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VERSUS THE VOX POPULI

Reflections on the practice of art as a quest for liberation

by

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Statement

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Abstract

This dissertation is an attempt to define the constellation of circumstances and ideas, which has determined my strategy in the paintings and performances submitted for examination. Unlike many artists I do not accept the fact of postmodernity. On the contrary, art and life remain suspended between the future and the past, the essential modernist condition.

I argue for this in the introduction and the first two chapters, through a description of the performance work of Joseph Beuys and on my reaction to it in a performance in which I attempted to examine the practical paradoxes of art making in late modernity. I take my position largely from the Frankfurt school and succeeding debates about their work up to Žižek. For, while we remain in modernity we cannot regard it simply as an unfinished project. It is no longer possible to adopt an avant-garde position in one's practice.

The central section of the thesis contains a series of studies of the careers of major artists who have faced up to the paradoxes of modernity from Picasso to Richter and Parr. Through their successes, failures and sometimes duplicity, a practical profile emerges – a guide to the limits of contemporary practice. The last chapter concerns my paintings as a response to this profile.

Preface

Contemporary art is in crisis, or so it appears from a practitioner's viewpoint. Never before have the contemporary art world and art institutions been so unanimous, so determined in their view that art has little or no power to influence the conduct of affairs or individual lives by manifesting revelatory difference. The emerging generations of artists, critics and curators, world wide, are united in their view that contemporary art is destined to remain aligned with the requirements of production and consumption, doomed to follow their shifting emphases within human techniques, experience and aspiration. Simultaneously art has become 'Big Time'; the rewards for a single year in the international spotlight are now sufficient to fund a lifetime of private work.

In itself this might not be a serious matter. Art and artists have survived all kinds of conditions to produce magnificent work. Even Saddam Hussein was a significant art patron. It is undeniable, however, that the human scope and reach of contemporary art has been narrowing for at least two decades, despite its massive audience. The lack of a direct artistic response to recent events is a small, but highly relevant, indication of the slow but sure depletion of the critical and ethical resources available to the contemporary artist. Art appears to have lost the capacity to embody liberation as a vital ideal, both within the practice of art making and as the figure of art within the larger world of the art audience, art institutions and the art market.

The central concern of this thesis is to investigate the conditions under which it may still be possible for an art practice to become a virulent form of liberation. Can a contemporary artist, in particular myself, maintain the goals of artistic and social liberation, while retaining an affiliation with commercial and performative art?

It is not what is 'present at hand', to quote Heidegger,¹ but what humans make out of their psychological and ontological conditions within the world that fully engages freedom. It is this human decision to engage in a transient process of creation that reveals, confronts and thereby liberates human desires and concerns.

In this thesis difference is not defined as the gap between different concepts of art. It is used rather, to describe those moments when desire is liberated through the appearance of specific differences within the work of art. During the production and reception of the art work, a Gestalt emerges, a pattern of differences that shapes the desired liberation through the life world of the artist as whole. Through its range of angst and hope art resonates nurturing creative aspirations and the possibility to think differently through the recognition and mediation of undifferentiated desire.

Within this concept of difference art can liberates only through producing 'difference'. Claire Colebrook writes:

Science may give consistent descriptions of the *actual* world, such as the things we observe as 'facts' or 'states of affairs', but philosophy has the power to understand the virtual world. This is not the world as it is, but the world beyond any specific observation or experience. For Deleuze, the concept that best answers this power to think the whole of life is difference. Life is difference, the power to think differently, to become different and to create differences. The philosophical ability to think this concept will help us to live our lives in a more joyful and affirmative manner. Because philosophy allows the transformation of life, it is a power, not an academic discipline. Similarly, but in its own different way, art also encounters difference: not by producing a concept of difference but by presenting and creating differences (such as all the different characters in a novel or different sounds in a symphony). If we want to know what something (such as art, science or philosophy) *is* then we can ask how it serves life.²

In that context I see difference as something that describes nothing 'defined' but is necessarily an epiphanic constant, in all attempts to find 'different' perspectives for individual art. Difference, as it is represented in this thesis, is a fundamental requirement for an art of liberation. The argument wants to drive home the point that creative desire allows difference so that liberation can occur.

I map out the terms of this investigation and my approach to this question in detail in the Introduction. I will deal here with my observations on the current predicament, the place from which I started.

It is not so much that art is becoming irrelevant to the quotidian or that artists may act in bad faith, that hardly matters. The crisis is manifest in the increasingly trivial, repetitive, downright boring nature of most recent work. It seems that art has reached a series of blockages, dead ends, ranging from the failure of feminist rhetoric to the by now long standing incapacity of artists to transform digital techniques into revelatory or liberating works of art. As BB King said 'The Thrill is Gone'. The once rich field of contemporary art filled with the promise of freedom appears to have transformed itself into a writhing pyramid of well-nourished mediocrities, each aiming blindly for its apex. We have returned to what Harold Rosenberg once memorably described as *The Herd of Independent Minds*.³

The rhetoric of feminism, which began to affect contemporary art practice in the late 60's, has, manifestly, failed to deliver its promise of liberation for art, artists and their audience. This is because it concentrated on instrumental goals such as pointing to the small number of women artists represented in art institutions and demanding equality simply on the basis of gender, an aesthetic version of the equal time argument used by minority parties during elections. In a billboard action, The Guerrilla Girls, 1989 asked

'Do Women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?' and cited the percentage of women artist in its collection. Any answer to that billboard must be 'interested' in the Kantian sense and can contribute to artistic liberation for all.⁴ It also developed an open-ended critique of a wide range of representations as gendered, sexist, and repressive and sought to censor or prohibit them absolutely.

It was argued that the achievement of such goals, the occupation and re-assignment of certain artistic territories to women on a statistical basis and the total denial and collapse of other territories was inherently an act of liberation, identical with the liberating potential that was, until recently, taken to be inherent in contemporary artistic practice.

Feminist argument carried great conviction in terms of fairness and justice but only at an instrumental level. As I shall argue throughout this thesis, it is not possible to develop an art practice that is concerned with freedom as a continually manifest quality in the work if one has already set one's instrumental benchmark for success ahead of time. Instrumental thinking always works in opposition to liberation.

It is undoubtedly possible to argue that the overall effect of feminist rhetoric has been to help move contemporary art as whole to the position where it has nearly all become a cynical instrumental practice that holds out no hope of freedom and whose practitioners are barely aware that freedom is possible. Peter Sloterdijk explains:

Thus we come to our first definition: Cynicism is enlightened false consciousness. It is that modernized, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has laboured both successfully and in vain. It has learned its lesson in enlightenment, but it has not, and probably was not able to, put them into practice. Well-off and miserable at the same time, this consciousness no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology; its falseness is already reflexive buffered.⁵

As Sloterdijk pointed out cynical, instrumental practice is already 'reflexively buffered' and does result in freedom. This, however, is not my argument. In this thesis I am concerned solely to research and describe the remaining potential for liberation in contemporary art practice so as to give myself and others access to it.

