

NICOLAS BOURRIAUD
THE RADICANT

Ch. 2

Radical
Aesthetics

RADICANT AESTHETICS

The major aesthetic phenomenon of our time is surely the intertwining of the properties of space and time, which turns the latter into a territory every bit as tangible as the hotel room where I am sitting right now or the noisy street that stretches beneath my window. By means of these new modes of spatializing time, contemporary art produces forms that are able to capture this experience of the world through practices that could be described as "time-specific"—analogous to the "site-specific" art of the 1960s—and by introducing figures from the realm of spatial displacement into the composition of its works. Thus, today's art seems to negotiate the creation of new types of space by resorting to a geometry of translation: topology. This branch of mathematics deals less with the quantity of spaces than with their quality, the protocol of their transition from one condition to another. Thus, it refers to movement, to the dynamism of forms, and characterizes reality as a conglomeration of transitory surfaces and forms that are potentially movable. In this sense, it goes hand in hand with translation as well as with precariousness.

AESTHETIC PRECARIOUSNESS AND WANDERING FORMS

Of all the sociological phenomena of these early years of the twenty-first century, the generalization of the disposable is no doubt the one that goes most unnoticed. It even tends to be regarded as a cliché, a legacy of the first ecological alarm bells sounded in the 1960s. Be that as it may, it is a fact that the lifespan of objects is becoming shorter and shorter, their turnover in the marketplace ceaselessly accelerated, their obsolescence carefully planned. Social life seems more fragile than ever, and the bonds that make it up seem increasingly tenuous. The contracts that govern the labor market merely reflect this general precariousness, which mirrors that of commodities whose rapid expiration now permeates our perception of the world. Originally, the term "precarious" referred to a right of use that could be revoked at any time. It must be admitted that each of us now intuitively perceives existence as a collection of ephemeral entities, far from the impression

of permanence that our ancestors, whether rightly or wrongly, formed of their environment. Paradoxically, however, the political order that governs this chaos has never seemed so solid: everything is constantly changing, but within an immutable and untouchable global framework to which there no longer seems to be any credible alternative. In an immediate environment that is constantly being updated and reformatted, in which the short-lived is overtaking the long-term and access is overtaking ownership, the stability of things, signs, and conditions is becoming the exception rather than the rule. Welcome to the disposable world: a world of customized destinies, governed by the inaccessible mechanism of an economy that, like science, is developing in a state of complete autonomy with respect to lived reality.

Until well into the 1980s, a fashion in clothing or music had time to develop before giving way to another that was equally distinct. By contrast, today's trends constitute a kind of continuous, low-amplitude motion, whose content no longer corresponds to behavioral or existential choices, as it did for the great pop culture movements of the last fifty years of the twentieth century. In the contemporary cultural tide, the waves no longer cover each other forcefully, forming hollows and crests. On the contrary, countless little wavelets wash up on the beach of a "now" in which all trends coexist without animosity or antagonism. The cultural choices are options that can be combined and superimposed. Nothing *counts*, since nothing really binds us or requires us to commit ourselves. Let us recall the great Nietzschean question of eternal return: are you willing to relive for all eternity the moments you are experiencing right now? Transposed to the realm of art, this question entails a commitment to values, a space traversed by conflicts, by wagers with consequences for the future. That question no longer arises. And yet it introduced tragedy into culture, for at that time artistic propositions, like the statements that accompanied them, bore the stamp of irreversibility; they had weight and a cutting edge [*tranchant*]. Now that the era of commitment is past, we find it

pathetically difficult to retain anything at all in a cultural environment that is marked by its volatility—except proper names, which increasingly function as brands.

Various authors have sought to delineate the contours of this precarious universe. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman defines our industrial cult of the ephemeral as constituting a "liquid modern society" in which "the waste-disposal industry takes over the commanding positions in liquid life's economy."⁶⁵ In this society where everything is disposable, a society "nudged from behind by the horror of expiry," nothing is more frightening than "the steadfastness, stickiness, viscosity of things inanimate and animate alike." And the driving force of this "liquid life" is needless to say that globalized consumerism whose glorious face is the shopping malls and whose miserable underside is the flea markets and the slums, in a universe of global competition between disposable employees who are alternately consumers and consumed. As early as 1984, the German thinker Ulrich Beck described a "risk society" in which the individual—under the weight of "menacing possibilities," whether ecological or economic—becomes the object of an "invisible impoverishment" generated by universal precariousness.⁶⁶ Nor is private life far behind. Global capitalism, writes Slavoj Žižek, "clearly favor[s] [a] mode of subjectivity characterized by ... multiple shifting identifications," a development that turns queer theory, MySpace culture, and the avatars of Second Life into the objective allies of a society governed by the quest for perpetual novelty.⁶⁷ Michel Maffesoli relativizes the emergence of this social changeability, regarding it as simply a polytheistic and pagan, eclectic and pluralistic "period," a

65. ZYGMUNT BAUMAN, *LIQUID LIFE* (CAMBRIDGE: POLITY PRESS, 2005), 3.

66. ULRICH BECK, *RISK SOCIETY: TOWARDS A NEW MODERNITY*, TRANS. MARK RITTER (LONDON AND NEWBURY PARK, CA: SAGE PUBLICATIONS), 1992.

67. SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK, *THE SPECTRE IS STILL ROAMING AROUND: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION OF THE "COMMUNIST MANIFESTO"* (ZAGREB: ARZKIN, 1998), 25.

"sign of vitality" that follows quite logically the totalizations of modernism. "The emblematic figure of this moment," he writes, "points to an identity in motion, a fragile identity, an identity that is no longer the only solid foundation of individual and social existence, as it was for modernity."⁶⁸

This "liquid" modernism became a reality at the beginning of the 1990s, when the economic crisis relegated the themes of consumption and communication, which had dominated the 1980s, to the background. Using disparate sculptural means, Jeff Koons, Jenny Holzer, Cindy Sherman, and Haim Steinbach had all set the social play of shopping—whether it be that of identities (Sherman) or that of exchange value (Steinbach), ideology (Holzer), or the marketing of desire (Koons)—on durable supports. But as soon as the decade was over, the works of Cady Noland, which stood midway between the icy aesthetic that had prevailed until then (recognizable by its perfect finishes and sophisticated packaging) and the aesthetic of the flea market (which would soon become the formal structure most commonly employed by artists), formed a perfect transition to the 1990s, which would oppose the luxurious forms of the art of the preceding decade by exalting the precarious against the solid, the use of things against their exchange under the aegis of the language of advertising, the flea market against the shopping mall, ephemeral performance and fragile materials against stainless steel and resin.⁶⁹

In these early years of the twenty-first century, it is clear that the oppositions are less marked. All forms coexist peacefully, and artistic production no longer even seems to be organized by that pendulum swing between the solid and the precarious that continued to echo

68 MICHEL MAFFESOLI, *DU NOMADISME* (LIVRE DE POCHE, 1997), 109.

69 FOR MORE ON THE MARKET AS HEGEMONIC FORM OF THE ART OF THE 1990S, SEE THE AUTHOR'S *POSTPRODUCTION* (NOTE 36).

the alternation of classical and baroque, a "fundamental principle of art history" according to the historian Heinrich Wölfflin.⁷⁰ For such "fundamental principles" can only fully operate in a radical world, or a world that retains a memory of that radicality. In a postmodern universe, everything is equivalent. But in a radical universe, principles mingle and multiply by means of combinations. No more subtraction, but constant multiplication. That profusion, that absence of clear hierarchies, is in keeping with this precariousness, which can no longer be reduced to the use of fragile materials or short durations but now imbues all artistic production with its uncertain hues and constitutes an intellectual substrate, an ideological backdrop before which all forms pass in review. In short, precariousness now pervades the entirety of the contemporary aesthetic. Is this a paradox? Officially, if I may say so, precariousness is the sworn enemy of culture. Let us recall certain axioms of Western culture which hold that the cultural object is defined by its enduring character, or simply by its opposition to the world of consumption. Hannah Arendt's writings are a good example of this attempt to rank things according to their degree of solidity: "Culture is being threatened when all worldly objects and things, produced by the present or the past, are treated as mere functions for the life process of society, as though they are there only to fulfill some need."⁷¹ In other words, art must absolutely resist the process of consumption: "An object is cultural to the extent that it can endure; its durability is the very opposite of functionality." Zygmunt Bauman makes the same argument, but he targets the enemy with greater precision: as the new purveyor of cultural criteria, the marketplace of consumption "propagates rapid circulation, a shorter distance from use to waste and waste disposal, and the immediate replacement of goods that are

70 HEINRICH WÖLFFLIN, *PRINCIPLES OF ART HISTORY: THE PROBLEM OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF STYLE IN LATER ART*, TRANS. M. D. HOTTINGER (NEW YORK: DOVER, 1950).

71 HANNAH ARENDT, *BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE: EIGHT EXERCISES IN POLITICAL THOUGHT* (NEW YORK: VIKING, 1968), 208.

no longer profitable."⁷² Operations that, according to Bauman, are radically opposed to "cultural creation." But is this dichotomy between the enduring and the functional still relevant today? Is it capable of establishing a distinction between what belongs to culture and what is hostile or alien to it? Is precariousness in itself a bad thing? Are there cutting edges [*du tranchant*] to be found in the precarious universe?

Paradoxically, precariousness is inscribed in the culture by the many mechanisms that seek to remedy it, and attest to it at the same time. We live in a "ctrl+S universe," a society with "automatic backup" in which the recording and archiving of cultural phenomena are widespread and systematic. If it is true that, as Bauman writes, "among consumer society's industries waste production is the most massive,"⁷³ the same might be said of the industry that reflects it, that of preservation. Thus, a dense network of journals, museums, websites, and catalogues is turning the art world into a kind of hard disk that stores, recycles, and reuses the most precarious productions. Here too, the culture of precariousness privileges the replayable (which depends on access) over the durable (which involves the physical possession of things). Today, the function of the art museum has less to do with the storage of objects in a physical space than with the maintenance of a database of information. A performance by Vito Acconci from 1970, of which nothing survives but photographic documents and eye-witness accounts, potentially represents the same value as a sculpture displayed in the rooms of a museum—specifically that of a replayable score, but also that of an artistic event whose shock wave cannot be reduced to its physical duration. Today, when Tino Sehgal recruits actors to interpret his interactive scenarios, he requests that no visible traces be left behind. This insistence on the

"here and now" of the artistic event and the refusal to record it are a challenge to the art world (whose institutional character is now becoming indistinguishable from archiving); they are also the assertion of a positive precariousness, or even an aesthetic of uncluttering, of wiping the hard disk.

If Hannah Arendt's criteria for the definition of culture—its enduring character, its distance from social processes, its rejection of function and commercialization—are applied to contemporary artworks, it is clear that nearly all of them fail to satisfy it, as does the system in which they are involved. Does this mean they are merely a parody of culture? Or on the contrary, that they are defining new territories in response to a new and unprecedented situation? For when we examine the phenomenon of artistic production today, we find that there seem to be new types of contracts being concluded between the physical duration of the artwork and its duration as information, contracts that shatter the foundation of certainties on which critical thought has hitherto been based. It is my contention that art has found a way not only to resist this new unstable environment but also to draw new strength from it, and that new forms of culture and new types of formal writing could very well develop in a mental and material universe whose backdrop is precariousness. For this is the situation in these early years of the twenty-first century, in which transience, speed, and fragility reign in all domains of thought and cultural production, giving rise to what might be described as a precarious aesthetic regime.

A modern moment took place at the end of the nineteenth century: the brushstroke became visible, expressing the painting's autonomy and magnifying the human hand in reaction to the industrialization of images and objects. It may be that, in these early years of the twenty-first century, our own modernity is developing on the basis of this collapse of the long term, at the very heart of the consumerist whirlwind

72 ZYGMUNT BAUMAN, *LIQUID LIFE* (NOTE 30), 59.

73 *IBID.*, 9.

and cultural precariousness, countering the weakening of human territories under the impact of the globalized economic machine.

NO FIXED FORM (HOMELESS MATERIALS)

A history of the use of precarious materials in art since Kurt Schwitters's subtle compositions of found objects would fill multiple volumes. Here, however, we are interested in the contemporary meanings of the practice. It is certainly true that twentieth-century artists made abundant use of waste and everyday objects, but they did so for many different aesthetic reasons. Thus, Joseph Cornell's surrealist boxes have nothing to do with Rauschenberg's "combine paintings," which sought to bridge the gap between art and life from a very Duchampian perspective. The industrial waste amassed, compressed, or packaged by the New Realists of 1960 sought to create an expressive lexicon of the new industrial nature, while the natural precarious materials manipulated by the Italian artists of Arte Povera in the latter half of the decade were a response to the consumerist optimism of American Pop Art. As for the precarious compositions produced by the various members of the Fluxus movement, they valorized everyday life against its capture by artistic means and introduced a poetics of the next-to-nothing that would later find its most forceful expression in the works of George Brecht and Robert Filliou. And today?

