

## SECRECY AND PUBLICITY

### *Reactivating the Avant-Garde*

**T**HE LAST DECADE has seen an increasing use by young artists of strategies and forms derived from neo-avant-gardes—Fluxus, Conceptual or Performance art. This has called forth charges of plagiarism from an older generation of artists, who feel the young brats are getting credit for ‘things we did thirty years ago’, without acknowledging and sometimes—even worse—without *knowing* their predecessors’ work. Are these repetitions, then, the blind, dumb survivals of forms long past their prime? There are indeed young artists making neo-Conceptual or Fluxus-type work that seems an exasperatingly minuscule variation on what has been done before: creating ‘social works of art’ by cooking dinners or spending the night with strangers; taking ‘jobs’ in non-art professions. While many such strategies bear an uncanny resemblance to activities in the sixties that were far more marginal, and far less commercially successful, the fact remains that the repetition of a given practice within a changed historical and cultural context has a different meaning and function. Theory has not found it easy to come to grips with this phenomenon, in part because we still find it difficult to think about history in terms of survivals and repetitions—as what Hal Foster has called a ‘continual process of protension and retention, a complex relay of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts’.<sup>1</sup>

The crucial question is whether (and how) artists actually manage to reactivate avant-garde impulses, or whether they merely recycle some of its forms in a nostalgic mode. In the first instance, they would resemble Benjamin’s Jacobins, seizing on the revolutionary potential of the Roman Republic to realize its now-time.<sup>2</sup> In the second, they would be closer to the postmodern pastiche-artists that Jameson analysed in the

eighties as, precisely, recycling disembodied signs. Whereas Benjamin perceived the liberating potential of breaking through linear history in order to arrive at a 'dialectical image', Jameson concluded that the postmodern era resulted in a consumption of nostalgic motifs completely devoid of true historical consciousness. The active, revolutionary repetition described by Benjamin had been perverted into a passive, consumerist reflex.<sup>3</sup> The distinction between the two positions, however, is not necessarily clear-cut. There may be complex amalgams of both in any historical phenomenon—delusion and denial as the boon companions of insight. Aby Warburg was convinced that the practice of the Renaissance was just such a hybrid—artists deliberately sought to use antique forms, seeing a now-time in them; but they were also taken over by the forms, possessed. Their repetitions were not completely sovereign and intentional; at times they were involuntary, like neurotic symptoms.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, Warburg was firmly on the side of reason, and focused on artists' attempts to master the pagan impulses encoded in the antique *Pathosformeln* that they deployed.

### *Art and life*

With various degrees of explicitness, some of the recent repetitions of avant-garde strategies have highlighted the question of art's role vis-à-vis the—or a—public. While art has been ever more widely publicized, its public role, in a more fundamental sense, has become more doubtful. This problem has, of course, been tackled in various instructive ways at different points in the history of the avant-garde. Contemporary artists often offer repetitions-with-variations on these earlier approaches, thus pointing the way to a renewed historical examination of these 'anticipated futures' and 'reconstructed pasts'. Social theory has also focused on the problematic role of the public sphere and investigated the different forms it can take. Following leads from both art and theory, we enter

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<sup>1</sup> *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the Turn of the Century*, Cambridge, MA 1996, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte' [1940], *Abhandlungen. Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I.2, Frankfurt am Main 1991, p. 701.

<sup>3</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC 1991, pp. 1–54. On the two versions of historical repetition, see also Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (revised edition) New York 2001, pp. 69–110.

<sup>4</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'Image survivante. Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Paris 2002, especially pp. 273–314.

a realm where even apparently blind repetitions may be of significance as mnemonic traces; where even involuntary symptoms may yet contain re-activating elements.

Any reappraisal seems doomed to begin by repeating what Peter Bürger wrote in the *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), even if it goes on to criticize or dismiss it. Bürger's book is the theoretical consummation of the late-sixties' break with a depoliticized conception of the avant-garde. Clement Greenberg had used the term as a synonym for his idea of modernism, to mean 'purified' arts locked up within their own 'area of competence', their own history. In Jacques Rancière's terms, both the Greenbergian and the Bürgerian conception of the avant-garde can be seen as responses to Schiller's contention that art and aesthetic play, as the essence of man, would bear 'the whole edifice of the art of the beautiful and of the still more difficult art of living'.<sup>5</sup> As Rancière has shown, the crucial 'and' within 'art and life' has been variously interpreted. Like others before him, Greenberg went on to link art and life by conceiving of an independent 'life of art', from Manet to Morris Louis. On the other hand, Bürger focused on the way movements such as Dada and Surrealism, whose importance had been minimized by the 'modernist' conception of the avant-garde, had attempted to use art to transform life. Modern art's autonomous and specialist status was treated as a hindrance to be overcome; art should not be limited to its own small sphere, it should revolutionize society. The ultimate aim of Dada, Surrealism and the 'historical avant-garde' in general had been to integrate art into the *Lebenswelt*, into society and everyday life.