This is not to say that women artists do not engage in the quest for a liberated art practice. On the contrary there are many whose work I find liberating. Their work shows the same undivided desire for liberation and qualities of resistance that are the underlying theme of this thesis. In this context, I discuss Hannah Wilke's *Intra Venus* from 1993 in which a series of chromagenic supergloss photographs were taken while

Wilke was dying of lymphoma, in chapter one. I could have included more women to support the case for an art of liberation.⁶ My decision not to do so, however, is

exclusively related to the conceptual and technical issues relating to my work which I have attempted to overcome during my long years of research. I have chosen to write about artists and artwork in which I find these problems are figured directly.

My research focuses on the liberating aspects of artists and their practice. In my practice I maintain a position in which art delivers an overarching concept that does not serve any particular ideology. Thus, as a condition for liberation, I reject any rhetoric that demands an art of rules and regulation. I am convinced that such restrictions never liberate but rather function as a tool to defend specific territories and interest groups. For that reason I found that feminist rhetoric has no place in this topic

In my work this position is presented through actions and objects that originate in a fundamental desire to be able to create difference and exhibit it without becoming hostage to an ideology. My position is very close to that of Joanna Frueh's notion of 'crossing', because as she says 'crossing is the law of laws'.

In that context, I see every reason for art to become a liberating praxis, to seek differences of any kind (not defined) that perpetuate humanistic endeavours for freedom; constantly seeking beyond boundaries to be freed of rhetoric and rules. Feminist rhetoric failed in its experiment to provide uncensored spaces that allow opposites and creative differences to emerge.

Joanna Frueh reflects on this bankruptcy in her speech performance *Fuck Theory*, 1992, in which she expresses her desire to cross, so as to give art space for a completely liberated practice:

[As Frueh speaks she hears an uncanny clarity in her voice. It is so acute and affectionate that it penetrates listeners' bones while demanding nothing.]

In my reeking rosinness I like to wear full skirts so I can take long quick strides as though I'm walking away from the damned; and I also think that maybe I'm one of the damned and that's why I'm walking so fast. To be god and evil is to be in between, in movement, and to be outside them altogether, to cross into them from other conditions. Crossing is the law of laws. Crossing is love, which excludes no one, nothing, Fuck theory loves all positions.

The technical language of postmodern theory became an exclusionary weapon, a tool of mastery over art-world money-, star-, and idea-making. This situation was replete with irony, for schlock theory mouths an end to mastery. Words such as *sign, code, text, discourse, problematic, privilege, male gaze, phallic mother, hegemony, praxis, fetish commodity*, and many more have come to be part of the unloving tongue of schlock theory. Technical fields have technical languages, art being no exception, and key figures speak a magical language that

transforms, on the tongues of charmed followers, into prosaic jargon that, despite its tediousness, belongs to postmodern Arcanum whose very arcaneness has been spellbinding.

Arcane Language holds schlock theorist in thrall, they make mental masturbation into the Postmodern Mysteries. Erotic thinking is also mental masturbation, the voluptuary's enjoyment of her own insatiable intellect. Erotic thinking, unlike Postmodern Mysteries, desires connection beyond the arcane legitimacy of a limited self-love. The erotic thinker is a fucker.⁷

In Chapter One, I address the optimistic critical perspectives that Beuys presented to the public in his installation *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz*, 1977. I included various artists that relate to Beuys as an additional example of restricting or opening up a liberating praxis in art. The thesis begins with Beuys, because of his concept of liberating art, embedded and in part produced by the community and his resolute challenge to instrumental practice of all kinds. Through Beuys' work I established the terms of my own practice.

In Chapter Two I discuss my related performance installation, which I called *The Honigpumpe is kaputt*, (The Honey Pump is broken) 1999/2000 to Beuys' Installation at the *documenta 6*.

I presented my performance as a direct critique of the contemporary arts audience, which constantly misconstrues the liberating aspects of art, preferring to see art as a form of show business. I therefore developed it from Beuys' *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz* installation. I used his concept as an anchor point from which my absurd and ridiculous actions could flow, negating clichés about art and artists, thereby ridiculing the passive posture of the individual spectator.

I wanted to address this misappropriation, through which Beuys' suggestion that 'everyone is an artist' led increasingly to a trivial and repetitive art that slowly petrified the creative possibilities of its practitioners. Inasmuch as Beuys' encouraged hope for unfettered human creativity, just so did the *Honigpumpe is kaputt* tend to assign to the status quo the task of providing a new context for liberation. Beuys seemed unable to resolve this paradox within his work. In my performance I set out to reveal the weakness of his rhetoric and to confront Beuys failure on his own and my terms. Chapter two therefore sets the context for examination of the work of major international artists which follows.

Chapters Three and Four explore the possibilities for liberation and the limitations imposed on libertarian art practice (for artists Duchamp, Warhol and Graham) who choose to work within the technologies of mass production and communication, and their assumptions, for instance Andy Warhol's notorious statement that he would have

rather been a machine. On the face of it, this is a profoundly instrumental anti-libertarian sentiment. It appears to have informed, indeed been taken for granted by successive generations of artists working in 'new media' or 'electronic arts'.

Because of its novel resources, the 'new media' have often been presented as offering an automatic guarantee of epiphany. The contrary is the case; digital technology has not and cannot initiate original strategies for liberation, only human actions can do that. If one wishes to use the 'new media' to decorate a work and impress its audience as if it were a new commodity for consumption of the 'new media' will deliver that result automatically but it is not liberation.

At that instant the 'new media' is rendered incapable to deliver liberation. This can be seen in P. Piccinnini's endomorphic sculptures and digital prints called *Psycho-tourism* and *Protein Lattice Stills*. As David Bromfield argues in *Slush Puppy*,⁸ she misrepresents and sentimentalises the nature versus culture debate in terms that first appeared in the nineteenth century. Piccinnini avoids any attempt to deal critically with problematic ethical and social issues in relation to science and technology.

Piccinnini uses digital media to produce a commodity in a field of commodities, consequently she is used by the 'new media' and art institutions to sketch out the future of art as a sentimental site of commercial production. In her arch, disingenuous techno-complicity, she denies her audience any liberating insight into the problematic of future science and its ethical implications. In her comments on her work *Protein Lattice* she remarked.

The only thing that makes 'tissue engineering' seem any stranger than 'civil engineering' is a residual humanism of the sort that maintains materiality as a moment of absolute difference between things. With this romanticism set aside, there really is no difference between a person and a rat.

I have to admit to feeling a certain sympathy for laboratory rats and for models. Both are pieces of meat. They are organic vessels destined to contain the desires of those who utilise them . . .

...The fact is that if you want to sell a technology like tissue engineering you need to focus on the something a little more 'up' than mutant rodents.⁹

It is clear that Piccinnini has no problem with the subjection of laboratory rats or models to the market, that she can see no problem with using sex to sell anything and that she cannot distinguish between the behavioural criteria useful for rats and the complex creation of difference in which human beings engage.

This kind of art does not bring about original insight or liberation. It becomes apparent that if artists do not implement liberation in their practice, the 'new media' cannot deliver on liberation. The attitude of the artist transcends the medium art to visualise images of liberation.

Hence Chapters Three and Four offer my assessment of technologically-based art. There is, however, no reason to pursue what would be a purely negative assessment of digital art and new media in this thesis. No matter how much an artist engages in virtual realities and digital techniques, the success of a libertarian art practice is measured by its ability to explore human experience and with it dimensions of the private being and to present this to an audience. In theory at least, the environment, virtual, cyber or old-fashioned hard-core material, should make no difference to these expectations.