Here is a gigantic shambles without beginning or end... The most heterogeneous objects—some used, some not—accumulated, isolated, or connected by tubes or wires within a structure that has no symmetry or overarching form but abounds in little compositions that are partially or totally hidden beneath the mass of the materials. The first time I saw an installation by Jason Rhoades—in Cologne in 1993—I was puzzled. What was he getting at? And yet all of the elements of this precarious aesthetic were right before my eyes: clutter, indeed saturation; the use of "poor" materials; a failure to distinguish between scraps and objects of consumption, between edible

and solid; and the rejection of any fixed compositional principle in favor of installations that seem nomadic and indeterminate. At the time, the allusions to homeless encampments seemed to be justified by a difficult economic situation. In New York in that same year, Rirkrit Tiravanija turned a gallery into a soup kitchen, inviting passersby to come in and eat in the guise of an exhibition. But what remains visible of Tiravanija's installations is not unrelated to those of Rhoades: kitchen utensils, minimal furnishings, and various objects in a state of apparent disorder unstructured by any discernible composition. As if in a world completely saturated with objects one could only compose negatively, by hollowing out: Rhoades, a Californian who died in 2006 at the age of forty-one, and Tiravanija, a Thai artist born in Argentina, are sculptors who bring figures to light by eliminating, by scraping away and eliding. For them there is no such thing as a blank page, a pristine canvas, or material to be worked. Chaos is preexisting, and they operate from the midst of it.

In 1991, an album by the group My Bloody Valentine, *Loveless*, expressed this new aesthetic tendency in the medium of sound. Within an undifferentiated aural chaos of electric guitars, the melody of each piece seemed to emerge by a series of subtractions, by emptying out, as if carved from some dense, preexisting magma. Reflections on a civilization of overproduction, in which the degree of spatial (and imaginary) clutter is such that the slightest gap in its uninterrupted chain—whether it be a disused urban area, a barren expanse (jungle, desert, or ocean), or an impoverished area—immediately becomes photogenic, even fascinating. The "few" or the "little" [*le peu*] is the ultimate icon, even in the midst of abundance. Here the artistic *laissez-faire* of a Jason Rhoades assumes the status of a moral act.

Fragile compositions, then. But that was not the final word of an aesthetic that insists on this fragility, not in an effort to highlight art's capacity to immortalize, but on the contrary, because it sees art as

the exaltation of instability. Born of the general excess, these compositions are in keeping with what the urban landscape has become, a precarious, cluttered, and shifting environment. Just as much of contemporary video deliberately models itself on the practices of amateurs, privileging raw documents and shaky images and restricting itself to the most rudimentary editing, in the same way, Jason Rhoades's installations assert that they only differ from life itself by a slight symbolic displacement. In a world that records as quickly as it produces, art no longer immortalizes but tinkers and arranges, throwing the products it consumes on the table pell-mell. Millions of people shoot, compile, and edit images with the help of software available to everyone. But they freeze memories, whereas the artist sets signs in motion.

Thus, Gabriel Orozco's photographs are merely stills from the great film of the precarious world. He frames ephemeral sculptures, collective, anonymous, and lowly compositions: a suspended plastic bag, water in a burst balloon, bunches of bicycles on a sidewalk. Orozco's subject is the collective as producer of forms, but at precisely the point where it cannot be distinguished from natural phenomena. Human agency or inclement weather—how can one tell them apart? Thus, as an artist he stands in the tradition of Jacques Villeglé, who collected the results of that "anonymous tearing" that provided the basic material for his project of unsticking posters, and Bernd and Hilla Becher, who created the visual yearbook of disused industrial structures. Human activities, sometimes indirectly, produce subtle compositions that the artist is content to simply frame, thus inscribing them within the register of duration, as with the series of *Monuments* conceived by Thomas Hirschhorn: "I wanted to show that monuments come 'from below,'" he explains. "I love anonymous altars, where people bring flowers and candles." One of these models was the improvised altar to Lady Di that came about after her accidental death in Paris, the reproduction of the flame of Bartoldi's Statue of

Liberty that her admirers spontaneously occupied because it was conveniently located above the tunnel where the media-friendly princess lost her life. Hirschhorn constructed a replica of it using his materials of choice (cardboard, aluminum foil, brown tape) before going on to realize more complex installations dedicated to authors such as Gilles Deleuze, Georges Bataille, Baruch Spinoza, and Michel Foucault. "It's a critique of the classical monument, in its choice of whom to memorialize and in its form. The monumental tradition celebrates warriors and men of power in the central squares of cities; I make monuments to thinkers in locations on the outskirts, where people live, precarious monuments that don't try to impress anyone and eschew the immortality of noble materials, marble or bronze."⁷⁴ The precarious aesthetic comes "from below" and cannot be distinguished from a gesture of solidarity.

Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla make impressions in sand of signs etched on the soles of shoes (*Landmark—Footprints*) or encourage passersby to draw with white chalk on the asphalt of city streets (*Chalk Project*). One of their videos, *Amphibious (Login-Logout)*, produced in 2005, shows a procession of seemingly trivial forms and events winding along a river and watched by turtles that have climbed up on a makeshift raft.

At the invitation of the Tate Gallery, Mark Dion recruited volunteers to collect the slightest artifacts trapped in the mud of the Thames at the foot of the British institution—pipes, plastic objects, old shoes, oyster shells... These archaeological excavations made it possible to raise the cultural and industrial history of London back up to the surface (*Tate Thames Dig*, 1999). While the horizon of Dion's work is the global environmental crisis and the sociopolitical relations between the rich

74. THOMAS HIRSCHHORN IN CONVERSATION WITH VALÉRIE SAINT-DO, AVAILABLE ONLINE AT [HTTP://WWW.HORSCHAMP.ORG/ARTICLE.PHP3?ID_ARTICLE=1300&VAR_RECHERCHE=HIRSCHHORN](http://www.horschamp.org/article.php3?id_article=1300&var_recherche=hirschhorn).

countries and the Third World—which he finds forms for in installations inspired by the museography of natural history and zoology—he too depicts our world as an enormous pile of assorted debris that the artwork then sets about collecting, classifying, and interpreting. This same perspective informs George Adeagbo's installations, constellations of trivial objects rescued from some abstract disaster, as well as the samples taken by Jeremy Deller from the folk culture of the United States.

While some artists seem to distance themselves from this precarious aesthetic, often they are only separated from it by their works' degree of material solidity. Take the trio of superstars consisting of Jeff Koons, Maurizio Cattelan, and Damien Hirst. What do they have in common besides the fact that their exhibitions are major events, unless it be their shared ambition to take an iconography born of contemporary precariousness and render it monumental? Thus, Jeff Koons takes children's toys and endows them with an enormous physical weight that contrasts with their frivolousness. His subject is heaviness: he turns the lightest of gadgets into untransportable monoliths, inflatable objects into lead, cheap junk into jewelry, as if he regarded aesthetic surplus value as a kind of gravity. For Koons, the density of matter becomes the quintessential code by which to organize the visible. An obsession with precariousness compels him to turn it into spectacle—that is, accumulated capital, gold value. As for Damien Hirst, the magnificent visual means he employs, the flawless finishes of his huge glass cages, and the luxurious formats of his paintings only serve to underscore the morbidity or fragility of the subjects he pins or imprisons there. Formaldehyde immortalizes, so he uses it to protect art against putrefaction. A butterfly catcher, the curator of a museum of cadavers, and the brilliant interior decorator of the hospital of the twenty-first century, Hirst is the great denier of precariousness, which he thus highlights as our actual horizon. Subodh Gupta's gleaming installations, realized using the most ordinary kitchen utensils to be found in the Indian state of Bihar; Nari Ward's heartbreaking

assemblages, produced by collecting used materials from New York City's African-American neighborhoods; Bertrand Lavier's chromium-plated African masks; and David Hammons's subtle arrangements of objects—even though they all belong to the category of sculpture, all of them contribute to the iconography of the precarious world.

It is equally clear that Cattelan works at the very heart of that universe. He derives the bulk of his material and the resources for his Chaplin-esque irony—the irony of the vagabond set loose in the universe of power—from the unstable status of the artist, the fragility of his position within the mechanism of the production of value. Thus, his life-size reproduction, above the municipal garbage dump of Palermo, of the letters that spell out “Hollywood” in the Los Angeles hills (*Hollywood*, 2001) may be seen as an emblem for his work, which is haunted by social precariousness and frequently orchestrates collisions between luxury and poverty. The emblem of this collision between two worlds is vanity, and it is coming back into fashion in these early years of the twenty-first century. Subodh Gupta's *Very Hungry God* (2006) represents an enormous skull with the help of an assemblage of chromium-plated implements. Piotr Uklanski has done the “portrait” of a collector—specifically François Pinault—in the form of an X-ray image; earlier he produced a photograph in which intertwined nude bodies form a skull and crossbones. In the context of luxury, vanity acquires new meaning. When social cynicism reaches heights like these, the artist becomes a kind of pre-Socratic philosopher, the only one who can say to the emperor, “get out of the way, you're standing in my sun.”

URBAN WANDERING

When future historians study our era, they will no doubt be struck by the number of works that depict life in the big cities. They will note the countless images of streets, stores, markets, buildings, vacant lots, crowds, and interiors that were exhibited in galleries in our day. From this they will infer that the artists of these early years of the twenty-first

century were fascinated by the transformation of their immediate environment and the "becoming-world" [*devenir-monde*] of their cities. They will compare this period to the second half of the nineteenth century, when Édouard Manet, Claude Monet, and Georges Seurat depicted the birth of industrial civilization, also by painting scenes of urban life from the immediate outskirts of the cities. The Impressionists' views of boulevards and Parisian cafés bear certain similarities to the post-industrial landscapes of Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, Beat Streuli, and Jeff Wall. And going beyond contemporary photography, one could define nearly all contemporary artists by reference to the Baudelairean maxim "to distill the eternal from the transitory." For the omnipresence of precariousness in contemporary art inevitably pushes it back toward the sources of modernity: the fleeting present moment, the shifting crowd, the street, and the ephemeral. In his most programmatic text, Baudelaire attempts to sketch the profile of this *artiste mutant*: "a man of the whole world, a man who understands the world and the mysterious and lawful reasons for all its uses," he is "interest[ed] ... in things, be they apparently the most trivial." A flâneur who is able "to become one flesh with the crowd," that is, "the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite,"⁷⁵ this artist is "a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life."⁷⁶ From Gabriel Orozco to Thomas Hirschhorn and from Francis Alÿs to Jason Rhoades—all of them artists whose formal universes are nonetheless clearly dissimilar—many contemporary artists would embrace this definition of Baudelairean modernity, indexed to the urban, wandering, and precariousness. And the figure of the "kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness" might have been expressly

75 CHARLES BAUDELAIRE, *THE PAINTER OF MODERN LIFE AND OTHER ESSAYS*, TRANS. AND ED. JONATHAN MAYNE (LONDON: PHAIDON, 1964), 6–12.

76 *IBID.*, 9.

invented to describe the viewer of a work by Rhoades or Tiravanija, who is able to break down and reconstruct the movements that unify the thousand and one elements of an installation that would seem, to a more stationary gaze, to be nothing but pure chaos.

"Perhaps you know what an *erre* is?"* asks Jacques Lacan. "It's something like momentum. The momentum something has when what was formerly propelling it stops."⁷⁷ At the end of the 1970s, when the modernist engine stopped, there were many who proclaimed the end of the movement itself. Thus, the postmodernists walked around the vehicle, deconstructed its mechanics, broke it down to spare parts, and formed theories regarding the nature of the breakdown before strolling off into the surrounding area and announcing that everyone was now free to walk however they liked, in whatever direction they chose. The artists under discussion here intend to remain the car, in the same direction as modernity, but while operating their vehicle according to the reliefs they encounter and with the aid of a different fuel. The *erre* would then be what remains of the forward motion initiated by modernism, the field that is open to our own modernity, our altermodernity. Thus, the work of Gabriel Orozco is riddled with allusions to the erratic movements of the urban pedestrian. *Yielding Stone* (1992) is a plasticine ball that is rolled across the asphalt surfaces of the city and collects the tiny debris that lies in its path. Consisting of a thin layer of minute materials, peelings, and dust, *Yielding Stone* is intended to reach the weight of the artist over the years, so that although it is not anthropomorphic it acquires the density of a portrait of the artist as flâneur. In a magnificent series of paintings begun in 2005 and entitled *The Samurai Tree*, Orozco uses gold leaf and tempera to paint a central circle, around which the compositions then develop by

* TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: THE WORD *ERRE* IS RELATED TO *ERRER*: TO WANDER, AND *ERRANCE*: WANDERING. BOTH OF WHICH ARE IMPORTANT WORDS IN BOURDRIAUD'S TEXT.

77 JACQUES LACAN, "LES NON-DUPES ERRENT," SEMINAIRE XXI, NOVEMBER 13, 1973, UNPUBLISHED.

following the movements of the knight in chess, adding new circles of various sizes until the edges of the surface are reached. Each of the paintings describes a series of subtle spirals and undulating lines that evoke both Joan Miró's *Constellations* and Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*. Utilized here as a compositional principle, the knight is a recurring figure in Orozco's work. *Knights Running Endlessly* (1995) consists of a chess set with 256 squares, all occupied by knights. The movement of this chess piece, which seems so fanciful and arbitrary but is actually strictly prescribed, functions as a metaphor for wandering, for sidling through the crowd of the big cities, for which the works of the series *The Samurai Tree* are icons.

