Evil, Surplus, Power: The Three Media of Art

In avant-garde rhetoric, as appropriated by contemporary art, the ideas of social engagement and artistic achievement have been almost identical: after art's self-sublation, its principal goal has supposedly been social engagement. Yet despite the internalization of the avant-garde's socially oriented legacy, the true episteme and achievement of art since the 1960s has been conceptual surplus rather than social involvement. The negative antisocial character and vicious genealogy inherent to art since early modernist practices fostered various manipulations of this conceptual surplus, which eventually turned into the surplus value—the "metaphysical index"—of art's economics, as Diedrich Diederichsen puts it. Regardless of whether this surplus is a cognitive gimmick, symbolic capital enhancing the cultural impact of an artwork, or a financialized abstraction simply increasing the cost of art, it has functioned as a hidden *power* of art in contemporaneity, and has been effectively disguised by art's stated good will and emancipatory intentions. But what happens to art as an institution of contemporaneity if its codex of self-sublation and the logic of conceptual surplus are demolished by post-secular, post-conceptual cyber-fantasies?

1. Descending into Evil to Gain the Good: Truth Instead of Power

The main difference between Kantian and Hegelian aesthetics is quite evident. The former embeds its goal in disinterested universal pleasure, and hence grounds art in the perception and contemplation of transcendental aesthetic phenomena by a community (*sensus communis*). The Hegelian model insists that the primary goal of art is revealing truth ("a truth procedure," as Badiou puts it [1]). This truth is gained via sensuous means, which only art is able to handle. In this case, art is not simply something sensuous as opposed to being cognitive or philosophical, but it is a specific, sensuously designed tool—the medium for attaining truth. Yet, as we remember from Hegel's aesthetics, when these sensuous means wither away, or art no longer applies them with the aim of obtaining truth, then art itself ends. [2] In his introduction to *Aesthetics*, Hegel defines the classical art of Greek antiquity (and of the Renaissance) as art in which the idea and its sensuous configuration are shaped in accordance with one another. In art from these periods, the idea does not hover over materiality as in Romanticism, or as in modernist art and conceptualism. As Hegel argues, in the art of the classical period spirit appears sensuously and in its body, simply because it is by means of sensuous embodiment that the spiritual can be manifested as "the truly inner self," and not as an abstraction. [3]

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[1] Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford University Press, 2005).

[2] G. W. F. Hegel, "Introduction," in *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford University Press, 1988), 1–91

[3] Hegel, "Introduction."

Indeed, Hegel does not try to preserve art or aesthetics at any cost. This is because his goal is truth. And if art's sensuousness means no longer functioning toward that goal, philosophy can deal better with obtaining truth. Long before Hegel, Plato similarly demonstrated that art is not at all what's at stake, but rather the common good; and if it can be gained via philosophy, or the rule of the polis, then art, poetry, and music don't matter much.

This is to say that the function of art and aesthetics is not autonomous for either Hegel or Plato; art has an applied function and subsists simply in surpassing evil and viciousness in favor of truth and the common good. (In fact, even catharsis was nothing more than one of the first attempts at purification and release from the malicious and evil components of human affects and social vices.)

It is interesting to recall the ancient methods by which the acquisition and conquest of the good and the true were exerted in myths about the origin of art. In the Orpheus myth, or in Parmenides's verse about acquiring wisdom, in order to properly engage in poetry or art, both poets—Orpheus and Parmenides—have to descend into hell, the repository of evil, and jeopardize their lives even at the cost of undergoing a tremendous loss, like Orpheus's loss of Euridice. Contact with the dark forces of evil is mortifying. The task nonetheless is not simply acquiring the experience of evil and then documenting it; it is not simply obtaining some knowledge about death and the uncanny in exchange for a risky journey. It also implies that after the descent one has to ascend and reveal the knowledge gained on that risky quest by means of *composing* a "weird" product—*a work of art*. In other words, this weird product (a work of art)—a piece of gained truth produced *as the result of passing through evil*—could not have been realized in the form of a straightforward statement in a bargain with the gods. Truth and the good can only be acquired by means of a new body in the form of a strange product in which the producer has to generate a disguised, oblique, and fictitious mode of accessing the truthful.