So far digital art has not been able to communicate between life and art or art and life. One can go as far as to say that the sterile and repetitive characteristic of digital art does not connect to the human aspects of life but rather separates the creative from life. In its machinelike codes zeros and ones replace all that is human. I develop these points in the introduction, with reference to Zizek, Marcuse and the science fiction of Grant Egan.

Contrary to Warhol's concept of the artist as a machine, digital art works appear like TV screens on an assembly line; in an extreme pastiche of Walter Benjamin's notion of loss of aura in a work of art through reproduction. As a result all the individual resistances that can be attributed to an original work of art have been flattened to the digitised monotony of un-freedom. It is not necessary to debate digital techniques within this thesis.

In Chapter Four, Dan Graham's *'Picture Window' Piece* stands as an example of how interactive materials can successfully be employed as investigative instruments within a work of art. As Graham's work reveals, the only reason for art to engage with technology is to point to the liberating or alienating elements, which emerge in human experience as technology widens the gap between art and life.

In Chapter Five I address the extraordinary phenomena of well-nourished mediocrities in contemporary art, principally through the complex career of Jeff Koons. One can find much stronger evidence and indisputable examples of mediocrity in the works of artists such as Julian Schnabel and Mark Kostabi. The art market boom in Schnabel's work and its eventual crash as Schnabel moved out of fashion is sufficient evidence that his paintings had no ethical or liberating content. They were merely

vehicles for intense speculation, a means to increase turnover, to attain fame and money and no doubt the love of women without the need to do any significant creative work. Kostabi's work faces a similar fate. He commissioned art students whom he paid an ordinary wage to work up his sketches, banal pastiches of modernist mannerisms and sold 'his' paintings for big money. That exploitative work-relation leaves the work desolate and void of any aspect of liberation.¹⁰ An examination of their work would, however, yield nothing of value for my thesis.

Koons, however, presents a more complex critical challenge, since his work presents a false aura of liberation through the recovery of various dimensions of kitsch as if that in itself were an act of liberation. Koons career also affords an opportunity to engage with the disastrous changes in the international art market and its ethos. These can be summed up by the shift from the attitude of the dealer Leo Castelli, who refused to sell an entire exhibition by Jasper Johns to one collector, on the grounds that it was banal and against the interests of the artist, to Mary Boone, super star dealer of the eighties, for whom such an achievement was the supreme coup.

In Chapter Five I discuss the mediocrity of Jeff Koons work, the limitations that his self-indulgent and trivial art has brought about in contemporary art. I argue that the obsession to dazzle and impress the arts audience by imitation and kitsch alienates the art object from its deeper meaning and, more importantly, from its intrinsic worth as a means to liberation. Koons' banal baroque objects are void of all the secrets of humanity. Nothing in his cynical work can be attributed to the human existential condition. It reduces life itself to commodity, a cynical moment of exchange.

The awareness that creative work has been reduced to a form of cynical exchange is not restricted to the plastic arts. The novelist Norman Mailer recently described changes to the forces of production and consumption, which now allow only mediocre writers to become best sellers. Essentially Mailer argues that the range of the market for books has contracted to the point where good, liberating writing is simply uneconomic. It seems that increased cultural 'efficiency' and the narrowing scope of manifest difference are universal experiences. It is marketing, the cost of shelf space and the 'just in time' distribution system, not quality or demand, which determine which books will be available and where. Everywhere in the world one sees the same small range of titles.¹¹ Similar market pressures have brought about a cultural efficiency in the visual arts, though, as I shall show, it takes a far more diffuse and complex form.

Suppose, however, that the sense of confinement, even repression, that predominates in the art world is merely a rhetorical mirage. Certainly there has never been a serious attempt to ground the new situation beyond the zero sum game of fashion – that other

far more accomplished rhetorical mirage. In fact there is no sense of an absolute break in contemporary practice. In Chapters Five, Six, Seven and Eight I conduct a search for the threads of a continuous tradition of liberation and resistance.

The ghosts of the avant-garde and its heirs stare back fixedly from work by artists as varied as Richter and Paul McCarthy. It is as if the contemporary scene relies absolutely on an endless rhetorical repetition, a perpetual rerun of the denial of the goals and values of modernity, without being able to leave them behind, in the way its apologists frequently claim has been achieved.

The dilemma of modernity, a Janus-like condition, in which the past may be dead but the future has yet to be born, remains as demanding as it ever was, even though so many artists have decided to forget the future so as to dull the pain of the present moment.

It may, therefore, be possible to recover the threads of an epiphanic, liberating creative practice from within recent art so as to restore a way of making art, a praxis that is not cut off at the knees by irony before it begins. I have investigated that possibility in this thesis and in my recent practice.

The repetitive nature in this thesis is inevitable. The reasons are that I look at various artists and their praxis from different points of view. I have to respect that the main focus remains fixed on resonate liberation within the work of each artist and his/her praxis. To do this repetition in this thesis is a necessary way to recycle what has escaped through the mesh of my writing. I do so in order to address the topic again and again from other perspectives, thus to arrive at an overarching analysis, a 'reminder'¹² to point out the diverse and important relations in art on liberation.

Contemporary art practice is now characterised by a new ontological relationship with the wider 'market' and with market ideologies of art, which bring about an apparently complete loss of freedom. Characterised by an ontological relationship of an artist's production for a short-term money market shortens the artistic authority in relation to life. In a word the long-term value of art as a creative credibility in everyday life is now part of the short term cycle. Art as a long term validity to be able to resonate between imagination and life does not last longer than a newly designed washing machine or other consumer goods. Art in those circumstances (Koon's art, which I discuss in Chapter Five) alienates itself from humanity as a sign of liberation.

The potential for art as a liberating praxis, however, can be illustrated through key examples of work by high profile contemporary artists. I will analyse their works in order to see whether they, or their limitations, contain or imply a theoretical, or practical, demonstration of a liberated practice.

I will direct attention to work in which the 'liberated' or 'resistant' spaces or passages either become a source for critical resistance or are completely compromised by their close proximity to the market. This selection takes into consideration my understanding of art and its broader application in praxis. The social and the academic structure, that which 'insists on operational and behavioural concepts' (Marcuse),¹³ is contrasted to the suppressed or simply unseen alternatives of artists who ground their art on principles of liberation. The tradition and strategies represented by the Frankfurt School, notably Marcuse and Adorno, remain, for me, the most convenient position from which to begin.

I have written, however, from the perspective of a practising artist. I acknowledge that I cannot do otherwise than to look at art in relation to my own desires, actions and work. For that reason I have included artists and specific works in which the desire of the artist is directly related to a liberating praxis in art. They represent a broad spectrum of styles, reactions and approaches in relation to the purpose of art. In general, they are not analysed and categorised in terms of an art history but assessed in close proximity to the innovative and confrontational manner that characterises artistic liberation. Various strategies are placed next to each other so that one can detect different qualities of resistance, in relation to market ideology and social conventions. This also refers to my own art practice, which attempts to resist artistic and social conventions through the reversal of the material bases of art.