If wandering practices are becoming so important today, even to the point of providing art with compositional models, it is in response to the evolution of the relations between the individual and the collective in the contemporary city. Walter Benjamin, who characterized the artwork's aura as "the unique phenomenon of a distance,"⁷⁸ describes its progressive disappearance in spatial terms: the space of human life is undergoing a metamorphosis; the distance between things and living beings is diminishing; the modern city, whose vital element is the crowd, introduced "perception in the form of shocks"⁷⁹ as a formal principle that found its aesthetic and technological expression in film. The immensity of the crowd, writes Benjamin, destroys the bond between the individual and the community, and it can only be recreated by an intentional, even artificial act. Thus, one might say that the contemporary megacity, as depicted or set in motion by the artists of today, is the effect of a political *erre*, of what remains of the movement of socialization when its own energy has vanished, giving way to an urban chaos. Moreover, each of these megacities displays the features of the world economy in concentrated form: the true borders are

now internal, and they bring about subtle forms of segregation between social or ethnic classes in the city itself.

For years, John Miller has been photographing scenes of daily life during the lunch break, wherever in the world he happens to be. The series *Middle of the Day*, which now numbers thousands of photographs, brings together images of this pause in the workday, this interstitial moment in which the employee—on parole, as it were—occupies the public space, eating lunch on a bench or strolling through the city. This period in which industrial production is suspended was also the subject of Georges Seurat's painting *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884–86). A depiction of the weekly day off in the nearby Parisian suburbs, a pointillist allegory of the birth of the leisure society, the work of this French post-Impressionist was realized using pictorial means that themselves evoked the division of labor. With his punctual brushstrokes mechanically applied to the surface of the canvas, Seurat attempts to reproduce the movement of industry in painting. His dream was that it would be possible to reproduce his paintings ad infinitum, as if on an assembly line, by applying the dots of color to the canvas one by one. In a certain sense, Seurat anticipates the pixel. Today, when John Miller sets out to depict the midday lunch break, he too uses means that are perfectly homothetic to his subject: an amateur camera and framings that are sometimes approximate. And he displays these views of city centers and downtown areas by the hundreds in the most ordinary formats, in simple wooden frames. And where were they taken, these images of semi-occupied pedestrians with their sandwiches, against a backdrop of shopping malls or strolling around in the park? While a sign sometimes offers a vague clue, it is hard to tell if these are photographs of Amsterdam or Moscow, Hong Kong or Buenos Aires. John Miller depicts Seurat's Sunday enlarged to planetary dimensions and confined to the legal hours of flânerie.

78 BENJAMIN, "THE WORK OF ART IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION" (NOTE 20), 222.

79 WALTER BENJAMIN, "ON SOME MOTIFS IN BAUDELAIRE," IN BENJAMIN, *ILLUMINATIONS*, 175.

Since 1991, Francis Alÿs has made his walks in Mexico the starting point for a body of work that is equally divided among painting, drawings, photographs, films, and actions. "Walking," says Alÿs, "is one of our last remaining intimate spaces." He sometimes records his strolls or collects found objects and images that he will later use in his paintings. Why is it that the contemporary equivalent of landscape painting is so often based on action and narrative at the expense of representation? Alÿs offers this explanation: "My paintings, my images, are only attempting to illustrate situations I confront, provoke or perform on a more public, usually urban, and ephemeral level. I'm trying to make a very clear distinction between what will be addressing the street and what will be directed to the gallery wall. I tried to create painted images that could become 'equivalents' to the action, 'souvenirs' without literally representing the act itself."⁸⁰ The artist of the precarious world regards the urban environment as a container from which to separate fragments. How many Florentine painters used terra sienna to depict the landscapes of Tuscany? Today, working *sur le motif*, or in nature, as the Impressionists did in their day, means entering the motif itself and moving according to its rhythms. The Slovenian artist Marjetica Potrč doesn't represent the slums of Caracas; she spends time there in order to study them from within, gathering or reconstructing fragments of them and then, in a second phase, proposing alternative solutions. The Danish group Superflex doesn't represent the power relations or commercial flows within countries of the Third World, but sets up structures for producing *soda de guarana* in Brazil and bioelectric power plants in Africa.⁸¹ When speaking of these artistic interventions in urban reality, one is tempted to recall the famous formula of Karl Marx from his *Theses on Feuerbach*: "the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it." Be that as it may, here we

80 FRANCIS ALÿS, "FRANCIS ALÿS: STREETS AND GALLERY WALLS," INTERVIEW BY GIANNI ROMANO, *FLASH ART* (INTERNATIONAL EDITION) 33, NO. 211 (MARCH/APRIL 2000): 72-73.

clearly find ourselves confronting another of the central figures of modernity.

To capture the city in an image really means following its movement. Remember Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's long tracking shot along the river in *Riyo*. In a sequence from the series *The Needle Woman*, Kim Soo-Ja is filmed from behind as she impassively confronts the advancing wave of an Asian crowd. In his video installation *Electric Earth* (1999), Doug Aitken retraces the promenades of a solitary walker through a nocturnal urban landscape that is just as difficult to identify and from which all human presence seems to have been erased. What remains is the non-place (for example, the parking lot of a shopping mall) and machines (satellite dishes, laundromats) that little by little seem to take control of the flâneur, a contemporary zombie threatened and unsettled [*précarisé*] by the metaphysical indifference of his environment. Urban lighting seems to be Aitken's building material: harsh and cold, light is omnipresent here, and the pale streetlights leave streaks and smears on the sidewalk. Aitken's treatment of light is the opposite of that of Seurat, who sought to eliminate light's iridescence, its luminous halo, retaining only the definite color of the object under precise atmospheric conditions. The contemporary city, by contrast, must be represented in motion, and that goes for its light as well.

Like an insect colliding with a pane of glass, the wanderer quickly runs up against those territories in which the amount of (shared) public space is growing smaller every day. The South African artist Kendell Geers displays the flip side of the contemporary city in a number of

81: MANY FURTHER EXAMPLES COULD BE CITED—I WILL MENTION ONLY A FEW OF THEM HERE: THE TURKISH ARTIST CAN ALTAY TAKES PHOTOGRAPHS THAT DOCUMENT DERELICT AREAS AND OTHER SITES WHERE TEENAGERS CONGREGATE; THE JAPANESE ARTISTS OF ATELIER BOW WOW INVENTORY THE INTERSTITIAL SPACES PRESENT IN THE URBAN FABRIC; AND THE GROUP OF FILMMAKERS AND ARTISTS RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE, BASED IN NEW DELHI, CONSTRUCTS LONG-TERM PROJECTS INVOLVING VARIOUS COMMUNITIES.

his works of the 1990s: photographs of private security systems as well as works that are haunted by danger—such as *Mondo Kane* (2002), a minimalist cube covered with broken glass—or even literally dangerous, as with works that are made of razor blades or have an electric current running through them. Francis Alÿs's universe also exhibits the city's mechanisms of control and standardization, but it does so by gathering images of precariousness: homeless people, dropouts, stray dogs. His slide show *Sleepers II* (1997–2002) depicts eighty such figures dozing on sidewalks, photographed at ground level, surrounded by blurred asphalt that alters our perspective on the city.

The *erre*, an invisible line that cuts across city centers and downtown areas, groups together all those with nowhere to go—vagabonds, nomads, gypsies, marginalized individuals, and illegal immigrants. Thus, the wanderer very quickly finds him- or herself associated with the world of criminality. And if Baudelairean *flânerie* is a brief time out for the person of leisure, wandering quickly carries its practitioners beyond the pale of legality. Indeed, precarious artists often choose to define their work in terms borrowed from the world of criminal vagrancy: petty theft, poaching, robbery, and a refusal to seek paid employment. Kendell Geers confesses: “When I work with an existing image or object and shift it, I don’t conceive it as sampling in a DJ sense, or even plagiarism as the Situationists did, but as pure theft. It is about stealing the images from Hollywood, from CNN, literally taking images and reworking them.”⁸² Bruno Serralongue works as a newspaper photographer, except that because he has no official credentials, he is forced to place his camera at the outskirts of the event, visually marking the line that separates the artist from the journalist whose methods he pretends to adopt, the professional from the mere citizen. Thus, he makes his way toward the margins of

82 CONVERSATION BETWEEN KENDELL GEERS, DANIEL BUREN, AND NICOLAS BOURRIAUD, IN KENDELL GEERS, EXH. CAT., MUSEO D'ARTE CONTEMPORANEA, ROME (MILAN: ELECTA, 2004).

information and assumes the role of witness, as when he produces portraits of illegal immigrants or striking workers. Serralongue photographs the line that separates information—the official *communiqué*—from the periphery of the event that serves as its pretext. He places himself outside the law.

Contemporary art commits its most serious act of breaking and entering against our perception of social reality. It essentially renders everything it touches precarious; such is its ontological foundation. By laying hold of the elements that make up our daily lives (corporate logos, media images, urban signs, and administrative procedures) and making them the materials from which they compose their works, artists underscore their arbitrary, conventional, and ideological dimension. We exchange objects for money, we live in this or that manner, but did you know that we could also do otherwise? By making the elements of the ordinary mechanisms of lived reality operate in different ways, art functions as an alternative editing bench for reality.⁸³ By formalizing behaviors, social interactions, spaces, and functions, contemporary art lends reality a provisional and precarious character. Unlike the ambient discourse, which comes down to Margaret Thatcher’s famous formula—“There is no alternative”—art preserves intact an image of reality as a fragile construction and carries the torch for the notion of change, the hypothesis of a plan B. If contemporary art is the bearer of a coherent political project, it is surely this: to introduce precariousness into the very heart of the system of representations by means of which the powers that be manage behaviors, to weaken all systems, to endow the most well-established habits with the appearance of exotic rituals.

Art is thus a kind of primitive editing bench that apprehends social reality through its forms. In more general terms, these works produce

83 A THESIS I HAVE DEVELOPED IN GREATER LENGTH IN *POSTPRODUCTION* (NOTE 36).

the fiction of a universe that operates differently. This fiction might be said to introduce the dimension of the infinite into the continuous ribbon of social reality, just as language allows us to carve into tiny pieces this or that physical reality that for animals is a continuum, a one-dimensional space. Because we have been humanized by language, we know the element in which we move is not indivisible. The room in which I am writing these lines may be broken down into floor, table, drawer, handle, wood grain, mementos, and so on, ad infinitum. In the same way, the fictional dimension of art pierces the chain of reality, returning it to its precarious nature, to the unstable mixture of real, imaginary, and symbolic that it contains. This fiction augments reality, allowing us to keep it in perpetual motion and hence to introduce utopia and alternatives into it. For fiction is not just the imaginary, and the fictional cannot be reduced to the fictive. For example, the Duchampian readymade belongs to the order of fiction, but its nature is not different from that of the reality it presents, except with respect to the narrative by which Marcel Duchamp causes it to enter a fictional regime. The *fictive* is opposed to the reality that inspires it; the *fictional*—which is the regime of stories and narration—subtitles or dubs it, without erasing it.

Thus, wandering represents a political inquiry into the city. It is writing on the move and a critique of the urban, understood as the matrix of the scenarios in which we move. It creates an aesthetic of displacement. The term is admittedly well-worn today, a century after the Duchampian readymade, which was the act of displacing, or transplanting, an everyday object to the legitimating mechanism of the system of art. But if Duchamp used the museum as a kind of optical device that allows us to see a bottle rack differently, it is clear that the museum today is no longer a dominant apparatus, buried as it is beneath a mass of processes for capturing and legitimating that did not exist in Duchamp's day. We have seen that Walter Benjamin links the loss of the aura to the emergence of mechanical techniques for capturing

images, that is, to the emergence of the cinematographer as a model of control. Today, he continues, anyone can be filmed on the street, a surprisingly prescient anticipation of the systems of surveillance in use in most cities today. The mass-produced object inserted into the recording device of the museum (Duchamp) has its contemporary counterpart in the bodies of urban wanderers and the forms they carry with them as they move through the generalized telegenic space of the twenty-first century.

Hegel saw human history as a single path, evolving through an organized sequence of progressions and advances toward an eventual conclusion. The Hegelian vision of history, which is so persistent in twentieth-century art, may be represented by the image of a highway. As a formal compositional principle, wandering points to a conception of space-time that is opposed to both linearity and flatness. Both the linear time of history as well as the vision of a one-dimensional space of human life are rejected by works constructed on the model of progressions, itineraries, and a meandering navigation among different formats or circuits. The notion of the painting as a window, which dominated the classical age and which organizes the visible around the perceptual channel of monocular perspective, is to space what the Hegelian vision of history is to time: a tension modulated toward a single point. At the end of the nineteenth century, pictorial modernity begins to obstruct perspective, diverting the linearity of space toward time. Henceforth, it is flatness that will govern pictorial space, while the representation of history (time) will be oriented around a linear account. In an important text, Leo Steinberg dates the appearance of post-modern space to Robert Rauschenberg's first "combine paintings,"⁸⁴ in which painting becomes a network of information. Neither windows that reveal the world nor opaque surfaces, Rauschenberg's works

⁸⁴ LEO STEINBERG, *OTHER CRITERIA: CONFRONTATIONS WITH TWENTIETH-CENTURY ART* (NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1972), 82–91.

effectively inaugurate a wandering of meaning, a stroll through a constellation of signs.