Hence the paradoxical dialectics: art was needed as a force of purification from evil and grief, but it could only be produced by some insane creature like the artist, or the poet, who would risk descending into the depths of evil, who would experience and study it and then de-alienate its uncanniness by means of a sensuous transformation of that horror (grief), in order to extract light from the dark, to transform dense inhuman incomprehensibility into human clarity—into the truthful, into beauty (when beauty implies ethics rather than aesthetics).

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno repeats that behind any image or phenomenon in art stands the uncanny. Let's remember Nietzsche's statement that "we possess *art* lest we *perish of the truth,*"[4] which in fact is a paraphrase of the following: *art brings the true fictitiously, since the direct transmission of the true could kill*. This is because acquisition of the true passes inevitably through evil.

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[4] The full quotation reads as follows: "For a philosopher to say, 'the good and the beautiful are one' is infamy; if he goes on to add, 'also the true,' one ought to thrash him. Truth is ugly. We possess *art* lest we *perish of the truth*." Friedrich Nietzsche, Book 3, §822, in *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale (Vintage, 1968), 435. Emphasis in original.

We see a similar act of descending into the dark depths of evil and then uplifting it to the good in Dante's descent into the Inferno. What happens to Oedipus before he is blinded and becomes a poet demonstrates a similar topology: only after the ultimate confrontation with horror is Oedipus able to face the true and transmit it by means of poetry—by becoming blinded by uncanny evil, but having acquired the true at this cost. Christ, too, first descends to earth and suffers in order to subsequently protect humanity from evil. According to Hegel, in his descent and ascent Christ epitomizes the dialectical topology reminiscent of the artist's passage to the realms of evil with the aim of transcribing it into the good.[5]

Such a topology is in fact a description of the dialectics of the idea, of the spirit. As Hegel argues, it is true that sensuousness is acquired through a descent of the spirit and of the idea into reality and it is then a contradiction to the idea; but the descent of the spiritual and the conceptual into sensuous objecthood is the inevitable cycle an idea follows (Mikhail Lifshitz).[6] The *highest* has to inevitably descend to the *lowest*, and the *lowest* is able to evolve into the highest—into the ideal, the true. This process is formed as one dialectical body. For Hegel, such "masochistic" dialectics represents the aesthetics of classical art, where the convergence of the conceptual and the material—the *incarnation* of the conceptual—takes place. Hegel mentions Christ as an example of spirit's *concrete* incarnation. In Christ, the abstract (spirit, logos) and the concrete (body, matter) converge. Yet this convergence takes place not as a mechanical combination, but as a result of the voluntary sacrifice of God (of the highest) by means of a fatal descent to the most painful, malign, and vicious—to the lowest.

What is crucial here, along with the argument about art as a medium against evil that is dedicated to the true, is of course the aspect of *power* and its economy. Traditionally, in the critique of ideology, the quest for truth is identified with power and ideology. Yet the topology of truth that we have just discussed—its genesis and gnoseological trajectory—conversely opts *against* power. In art, only one of the two—truth or power—can be chosen. Why is this so? Because power delimits the potentialities of *sensuousness* (*Sinnlichkeit*)—which in fact forms the syndrome of the artist's voluntary, "masochist" vulnerability. Power forecloses the motives that would enable our protagonist—the artist—to dare to confront evil for the sake of truth.

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[5] Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, 73–77.

[6] Mikhail Lifshitz, "Estetika Gegelja I Sovremennost" (Aesthetics of Hegel and contemporaneity), in *O Gegele* (On Hegel) (Moscow: Grundrisse, 2012), 153–85; 172.

Francis Alÿs, *Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing,* 1997. 9:54 min. Mexico City.

2. Choosing Power Instead of the Impossible Truth

A very important Copernican turn takes place in modernism's treatment of evil and the true. What is important for modernism is the stoic acceptance of evil rather than the "masochist" surpassing of it: it is important to dare to fall, to become sinister, or even to sarcastically intensify maliciousness, skeptically defying truth as an impossibility. This turn was crucial starting with Nietzsche and Baudelaire and was reversed only in the expanded sociality of the Soviet avant-garde. We should therefore keep in mind that all artistic programs taking place since then are embedded in this negativist genesis of art production. Modernism's maliciousness is not about a conscious and programmatic choice for evil, but departs from a certain onto-gnoseological facticity in which evil is the status quo and the struggle against it no longer presupposes any procedures of "masochist" self-resignation. (The Western avant-garde in capitalist conditions, as opposed to the Soviet one, does not find the way out of this predetermination for evil). Therefore sensuousness, which Hegel considers the principal means by which to pursue the truth in art, is not simply an aesthetic method; sensuousness is the technique for the *voluntary choice of self-resignation* for the sake of reaching the true and the common good.

