's paintings or the system of linear coordinates in Agnes Martin's)—and geometric abstraction, from Suprematism and De Stijl to Constructivism—to which you often paid homage by incorporating reproductions of famous artworks from the twenties and thirties in your works, using them as support for your drawings and also as actual material for your sculptures (as in the case of Marcel's Breuers chair). How are these traditions meaningful to you? Do you see your work closer to one of them?

**WG:** I'm not sure of that source, but maybe I was referring to finding a way to work. At one point I realized that we live in a very pluralistic time, and for me rather than starting with an “anything goes” attitude, I needed to exclude many of the options. This wasn't a decision about formal things—or

reduction for visual reasons—though it might look that way, but reduction related to structure. If one has things to work against that can be productive. I've used a lot of images in my drawings--they are pages from a variety of books—so while I might be interested in some of them, I wouldn't invest so much into any particular source.

**SS:** In your work abstraction is a manyfold concept: it addresses the formal aspect of your artworks, which comprise essential graphic elements and appropriated images (abstracted from their original context); the disappearance of the author behind a multiplicity of references and citations and, finally, the immateriality of artistic labour, which derives from the choice of your mode and media of production. Which of these aspects do you find most relevant? How would you describe abstraction as a term pertaining to your work?

**WG:** I think you've done an excellent job describing abstraction as a term pertaining to my work!

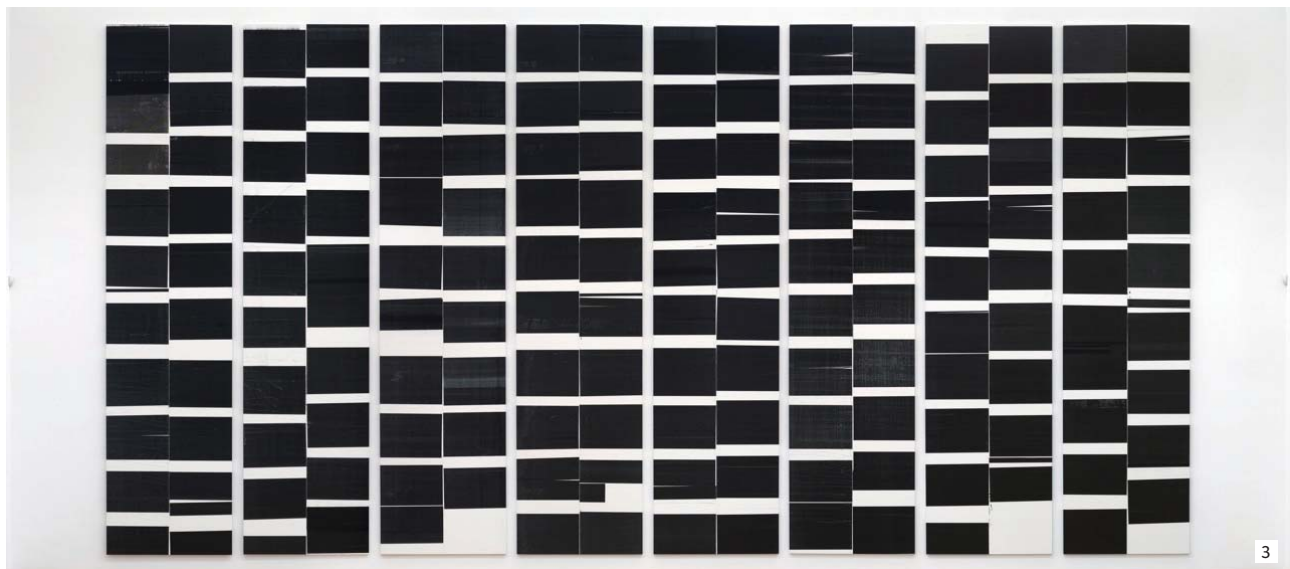
**SS:** The use of technology in the production of artworks has generally been privileged by artists whose interest was to achieve a formal perfection devoid of any trace of their own intervention. You decided to force the capacities of the mechanical tool you have chosen to produce your works—a common computer printer—in order to do a job for which it

was not expressively designed for, printing on large format canvases. This resulted both in the need for you to accommodate the technical capacities of your tool (by folding the canvas, pulling it out of the printer, re-printing it as many times as needed to obtain the intensity of colour desired) and in a series of unpredictable malfunctioning of the printer itself, generating the final look of your works (interruptions in colour, distortions in the images, imprecisions in the overlapping layers of colours). How important are these two elements—chance and technology—important to you? Have you ever been disappointed by the unforeseeable results of their interaction?

**WG:** There is always some form of disappointment in making an artwork. In my case, there is some expectation, an attempt at translation. A struggle for some ideal—but that ideal may not always be clear, and it is likely in transition.

Because of the process with the works on canvas, I must reject or accept whatever the results are. I can't work back into them after they are stretched like some painters can.

There are moments during the process when I can intervene. I can add layers, but I can't subtract or erase. So inevitably there are tons of rejections. But a rejection one day could lead to a re-evaluation a couple years later and generate a different series. Or a chance event could lead to a repeatable structure.



### Captions

1 Wade Guyton, Installation view, Portikus, Frankfurt, 2008

2 Wade Guyton, Untitled (CAT.4 CAT.7), 2006, Epson DURABrite inkjet on book page, 22.6 x 30.7 cm

3 Wade Guyton, Installation view, Museum Ludwig, Cologne, 2010. Photo: Maurice Cox.

**Wade Guyton** is an artist living in New York City. He has had solo exhibitions at The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Secession, Vienna; Museum Ludwig, Cologne; Portikus, Frankfurt; Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Deurles. His latest exhibition include Kunsthalle Zurich and Kunsthaus Bregenz, both 2013.

**Silvia Simoncelli** is an art historian and independent curator based in Milan and Zurich. She is professor at Brera Art Academy and course leader of the Advanced Course in Contemporary Art Markets, NABA in Milan. She lectures regularly for the Postgraduate Programme in Curating at ZHdK, Zurich. Her research interests comprise the relation between art and economy, institutional critique and art in public space. Recent projects and participations include: Artists and rights in contemporary art, symposium, Artissima, Turin; Visions of Labour, exhibition, Kunshalle Sao Paulo; Who is Afraid of the Public, symposium (together with Dorothee Richter and Elke Krasny), ICI, London, 2013; Performing Structures, exhibition, Wascherei, Kunstverein Zurich, 2012; Deimantas Narkevicius, Revisiting Utopia, special program, Winterthur Short Film Festival, 2011.

# “An attempt” Parcour in the imagination of Damian Navarro by Véronique Ribordy

*Damian Navarro is the artist invited to contribute a work to this issue. His practice involves abstraction on many different levels of production and with a complex set of references and interests – and includes the participation of uncommon contributors too.*

In 1963, Thomas Pynchon publishes *V.*, a novel that would become cult classic. In Chapter Sixteen, the American writer invents a new origin for the graffiti “Kilroy was here”, famous since the GI landing on the Normandy coast; the little man with the big nose that jinx behind the wall is in fact a code inspired by a wiring diagram.

The explanation is convoluted. It delighted Damian Navarro. The Lausanne artist likes manipulating codes more than anything. He superimposes meanings and references, collects the allusive. Rather than works, he produces “clues” and “investigation documents.”

## *Entre nous*

At HEAD, Haute École d’Art et de Design (University of Art and Design) in Geneva, Damian Navarro is distinguished by his ability to scramble messages. His drawings, reduced to the essentials, overlap references to such an extent so to seem as many enigmas, created for bewildering the viewer: a “trap for experts”<sup>1</sup>, as Navarro said. Damian remembers with malice, of an early drawing, a triangle which borrowed as much from the world of hip hop as from Blinky Palermo. It was meant as a denunciation to the insider world, the *entre nous* of contemporary art. Already having borrowed his codes from two worlds apart from one another, that of the street and of the school, he adds a third, unearthed in *The Promise* by Dürrenmatt. The design of a truffle, a circle bristling with spines, which symbolizes the failure of the detective in the novel by Dürrenmatt, is in the spirit of Damian Navarro an “indicator of misunderstanding.” This *esprit mille-feuille* didn’t leave him ever since.

## *Sculptures Parentales*

The series of *Sculptures Parentales* gave a decisive direction to his work. The first *Sculptures Parentales* was born by chance, out of a blue cloth left on an orange bowl in the family kitchen.

This ghostly presence, evoking at the same time a negligent and daily gesture, retained Navarro’s look. Since then, he commandeered objects scattered in his parents’ house. This collection turns quickly into a search for pseudo-clues around the artist and his parents. Navarro built a fictitious investigation, he amuses himself multiplying false trails. What objects can explain who he is? How to tell the origins? Navarro plays Little Tom Thumb and leaves behind traces that, if saying almost nothing of his family, reveal on the other hand a lot about his approach. These works, “discrete, but not intimate”, lay the foundation for a subtle and “unpretentious” work.

Damian Navarro spent his childhood between two cultures. He grew up in Switzerland, into a family of Spanish origin. During the summer the family would travel back to Spain. These *zigzag* trips are the essential stages of a hybrid education. After the diploma, Damian decides to enroll at the HEAD. His parents do not object. Gradually, as *Sculptures Parentales* develop, they even show a sustained interest in this activity, their son is so passionate about. They begin in turn to propose items, “archives” they choose in their immediate environment. Reflection becomes common: “I opened a playground for them, very fertile for them and for me.” *Sculptures Parentales* form, from that moment on, the tutor around which the work is developed, through hybridization and subsequent transplants. They also allow us to overcome

that *entre nous* denounced by the drawings. The work becomes a way to communicate, material to exchange.

## W

On this ground for reflection other drawings germinate. The inquiry about the origins is enriched by a new series of clues. Navarro, with his recurring interest in codes and hybridization ended naturally by crossing the world of American novelist Thomas Pynchon. Pynchon's taste for mystery, the accumulation of details, borrowing from all sorts of culture, from the most erudite to the most popular, could only fascinate the young artist. The novelist's obsession for the letter V<sup>2</sup> finds its answer in the W Damian Navarro uses as a marker of identity: a zigzag identity, marking the trajectory of the artist between Spain and Switzerland, a letter used in Northern Europe, almost unknown in the Romance languages. It was then the director John Carpenter and his horror film *Fog* (1980) who gave Navarro is the idea of an "invisible architecture". W became the basis of a grid on which images come to lay, a "supporting scaffold", "like the one we saw on the roadside in Spain", where the images taken from the most diverse sources function as as many narrative triggers.

The W drawings series eventually form a vast "parchment of data," a collage of words that says well the back and forth between past and present, Switzerland and Spain, image and idea. Navarro structures the space of these drawings with collages of marbled papers. Water prints its arabesques in colour, echoing the theory of "continuous movement" developed by Nicolas Bourriaud in *The Radicant*: "After the time of the engagement, we experience pathetic difficulty remembering anything in a cultural volatile space ..." says Nicolas Bourriaud, who elaborates on the idea of a "liquid modernity."<sup>3</sup>

Horror and science fiction, comics, novels and scientific theories, Navarro fires on all cylinders, but it is the margins which interest him the most. This in-between where the "hypothesis is more interesting than the statement," where the image turns into a trap, where the "elusive" is the key.

When he draws from the archives of cinema, he scrutinizes the hidden part, which is not seen in the film. His drawing aims to highlight the intangible. His sculptures are annoying by their enigmatic opacity, if deceptively simple. If Damian Navarro owes something to Duchamp, it is first to his theory of the *infra-thin*<sup>4</sup>. Between absence and presence, almost nothing and nothing, said and unsaid, hidden and

revealed, Navarro doesn't choose. Just as he doesn't opt for either abstraction or figuration. Forms interest him "for the charge of ideas that they can bring," and perhaps even more, for the "different levels of reading" they can suggest. Each new work is as a camouflage operation, where the detective is also the murderer.

## Notes

1 All quotes by Damian Navarro are from an interview at Circuit, Lausanne, April 23, 2011.

2 V is the debut novel of Thomas Pynchon, published in 1963.

3 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Radicant, pour une esthétique de la globalisation*, Paris, 2009, p.94.

4 "The possible, implying the becoming - the passage from one to the other takes place in the infra-thin. [...] fire without smoke, the warmth of a seat which has just been left, reflection from a mirror or glass, watered silk, iridescents, the people who go through (subway gates) at the very last moment, velvet trousers their whistling sound is an infra-thin separation signalled." Paul Matisse, ed., *Marcel Duchamp, Notes*, G.K. Hall, Boston, 1983, p. 45.

**Damian Navarro** (born 1983) is Swiss and Spanish. He lives and works in Lausanne. He has a diploma degree in Visual Arts from Geneva University of Arts and Design. His work doesn't intend to prove anything. It's mostly about testing and trying to confront trivial informations or historical facts which don't necessarily seemed ever made to cross. Despite recurrent use of elements from his everyday life, his work can be read as chronicles more than merely autobiographical. In 2011 Damian Navarro received the Swiss Art Award, Prix de l'Office Fédéral de la Culture, Basel, Switzerland. He was artist in residency at Atelier Vaudois du 700 at Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris in 2013.

**Véronique Ribordy** (1961, born in Sion, lives in Vevey, Switzerland) is an art historian, critic and curator. She graduated in History of Art at University of Geneva, Switzerland and received her MAS in Curating from the University of the Arts, Zurich, in 2011. She has been working for many years as journalist and has collaborated with several museums and cultural institutions in the Valais region (Switzerland) since 1989, such as Manoir de Martigny, Fondation Pierre Gianadda Martigny, Caves de Courten Sierre. She is currently working on a Contemporary Art exhibition to be held at the Neuchâtel Museum of History and Art, Switzerland, in the summer 2015. Parallel to this, she is researching the South East Asian and Asian markets to source and develop curatorial opportunities with contemporary artists and exhibition spaces for an exchange with Swiss artists.

### Captions

Damian Navarro, *Cuisine-Cointet IV*  
(w, *Fog as the architecture of the invisible, part VI*), 2013,  
stickers, watercolor, walnut stain on paper, 61 x 43.5 cm





# Power and Necessity of Abstraction in Marx

## Roberto Nigro

Plato was obliged to have recourse to the “ideas” as philosophical concepts to put things in order in the Greek city. In a community of free men as rivals, each citizen lays claim to something. Then, how to judge the validity of claims? The city invents the *agôn* and Plato formulates a criterion for judging the validity of different claims: the “idea” as the authority managing rivalries.<sup>1</sup> Nearly 2400 years later, Alain Badiou, who claims to be a “sophisticated” Platonist, asserts that we must be capable of thinking how truths appear; he does not uphold that truths pre-exist in a separate “intelligible place” before becoming mundane and that they are born simply by descending from the heavens above; but the core of his argument is that a truth is a singular body that enters into a differentiating relation with an infinity of other bodies according to the rules of a logic of relation.<sup>2</sup> If in the Deleuzian and Guattarian interpretation Plato’s recourse to the “idea” emerges almost as the attempt to interrupt the *agôn*, the endless struggle among the claimants, in Badiou’s account, truth that appears is a pure multiplicity and such a multiplicity is plucked from the void.<sup>3</sup> If ontology, as discourse on being, is historically accomplished as mathematics, one can reasonably call logic a formal theory of relations.

For more than 2500 years western thought has dealt with abstractions. And its history has not yet come to an end. Our civilization took shape in the form of abstraction. Philosophy, which was the main form our culture assumed, is a creative activity producing concepts; and concepts are given in the form of abstraction. One could assume that the form thought takes in the very act of thinking is the abstraction. But from what does thought abstract in the act of thinking? Moreover, does it make sense to say that it abstracts from *something*? If we call this *something* reality, how can we define the kind of relationship existing between abstractions and reality?

In order to disentangle some of these questions, I would like to turn my attention to Marx in the next few pages. There are several reasons to (*re*)-turn to Marx while posing this kind of question. Of course, one of the main motives depends on the crucial role that the question of abstraction plays in his work. But secondly, and probably more importantly, this is due to the peculiar pathway Marx’ approach opened up in contemporary thought. Setting out from the critique of both empiricism and idealism (which includes the critique of the empiricism of the subject and its inverse: the transcendental subject, the critique of the idealism of the concept and its inverse: the empiricism of the concept)<sup>4</sup>, Marx’s materialism leads to some of the crucial issues at the forefront of contemporary discussions in human sciences. His methodological and epistemological approach set the way to a critique of universals such as we know it today through the work of Michel Foucault, for instance.

But let’s explain some of the issues at stake in this trajectory step by step.

It is largely admitted that Marx inserted a radical break in people's historical and political consciousness, and that the Marxist theory of society did inaugurate an entirely new epistemological field. What is less acknowledged is the profound epistemological, conceptual, and philosophical revolution he introduced in the discursive space of modernity. Marx brought to collapse the soil of our knowledge (in Marx's terms, such a soil was referred to as classical political economy and philosophy as he had learnt it, from the tradition which ran from Plato to Hegel). But, by the same token, he deeply contributed to settle a new methodological and epistemological configuration of our modern knowledge.

Marx's project develops in the form of a critique. It is not the first time since the epoch of Kant that we hear speaking of critique. But for the first time critique means analysis of the historical conditions allowing discourses to assume their validity and their value of truth. The materialistic bases of Marx's analysis are set *against* the ideology of the eighteenth century and *against* the discourses of the classical economists. In both cases the notion of abstraction will come to play a pivotal role, since Marx intends to show how it has been distorted and mystified by *philosophes* and classical political economists. By the same token, he will draw on the notion of (*determinate*) *abstraction* to display its powerful effectiveness: this is the epistemological concept through which Marx introduced in the history of thought an unprecedented revolution.

Marx speaks of *determinate* abstraction in the *Introduction of 1857* to the *Grundrisse*. He writes: "It seems to be correct to begin with the real and the concrete, with the real precondition, thus to begin, in economics, with e.g. the population, which is the foundation and the subject of the entire social act of production. However, on closer examination this proves false".<sup>5</sup> So, according to Marx, to begin with the real or the concrete as a presupposition is as naive as false. Such a methodology, consisting in extracting from the real and concrete the abstract, is part of the Robinsonades of the eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup> To this false method Marx opposes a methodology that takes *the concrete as a result*. This is the scientifically correct method. "The concrete— Marx points out— is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation [*Anschauung*] and conception".<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the correct method goes from the abstract to the concrete, to the determination. Determination is the product of a theoretical approximation, which utilizes general abstractions, polarities, and dimensions for this end.