To describe this new figure of the artist, I have coined the term *seminaut*: a creator of paths in a landscape of signs. Inhabitants of a fragmented world in which objects and forms leave the beds of their original cultures and disperse across the planet, they wander in search of connections to establish. Natives of a territory with no a priori borders, they find themselves in the same position as the hunter-gatherers of old, those nomads who created their universe by tirelessly crisscrossing space. In her documentary *The Gleaners and I*, Agnès Varda tailors her method to her subject. Shooting a film on the ancient practice of gleaning and its contemporary forms, she wanders from one person to another, one place leading her naturally to the next, patiently constructing an analogy between her profession as filmmaker and the act of gleaning, the tolerated piracy of a system of production.

Seth Price, whose practice oscillates among seemingly incompatible forms, from writing theoretical essays to compiling mix tapes, conceptually associates wandering with the multiplicity of cultural forms available to works today. He writes: "Suppose an artist were to release the work directly into a system that depends on reproduction and distribution for its sustenance, a model that encourages contamination, borrowing, stealing, and horizontal blur? The art system usually corrals errant works, but how could it recoup thousands of freely circulating paperbacks?"⁸⁵ Price employs the term "dispersion" to describe his artistic practice, which involves disseminating information in various forms. Thus, the work *Title Variable* takes the form of albums, essays, and files, all of which are consultable online. Just like

an installation by Jason Rhoades, an exhibition by Rirkrit Tiravanija, or most of Pierre Huyghe's works, *Title Variable* cannot be confined within a unitary space-time.

In the works of Kelley Walker, Wade Guyton, and Seth Price, forms appear as copies, forever transitory. They seem to be suspended, poised between two translations, or as if they were permanently translated. Taken from magazines or websites, they seem ready to return there, unstable, ghostly. All formal origins are negated here, or more correctly rendered impossible. The mix tape is the symbol of this culture of postproduction. Seth Price has made a number of them, and Peter Coffin also puts together a lot of thematic compilations on CD. Navigating through a network of photocopies, printouts, screens, and photographic reproductions, the forms appear as so many transient incarnations. The visible appears here as essentially nomadic, as a collection of iconographic phantoms, and the work as a kind of jump key that can be connected to any support whatsoever and is capable of infinite transformations. The practice of these three artists, which discourages any attempt to assign their works to a precise and stable place in the chain of image production and processing, continues in more radical form the "rephotography" that Richard Prince has been practicing since the 1980s. But it is surely Kelley Walker who has taken Warhol's demonstration of the artist faced with the machine to its logical conclusion. Instead of identifying with it, as Warhol proclaimed, Walker presents himself as a minimal subjectivity, in motion, ceaselessly customized by the products it consumes, and operating within an entirely mechanized environment. Constructing chains of visual objects caught up in a never-ending process of reconfiguration, he depicts a deracinated reality through works that are merely freeze-frames of an emerging utterance.

⁸⁵ SETH PRICE, *DISPERSION* (2002), AVAILABLE ONLINE AT [HTTP://WWW.DISTRIBUTEDHISTORY.COM/DISPERSION2008.PDF](http://www.distributedhistory.com/dispersion2008.pdf).

CODA: REVOCABLE AESTHETICS

One might justifiably wonder if the true master narrative of our era—the presence of which is so blinding, we fail to perceive it—is actually this: that there is not, and can no longer be, any master narrative. The fragmentation of everything and everyone in a confused mass that forms an information bubble would then function as a totalizing ideology for our antitotalitarian world. Which is why we find it so difficult to conceive of history on the move. Who is recounting it? And for whom? And who could the hero of this narrative be, given that no people or proletariat can lay claim to that title any longer, and there is no longer any universal subject?

The general precariousness may be understood in connection with a culture in which there is no longer any master narrative—historical or mythical—around which forms can be organized, unless it be that of the *archipelisation* of iconographies, discourses, and narratives, isolated entities connected by filigree lines. We are confronted with images of a floating world, like the *Ukiyo-e* of Hokusai. Within these aesthetics, which are henceforth deprived of any grounding in a “master narrative of legitimation” (Lyotard) and partially or completely cut off from any local or national origin, every work must help to produce its own context, to signal its own coordinates—shifting meridians. In the order of aesthetics, this principle of deterritorialization points to that kaleidoscopic vision that Baudelaire describes as the very essence of the modern: positioning and value judgments take place in changeable, precarious, and revocable contexts. It is enough to make the sedentary residents’ heads spin. But aren’t they already experiencing it themselves, assuming they perceive something of this transformation?

In the early 1990s, mass marketing—supported by the Internet, which was still in its early days—embarked on a strategy of individualizing products while making the act of purchasing them as immaterial as possible. Thus, in luxury boutiques, the objects grew scarce in an

artificial attempt to place the consumer outside the world of mass production, which was embodied in the aisles of the supermarket. Thus, marketing’s final ruse consists in denying the existence of quantity, creating the illusion of scarcity, and playing on the obscure nostalgia for privation. The diagnosis of these marketing experts seems entirely justified: the precariousness that affects the entire cultural landscape surely stems, at least in large part, from the process of cluttering that distinguishes our era. It is a function of mass production, and its antithesis—the impression of solidity—has more to do with an object’s isolation than with the material from which it is made. A matchstick on a pedestal will always seem less precarious than a heap of marble.

Precarious: “that which only exists by virtue of an authorization that may be revoked at any time.” Which is as much as to say that contemporary artworks do not have any absolute rights when it comes to obtaining “legal status.” Is it art or not? This question, which delights the customs officers and border guards of culture and thrills its jurists to no end, is essentially the equivalent of a police investigation: what right do you have to enter art’s soil? Do you have legal documents? But the question could be formulated differently: what constitutes a real presence as it traverses the space-time of art? Does this new object that has entered the artistic bubble generate thought and activity, or not? Does it have an influence on this space-time, and if so, what sort of productivity does it generate? These are the questions, it seems to me, that are more pertinent to ask of a work. Whether or not the object exists, whether or not it holds up and has a story to tell, coordinates, produces... Does something pass or come to pass? Let’s set aside the reflexes of the policeman and the legislator and look at art through the eyes of a curious traveler, or those of a host receiving unfamiliar guests in his or her home.

Does the general context of clutter in which artworks appear to us today, which determines their modes of production and the manner in which we receive them, cause us to judge them differently? We'll come back to this question in the third part of this book. For now, however, consider the example of John Armleder's exhibition at MAMCO in Geneva in 2006. Organizing a retrospective of his work, the artist takes apart the entire corpus that can be identified as "the work of John Armleder" and puts it back together. By piling up and juxtaposing his work, by bringing some together and separating others, Armleder dramatizes the interchangeability of their positions and underscores a fundamental principle: the artwork is no longer a terminal object but merely one moment in a chain, the "quilting point" [*point de capiton*] that more or less solidly connects the various episodes of a trajectory. Armleder's rereading of his own work suggests that one of the surest criteria by which to judge any artwork is its capacity to insert itself into different narratives and translate its characteristics—in other words, its potential for displacement, which permits it to engage in productive dialogue with a variety of different contexts. Or in still other words, its radicantity.

JOURNEY-FORMS

THERE IS AN IMAGINARY CONCEPTION THAT JUST BARELY ACCOMMODATES THOSE INTENT ON NOT BEING DUPEES OF THE STRUCTURE: THE IDEA THAT THEIR LIFE IS BUT A VOYAGE. LIFE, IN THIS VIEW, IS A NOMAD'S EXISTENCE, THE CONDITION OF THOSE WHO DWELL AS FOREIGNERS IN WHAT'S CALLED "THIS WORLD."
(JACQUES LACAN)

THE JOURNEY-FORM (1): EXPEDITIONS AND PARADES

On July 9, 1975, Bas Jan Ader's sailboat departed the east coast of the United States in an attempt to cross the Atlantic as part of his project *In Search of the Miraculous*. But three weeks after his departure, radio contact was lost. And on April 10, 1976, rescue teams found only the artist's half-submerged boat. The dramatic disappearance of an artist who was one of the most promising of his generation was

reminiscent of the helicopter accident in which another great pioneer, Robert Smithson, had perished three years earlier. They had in common that spirit of travel and adventure, that taste for great expanses, that was highlighted by the tragic circumstances of their deaths. Thirty years later, these two major bodies of work are unexpectedly being echoed in the works of those artists for whom the journey has become an art form in itself, or who find in the barren expanses or no-man's-lands of post-industrial society surfaces for inscription much more exciting than those offered by art galleries—an attitude already evinced in Smithson's colossal site-specific works of the 1960s, just as much as in the expeditions of Bas Jan Ader.

Today the journey is everywhere in contemporary works, whether artists borrow its forms (journeys, expeditions, maps), its iconography (virgin territories, jungles, deserts), or its methods (those of the anthropologist, the archaeologist, the explorer). If this imaginary universe is born of globalization, the democratization of tourism and commuting, let us underscore the paradox in the fact that this obsession with the journey coincides with the disappearance of any *terra incognita* from the surface of the earth. How can one become the explorer of a world now covered by satellites, a world whose every millimeter is now registered and surveyed? And more generally, how do artists take account of the space in which they live? Here the form of the expedition constitutes a matrix, in that it furnishes a motive (knowledge of the world), an imaginary universe (the history of exploration, subtly linked to modern times), and a structure (the collection of samples and information along a path).

Speaking of his film *A Journey that Wasn't* (2005), which retraces his expedition to the Antarctic, Pierre Huyghe insists that "fiction is a means of capturing the real."⁸⁶ It constitutes a means of locomotion that enables him to generate new knowledge of the contemporary

⁸⁶ PIERRE HUYGHE, INTERVIEW BY GEORGE BAKER, OCTOBER 110 (FALL 2004): 86.

world, and the principal tool for constructing a body of work whose general form and metaphors are those of the journey. The set of works that was generated by this expedition and by the preparations for it constitutes a cognitive process that stretches across a period of several years. It is based on a narrative element, a rumor: an island was said to have appeared near the South Pole, and a strange creature was reported to have been born there—an albino penguin, an effect of the Earth's warming. The expedition carried out by Huyghe and his team aboard a laboratory ship weaving among the icebergs in a sea whipped by glacial winds uses fiction as a vehicle and the journey as a kind of drawing. Here we rediscover one of the principles invoked by Victor Segalen in his definition of the exote: "My journey," he writes from Beijing to Jules de Gaultier in 1914, "is decidedly taking on for me the quality of a sincere experience—a confrontation, in the *field*, between the imaginary and the real."⁸⁷ Another of his virtues, the writer recalls, consists in "*being free* with regards to the object that is felt or described."⁸⁸ Imagination and fiction enable Huyghe to open up free spaces in the real geography he traverses.

The work of Melik Ohanian involves, as he explains, "the experience of exploration more than the image of exploration." Ohanian's way of bringing adventure into play is perfectly expressed in his *Island of an Island* (1998–2001), an installation in several phases that opens with the narrative account of an event: in 1963, the island of Surtsey appeared off the coast of Iceland following a volcanic eruption. Around this geophysical event, Melik Ohanian constructed a unitary form linking heterogeneous levels of discourse and reality. Thus, *Island of an Island* brought together in a single space a film projected on three different screens showing aerial views of the volcanic island, and, on the floor, 900 light bulbs that traced the outline of a rare plant

87 SEGALLEN, *ESSAY ON EXOTICISM* (NOTE 42), 58.

88 *IBID.*, 34.

discovered on the island, whose image was reflected as a red dotted line in five convex mirrors attached to the ceiling. At the entrance to the room, books were suspended from wires, forming a curtain, and in this way made available to the installation's visitors. The *Island of an Island Handbook* is a compilation of excerpts from scientific studies and facsimiles of articles from the Icelandic press at the time of the eruption. History desynchronized: the anecdotes of the press stand side by side with the scientific analysis of a nascent, literally prehistoric universe. Ohanian continued his investigation into barren zones with *Welcome to Hanksville* (2003), in which the world appears as a vast movie set, an archipelago of *terrae incognitae* in which art can develop scenarios (which become forms) and protocols for the acquisition of knowledge.

The group Gelitin has adopted the form of displacement as a mode of production. The microcommunity of its four members might be compared to an exploratory probe equipped with multiple instruments for apprehending reality, which privileges the material dimension of culture in the choice of its thematics and employs the human body (insofar as it feels pleasure and lays itself open to experimentation) as its principal instrument of knowledge. Thus, in the video *Grand Marquis* (2002), various performances give emphasis to their discovery of Mexico. For *Nasser Klumpatsch (The Ride)*, which documents a project presented in Sofia in 2004, Gelitin set in motion the very process of mounting the exhibition, traveling the 700 kilometers between Vienna, where they live, and the Bulgarian capital, where they were invited to exhibit, on mopeds, and taking advantage of every leg of the journey to supply their final destination with new forms. The exhibition was the product of a trajectory that was punctuated by the works as if by notes on a geographic map.