Yet if the very idea of gaining truth and saving others from evil is discredited as a forgery, as a conceited pretension, then sensuousness as the tool that can achieve truth is redundant.

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Genuine truth, then, is the impossibility of truth, hence sensuousness as the aesthetic medium through which evil is confronted must be dismissed and profaned. When truth has to be dismissed from art, then power inevitably becomes the principal ethical medium within it.

Adorno theorized this Copernican shift as the tragic condition of art. He showed that discarding aesthetics as the regime of sensuousness was the stoic choice of the courageous who had to inevitably stand up to evil. For Adorno, any attempt to use sensuousness to talk about "the true" and claim any utopias against evil would be ridiculous after the Holocaust. This was why the stake of negative counter-aesthetics was in the ultimate nullification of artistic sensuousness, in reaching art's zero degree. This was not because such a condition was desired, but because it was inevitable under the conditions of the alienated capitalist economy and society. So, what remains after the impossibility of sensuousness in art is art's end, i.e., the apophatic articulation of the ineffable, the incarnation of emptiness and of the absence of truth, which is superseded by the reification of this emptiness.

Of course, Adorno is quite far from the paradoxical conceptual tautologies of contemporary art; yet it is with Adorno that modernism's negativity was first envisaged as an obligation for a work of art to be a total alterity to culture and sociality, in order to further alienate an already alienated society. Consequently, it is with Adorno that we can first mark the moment when abstraction and the zero degree of composition become not merely a method or a demonstration of a medium in an artwork, but in this self-destructive move, art gradually turns into a gnoseological institution of art's nullification and sublation until ultimately, in conceptualism, art articulates the goal of such negative genealogy in establishing the bureaucratic systematics of its own nullification. What is crucial in such an ethical strategy is that art self-sublates and starts functioning merely as the administrative machine that operates not via "the truth," "the good," or "the sensuousness," but via the bureaucratic legitimization of its acts of conceptualization.

In his well-known text from 1990, "From Aesthetics of Administration to Institutional Critique," Benjamin Buchloh confirms that in a conceptual artwork, a ready-made, along with superseding the image with a linguistic proposition, theoretical speculation, or speech act, the principal tool of institutional validation is legal power, a tacit juridical contract, an administrative act that augments the value of the semantic trick which is at work in a conceptual piece.[7] Buchloh cites passages from programmatic artistic manifestos on negativity and annihilation by such artists as John Cage (whose motto was "no subject, no image, no taste, no object, no beauty, no talent, no technique [no why], no idea, no intention, no art, no feeling"); Ad Reinhardt (who calls, in his "Art as Art" manifesto, for "no lines or imaginings, no shapes or composings or representings, no visions or sensations or impulses … no pleasures or pains, no accidents or ready-mades, no things, no ideas, no relations, no attributes, no qualities—nothing that is not of

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[7] Benjamin Buchloh, "From Aesthetics of Administration to Institutional Critique," *October*, no. 55 (Winter 1990): 105–43.

essence"); and Joseph Kosuth (who claims that "the absence of reality in art is exactly art's reality").[8]

From Duchamp to Warhol, the speculative gimmick added to the ready-made object was always openly claimed as part and parcel of the tacit Dadaist codex; it implied the sober acceptance of "evil," since such an act allowed art to openly expose the inflated significance of the bureaucratized metaphysical surplus—the act of instituting authority and its potential capitalization. In this case, the act of power and its vicious acquisition is honestly and arrogantly revealed and even subject to sarcastic irony.

George Kiesewalter, Portrait of Andrey Monastyrski and Vladimir Sorokin, 1983. Moscow, Garage Archive Collection.

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[8] Buchloh, "From Aesthetics of Administration to Institutional Critique," 112, 113, 128.