In other words, truth is an objective for the analysis and not its starting point. Marx destroys every sort of fetishism of the concrete and show "the path of abstract knowledge, rising from the simple to the combined," and in so doing helps us to discover, to invent reality. Instead of "simply reproducing" reality, abstraction is the thinking process that leads to grasp antagonisms, and contradictions crossing reality. At the same time, abstraction maps out lines of flight and possible ways out. That's the reason why abstraction also is an invention.

But to say that abstraction is an invention does not mean that Marx has passed from the critique of the epistemological realism, i.e. from the critique of empiricism, to a sort of idealism. In fact, idealism would only be the other side of the same coin.<sup>8</sup> Antonio Negri shed light on this aspect, when he wrote: "The process of determinate abstraction, of the approximation and of the abstract conquest of the concrete is a *collective process*, of collective knowledge. The process of determinate abstraction is entirely given inside this collective proletarian illumination: it is therefore an element of critique and a form of struggle".<sup>9</sup> In other words, when

we speak of abstraction in Marx we are confronted with a process of production of truth, which calls into question the political effects of producing and telling the truth. It means that there exist different degrees of abstraction: on the one hand, the abstraction, which seeks the real in the concrete (determinate abstraction), and on the other hand, the concrete seeking in abstraction its determination (the process of the tendency). That's the reason why abstraction is simultaneously genealogical analysis of the field of forces implicated in the historical process and strategic diagnosis of the field of possibility.

But what does it mean that abstraction heads towards the diagnosis of the field of forces and tries to capture them in a process that is both of invention and of production? Through this double process going from the abstract to the concrete (in order to find in it its determination) and from the concrete to the abstract (in order to discover new possibilities), what is explored is the side of the multiple and active *relations* which individuals establish with each other.

We have already said that Marx's materialism excludes the empiricism of the subject (and its inverse: the transcendental subject) and the idealism of the concept (and its inverse: the empiricism of the concept). Marx drove the philosophical categories of the *subject*, of *empiricism*, of the *ideal essence*, etc., from all the domains in which they had been supreme.<sup>10</sup> For Marx, abstraction can in no way be search for essences, eternal truths, or universals. Marx thinks that philosophers have formed a false idea of what an essence is (and this error is so essential to them that one can hardly imagine a philosophy without it). As Etienne Balibar writes: "They [philosophers] have thought, firstly, that the essence is an *idea* or an abstraction (one would say today, in a different terminology, a *universal concept*), under which may be ranged, in a declining order of generality, specific differences and, finally, individual differences; and, secondly, that this generic abstraction is somehow 'inherent' (*innewohnend*) in individuals of the same genus, either as a quality they possess, by which they may be classified, or even as a form or a force which causes them to exist as so many copies of the same model".<sup>11</sup>

Marx rejects both the *realist* position and the *nominalist* one. He does not accept the idea that the genus or essence precedes the existence of individuals; neither, as we have seen through his critique of the concrete as presupposition and starting point for the analysis, that individuals are the primary reality, from which universals are 'abstracted'. Marx is the thinker of the relation, of the cooperation, of what happens 'among' (*tra*).<sup>12</sup> Abstraction must grasp the multiple and active *relations* which individuals establish with each other. These relations define what individuals have in common and constitute the common at each moment in multiple forms. This *common* is not a pre-existing *thing*, what the abstraction would bring to language. As a concept, it is an abstraction that seeks the real in the concrete.<sup>13</sup> Common would be this *transindividual* reality that abstraction let think. Transindividuality as such is "Not what is ideally 'in' each individual (as a form or a substance), or what would serve, from outside, to classify that individual, but what exists *between individuals* by dint of their multiple interactions," as Balibar points out.<sup>14</sup>

Marx's rejection of both nominalism and essentialism let us go one step further on the pathway of the critique of universals. Marx's analysis does not proceed from primary, original, and already given objects or notions such as universals, from which concrete phenomena should be deduced. It accounts for a logic of relations, for practice. By reading Marx we wonder how we can decipher what happens if we do not accept a priori the existence of ready-made notions. And Marx' method promptly provides us with an answer that consists in showing that the truth is the result of practices emerging from struggles, from class struggles

and social relations. Setting out from these practices and from the understanding of the forces at work, analysis must also be able to tell in advance what possible forms the development of historical and social processes might assume (what Marx would call method of the tendency).<sup>15</sup>

However, this critique of universals sketches out further issues in Marx's critique. Let's mention in conclusion a last aspect. Marx (and Engels) had been profoundly impressed by the reading of an influential work that appeared at the end of 1844 under the signature of Max Stirner. The work in question was *The Ego and its Own*. In this book, Stirner developed a critique of all universals inasmuch as universal notions are abstractions, which means that they are fictions, as he pointed out. Stirner was meaning (although this became much more clear later through Nietzsche's critique) that the death of God signals the end of metaphysics and implies the death of all universals (be in the form of God, Man, Church, Socialism, Revolution, or Christianity...). According to Stirner, these fictions, i.e. abstractions, are perverse dominations since they are used to substitute for individuals and the thought of individuals.<sup>16</sup>

Marx will respond to this critique through an analysis that highlights where resides the power of such abstractions. So, he poses a question unprecedented in philosophy: the question of ideology and provides an answer in terms of class. The division of society into classes is a condition to also understand the structure of thought and how ideas become dominant. Marx connects the question of production of ideas with the question of domination. By doing so, he does not take away the production of discourses from the field of struggles and practices in which they are constituted. As Balibar stresses: "Marx, for his part, was seeking rather to effect a critical distinction within the very use of the concept of 'truth' by relating every statement and every category to the conditions of its elaboration and the historico-political stakes involved".<sup>17</sup> Therefore, one could say that by posing the question of ideology Marx was not putting the question of the metaphysical distinction between error and illusion, neither was he asking for the problematic of consensus. He was raising rather the question of the conditions in which discourses are elaborated and take their form and validity.

By keeping in mind this question, let's conclude then with a last (open) remark. We know to what extent Foucault's research on these and similar issues is today at the center of epistemological, philosophical and political discussions in the human sciences. We wonder whether it would be possible for Foucault to pose the question of *parresia*, as he did in his last courses at the *Collège de France*, without the theorizations we have lastly mentioned here.<sup>18</sup> What trajectory could have taken his inquiry on the production of truth as result of social and governmental practices and his investigation of the political effects of telling the truth without Marx' problematizations? Of course, it is an *abstract* question, and not a *philological one*. A possible encounter for a coming research!

### Notes

1 cf. Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, p. 9.

2 cf. Alain Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, Polity Press: Cambridge, 2011, p. 26 and p. 32.

3 Without referring to Deleuze and Guattari, Paolo Virno develops a brilliant analysis of this topic, which could be referred to as the logical basis of metaphysics. We are thinking of the question of the "infinite regress" ("e così via, all'infinito"), as Virno points it out. He interprets the history of philosophy as the history of attempts to interrupt the infinite regress. Through an in-depth analysis of texts of logic, anthropology and philosophy, he provides us with an interpretation of the ground on which politics rests. See Id., *E così via, all'infinito. Logica e Antropologia*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2010, here p. 90 and ff.

4 cf. concerning this topic the crucial analyses of Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, The Penguin Press, London, 1969, pp. 227-229.

5 cf. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Penguin Books, London, 1973, p. 100.

6 Ibidem, p. 83.

7 Ibidem, p. 101.

8 cf. Paolo Vinci, "Astrazione determinata," in *Lessico Marxiano*, Manifestolibri, Roma, 2008, p. 53.

9 cf. Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx. Lessons on the Grundrisse*, Pluto Press, London, 1993, p. 47.

10 cf. Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, op. cit., p. 228.

11 cf. Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, Verso, London, 1995, p. 29.

12 cf. Paolo Virno, *Cooperazione*, in *Lessico Marxiano*, op. cit., p. 83.

13 The notion of "common" is at the core of the analysis developed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Commonwealth*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2009.

14 cf. Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, p. 32.

15 The critique of universals and methodological issues connected with the ways of writing history are at the core of Foucault's historical and philosophical methodology and inquiry. Cf. for instance, what he says in Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008, p. 2-3. On the method of the tendency in Marx, cf. A. Negri, *Marx beyond Marx*, op. cit., p. 48 and ff.

16 cf. Louis Althusser, *The Humanist Controversy (1967)*, in *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings*, Verso, London/New York, 2003, p. 221-305. Also Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, op. cit., p. 33-36.

17 Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, op. cit., p. 46.

18 cf. Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others. Courses at the Collège de France 1982-83* and Id. *The Courage of Truth. Courses at the Collège de France 1983-84*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York, 2010.

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# New Art Market(s) and forms of capital

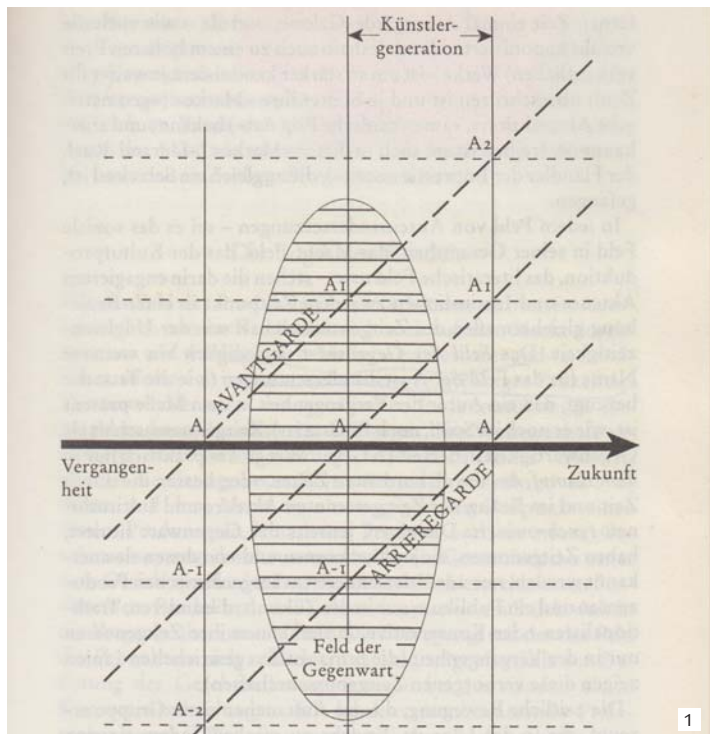
## Dorothee Richter

In the following argument I would like to explore some notions that are underlying the questions of Art and Art Market, which should be discussed as an introduction to this field:

What is contemporary art? How is contemporary art produced? What is a commodity? What are the various forms of capital that play a role in the realm of art? Financial markets – art markets, how are they related? And does art still move us?

### What is contemporary art?

I would like to begin with a remark by Pierre Bourdieu, who makes a detailed analysis of what “contemporary” means in the realm of art: “At each moment in time, in any field of struggle whatsoever (the whole social field, field of power, field of cultural production, literary field, etc.), agents and institutions engaged in the game are simultaneously contemporaries and temporally discordant. The field of the present is merely another name for the field of struggle (as shown by the fact that an author of the past is present to the exact extent that he is still at stake). Contemporaneity as presence in the same present only exists in practice *in the struggle* that *synchronizes* discordant times or, rather, agents and institutions separated by time and in relation to time.”<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> “The temporality of the field of artistic production”, in Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, p. 159 (see note 1).

What does Bourdieu mean by this? Simply put, he is suggesting that yesterday's revolutionary avant-garde's are today recognized as agreed on art and will tomorrow be acknowledged as historically significant or viewed as outmoded. What we perceive as contemporary art is the result of mechanisms of repression, of enforcement strategies on the part of the protagonists (artists, gallery owners, collectors) and institutions such as art academies, galleries, museums, and public and private collections. They emerge through a power related negotiation process.

This "contemporary art" and the new markets associated with it do not simply materialize; they emerge as part of a complex system of relations. Besides, these "vogues", as I would provisionally like to call this phenomenon, should not only be conceived of in temporal terms; they should also be thought of as **territorial**, as may doubtless already have occurred to the reader. The latest art movements generally appear in metropolitan areas relative to a particular historical situation. They develop through various acts of consecration – prizes, critical attention, stipends, exhibitions, reviews, galleries, etc. Thus, there is always a centre, in which the latest art emerges, and peripheries, which lag behind the up-to-date art scene. Western Europeans and Americans are so accustomed to this situation that in general it is no longer noticed; sadly now it seems natural that none of the peripheral regions really come up to the standard required by Western ideas of art. Everything outside the western hemisphere is seen as "other" – as other subjects – and is then included under the rubric of "otherness" in the Western-oriented art canon. Here it is an "other subject" that looks back; the artist reverses the usual direction of vision and satirizes attributions – using the tools wielded by visual arts in the West.



2 Armando Mariño, *El centinela* (The Sentry), 180 × 220, in in *Der globale Komplex*, exh. cat. OK Centrum für Gegenwartskunst, Linz, and Grazer Kunstverein (Linz/Graz, 2002), p. 29.

According to the catalogue, in the works of Armando Mariño a so called "black troublemaker" disavows the cultural icons of contemporary art [here Mario Merz]; he displays these works as part of a world structured in the service of power interests in terms of race, class and gender.<sup>2</sup> Thus he is not merely an ironical commentator but rather a situational critic, often making use of humour as a tool.



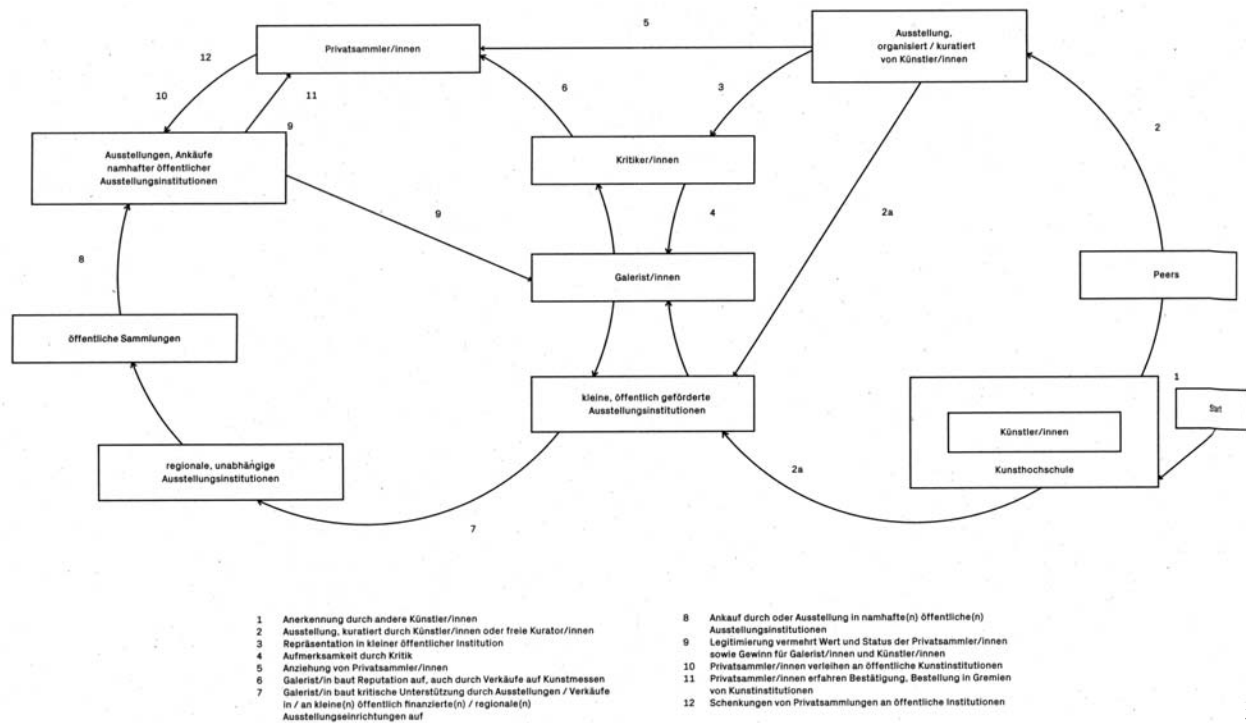
There is clearly a hegemonic aspect in contemporary art or, to put it another way, Western art trains subjects to consent to a Western ideology. Roger Buergel and Stefanie-Vera Kockot have discussed this movement in detail, using the example of abstract expressionism<sup>3</sup>, which was initially met with considerable mistrust on the part of the established political powers in the USA. However, the perception of abstract expressionism has changed over the years – instead of a disorganizing force seen as a threat, critics now emphasize the motif of freedom, a freedom that they are keen to locate in the pictures. Ultimately, abstract expressionist images were proclaimed as representative of an ideology of freedom and American taxpayers' money was spent on funding touring exhibitions to present these pictures internationally. In short, contemporary art is based on a kind of agreement that is brokered in particular spatial and temporal contexts. Therefore it is obviously not by chance that the more easily tradable works of art in all (new and old) art markets in Britain, the US, Brasilia, China and India appear again mostly as paintings. "A highly specific relationship may be said to exist between those works that are seen to require artistic legitimation – punch lines and Mehrwert- and those that are acknowledged as art in the everyday sense of the term, without further discussion. The latter are more numerous. Of course all of the works of this type – the ones that require no justification – are actually justified by other works. [...] They are able to forgo external justifications and thus give off the heavy sent of immanence, in which the business of art is so fond of steeping. It is work of this kind that finance the everyday operations of the art industry. They circulate throughout the world, and images of them fill the catalogues and art magazines. Yet it is only works of the first type - those that are openly in need of legitimation - that keep the discourse alive."<sup>4</sup> as Diedrich Diederichsen argues. Also the works of art of a more traditional, or to speak with Diederichsen, 'boring' appearance are more likely to transport the ideology of a self sufficient independent (genius) protagonist in the field, which forms an analogy to the interdependent entrepreneur, the new figure in emerging economies. It is by no means per chance that especially these so called "art fair art" is mainly produced by and attributed to male protagonists, mentioned by Olav Velthuis are for example Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami, Richard Prince, Maurizio Cattelan, or Damien Hirst.<sup>5</sup> And it is not by chance that the new markets (China, India and Brasil, who are said to have saved the market in the last big crisis in 2008/2009) promote male artists who often use painting as a favourite media.<sup>6</sup>

**The question of what art is should be stated more precisely: How is art produced?** How does it come about that certain creations are recognized as "art" in the Western sense and enter into the canon, while others do not? As we have seen, time and place play an important role. These acts of recognition, of consecration, take place in a complex field. If one follows the art eco-system model established by Arts Council England in 2004, acts of consecration pass through complex interactions involving individual actors and institutions. As Ulf Wuggenig argues: "Due consideration must be given to the fact that the importance of the individual elements varies according to the particular phase the consecration procedures are in and the countries involved. Depending on the country, public and private actors play a more or less critical role."<sup>7</sup>

This is the sequence proposed by Arts Council England:<sup>8</sup>

1. Artists attract recognition of peers
2. Exhibition curated by artists or freelance curator
3. Representation in a small publicly funded gallery
4. Activity attracts critical attention
5. Attracts attention of dealer
6. Attracts private collectors

7. Dealers build artists' reputation through sales including international art fairs
8. Dealer builds critical endorsement through exhibitions/sales in small publicly funded/regional independent galleries
9. Purchase or exhibition in major public gallery
10. Legitimization adds value and status to collector and profit to dealer and artist
11. Collector lends to public gallery
12. Collectors' discernment is endorsed – invited onto Boards of Galleries
13. Collectors bequest collection to galleries.