The historical avant-garde had failed, but Bürger was comparatively forgiving about this, while being notoriously hard on the postwar neo-avant-gardes who, in his view, merely repeated the forms and strategies devised by their predecessors, reaping huge institutional and commercial success without any real struggle for change. Bürger has been criticized for his blindness to the distinctions within this repetition—not seeing how the neo-avant-garde had tried to adapt to new circumstances. The historical avant-garde, too, had often opted for mockery of capitalist modernity (Dada), or utopian evocations of what cannot be (De Stijl) rather than attempting to integrate art and life.<sup>6</sup> This is certainly true,

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<sup>5</sup> See 'The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes', NLR 14, March–April 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Foster, *Return of the Real*, pp. 15–16.

but what matters is that there was a constant *oscillation* in the avant-garde between irony, utopian visions and the desire to effect real change: the first two could lead to the last, which could itself revert to the ironic or utopian distance when it was frustrated. Malevich's visions found their counterpart in the Constructivist attempts to realize a 'productivist' art; Constant allied his New Babylon, which remained essentially an art project, with the Situationists' revolutionary interventions.

### *Corruptions of the public sphere*

In a noteworthy repetition-and-critique of Bürger, Jürgen Habermas has argued that the attempt to 'reconcile art and life' he described was doomed to failure because it operated from only one of the autonomous spheres of which modern society consists.<sup>7</sup> For Habermas, as for Weber, modern society involved the disintegration of unified 'worldviews' into the separate fields of science, art and morals, or law; each one largely the domain of specialists. The avant-gardes may have tried to leave the art world behind in order to reform life, but they had not succeeded in penetrating any of the other spheres. The basic structure of modern society was left unscathed. Habermas was not particularly sad about this failure of the avant-garde project: in his view, the destruction of the different spheres would mean a regression, a break with the 'project of modernity' that emerged with the Enlightenment.

The Weberian spheres of art, science and law are not, of course, completely isolated from each other, even if their internal discourses are largely autonomous. They also co-exist within the public sphere, whose origins Habermas traced to the 'reasoning citizens' of eighteenth-century Britain.<sup>8</sup> While each of the specialized domains has its own, internal semi-public space—constituted by art journals, or scientific conferences, for instance—they also require a general public sphere to mediate between themselves and the rest of society. It is through this *Öffentlichkeit* that the smaller spheres have effects on the 'outside world'. This was dramatically manifest when art criticism first emerged as an autonomous sphere within public debate, in the eighteenth century: the first critical reviews of the French Salon were illegal pamphlets, for the

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<sup>7</sup> *Die Moderne—ein unvollendetes Projekt*, Leipzig 1992, pp. 32–54.

<sup>8</sup> *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt am Main 1990 [1962], pp. 54–160.

assault on state-sponsored artists was seen as undermining the entire Ancien Régime: when the decadence of its art was decried, so was the rottenness of the state.

The public sphere has been described as a fiction that creates its own reality. When people start addressing each other as its representatives, as these first modern art critics did, the idea of this sphere becomes an invitation to start behaving as if it actually exists—‘The idea of a public is motivating, not simply instrumental.’<sup>9</sup> As modern art grew more specialized, art criticism’s ability to influence other spheres dwindled. But it was still aimed at a public—or at different, often overlapping, publics. At the core of the art world was a semipublic group of professionals, who addressed each other rather than a wider audience. But even the most esoteric forms of modern and contemporary art make an implicit claim to embody something that should—even if it does not—matter to society as a whole.

That claim now has a rather desperate sound. If the public sphere originally proposed by the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie had promised a forum for rational, enlightening debate, the media concentration of the nineteenth century led to an increasingly sensationalist, consumerist public domain: ‘critical publicity is replaced by a manipulative one’. For Habermas, the growing media focus on private life—of ordinary people, as well as celebrities—could be seen as a reprise of a premodern form of ‘representative publicness’, in which the king, as embodiment of the divine and social order, lay beyond criticism. Although their role was subordinate, the lesser nobles incarnated this order as well. Modern public figures, politicians or stars are also representations in this sense, although as embodiments of a shifting media culture rather than an immutable absolutist system. ‘Publicness becomes a court’, a baroque show rather than a sustained rational discourse.<sup>10</sup>

Robert Altman’s 2001 film *Gosford Park* connects and counterposes the declining British aristocracy of the interwar years with the world of cinema—indeed, with the entire culture industry. The film is, on one level, an Agatha Christie-style murder mystery, set during the course of an English country-house weekend in 1932. Altman’s many cameras

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, New York 2002, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, pp. 270, 299.

roam 'upstairs' and 'downstairs', portraying servants who live their passions through the medium of their masters' lives. There are some alien elements at the party: Ivor Novello, matinee idol and star of Hitchcock's *The Lodger*, and his friend, a Jewish-American film producer looking for 'realistic' details for a Charlie Chan mystery with a similar setting. As an entertainer, Novello is an outsider among the aristocratic house-guests, who make their contempt for the cinema abundantly clear. One particularly vicious old hag refers to *The Lodger*—Hitchcock's film had just been remade as a talkie—as *The Codger*.