3. The Bureaucracy of the Conceptualized Surplus

There's an anecdote that provides an eloquent example of such bureaucratically instituted art power. While living in the Russian North, the Russian actionist artist Anatoly Osmolovsky was sailing with other artists along a riverbank when one of his friends suggested they get out and have a picnic at a meadow they were sailing by. Osmolovsky fiercely objected to stopping because, as he argued, it was not the proper meadow to stop at. When his friend asked why, he answered: "Because this meadow is not fashionable" (*Potomu chto eto ne modnaya poljanka*). The artists sailed on until they encountered a meadow slightly further away; although the new meadow was completely identical to the previous one, Osmolovsky agreed that the new meadow was fashionable enough for a picnic.

This story demonstrates the conceptualist logic of the ready-made. Nominally similar and identical objects are conceptually different. One meadow is simply a piece of beautiful nature, while another is not a piece of nature anymore; it acquires a cognitive surplus that cannot be sensuously traced or confirmed, nor can it be comprehended in a conventional way. When the second meadow is labeled as fashionable, we are dealing with a tautology, a surplus conceptual abstraction that hovers above the materiality.

On the one hand, this presents a classic case of what I once defined as a "simple machine of conceptualism."[9] We have two elements (two meadows) that construct a machine of

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[9] Keti Chukhrov, "Prostie Mashini Conzeptualizma" (Simple machines of conceptualism), *Moscow Art Magazine*, no. 69 (2008): 9–16.

reciprocal indexical relation, a nonsensical reference between two meadows that becomes a cognitive trick. As Rosalind Krauss emphasizes, what is important in the indexicality of a conceptual work is this disjunctive gap between the two elements, despite the act of their correlation.[10] Meanwhile, in our anecdote about two tautological meadows, there is one more component beyond the nonsensical semiological trick that institutes the surplus impact of "the fashionable" meadow. This supplementary component is added to the indexical semiological junction between the two meadows to bureaucratically assert one of the meadows as "fashionable." This assertion of a nonexistent quality as a symbolic surplus exceeds a simply conceptual paradox between two objects (meadows). It surmounts the mere representation of the conceptual "trick" to become *the bureaucratic act of instituting*, with all its legalistic force. We can witness such an act (codex) of instituting the nonsensical as early as Malevich's *Black Square*, Duchamp's *Fountain*, Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*, or Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans*. Thus, what is endorsed in the act of conceptualization and what acquires *surplus validity* is not merely an indexical tautology—a paradox of semiological difference between two similar meadows, the real meadow and the fashionable "art meadow." Even more important than the act (or gimmick) of conceptualizing the semantic gap is the act of forcefully establishing the legitimacy of this quasi-theoretical game, which must ultimately acquire historical, institutional, and artistic validity.

This administrative gesture asserts the absence of the meadow's fashionable condition as if it were its existent status; in this case something absent is instituted as if it were present. Meanwhile, what is physically present—i.e., that very natural meadow—is treated as absent and is subsumed by the supremacy of another meadow that acquires a conceptual surplus. This Dadaist, nihilist gesture is the principal episteme of contemporary art and its cynical genesis departing from the inevitability of evil and the necessary application of power. Such a gesture is art's heuristic and gnoseological achievement too.

Among the most notorious cases that reveal the juridical and administrative power of an artwork is Andrea Fraser's *Untitled* (2003). In this work, Fraser meets a collector to pass him her artwork, which in accordance with the juridical contract between them is nothing but her sexual intercourse with that very collector, videotaped and subsequently exhibited as the document validating the collector's purchase of that piece. In this case the empty contents, the ready-made of sexual intercourse, is not merely displayed as an exhibit in order to bureaucratically confirm the artness of no art; a proper juridical contract officially endorses this act of intercourse as being art, and helps to symbolically validate (and monetize) the absence of the artistic validity of the sexual intercourse. (Interestingly, the juridical validity of the contract is precisely what simultaneously mocks its own validity and functions as an "artistic" object.)

Now, if the same "paradox of the two meadows" appeared in a philosophical or a theoretical context, it would never generate such symbolic surplus; neither would it get monetized to the extent of becoming a precious object with added value. In theory, the immateriality of a concept or an abstract idea could never be traded as a materially evaluated and monetized object. Only when the quasi-philosophic conceptualist paradox

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[10] Rosalind E. Krauss, "Towards Post-Modernism: Notes on Index," chap. 2 in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (MIT Press, 1985).