3

3 Arts Council, see footnote 8

No artistic career follows such a direct trajectory; there are forward and backward steps, periods of stagnation and unexpected events. Also this more rigid scheme proposed by the British Council maybe even distracts the somehow chaotic production of a name, a label, in other words a star. The art-star appears through a variety of acknowledgements in rather small circles. In this system single figures (understood as specific actors in a field) with a lot of economic or cultural capital can through their recognition “make” an artist, as for example happened for Louise Bourgeois through the gallery Hauser & Wirth, but these “discoveries” often follow recommendations by other artists from an inner circle. “Contemporary art” thus always appears in a discursive space, a space of what is and is not allowed, a space of inclusions and exclusions. And contemporary art is a relatively new concept; autonomy, i.e. comparative independence, was inconceivable for a religious or court artist, as Peter Bürger and Terry Eagleton have established.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand contemporary art may serve in more subtle ways an ideology of a bourgeois (neoliberal) society.

What is interesting in these quasi-autonomous fields of art is, as Pierre Bourdieu maintains, the fact that “this relatively autonomous universe (which is to say, of course, that it is also relatively dependent, notably with respect to the economic field and the political field) makes a place for an inverse economy whose particular logic is based on the very nature of symbolic goods – realities with two

aspects, merchandise and signification, with the specifically symbolic values and the market values remaining relatively independent of each other."<sup>10</sup> [authors emphasis] However, this symbolic value is only attained when art is produced without there being any direct interest in exploiting the product. It is just this "purity" in art that constitutes its value, the option of responding independently to social conditions. Here, the "inverse economy" means that artworks do not seek to plug themselves directly into the market but strive to create other values, be they defined or indeterminate. Thus avant-garde art first of all has no apparent interest in the market. The successful exploitation of an overly direct and conspicuous interest in the market would immediately transform the product in question, shifting its status from belonging to an avant-garde that is not fully recognized but full of promise, to being tarred with the brush of belatedness. An art object or artist that misses the boat all but invites ridicule.

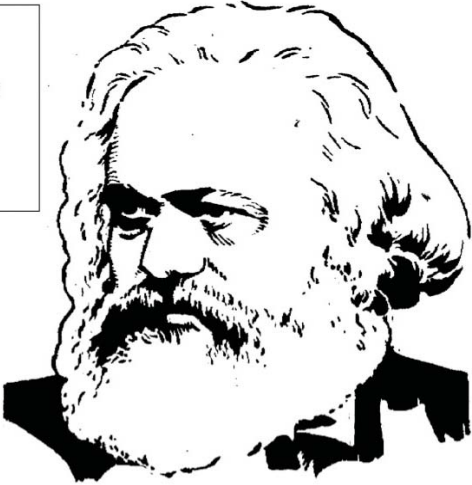
The market for cultural goods is, however, very strongly differentiated and this is further complicated by new markets and new types of products, as we will see later.

### What is a commodity?

The value of art is essentially rooted in a specific time, a specific place and a specific non-dependence on having any direct application. It arises from these negotiation processes, but what exactly constitutes use value and exchange value

## use value vs. exchange value

Use value  $\neq$  object and its usage



4

4 Slides created by Jörg Kohnen-May.

In the next section, I will focus in particular on an article by Walter Grasskamp which discusses these two terms from the perspective of art.<sup>11</sup> The notion of exchange value and use value goes all the way back to Aristotle and denotes key categories for speaking about the commodification of things, on this Marx based his economical theory.

"If the one [the exchange value] makes it possible to look at market conditions regardless of the nature of the goods, the other [the use value] is focused on just these material properties; if the exchange value characterizes the relationship between people negotiating a price, the use value defines the relationship between people and things."<sup>12</sup>

# use value and exchange value

5 Slides created by Jörg Kohnen-May.



5

The use value appears to be more obvious and is thus often ignored by the political economy. The term “exchange value” is considerably more charismatic, mysterious and puzzling. However, in real commodities we find a mixture. This is taken advantage of in advertising, which enhances a product and its simple use value with glamorous attributions. Grasskamp argues that modern art can be seen as the ultimate product and has some similarities to money, while being endowed in addition with the possibility of speculation:

“In the meantime, modern art is seen as a branded product par excellence, and there are indeed many [parameters] for this: on the producer’s side, it has high recognition value by virtue of the artist’s characteristic style and signature; on the collector’s side, it has the prestige value associated with ostentatious ownership; in terms of quality of the object owned, it ultimately has material and cultural durability, which goes along with the expectation of a possible increase in value. Thus it represents an attractive prospect for the consumer and a lucrative investment.”<sup>13</sup>

The use value of artworks tends towards zero; with contemporary art, moreover, there may not even necessarily be the material durability emphasized by Grasskamp – to take just one example, one need only think of the pieces made by Dieter Roth out of chocolate, which then had to be treated with poisonous gas by collectors and museums in order to preserve them. Artists thus create products that at all events refrain from looking like products. Grasskamp makes the following ironic remark about this: “The training of the artist as entrepreneur, who must not appear to be a businessperson but can only survive by being one, [takes place at the academy]. [...] An academy is always also a business school in disguise.”<sup>14</sup> Especially the diamond skull by Damian Hirst *For the Love of God*, was a human skull recreated in platinum and adorned with 8,601 diamonds weighing a total of 1,106.18 carats. Approximately £15,000,000 worth of diamonds were used. It was modelled on an 18th-century skull, but the only surviving human part of the original is the teeth. The asking price for *For the Love of God* was £50,000,000 (\$100 million or 75 million euros). It didn’t sell outright, and on 30 August 2008 was sold to a consortium that included Hirst himself and his gallery White Cube.”<sup>15</sup> This piece marks a turning point in the discourse around the relation of art and money. Now the artist is acting openly as an entrepreneur, but an entrepreneur

who also mocks the money business. Mimicry and critique is now intertwined closely. Still, artworks contain immaterial values – the various forms of capital involved have been delineated by Pierre Bourdieu. Some of these forms of generating value, these forms of neoliberal entrepreneurship might be even more noticeably displayed in the figure of the contemporary curator.

### What are the various use values and exchange values that play a role in the art world?

Bourdieu extended the concept of capital: instead of simply limiting the term to economic capital, from his perspective it exists in three different manifestations: economic capital, cultural capital and social capital.<sup>16</sup>

**Economic capital:** the creation of value from work and exchange and its representation in money and the accumulation of money.

**Cultural capital,** which takes three forms:

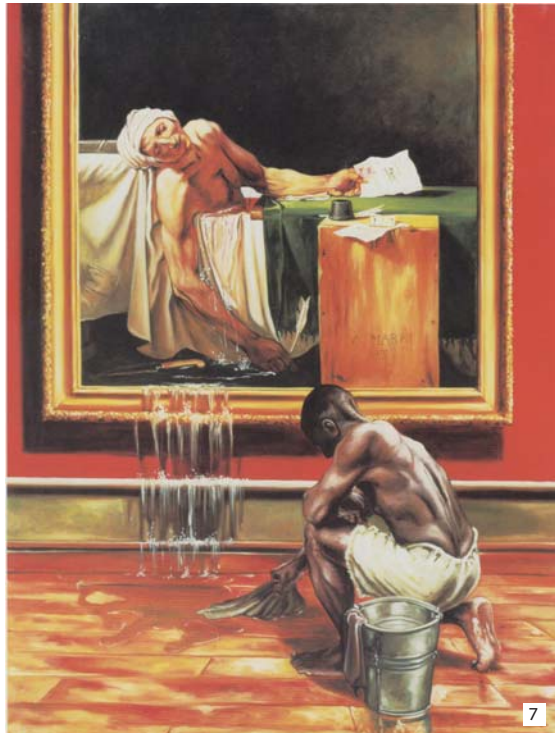
**1. Family-transmitted cultural capital** – this refers to one’s knowledge of cultural goods and the “habitus” associated with this; habitus means one’s behaviours, modes of expression, clothing and general appearance to the outside world, which displays complex codes. Cultural capital is fundamentally associated with the body and requires a process of internalization; personal investment must be made *in teaching and studying – this costs time and is paid for by the investor (or their parents)*. The delegation principle is ruled out. Embodied capital is a possession that has become an integral part of the person and is incorporated into their habitus. This *cannot* be passed on in the short term unlike money, property or a title.

**2. Objectified cultural capital** includes writings, paintings and sculpture. However, to enjoy these one also needs cultural capital. Cultural goods can be acquired materially or symbolically. A symbolic acquisition would be, for example, having power of control or acquiring something on paper. This gives rise to the ambivalent position of managers and of arts administration.

**3. Institutionalized cultural capital:** a title, emphasizes the difference between title holders and autodidacts who are under pressure to prove their credentials. Any title yields various profit-making opportunities.



6 Detail of an adaption of *The Death of Marat* by Jacques-Louis David (Jacobin supporters such as Marat, orders from the Convention, Napoleon on horseback, political propaganda, Marat as martyr), *L'Ami du Peuple* (The Friend of the People), a newspaper published by Marat, stabbed to death in 1793



7 Armando Mariño, *El centinela* (The Sentry), 180 × 220, in *Der globale Komplex*, exh. cat. OK Centrum für Gegenwartskunst, Linz, and Grazer Kunstverein (Linz/Graz, 2002), p. 29. An adaptation of *The Death of Marat* by Jacques-Louis David

**Social capital:** Membership of a group (club, degree course, association, family, aristocracy or a network build up during studies). The amount of social capital that the individual possesses thus depends both on the extent of the network of relationships that he or she can actually mobilize and on the range of (economic, cultural or symbolic) capital possessed by those with whom they are in relationship. Relationships require constant cultivation and the process of mutual appreciation is regularly ratified by the deployment of time and money.

Bourdieu's theoretical exposition is therefore also of particular interest as it goes beyond a rigid classical way of thinking without smoothing over the conflicts of interest between social groups. In this diagram one can see how Bourdieu saw the distribution for France in the 1970s; cultural capital also serves as a means of distinguishing oneself from other groups, a way of establishing a line of demarcation. Cultural capital can be turned back into economic capital when, for instance, a training to be a designer, artist or teacher pays for itself. This is what Diederichsen sees as second order of use-value.<sup>17</sup> As Diederichsen remarks, the tendencies of hidden agendas differ with the systems: "Further, in terms of time spent in art school, when considering how the value of artistic production is created, it is normally important to ask who financed the artist's training. In Europe, the answer is still primarily, in full or in part, the state (or, in a populist abbreviation, the taxpayers.) In the United States and other neoliberal areas of the world, financing this general component of labor that is socially necessary for the production of art has become the responsibility of the artist themselves, who take loans to pay their way through school and, as it were, invest the income they will only receive later into their prior education. In this sense, artist are entrepreneurs who pursue their own material interest and later that of others. The alternate model (traditionally followed in Europe) effectively casts artists as civil servants or government employees and hence, at least indirectly, bound to a conception of the common good."<sup>18</sup> Here again one could argue that the social agency of curating is mostly much more directly connected in Europe with neoliberal entrepreneurship than the artistic.

Cultural and social capital should be examined more closely in the particular places that have become new locations for the art market. This much can be said: the financially powerful elites in India and China use cultural goods as a means of distinction; that is, they want to mark themselves off from other social groups. The art market in China still functions as a largely closed market – Chinese artists are bought by Chinese collectors. To break into these closed markets, Art Basel established a presence in Hong Kong. One can take a similar view of the new institutions set up by arts universities and museums in Hong Kong and for example Abu Dhabi.

The artistic comment on this well known image *The Death of Marat* by Jacques-Louis David puts western art in a specific setting, it may be interesting that Jacques-Louis David was a Jacobin supporter, one of his most famous paintings was Napoleon on horseback, a decidedly political propaganda, very modern in its appearance. Also Marat was the publisher of the newspaper of, *L'Ami du Peuple* (The Friend of the People), he was stabbed to death in 1793. So the staging of his heroic life and death that culminates in this (imaginary) image of him as a martyr of the new republic could be seen from other perspectives. In real life, one might add, the cleaning staff would be women. Unsurprisingly most new painters of the new art market(s) are male – again a recourse of the artist-genius-entrepreneur narration pattern.

### Financial Markets – Art Markets

There are, however, other hidden agendas that underlie art acquisition, beyond proclivity or personal cachet and the gains that go with it. In *Das Gespenst des Kapitals* (The Spectre of Capital), Joseph Vogl argues that, amazingly, financial markets discursively fabricate the present and future:

“In point of fact, this Nobel Prize-winning transformation [the Black-Scholes formula] of guessing games into the science of finance could amortize the virtuality of uncertain futures and with it the very dimension of time. If – based on the parameters set by normal distributions, mean values and Gaussian or bell curves – the scatter of future events can be calculated according to the range of variation of past unpredictability and if future risks behave analogously to existing risks, the business routines of the financial markets will be sustained by the fact that future expectations can be translated into expected futures and this will lead overall to a more or less reliable homogeneity between the future present and the present future.”<sup>19</sup>

What Vogl means is that the premise of speculations that are built on the latest economic theories emanates from a guessing game and this game only works out if the present merges into the future in an essentially uniform fashion, whereby normal distribution and mean values play a major role. But these are completely speculative assumptions, which, as you know, also lead to bets being placed on losses on the financial market, thus contributing in part to the threat we face of the system collapsing for the time being. Attempts are, in fact, constantly being made to contain an event, or an investment, with a system of reinsurance. But at some point the last person in the long line of reinsurers takes a hit and this sparks a chain reaction. As Vogl puts it:

“Since neoliberalism created the vision that all events and conditions in the lived-in world could be endowed with a market value – in a perfect competitive world one needs to know nothing more than the price of things – a differentiated, as it were molecular, market can hedge any possible future with securities, options and derivatives, and guarantee a kind of earthly providence.”<sup>20</sup>

8 See footnote 24

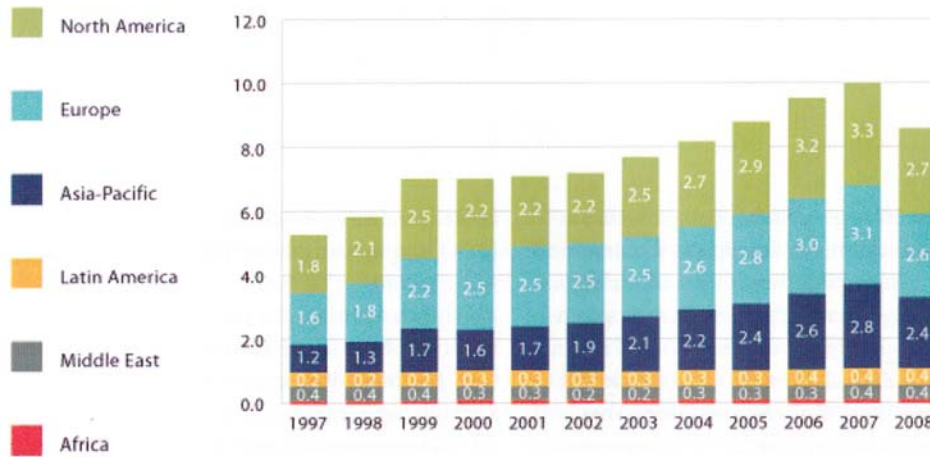
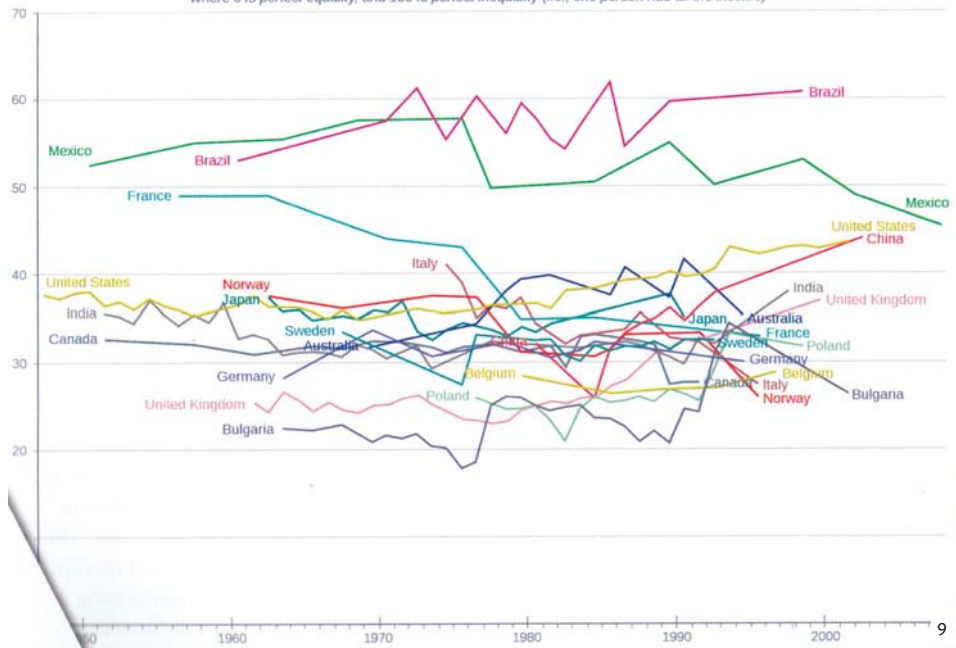


Figure 3: Number of HNWI per region (in millions) / Anzahl der HNWI nach Region (in Millionen)

8

Gini Index - Income Disparity since World War II  
 where 0 is perfect equality, and 100 is perfect inequality (i.e., one person has all the income)

9 See footnote 24



9

The market that allegedly balances everything out is ultimately the future security for all games of this kind, “with the minor flaw that this premise is not all that probable. The most recent thesis proposed by equilibrium theory also predicts a reconciliation of nation states with liberalism; at present we all find ourselves part of a major worldwide experiment which will remain in progress for the foreseeable future.<sup>21</sup> In summary, one can say that the supposedly oh-so-rational world of the economy and economic science is based on rather far-fetched suppositions and hopes that are illusory in the extreme.