### *Mass media: a perverted avant-garde?*

The irony is that they are much more similar to Novello than they think. He is simply a new kind of aristocrat, in the media sphere. Like his outdated relatives, only more successfully so, he provides a thrilling spectacle for the lower classes. In one beautifully constructed scene, the enraptured servants stand in the darkened hallway outside the drawing-room, listening to Novello singing inside. Most of the upper-class guests are indifferent to the performance, but to the servants they are all stars—even if Novello is the most glamorous. All provide the servants with spectacle, and gossip about their private lives is traded assiduously. For Bürger, while the avant-garde had failed in its attempt to dissolve art as an autonomous sphere, the culture industry had achieved the perversion of that aim, a *falsche Aufhebung* of artistic autonomy. Its omnipresent products *did* change people's lives, if only by drawing them into different patterns of consumption.<sup>11</sup> The perverted public sphere of the mass media had, in effect, become a dystopian avant-garde that was now successfully tampering with the autonomous spheres. Altman's film is a sympathetic study of the effects of this cultural monster on people's lives.

What was the response of the neo-avant-garde of the sixties and seventies to intimations that an alternative cultural force, in the form of the mass media, was fast perverting its own aims? Andy Warhol, who took these commercial media as a conscious focus for his practice, was often shunned by partisans of avant-garde art. Issues of *Artforum* from the late sixties and early seventies give the impression that the magazine was going out of its way to avoid discussing Warhol's art and everything he

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<sup>11</sup> Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Frankfurt am Main 1974, p. 68.

stood for. *Artforum* was intimately linked to postminimalist, conceptual and related neo-avant-garde tendencies—reactions, in part, against the modernist abstract art of the postwar decades, and seeking ways to break out of the gallery's white cube. Warhol did this too, but by integrating his art into the spectacular economy. His magazine *Interview* started as an underground film journal, became progressively slicker and ended up as the yuppie-lifestyle magazine of the 1980s. Warhol made the step from the avant-garde to its *Doppelgänger*, the culture industry. Openings became society events; cameos in soap operas and the labours of the *paparazzi* put universal recognizability within the artist's reach.

Warholian practice has had perhaps more than its fair share of repetition among contemporary artists: a desire for integration into the worlds of fashion, advertising and pop culture is widespread. But—just as Warhol's work continued to be exhibited in galleries and discussed in art magazines (eventually, even *Artforum*)—in targeting the mass media, contemporary artists have not abandoned the art world. If anything, they are now able to combine their activities across different spheres with greater ease. During much of his career, Warhol's media success threatened to undermine his art-world credibility. Now that that world itself has definitively become part of the media, artists who work as veejays or fashion photographers are as welcome in museums and galleries as they are in the glossy art magazines where they might do fashion spreads. Scarcely anyone now makes a distinction between their work appearing in the 'artist's pages', under the editorial control of the magazine, or in an 'experimental' ad by some fashion designer targeting an art-magazines audience. Such phenomena turn Warhol into a prophet, and have undoubtedly contributed to stimulating a wider critical approach to his work that has shed the traditional art-historical focus on his paintings—which is not to say that this neo-Warholian avant-garde is a particularly encouraging phenomenon. The artists who think they can finally escape art's isolated, autonomous sphere end up as fodder for a perverted avant-garde that they cannot control or even influence to any significant degree.

The other response to populist mass media—and conservative art magazines—was to make one's own. Small-circulation journals and reviews became crucial media for twentieth-century avant-gardes. When these penetrated the public sphere at large, it was as caricatures that mocked the latest form of artistic 'madness'; establishment art journals

were only slightly more interested. Various Dada and Surrealist reviews (from the belligerent, political *La Révolution surréaliste* to the glossy *Minotaure*) tried to create something close to what contemporary theory has dubbed a counter-public: an audience that to some extent has a subordinated social status, and is critical of mainstream media and the prevailing ideology. Nancy Fraser, who introduced the term ‘subaltern counter-publics’, focused on subordinated social groups such as women, coloured people and gays. Michael Warner, while putting special emphasis on queer experience, has argued that participants in a counter-public can be ‘subalterns’ for no other reason than their identification with this group—be it a fundamentalist tendency, a youth-culture tribe or ‘artistic bohemianism’.<sup>12</sup>

Avant-gardes can thus be seen as attempting to establish a counter-public not through some *a priori* social stigma—its participants were often white males with a middle-class background, although there was the occasional Claude Cahun—but on the grounds of a radical dissent from the dominant form of publicness, and the society it represented. Avant-garde reviews differed from both the mass media and the more traditional art and literary publications which, equally marginal, merely existed alongside the culture industry. These were aimed at a specialized public, a target group of art-lovers, whereas the avant-garde saw its productions as counter-media that tried to create, or maintain, an oppositional public. They were thus potentially addressed not to a limited group with some special interest (such as art) but to a much more diverse layer that wanted to develop a critical understanding of society.