I have found examples in the practice of Joseph Beuys, Hannah Wilke, Andy Warhol, Dan Graham, Jeff Koons, Paul McCarthy, Pablo Picasso, Gerhard Richter and Mike Parr. The work discussed either establishes a significant critical difference or succumbs to fashionable art market ideologies, so as to transform itself in the process into inconsequential trivia, mere gossip, a whispered rumour that art may still exist somewhere, anywhere else.

Needless to say my account of these works is not an absolute critical judgement but more or less a detailed snapshot of a work in progress. Although some of the artists I have chosen are deceased I argue that their work still progresses through the refining process of the market. It continues to challenge and provoke resistance to market conventions. My *Reverse Iconography Paintings* have also, I believe, achieved a unique basis for an epiphanic, critical challenge.

Each chapter of this thesis is intended to help construct a point of view that demonstrates the legitimate position of my own work. In itself, this may appear to be an inappropriate ambition given the absolute relativity of contemporary art but, as I have indicated, this relativity may prove to be mere rhetoric.

I conclude by establishing a personal reference to my *Reverse Iconography Paintings*. The solution is one that grounds the meaning of creativity in the desire to resist conventions in painting. By 'turning painting on its head', by means of reversal, not as a mere cartoon like Baselitz, I am able to challenge artistic practice at the base of its historic materiality. During my extensive research of art theory and practice I have finally arrived at the beginning of a material strategy of liberation from which my practice can grow.

As part of the submission for my doctorate, this thesis will present the wide range of research that I have undertaken in my art theory and practice. This has resulted in a considerable body of work, represented here by my reversed action of paintings. As I wrote this paper I found that my theorising about the *Reverse Iconography Paintings* contributed directly to my understanding of liberating and resistant values in art.

NOTES

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, (London: Blackwell Publishers First edition 1962, this copy 1995), 130.

² Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 13.

³ Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962), 206–40.

⁴ Tracey Warr and Amelia Jones, *The Artist's Body*, (London: Phaidon, 2003), 22.

⁵ Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Translated by Michael Eldred, The University of Minnesota, (London, New York: Verso 1988), 5.

⁶ Examples for that could be Niki de Saint-Phalle and her *First Shooting Impasse Ronsin* 1961 *Tir á Volonté* (Fire at will) paintings, the famous body sculpture pieces such as *Fingerhandschuh* (Finger Gloves) 1970 of Rebecca Horn, Ulrike Rosenbach's performance *Don't Believe I Am an Amazon*, 1975 in which Rosenbach emphasises the condition of the artist as simultaneously victim and torturer, in her bow and arrow shooting performance. Carolee Schneemann and the well known performance *Interior Scroll* from 1975, as well as the Video Performance *I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much*, 1986 by Pipilotti Rist and of course the oeuvre of Hannah Wilke.

⁷ Johanna Frueh, *Erotic Faculties*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press 1996), 46–47.

⁸ David Bromfield, *Slush Puppy, Art and Life with P. Piccinini*, <http://www.behindthe-8-ball.com/>, 2002.

⁹ David Bromfield, 2002.

NOTES CONTINUE

- ¹⁰ During my artists residency in New York in 1993/94 I met a fellow artist and student who was working with Kostabi in his studio. From her I heard of this practice of paying wages to students so that his paintings are produced in factory-like conditions. Kostabi's method is also described in his many self-centred, even narcissistic publications.
- ¹¹ Norman Mailer *Only in America* speech to Commonwealth Club of San Francisco February 20, 2003. New York Review of Books, electronic edition, Vol. 50, Number 5, March 27, 2003.
- ¹² The arguments in this thesis are not repetitious in a simple sense They contain are necessary reminders of the many perspectives that circulate through the single complex issue of liberation. See Derrida: 'But then what? What remains? The remains to which a burial is supposed to give rise? Or the remainder of the series....' Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, Trans Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 186.
- ¹³ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 12.

Introduction

Can art take liberation for its goal?

There appears to be lack of meaningful resistance against the imposition of artistic conventions in contemporary art practice, masked, perhaps, by its endless superficial shifts. Yet it may still be possible for an art practice to become a virulent form of liberation. Can artists maintain the goals of artistic and social liberation, while retaining an affiliation with commercial and performative art?

The image of liberation in and through art has been shaped over a considerable time but is now viewed with almost universal scepticism. Can the work of artists, which is still supposed to be based on principles of independence and freedom, be reconciled to the affirmative, instrumental and, sometimes, confrontational understanding of art within contemporary society?

In the introduction to, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Slavoj Žižek retells the following story of freedom:

A German worker gets a job in Siberia; aware of how all the mail will be read by the censors he tells his friends: "Let's establish a code; If the letter you get from me is written in ordinary blue ink its true; if its written in red ink its false". After a month his friends get the first letter written in blue ink. "Everything is wonderful here the shops are full and food is abundant apartments are large and properly heated, cinemas show films from the West, there are many beautiful girls ready for an affair . . . the only thing you can't get is *red ink*."¹⁴

As Žižek points out, the mention of red ink produces the effect of truth independent of the literal truth of the blue ink. This is a useful model for the possibility of an art practice which maintains the possibility of freedom. Whilst contemporary art no longer has the privilege of an 'avant-garde' position, marginal to the development of late capitalism, it can, nonetheless, send coded signals that realise both specific truths beyond the market and affirm the possibility of art as a liberating praxis.

The key strategy available for this coding is resistance, the resistance, whether it be material limits of the work or the conceptual or structural limits of the practice itself as they are revealed to the artist and his audience. Resistance is always a consequence of the clear representation of differences, of a refusal to collapse one's practice to the single dimension of the art market.

The remainder of this introduction examines various implications of this proposition.

The death of artistic freedom has been greatly exaggerated.

Artists appear to use the concept, the figure, of liberation, either as an effective base, a rhetorical tool or to squander their prospects of active freedom in favour of a posture of displacement so as to produce mere tastefulness, art that is the same but different, art for the market. It may be possible to maintain a humanistic art, characterised by its attempts to resist bourgeois refinement and market values, by a determination to encourage the presentation of difference as the prevailing mode of art.

The artwork itself always contains the mediating process and becomes the determining device of liberation – through its success in revealing differences.

The current resort to pastiche, to mimetic re-presentation of art by more recent art under the pretence of criticism or irony indicates a tremendous frustration. Artists can no longer find a creative identity through the simple struggle for freedom. There is a deluge of predictable performative art going through the motions in contemporary spaces. Contemporary art appears as a historically conscious mime. In a strange parody of scientific research it appears as a monotonous imitation of an over-present academic structure that seeks a contemporary 'discipline' in the putative historic 'objectivity' of art, hence the collapse of 'presence' in contemporary practice.

Artists can figure liberation very differently.

Beuys used the figure of the liberated self to determine and direct the creative potential of his audience as individuals in relation to social agendas. In the *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz* Beuys argues for a social sculpture project as a kind of truth–value in the work of art.

Alternatively for artists like Richter and Picasso, liberation resides in the usefulness of their work to society in a purely aesthetic dimension. Others such as Warhol, understood the work of art as something that is independent, un-tempered by mass opinion and considered 'true' only through its immediacy as a readymade object, what you see is what you get.