Viewed in this way – and there are some very rich people who have come to this conclusion – the art market is a relatively safe, crisis-proof and stable way of accumulating capital. What is interesting in the art market is that an individual



collector can influence it through his or her purchases, an individual can built up a valuable collection which adds to the value of every piece in the collection. In many respects it is a specific market, as Clare Mc Andrew, director and founder of Arts Economics, a Dublin-based research and consulting firm specialized on the art economy, remarked: "it takes about thirty years on average for a piece of art to reappear on the art market after being sold. So, for example, if you sell a piece it probably won't resell for another thirty years. That was the average we've found, and in fact some pieces never resell. So it's a slow-moving, unique marketplace that makes it very different from other financial markets."<sup>22</sup> Moreover, there are more and more extremely wealthy people. Here you see a statistic about high-net-worth individuals (HNWIs), people with investable finance in excess of US\$1 million, and the number of ultra-HNWIs with assets of US\$30 million has also risen – Latin America, the Middle East and Africa have remained constant but a sharp increase has been recorded in North America, Europe and Asia according to Mc Andrew. The big changes in the global art market were summarized by Mc Andrew: "And the most important markets for contemporary art are now definitely outside Europe. In 2010 the U.S. was still the largest contemporary market, but China overtook the U.K. to be the second largest. In 2011, China is by far the largest – based on auction sales it had a 45 percent share versus the U.S. at 25 percent. And China has come from virtually 1 percent or 2 percent in 2002. So it's been an astonishing rise, and it's these markets outside Europe that have really helped the art market as a whole and contemporary art especially to come out of the hole it was in 2009."<sup>23</sup> Alarming, though, at the same time the income gap has grown dramatically. The artist Andrea Fraser has researched this: "Finally, a couple of years ago, a group of economists began to look at these comparative indexes not simply for evidence of art's investment value, but for an explanation of its price structure. [They] suspected that equity market returns actually have a direct impact on art prices by increasing the buying power of the wealthy. So they compared art prices to income measures."<sup>24</sup>

Subsequently, the academics cited by Fraser found that there was no connection between art-based profits and general income variables (such as GNP). Her findings were shocking: "Art prices do not go up as a society as a whole becomes wealthier, but only when income inequality increases."<sup>25</sup> Thus the countries experiencing a noticeable art boom are precisely those that show an increase in income disparities: the USA, China and India. Mc Andrews claims knowingly that buying art is often a tax efficient way to transfer wealth through generations.<sup>26</sup> Even if one is aware of the totally imaginary side of prices related to art works, it is annoying and interesting to think how these prices are produced and for a time agreed on.<sup>27</sup> Olav Velthuis argues, relying on a variety of researches, that the fact of making a "sacrifice" to purchase an art work, like not going to an expensive holiday or buying other luxury items, is obviously an experience that makes buyers feel more dedicated and also more valuable themselves.<sup>28</sup> So the relations of buyers, dealers and artists are psychological complex, just to open up the field of discussion, not only the pleasure of collecting with its obvious anal-fixation is at stake but other, slightly aggressive and auto-aggressive tendencies. This is even more so in states in which the art market is more closely relying on private purchases. In Europe there is still direct public arts funding, which gives artists and the intelligentsia far more room for manoeuvre. Overall the artist Andrea Fraser adopts a decidedly downbeat tone when it comes to culture, especially one might ponder, after her ambivalently received art work, *Untitled* (2003), a video edition of five, in which she videotaped a performance of her having sex with a collector.<sup>29</sup> In this way she performed and repeated the "authentically stages life" of Warhol, she performed and repeated the "tyranny of looking good", as Isabelle Graw has formulated for Warhol's factory

“staff”.<sup>30</sup> This does point in a radical way to the overall power of the market, but maybe on the price of a submissive position of the artist which is after all not what a collector wants. Fraser’s suggested solution nowadays is to create new art venues that would act autonomously, and for artists, curators and critics to retreat there and pay no attention to the market.

I am not so pessimistic about the state of things and continue to see the opportunity for art to adopt a critical view of things, even if there is plenty of evidence that art production is repeatedly being overtaken, mollified and co-opted by market developments. Bourdieu claims for the intelligentsia something that can also hold true for artists:

“The intellectual is constituted as such by intervening in the political field *in the name of autonomy* and of the specific values of a field of cultural production which has attained a high degree of independence with respect to various powers (and this intervention is unlike that of the politician with strong cultural capital, who acts on the basis of a specifically political authority, acquired at the price of a renunciation of an intellectual career and values).”<sup>31</sup>

### And yet it moves us ... ?

The double role of art as a possible means of criticism and as a tradable luxury item probably cannot be resolved by withdrawing into an autonomous clique as Fraser proposed. Ultimately, the interesting coteries will then be commercially exploited and integrated into the system (whether as professors or in some other capacity). To offer a glimmer of hope here, I will provide an example as a comment on the system. This picture is, no doubt, familiar to you.



10 Sturtevant, Warhol *Flowers*, 1990.  
Courtesy Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt

Yes, Warhol one might think, but it is in fact Sturtevant, whose artistic practice it is to copy artworks by male stars of the art world, sometimes even using their meshes when creating screen prints. She articulates a feminist critique of iconic white male artists. And, of course, a critique of the art market too, especially when she says in one catalogue that a collector passed off one of her works as a Warhol, and that he himself no longer knew what he had bought. Since artworks, regardless of whether they are based on multiple authorship – one thinks here of Anselm Kiefer’s or Olafur Eliasson’s massive production facilities – are always

attributed to the one famous person in the art market, Sturtevant intentionally unsettles the market.

One might argue then that even if contemporary art can be classified as a cultural asset only for certain social groups and strata, even if it may be used perhaps as a superior object of speculation, in each case it conveys a message. This message can – at any rate, that is what I still believe – offer the possibility of breaking with existing patterns of thinking, of becoming something different from what one was before, as Foucault once formulated so elegantly in relation to philosophy: “... all the work that has been done to think otherwise, to do something else, to become other than what one is”.<sup>32</sup>

Art market and a critical attitude cannot be seen as fundamental contradictions, we are all part of a celebrity culture, of a labelling machine, of so called cognitive capitalism, as Isabelle Graw states in *High Price*.<sup>33</sup> For the overall economic situation Vogl projects: “With the deregulation of the financial markets and the opening up of “international markets for human capital”, there is put into effect – accentuated by a rhetoric of expansion – a projective and flexible adaptation of society to continual situations of risk. This probably entails a reform of older welfare states and the emergence of a new format that merits the name not only of a competitive society but also of a risk culture with a modular organization. In this system there will be no classes or parties, only the bond between financial interests and economic partners.”<sup>34</sup> This would be the distribution of interest groups all over the world (and only in this sense the nation state would be less important or more global) and reminds of the already existing art world. A retreat cannot be achieved, but a position can be taken up under all circumstances. Some resistance could be expressed without falling back into the quite strange but popular heroic gesture of some “revolutionary” male intellectuals. Just as an example: Even when in the lecturer-student relationship also a very hands-on price tack occurs in these expensive neoliberal education systems the attitude towards the students will matter, the honesty, the support, the challenge of equality and the attempt to make knowledge a shared process accessible for free and for many.<sup>35</sup>

**Dorothee Richter** is head of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating and co-founder, with Susanne Clausen, of the “Research Platform for Curatorial and Cross-disciplinary Cultural Studies, Practice-Based Doctoral Programme” a cooperation of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating and the Department of Fine Arts, University of Reading. From 1999 to the end of 2003, Richter was artistic director of the Künstlerhaus Bremen where she curated a discursive programme based on feminist issues, urban situations, power relation issues, institutional critique. In 2005 she initiated, in collaboration with Barnaby Drabble the Postgraduate Studies Programme in Curating. Symposia: “Re-Visions of the Display”, coop. Jennifer Johns, Sigrid Schade, Migros Museum in Zurich. 2010 “Institution as Medium. Curating as Institutional Critique?” coop. with Rein Wolfs, in 2013 the symposium “How is afraid of the public?” at the ICA London, coop. with Elke Krasny, Silvia Simoncelli and the University of Reading. Her most recent publication is Fluxus. Kunst gleich Leben? Mythen um Autorschaft, Produktion, Geschlecht und Gemeinschaft and the new Internet platform [www.on-curating.org](http://www.on-curating.org) which presents current approaches to critical curatorial practice. In 2013 she published a film together with Ronald Kolb: Flux Us Now! Fluxus explored with a camera.

## Notes

1 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA, 1996), p. 158. Originally published as *Les règles de l'art: Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris, 1992).

2 *Der globale Komplex*, exh. cat. OK Centrum für Gegenwartskunst, Linz, and Grazer Kunstverein (Linz/Graz, 2002), p. 29.

3 Roger Buerge, Stefanie-Vera Kockot, eds., *Abstrakter Expressionismus: Konstruktionen ästhetischer Erfahrung* [Abstract expressionism: Constructions of aesthetic experience] (Dresden, 2000).

4 Diederich Diederichsen, *On (Surplus) Value in Art*, Reflection 01, (Berlin 2008), p. 29-30.

5 Olav Velthuis, "Introduction", in Maria Lind, Olav Velthuis eds., *Contemporary art and its commercial markets, a report on current conditions and future scenarios*, Berlin 2012, p.19.

6 See *The Art Market*. Hans Belting in Conversation with Clare McAndrew, Karlsruhe, February 20, 2011, [http://www.globalartmuseum.de/site/guest\\_author/303](http://www.globalartmuseum.de/site/guest_author/303), (access 22. Sept. 2013) Mc Andrew: "It went through a particularly rough patch in 2009, the market contracted by around 70 percent, but it has recovered very strongly again. So it's been an extremely volatile marketplace. It's seen some highs and lows, but over all it's been a period of growth relative to any other periods. And although 2009 saw probably the worst recession since the recession of the early 1990s, it's still at a much higher level than it's ever been, and in 2011, it surprised us once again and is at a higher level than the peak of 2007."

7 See Ulf Wuggenig and Heike Munder, *Das Kunstfeld: Eine Studie über Akteure und Institutionen der zeitgenössischen Kunst* [The art field: A study of actors and institutions in contemporary art] (Zurich, 2012), p. 95.

8 Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, *Taste Buds: How to Cultivate the Art Market* (London, 2004), p. 6. See [http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/documents/publications/tastebudssummary\\_php7xDjDe.pdf](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/documents/publications/tastebudssummary_php7xDjDe.pdf) (accessed 15 August 2013).

9 Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* [Theory of the avant-garde] (Frankfurt, 1974). Bürger still makes use of a rather inflexible grid as a model; Terry Eagleton clearly states that this quasi-autonomy generated ideological subjects, namely as independently acting operators. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford, 1990).

10 Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, p. 141 (see note 1).

11 Walter Grasskamp, "Das Entgegenkommen der Dinge: Versuch über den Gebrauchswert" [The accommodation of things: An essay on use value], in *Konsumglück: Die Wa(h)re Erlösung* [Consumer happiness: Product redemption] (Munich, 2000), pp. 31–45.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 32 [translated].

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 119–120 [translated].

14 *Ibid.*, p. 117 [translated].

15 See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Damien\\_Hirst](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Damien_Hirst), accessed 14<sup>th</sup> Oct. 2013.

16 Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital", in John G. Richardson, ed., *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, trans. Richard Nice (New York, 1986), pp. 241–58.

17 See Diederichsen, see footnote 3, p. 39: „Thus use value is every bit as present in art objects as it is in all other commodities.“

18 Diederichsen, see footnote 3, p. 34.

19 Joseph Vogl, *Das Gespenst des Kapitals* [The spectre of capital] (Zurich, 2010/2011), p. 109 [translated].

20 *Ibid.*, p. 110 [translated].

21 See *Ibid.*, p. 112.

22 See *The Art Market*. Hans Belting in Conversation with Clare McAndrew, Karlsruhe, February 20, 2011, [http://www.globalartmuseum.de/site/guest\\_author/303](http://www.globalartmuseum.de/site/guest_author/303), (access 22. Sept. 2013)

23 See *The Art Market*. Hans Belting in Conversation with Clare McAndrew, Karlsruhe, February 20, 2011, [http://www.globalartmuseum.de/site/guest\\_author/303](http://www.globalartmuseum.de/site/guest_author/303), (access 22. Sept. 2013).

24 Andrea Fraser, "L'1%, c'est moi", in *Texte zur Kunst* 83, "The Collectors", (September, 2011), pp. 114–27, here: p. 119.

25 Ibid., p.119.

26 Again Clare Mc Andrew can explain motives: „And I think this is why art probably fared a lot better during the recession than a lot of other asset classes. It had that idea that it was a real, physical asset, it had enduring value and this value tended to increase over time. It's a buy-and-hold strategy for art investing, and also a very useful and often tax-efficient way to transfer wealth through generations." See *The Art Market*. Hans Belting in Conversation with Clare McAndrew, Karlsruhe, February 20, 2011, [http://www.globalartmuseum.de/site/guest\\_author/303](http://www.globalartmuseum.de/site/guest_author/303), (access 22. Sept. 2013)

27 Most interesting in this respect: Olav Velthuis, *Talking Prices, Symbolic Meanings of Prices on the Market for Contemporary Art*, (Princeton 2005).

28 Ibid., p.172 – 176.

29 See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrea\\_Fraser](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrea_Fraser), accessed Oct. 2013: In her videotape performance *Untitled* (2003), Fraser recorded a hotel-room sexual encounter with a private collector, who had paid close to \$20,000 to participate,<sup>[4]</sup> "not for sex, according to the artist, but to make an artwork."<sup>[5]</sup> Actually, according to Andrea Fraser, the amount that the collector had paid her has not been disclosed, and the "\$20,000" figure is way off the mark. Only 5 copies of the 60-minute DVD were produced, 3 of which are in private collections, 1 being that of the collector with whom she had had the sexual encounter; he had pre-purchased the performance piece in which he was a vital participant.

30 Isabelle Graw, *High Price, Art Between the Market and Celebrity Culture*, Berlin 2008, p. 172 and p.181.

31 Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, p. 129 (see note 1).

32 "Philosophy as activity. The movement by which, not without effort and uncertainty, dreams and illusions, one detaches oneself from what is accepted as true and seeks other rules—that is philosophy. The displacement and transformation of frameworks of thinking, the changing of received values and all the work that has been done to think otherwise, to do something else, to become other than what one is." Michel Foucault, *Von der Freundschaft. Michel Foucault im Gespräch*, Berlin 1984, zitiert nach Christine Hauskeller, *Das paradoxe Subjekt, Unterwerfung und Widerstand bei Judith Butler und Michel Foucault*, Tübingen, 2000 S.46.

33 Isabelle Graw, *High Price, Art Between the Market and Celebrity Culture*, Berlin 2008, p.16-17.

34 Vogl, *Das Gespenst des Kapitals* (see footnote 19), p. 112 [translated].

35 Further readings, which are not explicitly mentioned in the text:

- Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensiek, (eds.) *The Global Art World, Audiences Markets, and Museums*, Ostfildern 2009.

- Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensiek, Peter Weibel, (eds.) *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, Cambridge 2013.

- Isabelle Graw, "Von Künstlern und Intellektuellen möchte der heutige Sammler und Trustee nicht mehr behelligt werden", *Tageszeitung* Nr. 7333, Berlin 14.4.2004. S.15

- Luis Jacob (ed.), *Commerce by Artists*, Toronto 2011.

- Olav Velthuis, *Imaginary Economics*, Rotterdam, 2005.

# Talking about Abstraction...

## A conversation with Maria Lind

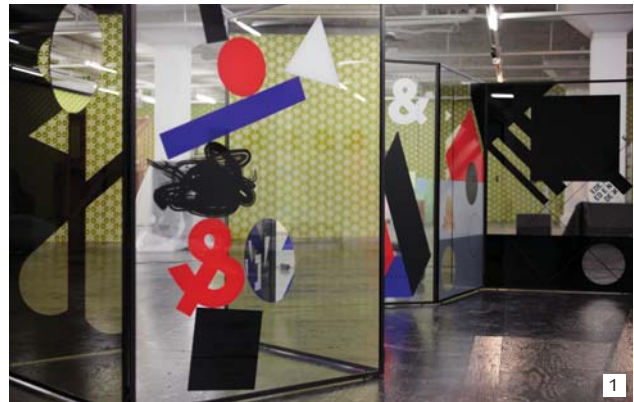
### by Silvia Simoncelli

**Silvia Simoncelli:** When you developed the *Abstract Possible* project, you explored it via three different strands: geometrical abstraction, withdrawal and economic abstraction. The latter seems to have taken a broader space than the first two, not only because of the rich program accompanying the show at Tensta Konsthall in 2012, which was focusing on economic abstraction, but also due to the many initiatives that you have developed there afterward, such as the curatorial summer workshop on "Economy", the series of public seminars "Publishing in Process: Ownership in Question", a series of panel discussions on contemporary art funding. Do you plan to keep on researching on this issue also with your next projects?