### *Bataillean transgressions*

In the late fifties and early sixties, the Situationists could conceive of their publications as means to create a revolutionary counter-public that would effect real change. In the thirties, Georges Bataille had taken a different approach. Although intimately involved with reviews such as *Documents* and *La Critique sociale*—not to mention the Collège de Sociologie which he co-founded in 1937, and which can be seen as a counter-medium of the spoken word—Bataille was simultaneously impatient with such counter-publics, incapable of bringing about the total revolution he felt was needed. Reviewing some volumes of Surrealist poetry for *La*

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<sup>12</sup> *Publics and Counterpublics*, pp. 118–21.

*Critique sociale* in 1933, Bataille was scathing about the gap between Surrealism's ambitions and its concrete results. He reminded his readers that Surrealism had wanted to be 'a mode of existence that exceeded limits'—especially the limits of the literary and art worlds. The aim had been not merely artistic renewal but 'surrealizing' life—and thus creating a social revolution. In practice, as Bataille acidly underscored, it just resulted in collections of poetry, some of it good (Tzara), some of it bad (Breton, obviously), but in any case, not more than verse.<sup>13</sup> Surrealism had failed in its avant-garde attempt to revolutionize life, to be more than merely art or poetry (although Bataille might have been less harsh on some of the Surrealist painters).

Bürger's analysis of the neo-avant-garde itself repeats Bataille's condemnation of its historical predecessor: the diagnosis of failure is the same. Like Habermas, Bataille was well aware that the autonomy of art was only part of a wider phenomenon. In his essay, 'L'Apprenti sorcier', he noted that science, art and politics (to Bataille, now just another sphere) operated in isolation from each other, and that 'existence thus shattered into three pieces has ceased to be existence: it is nothing but art, science or politics'.<sup>14</sup> What distinguishes Bataille from Habermas and Bürger is, of course, his deep aversion to the inheritance of the Enlightenment. Bataille was driven by a Romantic longing for pre-modern times, peopled with integrated, 'virile' beings whose lives revolved around the myths and rituals through which the sacred is made manifest. His Collège de Sociologie, which organized lectures by various speakers in a room behind a bookshop, was dedicated to *la sociologie sacrée*. For Bataille, this study of the sacred was an instrument to bring about its revival. But sociology, as a scientific discipline, was structurally similar to modern art—an autonomous sphere of modern society. There was no reason why a sociological avant-garde should succeed where an artistic one had failed: surely such an undertaking would be just as doomed as Surrealism, from Bataille's point of view?

One can deduce Bataille's response to this conundrum from his activities and writing of the late thirties. In the final analysis, artistic and

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<sup>13</sup> Georges Bataille, 'Breton (André). Le revolver à cheveux blancs. Tzara (Tristan). Où boivent les loups. Éluard (Paul). La vie immédiate' [1933], in *Oeuvres complètes*, I, Paris 1970, pp. 323–25.

<sup>14</sup> 'L'Apprenti sorcier' [1938], in Denis Hollier, ed., *Le Collège de Sociologie (1937–1939)*, Paris 1979, pp. 46–47.

scientific avant-gardes alike were to be no more than stepping stones on the way to the *true* avant-garde: the sacred one. The realm of the sacred had been all but closed off to modern man, whose world was ruled by the imperatives of production and who had no access to the excessive, wasteful consumption that Bataille admired in primitive feasts and sacrifices—the potlatch, for example.<sup>15</sup> A sacred avant-garde would have to be transgressive—not merely to break out of the art world and into ‘life’, but also in order to forge complete human beings and a re-integrated society. This would not be possible, in Bataille’s view, without the creation of new myths and rituals, capable of momentarily suspending man-made institutions and laws.

### *Going underground*

But how could the merely artistic infringements of Surrealism give way once more to the ritualistic transgressions of the sacred? In his theory of religion, expounded in a series of books in the forties and fifties, Bataille examined the interplay between prohibition and transgression: ‘A prohibition is meant to be violated’, he noted in *L’Érotisme*. In his view, the violation of the law was intimately connected to the sacred—transgression opening the way to the world of gods, feasts and sacrifice that lay beyond law, beyond prohibitions. Yet his insistence that ‘transgression exceeds, without destroying, a *profane* world which it complements’, suggests that what is at stake here is a kind of social and psychic equilibrium. Like Bakhtin, Bataille argues that the order of the profane world is guarded by its very opposite, the (temporary, ritualistic) transgression of its rules.<sup>16</sup> An avant-garde that could succeed in re-establishing the sacred as a primary force would be truly revolutionary, in that it would destroy the modern social order. But it would then become deeply conservative—the guardian of a world in which periodic outbursts guarantee equilibrium.

The Collège de Sociologie was just as unlikely as Surrealism to effect this revolutionary transition to a post-capitalist world that would also be a return to the pre-modern era. It could be no more than a preliminary investigation of the possibility of creating a true sacred avant-garde. It is in this light that one must understand the attention given by Bataille and his fellow ‘sociologists’ to secret societies, as tools for radical change.