Liberation in art seems to be connected to the intervention of individuals in life in general. Therefore, the closer art interacts and intervenes with life, the more its liberating potential can enter reality in the form of praxis. This proximity to the real as a challenge is illustrated in Parr's performance *Malevich – A Political Arm*, (see Chapter Nine).

Art and the 'Real'

The concept of the real recurs throughout this thesis. It is plain that, on each occasion, it refers to a different facet of the problem of reality or, to put it bluntly the word 'real' means something different on each occasion that it is used, This is not a result of sloppy thinking but an inevitable consequence of the changes which have occurred in the concept over the last two decades.

These are best understood in terms of popular of usage. At one time realism and romanticism formed an opposition in popular culture. It was good to be realistic and impractical to be romantic throughout the modern era. Indeed, in culture, the possibility of realism underpinned modernism from Courbet through Surrealism to the unbounded reality of the 1960's – *un realisme sans rivages*.

Today the popular opposition is between real and unreal. 'Unreal' is an expression of approval and enthusiasm. It is good to be Unreal. It is authentic to be Unreal.

This inversion or infolding of the notion of the real has excised the possibility of arguing directly for art as the only safe touchstone of human reality. Instead, as I shall show, artists often play with the notion of the real as if it were merely another item in some transcendental supermarket of cultural values in which the choice of particular 'reality' is merely a matter of consumer preference. Their ambition, like that of their audience may well be to 'Get Real', with a big price reduction if possible.

It is no coincidence that Platonism, the great enemy of all projects towards a humane unified realism, has resurfaced in our primitive digital popular culture where a computer terminal has replaced the shadows on the wall of Plato's cave. In the movie *The Matrix*, Neo, a new recruit to the movement against the Matrix, a Fascistic computer-based society run by and for machines – asks if a computer simulation he has 'entered' is 'real'.

He is told:

'What is real? How do you define real? If you are talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, you can taste and can see then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain.'¹⁵

In other words reality is no more authentic than a multi-channel TV set and probably less so than the readymade consumer reality offered in video games which are of course 'Unreal'. Neo is introduced to the 'real' world beyond the Matrix, which is a blasted ruin, with the words:

'Welcome to the Desert of the Real.'

This suggests that that which is not the product of a compliant, even Fascistic, reason will be apprehended as a fearful chaos; the 'real' has become the sublime of the digital era. If the real is, in every sense, a desert, why go there?

The point here is not to rehash a hackneyed old philosophical ploy but to note that digital popular culture has returned it to the core of the ideological agenda. It has therefore reappeared as an urgent issue for any contemporary artist who wishes to work with immediate experience.

Let Richter stand for all the artists discussed in this thesis:

I don't mistrust reality, of which I know next to nothing. I mistrust the picture of reality conveyed to us by our senses, which is imperfect and circumscribed.¹⁶

There is, however, another way to conceive reality - not as an ego-centred series of unreliable phenomenon but as a pattern of resistances suspended between an unknowable objectivity and the incomplete subject, a pattern through which the liberated subject must emerge. Until recently this model of the real fitted most descriptions of artistic praxis, in which the artist discovered the defining limits of the real through creative work. It also helped bind art to the project of liberation. Finally it has the advantage of being indifferent to the emerging digital environment. If virtual human beings were ever to appear, their 'real' would still be defined by their experience of limits and resistance, within and without the cyber universe. Such limits have indeed been explored in the subtle fiction of Perth writer Greg Egan, notably in his novel *Permutation City*, where cyber realities are limited by the computer power available. For a cyber being, this experience would manifest itself as reality, both limit and resistance.

This model of the real as a set of limits also helps to explain the endless series of meanings that the concept of reality generates in a discussion of artworks. Each artist discovers a different set of resistances through their praxis. It is therefore possible to speak of the reality revealed by the art of Beuys or of Dan Graham, on condition that one recognises that these are open systems, produced through the impact of the essential liberating potential of art on a specific series of existential and material resistances.

These are the terms in which I will use the concept of the 'real'. They stand in contrast to the failure of much of the recent artwork I will discuss to mark out the limits and resistances of the real. The reasons for that failure are explored throughout the thesis.

It appears that the perception of the real is essentially a cognitive faculty, the capacity to determine what is true as a value of being, not as result of *a priori* reasoning. Liberation and difference, as well as the desire to resist material and cultural pressures all contribute to an engagement with the real. In a sense, they make the real possible. They are all, however, a potential threat to the rhetoric and refinement of the art market.

This process of reality, value and destruction is best explained in Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* when he points out:

In classical Greek philosophy, Reason is the cognitive faculty to distinguish what is true and what is false insofar as truth (and falsehood) is primarily a condition of Being, of Reality – and only on this ground a property of propositions. True discourse, logic, reveals and expresses that which really is – as distinguished from that which appears to be (real). And by virtue of this equation between Truth and (real) Being, Truth is a value, for Being is better than Non-Being. The latter is not simply Nothing; it is a potentiality of and a threat to Being-destruction.¹⁷

The potential threat differs greatly, however, within the praxis of each artist. The strategies employed by some artists produce a practice that, grounded as it is in an artistic desire to demonstrate a critical attitude to the arts audience, is nonetheless sacrificed for a regurgitated banality that entertains, logically and guarantees popular success. In the performance work of Paul McCarthy a critical attitude is trivialised by way of parody and mimicry to produce shock as entertainment.

The entertainment factors in art – visible in Warhol's disingenuous literalism – always negate the potential of art as a constructive threat to social conventions and an ethical touchstone. Mainstream society reads art through an instrumental logic towards that which is useful and real – the art market. Artistic truth may be challenging or affirmative as a 'value' in the sense that Marcuse has described truth. From this it follows that artistic truth as a value – predominately for exchange – must be renegotiated by the individual artist through each work, on grounds of liberation that is not to be constrained by art, as a 'logical', market-driven, dimension of entertainment. Artists must constantly decide if their art can be allocated a determinate ontology that is rooted in performative routines and efficiency alone. With Koons and Warhol, a dazzling 'effect of the real' mimics traits of artistic grandeur and ignores or seeks to abolish the development of artistic differences within the work itself.

Mimesis

On an international scale, art objects have reached a universal sleekness that can be measured against an ever-shifting archive of standard artistic strategies evaluated as a collective market driven truth-value. The closer their relation to the logic of the market driven 'real', the more truth those objects acquire. The more artworks become imaginative and resistant, and less 'practical', the less seriously they are taken.

Thus the individual, nominally private, contemporary artist can only identify with 'culture' through a hierarchical schema of exchange firmly embedded in the market.

Writing in the sixties Marcuse suggested:

Today this private space has been invaded and whittled down by technological reality. Mass production and mass distribution claim the entire individual, and industrial psychology has long since ceased to be confined to the factory. The manifold processes of introjection seem to be ossified in almost mechanical reactions. The result is, not adjustment but mimesis: an immediate identification of the individual with his society and, through it, with the society as a whole.¹⁸

Mimesis, I would like to argue, is now the situation of the contemporary artist, who no longer occupies a privileged margin in the process of production but is subject both to the discipline of the market and, through the institutions, to the intense scrutiny of the ideological state apparatus, the arts industry.