**Maria Lind:** In Stockholm there were different emphases in the different venues: formal abstraction at Tensta Konsthall (with work by artists such as Doug Ashford, Claire Barclay, Wade Guyton, Hague Yang and Walid Raad), social abstraction at the Center for Fashion Studies at the Stockholm University (with work by Mai-Thu Perret and Emily Roysdon) and economic abstraction at Bukowskis auction house (with works by artists such as Matias Faldbakken, Zachary Formwalt, Wade Guyton, Iman Issa and Mika Tajima). This being said, things were not pure - there were certainly various forms of abstractions at play everywhere, across strands. The strand of economic abstraction was accompanied by a publication, *Contemporary Art and Its Commercial Markets: A Report on Current Conditions and Future Scenarios*, its release and a symposium plus a panel discussion co-organised with Konsthall C on public and private funding in Sweden. These discussions led to a series of hearings on the demands on "the broadening" of funding sources in Sweden co-organised with a handful of fellow kunsthalls in the suburbs of Stockholm.

I have a long-standing interest in art and money, which has manifested itself in various ways. The group exhibition *Exchange & Transform* (Arbeitstitel) at Kunstverein München in 2002 is one

example, a symposium at Witte de With in Rotterdam in 2005 is another. When I was working at Iaspis we did a one year long project with Marysia Lewandowska and Konstfack, and a number of artists including Goldin+Senneby, exploring notions of ownership in relation to art. It was entitled *Who Makes and Owns Your Work* and it was truly collective, to the point that we decided collectively on the budget. It consisted of open and closed seminars and culminated with an event where new art works took place along side debates and performances on the topic.



Starting at Tensta konsthall made me hyper conscious of the current funding situation for art institutions, having to deal with it every single day. Sweden, like many other northwestern European countries, has gone through radical changes regarding the funding of culture over the last 15 years, without there having been a proper public debate about the ideological as well as practical effects. It became clear to me that while we are doing exhibitions and other projects, with a special focus on mediation, like many other institutions, we also need to actively reflect and act upon our conditions of production. The three strands in *Abstract Possible* were immediately declared as our loose themes overall at Tensta konsthall during my directorship: questions concerning artistic formulation, interpretation and

organization; art and economy; and artists' conditions of work and production. *Publishing in Process: Ownership in Question*, curated by Marysia Lewnowska and Laurel Ptak, is an example of the two latter, as well as the theme of economy at the Curatorial Summer Workshop which we did in collaboration with Nina Möntmann and The Royal Institute of Art where she is a professor of art theory.

Our group of sibling kunsthalls in the suburbs of Stockholm are in the midst of planning a series of hearings mixing our respective local politicians and bureaucrats affecting our work, aiming at increasing their understanding of what small visual arts organizations like us actually do. The important values which we produce.

The theme of art and economy will surely accompany me further. However, right now I am looking at notions of the commons and commoning. It is related to both what we did with *Who Makes and Owns Your Work*<sup>1</sup> and *Publishing in Process: Ownership in Question*<sup>2</sup>, as well as to money and the total economization under late capitalism. The latter is of course essential to *Abstract Possible*. Here, property relations as being at the very core of our existence, even more so than economization, can be seen as the next thing to look at. All this feeding into the fact that in general I want to do things discussing the future, very much inspired by Boris Buden and his ideas around "retrotopia". I.e. that today there is still plenty of utopian thinking, despite claims to the contrary, but it is tragically enough almost entirely focused on the past culture of commemoration.

**SS:** While preparing for our conversation I re-read *European Cultural Policies 2015*, the book published by Iaspis and the eipcp in Vienna that you co-edited in 2005, about the funding structure of contemporary art and its possible future. There, the different contributors pointed already their attention to the growing importance of the private-public partnership, the shift of the art world agenda from museums to art fairs and the diminishing European and state funds for arts, in favour of the creative industries. Looking at the situation today, it looks like it took far less than 10 years to reach the scenario presented there. Do you think there is the possibility that art production and the related cultural production activities could be agencies of change for such trends in the near future?

**ML:** The way things go now it seems as if we will have even more of the same. In other words, we

have just seen the beginning of the creative turn and the withdrawal of the public sector from funding of culture. This is a long cycle. Unless there will be drastic political changes. These are political questions and as long as the art world, like other cultural sectors, stay away from palpable public debate and political struggles it will not change. It will still be possible to act from pockets of potentiality, temporary spaces to manoeuvre, but on a systemic level it will get worse. For example, I don't think we in a foreseeable future can evade or overturn the excessive, even perverse, assessment culture of neoliberalism. However, I do believe we are able to change some of the criteria of evaluation. Here the report *Size Matters*, commissioned by the advocacy group Common Practice in London is a useful and inspirational step in the right direction.



**SS:** In times of diminishing budgets, smaller institutions are trying to develop strategies to implement their fund raising possibilities and to exchange knowledge and experiences in order to benefit mutually from each other's. Together with Casco (Utrecht), CAC (Brétigny), CA2M (Madrid), Zavod P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. (Ljubljana), Digital Art Centre (Holon), Les Laboratoires D'Aubervilliers (Paris), and The Showroom (London), Tensta Konsthall created Cluster in 2011. Could you tell us a bit about it?

**ML:** As a newly appointed director at Tensta konsthall I quickly learned that it was not so easy to talk to colleagues about working there. The context itself, and the demands and expectations from funders, the media and others are very different,

both from what I had experienced in the past and from what most of my colleagues knew. For instance how we are expected to interact with the local community, mostly in preconceived and formulaic ways. So I contacted colleagues in similar situations, people running small visual arts organisations in suburban residential areas, or the like, in big cities in Europe. We met for the first time informally in Venice two years ago and there was a certain curiosity and enthusiasm at the meeting. We decided to form a network, which we call Cluster, in order to learn from each other. As our applications were successful we managed to get funding for all of us to travel to each other and to study on site, in detail, how each organization is operating. Financially, governing-wise, contextually etc. It has been extremely interesting for me, to have all these concrete other examples and this rather intensive exchange, and to do this without any other specific goal in mind. And I don't think I am the only one feeling this way. In September we will go on our last visit, to Ljubljana and then we will discuss if, and how, to go on. Perhaps it will lead to formal collaborations, perhaps not.



As you can tell the purpose is not to “implement fundraising possibilities” but rather a kind of consciousness-raising and solidarity building. Liberated from demands on immediate and measurable outcomes. I believe we will see more cases like this one in the future, with organisations and others connecting across regional and national borders, which traditionally are the uniting factors. In addition to CIMAM and other global associations which so far have not been so useful. Another example of a recent smaller network with organisations with shared concerns is The International with among others the Vanabbemuseum in Eindhoven, MACBA in Barcelona and Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana.

**SS:** In 2011 Andrea Fraser published her text *Le 1% c'est moi*, where she presented an account on a

number of art patrons who actively support the art market and artistic production, unveiling their link to the current world economical disparities, the financial crisis and unethical conduct in business. On the base of this account, Fraser encouraged artists to reflect seriously on the provenance of money that support their work and to refuse compromises. When organizing one of the two parts of *Abstract Possible - the Stockholm Synergies*, in collaboration with Swedish auction house Bukowskis you chose to make that problematic relation clear by actively involving them both as show venue and as funders of the book you edited with Olav Velthuis, *Contemporary Art and its Commercial Markets*. This decision has sparked different reactions and comments. In an article in e-flux Sven Lutticken defined both Fraser's and yours as “impossible models, as models that have already failed” and which therefore “have their value in a situation without easy answers and clearly-labeled emergency exits”.

In his article “The End of Contemporary's Art Bubble Economy”, published in *Texte zur Kunst*, Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen looked back at the *Abstract Possible* exhibition in Stockholm, from a different point of view. He stated that the collaboration between Tensta and Bukowskis fulfilled at best the need of Lundin family, owner of both the auction house and petrol company Lundin Petroleum, to distract the general public's attention from the accusations to the company of unethical conduct in Africa. Seeing it as almost a dead end for institutional critique, Rasmussen suggests instead that the occupy movement and the protest culture of recent years should be seen as models and could provide a context where new structures for artistic and cultural production could be developed, outside the circuit of corrupt money. Do you see this perspective as an interesting and promising one for the emergence of new forms of art spaces and funding strategies as well? From your practice is quite evident that you favour the idea that it somehow essential to operate in a system in order to make its contradictions clear, do you think that this makes sense even when the system has already normalized critique as one of its many constituent elements?

**ML:** The part of *Abstract Possible: The Stockholm Synergies* which took place at Bukowskis auction house for two weeks was a typical case of outsourcing rather than a collaboration, with a specialist consultant doing a clearly predefined task. In this case this was me guest curating an exhibition, being a consultant, where the art works were for sale at set prices, not at an auction. In collaborations you nor-



mally share both the input and the execution, you discuss and make decisions together and then you carry it out together. I guest curated a so-called primary exhibition, a format which they as a player on the secondary market have invented in order to simplify the entrance to the primary market, which is otherwise the arena of galleries. I in turn outsourced the conception of the framework to the artist duo Goldin+Senneby who for a long time in their work have engaged with finance economy and post-Fordist working methods. The result was that the staff of Bukowskis was asked to be responsible for the installation and the mediation of the exhibition, rather than me as the curator. Business as usual, in other words, and not a different, possibly sexier, set-up. The fee which I was paid for the job was used to fund the report *Contemporary Art and Its Commercial Markets*.

One of the purposes was to put on the table and trigger a discussion about the situation of contemporary art and money, on the effects of the boom of the commercial art market, in and of itself but also on public funding. Which is a situation with which Tensta konsthall among others has close encounters, where the pressure on generating more income, specifically private funding, has increased rapidly. The boom of the commercial art market might seem distant but it affects things in most corners of the art world. At the same time as public money is more and more instrumentalised and in many countries also shrinking. In Sweden it is almost impossible to generate this income – there are very few foundations to apply for for contemporary art and the culture of donations is practically non-existing. This is a clear systems error which until *Abstract Possible* had hardly been publicly debated at all.

So our bringing the situation to the table was by entering the belly of the beast, being very well aware of the fact that in the current economic system we can never entirely escape the beast. To believe that you can escape in any fundamental way is to buy into the most comfortable illusions, like contending that using a textile bag for grocery shopping subverts the food industry and its negative effects on human health and the environment. You are shooting the messenger rather than the sender. Instead we over-performed, and did what cultural policy and our funders require. We were the cunning Stakhanov of neoliberal cultural policy. By doing it this way a number of contradictions were exposed and even performed. Among the contradictions is the extensive involvement in the Swedish art world of the

owners of Lundin Petroleum, a company using methods to find oil which must be condemned. However, not guest curating an exhibition at an auction house which is owned by the Lundin family, or not accepting them as buyers at a gallery or as donors of art works to public collections like Moderna Museet, does not guarantee that you stay “clean”. The whole system is impregnated with money from sources like this, whether it is oil, weapons or oligarchs ruining entire regions. It is the very fuel of the art world. This is clearly not unproblematic but the bigger issue is the passive acceptance of a paradigm shift which has direct – negative – consequences on what kind of art which is being made, shown, distributed and discussed in the public realm.

The so-called “protest culture” has been going on for a while, I often think of Seattle 1999 as one start. Many artists and other cultural producers have been involved and great art projects have come out of it and simultaneously been involved in and stimulating it. Everything from *Nine Scripts* from a Nation at War by Andrea Geyer, Sharon Hayes and others and *A Small Post-Fordist Drama* by Marion von Osten and collaborators to anything which Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri have made. It is not unlike the effects of the movement against the war in Vietnam, which did not produce art movements or a clearly defined style. The Art Workers Coalition was an important initiative for the scene and for the discussion but as Julia Bryson-Wilson has shown it did not generate significant art or new structures for artistic and cultural production. Instead it created an awareness and helped shape a sensibility which in turn is discernible in art works as well as curated projects.



The idea that protest culture would create new structures for artistic and cultural production is interesting and I would be happy to see such struc-

tures materialise. Unfortunately it is not so likely, at least not in the short run. Occasional projects yes but not structures. However, there are already enclaves of artistic and cultural self-determination which like the manifestations of protest culture have difficulties in creating organizational continuity and agility. In the meantime I am not ready to give up everything in the existing system, we can still create space to manoeuvre, here and there. The public institutions also belong to us and we can try and use them in ways which we find meaningful. I am curious what the consequences for a purist who seems to want a clean slate in favour of a certain kind of practice, like Rasmussen who has collected gallery art and worn tailor-made suits for so long, will be if the protest movement is to show the way for how to relate to art and therefore also to life.

**SS:** There is another topic which I think is connected with the option of accepting the invitation from an auction house as exhibition partner and deciding to offer works directly for sale, in a different circuit than the one of the gallery or of the art institution itself. In her project *Money* at Kunsthalle Bern, Maria Eichhorn remarked among other things, that the Kunsthalle used to sell artworks at fixed prices to sustain its activities. Outsourcing this function to an auction house as you did, not only makes it more transparent, but at the same time it looks as a comment to the fact in recent years more and more young artists are taken directly from their major gallery to institutional shows directly into the auction market, running the risk of compromising their careers if unable to maintain in the near future a production that matches the expectations of the market itself. What is your position about this?

**ML:** The exhibition at Bukowskis did indeed comment on this. First of all, in many parts of the world private money is since a long time directly involved with the non-profit sector. In some cases even as art works are being sold by or through non-profits, to their benefit, like at the German kunstvereine. Not to speak of how galleries and collectors can affect both which exhibitions are put on but also what works enter collections. Or marketing departments having more and more say in terms of programming.

Regardless if an artist wants to operate in the profit or non-profit parts of the art world, I get suspicious if they speak about a career, let alone worrying about compromising it. This is already a commodification. I would like to see critics, journalists, art

historians and researchers do deep research into the workings and effects of everything from auction houses and galleries to museums and universities. There is a blatant lack of solid investigations and scholarship on the current conditions of production.

*Conversation conducted over e-mail, September 2013*

#### Notes

- 1 <http://whomakesandownsyourwork.org/>
- 2 A series of public seminars begun in February 2012 organised by Tensta konsthall. <http://www.tenstakonsthall.se/>

#### Captions

- 1 José León Cerrillo, *Hotel Edén Revisited*, 2011, installation view. *Abstract Possible the Stockholm Synergies*, Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm, 2012. Photography by Jean-Baptiste Béranger.
- 2 Tommy Støckel, *In My Mind This Goes on Forever*, 2012. Photography by Jean-Baptiste Béranger.
- 3 *Abstract Possible - the Stockholm Synergies*, installation view. Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm, 2012. Photography by Jean-Baptiste Béranger.
- 4 Haegue Yang, *Dress Vehicles: Golden Clowning*, 2011, installation view. *Abstract Possible the Stockholm Synergies*, Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm, 2012. Photography by Jean-Baptiste Béranger.

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# Beyond Reflection: Radical Pedagogy and the Ethics of Art Sponsorship

## Amber Hickey

In Fall of 2008, I agreed to co-organize a workshop with the Tate Modern Department of Public Programmes. It wasn't a freelance job, contract, or internship. I was simply called a "collaborator," a role that turned out to be useful, given that I had no formal ties to the institution. Almost a year and a half later the two day workshop, entitled *Disobedience Makes History*, finally happened.<sup>1</sup> This attempt at radical mediation resulted in an ongoing series of creative, collaborative actions, critiquing the Tate's acceptance of sponsorship from British Petroleum (BP), and helping to open up public debate across the United Kingdom and elsewhere about the ethics of art sponsorship.

During the initial planning stages of the workshop I invited John Jordan, a friend and art-activist, to facilitate the workshop. He reluctantly agreed to do so, although he acknowledged feeling "institutionalized" by the idea.<sup>2</sup> The two curators at the Tate Modern with whom we were planning the workshop seemed to be some of the most radical curators at the institution. However, as the days of the workshop came closer, one of the curators sent an email to Jordan and me stating: "Ultimately, it is also important to be aware that we cannot host any activism directed against Tate and its sponsors, however we very much welcome and encourage a debate and reflection on the relationship between art and activism."<sup>3</sup>

Soon after, Jordan called me. Due to the curator's blatant attempt at political censorship, he wanted to disregard the request and make a point to critique the Tate's longtime sponsor, BP, during the workshop. He asked me if I agreed, not wanting to jeopardize my position with the Tate. My concern was not with my relationship with the Tate; I was hoping this workshop would result in something beyond reflection, so of course I agreed with him. In the past,

I had been involved in many workshops that hinted at the potential for provocation and change, but merely offered a taste of what could be. The possibilities that could arise from a more direct approach proved more exciting than any workshop plan.

At the time the email was sent, the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico had not yet occurred. Therefore, the curator's attempt at censorship was testimony of the Tate's prior awareness that their twenty-year practice of accepting sponsorship from BP contradicts their ethical policy. The policy clearly states that "The Tate will not accept funds in circumstances when...the donor has acted, or is believed to have acted, illegally in the acquisition of funds, for example when funds are tainted through being the proceeds of criminal conduct..." Their organizational priorities, which include a goal to demonstrate "leadership in response to climate change," are also in conflict with their sponsorship choices:<sup>4</sup>

"BP is one of the world's largest single corporate emitters. In 2007 alone the company released over 63 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub> into the earth's atmosphere, roughly equivalent to the emissions of Portugal."<sup>5</sup>

Shortly after the gulf oil spill in April 2010, the US government filed a public lawsuit against BP for their part in the spill. If it was not clear to the public before that BP is a criminal corporation, it should be now.<sup>6</sup> Somehow, it seems there is still work to be done, perhaps due in part to the cultural airbrushing of their image by art institutions such as the Tate.