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<sup>15</sup> See *La Part maudite, précédé de La Notion de dépense* [1933–1949], Paris 1967.

<sup>16</sup> Bataille, *L’Érotisme*, Paris 1957, pp. 72, 76.

Bataille argued that the idea of the secret society was already implicit in the artistic avant-garde, at least since Dada. He made clear that he was not interested in vulgar conspiracies but in covert organizations that could create new myths and rituals, which would later be widely disseminated. In a lecture given before the Collège on March 19, 1938, Bataille proposed the primitive Christian sect as the exemplum of such a cell—one that had, in fact, revolutionized the world. In a fit of realism, he admitted that there were counter-examples, such as Freemasonry—in his view ‘*un monde mort*’, a sect that had never become a church.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, as the German historian Hans Mayer showed in his lecture to the Collège on April 18, 1939, there were more successful models closer to home.

In the domain of rites and symbols, Mayer argued, Hitler had not really created anything new: instead, he had transformed the ideological totems of a wide variety of reactionary sects into political reality.<sup>18</sup> Mayer traced this heritage back to the Romantic era and the German resistance to Napoleon, when secretive political and paramilitary groups had created a cult of Germanic tradition that was fiercely opposed to French rationalism. There is no doubt that Bataille, who prided himself on the title of ‘sorcerer’s apprentice’ that Kojève had applied to him, was at some level impressed by this achievement. He was dissatisfied with the avant-garde’s reliance on counter-media—journals like *La Révolution surréaliste* and *Documents* were severely limited in their effects. His attempted solution to this problem was to go underground—to create a secret world at which the Collège, or *Acéphale*, the Nietzsche-studded review he was editing at this time, merely hinted. Parallel to the Collège, he founded a secret society, also named *Acéphale*, which was to create the new myths and rituals of the future.<sup>19</sup> Taken together, Bataille’s activities surely amount to the most ambitious, most carefully thought-through, most desperate and supremely bizarre undertaking of the historical avant-garde. But by April 1939, when Mayer gave his lecture, time was fast running out. Soon the Collège would be disbanded and

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<sup>17</sup> Roger Callois [lecture in fact given by Bataille], ‘Confréries, ordres, sociétés secrètes, églises’ [1938], in *Le Collège de Sociologie*, pp. 283–86.

<sup>18</sup> Hans Mayer, ‘Les rites des associations politiques dans l’Allemagne romantique’ [1939], *ibid.*, p. 452.

<sup>19</sup> Marc De Kesel, ‘Woord vooraf’, in Marc De Kesel, ed., *De sfinx van de sociologie. Georges Bataille. Een politieke filosofie van het geweld*, Leuven/Amersfoort 1994, pp. 9–13; Francis Marmande, *Georges Bataille politique*, Lyon 1985, pp. 59–69.

Walter Benjamin, its frequent visitor, dead. Bataille's sect would not become a church.

Whereas Warhol allied himself with a power that was, effectively, changing things—the media of a corrupted public sphere—Bataille plunged in the other direction, that of the underground cult. Contrary to what one might expect from today's heavily publicized art world, Bataille's penchant for secrecy returns in some contemporary practices—but combined with *publicity* for these hidden activities. If Spanish–Dutch artist Alicia Framis spends the night with strangers as a dreamkeeper in a silver dress, this 'privatization' of the work of art is then made public in exhibitions, with photographs and articles. The same goes for Suchan Kinoshita, who went on journeys with various individuals to unknown destinations, or for Carsten Höller, who locked himself up in the Atomium in Brussels for twenty-four hours to see what it was like to step outside society for a day—here, following in the footsteps of Belgium's King Boudewijn, who abdicated for twenty-four hours in order to avoid signing an abortion law. Höller's work was more 'secret', in that he did not publish any photographs or video recordings of the event himself, but it was nevertheless quite widely publicized in the art world.

Such activities no longer retain the hope of forming a sect that will lead to major social transformations. Instead, they convey a sense that meaningful communication must be sought in a non-public realm, in small groups. This fact is then made public: the public itself is excluded from the intimate sphere of 'real' contact or experience, and must consume it—the idea of it—at a remove. French curator Nicolas Bourriaud has developed what he calls a 'relational aesthetics' with regard to this sort of work, identifying the crucial establishment of new forms of communication as alternatives to the perverted mass media—for instance, by organizing a party or a dinner.<sup>20</sup> But such activities quickly tend towards the mere *simulation* of a 'more authentic' kind of communication, and fail to create a convincing publicness. Their ephemerality and small scale makes them exclusive and closed.