The duo of Abraham Poincheval and Laurent Tixador is driven by a similar ambition, and they take this experimental logic to the point of

placing themselves in physical and mental danger. Each of their exhibitions brings together the tangible traces of an adventure conducted under extreme conditions. Thus, they spent one month on a desert island in a state of complete self-sufficiency (*Total Symbiosis I*, 2001), and they crossed France in a perfectly straight line (*L'Inconnu des grands horizons* [The Unknown of the Wide Horizons], 2002). Then they organized a speleological expedition in a tunnel they dug themselves, in which they were buried (*Horizon moins vingt* [Horizon Minus Twenty], 2008); spent time in prison; and pitched a tent on the roof of a skyscraper. Caught between the status of expedition souvenirs and that of scientific instruments, the objects displayed at their exhibitions suggest ballistic analysis and the calculation of trajectories as much as they do the art of surviving in a hostile environment.

In 2006, Mario Garcia Torres set out to find the mythical hotel where Alighiero e Boetti stayed on his travels to Kabul, the One Hotel: it was a way of plotting the passage of time. He also attempted to meet all the students whom Robert Barry—then a professor in Halifax—had told a particular secret, which thus took on the status of a conceptual artwork (*What Happens in Halifax Stays in Halifax*, 2005). Alfred Hitchcock used the term “McGuffin” to describe the elusive objects chased by the characters in his films. Artist-travelers often view history as a McGuffin, as the vanishing point or element of suspense that enables them to organize their parades of form. *Cucumber Journey* (2000) by Shimabuku is a typical work by the Japanese artist. It traces on the surface of the Earth the wandering lines of a journey that has its origins in an argument for departure very close to Hitchcock’s McGuffins—pretexts for a setting in motion. For this boat trip from London to Birmingham on an eighteenth-century canal, Shimabuku takes the process of making pickles as a poetic incentive for drifting: “The vegetables and cucumbers that I bought fresh in London were pickled by the time I reached Birmingham. While traveling from London to Birmingham, I got recipes for pickles from

other people, and I watched the sheep and water birds and leaves floating in the water. And I watched the cucumbers slowly turning into pickles.”⁸⁹ One might compare this project to another by Jason Rhoades, called *Meccatuna* (2003). Unlike Shimabuku, Rhoades did not actually travel with the objects he transported. His goal was to have a live tuna make a pilgrimage to Mecca; but given the difficulties he encountered, he lowered his sights from a live tuna to a tuna sushi roll; before finally making do with canned tuna.⁹⁰ Both of these projects bring into play the double meaning of the word *expédition*, which can refer to both expedition and shipping.

Sometimes, in contrast to these experiences of wandering, it is the path’s coordinates that are important; its beginning and endpoints. On June 23, 2002, a peculiar procession departed from MoMA in New York City—which was closed for a period of time for renovation—heading for the museum’s temporary address in Queens. The participants held reproductions of works from the museum’s collection out in front of them: works by Picasso, Giacometti, and Duchamp. This work by Francis Alÿs, like the march he had recently organized in the Lima region of Peru, belongs to the genre of the parade, which—as Pierre Huyghe reminds us—“replays the idea of migration.” Huyghe adds that in New York City, most annual parades are organized by immigrant communities as symbolic repetitions of their exodus.⁹¹ A group march

⁸⁹ PRESS RELEASE FOR THE EXHIBITION AT THE GALLERY AIR DE PARIS.

⁹⁰ “THE MECCATUNA (2003) PIECE IN NEW YORK STARTED OUT AS A VERY SIMPLE IDEA TO TAKE A LIVE TUNA ON A PILGRIMAGE TO MECCA. I TRIED TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO DO IT, IF IT WAS POSSIBLE OR NOT, AND IT TURNED OUT IT WAS HARD. TO KEEP THE TUNA ALIVE, YOU HAVE TO KEEP IT SWIMMING. BUT I THOUGHT IT WOULD HAVE BEEN VERY BEAUTIFUL TO TAKE A TUNA TO MECCA. AND THEN IT WENT TO SUSHI TUNA, AND THAT WAS ALSO HARD. THEN IT TURNED INTO CANNED TUNA. THAT’S THE ONE I ACHIEVED FOR THE SHOW IN NEW YORK.” (JASON RHOADES, IN CONVERSATION WITH MICHELE ROBECCHI, *CONTEMPORARY*, NO. 81 [2006]: 42.)

⁹¹ PIERRE HUYGHE, INTERVIEW BY GEORGE BAKER (NOTE 86).

is thus the temporal equivalent of a monument: it constitutes a replay, or rather a reenactment; the taking of a historical moment used by the actors as a kind of free musical score to create a moving image.

The form and iconography of the parade or demonstration, so often used since the early 1990s, refer to an event that the participants seek to celebrate or lay claim to in order to make it a foundation for the present. When Philippe Parreno recruits children to carry signs and chant the slogan "No more Reality," he is demanding that fiction and special effects be allowed to interfere with the protocols by which our shared reality is constituted (*No More Reality II*, 1991). Three years later, in collaboration with Carsten Höller, he uses the form of the demonstration again, this time to demand the liberation of an apparently monstrous "creature" whose identity remains mysterious (*Innocent et emprisonné: "Mais ce que vous avez à me reprocher c'est que j'ai abandonné mon premier amour"* [Innocent and imprisoned: "But what you're accusing me of is that I abandoned my first love"], 1994). Designed to express collective demands, here the demonstration becomes a projection of individual desires, the sign of an atomization of demands and narratives. Beneath the image of the marching crowd, the subtitles are now composed by individual authors. By contrast, during the modernist era, the individual might find himself carried by the message of a group. When this theme is used by Alÿs, Huyghe, Parreno, or Jeremy Deller (who organized a parade of minorities for the opening of Manifesta 2004 in San Sebastián), what counts is the setting in motion of a principle, the activation of an aesthetic. A group starts walking, becoming an image by detaching itself from the crowd and observed by the crowd itself.

What emerges from this proliferation of nomadic and expeditionary projects in contemporary art is an insistence on displacement. Faced with rigid and ossified representations of knowledge, artists activate that knowledge by constructing cognitive mechanisms that generate

gaps and prompt them to distance themselves from established fields and disciplines, setting knowledge in motion. Globalization offers a complex image of the world, fragmented by particularisms and political borders even as it forms a single economic zone. Today's artists travel this expanse and insert the forms they produce into networks or lines; in works that generate knowledge effects today, the space of contemporary life appears as a four-dimensional expanse in which time is one of the coordinates of space. This can be seen in works by artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija, who duplicates and summarily reconstructs the places he has stayed (*Apartment 21 [Tomorrow Can Shut Up and Go Away]*, 2002); it can also be seen in the work of Gregor Schneider, who has expanded his house to accommodate the past and the future, turning it into a permanent construction site. Here too, space is regarded as joining forces with time. This complication and the various figures it generates constitute the basis for this aesthetic of expeditions.

THE JOURNEY-FORM (2): TOPOLOGY

Thus, the journey is not just a fashionable theme but the sign of a deeper development, which affects the representations of the world in which we live and the way we inhabit it, concretely or symbolically. The artist has become the prototype of the contemporary traveler, *homo viator*, whose passage through signs and formats highlights a contemporary experience of mobility, displacement, crossing. The question is thus: what are the modalities and figures of this *viatorization* of art forms?

The journey has become a form in its own right, the bearer of a visual matrix that is gradually replacing the ad-like frontality of Pop Art and the documentary enumeration of Conceptual art, to cite two formats still widely used in the art of today. The emergence of the journey as a compositional principle has its source in a cluster of phenomena that form part of a sociology of our visual environment: globalization, the

transformation of tourism into an everyday phenomenon, and the advent of the computer screen as a feature of daily life, a phenomenon that began in the 1980s but has accelerated since the early 1990s with the explosion of the Internet. With the practice of web surfing and reading by following hypertext links, the web has produced specific practices that affect our modes of thought and representation. It is a mode of visuality distinguished by the simultaneous presence of heterogeneous surfaces, which the user links by charting a course or by random exploration. The type of mental progression brought about by the use of this instrument—amid a profusion of links, of files arranged on the surface of the screen or buried under banners, popups, and interfaces—has introduced a kinetic approach to elaborating objects that may very well become the basis for our era's brand of visual writing: composition by journey.

In more general terms, our globalized universe calls for new modes of notation and representation. Directly or indirectly, our daily lives now unfold against a vaster backdrop and depend on transnational entities. The representation of nonstatic spaces involves the construction of new codes that are capable of capturing the dominant figures of our imaginary universe (the expedition, wandering, and displacement), an operation that consists in doing more than merely adding a vector of speed to frozen landscapes. The cognitive trajectories imagined or experienced by the artists of these early years of the twenty-first century can be reconstructed by hypertextual forms, compositions whose unfolding enables them to make resonate the temporalities, spaces, and heterogeneous materials that constitute the procedures these artists use. In most of the works of Pierre Huyghe, Liam Gillick, Mike Kelley, Francis Alÿs, and Tacita Dean—to cite just a few of the artists who exemplify this development—the form of the work expresses a path, a journey, more than a fixed space or time. Here the finding of forms takes place through the composition of a line of flight, or even a program of translation, more

than the elaboration of a plane or volume: we are leaving the domain of Euclidean geometry and entering that of topology.

What is topology? It is a branch of geometry in which nothing is measured and no quantities are compared. Instead, one establishes the qualitative invariants of a figure, for example, by deforming it, as when one folds a sheet of paper or takes an object of one dimension and plunges it into another to see if the constants survive that change intact. One examines the edges of its surfaces: what is it that constitutes their structure? During the final years of his seminar—from 1972 to 1980—Jacques Lacan decided to reformulate his teaching in terms of topological figures, employing Möbius strips, Borromean knots, tori, and Klein bottles like so many “mathemes” useful to his enterprise of formalizing the unconscious. If the *objet petit a*, the void [*béance*] around which the formations of the unconscious “circle,” constitutes the first term of the chain of desire that forms within each individual (the origin of his or her drive circuit [*circuit pulsionnel*]), the Lacanian unconscious could be schematized as a chain of signifiers (containers, symptoms) beneath which the signifieds glide into place through the intervention of mental objects that function like the “quilting points” used by the upholsterer. With topology, Lacan seeks to elaborate a map of the unconscious.

Although the works of Thomas Hirschhorn, Jason Rhoades, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and John Bock are very different, they nevertheless have one characteristic in common: the spatio-temporal dispersion of their elements. It is clear to the viewer that there is no immediately recognizable form (geometric or organic), no chromatic harmony, no apparent design to organize what seems to be a random collection of disparate elements. One must penetrate the installation and enter into the internal logic that structures the space of the work. Then one perceives the unfurling of a flow, within which one can organize forms according to one's path through the installation. This notion of

the exhibition as a "photogenic space" to be cut up into sequences by the viewer-actor was brilliantly introduced by the project *Ozone* (1989), a series of exhibitions produced by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Bernard Joisten, Pierre Joseph, and Philippe Parreno around the image of the "hole in the ozone layer," which the artists regarded as an iconographic power cell capable of sustaining a collective and ongoing project. This figure of the active visitor then became widely established, but only implicitly—in an installation by Thomas Hirschhorn, visitors literally dig in, dipping into the pile themselves and creating their own assemblages from the fragments spread out in a saturated space.

Minimal art insisted on the phenomenological experience it sought to induce in the viewer. It called the space surrounding it into question, as well as the knowledge that enabled the viewer to identify an artwork. In an exhibition by Jason Rhoades or Thomas Hirschhorn, the viewers' attention is bombarded from every side; they can't possibly take in the whole installation in a single glance. Indeed, it is immediately clear that not everything can be seen. They find themselves in the presence of a chaotic current of signs that exceeds their capacity to master the space around them. They are caught up in a journey-form, swept along a spatio-temporal line that goes beyond the traditional notion of an environment. *24h Foucault* by Thomas Hirschhorn (2004) played with this excess: in this huge installation, which contained an impressive mass of information, one could watch or listen to all of Michel Foucault's appearances on TV and radio—an impressive mass of visual documents; and his complete works were laid out beside an army of copying machines. Finally, hour after hour, from noon on Saturday to noon on Sunday, speaker after speaker took the floor in the lecture hall located in the middle of this setup. The journey-form is above all defined by an excess of information, which forces the viewer to enter into a process and construct his or her own personal path. If the works of Jason Rhoades or Thomas Hirschhorn have met with

such a widespread and immediate response, it is also because their compositional principle plays with this saturation, which our epoch intuitively knows it embodies. Vast displays of heterogeneous elements—sometimes grouped by series, sometimes by affinities, and sometimes, as in Hirschhorn's case, around the proper name of an author—with no perceptible structural organization. Works like these inaugurate a specific regime of the sign. Beyond the Pop and Minimal serialism of the 1960s and the fragmentation of the 1980s, they stage an effect of visual critical mass by chaotically accumulating information and industrially manufactured forms. These signs rub shoulders, coalesce into clouds of data, subdivide in space, and spill out onto the street. All of which makes it abundantly clear that this type of agglomeration no longer has anything to do with Arman's groupings of objects in the 1960s, or with Jean Tinguely's mechanical compositions, which are never far from anthropomorphism. By contrast, the contemporary journey-form combines the forms of the ruin (culture after the modernist narrative) and that of the flea market (the eBay economy) in nonhierarchical and nonspecific spaces (globalized capitalism).