In their twenty-year relationship, the deal has remained essentially the same: BP offers money, and the Tate, in turn, offers social currency, cultural capital, and progressive clout. The chair of the Tate Board of Trustees is Lord Browne Madingley, former CEO of

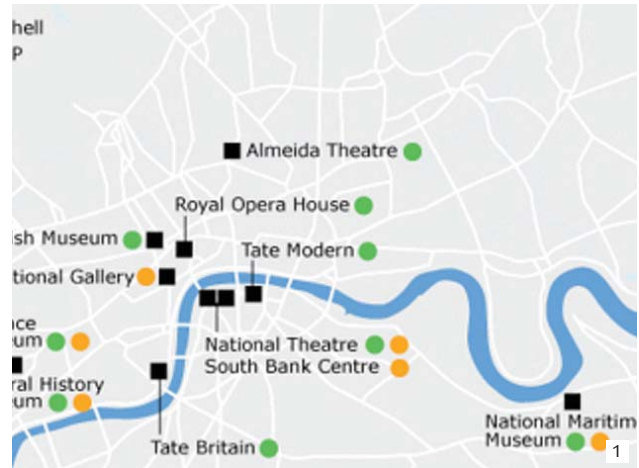
BP. However, I doubt he had any influence on the email that was sent to us. It is more likely to have been a classic case of self-censorship, stemming from fear and conceived of by the curators themselves to protect against any possible criticism. Notably, when one looks at the history of social change, it is clear that in order to achieve progress in urgent issues, a precarious situation needs to be seen as motivation, rather than as a boundary.

Rather than functioning as a warning, the email functioned as a catalyst for us, and Jordan decided that he would project it onto the wall near the beginning of the workshop. The participants would then be asked to decide how to react. In radical pedagogy, it is important to start with real material that is relevant to all in the space. The more real and less abstract the subject is to students, the more learning and genuine sharing of knowledge occurs.<sup>7</sup> Although we would violate the trust of the curators by revealing the email, doing so and challenging the hierarchies that we were expected to answer to had the potential to cause something genuinely interesting to happen.

The first day of the workshop arrived, and as Jordan, one of the curators, and I laid out a selection of radical books on the chairs where the participants would sit, there was a palpable tension in the air. The issue that we were about to bring up with thirty-two individuals is one that is incredibly difficult, particularly because it is so divisive. Following the global financial crisis and, more recently, the change of government in the UK, many cultural institutions have found it increasingly difficult to secure funding. As an artist and organizer myself, I recognize the challenge of being constantly faced with ethical issues, and the many risks of contradicting one's politics when working in the arts. I frequently wonder if it is possible to make and share art in a "purely ethical" way. I am not sure if such a purity exists; to argue that it does sounds idealistic. However, there is a difference between idealism, and being active and aware of the symbolic and concrete meaning of our choices, and their broader effects.

A common reaction to the argument against the acceptance of BP sponsorship, and one we encountered several times during the workshop, is, "Why does it matter where the money comes from, as long as it is going towards something positive?" BP is currently "a major sponsor of the British Museum, the Tate galleries, the Royal Opera House and the National Portrait Gallery. In addition it sponsors the Almeida theatre, the National Maritime Museum, as

well as the Science and Natural History Museums."<sup>8</sup> The passive and widespread acceptance of this particular type of sponsorship greatly benefits the corporations that provide it. Through their visual and textual association with institutions with desirable "profiles," this money affects the way society views these corporations. Therefore, the acceptance of corporate sponsorship can indirectly, but drastically, impact our communities, our health, and our environment.



Another common argument is that due to their support of the arts, BP cannot be all that bad. This is simply not true. In fact, "... according to one group of BP shareholders, BP spent more on their new eco-friendly logo last year than on renewable energy."<sup>9</sup> Even before the gulf oil spill, BP had a deplorable environmental record. Sponsorship agreements function as social cushions, assisting the corporation in continuing to function in an unethical manner.

"Patronage masks the corporation's participation in constructing social relations and identities in a multidimensional culture of everyday life.

... Culture cannot be isolated from social and political agendas."<sup>10</sup>

What if the Tate were to "interrogate the interests of the corporation itself [and] consider the potential for alternative forms of participation in the production of culture?"<sup>11</sup> Once art institutions stop accepting funds from unethical corporations, they will be making a radical statement by positioning themselves against practices that harm humans and the environment, and those corporations will be pressured to confront the reality of their unscrupulous practices.

The second day of the workshop arrived. The email had been shown to the participants the week before, to the great dislike of the curator present. After a heated discussion, the participants had decided to plan an action which would question the Tate's sponsorship decisions. Before the participants arrived on the second day, the gallery administrators called Jordan in for a meeting with several members of staff, including the director of security. He was first given a lecture about the importance of respecting corporate sponsors, and then informed that the workshop was to be monitored with high security. They threatened to cancel the workshop or shut it down if we were to do anything that would threaten the "peaceful enjoyment of the visitors."

At the end of the day, the participants performed a beautiful yet simple action. They posted large black letters on the windows of the seventh floor workshop room that read "Art not Oil." The words remained on display for about thirty minutes, as several of us went outside to document the action.



Before the workshop ended, we discussed the need to form a group that would continue and build upon the efforts that we had started. After the workshop, the participants stayed in touch, met with other like-minded people, and began performing actions as the art activist collective, Liberate Tate. LT regularly organizes creative actions, aiming to encourage the Tate galleries to cease their acceptance of sponsorship from BP. This is an extraordinary outcome for what began as a simple idea to provoke institutional critique, fuelled by activist thinking, inside the concrete walls of the ten-year-old monolith of the Tate Modern.

Locally, Liberate Tate has built ties to research organization Platform and grassroots activism group Art Not Oil, both of which they collaborated with in

their *Tate a Tate* audio tour project, aiming to "provide visitors with a new experience of the presence of BP" in the Tate galleries.<sup>12</sup> Art Not Oil is allied with Rising Tide and the Greenwash Guerrillas—environmental activism groups with chapters internationally. However, it has proven difficult to find movements focusing specifically on the ethics of sponsorship in the cultural industry in other countries. Having recently moved back to the United States, I cannot help but notice the ubiquitous presence of corporate logos on cultural institutions in our cities; one of the most ironic is a Boeing logo on the National Center for the Preservation of Democracy in Los Angeles.<sup>13</sup> That the influence of the cultural industry in the cycle of corporate image-repair seems to be largely overlooked here is frustrating, but unsurprising, considering that the United States has a firmly established and widely lauded history of private funding of cultural institutions. Although sponsorship from tobacco companies is no longer socially acceptable, there is still a marked lack of critique in the receipt of sponsorship from other industries with questionable ethical records. In 1969, the Guerrilla Art Action Group performed an action that has come to be known as *Blood Bath* in the MOMA lobby, protesting the presence of the weapons-industry-affiliated Rockefeller family on the museum's board.<sup>14</sup> Aside from this and other related actions by the GAAG, as well as those by Hans Haacke and the Art Workers Coalition, most of which occurred during the Vietnam War Era, I have not managed to unearth a critique that has emerged with such high visibility in the United States since.<sup>15</sup> This area is ripe for exploring, particularly right now with the risks of climate change quickly escalating. In May 2013, CO2 levels in the atmosphere reached their highest levels in "at least 800,000 years"<sup>16</sup> and "the increase in the global burning of fossil fuels is the primary cause of the increase"<sup>17</sup>. Now more than ever is the time for art institutions to take action in regard to the role they play in the continued exploitation of fossil fuels. It would be disappointing, not to mention incredibly detrimental, if these supposed bastions of celebrating life would continue to affiliate themselves with practices that damage the environment and our communities (with the brunt of the risks falling on low-income countries).<sup>18</sup> As Jordan stated in a recent talk, "With every act of obedience we remake the world as it is and undo the world as it could be"<sup>19</sup>.

Following growing public pressure, along with the actions of Liberate Tate, the Tate issued a public statement of their intent to re-evaluate their acceptance of BP sponsorship. I hope the term "re-evaluate" will come to fruition with more than mere discussion.

## Notes

1 The public call for participants for Disobedience Makes History stated "This workshop will explore the history and practice of creative disobedience and will culminate in a co-created intervention." A copy of the call out can be seen on page XX.

2 It was not the first time Jordan had been invited to lead a workshop at the Tate. He was also invited in 2008 to lead a workshop related to Doris Salcedo's Unilever-sponsored Shibboleth in the Turbine Hall. He refused at that time, due to Unilever's support of the Burmese military junta.

3 The email was sent to Jordan and me on February 6, 2009.

4 "Tate Ethics Policy" <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/4428>, Last modified 2008; "Our Priorities" <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/our-work/our-priorities>, Last modified 2012.

5 "BP Wins Coveted Emerald Paintbrush Award" <http://www.greenpeace.org.uk/blog/climate/bps-wins-coveted-emerald-paintbrush-award-worst-greenwash-2008-20081218>, 22 December 2008.

6 See, for instance, "BP knew 2010 U.S. Gulf spill was risk, lawyers tell trial" <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/30/us-bp-trial-idUSBRE98T0UM20130930>, 30 September 2013.

7 John Jordan in discussion with the author, November 2010.

8 "Artists prepare for BP protests at Tate Britain," <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2010/jun/24/artists-bp-protest-tate>, 24 June 2010. Update, February 2013: According to grassroots activism group Art Not Oil, the Almeida theatre is no longer accepting sponsorship from BP ("About Art Not Oil," <http://www.artnotoil.org.uk/about>, 2011).

9 "BP: Beyond Petroleum or Beyond Preposterous," <http://www.corpwatch.org/article.php?id=219>, 14 December 2000.

10 Mark W. Rectanus, *Culture Incorporated: Museums, Artists, and Corporate Sponsorships* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 5.

11 Ibid.

12 "'Tate a Tate' - Audio Tour," *Liberate Tate Blog*, <http://liberatetate.wordpress.com/alternative-tate-tour-2/>, 2012. More information on the tour can be found here: <http://www.tateatate.org/>.

13 Examples of Boeing's efforts that contradict their affiliation with the National Center for the Preservation of Democracy include their involvement with drone warfare and surveillance technologies. The Military Aircraft section of Boeing's website states "Whether the need is for strike or surveillance aircraft, mobility craft, unmanned systems, weapons,

and more, Boeing meets the enduring needs of customers around the world..." ("Military Aircraft," [http://www.boeing.com/boeing/bds/military\\_aircraft/index.page?](http://www.boeing.com/boeing/bds/military_aircraft/index.page?), Last modified 2013).

14 Guerrilla Art Action Group, Jon Hendricks, and Jean Toche, Gaag, the Guerrilla Art Action Group, 1969-1976: A Selection (Printed Matter, 1978) Number 3, Communique.

15 If the reader knows of any such efforts, please get in touch. I would love to hear about actions and groups that I may have overlooked.

16 "Record 400ppm CO2 milestone 'feels like we're moving into another era'" <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/may/14/record-400ppm-co2-carbon-emissions>, 14 May 2013.

17 "Global carbon dioxide levels set to pass 400ppm milestone," <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/apr/29/global-carbon-dioxide-levels>, 29 April 2013.

18 "Climate change will hit poor countries hardest, study shows," <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2013/sep/27/climate-change-poor-countries-ipcc>, 27 September 2013.

19 "Letter to a corpse," <http://labofii.wordpress.com/2013/09/27/letter-to-a-corpse/>, 27 September 2013.

## Captions

1 Map of art institutions in London that accept sponsorship from Shell and BP *Artists BP Protest Tate*. Source: The Guardian, 2010.

2 "Art not oil" action, *Disobedience Makes History*, Tate Modern, 2010. Photograph by Amber Hickey.

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**"Beyond Reflection: Radical Pedagogy and the Ethics of of Art Sponsorship"** was written in 2010. Since then, the article has undergone minor changes and updates. It was originally published in the first issue of the *ArtLeaks Gazette* (<https://ia601702.us.archive.org/20/items/ArtLeaksGazette/AL-Gazette-Hickey.pdf>)

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# Curatorial Outsourcing: Curate Local

## Lindsey V. Sharman

Outsourcing in the curatorial world is often done by quietly utilizing the labour of volunteers or curatorial assistants eager just to be close to a project, naively hopeful for recognition—authorship being typically the most coveted currency in the cultural sector. While artistic subcontracting and outsourcing is a centuries old practice that has been extensively utilized, this working method within the curatorial realm has been widely ignored. Artists are extensive outsourcers; contrary to what modernism would have you believe, the artist's studio is rarely a place of solitary ingenious creativity, but a place of work and even a factory employing any number of workers from wage earners to short-term contractors. Damien Hirst engages short term “assistants” on fixed term contracts to prepare most (if not all) of his work.<sup>1</sup> Olafur Eliasson employs an extensive team from architects to contextualizers, archivists to cooks. He keeps a base of forty-five employees but engages engineers, curators, and cultural producers as required.<sup>2</sup> Like in the artist's studio, curatorial outsourcing can enable one to take part in many projects at once, while outsourcing all of the “active” work to low or non-paid workers. Corporate outsourcing developed because of economic greed. Curatorial outsourcing could either continue to legitimize the exploitation of interns and non-paid workers, or play a part in the professionalization and organization of these workers.

Whereas outsourcing in the corporate world is typically seen as a negative practice, is it possible for cultural producers to employ such practices while avoiding the exploitative? When used in the cultural sector, while conceptually similar to corporate outsourcing, it is employed for different ends. The goals of corporate outsourcing, such as a reduced permanent work force, are precisely the restrictions that outsourcing for curating can alleviate. The corporate world uses outsourcing and subcontracting primarily for financial reasons; to reduce the permanent work force and employ fewer wage earners—those who have an increasing wage over time, are paid regardless

of their output, and require support from the company by way of healthcare and other benefits. Outsourcing replaces permanent workers and often results in distancing the company from a community and community-based obligations.<sup>3</sup> In the curatorial world a small work force and an insufficient number of wage earners is often what stands in the way of completing or even commencing projects.



The corporate world has “witnessed a new enterprise structure closer to networks than the large firms of the industrial age.”<sup>4</sup> What most art institutions of any size, as well as independent curators could benefit from is an established network of outsourcers or subcontractors that can be contacted and hired for a set amount of time or for a specific job. This network, however, would only be useful to both the outsourcer and the outsourced once established professionally, which causes its own long list of problems, but without which cultural capital is likely accumulated by only one author, using the free or non-paid labour of agents who would only rarely accrue their own capital. There already exists a loosely formed network of non-paid or low-paid cultural labour that can be accessed primarily through internships and educational sources. This situation that relies on exploitation is already similar to corporate outsourcing, and is rampant in the cultural sector.

Cultural producers should acknowledge this as a problem in the field—“aside from domestic work and child care, art is the industry with the most unpaid labour, sustaining itself on the time and energy of unpaid interns.”<sup>5</sup> However, could outsourcing and subcontracting, counter intuitively, provide an opportunity to professionalize, specialize, and see a return on labour?

Maria Lind has recently been experimenting with the concept of outsourcing within the curatorial realm through the exhibition series, *Abstract Possible*. Different manifestations of the project, which explores abstraction’s many forms found in contemporary art and culture, have been realized in Mexico City at the Museo Tamayo (*The Tamayo Take*), The Malmö Konsthall in Sweden (*The Trailer*), White Space in Zurich (*The Zurich Test*), and in Spanga at the Tenstall Konsthall (*The Stockholm Synergies*). Unlike the hierarchy found in the artist studio, the curatorial subcontractors utilized for *Abstract Possible* are (at times) not just labourers but recognized as having valuable specialized knowledge and resources. For *The Tamayo Take*, Lind contracted the groups Pase Usted and Salon to mediate. In *The Zurich Test*, twelve curatorial students from the Zurich University of the Arts—Garance Massart-Blum, Milena Brendle, Melanie Büchel, Marina Lopez-Coelho, Jeannine Herrmann, Amber Hickey, Sonja Hug, Candida Pestana, Corinne Isabelle Rinaldis, Lindsey V. Sharman, Silvia Simoncelli, and Catrina Sonderegger—were asked to produce and facilitate the exhibition and mediation it to the public.

Because of the influx of interest in curatorial education, new curators have to be more creative in finding themselves places in the job market. While the curator, at least in the independent and lower budgeted end of the spectrum, has traditionally been concept builder, grant applier, text writer, carpenter, painter, educator, party planner, caterer, ad infinitum, the series of *Abstract Possible* exhibitions may indicate that there is a move towards a specialization of each of these tasks. Perhaps de Appel’s Gallerist Program is the first (albeit commercialized) step towards, or even in response to, a further specialization of the field.<sup>6</sup>

Salon and Pase Usted are two interconnected firms/projects founded in 2008 that work with many museums in Mexico, and whose efforts often result in what is labelled as “mediation.” However, what they accomplish goes much further. They offer a platform on which to exchange ideas and create a community committed to the collective development of their country. Because of their focus on mediation as a

practice in and of itself, they have created a specialized niche market within their own cultural context. These mediation specialists were contacted to organize events peripheral to *The Tamayo Take* that would improve and deepen the public’s relationship with the topic of abstraction. They took the exhibition not as a subject but as a starting point to “unfold the different discourses or ideas around the exhibition.”<sup>7</sup> Three events were planned for *Abstract Possible: The Tamayo Take* that involved not only artists who were taking part in the show, but artists, theorists, writers, and architects, who were not directly linked to the exhibition but were included to expand the conversation. Pase Usted and Salon’s services have been utilized by many museums as well as independent curators, and their cultural production has resulted in all forms of capital. The three discursive *Abstract Possible* events from *The Tamayo Take* can be viewed at [www.abstract-possible.org](http://www.abstract-possible.org): yet another platform for investigation into abstraction designed by the members of Salon and Pase Usted.