The Warholian embrace of a corrupted publicness or the Bataillean retreat into secrecy are, fortunately, not the only options. Over the past decade, there has been a growing sense of the need for a public sphere

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<sup>20</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle*, Dijon 1998.

which, if it is based in the art world, also reaches out to a wider layer, beyond a specialized circle. In part, this has involved paying renewed attention to the central role that counter-media have played, with reprints of magazines such as *Documents* and various studies of avant-garde reviews. If there has been an element of radical chic in the art world's re-awakened interest in the Situationist International, it has nonetheless helped to put the status of the art audience, and art's wider responsibility for a critical form of publicness, back on the agenda. Rarely has an avant-garde gone about creating a public for itself with the same thoroughness. The Lettrist International's obscure and freely distributed *Potlatch* aimed—as Debord later stated—to ‘constitute a new movement’; the more accessible *Internationale Situationniste* was published once this had taken shape.<sup>21</sup>

The nineties' art-world reprise of Situationism has come under attack from T. J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith for its focus on the early phase of the group, when artists like Constant and Jorn were involved, and neglect of the later, more political stages.<sup>22</sup> There is much truth in this and the reason, in many cases, is all too apparent: Jorn and Constant provided objects to show and commodities to sell. But things are not always that simple. When an exhibition space like Witte de With in Rotterdam stages a New Babylon exhibition it may be an attempt by a minority within the art world to use this sphere to establish a critical counter-public, rather than a fiendish plot to depoliticize Situationism. From this art-internal perspective, the focus on the Constant and Jorn phase makes sense: at this stage the SI had not yet cut its ties with the art world, so its practices can help curators, critics and artists to gain an understanding of how art media can work as counter-media, rather than as specialized reviews.

### *Blurring the 'and'*

Attempts to ‘fuse art and life’ in a grand way have only gradually yielded place to a focus on the use or uses of media, and on the forms of

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<sup>21</sup> Guy Debord, foreword [1985] to *Potlatch 1954–1957*, Paris 1996, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> T. J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith, ‘Why Art Can't Kill the Situationist International’, *October* 79 (Winter 1997), pp. 15–31; ‘Letters and Responses’ by Peter Wollen and T. J. Clark/Donald Nicholson-Smith, *October* 80 (Spring 1997), pp. 149–151. See also Debord's remark on the ‘Nashist’ manoeuvres of the art world in ‘*Cette mauvaise réputation . . .*’, Paris 1993, p. 35.

publicness that they entail. This development can be traced, for example, in the writings of Allan Kaprow. In a 1971 text, the man who pioneered (and baptized) Environments and Happenings described the avant-garde activity of turning *nonart* into Art: you take a thing, a thought, an act that is not considered to be art, and then declare it to be so, or use it as the basis for an artistic practice. Artists who engaged in this game have ‘at all times . . . informed the art establishment of their activities, to set into motion the uncertainties without which their acts would have no meaning’. Another strategy was *anti-art*, the deliberate sabotage of art’s conventions and values, as in a lot of Dada; but this was even more hopeless than the appropriation of nonart. Kaprow advocated a third option, *un-art* and, writing of the ‘un-artist’, claimed that:

Agencies for the spread of information via the mass media for the instigation of social activities will become the new channels of insight and communication, not substituting for the former classic ‘art experience’ (however many things that may have been) but offering former artists compelling ways of participating in structured processes that can reveal new values, including the value of fun. In this respect, the technological pursuits of today’s nonartists and un-artists will multiply as industry, government, and education provide their resources.<sup>23</sup>

It is easy to dismiss such delusional technocratic optimism, expressed in a hazy bureaucratese (which social activities? what structured processes?) that completely ducks the question of whether industry and government will be determining the new values as they provide the funds. Still, the text is an interesting symptom, depicting Kaprow’s struggle with art’s public role—something he treats as optional. Thus, ‘an un-artist is one who is engaged in changing jobs, in modernizing’. He stops being an artist and aspires ‘to become, for instance, an account executive, an ecologist, a stunt rider, a politician, a beach bum’. We once again see the avant-garde ideal of integrating art and life—not by becoming part of the culture industry (Warhol), or by secret activities that aim to transform the entire social order and create a new world that would have no more autonomous art (Bataille), or by counter-public activities that have the same aim (Situationists), but by adopting different professional identities. ‘When art is only one of several possible functions a situation may have, it loses its privileged status and becomes, so to speak, a lower-case attribute.’ When an un-artist becomes

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<sup>23</sup> Allan Kaprow, ‘The Education of the Un-Artist, Part I’ (1971), *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (ed. Jeff Kelley), Berkeley 1993, pp. 98, 106.

a politician—Kaprow gives an example of one who stood successfully in a local election—his activities will be seen as political by most, and as a form of art by some.<sup>24</sup>

This advocacy of a kind of double-coding has proved prophetic: in the nineties, artists started acting as businessmen, advisers, anthropologists, curators, biologists and more. It is usually far from clear whether this is really changing jobs, or simply masquerade. The ‘job’ is, in any case, usually presented in an art context, such as a magazine or exhibition; that is to say, it is made public, even if in a limited way. The difference between un-artists and those who use nonart and at all times ‘inform the art establishment of their activities’ turns out to be very vague. For Kaprow, ‘changing jobs’ implied the possibility of going out into ‘life’ and doing things that could be presented or seen as art, but didn’t have to be. There was an element of choice. He also thought that artists could be involved in a different and more satisfying publicness, working in the communications media in ways that were not limited by being (perceived as) art.