is instituted as an artwork can it function as a precious material object with boosted surplus value. It does not matter whether this surplus can be nominally monetized or not, as it is first and foremost a fact of symbolic valorization. Moreover, such an artwork's impact is not valid merely as a paradoxical pun—quoted, transmitted, researched—which would be the case if it were merely a theoretical research text. In a conceptual artwork, any immaterial, cognitive game or paradox undergoes the reification of the symbolic surplus, which is then instituted as valorized objecthood despite its immateriality and absence. This is why Diedrich Diederichsen calls this kind of surplus in art a "metaphysical index"; as he argues, in contemporary art value is constructed by mere spirit, by metaphysical speculation, which exceeds the use value of an item even more than is the case with luxury commodities.[11]

We would add that if in a commodity or in non-contemporary art, surplus value is a combination of living labor, unique aura, artifice, and recognition of an artwork as a piece of cultural heritage—in other words, if it implies certain morphological components for validation, and surplus value is therefore added to a *certain substance*—in the case of conceptual art, surplus value is added to *almost nothing*. Conceptual art's use value has to be almost *zero*. (For instance, Cage's *4′ 33″*.) Unlike the hidden surplus in a regular commodity, in conceptual art such metaphysical surplus value is maliciously exposed and ironically and bureaucratically asserted as an achievement of artistic activity and authority. This is why the artist himself has to be an institution, and a *malign*, *omnipotent* bureaucrat.

Therefore, Steven Wright's initiative in *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* to restore the ready-made's and contemporary art's use value and thus deprive art of its "expert-based" bureaucratic surplus component seems quite puzzling.[12] The question is not about devalorizing art's valorized topology, thus depriving it of "false" competences. Wright's attempt to extract the art object from the hyper-institution that endows it with symbolic value and insert it back into life, sharing a valorized conceptual art object with users, does not end up democratizing art. Rather, Duchamp's pissoir, for example, if it again acquired 1:1 use value and returned to the realm of consumption (the profane space of the everyday), would simply cease to be a Dadaist artwork based on a nonsensical logical proposition. In that case, nobody would even notice the return of the artistic ready-made to the realm of daily life, as the only thing one needs a pissoir for is to piss in it. Why would anyone need a ready-made *as an artwork* to be reinserted into everyday life? The *artness* of a ready-made art object—if it returned to a "profane" everyday reality—could only be sustained if such a return to the everyday were posited and documented as a conceptualized profanation of the formerly valorized conceptual object. In that case, its relocation away from the museum back into mundane reality would have to become a further and stronger act of conceptualization. This is not to deny in any way the use value of an artwork as such; but it is to say that the works that did their best to mock and undermine their use value cannot retrieve what never formed them. An artwork that is determined by use value is one that claims use value consciously, voluntarily, and within

[11] Diedrich Diederichsen, *On Surplus Value in Art* (Sternberg Press, 2008).

[12] Stephen Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* (Van Abbemuseum, 2013).

its poetics and formation. A conceptual work of art denies the use value of the objects that it engages.

Comedian Apparel line based on Maurizio Cattelan's eponymous work *Comedian,* 2019. On sale at Perrotin's store. See →.

4. Three Post-conceptual Essentialisms of Contemporary Art: Techno-Cybernetic (Post-human), De-colonial, Pop-Performative

Among the artistic edifices that most drastically bid farewell to the conceptualist codex was socially engaged art, the impact of which nowadays—with the rise of conservative movements and the election of right-wing authoritarian governments—can be considered a failure.

I cannot dwell here at length on the aberrations within socially engaged art, but will mention its primary controversy: its strange mutation and unconscious hypocrisy. On the level of the rhetoric of resistance and critical discourse, it claimed expanded public engagement and affirmative democratic sociality. But when it came to the rules of validation of artistic achievement and regimes of recognition, the counter-aesthetic aspects of socially engaged art were evaluated *not* by their sociopolitical merits, but by the extent of art's self-sublatedness in these works of art—the tacit bureaucratic conceptualist codex which does not need any public to valorize and legitimize the institutional power and artistic merits of an artwork. The 2012 Berlin Biennial, curated by Artur Żmijewski, along with his art in general, provide a good example of how to preserve the nihilist logic within the external form of a socially engaged, affirmative art practice. In his work one witnesses the narratives and stylistics of political critique, which pretend to be the contents but turn out to be merely the work's formal package. Social engagement here functions as the annihilator of aesthetics, bringing an exhibition closer to the zero degree of art. Thus the only role of the social artwork's contents is in the annihilation of art's aesthetic remainders, quite like in a conceptualist artwork. This is why numerous institutional initiatives since the 2000s[13] that intended to create alternative,