The journey-form encompasses the unity of a path; it takes account of or duplicates a progression. Through a compositional principle based on lines traced in time and space, the work (like the Lacanian unconscious) develops as a chain of linked elements—and no longer within the order of a static geometry that would guarantee its unity. This spontaneous conception of space-time, which we find in the works of the era's most innovative artists, has its sources in a nomadic imaginary universe that envisages forms in motion and in relation to other forms, one in which both geography and history are territories to be traveled. "Mobilis in mobili," moving within the moving element: such was the motto of Jules Verne's Captain Nemo. These journey-forms provide the iconography of global displacement with its anchor. But the emergence of this iconography also reflects the

character of an era in which multiplication has become the dominant mental operation. After the radical subtraction of early modernism, after the analytical divisions of a Conceptual art in search of the artwork's foundations, after a postmodern eclecticism whose central figure was addition, our era finds itself haunted by the multiple. Knowledge and forms are tormented by hybridization, which is supposed to generate beings and objects as products of multiplication. Simply by browsing the Internet in search of information, one gets a glimpse of this imaginary empire of the multiple. Every site explodes into myriad others; the network is a proliferating connection machine. And the art of the 2000s, which has its formal basis in connections and tightly stretched cords, tends less and less to represent space as a three-dimensional expanse: if time is not an attribute of space (Henri Bergson put an end to that notion), it nonetheless enables one to multiply it endlessly. Teeming is one of the dimensions of contemporary space-time: one must clear away, hollow out, eliminate, forge one's own path through a forest of signs.

The components of a journey-form are not necessarily united in a unified space-time. A journey-form may refer to one or more absent elements, which may be physically distant, past, or yet to come. It may be composed of an installation with connections to future events or other places. Conversely, it may bring together in a single space-time the dispersed coordinates of a path. In both cases, the artwork takes the form of an unfolding, an arrangement of sequences that place its objective presence in doubt and cause its "aura" to flicker. The work is transformed into the index of an itinerary. *Park—A Plan for Escape* (2002) by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster fits this description. "It's not even clear where it all starts or stops," the artist comments. "Beyond this tree, after this cloud..."⁹² Tobias Rehberger creates

92 QUOTED IN DANIEL BIRNBAUM, "RUNNING ON EMPTY: THE ART OF DOMINIQUE GONZALEZ-FOERSTER," *ARTFORUM* 42, NO. 3 (NOVEMBER 2003).

sculptures that exploit geographic distance: *Treballant / Trabajando / Arbeitend* (2002) consists of an acrylic lamp exhibited in Barcelona, which goes out when the artist leaves his studio in Frankfurt. And at his exhibitions, Gregor Schneider, whose work is centered on the transformation of his house into a labyrinthine and obsessional construction site, shows items that document a work located elsewhere. In most of his works, Philippe Parreno plays with modulations of space-time. Thus, *The Boy from Mars* (2003) is presented as a disposable DVD that can be viewed only once and that documents an architectural project realized in Thailand, *Battery House*, which derives its energy from the driving force of buffalo and elephants. Then we meet the same project in the form of a glow-in-the-dark poster and as an illuminated sign. Where is the actual place of the work? It is multiple, formed by the articulated collection of its various modes of appearance.

Whenever he travels anywhere in the world, Franz Ackermann constructs a mental map of the place that goes beyond purely cartographic elements to integrate memories and personal notes. These forms and data are later incorporated into large-scale pictorial compositions, which sometimes grow in size to the point where they structure an exhibition. As an inheritor of the psychogeography invented by the Situationists, Ackermann depicts a contemporary experience of space. Inventing a type of painting that strives to become topography, applying GPS to color, he traces journey-forms in an effort to create an atlas of the transformation of urban spaces. His paintings are constructed around a mesh of more or less tightly overlapping colored planes, which are alternately fluid and angular and against which there stand out fragments of figures caught in a network of sinuous lines. In Ackermann's installations, a canvas will be connected to a metallic structure and extended by objects, photographs, drawings. Thus, an exhibition by Franz Ackermann makes one think of a three-dimensional computer screen on which multiple files are open, windows onto heterogeneous data regarding a place.

Contemporary painting seems tormented by this desire to represent the contemporary individual's lived experience of space through the intersection of spatial and temporal networks, figures of meshing, and superimposed planes. It is an ambition that is shared by the cartographer in the era of GPS, which takes satellite images and adds to them the transport routes and communicative flows which constitute the reality of the territory really traveled by the individual. In a human space now completely surveyed and saturated, all geography becomes psychogeography—or even a tool for *geocustomizing* the world.

This intuition informs the painting of artists as different as Michel Majerus (who died in an accident in 2002), Miltos Manetas, Matthew Ritchie, and Julie Mehretu. The subject of Majerus's work is urban space perceived at a certain speed. His enlargements of logos and details of industrial packaging, their surfaces swept by Expressionist brushstrokes, mixed to produce monumental compositions that rival the giant screens of Asian megacities, trace a kind of emotional map of consumerism. Manetas's painting almost seems to be a mechanical effect of the space of the Internet: it blends the landscape of technology with the affective reality of the individual, whose experience seems to be entirely filtered, as much as generated, by the screen. Matthew Ritchie takes as his point of departure an imaginary cosmogony based on a decomposition of the chemical reality of the world and uses an abstract pictorial vocabulary to compose a vast quantum fresco that reenchants science. As for Julie Mehretu, her canvases superimpose various different strata of the representation of the structured space in which we move. The result is the contemporary equivalent of the ambitious topographical projects of the nineteenth century, one of whose principal exponents in the United Kingdom was the young William Turner. The two-dimensional, pictorial journey-form displays the characteristics of a geographic map, its three-dimensional counterpart those of a ribbon or even a Möbius strip. In the former case, the painting produces its space by transposing

pieces of information onto the canvas; in the latter, the visitor moves along a flow that unwinds like a fragmented text.

"Aboriginals, it was true, could not imagine territory as a block of land hemmed in by frontiers: but rather as an interlocking network of 'lines' or 'ways through.' 'All our words for *country*,' he said, 'are the same as words for *line*.'"⁹³ This is how the writer Bruce Chatwin introduces his description of the "walkabouts" of the Australian aborigines, a practice whose adoption by the West might cause a true topographical revolution. The walkabout is a ritual journey in which the aborigines walk in the footsteps of their ancestors and "sing the country" as they travel through it. Each strophe recapitulates the creation of the world, since the ancestors created and named all things by singing. "What the whites used to call the 'Walkabout,'" Chatwin writes, "was, in practice, a kind of bush-telegraph-cum-stock-exchange, spreading messages between peoples who never saw each other, who might be unaware of the other's existence."⁹⁴ It is hard not to see the vision of space revealed in the walkabout as a wonderful metaphor for the contemporary art exhibition and as the prototype of the journey-form. Topography, used so much by contemporary artists, defines a pictorial site that is geared to the viewer's real movements in everyday life. Walking constitutes a text in itself, which the artwork translates into the language of topology.

Although the radicate forms a line, it cannot be reduced to a one-dimensional linearity. If the function of the ego is to unify the various different perceptual and cognitive lines of an individual, we know that the latter—equipped with technologies that profoundly alter his or her experience of space-time—cannot be reduced to the classical definition of the subject, any more than to a linear monographic narrative.

⁹³ BRUCE CHATWIN, *SONGLINES* (NEW YORK: PENGUIN, 1987), 56.

⁹⁴ *IBID.*, 56–57.

Contemporary art shows how lived experience can be reorganized using mechanisms of representation and production that correspond to the emergence of a new subjectivity that demands its own modes of representation. This is the question asked by Doug Aitken: "How can I break through this idea [that time is linear], which is reinforced constantly? How can I make time somehow collapse or expand, so it no longer unfolds in this one narrow form?"⁹⁵ Even though it expresses a path, the journey-form puts linearity in crisis by injecting time into space and space into time.

THE JOURNEY-FORM (3): TEMPORAL BIFURCATIONS

It may be that, in the imaginary representation that an individual of the beginning of the twenty-first century forms of the world, space and time have come to the point of merging and exchanging their properties. We know that time is spontaneously identified with succession, and space with simultaneity. Let us repeat, then, that we now live in times in which nothing disappears anymore but everything accumulates under the effect of a frenetic archiving, times in which fashions have ceased to follow one another and instead coexist as short-lived trends, in which styles are no longer temporal markers but ephemeral displacements that take place indiscriminately in time or space. Hype, or fashion miniaturized. For modernism, the past represented tradition, and it was destined to be supplanted by the new. For postmodernism, historical time took the form of a catalogue or repertoire. Today the past is defined in territorial terms: when one travels, it is often to change epochs. Conversely, to consult a book of art history today is to encounter a geography of contemporary styles and techniques. A science was once founded on the basis of this projection of time onto space: anthropology. To the various regions of the planet there correspond various temporal

95 DOUG AITKEN, "A THOUSAND WORDS: DOUG AITKEN TALKS ABOUT ELECTRIC EARTH," INTERVIEW BY SAUL ANTON, *ARTFORUM* 38, NO. 9 (MAY 2000): 160.

sequences, so that "over there" is spontaneously transformed into "back then."⁹⁶ Isn't it true that what tourists today are primarily seeking is a temporal change of scenery, achieved by means of geographic distance? And doesn't the fascination that the city of Berlin, for example, holds for artists today stem from the fact that two distinct lines of historical development coexist there—that of German popular democracy and that of the Federal Republic? According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, "a journey occurs simultaneously in space, in time and in the social hierarchy."⁹⁷

A Borgesian aesthetic: the work of the Argentine writer contains numerous allusions to the spatialization of time, to its labyrinthine and nonlinear, bifurcating nature. Following Bishop Berkeley, Jorge Luis Borges regards the movement of time as flowing from the future into the past and thus as a ceaseless production of the past. In his short story *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, he imagines a civilization whose inhabitants have developed a novel relationship with metaphysics: "For them, the world is not a concurrence of objects in space, but a heterogeneous series of independent acts. It is serial and temporal, but not spatial."⁹⁸ In this civilization, producing, discovering, and exhuming are one and the same, so that the archaeologists of Tlön can just as easily invent the objects they exhibit as unearth them. Don't we make discoveries in the past as well as the present? It seems that contemporary art resembles the thought of the philosophers of Tlön. In the context of the complex relations that many artists entertain with

96 JOHANNES FABIAN, *TIME AND THE OTHER: HOW ANTHROPOLOGY MAKES ITS OBJECTS* (NEW YORK: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1983), QUOTED IN HAL FOSTER, *THE RETURN OF THE REAL* (CAMBRIDGE, MA: MIT PRESS, 1996), 177.

97 CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS, *TRISTES TROPICIQUES*, TRANS. JOHN AND DOREEN WEIGHTMAN (NEW YORK: PENGUIN, 1992 [1973]), 71.

98 JORGE LUIS BORGES, "TLÓN, UQBAR, ORBIS TERTIUS," IN *FICCIONES*, ED. ANTHONY KERRIGAN (NEW YORK: GROVE PRESS, 1962), 23.

history today—and now that the end of the race for the “new” that structured the narrative of the artistic avant-gardes has been generally acknowledged—a formal discovery, the establishment of a relationship between the past and the present, is just as valorized today as an anticipation of the art of the future; for paradoxically, this kind of exercise also belongs to the past, and the idea of an art of the future to the elaboration of the present.

If time today has been spatialized, then the heavy presence of the journey and of nomadism in contemporary art is linked to our relationship with history: the universe is a territory, the entire dimensions of which can be traveled—the temporal as well as the spatial. Today, contemporary artists enact their relations with the history of art under the sign of travel, by using nomadic forms or adopting vocabularies that come from the interest in “elsewhere.” The past is always present; one need only make up one’s mind to go there. Consider the example of Pierre Huyghe’s plans to lead an expedition to the Arctic in 2002. When we examine the forms it generated—from the preparatory photographs to the performance of the musical comedy *A Journey that Wasn’t* in New York City three years later—we find that the iconographic backdrop of this cycle of works contains numerous historical references, from the Golden Age of Discovery to the circumstances surrounding the invention of the phonograph. The journey-form is a “switching form,” a generator of connections between time and space. And for Pierre Huyghe, it is the combination of the two—the elaboration of exhibition structures articulated by a chain—that makes the object seem to be an event in progress, even as it produces spaces with the aid of temporal materials.