When this happened, it usually took a more Warholian turn, and simply meant the integration of art with advertising or fashion—see the Benetton ads by Oliviero Toscani, who always presented his work as an avant-garde activity. Joseph Beuys wanted to use his shaman persona to effect changes by exploiting the mass media, as well as the art world; but the former tended to reduce him to the stereotype of the wacky artist. Warhol admired Beuys as a true star, more akin to Marilyn than to other visual artists, and portrayed him in a remarkable series of paintings. If Beuys partially succeeded in transforming the art context through performances, lectures and discussions, making it less exclusively focused on the contemplation of static works, the perverted avant-garde of the mass media frustrated his attempts to place it at the service of a genuinely radical practice.

### *Site and nonsite*

Artists have hence rediscovered the need to present their work—whatever ‘job’ they may have adopted—in art-related media, a situation that Robert Smithson subjected to fruitful analysis in the late sixties. At a

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<sup>24</sup> Kaprow, *Essays*, pp. 104–5.

time when many artists tried to escape from the gallery space by ‘changing jobs’ or realizing earthworks somewhere in the desert, Smithson noted that they were usually forced to come back to the gallery to present their work, in some form or another: ‘It seems that no matter how far out you go, you are always thrown back on your point of origin’.<sup>25</sup> The imperative for this was in part economical: something—photographs, objects, drawings—had to be exhibited and sold in order to make the artists’ work possible. But at least as crucial as selling was *being seen*: the white cube of the gallery was the medium that made the artist’s work visible to an audience.

Of course, print media can have the same function: sixties’ artists discovered the magazine as a medium for their projects. Smithson’s photo essays, published in *Artforum* and other journals, are among his most important works. But since art magazines are, to a large extent, focused on (reviewing) exhibitions, this first medium was still an important way to reach the second. In response to this, Smithson developed ‘the dialectic of site and nonsite’, through which he examined the relation of art space and outside world. His nonsite-works consist of geometric containers filled with earth or stones: ‘The nonsite exists as a kind of deep three-dimensional abstract map that points to a specific site on the surface of the earth’.<sup>26</sup> With his sites–nonsites, Smithson went beyond avant-garde attempts to abolish the art world: for all its imperfections, this provided media that should be put to use rather than disdained.

Although Smithson preferred the materiality of these ‘three-dimensional maps’, they were usually complemented by a real map or by photographs that show the site—for instance, a quarry in New Jersey—from which the material for the nonsite derives. In the case of his earthwork, *Spiral Jetty* (1970), he also used film to present a distant site to the art audience. Over the past decade, photography, film and video have become the main media for incorporating sites into the art context, and the job most often adopted by contemporary artists has been that of (documentary) filmmaker or photographer. Using these media, the exhibition space can also be a place to present images of the world that counter those of the mass-media. At this year’s Documenta 11 in Kassel, it did

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Smithson, ‘Fragments of an Interview with P. A. [Patsy] Norvell’ [1969], *The Collected Writings* (ed. Jack Flam), Berkeley 1996, p. 192.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Cummings, ‘Interview with Robert Smithson for the Archives of American Art / Smithsonian Institution’ [1972], in Smithson, *Collected Writings*, p. 295.

not seem to matter a great deal anymore whether an artist's background was in art, cinema or photography. Pierre Huyghe, Chantal Akerman and David Goldblatt were presented as equals, and what united them was the site–nonsite dialectic. Whereas Smithson's use of this was still somewhat formalist—it sometimes seemed to be an end in itself—contemporary artists deploy it to present, for instance, images of the highly charged border region between the US and Mexico (Akerman), or to reconstruct the beginnings of the counter-medium of hiphop (Huyghe). It is telling, however, that when a work gets 'too political', part of the art audience will still object to an improper use of art.

### *Counter-media corruptions?*

The curator of Documenta 11, Okwui Enwezor, has repeatedly stated that the main question for the mega-exhibition was the development of a public sphere in which art works could be discussed and utilized as a means of understanding the contemporary world.<sup>27</sup> Most of the mass-media coverage, though, and even that of the art media, focused on predictable quasi-topics—Enwezor as the first African curator of the Documenta, or as an intellectual supposedly expelling sensuous pleasure from art, et cetera. Not that all the blame for this rests on one side. The exhibition in Kassel was conceived by Enwezor as the last in a series of five 'platforms'; the first four had consisted of discussions and lectures on various aspects of globalization and postcolonial culture, held in different parts of the world. Some of these took place in closed session, and the published reports of their proceedings were still unavailable when the Kassel exhibition opened its doors.