Practising artists in general now know about the machinery of historical significance and that that 'significance' can be co-opted as a place of artistic belonging. It can always be traded as reference point, even in a work that claims that all historical references have been liquidated. Mieke Bal's *Quoting Caravaggio* provides a clear contemporary reference point for this strategy.¹⁹ Hence an infinite recession of easily marketable mimeses has become the foundation of contemporary art. For example consider the family tree of Duchamp's *Urinal*, all living on his reputation. This functions as a substitute formula for the production of sound (reliable) art which replaces the avant-garde with the market as its Hegelian engine. The immediate identification of the individual with and through society is not defined by serious art, but set by an infantile, playful attitude towards art that allows art as a category to be 'broadened' into art as a consumer good, defined as widely as possible.

In Gerhard Richter's paintings of multiple style and techniques the concept of avant-garde and market as a dialectic proposition produces another dimension of marketable art. I want to map a kind of flat dialectic, in relation to Richter's approach to art, that plays innovation and fetish against each other and results in a synthesis of art for

consumption. The end product is always a perpetual erosion of credibility. The work itself dismantles its critical authority, thereby affirming an outpouring of sentimentality by the artist.

Sentimentality

Art as a sentimental sign can never be critical, merely kitsch. Richter's art surrenders the struggle for liberation to the limits of popular taste. Art takes on the garb of kitsch so that it can be marketed, traded as an authentic positive experience, consolation for a bad world. Richter, a self-nominated 'bourgeois painter', may have more in common with his nineteenth century forbear Spitzweg than has been realised.

Adorno observed that:

Freedom from repression can be represented only by what does not succumb to repression; residual use value, only by what is useless.²⁰

In work by Warhol, Koons, and Richter the reiteration and to some extent the imitation of 'real' equates to a reality of 'refinement', which shapes the exchange value of art, and hence with the presence of the artist in society as living exchange value. This quest for 'artistic excellence' leaves in its wake an art that must surrender its commitment to liberation. At this moment of surrender, contemporary art practice evades questions as to what art means or signifies beyond consumption, that is why contemporary art is so compatible with the forms of consumer objects and consumption in general.

The relationship of the audience to art, as it has been observed by Dan Graham, takes the form of a non-engaged gaze, through which the individual does no more than simply look, passively, at an art object. It appears that art has no other directive than for volatile desire to become real, grounded through an act of passive consumption.

For that reason Graham engages the audience through video installations that embed them in the real. Thereby his work claims the status of truth. Through the shift from the imaginative to the practical the artwork maintains a logic that requires Graham's audience to engage with the real in his work.

At this moment, this interchange, the passage from the imaginative to the real or from the playful to the rational remains available as the site in which the contemporary artist can play and resist or confirm and imitate.

Transformation to the 'real' happens within dimensions of the imaginative and consequentially ties contemporary art practice to the implications of reification and observation. Graham's exposure of 'engagement' as a hands-on part of art practice combines the elements of artistic reification and audience participation as a counter move to the alienation effects of purely representative art.

This conditioning of the audience, in respect to the immediacy of 'situation art', suggests that an artwork that is, literally, engaging, requires a mediator who negotiates between the social system, the market and the artist's desire to be free. The experiment of engagement in Graham's art however, opens up justifications for the unconcerned artist to stage art as an impressive product – theatrical installations and the like - that does not engage with the aesthetic responsiveness of the audience but dazzles the engaged and responsive audience through its impressiveness.

Graham's experiment with the immediacy of art and logical advances in art practice encouraged the theatricality of the working practice of Jeff Koons. In the latter, the context of art reality is collapsing and an alienated relationship to art emerges that is different to pop Art and Graham's conceptual experiments.

Alienation One More Time

Marcuse describes the relationship of alienation to art as an objective reality; alienated art has become dead, a mere commodity:

This identification is not illusion but reality. However, the reality constitutes a more progressive stage of alienation. The latter has become entirely objective; the subject which is alienated is swollen up by its alienated existence. There is only one dimension, and it is everywhere and in all forms. The achievements of progress defy ideological indictment as well as justification; before their tribunal, the "false consciousness" of their rationality becomes the true consciousness.²¹

Graham's conceptual installations, notably his video and mirror pieces, invite the audience to experience art in their own consciousness. This recalls the complex liberating challenge within the *Honigpumpe is kaputt* a performance I did in 2000 in Perth. Initially, my project was to expand from Beuys' *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz* in which Beuys claims an emblematic presence for his artwork, that manifests an anthropological understanding of the sign, the work as a social sculpture. In all his work Beuys brings back the human and the principle of liberation into the artistic equation. In art, liberation is founded on the principle of audience engagement as a means of creative participation.

The Super Artist

For my part in *The Honigpumpe is Kaputt* I claimed that the discernment and the cultivation required by conformist art has created a Super–Artist myth that needs to be overcome by refusing participation. By refusing participation within a predetermined and orthodox spectrum of art I expanded my right to liberation into self-ridicule. Thereby the self-ridicule of pouring honey over my head transforms and initiates the self-ridicule of the audience. In all, a mood of liberation from social constraint emerged from the performance and engaged the audience in collective laughter thereby transcending the subdued context of academic expectations on art.

Art thus becomes a witness to social conventions as an element of the ridiculous and ironic dimensions of culture. This level of irony relies on humour as an implicit commentary. The performance reveals dialectic elements of the Super–Artist myth – the super artist ridicules himself and the economic structure of contemporary art. Contemporary cultural efficiency is shown to be an aspect of market refinement to which even Beuys *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz* must surrender its artistic complexities.

To avoid this, contemporary art must reinvent itself constantly so as to overcome the established controls as reinvented daily by mass culture. Adorno explains:

It is only insofar as they are subjects that people themselves constitute the limits of reification; hence mass culture must re-establish its control over them again and again [immer aufs Neue wieder erfassen]: the hopeless effort of this repetition is the only trace of hope, that this repetition is in vain, that in spite of everything, people are not controllable.²²

Adorno justifies a closer analysis of my concept of the super artist and its implications in *The Honigpumpe is Kaputt* performance.

Duchamp once observed that a work of art dies with its creators. Given the efficiency of the contemporary art market, an artist can now easily outlive his work. Any serious art practice must constantly renew itself so as to liberate itself from mainstream market limitations. Super artists are automatically subjected to control and turned into a myth and as time passes, historians and critics refine the working definition of every super artist, polishing it with acts of revelation, so that even the most controversial act can be sustained as a civilised project of culture and the art market.

The controversy of Gerhard Richter's *October 18, 1977* cycle is a case in point (See Chapter Eight). The controversial act of painting a highly charged political theme, such as the suspicious death of Bader and Meinhof in their prison cell and the media response is transmuted, over time, in Richter's work into an manifesto for the

transcendent values of skill and material. Furthermore, as I show in that chapter, I point to the fact that the *October 18, 1977* cycle is now competing with the romantic aspects of death in the painting of artists like Caspar David Friedrich. Over time the controversial context of Bader and Meinhof will be sustained as a civilised project of culture, ethically okay and speculative as bourgeois art on the market. In future the technical aspects of the *October 18, 1977* cycle will distort the problematic and liberating insight to be drawn from the controversial events of 1977. For the art establishment the fundamental objective is to create a Super–Artist able to bend creative relationships to its economic needs. Thereby art is stripped of all its liberating elements, indeed liberating entities that can be attributed to the work transform themselves into a debate about the myth of artist (Richter), materials and paint application.