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[13] For example, see issue 21 of *On Curating* (January 2014), dedicated to New Institutionalism

emancipation-based alliances to support the commons within artistic and civic social spheres, or to expand public programs aiming to democratize art, led to almost no social results. Quite similarly to conceptualist practice, their episteme remained self-referential because of an inability to exceed the frame of art as a hyper-institution. To repeat, these initiatives and practices were socially engaged only formally: they valorized their anti-aesthetic merits not as political achievements, but as the coefficient of art's self-sublatedness, which art's bureaucratic power eventually validated, uplifting nonart *to the degree of* art.

Meanwhile, after social engagement, the post-conceptual exodus from art's nihilist path has continued in more recent practices, which are sometimes labeled as "new materialist," "research-based," or "meta-modernist" (Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van der Akker).[14] In such practices, one can trace an exhaustion with art's negativist rigidity and conceptualization of the void, yet art's applied social role does not seem to be a matter of interest.

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After the financial crisis of 2008, the failed Occupy movements, the new flows of financial capitalism, and the collapse of socially engaged practices, it seemed that art would return to its conceptualist path, shifting to the expanded social and political-economic spheres and rechanneling defeated social activism into a neo-conceptualist questioning of alternative businesses and economic strategies. For example, it would turn concrete segments of social and economic practice into artistic ready-mades offering alternative economic paradigms. In this case both the conceptual genesis and social formatting of contemporary art would find its continuation.

e-flux *as an art platform* (including education and circulation strategies), and the Time/Bank activities initiated by Julieta Aranda and Anton Vidokle,[15] which functioned as the ready-mades of an alternative business economy, embodied such projects to a certain extent. If this tendency had developed further, it would have meant a continuation of art's ironic path in its social conceptualization of various modes of the capitalist economy. Yet the hegemony of tendencies in art were channeled elsewhere. After the collapse of conceptualist poetics, and the further collapse of socially engaged quasi-avant-garde projects, the terrain of art has played host to three main theoretic fashions that fit its post-conceptual paradigm. These three essentialist tendencies are: (1) a techno-cybernetic (post-human) tendency; (2) a de-colonial tendency; and (3) a pop-performative tendency.

Before I dwell on these three essentialisms dominating the post-conceptual terrain of art, I want to reiterate the following: modernist, avant-garde, and conceptualist poetics

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[14] Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van der Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 2, no. 1 (2010)

[15] "Time/Bank: A Conversation with Anton Vidokle and Julieta Aranda," *Manifesta Journal*, no. 14 (2012).

presupposed, as an indispensable trait, the "castration" of pleasure and enjoyment—which is so abundant in mass culture. They implied a prohibition of any forms of emphatic engagement with an artwork and its sensuous evolution, characteristic of premodernist art, to say nothing of any affective immersion in ritualistic spiritualities. Hence the primacy of theory and speculative logic—the condition that established contemporary art as an institution that has no need of any audience or its feedback for evaluation and historization. By this logic, classical sensuous empathy is forbidden, pleasure and entertainment is castrated, and ritualistic sublimity is annulled. Meanwhile, in the abovementioned three paradigms we can trace drastically different onto-gnoseologies and epistemes.

In techno-cybernetic, de-colonial, and pop-performative paradigms we witness a demand to change the rules of historicizing within the art institution, an effort to cancel art's self-referentiality and self-sufficiency and open up paths for pleasure, erotization, mystical divination, sincerity, and sensuality. Such poetics fail to understand that modernism and conceptualist poetics—even in their announcement of the end of art, even in their nihilist defiance of enlightenment—preserved an umbilical cord to art by means of instituting themselves as art's self-reflection. The three abovementioned post-conceptual essentialist paradigms surpass this drama. Consequently, they deal not even with the defiance of enlightenment, or the sublation of art, i.e., with the awareness of their loss, but with the loss of the understanding of what was lost. As a result, the end of art, which was hitherto so essential to constructing contemporary art's negativist territory, is no longer at stake—but rather the end of art's end.