In contrast to the 1997 Documenta X, at which curator Catherine David had organized a hundred days of lectures and discussions during the course of the show, in Documenta 11 there was a separation between a semi-public critical discourse that took place in rather secluded meetings, with few direct links to art, and the actual art exhibition. The distinction, however, is not absolute: much of the art that was on show did import social and historical sites in such a way as to emphasize art's connexions with wider issues. New Babylon was, indeed, shown almost in its entirety without any attention being paid to the more

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<sup>27</sup> Tim Griffin, 'Documenta Enters Its Third Period' (interview with Okwui Enwezor), *art press* 280 (June 2002), p. 32.

interventionist side of the SI—but at the same time, links were forged between that project and works such as David Goldblatt’s photographic analysis of utterly dystopian urbanism in South Africa, a montage that emphasized both the problematic aspects of New Babylon and its potential to stimulate thought and action.

David’s Documenta X was manifestly a ‘small’ exhibition, blown up to the scale of a blockbuster tourist attraction. In essence, it was very similar to the intellectually rigorous exhibitions David presents for a select audience at smaller venues. The hand of the curator was everywhere to be seen, in the selection of art, the publications and the lecture programme. While David inflated a countermedium-type show on to a massive scale, Enwezor created a hybrid between the almost secretive, counter-public manifestations of the earlier platforms, and the mass-audience art exhibition of Kassel. In their different ways, both curators struggled with the paradox of a counter-medium in the mass-media limelight. It is telling that David, for whatever reason, did not go on to do other blockbusters after Documenta X but preferred to return to working with small spaces like Witte de With in Rotterdam, where she is director. Currently she is focusing on a long-term project of exhibitions, lectures and publications under the title ‘Contemporary Arab Representations’, using art spaces to import sites through writing and speech as well as photos and videos from Beirut and other cities.

While a position like David’s may be seen as a retreat in the face of the perverted avant-garde’s corruption of the public sphere, it is not a defeat—at least, not if curators, artists and critics realize that artistic counter-media are to be distinguished from specialized media of the art world. What is at stake is not a flight into some kind of small-scale Biedermeier snugness, but an act of concentration, of contraction, with the aim of having outward effects. These have a way of being slow and unpredictable in coming, and always run the risk of being a new Freemasonry rather than the equivalent of early Christianity. But the ambition is by no means low.

What emerges from these countless transformations and reiterations of the avant-garde? There is no doubt that the work of many contemporary artists does consist in facile, opportunist and sometimes involuntary repeats, whether they are engaged in neo-Warholian relationships with the corrupted public sphere or in more minimal attempts to create their

own publics, like Framis and Höller. Fortunately, there are also more active and conscious repetitions. A case in point is the work of Bik Van der Pol, a duo comprised of Liesbeth Bik and Jos van der Pol. These two artists have developed a challenging dialogue with the art of the late sixties—in a project devoted to Lee Lozano, for instance, an obscure and almost bizarrely radical conceptual artist, who dropped out from the art world altogether. Another work that deals with this period is the 1997 ‘Proposal for Reclaiming a Space’, a repetition—in Norwich—of the gallery that Konrad Fischer created in Düsseldorf in the sixties by closing off a small passage. The Norwich piece was then turned into an ‘unlimited edition’, a kind of do-it-yourself starter’s kit for creating one’s own art space. Fischer started out as an artist, and Bik Van der Pol admires his reliance on ideas and contacts rather than capital. But over the decades Fischer’s gallery has become an art-world institution, interested in promoting its stable of artists rather than thinking through the problems of relating to a wider sphere.

Bik Van der Pol’s work is an invitation to break through institutional stagnation by creating new exhibition spaces, as well as other media—while the possibility of a future reterritorialization of these is hinted at by the fact that the reclaimed gallery’s further history is known. But to what extent do exhibition spaces—commercial or otherwise—and art publications and discussions actually function as effective counter-media? Websites related to the anti-globalization movement have played a significant part in attempting to stimulate social change over the past few years. There is a partial overlap here with the fringes of the art world, although a large gap still exists between art and activism. But a more reflective approach can also be seen as a positive characteristic of artistic counter-media, especially as the space for this dwindles to zero in the corrupted public sphere. With his/her ‘Bookshop Piece’, Bik Van der Pol has emphasized the role of discourse in the field of art: the work consists of a copy of the London ICA’s bookshop in an exhibition space, which actually functions as a bookshop. Curators like David and Bartomeu Marí, her predecessor at Witte de With, have also stressed the discursive by giving lectures, debates and publications a prominent place in their activities.

Market interests permeate the art world; hype tends to prevail over criticism, and the simulation of theory over its enactment. The incomplete discursiveness of the art media is in part due to the commodification of

the sphere—there are products to be sold and reputations to be made, with quasi-intellectual advertising slogans. But in the more interesting cases, discourse is sabotaged by something other than market forces. Crucial to the realm of art is—in Adornian terms—the non-identity of thought and mimesis, of discourse and its suppressed other. While criticism and theory emphasize the discursive side of art, they are also forced to face their own blind spots and provisional nature. This dialectic, which should invigorate rather than enervate critical reflection, is crucial to the fragile but urgent project of creating and maintaining artistic counter-media. Dismal times call for a reassessment of the means at hand—but also insist upon the high importance of their possible countervailing uses.

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