And yet within this environment of myth artists become a construct of artistic appraisal and ‘scientific’ evaluation. The image of the artist always emerges as a ‘portrayal of bourgeois self-understanding’. Many contemporary artists have resigned themselves to working within the persona of the ‘the super artist’²³ as the marketable benchmark for the myth of their creativity. They inevitably fail to reinvent themselves (see also Chapter five).

The notion of the ‘super artist’ as I use it in this thesis should be understood to refer to the cult of historical admiration and myth making that defines the struggling intellect merely through an admiring description of itself. The contemporary cultural benchmark produces a standard inherited from the past that is never realised and eventually must be found in the future. This projection into the future by measuring one’s own talent against the past is extensively illustrated in Richter’s displaced practice of recreating the historical pictures of sentimental hope.

In his book *From Plato to Nietzsche* E.L. Allen sees Nietzsche’s ‘Übermensch’ in this context, as superman in the guise of a cultural overachiever:

There are times, however, when the Superman seems to be identified with one or other of the great historical figures, a Caesar Borgia, a Napoleon, a Caesar or a Goethe. Even Socrates was admitted to this select company in the end. The Superman, we may perhaps say, can only be produced in the future because man as such has potentialities waiting to be developed, and some in the past and present have travelled farther than others in this direction. But in none of them is the ideal fully realized, the ideal, that is, of the man who has overcome his animal nature, organized the chaos of his passion, sublimated his impulses, and given style to his character-or, as Nietzsche said of Goethe: ‘he disciplined himself into wholeness, he created himself’ and became ‘the man of tolerance, not from weakness but from strength’, ‘a spirit who has become free’.²⁴

Like the superman, the Super–Artist myth points to human beings who overcame the odds that are set by the art market and bourgeois society. This process of resisting and

overcoming odds however, is reclaimed by society and converted into a hero ideal. This perfect ideal then restricts any artist who is practising currently. In short the Super–Artist myth is the sign for art as an absolute limit, that embraces the platonic ideal as its creative home. Like other practices art becomes an instrument of domination:

The insistence on operational and behavioural concepts turns against the efforts to free thought and behaviour from the given reality and for the suppressed alternatives. Theoretical and practical Reason, academic and social behaviourism meet on common ground: that of an advanced society which makes scientific and technical progress into an instrument of domination.²⁵

The hyper efficiencies of the contemporary art market now allow the almost instant creation of super artists. The result has been the apparently paradoxical return, without debate, of any number of idealisms and essentialisms, indeed the entire reactionary pantechnicon of eighteenth century aesthetics—allegory is common and even absolute beauty has made a comeback.

In recent years ever more young artists have determined on leaving the academies to become ‘economically hyper–active’. They view their artistic career in terms of participation in a short-term market (akin to the money market) that is already dense with values and models that are derived, paradoxically, from historical and critical accounts. Their work is seen, and valorised—either tolerated or rejected, within this field of ‘super economic’ activity. In this field, the debate about art and exhibitions cannot venture beyond its overarching conception, the myth of the super artist, that is to say it cannot transcend the desire to be a pop star.

They ignore the fact that the artistic drive to be a pop star turns the artwork into an unproblematic commodity for the cultural institutions that perpetuate the super artist myth through the historical value of art. This raises the benchmark of myth and helps to liquidate any liberating traits within the work of art. Many desire to surrender liberation to success and ambition so as to become candidates for the status of Super–Artist.

A liberating art practice that transcends the Super–Artist myth is almost extinct in contemporary art. The works of Joseph Beuys Mike Parr, and my own reversed iconography paintings all attempt to do so. A liberating art practice is driven by experiment and change. Because of its experimental and open approach it resists practical reason and ultimately the ‘logic’ of the market. This art can only emerge from an autonomous and therefore resistant desire. The challenge is to bring difference and resistance into reality as an original idea and a material fact!

Liberation and the Field of Cultural Production

Liberation may be set in motion by an artwork, promoted and interpreted, far beyond the reach of the artist. A complex field of artistic and non-artistic expectations can influence the attitude of artists to liberation. Pierre Bourdieu in *The Field of Cultural Production* describes the importance of meanings, values and norms and how they are produced and controlled:

Thus as the field is constituted as such, it becomes clear that the 'subject' of production of the art-work – of its value but also of its meaning – is not the producer who actually creates the object in its materiality, but rather the entire set of agents engaged in the field. Among these are the producers of works classified as artistic (great or minor, famous or unknown), critics of all persuasions (who themselves are established within the field), collectors, middlemen, curators, etc., in short, all who have ties with art, who live for art and, to varying degrees, from it, and who confront each other in struggles where the imposition of not only a world view but also a vision of the art world is at stake, and who, through these struggles, participate in the production of the value of the artist and art.²⁶

Bourdieu ignores the first hand producer of artistic value and relevance, that is to say the artist, from the process of production. He attributes these qualities to the entire set of agents who are involved with art. I argue that only the artist has the space to make fundamental experiments with art as a form of liberation. All others emerge as mediating players in the field of culture. If this were not so, art would become, as some have tried to make it, no more than a sociological game, an aesthetic opinion poll.

The self-conscious artist alone approaches personal and social life so as to transcend them through practice. The artist as producer creates the object in its materiality and consequentially is required to make an initial choice in favour of or against liberation and difference. Clearly Bourdieu's entire set of agents determines the interpretation of art in society. But it is the artist who mediates between the idea and the material reference, which ultimately forces those agents to adapt to new territories of experience.

Categories and Cultural Capital

The habit of categorizing is essential for those who work in the culture industry. It is through categories alone that art works new to the market can be refashioned as a negotiable item for cultural exchange. In this transformation, exchange is best served by an art that tells a story, and uses the power of allegory to maintain the illusion of a 'painterly' value in art. Once it is on the market, art becomes a celebration of the ideal of the aspiring artist, the genius who dazzles his audience with myth and technique.

Bourdieu's research, and in particular his notion of 'cultural capital', seem to threaten the possibility of the practice of art as liberation. It is likely, however, that cultural capital is not acquired by direct engagement with the work of art but by a habitual engagement with the valorisation processes of the art market and art institutions. In this case a well-constructed artwork should be able to retain its liberating potential until it is 'discovered' by individual members of the audience. Constant desire for liberation cannot be translated into reality, if it were desire, for liberation would cease to be liberating and, instead serve some ideology. Art must be located at the site where liberation pours out as a riddle into the public sphere but remains concealed, does not provide an ideology. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* stands as a reminder:

6.5 When the answer cannot be put in words, neither can the question be put into words. The riddle does not exist. If a question can be framed at all, it is possible to answer it.²⁷

For the artist, this signifies that art is not an answer to predetermined inquiry, but a device, a tool that proposes alternative questions and insights. For the contemporary artist, identity is equivalent to the space where challenges are composed. No art, no artist, nor any agent in the field of culture, has the solution for creativity. The artist's quest is to formulate and frame the enquiry in such a way that many responses might follow. The issue must be real and show concepts of different thinking and above all be resistant to categorisation. Adorno explains:

It is not by chance that Baudelaire's cryptograms of modernism equate the new with the unknown, which is both a hidden telos and a *gout du néant*, a source of horror, because of its incomparability with the immutable.²⁸

The mediation of an artistic concept to an audience ought to be a revelatory act of liberation that goes beyond the categorisation of the market. Thus liberating art overcomes the cannibalistic nature of commodity by transcending it, beyond the clichés of the history of art. Its constant drive for the new and the unpredictable renders the market visible as providing only an illusionary concept of artistic freedom, permanently seeking to 'explain' art in its own interests.