This is why, with the invasion of these three post-conceptual paradigms into art, the art institution is in danger of decomposition, as a result of merging with mass media, pop culture, and show businesses. Certainly, the processes that triggered the emergence of these paradigms are not confined to the realm of contemporary art. They encompass drastic onto-gnoseological changes in the humanities, sciences, philosophy, and politics, which amount to a shift from the politics of secularity to one of explicit de-secularization, and to a drastic turn from the symbolic and ideated dimensions of culture and thought towards literal and nominalistic materialities, which is so evident in the philosophy of new materialism, in new media theory, and in the digital sciences.

5. From Human Neoteny (Fragile Deficiency) to Techno-Pagan Omnipotence
To repeat, the principal paradigmatic civilizational shift that automatically gave rise to the abovementioned three post-conceptual essentialisms in art is the global de-secularization and re-spiritualization of theory. The algorithmic vocabularies and sensorics of the machine, instead of serving as expanded technical tools of cognition, became new mystifying myths about machinic and cybernetic autonomies that often bring us back to magic and the mechanics of sorcery. For example, a recent exhibition about the history of artificial intelligence at the Barbican Center began its narrative about the origin of cybernetics with alchemy and pagan pantheist belief in animism and the spiritual

nature of objects.[16] The history of Japanese robotics was traced to Shintoism, according to which all inanimate natural and nonorganic forms—even tools and technologies—are inhabited by divine spirits (called *kami*) that surpass human intelligence.

Similarly, de-colonial theory often reminds us that the abolition of religion, the erasure of pagan rituals, the supersession of astrology by astronomy, and the dismissal of other modes of spiritism are in fact the result of Western secular culture's hegemonic domination over indigenous regions. Today it is easy to imagine religious rituals of all sorts being presented as art performances, or as emancipating agencies—something that would have been impossible a decade ago.

Secularity is, in fact, quite a recent phenomenon. Even the Renaissance that followed the clerical Middle Ages was not yet fully secular, given its pagan mysticism and fusions of poetry and sorcery, alchemy and science, theology and philosophy. In fact, secularity was attained speculatively, logically, and ethically no earlier than in Descartes's *cogito*. The most interesting paradox in the present de-secularization, with its focus on techno-mysticism, is its choice of certain notions and practices of emancipation that explicitly presuppose de-socialization and de-humanization. For example, one very popular term nowadays in social and urban studies is "navigation." This term comes from digital studies, as well as from research into the environmental aspects of ecology and biology. Another widespread term, automatically considered emancipatory, is Donna Haraway's "interspecies." It epitomizes radical equality and the intersection of all species, against the hegemonic anthropocentrism of human sociality. Both of these terms are useful tools in their respective fields. But they are applied far too often to dispute the concepts that formerly shaped a universalist view of the world, such as "*Weltanchauung*," "history," and "human society."

One of the central premises of anthropology and phylogenetics is the theory of human "neoteny." Paolo Virno dedicates a whole chapter to this notion in his *Multitude between Innovation and Negation*.[17] "Neoteny" here refers to the human species' insufficient protective capacities to survive in its natural environment. As Virno points out, a human being, unlike an animal, is born into neoteny, which motivates it to produce a *second* nature—culture, language, thought, a social horizon, a world—as a consequence and extension of the initial deficiency and vulnerability of the human species. Yet, the view of the world that the human subject needs as a deficient anti-species cannot be constructed in a sovereign way by a singular self; such a view can only be borrowed from another deficient anti-species. This is because the only way to see the world is necessarily through the eyes of another being. The perception of a singular self would not construct a view of the world; nor would it be able to navigate as animals do, without technical extensions. Constructing *Weltanschauung* then is a result of human vulnerability (neoteny): for survival, humans need the sensory and mental capacities of other human beings. Thus, the acquisition of culture, language, and world is not "my" affair and "my"

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[16] "AI: More than Human," curated by Suzanne Livingston and Maholo Uchida, Barbican Center, May 16–August 26, 2019.

[17] Paolo Virno, *Multitude between Innovation and Negation*, trans. Isabella Bertoletti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (Semiotext(e), 2008), 17–22.

capacity, but a capacity borrowed from other humans and other anti-species, who similarly failed due to their neoteny. The need for a universal horizon of the world is thus a necessity departing from this phylogenetic vulnerability. And the dimension of the generic and the symbolic is the consequence of such a condition. Animals, conversely, *do* have the capacity to be morphologically inscribed in their habitat, or even in their own selfhood, within which they navigate perfectly.