A journey in space or a journey in history? In 1998, Rirkrit Tiravanija organized a month-long expedition in a motor home. He traveled across the United States with five Thai art students who had never set foot there before. Their tour took them across the country from west

to east; it was punctuated by visits to mythical places, sites of American culture like the Grand Canyon, Disneyland, Las Vegas, Graceland (Elvis Presley’s home), the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln, and Kent State University. During the trip, Tiravanija and the other members of his crew maintained a live website and made videos, before sending all the information and images they had collected back to Philadelphia.⁹⁹

Thus, radical artists construct their paths in history as well as geography. Modernist radicality (which sought to return to the origin in order to efface the past of tradition and rebuild it on new foundations) is succeeded by a radical subjectivity, which might be defined as a new modality for representing the world: as a fragmentary space that blends the virtual and the real, in which time represents another dimension of space. This unification, however, is the spitting image of the ultimate objective of global capitalism: translated into economic terms, it is a question of a vast common market, a free-trade zone unsegmented by any border. For time and history, like borders, are producers of distinctions, factors of division, disruptive elements that the logic of globalization tends to weaken by diluting them in the smooth and unobstructed space of free trade. What is the only solution available to artists that does not involve contributing to the project of global cultural “sweetening”? It is that which consists in the activation of space by time and time by space, in the symbolic reconstruction of fault lines, divisions, fences, and paths in the very place where the fluidified space of merchandise is established. In short, in working on alternative maps of the contemporary world and processes of filtration.

Stories are Propaganda (2005), a film by Philippe Parreno and Rirkrit Tiravanija, was born of a trip spent wandering around Guangzhou,

⁹⁹ THE EXHIBITION WAS REALIZED IN THE CONTEXT OF *MUSEUM STUDIES 4* AT THE MUSEUM OF PHILADELPHIA IN APRIL / MAY 1998.

China's most heavily urbanized area. "This is a journey through an infinite urban landscape," the artists explain. "A series of banners setting up fragments of a parallel world, a feeling of suburbia. Information that glows before fading away."¹⁰⁰ Thus, the film is composed of still images—a TV show, an albino rabbit, a snowman made of sand. As in *Fade to Black*, Philippe Parreno's series of phosphorescent posters, the time available for viewing the images is limited, since each one vanishes quickly, blinking off. The soundtrack consists of a child's voice reading a text that describes a bygone age, "the good old days before cappuccino and sushi and arugula went global, when every second person was not a hero, before we had an identity online, before music became our soundtrack." Here again, spatial displacement is coupled with a journey in time. As for the installation itself, it uses the antiquated codes of the neighborhood movie theater (a red velvet curtain that is opened by hand), but those codes are visually contradicted by the fact that the title is written directly on the surface of the curtain, like a graffiti tag. At the end of the film, the curtain is drawn again, and the viewing is over. Industrial products, like natural materials, are privileged vehicles for such journeys into the fourth dimension. Simon Starling, an archaeologist of the relations between nature and the world of modernism, is one of those artists who thematize the traceability of things, who analyze the social and economic components of our environment. Thus, for *Rescued Rhododendrons* (1999), he transported seven rhododendron plants from the north of Scotland to the south of Spain in a Swedish car (a Volvo), thus reconstructing the migration of this plant, which was introduced by a Swedish botanist in 1763, in reverse. For *Flaga, 1972–2000* (2002), Starling drove a Fiat 126—manufactured in 1974—the distance of 1,290 kilometers that separates Turin, the automaker's headquarters,

¹⁰⁰ THESE LINES AND THE FOLLOWING ONES ARE EXCERPTED FROM THE VOICE-OVER SOUNDTRACK THAT ACCOMPANIES THE FILM. THE TEXT IS AVAILABLE ONLINE AT [HTTP://WWW.AIRDEPARIS.COM/PARRENO/STORIES/STORIES.HTM](http://www.airdeparis.com/parreno/stories/stories.htm) (ACCESSED BY THE AUTHOR FOR THE WRITING OF THIS BOOK ON AUGUST 17, 2008).

from the Polish city of Cieszyn, where some of that model's parts were manufactured at the time. Once back in Turin, Starling removed the car's engine, painted its body white and red—the colors of the Polish flag—and hung it on the wall, an object "informed" by the journey that it made. Having balsa wood shipped from Ecuador and using it to build a model of a French airplane in Australia, transporting a Spanish cactus to Frankfurt, Starling models exports and exchanges, mapping modes of production by executing drawings within reality itself. In praise of metamorphosis, of permanent transformation: he takes apart a shed and turns it into a boat, aboard which he then goes sailing on the Rhine (*Shedboatshed [Mobile Architecture No. 2]*, 2005); traveling around a Spanish desert on a moped whose engine leaks water, he uses the latter to produce a watercolor of a cactus (*Tabernas Desert Run*, 2004).

We also find the journey-form, which combines the dimensions of a geographic pathway and a journey in time, in the work of Joachim Koester, for whom "nothing is more instructive than a confusion of time frames." With this in mind, he follows the trail of historical figures and fictional characters and uses the materials he collects on these adventures to elaborate complex works that transcend the anecdotal through the complexity of their forms.¹⁰¹ For *From the Travel of Jonathan Harker* (2003), he retraces the journey of the character imagined by Bram Stoker in *Dracula*; all that he finds in Transylvania by way of traces of the novel and of history is a vague "Hotel Castle Dracula." The ambitious installation *Message from Andrée* (2005) takes as its subject an expedition to the North Pole conducted in 1897 by the Swedish explorer Salomon Andrée and his team, whose hot-air balloon crashed on the ice, condemning the explorers to die of cold and hunger. The photographs taken by one of them, Nils Strindberg, were discovered

¹⁰¹ ALEXANDER KLUGE, *THE DEVIL'S BLIND SPOT*, QUOTED IN HAL FOSTER, "BLIND SPOTS: HAL FOSTER ON THE ART OF JOACHIM KOESTER," *ARTFORUM* 44, NO. 8 (APRIL 2006): 212.

thirty-two years later, and Koester transcoded them to produce a strange film, in which a blinding, monochromatic field of white is traversed by a hail of ghostly black and gray spots, stripes, and rays of light—all that remains of the images captured more than a century earlier. Not far away, an archival image shows the balloon taking off, an evocation of those dreams of exploration that recur throughout the century of Jules Verne and David Livingstone like a refrain, but also a genealogical work on our nostalgia for *terrae incognitae*.

The phenomenon of the expedition has two sides: the discovery of new territories (the colonial model, which goes hand in hand with appropriation) and the archaeological mission, which takes on a special importance today, since it represents a specific relationship to time: it is the present en route toward the past, in search of its history.

In a certain sense, the archaeological expedition seeks time in space, and this is why it represents a working metaphor for numerous contemporary artworks. In his book *The Shape of Time*, published in 1962, the art historian George Kubler defines this new field of investigation with prescient lucidity: "Instead of our occupying an expanding universe of forms, which is the contemporary artist's happy but premature assumption, we would be seen to inhabit a finite world of limited possibilities, still largely unexplored, yet still open to adventure and discovery, like the polar wastes long before their human settlement. Instead of regarding the past as a microscopic annex to a future of astronomical magnitudes, we would have to envisage a future with limited room for changes, and these of types to which the past already yields the key."¹⁰² The artist-explorer is the pioneer of this spatialized relationship to history.

102 GEORGE KUBLER, *THE SHAPE OF TIME: REMARKS ON THE HISTORY OF THINGS* (NEW HAVEN, CT: YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1962), 125–26.

Another twentieth-century writer is a key figure in this area: Winfried G. Sebald. His stories find him wandering through an ambiguous literary space that blends fiction and documentary, poetry and scholarly essay. Sebald's books, containing countless uncaptioned black and white photographs, is difficult not to relate to contemporary art. On long excursions through Europe, from Scotland to the Balkans, Sebald shows how the memory of the people and events of the past haunt our lives and shape the space around us. For him, the experience of traveling represents a privileged form of access to memory: thus, he finds history's traces in buildings, museums, and monuments as well as in hotel rooms and conversations with the individuals he meets. Liam Gillick's novel *Erasmus Is Late* (1996)—which presents Erasmus Darwin, Charles Darwin's libertarian brother, and moves among various prominent figures of Victorian England—constitutes a similar stroll through a London both past and present. Moreover, Gillick's entire oeuvre could be described as an echo chamber in which the aesthetic procedures of the avant-gardes and the history of the work world call to each other across a tightly woven network of forms and texts. In Sebald's books, as in Gillick's exhibitions, remembering can never be reduced to the act of telling: the past is reconstructed through a patient collection of visual and linguistic details.

If the videos of Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba unfold in a subaquatic environment, it is for reasons linked to the very structure of memory. In an effort to build monuments commemorating various historical events—from the Vietnam War to the ecological disaster of Minamata—Hatsushiba constructs complex choreographies executed by divers. In *Happy New Year: Memorial Project Vietnam II* (2003), the underwater settings participate in the allegorical dimension of the work, assimilating the past to an unbreathable and vaguely dreamlike environment in which one immerses oneself. Above all, however, they represent a wilderness into which human beings must import their tools,

signs, and symbols: a void. W. G. Sebald, comparing our present with the rural societies of the past, when the preservation of the slightest object was vital to conserving the past and handing down memory, writes that "we have to keep throwing ballast overboard, forgetting everything that we might otherwise remember: youth, childhood, our origins, our forebears and ancestors."¹⁰³ Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba's underwater spectaculars might be seen as a spontaneous application of this theory: evoking the past means stripping it to an extreme degree of the circumstances surrounding it, and reconstructing it with the help of highly formalized detail drawings, colorful and ephemeral ballets that unfold in a neutral element.

A work by Paul Chan, *My Birds... Trash... The Future* (2004), in which two videos are projected on either side of a single screen, constitutes a true historical epic, recounted with means that are just as banal, borrowed from the lexicon of computer graphics: a rudimentary animated film overlaid with popups and blinking banners in a lively color palette dominated by brown, electric blue, and orange. A flashing and eye-catching aesthetic: that of contemporary information. In it we meet Pier Paolo Pasolini and Goya, Samuel Beckett and the rapper Biggie Smalls, in an apocalyptic environment traversed by religion and suicide commandos, where trash flies in formation and huge, disturbing birds are killed. This work by Paul Chan might be compared to Brian de Palma's film *Redacted*, which three years later evoked the war in Iraq with the aid of soldiers' blogs and images from mobile phones and amateur cameras. In both works, we encounter a loss of faith in the notion of a single medium, as if history and current events could only be transcribed and transmitted by the multiple, by the organized proliferation of visual and narrative instruments. This formal mode reflects our civilization of overproduction, in which the degree of spatial (and imaginary) clutter is such that the

slightest gap in its chain produces a visual effect; but it also points to the experience of *homo viator*, moving through formats and circuits, far from that monoculture of the medium to which certain critics would like to see contemporary art restricted.

TRANSFERS

As a manifestation of this culture of setting in motion (or viatorization), contemporary art identifies translation as a privileged operation. It must be said that modernism neglected the notion of translation, immersed as it was to its post-Babelian project of a (Western) universalism whose Esperanto was abstraction. By contrast, in our increasingly globalized world, all signs must be translated or translatable—if only into the new lingua franca of English—in order to really exist. But beyond this practical imperative, translation is at the center of an important ethical and aesthetic issue: it is a question of fighting for the indeterminacy of the code, of rejecting any source code that would seek to assign a single origin to works and texts. Translation, which collectivizes the meaning of a discourse and sets in motion an object of thought by inserting it into a chain, thus diluting its origin in multiplicity, constitutes a mode of resistance against the generalized imposition of formats and a kind of formal guerilla warfare. The basic principle of guerilla warfare is to keep one's fighting forces in constant motion; that way, they avoid detection and retain their ability to act. In the cultural field, such warfare is defined by the passage of signs through heterogeneous territories, and by the refusal to allow artistic practice to be assigned to a specific, identifiable, and definitive field. Since the end of the previous century, the act of translation has invaded the field of culture: transpositions, changes of dimension, ceaseless passages between different formats and levels of production, a diaspora of signs. Is this a new phenomenon? One might object that even the most insignificant drawing already translates an idea or sensation, that every work of art is the product of a series of transformations, normed displacements toward a form. Sigmund Freud showed how creative energy operates

103 WINFRIED GEORG SEBALD, *CAMPO SANTO*, TRANS. ANTHEA BELL (NEW YORK: RANDOM HOUSE, 2005), 32.

as a transformer of libidinal energy, through the various stages of the process of sublimation. Thus, Jean-François Lyotard is able to define painting as "libido hooked up to color."¹⁰⁴ But what today's artists above all retain from psychoanalysis is a knowledge of connections: how do things link up? What happens when one passes from one system to another, when a sign appears in a variety of assumed forms? Unlike the regime of transformation of energy described by psychoanalysis, translation has its own laws and norms. And even more clearly, it brings distinct and autonomous realities face to face and organizes their displacement.

Thus, one might define contemporary art in terms of a criterion of translatability, that is, according to the nature of the contents it transcodes, the manner in which it viatorizes them and inserts them into a signifying chain. Translation also appears today as the categorical imperative of an ethics of recognition of the other, a task it fulfills much more effectively than merely registering otherness. It may very well constitute the central figure of the modernity of the twenty-first century, a founding myth that would replace the myth of progress, which animated the modernity of the previous century. Andy Warhol encapsulated the mental landscape of the avant-garde artist of the 1960s when he declared that he "wanted to be a machine"—that is, in order to adapt to the standardized universe in which he moved, he sought to transform his human faculties into mechanical functions. No doubt, one could describe the ambition of the twenty-first-century artist as the desire to become a network. The modernity of the twentieth century was based on coupling the human to the industrial machine; ours confronts computing and reticulated lines.