As I demonstrate with Richter, artists 'mime' their artistic strategy from a historical point of view, the new remains always hidden as a danger that threatens but can never become real. It is merely a concept of a possible future, grounded in the past. There remains only a monologue from the past that, sentimentally, avoids as, Adorno mentions, the source of horror, 'the incomparable immutable nature of art'.

Liberation, Confrontation, Convention and Fear

Even in the market the artist is somehow expected to provide a semblance of liberation. This offers an opportunity for a liberating praxis. In the spirit of bad faith the middle class veils its fear of displacement as normality. Artists have a choice, to become, or not to become, part of the 'conventional art system' where normality is a euphemism for fear.

The function of the normal as a euphemism for fear of the unknown explains the rejection of art engaged in liberation. The artists Beuys, Parr, Graham and my own *Reverse Iconography Paintings* attempt to resist this type of propaganda and the rhetorical challenge of social rejection through an art of literal confrontation. They challenge the audience by placing them in the danger of real confrontation by including the audience as partners, participants and through immediate material confrontation. The challenge resides, as Adorno explains, in the refusal to surrender:

One decisive reason why artworks, at least those that refuse to surrender to propaganda, are lacking in social impact is that they have to give up the use of those communicative means that would make them palatable to a larger public. If they do not, they become pawns in the all-encompassing system of communication.²⁹

The dilemma of real versus illusion, the desire for liberation versus conventional attitudes must continue to require the invention of the impossible that turns almost at once into reason. The artist must mediate this situation, this looping effect, by providing the impossible. The resistance necessary for praxis is part of a process in which the artwork, that is say the performance becomes the focal point of one's interest in liberation.

Schiller and the play impulse

The theoretical framework of Friedrich Schiller's notion of 'play impulse', of middle class duty as opposed to play, offers another perspective on artistic liberation beyond the confines of instrumental reason. The 'play impulse' epitomizes the desire that makes someone aspire to make art, to play in the face of a totalising structure that produces a seamless banal reality. In the case of contemporary art this structure is formed by the art market, institutions and their functionaries, together with their conventions, rules and regulations.

This playful confrontation is the moment when 'serious play', that is art, meets life. The 'play drive' faces the serious in the 'thing' called reality and must compromise its playful desire in this real world. The perfect situation would be that there is no duty but only situations that can be called, according to Schiller, 'liberated' that is to say

'means to give liberation'. Beuys' expanded concept of art, proposed this situation of 'serious play' as a way to realise creativity through social action. Mike Parr on the other hand sees 'serious play' in the confrontation between identity and the barbarism of politics and pretended innocence (tamed art) in his recent political performances.

As a creative concept the play impulse is not restricted to artists. It is nevertheless an essential condition that occurs whenever there is a desire by the individual to shape ideas into material form, to play a serious game of the Will as in the philosophy of Schopenhauer, where nature and life is conditioned by the Will evident in the desire to eat, to survive, to articulate. For Schopenhauer the Will desires forcefully to have an active creative impulse that is bound to the survival of the Will and to the passing of time. The undifferentiated artistic impulse that I call desire resides in this existential situation, which leaves no alternative but the need for change, the need to make something new.

To make progress in my artwork is, therefore, to encounter an ontological condition in 'art'. It has nothing to do with style, fashion or the avant-garde, as constructed by postmodernity and its advocates. That is how I would like this thesis to be read.

For the artist the 'play impulse' is not only a child's impulse but a play like that of gamblers, driven by a dream of riches – for the artist in a creative sense – and paid with the pain of reality. The notion of 'gamblers' play' differs from Schiller's, argument that 'beauty is freedom in appearance'- that is to say freedom made manifest as material beauty.

The problem with Schiller's understanding of freedom is that freedom would accept that the horrific is also an element of play, which entails freedom of choice. Through choice one determines one's own type of play and hence determines the appearance of beauty and the sublime. This then defines the human play impulse as freedom through choice, and choice allows variations of the forms taken by desire, the basis of all difference, of all liberating artwork.

The specific relation that individual contemporary artworks have to a liberated desire, is, however, revealed by the level of resistance they manifest to the normal and the market. In all my examples of specific artworks it is the resistant qualities of the artwork that determine its success or failure. Serious art must be played out as an instrument that reproduces and intensifies difference through resistance. In fact, in opposition to the dull anaesthetic realm of fear in the new art market, the project of 'art' must always moves towards creative riches and critical pain.

Art should have the courage to maintain the project of the modern, to create attitudes that transcend collective corporate refinement. Modernity is not unfinished, as Habermas, suggests, on the contrary it is always and forever immediate. It exists permanently in the present. Failure is not important. Only through the act of failure and unknowing can one enter a space that is new. One must continue, as a seeker who thinks that a perception that differs does matter. The quest is not to produce acceptable objects and modes of performance, but to seek revelatory, resistant difference in art theory and in material production, a complete contemporary praxis.

He who does not seek shall not find, said Schönberg, coining what might be seen as the motto or principle of the new. Works that do not live up to this principle immanently, i.e. in their own context, become inadequate.³⁰

NOTES

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, (London: Verso, 2002), 1.

¹⁵ Wachowski Brothers, *The Matrix, Village Road Show Pictures, Groucho 2 and Warner Brothers*, A Silver Picture Production, 1999.

¹⁶ Gerhard Richter *October 18, 1977*, organised by Robert Storr, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2000), 95.

¹⁷ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 124.

¹⁸ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 10.

¹⁹ Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio, Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

²⁰ T.W. Adorno *Aesthetic theory*, trans C. Lenhardt, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 323.

²¹ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 11.

²² Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans by John Cummings, op.cit. *Adorno A Critical Reader*, Ed N. Gibson and A. Rubin, (London Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 385.

²³ I use the word 'super' in relation to artists whose work has become a subject of admiration in the eyes of the art lover rather than a critical body of practical research. I invented 'Super Artist' in the same context as 'Übermensch' which originated in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In my use, however, the 'Super Artist' is someone who is admired for his outsider view of society, which eventually becomes the heroic view or idealistic view and, finally, the general view of the mainstream.

²⁴ E.L. Allen *From Plato to Nietzsche, An introduction to the great thoughts and ideas of the western mind*, (UK: The English Universities Press, 1957), 182.

²⁵ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 16.

²⁶ Pierre Bourdieu *The Field of Cultural Production*, (UK: Polity Press, 1993), 261.

²⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein *Tractatus logico-philosophicus, Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1963), 114, (my own translation).

²⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic theory*, 32.

²⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic theory*, 344.

³⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic theory*, 33.