On the other hand, while an animal's capacities to navigate and survive in its habitat are far more developed than those of humans, this very navigational sovereign power paradoxically keeps the animal captive within its environment (habitat) and forecloses the world for it, as famously argued by Agamben[18] (and before by Heidegger). Many thinkers since then have argued that this foreclosure is relevant only for human beings and not for animals, hence such a view is extremely anthropocentric. But this is exactly the point: confinement to nothing but an environment is an unbearable limitation precisely for humans. An environment presupposes navigational tracks and thus it gives a species the option of interlacing or intersecting with, or tailing, other species (Elizabeth Povinelli), but it does not lead to the kind of general overview that could surpass the self and posit the self as a nonself.

In his *Homo Deus*, Yuval Harari shows that with bio-technical amelioration, human beings will gradually become immortal xeno-deities.[19] Yet he adds that this might not imply the enhancement of reason or even the evolutionary improvement of the neural construction of the brain. Humans will simply become cyber-animalized divinities, perfectly handling their own bodies, intelligence, information, and environment. Now, if, as Harari writes, the drawback of neoteny—the human incapacity to survive in its environment—can be surmounted bio-physically and technologically, then, hypothetically, history, the idea of the world, and the social interdependence of humans in thinking and language will simply become obsolete and redundant. Which means that the post-cyber human will aspire to nothing but the capacities of an intelligent animal with sovereign rule over and operation of its environment.

The next important question, which departs from the previous one, concerns two drastically different epistemic attitudes toward ontology and gnoseology:

1. According to the first approach, quantities do not grow into qualities. This entails the politics and poetics of an overall reversibility of quantities, i.e., radical literalist nominalism (the first law of thermodynamics).

2. According to the second approach, quantity irreversibly turns into quality, becoming second nature, labor, and culture (the second law of thermodynamics).

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[18] Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford University Press, 2004).

[19] Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (Vintage, 2015).

It's no surprise that crucial to contemporary techno-pagan mysticisms is a complete pre-Socratic pantheist reversibility—and consequently, a compliance with the first law of thermodynamics, according to which energy never expires, it simply recirculates. According to such logic, there is no death, no history, no revolution—no motivation to move forward into irreversible stages, after which a return to the previous condition would be impossible. On this level there are symmetries between the past and the future, the premodern and postmodern states, the same forms of consciousness before the origin of human labor and after it, etc. Conversely, according to the second law of thermodynamics, the increase of entropy accounts for the potential irreversibility of natural processes, and hence for the asymmetry between the future and the past.

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The concluding question is how the art institution as a bureaucratic machine molded by modernism and the conceptualist codex responds to the paradigmatic shift towards counter-secularity. How is the art institution positioned between evil, surplus, and power amidst the conditions of such a shift?

At the beginning of this essay, I depicted the artist as a "masochist" martyr who self-resigns from power and searches for evil in order to struggle with it. Subsequently, the modernist artist succumbs to cynicism to provoke the audience by means of power; then the conceptualist contemporary artist performs the bureaucratic legitimization of her power. Finally, the post-conceptual contemporary artist, indulging in a new counter-secular shift, becomes a sort of cyber-wizard, a techno-astrologist, a bio-alchemist enchanted by digital divination and mystical navigations, embodying some extraterrestrial "divine" omnipotence. What remains of art's institutional tools of social critique and self-reflection in this situation, when it ignores its genealogy of self-sublation and indulges in these post-secular phantasies, which are so attractively wrapped in technological invention, performative agencies, and de-colonial enchantments?

Why is it that the narratives of artificial intelligence, instead of expanding access to digital and cybernetic means of production, instead of enhancing emancipation and equality, instead of facilitating the further clarifications of reason, merely generate new fantasies of mystical power, reveries about dark ontologies and geographies, reducing both reason and the senses to the mechanics of algorithmic witchcraft?

Does it all mean that, if these fantasies persist, the museum and art practice will transform themselves into a kind of techno-temple that assembles the specimens of elite magic and power? This power is neither altruistically rejected, as in premodern art, nor critically appropriated, as in modernist and avant-garde conceptualizations.

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The text is based on a lecture given at "The Big Shift: The 1990s Avant-Gardes in Eastern Europe and Their Legacy," a "summer school" curated by Zdenka Badovinac and Boris Groys, held at the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana, August 25, 2019.

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