104 JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD, *DES DISPOSITIFS PULSIONNELS* (PARIS: UNION GÉNÉRALE D'ÉDITIONS, 1980 [1973]) [NOT TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH].

TRANSFORMATIONS, TRANSLATIONS, TRANSCODINGS

Since the 1980s, the planet has been dancing to the tune of the universal trend toward digitization. Images, texts, and sounds are passing from an analogue state to a digital one, which allows them to be read by new generations of machines and subjected to novel types of processing. This development is not without repercussions for contemporary art. On the one hand, this is because it affects the sources and materials artists use; on the other, because it ceaselessly creates obsolescence (where does one go to find a VCR to play an old VHS videocassette? and what about those old vinyl records?); but also because digitization is gradually destroying the old disciplinary divisions that held sway in the realm of technical equipment: on a computer today, one can listen to music, watch a movie, read a text, or look at reproductions of artworks. It's the end of the division of labor among household appliances; cultural post-Fordism for the family. A single system of codes—the binary language of computing—now makes it possible to pass from a sound to a graphic representation and to manipulate images in a thousand different ways. Images are now defined by their density, by the quantity of atoms they contain. How many pixels (picture elements)? Such is the new condition of the reading and transmission of images, centered on the capabilities of the computer, which today forms the basis of a new formal grammar developed by a new generation of artists. Artists, however, who do not necessarily utilize digital tools—for such tools are in any case part of the fabric of our manner of conceptualizing, representing, processing, and transmitting information.

Since it first took hold in the 1980s, home computing has gradually spread to all modes of thought and production. At the moment, however, its most innovative artistic applications stem from artists whose practice is quite distant from digital art of any kind—no doubt while waiting for something better to come along. But this is an area in which the computer as object is of very little importance compared

to the new forms it generates, foremost among them the mental operation at the very heart of the digital: transcoding. This passage from one code to another establishes, in contemporary artworks, a novel vision of space-time that undermines the notions of origin and originality: digitization weakens the presence of the source, since every generation of an image is merely one moment in a chain without beginning or end. One can only reencode what was already encoded to begin with, and every act of encoding dissolves the authenticity of the object in the very formula of its duplication. The work of Kelley Walker may be regarded as emblematic of this practice of transferring, of keeping signs in intermediate formats that permit their propagation, like those microbial agents stored at ultra-low temperatures to maintain their virulence. These signs without origins or stable identities represent the base materials of form in the radicate era. Instead of producing an object, the artist works to develop a ribbon of significations, to propagate a wavelength, to modulate the conceptual frequency on which his propositions will be deciphered by an audience. Thus, an idea can pass from solid to supple, from subject matter to concept, from material work to a multiplicity of extensions and declensions. The art of the transfer: one transports data or signs from one point to another, and this act is more expressive of our era than any other. Transformation, transcoding, passage, and normed displacement are the figures of this contemporary transferism.

To cite a few examples, when Pierre Huyghe transcribes his journey to Antarctica, he does so first in the form of an exhibition, then in that of a film, and then in that of an opera on ice. Liam Gillick transforms the story of a protest campaign by workers at a Volvo factory in Sweden into a series of Minimal sculptural sequences—as if an abstract film had been subtitled by striking workers (*A Short Text on the Possibility of Creating an Economy of Equivalence*, 2005). Saâdane Afif uses André Cadere's sculptures from the 1970s as a kind of color-coding system, which he then transforms into guitar chords played by automatons

(*Power Chords*, 2005). He also produced musical equivalents of his own works in the form of poems commissioned from writers, which he then set to music (*Lyrics*, 2005). In a video presented at the Whitney Biennial in 2006, Jordan Wolfson translates Charlie Chaplin's speech in *The Great Dictator* into sign language. Jonathan Monk engages in literal acts of translation when he takes a conceptual work by Robert Barry and translates its English-language content first into one language, then another, then that into a third, and so on until the original meaning is completely lost in a final, incomprehensible English sentence (*Translation Piece*, 2002). In Peter Coffin's work, a sound becomes an integral factor in the growth of a green plant; a thought becomes a winding thread that materializes in neon, evoking certain works by Keith Sonnier; modernist artworks become elements of a shadow theater; and a compilation of pieces of music becomes the tensor that will alter the configuration of a brain. Loris Gréaud records an encephalogram of the moment in which he mentally elaborates one of his exhibitions, thus producing a diagram that will be translated into luminous impacts intended for a series of lamps that will blink on and off at the exhibition. A logic of connections: in these works, every element used is valued for its ability to modify the form of another. One could cite countless examples of these *transformat* practices, all of which attest to the fact that the invention of modes of passage from one regime of expression to another is indeed a major concern for the art of the 2000s.

As we have seen, when the notion of translation is mentioned, that of topology is never far behind. Both of them have as their objective the transit of a form from one system of codes to another. Topology and translation are practices of displacement: what is it in an object that survives, and what is lost, when its properties and coordinates are reconfigured? Defining topology, Pierre Huyghe explains that it "refers to a process of translation. However, when you translate something, you always lose something that was in the original. In a

topological situation, by contrast, you lose nothing; it is a deformation of the same." He goes on to suggest that topology is "the fold of a situation. It's a way to translate an experience without representing it. The experience will be equivalent and still it will be different."¹⁰⁵ Using this processual model, it becomes possible to decipher a number of important contemporary artworks. It is a matter of taking a bundle of information and inventing a new mode of processing for it—in other words, of connecting to a flow of some kind and diverting it in a precise direction, that is, giving it a form.

THE "POST-MEDIUM CONDITION"

This valorization of instability against disciplinary stability, the choice of flows that cover lines and boundaries against the circumscribed territories offered by the various media, and the decision to shift among various formats instead of deferring to the historical and practical authority of a single one—all these shatter the aesthetic canons on which contemporary criticism is based. Seeking to describe this zone of turbulence, Rosalind Krauss speaks of a "post-medium condition." In a brilliant commentary on Marcel Broodthaers—specifically on the collection of works relating to the Belgian artist's fictional *Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles* (1968–72)—Krauss sees in Broodthaers's generic eagle an emblem that "announces not the end of art but the termination of the individual arts as medium-specific."¹⁰⁶ It is fiction, as it happens, that becomes the medium here, and comes to blur the boundaries between art and literature, narrative and form. More precisely, for Broodthaers the Museum becomes a medium in its own right, capable of endowing a heterogeneous collection of elements with a conceptual and aesthetic unity. But wouldn't any fictional framework be capable of replacing the traditional media in this way?

¹⁰⁵ PIERRE HUYGHE, INTERVIEW BY GEORGE BAKER (NOTE 86): 90–92.

¹⁰⁶ ROSALIND KRAUSS, *A VOYAGE ON THE NORTH SEA: ART IN THE AGE OF THE POST-MEDIUM CONDITION* (LONDON: THAMES, 2000), 12.

The *Department of Eagles* is only the harbinger of a long series of works from the 1990s and 2000s that aren't based on any specific disciplinary practice, but, on the contrary, borrow their modes of production and their formats from social reality.

This is the development that Rosalind Krauss denounces: "Twenty-five years later, all over the world, in every biennale and at every art fair, the eagle principle functions as the new academy. Whether it calls itself installation or institutional critique, the international spread of mixed media installation has become ubiquitous."¹⁰⁷ This new "academy," as she terms it, finds its material in that formal heterogeneity which constitutes the dominant experience of our time, an experience embodied by the channel-hopping TV-watcher: "Television and video seem Hydra-headed, existing in endlessly diverse forms, spaces and temporalities for which no single instance seems to provide a formal unity for the whole. This is what Sam Weber has called television's 'constitutive heterogeneity.'"¹⁰⁸ For Krauss, this "intermedia condition" ("in which not only language and image but high and low and any oppositional pairing one can think of freely mix") apparently represents a capitulation, and loss of interest in the medium; a sign of regression.¹⁰⁹ In Broodthaers's work itself, she notes, all the material supports are leveled by a homogenizing principle, the work of reification ("commodification"); thus, what was staged by the fiction of the *Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles* would today be the product of an accommodating attitude toward the entertainment industry.

The view that art must be rooted in some medium (painting, sculpture) is an extension of the Greenbergian theory of progress in art, progress that consists in essentializing art, in purifying the medium to the point

¹⁰⁷ *IBID.*, 20.

¹⁰⁸ *IBID.*, 31.

¹⁰⁹ *IBID.*

where it is reduced to a practice of resistance. Resistance to what? The fear of the disintegration of the various traditional media springs in the final analysis, from a pessimistic conception of culture that is very much present in Greenberg, for whom aesthetics was the arena of a struggle against a grave danger, the fall of art into kitsch. But let's turn the proposition around: what if the contemporary form of kitsch were actually none other than the confinement of artistic propositions within the gilt frames of tradition? And what if true art were defined precisely by its capacity to evade the implicit determinisms of the medium it employs? In other words, today one must struggle, not—as Greenberg did—for the preservation of an avant-garde that is self-sufficient and focused on the specificities of its means, but rather for the indeterminacy of art's source code, its dispersion and dissemination, so that it remains impossible to pin down—in opposition to the hyperformatting that, paradoxically, distinguishes kitsch.

TRANSLATED FORMS

The transfer: a practice of displacement, which highlights as such the passage of signs from one format to another. Speaking of the collective project *Ann Lee*, which involved the participation of a dozen artists, Philippe Parreno insists on the notion of passage: "For me, it's a simple act of exhibition: the passage of a sign from hand to hand. *Ann Lee* was a flag without a cause (the cause was invented as it passed from hand to hand)."¹¹⁰ As it happens, the medium used for this project was neither video nor any other specific discipline, but a character. A fictional character, the rights to which were acquired from a Japanese studio by Parreno and Pierre Huyghe, and which each artist—from Pierre Joseph and Doug Aitken to Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and Richard Phillips—was free to stage and interpret as he or she chose. The project *Ann Lee* thus made use of a system of formal

110 PHILIPPE PARRENO, "ANN LEE: VIE ET MORT D'UN SIGNE. ENTRETIEN AVEC FRÉDÉRIC CHAPON," *FROG* 3 (SPRING / SUMMER 2006).

translations based on a renewal of the idea of the medium, or rather on its original meaning as an "intermediary between the world of the living and that of ghosts." According to Walter Benjamin, a translation above all permits the original to survive, but it also entails its death. From the translation, there is no path leading back to the original text. *Ann Lee*, a manga character, ultimately died a legal death at the end of her artistic use; thus, she only existed in and through her passage from one format to another, through the intervention of artists who brought her to "life."

Sometimes it is history that the artist attempts to bring back to life by seeking modes of translation. In his video *Intervista* (1998), Anri Sala makes use of archival footage of his mother in Albania, where she is seen participating in a Communist Party meeting. Because there was no sound, Sala showed it at a school for deaf children and asked them to transcribe the dialogue. "They understood everything except for the only words that I could understand myself: Marxism / Leninism ... I feel a closeness to all meaningful / meaningless gaps."¹¹¹ What the act of translation produces is above all this remainder, this distance: here, this empty space that opens up between two generations separated by a historical event. Geography can also be translated. There is nothing more pathetic than those artists who merely import the signs of their visual culture and give them a vague face-lift, and thus help to reify them and reify themselves in an act of self-exploitation. There are others, however, who buckle down and viatorize their experience, without indulging in a little cottage industry of signs. Pascale Marthine Tayou may manipulate an iconography that largely comes from Africa—he composts its elements into a trenchant body of work that no longer has anything to do with folklore of any kind. His *Plastic Bags*, a formless mass of monochromatic plastic bags, delineate urban landscapes which are quite a bit more realistic than the tribal

111 ANRI SALA, IN *ART REVIEW* 18 (JANUARY 2008): 30.

motifs we are used to. And it is precisely because Tayou's work responds to the quintessential modernist question—"how can I bring my artistic work into line with the social modes of production that are currently in use?"—that it helps to define altermodernity. Piet Mondrian, Jackson Pollock, and Robert Rauschenberg asked themselves the same question in their day. Tayou's answer is the practice of collecting and the decision to set up his forms in the midst of precariousness.

For his part, Barthélémy Toguo connects his giant watercolors, African motifs, and cardboard boxes to the economic flows linking Africa to multinational corporations. Kim Soo-Ja, a Korean artist, develops a vision inspired by the Tao in exhibitions that combine Minimal art with ancestral motifs, while Surasi Kusolwong constructs formal processes in which products of Thai folk and popular culture find themselves informed and deformed by Minimal and Conceptual art. Navin Rawanchaikul places the aesthetic of the Indian movie poster and Hollywood science fiction in the service of a narrative epic that stages the role of art and its definition in the style of Conceptual art. All these practices have in common a focus on translation: elements belonging to a local visual or philosophical culture are transferred from a traditional universe in which they were strictly codified and fixed to one in which they are set in motion and placed beneath the gaze of a critical reading.