Using this model, curators could use outsourcing not just as a means to a workforce, but as a tactic to tap into local knowledge, creating connections of shared interests by focusing exhibitions towards local populations. If one is to expand the definition of curatorial outsourcing to include not just the notion of economics and production, but also the notion of working with local collaborators and a specialization of the field, the term better describes what was implemented at The Museo Tamayo edition of *Abstract Possible*. The use of outsourcing could result in projects that more accurately represent the needs and interests of populations within the locations they inhabit and become useful for conversations within those communities. Curators who outsource to local cultural producers would not transplant a topic into a space but facilitate locally relevant conversations. One

can see, however, the danger of the curator building an oeuvre of culturally sensitive projects to the (lack of) credit of collaborators who are often forgotten.

This practice could not only increase the reception of the local public, but also solves many problems faced by an art world that currently creates a massive carbon footprint. While consumers are constantly being reminded to “buy local” should cultural producers also begin to “curate, mediate, and produce local?” While this is a practice that some curators such as the team at *Praxis für Ausstellungen und Theorie*, who regularly contract a team of architects, designers, and producers when they are contracted for projects, have been practicing since the 1990s, it has been largely unexplored, or more likely, undocumented. If artists or curators outsourced locally wherever they organize exhibitions, outsourcing could even become an economical practice that saves on shipping costs and fossil fuels, creates jobs, and exposes cultural producers to local lifestyles.

Outsourcing’s resolution to the burning of fossil fuels is somewhat of a utopian view of the potentials of this practice and it would be more likely implemented to provide curators with a resource even more valuable: the curator’s primary shortage—that of time. Timelines for projects could be greatly reduced, projects could be more vigorously examined, and, thanks to international partnerships, projects could be planned around the clock. Not able to offer the project the time that it deserved, but also to see how the concept could further develop in the hands of yet another group of producers, Lind left most of the final decisions of *Abstract Possible: The Zurich Test* up to the curatorial students of the Zurich University of the Arts. In this case, Lind provided the artists under the established theme of abstraction and the students provided the rest. The students, along with the organizer of the program, were required to tap into the network of *Abstract Possible*, contacting producers in Sweden and Mexico in order to fully understand the project through the text and documentation created by Salon at the Museo Tamayo.

As a response to the Zurich art community’s interest in film, the students developed a screening program with Nico Ruffo at a local institution to offer an exploration into abstraction in film. The students also planned a workshop with children in order to attempt to create paper shapes inspired by the work of Tommy Støckel, which was both a withdrawal from the traditional academic “workshop” as well as a tongue-in-cheek response to the belief that abstract art could be made by children. It was necessary for

the students to collaborate (or communicate, in the case of Wade Guyton, who did not attend) with the artists to realize their works; and, as exhibition producers, were responsible for assuring funds for the exhibition—not an easy task for an exhibition within Switzerland with few clear “Swiss-links”. Although the team did have many ties to the country, funding bodies found it difficult to understand the role of the Swiss-based students within the scope of this project—being neither curators or artists, at times their roles were difficult to tack down, even for the participants themselves.



In complete contrast to the situation faced by the students in Zurich, if this type of working condition normalizes, it could actually see greater funds assured. Within the corporate world, outsourcing is done to save money and cut costs, but perhaps it could be implemented in the cultural sector as a creative tactic to procure more funding and to get in contact with increasingly varied public and private funds. If the practice is brought into the light, funding bodies could recognize “volunteers” or “assistants” as legitimate producers. These producers could apply to more institutions in different ways because of the diverse people and actions involved. Funding bodies may see these projects, which are more deeply explored by their multiple and varied contributors, as more culturally relevant and of benefit to support. Outsourcing within the arts could also be a way for well-known curators, who will likely remain in contact with dwindling corporate and state funding, to distribute these resources.

Outsourcing in the cultural world needs to offer something to its workers—if not monetary gain, then cultural capital in the form of connections and recognition needs to be brought to the fore. In the case of *Abstract Possible: The Zurich Test*, the most

valuable thing earned by the curatorial students was access to the network created by the project's other manifestations. However, because of the temporal and spacial limitations of the project and its producers, these connections will likely be fleeting and only enjoyed by a few in the large group involved. The largest gain found in this complex working situation is for the exhibition itself and the themes of abstraction in art today. Outsourcing provided the opportunity to slow down the often hurried curatorial process and more extensively consider the many issues raised by *Abstract Possible*, which is good for the concept of abstraction, good for the concept of curating, good for the artists, and good for the curator.



*Abstract Possible* shows that it is possible for a curator to outsource aspects of a project they feel unable to undertake and recognize when a task or part of a project can be better handled by another source. With outsourcing or subcontracting, an interesting project would not have to suffer because of a busy curator but could actually be improved by commissioning the help of others specialized in their fields. The most optimistic outcome of outsourcing is the possibility of extensive exploration of themes and the creation of a sustainable network of cultural producers. So long as cultural producers take responsibility for their actions, outsourcing or subcontracting can provide greater depth to the ever-expanding fields of cultural production. The exclusive retention of credit, funding, or power, however, problematizes the situation. If responsibility and recognition is not practiced, outsourcing will only perpetuate the already exploitative nature of the art world.

## Notes

- 1 Aidan Jones, Kevin Dowling, and Helen Pidd. 2008. "Recession Reaches Hirst's Studios." <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2008/nov/22/damien-hirst-studios-job-losses>. Accessed 10.12.2011.
- 2 See Olafur Eliasson. <http://www.olafureliasson.net/studio.html>. Accessed 20.12.2011, and Philip Ursprung. *From Observer to Participant: In Olafur Eliasson's Studio* (Cologne: Taschen, 2008), 10.
- 3 Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, trans. Gregory Elliott. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Verso, London, 2006, p. 369.
- 4 Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, trans. Gregory Elliott. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Verso, London, 2006, p. 221.
- 5 Hito Steyerl, "Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy," *e-flux* Issue 21, December 2010.
- 6 "The Gallerist Programme." *e-flux*. <http://www.e-flux.com/shows/view/9373>. Accessed 01.09.2011.
- 7 Interview by the Author with Jorge Manguia, conducted through Skype. September 26, 2011.

## Captions

- 1 Student's brunch at Wäscherei Kunstverein after the opening of the exhibition *Abstract Possible: the Zurich Test* at Whitespace. In the picture (from the right): Amber Hickey, Maria Lind, Isin Onol, Lindsey V. Sharman, Candida Pestana. Photo: Marina Lopes Coelho.
- 2 Lindsey V. Sharman and Marina Lopes Coelho setting up Tommy Stöckel's "Exposed Superstructure" (detail) at Whitespace, Zurich. Photo: Corinne Isabelle Rinaldis.
- 3 Painting the floor at Whitespace black, following Wade Guyton's set up instructions. Photo: Marina Lopes Coelho.
- 4 Children's workshop during the exhibition *Abstract Possible: the Zurich Test*. Photo: Marina Lopes Coelho.

**Lindsey V. Sharman** was born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (CA). Sharman has studied art history and curating in Canada, England, Switzerland, and Austria. Most recently, Sharman was appointed to a research position with the University of Calgary as curator of art for *The Founders' Gallery* at The Military Museums where she explores contemporary issues surrounding art and conflict.

# A Question of Funding

*In the interviews that follow artists Liam Gillick, Tommy Stöckel and Goldin+Senneby reflect with us on the present situation of diminishing public funding for culture and on the growing impact of private money and the art market on the production of art exhibitions and events. Having participated in Abstract Possible – The Stockholm Synergies, we have asked them to reflect on the reactions the show prompted due to the cooperation with a Swedish Auction House, and what future development they can foresee in the present scenario. We invited also Stefan Wagner, from the independent art space Corner College in Zurich to join the discussion: Switzerland is commonly regarded as a safe haven in terms of public support to the arts, but the petition Charta 2016 launched in 2012 proves the situation is undergoing major changes in this region as well.*

**The contributions were gathered by Melanie Büchel, Marina Lopes Cohelo and Silvia Simoncelli.**

## A response from Liam Gillick

**Silvia Simoncelli:** In the past years, cultural institutions in all European countries have been profoundly affected by cuts in public spending. This has of course a strong impact on the possibility for producing events, exhibitions, publications, and at the same time it makes the impact of private sponsors and patrons on budgets more relevant - and in need to be secured for the coming years. Do you think this growing importance of private funding - in the form of sponsorship or donation - could interfere with curatorial and institution's choices? To your opinion are there already some evidences of such interferences?

**Liam Gillick:** There is no universal European position in relation to public funding – and there has not been one during my adult life. “Private” funding has always been a major component of European cultural work. I would prefer to describe European public funding as part of the post-war social project that also included health care and education. I am not sure which European countries, if any, function with public funding alone for contemporary art. Even the Kunstverein system is a form of private funding by individual members. Bank guilt has been a major source of private funding – whether through the now crippled “Obra Social” in Spain or the large German and Swiss banks, which have been funding contemporary art and its institutions throughout my adult life. The countries that do engage in substantial

public funding also produce and sell weapons (Sweden, U.K. etc), engage in offering tax breaks for large corporations (Every European country) and have been involved in bailing out the banking system (Ditto). There is always an ideological trace of funding source left in and around supported work. This trace is fairly easy to see. Increasingly instrumentalised public funding leans towards education and some verifiable sense of “good work”. It directs itself away from super-subjectivity and tends to side-line the abject or irresponsible. Private funding also requires some educational aspect – generally part of the “charitable” requirements of the tax benefits involved in funding - but often appears superficially more tolerant of super-subjective positions. The point is that interference is everywhere. There is no innocence or ethical bonus from deriving funds from “public” sources – which include inequitable tax systems and pseudo-democratic governmental systems. The problem here is not a dilemma between public and private funding but when public bodies turn to private money in order to cut back direct involvement in contemporary cultural work. This always involves a reduction in politics towards a culture of accommodation – where cultural funding becomes part of a matrix of capital flows that are not reducible to money or exchange value alone. In short – the contemporary European left appears caught in an addiction to populist, festivalist cultural events or educationally verifiable practices while the right would rather just leave the whole thing to the “market”. The problem is a party political one and should be addressed that way. There is no inevitability about

the current situation – nor is there a requirement to “secure” private funding. Direct political pressure should be applied.

**SS:** Do you consider the source of funding as relevant information to be evaluated when accepting commissions or invitations to show at gallery or institution? Do you think that there is enough transparency about this topic?

**LG:** Absolutely. It would be ridiculous to do anything else. In my experience there is transparency on these issues – mainly because funders are usually vain enough to want to have their brand or name included.

**SS:** For one of the manifestation of the exhibition *Abstract Possible - Stockholm Synergies*, Maria Lind responded to an invitation to curate a primary exhibition at Bukowskis Auction House, where she developed one of three parts of the show, inviting Goldin+Senneby to devise the framework for it. This gave her the possibility to address the topic of private intervention in art funding in a truly straightforward way, aiming at generating a debate on cultural politics, discussing to what extent the need for finding alternative source of funding could compromise the art institution with market strategies. On the contrary, a number of observers pinned their attention on the ambivalence of the project, focussing on the topic of moral responsibility from the side of the curator, being Bukowskis connected to Ludin Oil, a company whose ethical conduct is somewhat dubious. Starting from such a radical example, what strategies do you think could be employed to effectively challenge the attention of media and public authorities on the current status of public funds withdrawal from cultural sector?

**LG:** It seems that the response to this part of the exhibition was a little muddled. It is highly unlikely that Maria Lind was unaware of the connection between Bukowskis and Ludin Oil. Even I knew about it and I am not deeply interested in the Swedish auction house scene. I didn't perceive any ambivalence in the project but we are operating in a time when pseudo-ethical positions announce themselves loudly from the side-lines or from within the closely policed protest zones that stand in for true resistance to capital. Lind's gesture was directed as much towards the art context as it was to the predictable mess of contemporary corporate life. Her exposure of near universal complicity with neo-liberal capital manipulation within the art context riled those who

believe that they can escape such a situation. The escape is a mirage and does not stand up to scrutiny. As for the last part of your question – I am not convinced that the instrumentalising aspects of public funding with its requirement for cultural gatekeepers and “good” works is a guarantee of anything. It is also worth bearing in mind that the current Swedish Foreign Affairs Minister was on the board of Ludin. The term public is indivisible from the term private in the regime of neo-liberalism. The requirement is for the left to accept its responsibilities towards advanced art and critical consciousness.

**Liam Gillick** is an artist based in New York. Solo exhibitions include *The Wood Way*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2002; *A short text on the possibility of creating an economy of equivalence*, Palais de Tokyo, 2005 and the retrospective project *Three Perspectives* and a short scenario, Witte de With, Rotterdam, Kunsthal Zurich, Kunstverein, München and the MCA, Chicago, 2008-2010. He was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2002 and the Vincent Award at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 2008. Many public commissions and projects include the *Home Office* in London (2005) and the *Dynamica Building* in Guadalajara, Mexico (2009). In 2006 he was a central figure in the free art school project *unitednationsplaza* in Berlin that travelled to Mexico City and New York. Liam Gillick has published a number of texts that function in parallel to his artwork. *Proxemics (Selected writing 1988-2006)* JRP-Ringier was published in 2007 alongside the monograph *Factories in the Snow* by Lilian Haberer, JRP-Ringier. A critical reader titled *Meaning Liam Gillick*, was published by MIT Press (2009). Liam Gillick was selected to represent Germany for the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009. He has taught at Columbia University in New York since 1997 and the Centre for Curatorial Studies at Bard College since 2008.

## A response from Tommy Støckel

**Marina Lopes Coelho:** In the past years cultural institutions in all European countries have been profoundly affected by cuts in public spending. This has of course a strong impact on the possibility for producing events, exhibitions, publications and at the same time it makes the impact of private sponsors and patrons on budgets more relevant - and in need to be secured for the coming years. Do you think this growing importance of private funding - in the form of sponsorship or donation - could interfere with curatorial and institution's choices? To your opinion are there already some evidences of such interferences?

**Tommy Støckel:** I heard of an incident a couple of years ago where a provincial German museum was unable to raise funds to produce exhibitions themselves and therefore asked a Berlin gallerist to organize their shows. As far as I understood, the gallerist practically put together a year long exhibition program from her own artists, who were all were happy to add a museum show to their CV. The gallery does represent "museum quality" artists but a curators should not have commercial interest in the artists that they choose to work with. An institution should not be used to enhance an artist's CV, which of course in the end will increase the possibilities of sales.

Another example of suspected instances of compromising the curatorial integrity is the tendency to include artists from countries where it is known that their country's arts council usually supports their artists generously. Those countries' contributions can apparently save exhibition budgets, and sometimes one could even suspect that whole exhibitions featuring only artists from these countries are only put on to help out institutions budgets. These exhibitions even seem to be put on to provide institutions with "financial breathing space" with these fully funded shows.

The 2012 Armory Show in New York had a special focus on Scandinavia which was of course financially supported by the arts councils of the Scandinavian countries. What shocked me, as a Dane, was the A3-sized hand-out poster printed by the Danish Arts Council that I stumbled upon at the fair, which proclaimed in large letters: "Need funding? We have it!". Obviously, in order to access the money, that they seem to be willing to hand out to anyone with an exhibition idea, the projects were

supposed to include Danish artists, galleries or curators in some way. Is it really good for Danish art that its artists are being chosen primarily because they are Danish? And only secondarily because of what they do as individual artists? Of course, public funding is much "cleaner money" than private sponsorships but I do believe that it can influence the curatorial aspects of an exhibition.

**MLC:** Do you consider the source of funding as relevant information to be evaluated when accepting commissions or invitations to show at gallery or institution? Do you think that there is enough transparency about this topic?

**TS:** I think that artists and exhibition organisers should be aware of where funding comes from, especially if it is used as advertising, but funding is also always a necessity that enables us to produce and create. Only very few turn down funds, if they give the opportunity to work. The question is perhaps just whether the private funding comes with some sort of restrictions or compromises in form of censorship, distracting logos or whatever it might be.

**MLC:** For one of the manifestation of the exhibition *Abstract Possible - Stockholm Synergies*, Maria Lind responded to an invitation to curate a primary exhibition at Bukowskis Auction House, where she developed one of three parts of the show, inviting Goldin+Senneby to devise the framework for it. This gave her the possibility to address the topic of private intervention in art funding in a truly straightforward way, aiming at generating a debate on cultural politics, discussing to what extent the need for finding alternative source of funding could compromise the art institution with market strategies. On the contrary, a number of observers pinned their attention on the ambivalence of the project, focussing on the topic of moral responsibility from the side of the curator, being Bukowskis connected to Ludin Oil, a company whose ethical conduct is somewhat dubious. Starting from such a radical example, what strategies do you think could be employed to effectively challenge the attention of media and public authorities on the current status of public funds withdrawal from cultural sector?

**TS:** As a participating artist in the Bukowskis exhibition, I followed parts of the public debate but not being based in Sweden, I was not able to read all the related articles. I personally think that it was an interesting experiment, and the connection between Bukowski and Lundin Oil definitely makes the

experiment more of a morally daring one. One thing that I am not certain of, is whether anyone commented on the fact that many of the artists who had their work in the “selling exhibition” at Bukowskis actually showed works relating to the commercial aspect of it, and that they were –although not as explicit as the curator– not purely passive players in the game.

**Tommy Stöckel** (\*1972 in Copenhagen, Denmark). Lives and works in Berlin. Graduated from The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Art, in Copenhagen. Among the exhibitions in which he participated are: the solo show *Ten Transports That Shaped The Work*, at *Jacob's Island Gallery* (2013), in London; *Conductivity*, at *Location One* (2012), in New York; *Abstract Possible – The Stockholm Synergies*, at *Tensta Konsthall and Bukowskis* (2012), in Stockholm; *Freilassung*, at *Museum Lichtenberg* (2012), and the solo show *When Pasts and Futures Meet*, at *The Nordic Embassies* (2008), both in Berlin; *Abstract Possible – The Zürich Test (with Wade Guyton)*, at *White Space* (2011), in Zürich; *Dystopia*, at *CAPC Museum of Contemporary Art* (2011), in Bordeaux; the solo show *3 Sculptures*, at *SMART Project Space* (2010), in Amsterdam; the solo show *Tommy Stöckel's Art of Tomorrow*, at *Arnolfini* (2009), in Bristol; and the solo show *From Here to Then and back again*, at *Kunstverein Langenhagen* (2008), in Langenhagen.

## A response from Goldin+Senneby

Dear On-Curating Magazine,

Our names are Erik Wikberg and Niklas Bomark and we have been asked to answer your questions on behalf of, or rather *instead of*, Goldin+Senneby. As you are aware, the artists are practicing a sort of withdrawal strategy inspired by George Bataille's secret society *Acéphale*, which to our understanding is the reason why they do not answer your questions themselves. Their strategy of withdrawal is evident in the artistic practice within their long-term framework *Headless* and many other projects, in the Primary Sale of *Abstract Possible*, and, undoubtedly, even in the very sentences you are reading right now.

The reason why we have been asked to answer your questions is because we are currently studying the primary sale of *Abstract Possible* in a research project, and have met the artists and discussed these topics a number of times. We are happy to do our best to answer your questions.

For the record, however, we want to point out that we are Ph.D candidates in business studies specialized in organizational theory, and none of us have any curatorial or artistic training. Consequently, we want to emphasize that our answers to your questions are based on our own understandings and interpretations of the views of Goldin+Senneby.

Best regards,  
Erik Wikberg  
Niklas Bomark  
Ph.D Candidate, Stockholm School of Economics  
Ph.D Candidate, Uppsala University

**Melanie Büchel:** In the past years cultural institutions in all European countries have been profoundly affected by cuts in public spending. This has of course a strong impact on the possibility for producing events, exhibitions, publications and at the same time it makes the impact of private sponsors and patrons on budgets more relevant - and in need to be secured for the coming years. Do you think this growing importance of private funding - in the form of sponsorship or donation - could interfere with curatorial and institution's choices? To your opinion are there already some evidences of such interferences?



**Erik Wikberg and Niklas Bomark:** In order to answer your question, we think it is important to clarify three things. First, yes, although we do not interpret Goldin+Senneby as particularly normative, they seem both concerned and intrigued by the growing dependency of private money in the public domains of the art world. Second, however, we do not think that the artists are bothered by private money *per se*, but rather worried about how this financing form is coupled to any demands or conditions from the financier, and the consequences this might lead to when it comes to artistic autonomy. Finally, to answer the part of your question that refers to if there are already evidences of interferences of curatorial freedom, we have noted that Goldin+Senneby have been concerned about the *instrumentalization* of both public and private financing of art. Without going into details and individual examples, one could nevertheless claim that there are already evidences of such tendencies diminishing the degrees of freedom for curators and art institutions in Sweden.

**MB:** Do you consider the source of funding as relevant information to be evaluated when accepting commissions or invitations to show at gallery or institution? Do you think that there is enough transparency about this topic?

**EW/NB:** Do Goldin+Senneby consider the source of funding to be relevant information when accepting commissions or invitations? Put shortly, yes. Do they think there is enough transparency about these topics? Put shortly, no. We are glad that you ask these two questions, as we believe they are fundamental to understanding why this event took place. The opacity of the art markets, and the white-washing of money through acquisition of art, is undoubtedly important themes in the framework of *Abstract Possible* and in the artwork *Abstract Possible: An Investment Portrait*. These tendencies can furthermore be said to be relevant both in the specific local Swedish context and in the global art world at large.

**MB:** For one of the manifestation of the exhibition *Abstract Possible - Stockholm Synergies*, Maria Lind responded to an invitation to curate a primary exhibition at Bukowskis Auction House, where she developed one of three parts of the show, inviting Goldin+Senneby to devise the framework for it. This gave her the possibility to address the topic of private intervention in art funding in a truly straightforward way, aiming at generating a debate on cul-

tural politics, discussing to what extent the need for finding alternative source of funding could compromise the art institution with market strategies. On the contrary, a number of observers pinned their attention on the ambivalence of the project, focussing on the topic of moral responsibility from the side of the curator, being Bukowskis connected to Ludin Oil, a company whose ethical conduct is somewhat dubious. Starting from such a radical example, what strategies do you think could be employed to effectively challenge the attention of media and public authorities on the current status of public funds withdrawal from cultural sector?

**EW/NB:** Generally speaking there is no simple answer to what kind of strategies there are to be employed. However, some clues can be derived through the literature about how different actors (e.g. artists) respond to- and change institutions. In a well-known article from 1991 Christine Oliver put forward five different strategies commonly applied by actors to alter institutions: Acquiesce, Compromise, Avoid, Defy and Manipulate. On a general level, these different strategies could provide a platform for further understanding of different strategies available to be employed. Returning to the particular case of *Abstract Possible*, one explicit performative strategy has been to overly affirm the tendencies important to discuss. One intention of the artists has been to stage the auction house of Bukowskis itself as a ready-made to be observed and scrutinized. How successful this unconventional strategy is to highlight the topics brought up in your question might still be too early to answer. One can however note that, when it comes to the specific debate on the ownership of Bukowskis, the primary sale brought an unprecedented critique of this topic, and a debate that is still on-going and more interesting than ever.

**Goldin+Senneby** (since 2004) is a framework for collaboration set up by artists Simon Goldin and Jakob Senneby; exploring juridical, financial and spatial constructs through notions of the performative and the virtual. Their collaboration started with *The Port* (2004-06); acting in an emerging public sphere constructed through digital code. In their more recent body of work, known as *Headless* (2007 -), they approach the sphere of offshore finance, and its production of virtual space through legal code. Looking at strategies of withdrawal and secrecy, they trace an offshore company on the Bahamas called *Headless Ltd*. A ghostwritten detective novel continuously narrates their investigations. Since 2010 their work has focused on *The Nordenskiöld Model*, an experiment in theatrical finance, in

*which they attempt to (re)enact the anarcho-alchemical scheme of 18th century alchemist August Nordenskiöld on the financial markets of today.*

**A response from Stefan Wagner,  
Corner College, Zurich**

**Silvia Simoncelli:** In the past years cultural institutions in all European countries have been profoundly affected by cuts in public spending. This has of course a strong impact on the possibility for producing events, exhibitions, publications and at the same time it makes the impact of private sponsors and patrons on budgets more relevant - and in need to be secured for the coming years. Do you think this growing importance of private funding - in the form of sponsorship or donation - could interfere with curatorial and institution's choices? To your opinion are there already some evidences of such interferences?

**Stefan Wagner:** Corner College is a small space for discussions, lectures, screenings, mini exhibitions and other unnecessary happenings based on collaboration. We, a team of six people with different backgrounds, intend to avoid self-institutionalization enforced by time and production modes through different strategies. For example we consider CC as a No-Institution<sup>1</sup> for non<sup>2</sup> academic purposes to deal with non<sup>3</sup> hierarchical structures. This means there is also no designated person responsible for funding. In fact this very unprofessional attitude is caused by unpaid labor. This is the reason we also don't do long term program scheduling. We are looking for our personal interests, what means to have a space for spontaneous, unused ideas and formats. To bring it to a point the whole structure is based on is the negotiation of the self that might end in a very clear image comparable with a Timpano<sup>4</sup>.

Our No-Institution is of course a problem for sponsorship and funding. We don't have the "odeur" for bohemian nor bourgeois representation and of course not for commercial sponsors nor foundations that expect us to bring them a return on investment. At the moment there are many changes going on in the funding situation in Switzerland. After the cuts in the visual arts by the Federal Office of Culture we are considering closing down due lack of financial support. We don't see any changes in private funding and will also not make a program that suits to any financial supporter. Art must be free and defended to all ways of economical exploitation. There is a time to say No. And if you are a No-Institution you are not existing anyway. No?

**SS:** Do you consider the source of funding as relevant information to be evaluated when accepting

commissions or invitations to show at gallery or institution? Do you think that there is enough transparency about this topic?

**SW:** It is important to know the sources. But to be honest in Switzerland all the financial support is somehow linked to black, off shore or tax heaven money – even if it is coming from a city or the state. Transparency can be made by ways of production or a structure of “resistance”.

**SS:** For one of the manifestation of the exhibition *Abstract Possible - Stockholm Synergies*, Maria Lind responded to an invitation to curate a primary exhibition at Bukowskis Auction House, where she developed one of three parts of the show, inviting Goldin+Senneby to devise the framework for it. This gave her the possibility to address the topic of private intervention in art funding in a truly straightforward way, aiming at generating a debate on cultural politics, discussing to what extent the need for finding alternative source of funding could compromise the art institution with market strategies. On the contrary, a number of observers pinned their attention on the ambivalence of the project, focussing on the topic of moral responsibility from the side of the curator, being Bukowskis connected to Ludin Oil, a company whose ethical conduct is somewhat dubious. Starting from such a radical example, what strategies do you think could be employed to effectively challenge the attention of media and public authorities on the current status of public funds withdrawal from cultural sector?

**SW:** The only way to work with the current situation is to insist that art is political and therefore there is always a need for a critical debate. Maria Lind seem to have found a good way in treading the complicated situation. It seems that this could be a role model for critical or ethical work with the current funding situation. To make it short: Art should not avoid to get in this ethical trouble – it is somehow its duty to deal with it in a reflected mode.

**SS:** In 2012 you organised a protest at the Swiss Art Award together with a number of independent art spaces. What was the reason behind? How did this action evolved?

**SW:** In 2011 the federal parliament introduced a new Cultural Promotion Regulation. The regulation organized the competencies of the Office for Culture and of Pro Helvetia differently than before. But what happened is that prizes for art spaces had

been abrogated, which was a hard hit for many self-organized art spaces – even if there were not many prizes awarded. In the end the regulation showed that a structural problem in the support of the visual arts in Switzerland. For example there is almost no support for infrastructures. It seems that self-organized art spaces can exist without paying rents, electricity or heating because funding is always based on temporary projects. This is of course a great joke because semi-permanent structures as well as self-organized spaces provide something that is in great need in the arts. Experiments, debates or opposition here are still possible, compared to the populist duties of institutions as museums or a Kunsthalle.

Another topic that was coming up in the discussion was payment of the artistic or curatorial work. There are no budgets for this work – but for materials, advertisement and the work of the technical staff. In the field of theater for example we have a different situation. Work is considered as a part of artistic production. This needs to be changed in the visual arts as well – especially if we see how our society will be transformed under cognitive capitalism discussed by the French economists Yann Moulier Bouateng. In general Switzerland has developed the visual arts field well – but only in terms of institutions that became highly institutionalized and used the financial support for new architecture or event exhibitions. We call that the lighthouse effect – only a few will profit from a lighted house. The reason for this policy is a competition in the cultural field that is materialized and visible in the Bilbao-Effect. Culture is part of economically driven city development, business strategy and event culture. The increasing number of Biennals, Art Fairs or branding architecture produced by architects like Frank Gehry, Herzog & de Meuron or Zaha Hadid welcomes us now in every Global City. To speak frankly - all the public money for culture goes at the moment into architecture, administration, marketing, insurance fees and transports. The results are Pablo Picasso or Jeff Koons exhibitions to attract a mainstream audience. It is even worse than this. In consequences all the big institutions do not talk about any kind of problems of the current society anymore – what is offered is just an entertainment program for Sunday afternoons. They also disregard their duty to work on art historical purposes. It's like TV – easy chewable entertainment instead of controversial content. In the end this is populist cultural politics.

As a person who runs a self-organized art space in a team I can't ignore these facts and we have addressed the problem. On the other hand our situation is crucial. We have almost no lobby in the power game of the art field or in politics. We do not generate representational environment for politicians. That's no news I know. But somehow it is also frustrating to see that creativity and experiments are only interesting in terms of the so-called creative industry – the last promising branch of economy in Switzerland.

We have collected more than 2000 signatures for our petition in which we ask for one million Swiss francs support. Let's see what politics makes out of our demands. We hope at least to have addressed some problems of the current art world: celebrity culture, networks for curatorial self-representations, interests of collectors in optimizing their financial interests, communication strategies of the financial industry and insurance companies or city and property developers that are driving the arts into a feudalistic representational system.

**Stefan Wagner** (\*1973) was trained as a railway clerk and decided in the late 90s to study art history, film studies and philosophy at University of Zurich. He worked in several free projects as a curator - even if he is not familiar or pleasant with the implications of the current concept of a "curator". Working in the highly competitive art world with its precarious working conditions he believes more in the idea of collaborations than self representation (such as the concept of curators does). In 2009 Stefan joined the Corner College team ([www.corner-college.com](http://www.corner-college.com)). Beside this engagement he teaches in art schools (Zurich, Geneva), writes for journals, magazines and catalogues, works in a national public art research project and initiated with group of people a federal petition (<http://charta2016.blogspot.ch>) for better working conditions in self-organized art spaces in Switzerland.

## Notes

**1** The idea of a No-Institution is based on the song "You Don't Love Me (No No No)" performed by the female Jamaican singer Dawn Penn in 1967 and 1994. While her song in the 60ies is based on a rocksteady line (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjOgnh0U6vg>) she changed it later into a reaggae-style with a slightly higher rhythm (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hy1YF54rZZM>). The song clearly shows that good ideas never become old but only new inspired (If you don't believe what you read here, you might read Paul Feyerabend's "Science as Art") Even though the fact of recycling is a matter of at least western civilizations the lyrics express the desire to adore and neglect the form of an institution at the same time.

**2** The term "non" derives etymologically from "No". So we back on the track. Check not famous but cool rapper Kool A.D. who sings in "No" (<http://mishkanyc.bandcamp.com/track/no-prod-by-amaze-88>)

...  
No, no, no no, no no  
No, no, no no, no no  
No no, no, no no, no no  
No, no, no no, no no

Check it out

No, no, no no, no no  
No, no, no no, no no  
No, no, no no, no no  
...

Kool A.D. makes a clear difference in the use of "No" based on syntactical structure. Therefore we can say that a "No" is a "No" but also not. No?

**3** Yes again non. Check this, it's oldie but goldie yeah: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7yD8bFtuA8>

**4** A Timpano is a traditional Italian menu performed in the movie „Big Night“. It contains Spaghetti, meat balls, eggs, tomato sauce, ham and other food. You might consider this recipe as a menu made out of food rests from a week. Indeed it could be used as recycling of the rests of a week where we back again on footnote 1. You also can have a look on the impact of Timpanos if you go to [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hn8\\_eKy3PdE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hn8_eKy3PdE)

**Melanie Büchel** (1977) is Head of Communications and Marketing at Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein (LI). Prior to that, from 2003 until 2011 she has been Assistant of the Communication Department at Kunsthau Bregenz (A). She studied Communications at Università della Svizzera Italiana, Lugano (CH) and Freie Universität Berlin (D) and graduated in 2003. In addition she completed the Postgraduate Programme in Curating at Zürcher Hochschule der Künste (ZHdK) in 2012. As well she is engaged over the years in several artistic projects. She exhibits her photography work and furthermore she is performing as dancer collectively with the dance company «Tanzufer» (A) in the field of (dance) improvisation.

**Marina Lopes Coelho** was born in São Paulo, where she was trained in graphic design and photography. Recently, she has graduated at the MAS in Curating Contemporary Art at the ZHdK in Zurich. She works as a freelancer photographer and curator in Zurich and São Paulo. She is the founder and curator of the independent art space Kunsthalle São Paulo.

**Silvia Simoncelli** is an art historian and independent curator based in Milan and Zurich. She is professor at Brera Art Academy and course leader of the Advanced Course in Contemporary Art Markets, NABA in Milan. She lectures regularly for the Postgraduate Programme in Curating at ZHdK, Zurich. Her research interests comprise the relation between art and economy, institutional critique and art in public space. Recent projects and participations include: Artists and rights in contemporary art, symposium, Artissima, Turin; Visions of Labour, exhibition, Kunsthalle Sao Paulo; Who is Afraid of the Public, symposium (together with Dorothee Richter and Elke Krasny), ICI, London, 2013; Performing Structures, exhibition, Wascherei, Kunstverein Zurich, 2012; Deimantas Narkevicius, Revisiting Utopia, special program, Winterthur Short Film Festival, 2011.

**Caption for the following page:**  
Poster for Charta 2016 petition



**Imprint**

Issue 20

**Publisher**

Dorothee Richter

**Co-Publisher**

Michael Birchall

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**Proofreading**

Amber Hickey, Lindsey V. Sharman

**Web Design and Graphic Design Concept**

Ronald Kolb &amp; Volker Schartner, Biotop 3000

**Graphic Design Twentieth Issue**

Biotop 3000

**Cover image**Wade Guyton, *Untitled (floor piece)*, plywood and paint,  
detail. Installed at White Space Zurich, 2011. Photo:  
Marina Lopes Coelho.**Supported By**Postgraduate Programme in Curating,  
Institute Cultural Studies, Department Cultural Analysis,  
Zurich University of the Arts  
[www.curating.org](http://www.curating.org)

# CHOREOGRAPHING EXHIBITIONS

## A book and a festival by Mathieu Copeland

**The book** brings together more than thirty international visual artists, choreographers, musicians, filmmakers, theorists and curators. A remarkable overview of the relation between choreography and exhibitions, it conducts a polyphony through five perspectives: score, space, time, the body and memory.

Authors include Jérôme Bel, Giovanni Carmine, Boris Charmatz, Tim Etchells, Barbara Formis, Kenneth Goldsmith, Abbie Hoffman, Karl Holmqvist, Pierre Huyghe, Myriam Van Imschoot,

Pablo León de la Barra, André Lepecki, Alan Licht, Raimundas Malašauskas, Malcolm McLaren, Gustav Metzger, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Catherine Wood...

### **The festival Sat 30 Nov 2013, from midday to midnight.**

For the book launch, the Ferme du Buisson has invited Mathieu Copeland to present a series of events in all its venues (the theatre, the cinema and the art center) featuring the authors and bringing together contemporary dance, visual art, music and cinema.



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SCÈNE NATIONALE  
DE MARNE-LA-VALLÉE

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ONCURATING.org is an independent international journal (both web and print) focusing on questions around curatorial practise and theory.

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www.oncurating.org

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Special thanks to all designers, artists and curators for their contributions.

Supported by the Postgraduate Programme in Curating ([www.curating.org](http://www.curating.org)),  
Institute for Cultural Studies in the Arts (ICS),  
Department of Cultural Analysis,  
Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK)