Sydney College of the Arts
The University of Sydney

VERSUS THE VOX POPULI

Reflections on the practice of art as a quest for liberation

by

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July 2003

Statement

This Thesis is presented as a record of the work undertaken for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Visual Arts at Sydney College of the Arts.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements iv

List of Illustrations v

Abstract vii

Preface viii

Introduction **Can art take liberation for its goal?** 20

Chapter 1 **Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz:** 36
The inaccessibility of Beuys' actions and installation works and the difficulties of presenting a liberating and humanistic art to the subsequent generation of artists.

Chapter 2 **The Honigpumpe is kaputt - The Honey Pump is broken:** 52
The notion of The Honigpumpe has been constructed but the process of circulation is down. A critical investigation that I presented at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery in 1999/2000.

Chapter 3 **Literalism, irony and mass-produced art objects:** 64
Warhol after Duchamp and the loss of creative difference.

Chapter 4 **Artwork and spectator – see yourself:** 77
Modern art alienates its audience, even as it employs social engagement, as part of an ironic and minimalist agenda, in an attempt to overcome the isolation.

Chapter 5 **The Business Coach as a Readymade Artist:** 84
How Jeff Koons managed his investment in contemporary art through seductive and self–centred fetishism.

Chapter 6 **Art and the parody of popular media trash:** 94
Paul McCarthy neutralises the critical authority of art by trivialising the elements of shock and disgust.

Chapter 7 **Picasso, the eternal painter:** 100
Freedom suspended during the process of art making.

Chapter 8 **Gerhard Richter and the aura of good painting:** 112
The struggle to regain the middle ground of art, to continue as a painter of experiences that are nowadays traded as common objects of exchange.

Chapter 9 **Identity, Freedom and the Real:** 129
Mike Parr's project to resist any ideological limits on art through a constant restoration of the potential for absolute freedom to the centre of his praxis.

Chapter 10 **Between Secret and Reference:** 142
My praxis, Reverse Iconography Painting and its ability to oppose orthodoxy in the history of painting. Art Praxis as it is revealed in the Reverse Paintings and the subsequent translating power of application and material.

Bibliography 156

Acknowledgements

This thesis was written in conjunction with the production of an exhibition at the Sydney College of the Arts and a video performance at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery in 1999/2000. During my research I had to struggle with the English language and with theoretical issues. I am in particular grateful to my long time tutor and friend David Bromfield who gave me valuable critique, patience and guidance to achieve my artistic goal. I also wish to thank Sydney College of the Arts and my supervisor Michael Goldberg who braved the difficult situation of 'the tyranny of distance', which needed to be overcome to make this project possible. I also want to extend my gratitude to Pippa Tandy for proofreading my text in the final stages of my thesis. I express thanks to Peter Mudie for helping me and giving me access to special material needed. Finally I am grateful to all those who gave their time freely to realise my project.

List of Illustrations

Following Page 36
Joseph Beuys, *Honey Pump,* 1977, (card number one), original graphic – Free International University, Photo: Caroline Tisdall
Joseph Beuys, *Honey Pump*, 1977, head section of the Honey Pump Installation

Following Page 46
Joseph Beuys, *Honey Pump,* 1977, (card number five), original graphic – Free International University, Photo: Staeck/Steidel
Joseph Beuys, *Honey Pump,* 1977, (card number four), original graphic – Free International University, Photo: Staeck/Steidel
Joseph Beuys, *Honey Pump,* 1977, (card number ten), original graphic – Free International University, Photo: Caroline Tisdall.

Following Page 49
Hannah Wilke, *Brushstrokes, January 19, 1992,* 1992,
Hannah Wilke (with Donald Goddard), 1992, *August 17, 1992/February 15, 1992/ August 9,1992*

Following Page 53
Martin Heine, *The Honigpumpe is kaputt*, performance/installation, 1999–2000, video still
Martin Heine, *The Honigpumpe is kaputt,* performance/installation, 1999-2000, (Installation detail).

Following Page 55
Martin Heine, *The Honigpumpe is kaputt*, performance/installation, 1999–2000, video still
Martin Heine, *The Honigpumpe is kaputt,* performance/installation, 1999-2000, (Installation detail)

Following Page 58
Martin Heine, *The Honigpumpe is kaputt,* performance/installation, 1999/2000
Martin Heine, *The Honigpumpe is kaputt,* performance/installation, 1999-2000, (Installation detail)
Martin Heine, *The Honigpumpe is kaputt,* performance/installation, 1999-2000, (Installation detail)

Following Page 60
Joseph Beuys, *The silence of Marcel Duchamp is overrated*, action at the TV Studio Düsseldorf, 1964

Following Page 62
Martin Heine, *The Honigpumpe is kaputt,* performance/installation, 1999/2000
Martin Heine, *The Honigpumpe is kaputt,* performance/installation, 1999/2000
Martin Heine, *The Honigpumpe is kaputt*, performance/installation, 1999–2000, video still

Following Page 66
Andy Warhol, *Ten Lizes,* 1963
Andy Warhol, *Arnold Schwarzenegger*, 1977-89, Polaroid

Following Page 68
Andy Warhol, *Mick Jagger,* 1975, Polaroid
Andy Warhol, *Muhammad Ali,* 1977, Polaroid
Andy Warhol, *Self-Portraits in Drag,* 1980, Polaroid
Andy Warhol, *Fiesta Pig,* 1979, Polaroid
Andy Warhol, *Brillo Boxes,* 1979, Polaroid

Following Page 70
Andy Warhol's, *wallpaper installation* at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1986

Following Page 73
Andy Warhol, *Mao Tse-Tung*, 1972, acrylic and silkscreen on canvas

Following Page 75
Marcel Duchamp *Bicycle Wheel* from 1951, readymade after the original of 1913
Joseph Beuys, *Its about a Bicycle?,* 1984, Bicycle with inscribed slates (detail)

Following Page 79
Dan Grahams diagram for *'Picture Window' Piece* (proposal) 1974

Following Page 82
Dan Graham, *Public Space/Two Audiences*, 1976, installation (detail)

Following Page 89
Jeff Koons, *Michael Jackson and Bubbles,* 1988 Sculpture (detail)

Following Page 90
Scott Ridley, *Blade Runner,* (Video still), edition director's cut
Stanley Kubrik (producer), Steven Spielberg (director) *Artificial Intelligence,* (Video still)
Jeff Koons, *Banality*, 1988, Installation, New York: Sonnabend Gallery.

Following Page 94
Paul McCarthy, *Whipping a Wall and a Window with Paint*, 1974
Following Page 96
MAD Comic Magazine from 1983, number 170
Paul McCarthy, *Bossy Burger*, 1991, performance video, installation
Following Page 97
John Heartfield and Wieland Herzfelde, c1960, *IN MEMORIAM POP ART*
Following Page 98
Robert Rauschenberg: *Trophy I*, 1959
Paul McCarthy, *Painter*, 1995, performance video, Los Angeles
Robert Crumb, *Mr. Snoid Goes Bohemian,* comix, c1969
Following Page 103
Pablo Picasso, *The Violin (Violin and Fruit),* 1913
Following Page 106
Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937 and *Guernica* (detail)
Following Page 108
Madrid-L'Action >>Militaire<< des Rebelles, 1937
Following Page 110
Pablo Picasso, *L'Atelier*, Paris, 1928-29
Following Page 114
Pablo Picasso, *Las Meninas,* 1957
Following Page 120
Gerhard Richter, *Atlas*: Panel 19, 1967
Following Page 122
Gerhard Richter, *Death (Tote),* 1988, oil on canvas
Photo of Ulrike Meinhof's dead as published in *Stern*, 16. June 1976
Ulrike Meinhof, photographic Model for *Dead 1, Dead 2, and Dead 3*
Following Page 124
Caspar David Friedrich, *Abbey in the Oak Forest,* 1809
Following Page 126
Gerhard Richter, *29. 1.2000,* from of the catalogue *Firenze*, 1999/2000
Following Page 129
Mike Parr, *Integration 1 (Leg Line of Blue Sky),* 1975
Following Page 134
Mike Parr, *Cathartic Action: Social Gestus No 5*, 1977
Following Page 137
Mike Parr's, *Malevich - A Political Arm, 2002,* performance
Following Page 139
Mike Parr's, *Malevich - A Political Arm, 2002,* performance
Mike Parr's, *Malevich - A Political Arm, 2002,* performance
Following Page 144
Martin Heine, *Reverse Iconography Praxis,* 2003
Following Page 149
Martin Heine, *11a.jpeg*, act of concealment, 2003
Following Page 150
Remains of a circular mat or basket discovered in building 5 at the Neolithic Site of Çatalhöyük
Img00010.jpeg/oedipan II (inversion 82) 135 X 135cm, 2002
Following Page 151
Readymade source *11a.jpeg* - the digital Internet image, 2003
Reverse contour drawing of the digital readymade *11a.jpeg*, 2003
Following Page 152
Reversed maze drawn onto the back of the grid of *11a.jpeg,* 2003
Reverse Painting *11a.jpeg,* (detail)
Following Page 153
Caravaggio, *Bacchino Malato* (Sick Bacchus), c.1593
Martin Heine, *11a.jpeg*/Carravaggio Series (inversion 86), 2003

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 Zizek. 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 Sloterdjik 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 Sloterdjik 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 rosiness 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 kaput*, (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 Piccinini has no problem with the subjection of laboratory rats or models to the market, that she can sees 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 Macquarie 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 Pippilotti 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 Zizek 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 Zizek 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 as 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 Caravagio* 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 *Tractus 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 Zizek *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.

Chapter 1

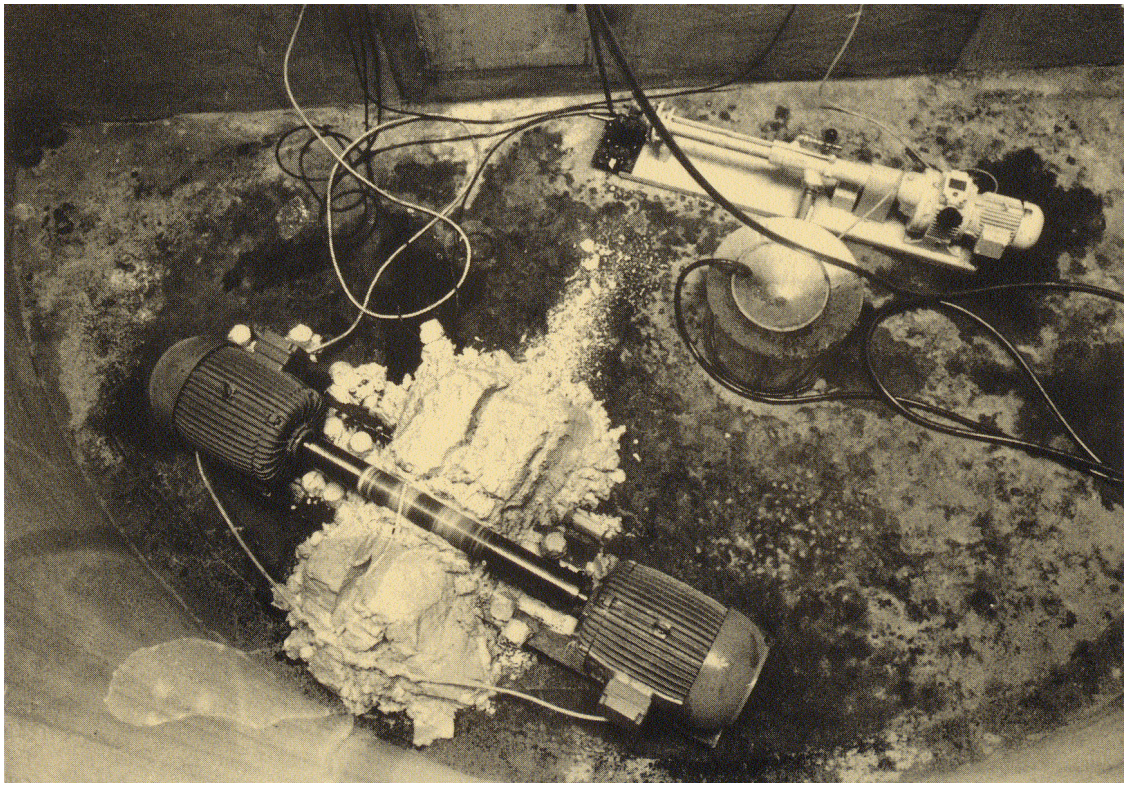
Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz:
The inaccessibility of Beuys' actions and installation works and the difficulties of presenting a liberating and humanistic art to the subsequent generation of artists.

Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz (The Honigpumpe in the Work Place) stands as the example through which the inaccessibility of Beuys' actions and installation work become most apparent. Beuys' sculptures and performances are time-based devices. They point to a moment or to transient qualities of objects and nature. Durability and the values of 'things' are made to conform to the finite and changing qualities of life. Because of the combination of materials he chose, as well as the critical discourse that accompanied his work and his image, Beuys' art will always remain somewhat inaccessible to the subsequent generation.

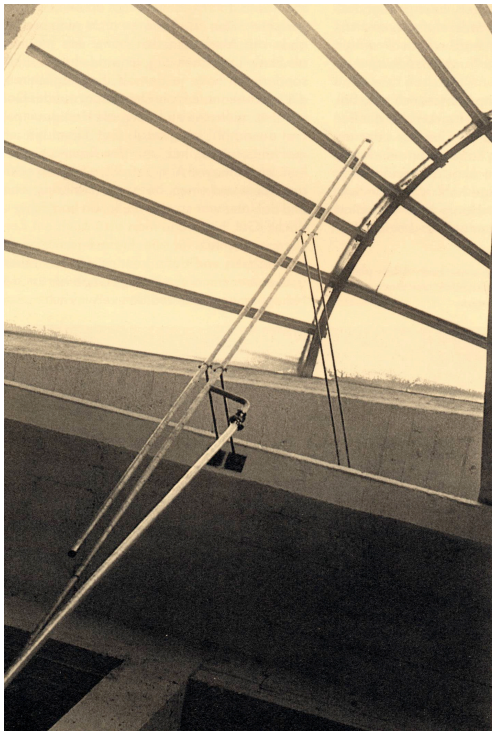
Beuys presented the installation, in association with his own innovation the *Free International University* (FIU), for the *documenta* 6 in Kassel, Germany. It is an important experiment, a comparison of reality and art, a juxtaposition of life as a social commitment and the creative needs of the individual. It was 'launched' from the lowest point of the staircase rotunda. Beuys connected several rooms of the Museum Fridericianum with a large system of plastic pipes. The honey pump - consisting of electro-motors – was at the foot of the staircase pumping honey up the staircase of the Fridericianum. The pipes displayed the function of circulation as a symbol of life. The functional quality of the flowing honey was derived from his symbolic use of fat, wax and honey in previous performances and installations.

The concept of life as an organic and organised system underlies the *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz.* The strategic position of this transient installation questioned the need for and the social responsibility of art in society.

The human dimension was portrayed through an 'organic' sign, evident in the course of circulation of honey through a large plastic tube, that extended through all the rooms in the *Fridericianum*. Circulation is a sign of life, as in the circulation of the blood and of the interdependence of all life in the life cycle. It is also a fundamental image of the life of societies, through which all culture, wisdom and wealth circulate. The honey that circulated through this tube, was an emblem, a material equivalent, of the creative thought processes attributed to human beings. It indicated that they are not fundamentally a product of instrumental reason but a necessary requirement of life for all. That is the significance of Beuys' observation that everyone is an artist.



Joseph Beuys, *Honey Pump*, 1977, (card number one), original graphic – Free International University, Photo: Caroline Tisdall.



Joseph Beuys, *Honey Pump*, 1977, head section of the Honey Pump Installation.

Beuys' expression 'everyone is an artist' which is quoted many times, does not entail that everyone is automatically qualified to be an artist and able to show their work in galleries. It rather implies the notion that human beings are bound by desire to live life creatively. Thus 'being' an artist means to cope with objects, memories and experiences, to meet everyday needs creatively.

In the process of pumping from low to high and back, the *Honigpumpe* reveals a natural flow of life and ideas harmonising the differences of object and thought. At the highest point Beuys imagined something like a 'head part' in which the honey did not flow but stood still, was 'kind of blocked'. For Beuys this was an important point in the whole installation. Beuys wished to show that, for art to flow freely through life and society, the limitations of the human condition must be overcome by freedom of thought, by a permanent desire for freedom:

> And there was also a head organ. There was a long large tube that reached up underneath the roof – Roof is eventually the head – and there was a bend and the honey was stuck in there, the honey did just not move anymore. On one point the honey was fixed. Indeed I had the impression that there must be something like a Brain, like a head, were up there in the head something gets blocked and overwhelms the function of the head, there up under the roof of the documenta.[31]

Beuys' remarks indicate the challenge that any attempt look beyond the ordinary production of art must encounter. This approach was much more than just a symbolic interpretation of experience or a symbolic account of memory. The material, honey became an aspect of the finite nature of living things. The power of time passing, shown through time–based objects and moving parts, can be used through art to change the nature of that life. This was a liberating experience for every individual who saw it. The close proximity of pumping honey lent immediacy to the honey pump that engaged every spectator. They became part of Beuys' creative and playful activity and hence adding their presence to the totality of the art project.

The need for this liberating act of presence and engagement has a strange background. For a long time now the premises of modernism have been slowly transformed. Originally modernism told a story about changes within contemporary experience and sensibility. Now modernity has been emptied out as it were to become merely an abstract product of exchange whose contents hardly matter. The works of the American Expressionists mark the point at which self-referential abstractions emerged in art. The artists of that time began to concern themselves with an analytical and self-referential art, thereby transforming modern art, and its theory. The current paradoxical valorisation of Picasso has arisen because he initially worked within the story–telling mode but his work is now presented solely in terms of its exchange value.

The non-representational took over the aesthetic and social objectives of art. The work of art was no longer seen as contributing to social concerns but as a technical problem that can be resolved through the logical, rational advance of art. The dominance of instrumental reason in art reached its limit with minimalism.

Although he discussed cubism, by 1925 Ortega y Gasset had already commented in *The Dehumanization of Art* that art was provoking a negative reaction in its audience. According to Ortega y Gasset modern art has the capacity to function like a social *andaqua fortis* that creates two oppositional groups:

> Modern art, on the other hand, will always have the masses against it. It is essentially unpopular: moreover, it is antipopular. Any of its works automatically produces a curious effect on the general public. It divides the public into two groups: one very small, formed by those who are favourably inclined towards it; another very large-the hostile majority. (Let us ignore that ambiguous fauna-the snobs.) Thus the work of art acts like a social agent which segregates from the shapeless mass of the many two different casts of men.[32]

It is sufficient to remember that the master narrative in a painting or any work has significantly changed from one inclusive of society, based on natural realism, to an exclusive theoretical discourse that emphasised the non-representational. Modern Art abandoned empathetic strategies in order to achieve other ends.

This process of segregating art–making from the shapeless mass of many modern theoretical discourses encouraged an art that withdraws from the social as a creative praxis Modern art was transformed into a style that silences critics and deters engagement.

From now on art no longer attempts to speak a public language. Ortega y Gasset's observation indicates that Modern Art is not instantly accessible, especially to the general public. To gain insight into the work of art it is necessary to engage with it at an abstract level. Through its flight into the abstract, art was (and still is) resisting the democratic pressure to serve the mundane desires of society. It is interesting to note, however, that the ever-increasing elements of abstraction lead to a commodification of art that once again invites the masses to participate in the formation of taste through the market.

In fact even the masses are welcome, art is not a democratic process. Art is at once inclusive and exclusive, it cannot be redefined by taking a vote, however, it is available to anyone who wishes to participate, always open to interpretation and manipulation.

Because of the simultaneously inclusive and exclusive nature of art it was vital for Beuys' expanded concept of art to be itself expandable. Beuys' work remains the only sustained attempt to maintain a practice connected to the life cycle.

In Beuys' work resistance takes the form of a 'political' strategy, initiated by Beuys in response to the superficial or abstract qualities, the literal and metaphysical flatness, related only to a self-contained art practice, to be found in American art. This was art for the 'self-made man'. Beuys found it shallow and inconsequential. He set out to undo its premises

The slow extraction of the human form and humane associations from the work of art can be traced back to Marcel Duchamp's invention of the readymade. The creation of art objects became a fetishised form of production, which originated in the mass manufacture of industrial goods. The resolution of the technical aspects of the art object, took place in Duchamp's case through the readymade, which resisted the orthodox procedures of art making. The logic of the readymade ensured that art had to rely, increasingly, on its ability to mimic the physical and metaphysical qualities of industrially produced goods, themselves a parodic inversion of the qualities of the readymade object. The public either had to educate themselves to understand this work as an immediate given or accept exclusion from modern art.

Beuys' art engaged this abstraction from a position of participation and liberation. Beuys' work does not instantly address the masses but speaks directly, through dialogue and action, to the individual. The *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz* illustrates this challenging relationship of art and participation. It embodies social political comments and presents a liberating art that contradicts 'technological' abstraction.

Americans have always had difficulties with Beuys' approach to art. Their understanding of modern art was predominately a variant on the American ideology of 'freedom'. In their juvenile collective hope for the American way, the assurance that everyone has equal rights for freedom and success, they turned the continuum of readymade art into a useful production line that recreates the American dream of freedom and success as dumb show. Art was no longer a human concern but a concern by humans to define the social experimentation of art as a product, defined as widely as possible to increase the chance of the American dream coming true. The analytical and abstract motives in art mingled with the easy production of the readymade and hence developed into a common product to serve an illusion or a dream.

The acceptance of every common product as a potential work of art turns art for the public into a shapeless mass of insignificant objects held in place by the most fragile of aesthetic assertions – mere nomination. Harold Rosenberg cautioned about this growing insignificance in art when he wrote in 1959:

> Kitsch is the daily art of our time, as the vase or the hymn was for earlier generations. For the sensibility it has that arbitrariness and importance which works take on when they are no longer noticeable elements of the environment. In America kitsch is Nature. The Rocky Mountains have resembled fake art for a century….
>
> …Life and Kitsch have become inseparable. Genuine art in our time has made this point again and again-in Cubist collages, the prophylactics of Neo-Plasticism, Surrealist poetry. Using kitsch is one of art's juiciest devices, and a comic revenge for the looting of art by kitsch. Art drinks the corn of the popular, takes it in limited doses as a poison, as a vaccine. It deals with life in the same way. [33]

Through this, negligible forms obtain the appearance of art. The process of fetishisation through which they emerged before becoming artwork determined the contemporary character of art and art institutions. From the sixties onwards contemporary art underwent a passage analogous to the elementary economic route from use value to exchange value. Simple cleverness could and still can bring you a fortune and also recognition as the new style on the market. That perception of clever art, which is still with us today, was mainly inspired by economic rationalism, which recognises only exchange value.

The rational in art remains an issue. Readymade style, with its leaning towards design and its manifest technical neatness, predominates internationally. The notion of readymade has crossed disciplines in art and is now also conventionally used in painting and all other media. The commonality of the readymade object within consumer culture allows an art to flourish as a fetish presentation that accentuates commodity standards.

The readymade originated in American culture as the overriding habitual convention of artistic production and reception. It already dominates international art as an aesthetic franchise, like fast food and pseudo democratic, corporate ideology. Any other artistic or cultural aim is branded as merely local and/or bad art because it exists outside the market franchise.

As a minute element in its expansive drive for domination, through the workings of the market, the United States has achieved and maintained a monopoly in the evaluation and valorisation of art and art making. This is not to say that all art acceptable to the market is made in the USA. Nor is it to suggest that locally based art

practice, fully cognisant of the need for a liberating art cannot occur. It will, however, always be caught up in a series of paradoxes endlessly moving from art with a local 'use value' to art that has no more than an international exchange value.

As Beuys asserted, contemporary art operates through a global franchise from New York. I would include in this the rapidly expanding Asia Pacific art market where everything from iconography to idiom suggests that this is the second phase of the global recruitment of local cultures, which began with display of 'Third World' artists in Paris and Kassel in the 1980's. The exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre,* Centre Pompidou Paris, 1989, led the way. [34]

The peculiarity of Beuys' actions and decaying materials did not fit into that global franchising. They were a pointed attempt to contrive resistance to it as art, grounded at the level of material existence.

Americans struggle with Beuys' art, in terms of the nature of the product and its social use value. For them the progress of the readymade is practical and logical and has therefore a claim to universal articulation. Beuys saw art as a social project that takes its drives from the universal creativity of the individual, whereas for Americans it appears as a regional German art that is involved with the deep-rooted, but firmly bracketed romantic humanism of Goethe, Schiller and Wagner. Here Americans misread humanism as lacking 'exchange value', meaning that it cannot be passively consumed and is not a source of immediate gratification. They cannot deal with the liberating and transcendent power in Beuys' art.

Contrary to American expectations of art as an instrumental construction framed by exchange value, the *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz* Beuys proves that universal concerns and humanism coexist within one body of work.

In her essay *Echoes in America* Joan Rothfuss confirms this misreading of Beuys art to Americans:

> If Beuys aims were universal – concerned with the human condition outside a specific historical moment – then what might it mean for those aims to be 'inherently German' at the same time? Could the two characteristics coexist in a body of work? Perhaps; but if the 'inherently German' is contained within the 'universal', why haven't Americans given Beuys a warm reception?[35]

For Americans, universal art appeared in the form of paintings by Frank Stella and sculptures by Don Judd. They could display a logical principle, an analytical directive that focused on a purely technical approach, to rectify, to fix art as a non-representational activity. This logic alienated the art audience from the human

dimension in art. The average audience read the non-representational as a merely decorative affirmation of consumer directed values.

Overall, their art appeared inward looking, individual and confirmed the exclusive character to which Ortega y Gasset pointed, standardized to the readymade of Marcel Duchamp. This analytical approach initiated an exclusion from practice of the liberating potential of art, the end of creative and material liberation.

Beuys' expanded project of art, by contrast, aimed at social participation and also at liberation as a continuous creative praxis – art as a permanent revolution. Within this liberating challenge Beuys' art emerges, in practice, as a continuous creative negotiation between difference and the social.

The social affiliations that the installation *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz* strove to accommodate emerged through Beuys' work on expanding the 'idea' as a third dimension besides nature and abstract art. The work is staged, between discourse and experimentation, as a 'real' or 'action' event. The attrition of the merely abstract artwork is expanded to a new base within social activity. The *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz* deliberately confronts the readymade through the expansion of the possibilities of art as an essentially social practice. This now takes centre stage.

The *Honigpumpe* as the creative sign was expanded and explored through Beuys' dialogue at the FIU, the Honey Pump and the working place were combined in a total artwork at the *documenta 6*. Both initiatives are bound by one strategy – Beuys' desire to assign art away from consumption and the market towards a permanent useful place in social life.

The *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz* served one purpose, to replace the exchange value of a single object as the prime source of artistic representation with an overarching concept of art practice as a permanent activity, that transcended the significance of individual art objects. It was anti-object, anti-result driven, anti-performance outcomes. It aimed to exchange the per-formativeness in art for a collective statement that favours creativity as the prime social rationale. Beuys understood the *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz* to lead away from the significance of art as object making activity to confront the individual spectator with a 'material reality' that is relevant to a life of constant change. The creative, but also corroding, process of life and the living organism was, for Beuys, the only true 'art material' able to reveal the 'transient' but also the liberating reality of life.

The symbolic substances that Beuys chose for a liberating creativity in art were materials such as felt, fat, oil, honey, and even food products that had been painted. Beuys worked through the fleeting and transient qualities of these materials so as to make his art impossible to conceive as a product for exchange in the market. He remarks about transient reality of his work:

> *My objects need to be understood as a stimulation to transform the idea of plasticity. They want to provoke thoughts of what a plastic art could be and how the concept of plastic is expanding into the invisible substance and thereby can be used by everyone.*
>
> *Forms of thoughts how do we form our thoughts.*
> *Speech patterns - how we transform those thoughts into words*
> *Social Plastic - how we form and gestalt (design) the world in which we live-in:*
> Plastic is an evolutionary process, every Human is an Artist.
>
> *That is why nothing is already determined or finished. All procedures are continued: chemical reactions, fermenting processes, transmutation of colour, decay, drying up. Everything is in transformation.*[36]

In regard to Beuys' art it must be mentioned here that even the transformative and transient qualities in art fell pray to the everlasting delusion that it is possible to own the liberating potential of art through a market transaction, a false aura of freedom conferred by exchange value. Many collectors nowadays purchase the short-lived objects that Beuys made in his heyday. They want to possess, to fix the fleeting potential that is in reality constant changing renegotiating its artistic use value.

The liberating function in Beuys' art creates a challenge – not only for the collector – but also for anyone who wants silent art as a non-representational entity. In the non-representational the human element is degraded from an immediate reality to a form of artificial indifference – a totalising system of equivalences.

For Beuys it was important to uphold the human in art by symbolically aligning art to the real time qualities of his material, their decay and ageing. In Beuys' artworks ontological changes, changes in the very nature of being, occur throughout the fabric of time. Therefore the work is a mere trace of process of creation, in short the artwork exists in real time as a wearing object and not through the mere perception of art admiration or its appropriation as an item of exchange.

Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz revealed its social commitment through this all pervasive aura of reality. For Beuys, impermanence is the original source of art, not the object, but the 'thought' that initiates the creative aspiration of the individual over a given period of time. The conscious individual is the artist but not as a maker who has worked out the market requirements for the artistic object; but rather as an individual

that knows that the condition of 'being' is to be engaged in creative activity as a fundamental directive in life. To be alive is to be active and creative. This activity is, for Beuys, not only pleasurable living but a conscious existence that contributes creatively to social concerns in society.

It is important to stress that for Beuys 'thought' implied something far more expansive than mere problem solving or platonic abstraction – something far closer to perpetual engagement with a universal schema of all experience and knowledge. That is why he found environmental activism so attractive.

In the expression 'everyone is an artist' the liberating qualities of being 'different' as positive action are revealed. In that context everyone has the potential to contribute differences to society, to enrich a mainstream culture. Participation is here more valorised than any single result. Through the process of creative awareness we are encouraged to view the challenges of life from various perspectives and hence to be liberated to initiate art as manifestation of creative difference. It is not the object, or the object maker, but the human being that desires liberation through the simultaneous making of objects and ideas. Praxis, in Beuys' view, is diffuse, present everywhere, it is the means by which an object emerges through participation, rather than as the means to an end, the solution to a fixed problem as set by the art market.

This notion that human existence is the permanent field of creation through which artistic outcomes are slowly revealed and the only possible instrument for both art and life, absolutely contradicts those who intentionally stage the reified image of the artist, the super artist as a negotiable art object.

Beuys' ideas about art were absolutely opposite to those of Andy Warhol. In Warhol's conception of art, the artist as the artwork is not the human being but the human being that deliberately processes its own image, its self-constructed ego as a functioning art object. One becomes removed, distanced from the ongoing self-awareness of one's own creative potential.

Warhol misses the awareness of one's own 'being' as a living creativity that contributes a social awareness that confronts the marketable ego as a monadic 'personal' art image. For Beuys, social awareness was the most important difference, an awareness, which he hoped to awaken in every human being. It was the opposite of Warhol's aim. In Warhol 'art imitates life' by simple reiteration and through that imitation it becomes 'real'. For Warhol the idea of 'where art resides' in society is articulated through his well-formulated and widely spoken principles such as 'every one will be famous for

fifteen minutes'; and the notion that he saw in himself a 'machine-like being', who wished to appropriate the literalness of life as an art form – in other words, a human version of the readymade.

Warhol saw reality as an exact equivalent to human consciousness in which awareness is revealed through the surfaces of everyday things. His notion of reality as an object to be manipulated but never transformed – what you see is what you get – is the logical conclusion. Warhol's literalness does not derive from a need for liberation but presents the sources of liberation as a one-dimensional parody of life that takes its conviction from the omnipresent exchange values of the market. His omnivorous collecting is a symptom of his blind, perhaps baffled dependence on the market, not a revolt against its hierarchy of values.

In the context of the object as the only human reality, Warhol realised a form of freedom. The dilemma in Warhol's realisation however, lay with the limitation of what readymade objects present to us – a readymade universe. Warhol contributes nothing more to the social dimension of life than himself as a blank persona who reiterates objective literalness as a form of pseudo–liberation on the basis that art must be instant, thereby mimicking the immediacy as indifferent spontaneity of his art.

The 24-hour film project *Empire State Building* can be seen as one of those spontaneous experiments. By imitating the passing of time, in a 24 hour movie, he thought to master aspects of life as 'reality'. But this is not so, because in screening the film to an audience in real time, reality as an event does not recreate literally the encounter of the time where and when the film was recorded. Nor is literalness present in the attempt to translate time and visual imagery. Literalness and reality in the work of art reside within the individual participation of humans relating to the screening in a creative manner. The audience for this film sequence creates their own individual realities as they watch the movie. Warhol's literal reality emerges from human involvement as an experience that is radically different from the human reality he intended to communicate.

Warhol's literal dealing with his environment through an imitation, or better a mimicry, of that reality in a 'what you see is what you get' fashion leaves no space for a contemplative or active transformation. It is no accident that his greatest 'legacy' has been to the fashion industry. A clear difference to Beuys' work emerges. Fleeting, almost composition-like, creations emphasise the metamorphic aspects of Warhol's work. Any entity that art projects must be conscious of moments, places, debates, and conditions of change.

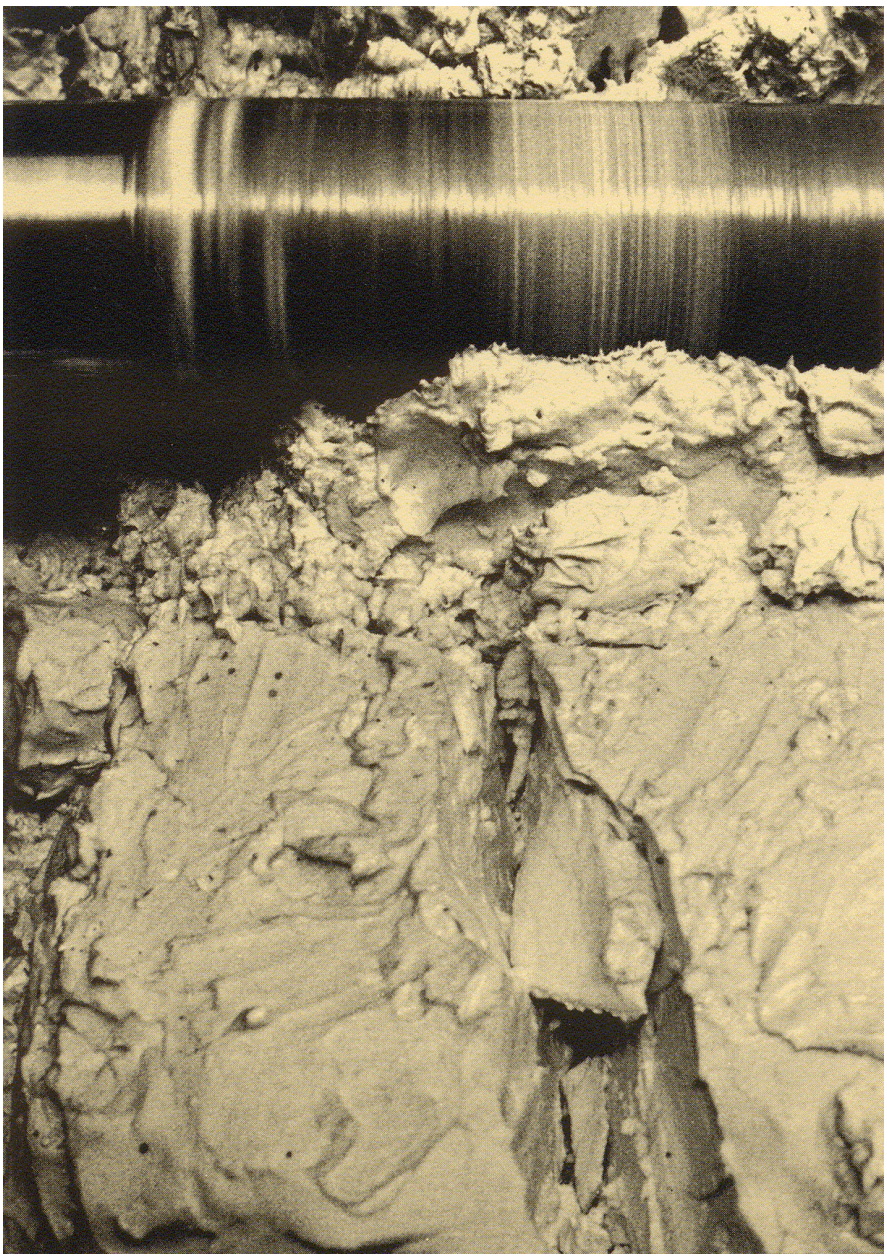
Beuys 'resisted' by shifting art from the studio to the public domain. Art happens wherever there is a conscious individual engaged in a creative process. The art object itself becomes part of an expanded thought process whereby its artistic value shifts from one of exchange to a value of social interaction.

In the *Honigpumpe* installation the flow of honey and the large pipes winding through the Fridericianum were there to allow the audience to ponder the space, linking the self, the imaginary and the material world in a form of praxis. The aura of communal 'presence' in this project is produced because the installation functions as a timing device that challenges objective, instrumental, introjected, individualism in art through its requirement for dialogue.

In the materialisation of Beuys' work theory cannot be considered separately from practice. Sculpture is always interconnected with thought, expression and desire. Just as the *Honigpumpe* project was present everywhere in the *Fridericianum* so were people who got involved and liberated themselves at the FIU through debate and creative thinking. The installation according to Beuys resembles a collective wholeness, an organic construct that combines participation and object in a whole sign of human life. Art is literally emerging as a sign-like circulation process resembling human desire to bring form from life. Beuys explained this in detail in the dialogue about the *documenta* 6 FIU and the *Honigpumpen* project with Bockemühl and Harlan:

> I would have never wanted to realise this as a independent sculpture, because I had at that time an offer to initiate the Honey pump at the debut of the Free International University in the *dokumenta*. Having a possibility like that I said ok and I drove there and had a look at the space. I found two alternatives spaces, one was a rectangular room and the other was half a circle. And behind those spaces there was such a place, I thought: good, here I could accomplish a sign for the Free International University. And around the Honey pump people can immediately materialise the 'fundamental concept' of the Honey Pump. Not only as sign and machine but also intellectual, thus to connect and talk with other people, and inform them selves for hundred days. The Honey Pump is not only conceivable as a thing, as a machine or sculpture.
> Actually humans belong to this project, which provide the Honey Pump with potentialities of certain human principles – but ultimately it is a mechanism and can only be accurate in a figurative sense – to illustrate for example circulation processes in sign like form.[37]

It was in the 'get together' and in the dialogue, the metaphor of social sculpture, that Beuys found the resistant and liberating potential in art. Warhol's literal object art has no similar dimensions, no dynamic relation to its audience



Joseph Beuys, *Honey Pump,* 1977, (card number five), original graphic – Free International University, Photo: Staeck/Steidel.



Joseph Beuys, *Honey Pump,* 1977, (card number four), original graphic – Free International University, Photo: Staeck/Steidel.



Joseph Beuys, *Honey Pump*, 1977, (card number ten), original graphic – Free International University, Photo: Caroline Tisdall. The Photo shows Joseph Beuys, *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz* and FIU Lecture room.

Contemporary artists, in thrall to the market, identify Beuys' art as too 'close' to political activity. It offers no sense of security as to how it might come in useful for their own liberating development. Artists do not appreciate that the 'expanded concept of art' speaks all the time and its gestures and forms exist far beyond lifestyle.

Beuys often stated that language is a part of practice and process and hence a matter of creative interpretation. He was explicit that his work is not autobiographical, that it is an evolving series of symbols, a continual extension of thoughts through the means of visual signs such as transient materials. Speech and dialogue are the essence of sculpture through which art 'plasticizes', that is to say, humanises, reality. Beuys explains:

> Thought and speech should be seen as plastic in the same way that a sculptor sees a plastic object. My main interest here is to begin with speech and to let the materialization follow as a composite of thought and action. The most important thing to me is that man, by virtue of his products, has experience of how he can contribute to the whole and not only produce articles but become a sculptor or architect of the whole social organism.[38]

Thought and speech were for Beuys the artwork, the creative substance, the medium he used to widen the concept of art into the social domain, to involve him and the public in politics and other fields of social management. Nonetheless he maintained that art was an existential form of creation and does not function through social conventions. That is why the conceptual structure in Beuys' work is very uneconomic, politically unresolved, and very difficult to connect with on a mundane level, to reconcile into the commodity character of the art market. These 'contradictions' make it difficult for others to follow his strategies.

Beuys became physically and mentally a vehicle for realising ideas. For him this meant not only to be part of practice for a given time, that is to say, for a performance or any other instigation; but to 'be' and live an active constant life that is creative and dedicated to extending the conception of art. It was Beuys' aim to inspire and live as an example in his art, to encourage the realisation that every human being is constantly involved in a creative process.

To read symbolic connotations into Beuys' work is to misread the expanded concept of art. His work is not a symbolic gesture nor is it a combination of materials to evoke a novel response. It is an act of duty and play. The whole *Honigpumpe* idea embraces this humanistic and playful concept, one could say that it is simultaneously realistic and symbolic.

In the *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz* the initial thought is not based on the origin of some event or happening which as a consequence determined the choice of material and interpretation or rather reveals a clear statement that places art at the foundations of human existence.

Furthermore the challenge of a free university that teaches art best represents the legacy that Beuys leaves to subsequent generations. The free education and the intertwining sign of flowing honey rejects the edicts of exchange and consumption in the process of making art. Beuys wanted to show everyone a field of liberated art. He was driven by the desire to find a third way for art to share in social life. Through the notion of transcendence – the expanded concept of art – art is everywhere possible and can engage everything and everyone that wants to be creative. Beuys as the educator and shamanic subject, his installations and drawings as well as the use of speech in a 'Gestalt' (form)[39] modelled the expanded concept so that it could be put to use. His novel way of using language as an artistic tool brought art practice closer than ever before to human reality.

Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz will always evolve, seeking the authentic self through speech and debate and through an assembling of materials. Nothing could be more real, more attached to the human condition and more confrontational of the symbolism and mimicry of contemporary art.

Beuys' strategic response resists norms, it works contrary to *vox populi*, the popular will. It laughs at constructed history and the falsification of memories that contribute to a performative art. For Beuys the all-encompassing concept of art was an essential device to explain the 'human condition' as 'the practice of art'.

This attempt to 'decode' art as a condition of the human, can act as a voice for the liberation of all humanity and its aspirations. For artists, the unknown and the challenge to be playfully creative posed by the work can only have relevance to life if the artist's mind is already free from the masking, misleading effects of rhetoric. In the liberating work of Beuys, his actions make use of rhetoric and thereby bend the imagination beyond phantasm into something real. The absurd becomes the potential of the real, able to alter perception and comprehension so as to shed light on the relation of life and art itself.

Hannah Wilke presented her *Intra Venus,* which I was privileged to see when I visited New York in 1993, in the same context of the undeceived struggle for freedom. In *Intra-Venus* a series of chromatic super-glossy images that marked out a site of mortality were shown. Wilke turned from a documentation of death to artefacts that foreshadow

and make real the factuality the real of death and decay. Her project does not promise alternatives but swipes promise tragically away so that one arrives at a point zero. The artist undertook the task of documenting her own tragic destiny. In the face of the inevitable result, the task of documentation is absurd, but, nonetheless, it is an act of liberation that touches, through creative thought, the very point at which artistic reasoning is given material substance, the moment when meaning enters a work of art.

Wilke distances herself from ideologies as a source of creation in her use of the immediate quality of photographic media. She makes her mortal substance the basis of meaning. Art at this moment does not negotiate but emerges from Wilke's own experience of fear, anger and courage in the form of 'true' works of art.

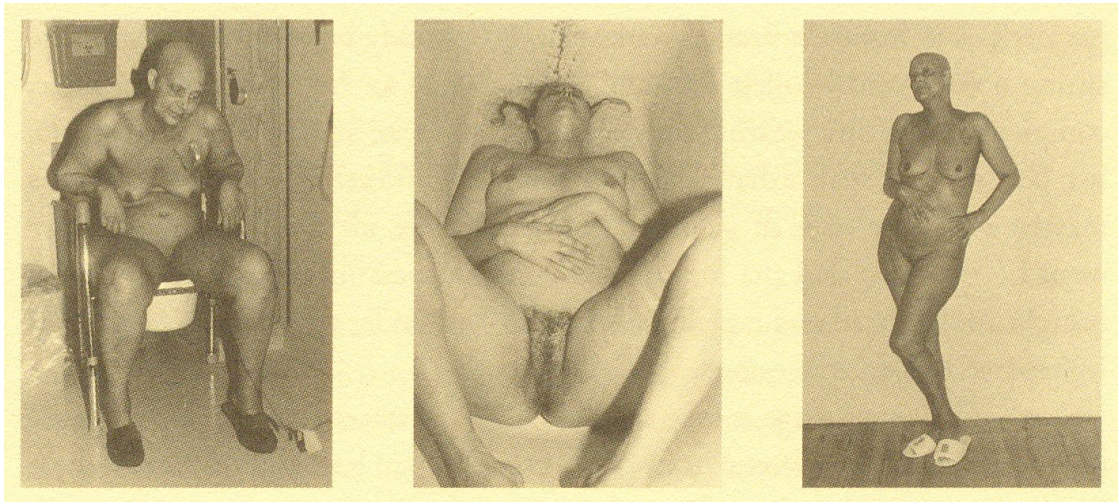
In previous exhibitions, Wilke also used bloodstained bandages from her bone marrow harvests, hair from chemotherapy, medical instruments turned into collages and sculptures. In *Intra Venus* this became an expanded art language that trades the playful with the deadly real and confounds illusion with documents of the deforming effects that come with this deadly illness. Many different interpretations challenged the audience.

For me, the photographic images suggested an attempt to deconstruct objects and idols and a will to confront me, the spectator as I attempted to comprehend the relation of woman and desire. I felt I was exposed to Wilke's bravery, confrontation, self-investigation, her way of saying that this is what life does to human beings. Moreover, I was aware that as the images were being shown at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York in 1993, Wilke had already died of lymphoma. The audience at that show had to face their own psychological awareness, possibly realising, as I did, the fragility of the boundaries between self and the ever-changing environment. I found myself in a position to play mortality against commodity, attempting to overlook bandages and formaldehyde so as to focus on those very glossy, chromatic aesthetic results.

One realises that such art works are not for now, but always for later. As the spectator I want to defer my own fate and destiny. I made an effort to find gaps in Wilke's images so as not to be confronted with a swollen and bruised body. One experiences a kind of reluctance to enter this site of documented mortality because to enter is to acknowledge that art is human and without boundaries. It became a site of cathartic action. Wilke's deconstruction of the artist myth, through her death, was drawn into contradiction with the ever increasing value of her work



Hannah Wilke, *Brushstrokes, January 19, 1992,* 1992, artist's hair on arches paper, 33 X 25.5 inches. Photograph: Dennis Cowley, Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, Copyright Estate of Hannah Wilke



Hannah Wilke (with Donald Goddard), 1992, *August 17, 1992/February 15, 1992/ August 9,1992,* #3From Intra Venus1992-93, three chromagenic supergloss performalist self-portrait photographs,71.5 X 47.5 inches each. Photograph: Dennis Cowley, Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, Copyright Estate of Hannah Wilke

Wilke's work did not close off the creative, liberating elements within her photographs. She expanded her own private experience into a liberated dimension, available to all but where few can follow. In her work, the desire of the spectator to find aesthetic equilibrium within the work of art fails since, if one conflict is settled, another opens up. This is a similar experience to that of trying to define the absolute meaning of one's own life.

It is this absurd but universal dilemma that prompts the audience in Beuys' performance to identify with his proposal that 'everyone is an artist'.

Wilke's rationale was to touch one's soul, to connect with the absurdity of a creative death. In her work one is able to think creatively about that which negates the aesthetic, to think of the bandages and the confrontational, but also distanced look of Wilke. One becomes aware, however, that only through that contradiction can the liberating beauty of the work be experienced in its full reality.

Liberating work such as this has no given agenda; it is not made to please. Rhetoric and rules have no importance within its profound absurdity. The artist has found the freedom to express contradictory feelings of destiny and desire. For Wilke wanted to show the slow decay of her body in artistic confrontational terms, adding another dimension of aesthetic appreciation.

I attempted to identify the body in the photographs as the artist's self-portrait, but I was constantly reminded of artistic artefacts. Thus the title *Intra-Venus* pointed the spectator to photos of the fertility or death cult figure known as the Venus of Willendorf 20,000 BC or, more importantly Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, 1482. Their strange artistic combination of medicine, technology and artefacts challenged the audience. An unsettling feeling of not being totally satisfied by categorising Wilke's images gave her photographs an outside appearance that can only be described as a state of liberation.

Wilke's photographs challenge the specific perspectives and categories of art history. She translates them into a contemporary art site where nothing is perfect and her art, amidst all this composition, reminds the spectators of their humanity. The spectator faces not closure but liberation, the knowledge that art is as diverse and real as life.

Beuys' *documenta* installation and Hannah Wilke's *Intra–Venus* both project the idea of a liberating art into the future. For both 'art' symbolises a call to all interested in art to evolve towards an open humanistic revelation that is never defined as a goal. For both the critical elements in their art are confrontational but essential to combat the restrictive and trivial conditions that petrify praxis in contemporary art.

NOTES

[31] Volker Harlan, *Was ist Kunst? Werkstattgespräche mit Beuys* (What is art? A conversation, in a workshop seminar with Beuys) (Stuttgart: Verlag Urachhaus Johannes M. Mayer GmbH, 1986), 55, (my own translation).
The dialogue with Beuys was held in Bochum Germany on the 23 April 1979. Participants in that dialogue were Volker Harlan, Michael Bockemühl and other unnamed contributors, a great part of that dialogue is dedicated to *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz, documenta 6* Kassel 1977.

[32] Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The dehumanization of Art*, and other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, second printing 1972), 5.

[33] Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New,* 264-265.

[34] Editions du Centre Pompidou, *Les Magiciens de la Terre,* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, 1989).

[35] Gene Ray, ed., *Joseph Beuys/Mapping the Legacy*, essay by Joan Rothfuss, *Joseph Beuys: Echoes in America*, (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, Sarasota, FL: John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art 2001), 39.

[36] Harlan *Was ist Kunst?,* 13, (my own translation).
Given that for Beuys words were part of the creativity process for the social sculpture I have left the text in italics as has been written in the original German issue. The reason for that is to keep semantic meanings of the translation as close as possible to the original German text.

[37] Harlan *Was ist Kunst?* 53-55, (my own translation).

[38] Charles Harrison & Paul Wood, eds. *Art in Theory 1900 – 1990*, *An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, (London: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 890.

[39] This form of speech could also be seen as way of 'maintaining that perceptions, reactions, etc., are gestalts and hence forms, as noted in *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*.

Chapter 2

***The Honigpumpe is kaputt* - The Honey Pump is broken:**
The notion of The Honigpumpe has been constructed but the process of circulation is down. A critical investigation that I presented at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery in 1999/2000.

One must exercise caution and self-restraint in the current climate of 'business art' in order to delay the process of creative repetition through which one hopes to find alternative directions. Through delay and constant confrontation one resists the intense pressure to produce art to a deadline and a bottom line. Every artist knows, however that even in the midst of confrontation, the ultimate outcome will be that one is returned to the instrumental, caught up in a market that demands intense, ever expanding art production. Any work, even the most resistant runs the risk of 'recuperation' for its exchange value. These days you may become a star involuntarily, because the market makes it so. In that sense contemporary art lacks the full possibility of resistance. It expands the Hegelian dialectic without reflection. In fact it has brought us nothing more than art as a Hegelian shopping mall, an art of multiple choices, with no sense of its own destiny.

In my art praxis I always insist that, as the artist, I remain an outsider who lets the creative play itself out in relation to the artistic and social environment. I am sure many have heard similar comments but what is different here is a unique creative condition, to observe and respect all that reflects upon my art and my relation to it. The important thing is to observe other observers, to note what they are doing and then immediately to force myself to see that action as a reversal of what I want to do as art. The audience can be an instantaneous cultural and political mirror.

In this context *The Honigpumpe is kaputt* has several didactic elements. The most pressing are, the ever-present Super–Artist myth and the performative nature of current art. I placed a symbolic pumping device in the centre of the installation, thereby making the claim that exasperated art and the triumph of the artistic ego obstruct the pump, through this obstruction a flow of creativity arises which is peripheral to the artistic desire for social and aesthetic integrity.

Although I used the honey as a substance in accordance with Beuys' idea of honey, there is a fundamental alteration in my concept of the honey as a metaphor. In my performance, honey is seen as a sweet substance, a sticky element, which differs from

Beuys' idea of honey, as the sign for life and energy. In this performance, honey does not transform artistic desire, not even in large quantities, because of its tempting sticky nature – it merely clings on, like unresolved creativity.

The metaphor contrasts the substance of art to the tempting sweetness of satisfaction for the contemporary artist when he encounters public recognition. I initiated a concept of placing a readymade object in the centre of the gallery. The setting of the work can be described as follows. A plastic sheet on the ground symbolised the demarcation zone in which the act of ridicule occurs. Taking advantage of two installed movable walls at the gallery I reduced the performance space to a small corridor. On each wall I placed a shelf left over from the set up in my studio, in which I displayed discarded material from my studio. In the centre of this corridor like setting I placed a red cat litter tray and in it the broken honey pump. The pump was taken from a hospital rubbish container and was used to circulate medical liquids in human bodies or their like. Above the tray and the pump I positioned the *sexy little watercolour* painting. I made the *sexy little watercolour* many years ago. I use it as a reference for artistic hope and naivety. At this instant in the work the sexy little watercolour is connecting with the spitting pump sketching out the absurd but creative attempt to make nice things.

A microphone attached to the pump increased the noise of broken pump sound over a stereo amplifier. In relation to the self-ridicule and provocation, I wrote part texts such as Salaud, Lumpenprolitariat, (translatable as dirty souls and scoundrels). A chessboard made of linoleum was placed on the plastic sheeting indicating the end of art making, according to the ideas of Duchamp. Further away I located two Mickey Mouse figures and a business suitcase. The two Disney figures were connected via a starter cable usually used for cars. Overall the setting of the installation was done to underline its ironic contents and also so that as soon the act of honey pouring triggered laughter in the audience, a collective act of self-ridicule would emerge relating to my selves and the ironic objects.

The Honey act was carefully thought out and every move had to be exposed to the absurdity and ridicule that must occur during the performance. At the outset of action I first liquidised the honey in a big white paint bucket. Artist and paint bucket became symbolic increasing the tension and the artistic ridicule of the creative gesture that followed. Having liquidised the honey I drew an upside down smiley face on both sides of the bucket. Next I fed the honey pump some of the liquidised honey. The pumping could begin. A cathartic act followed, I lifted the bucket and tipped the entire content over my head as I allowed the bucket to cover my face and rest on my shoulders.



Martin Heine, *The Honigpumpe is kaputt*, performance/installation, 1999–2000, video still by Caroline Heine, © by Martin Heine.



Martin Heine, *The Honigpumpe is kaputt,* performance/installation, 1999-2000, Photo: and © Martin Heine, (Installation detail).

The honey flowed all over the place. The bucket showed now a smiley face ironically challenging the audience to begin laughter. The tackiness of honey and laughter about my absurd gesture resonated in the galley, as a way of a flattering the audience and sweetening art.

As soon as the flattering tackiness of the work has been achieved in the appropriate way, for the arts' establishment, a cathartic result emerges that exposes predictable art, the sweetener, that gives you artistic success. Now, the honey is not directed inside a tube as a symbolic human organism, but is all over the *'field of cultural production'* (Bourdieu), a truly opportunistic and messy event. In the current situation, creative energy cannot flow because of the paranoid and procrastinating behaviours attributed to the artists. Doing it for the 'artistic field' demands appropriate behaviour by the artist to harvest the sweetness of being.

In *The Honigpumpe is kaputt* I situated the overflow, the uncontrollable creative excess of original thought, in the irrevocable gesture of overflowing honey. From the 'smiley bucket' the honey pours over the artist slowly engulfing him as the initiator of the process and merging with the objects on the floor. This is a cathartic gesture of an all-encompassing creativity that seeks to be liberated. Whilst the pump is merely making any old noise, the free flow of honey, independent of the pump, becomes a sweet sticky flowing mass that swallows up the artist and all objects close to him. The 'smiley bucket', makes the point that the elements of the 'creative' are independent of the pumps and pipes and of any institution.

The Installation/Performance evoked disbelief and surprise. It allowed me to reinforce that creativity must maintain a private space in order to express language but as creativity liberated from anticipation conditioned by the chronological history of art. In the performance the public was not sure if my gestures and arrangements met the preconditioned requirements of the audience for contemporary art. Difference expanded as an autonomous act, confronting the public through playful elements of self-ridicule.

The sequencing and placement of objects in the performance is autonomous, they must be seen as a critique coherent with Bürger's observations about the avant-garde. See Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* 1984.[40] In his theory he claims that the anticipated liberation of the avant-garde has not come about. Instead the avant-garde has become a commodity in itself. Even the most remote art-lover would nowadays appreciate the complex and resistant elements that are at work in avant-garde art. In this instance, the avant-garde refers to the kind of artists who have prolonged the slow failure of the neo-avant-garde.

The dysfunction of the pump – the heart of the installation - challenged the artistic falsifications already in place and the intolerance which the bourgeoisie has for art that resists the norms of market performance. A general change occurred, from a detached watchful audience, to the inclusion of artist and audience in the overall laughter, amongst sticky honey and assemblages of second-rate art.

This situation of collective catharsis and ridicule shows that serious modifications have taken place in relation to the social theory of Beuys' *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz*. The situation no longer included the audience and their opinion of this performance or their expectations about modern art. The performance forces itself onto the audience and the artist, who does not want to be part of 'the portrayal of bourgeois self-understanding' (Bürger). It is important that the audience could not be distanced nor were they invited to participate; rather they automatically experienced a cathartic reaction that turned the whole art situation on its head. The significance of the reception of the work gave way to the serious humour that emerged from each individual spectator. The assignment of the avant-garde project in contemporary art has been removed to the scrapheap of tradition.

One must now question the contemporary pretension in art that embellishes the resistant character of the avant-garde. In their reluctance to break free from market constraints, artists adjust their individual creativity to respond to the new market conventions in art. They produce different embellishments but adapt to the conventional condition of making art a useful piece of property. *The Honigpumpe is kaputt* works not from but *in* the scrapheap of tradition. It offered an ironic resistance to anyone who wishes to transform avant-garde intentions into a fetishised art product. Bürger explains:

> If an artist today signs a stove pipe and exhibits it, that artist certainly does not denounce the art market but adapts to it. Such adaptation does not eradicate the idea of individual creativity, it affirms it, and the reason is the failure of the avant-gardiste intent to sublate art. Since now the protest of the historical avant-garde against art as institution is accepted as *art*, the gesture of protest of the neo-avant-garde becomes inauthentic. Having been shown to be irredeemable, the claim to be protest can no longer be maintained. This fact accounts for the arts-and-crafts impression that works of the avant-garde not infrequently convey. [41]

This line of thinking leads straight back to the source, that is, it leads back to the historical avant-garde and with it the attempts to step outside an institutionalised aesthetic. These attempts now appear worn out and decorative. They affirm a state of mimesis in individual creativity and act to affirm the art market. The re-assignment of the avant-garde is now not a move to resistance but to an overall institution that makes



Martin Heine, *The Honigpumpe is kaputt*, performance/installation, 1999–2000, video still by Caroline Heine, © by Martin Heine. Moments of Cartharsis.



Martin Heine, *The Honigpumpe is kaputt*, performance/installation, 1999/2000, Photo: and © Martin Heine, (Installation detail).

'artistry' out of confrontational motives in art. *The Honigpumpe is kaputt* takes this into consideration. It expands from Beuys' installation and works through it to a liberating space of art. Therefore the *Honigpumpe is kaputt* is not an imitation but a sequel to Beuys' *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz*. A new chapter in an ironic but liberating process occurs, that challenges the sublation drive of the spectator, the same person who wants to see art function only within social conventions.

The leading concern in *The Honigpumpe is kaputt* as a sequel, is the myth of the super artist, and with it, the aesthetic dictatorship of the art establishment. It invites the cultural gatekeepers to ridicule through the authentic praxis of art. The ejaculation of honey from a little tray resembles the function of art contained by institutions. It hesitates and dribbles in its creative potential like a commune of multiple little gatekeepers dictating the inauthentic praxis of art. The lack of pump action is the synthesis of liberated entities in art, stifled by a praxis that merges liberated gestures through false interpretation into an 'arts-and-crafts' (Bürger) impression of art.

Liberating praxis is constantly sublimated within society into the historical soup of art history, through which art emerges as acceptable, tamed. This confirms that the next step for the liberator is always the right step but with the wrong outcome. That is not to say that the possibility of liberating art is always misconceived, the position of the artist as liberator is such that he can never emerge as totally liberated.

Art institutions, where simple knowledge is confused with, and substituted for, praxis, continually reconstruct liberating art into pure, inconsequential conventions. The desire for liberty is sublated into a prolonged quest for interpretations of the rules. *The Honigpumpe is kaputt* is intentionally a wrong step in the right direction, a liberating attack on the image of academic art and the Super–Artist myth. The play of decorative works against rubbish in my performance was a jester's stroke against domination. The confrontation was the wrong step, made right so as to shift the focus from the formal rituals of gallery presentation to the absurd efforts of art and artist.

Hence in the performance a mediation takes place that lets everyone make the wrong step at once; by unwittingly participating in the honey action collectively doing the 'wrong' thing but doing it 'right'; liberation in the act of honey pouring over the artist, united the concept of 'play' with the affirmative in culture in order so as to disaffirm it. To make right to do wrong, that according to Schiller, is a fundamental law of the artistic kingdom:

> If in the dynamic state of rights it is as force that one man encounters another, and imposes limits upon his activities; if in the ethical State of duties Man sets himself over against man with all the majesty of law, and puts a curb upon his

> desires: in those circles where conduct is governed by beauty, in the aesthetic state, none may appear to the other except as form, or confront him except as an object of free play. To bestow freedom by means of freedom is the fundamental law of this kingdom.[42]

In *The Honigpumpe is kaputt* the object of free play was revealed in the relation between the audience and myself because laughter after shock is not a bad thing if it can be accomplished. The totality of the Performance/Installation is an affair of resisting so as to denounce the artist's adaptation to the art market. Here *The Honigpumpe is kaputt* allies with Beuys' social sculpture project by denouncing adaptation and the affirmative traits of art. The artist ridicules institutional intimidation of freelance art and guards against the rules and regulations that attempt to enter the liberated space of art. The intimidation comes from a general drive that can be called categorising and expectation.

At this point the notion of the play drive is very significant, it provides the individual with the essential freedom constantly to revise desire and creativity. Only in this liberated space can the human be human. Schiller points out:

> For, to mince matters no longer, man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays.[43]

Schiller points directly to the need for liberation and the duty of institutions through which both art and freedom are supposed to shape destiny. *The Honigpumpe is kaputt* challenged this shared direction for a creative destiny. Like Don Quixote, who in the face of dread and power, took on destiny only to liberate his own desires I have confronted the affirmative aesthetics of institutionalised art. In the apparently foolhardy attempts of performance art to liberate human reality, the performer's foolish gestures do not focus on historical endurance nor on cleverly contrived commodities. Through the act of pouring – not pumping honey - I claim that honey on the floor reclaims intellectual freedom from an arts and craft impression of a now institutionalised avant-garde.

The Honigpumpe is kaputt resists becoming an institutional art which cannot bestow freedom by means of an image of freedom. Following Schiller and Beuys, the dysfunctional act of pouring honey emphasises the point that 'difference is making difference'. In the rubble of objects and the ensuing catharsis, one realises that freedom remains always autonomous. In short the act of making a difference is for itself alone, but laughter and surprise are for anyone.

The Honigpumpe is kaputt arrangement included artefacts with meaningful associations such as Duchamp's chessboard and the placement of the *sexy little watercolour* in the centre of the performance, standing on an easel just above the broken pump. The central position of the *sexy little watercolour* - a watercolour painting that I did twenty years ago - ridiculed through its shabby petty presence the privileged, aesthetic sameness of bourgeois art. In conjunction with the ejaculating pump it challenged the fancy decorative work that usurps the name of art and the marketing character of the readymade. It questioned an art that perpetually evolves towards a banal irrelevance where difference and meaning are optional.

In the proximity of rubbish to art, the aesthetic assignment within the readymade object reveals the complexity of what makes an artwork valuable. The question of Duchamp's art praxis arises once more, insinuating that the urinal was not an aesthetically driven act but rather a challenge to change the monotone decorum associated with salon art. This work is more about resistance to any pre-assigned aesthetic than any predictable art strategy. The readymades that followed Duchamp's act of confrontation merely embellished their maker's act of imitation by feeding on the silence in contemporary art. Tomkins explains:

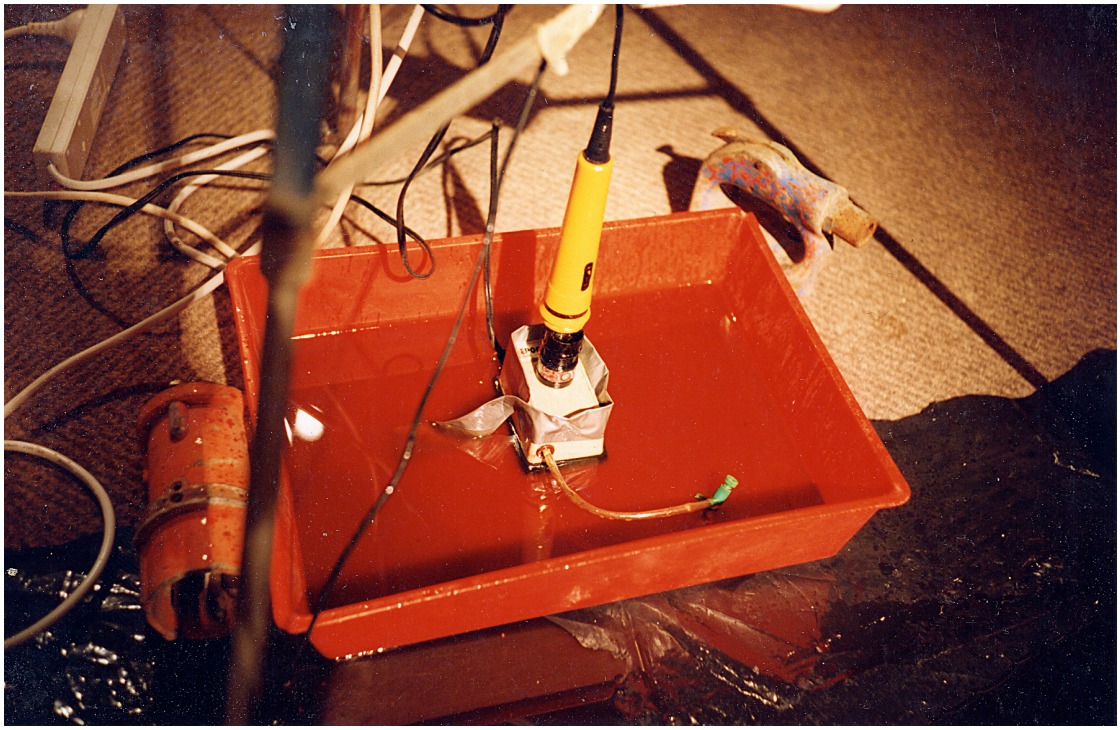
> The process of hagiology, which began to overtake Duchamp in the 1960s and which has been gathering momentum ever since, tends to assign esthetic significance to everything he did or thought or said, but the truth is that for about fifteen years, from 1918 to 1933, Duchamp's activities had very little to do with art. The myths that grew around him would eventually cause his dropping out to be seen as an important artistic statement in itself, but that was hardly what he had in mind at the time.[44]

The conception of the urinal and Duchamp's ultimate withdrawal from art placed emphasis on the liberating space as an act of silence. A myth of the silent artist emerges that I call a Super–Artist image through which the public identifies with the inexplicable significance of silent art. From this perspective Duchamp was destined to be publicly overrated.

Beuys frequently claimed that the silence of Duchamp is overrated. He pointed out that after the controversial introduction of the readymade, the artist and with him the theory of the readymade fell silent. In the artist's absence (Duchamp was now playing chess) the theory evolved as a crippled concoction of commodity, self-expression and consumerism. Despite that, the theory and praxis that Beuys maintains continues, no matter how the public rates the absence of the artist. In this context I continued the theory of Duchamp's readymade and the critical perspective of Beuys in the project of *The Honigpumpe is kaputt*. I reject the silence of any art that manifests itself in the rigid domination of style pertaining to established art.



Martin Heine, *The Honigpumpe is kaputt,* performance/installation, 1999/2000, Photo and © Martin Heine. The Photo shows the catharsis smiley bucket, the *sexy little watercolour* and the broken Honey pump.



Martin Heine, *The Honigpumpe is kaputt*, performance/installation, 1999/2000, Photo and © Martin Heine, (Installation detail). Aesthetic sameness of bourgeois art is challenged in conjunction with the ejaculating pump.



Martin Heine, *The Honigpumpe is kaputt*, performance/installation, 1999/2000, Photo and © Martin Heine, (Installation detail). In the proximity of rubbish to art one experiences the complexity of what makes an artwork of value.

The ironic 'trust' in the integrity of performance challenges theories that empower art with a permanently fixed point of style. *The Honigpumpe is kaputt* proves that, no matter how absurd it is, the project of art moves on regardless of 'rational' constraints. It expands from Duchamp's polarisation into multiple practices of convergence, from where art evolves as a liberating rupture, able to expand theories and invoke differences for making art.

One could say that an ironic act makes an unreasonable artist and so it is with *The Honigpumpe is kaputt*. In my exploitation and ridicule of the bourgeois conception of the Super–Artist myth, it slips away from its own respectful silence into a liberated conception of art. In *The Honigpumpe is kaputt* the challenge to silence is not only directed towards Duchamp's silence in ceasing to make art, but also confronts the reinterpretation of art and artists in history books without the actuality and the critical voice of those same artists. Beuys, for example, most likely would initiate his *Honigpumpe* project differently today, possibly altering the social engagement, within the new contexts thrown up by the transient nature of time.

This is even more obvious in Beuys' opposition to Duchamp's silence, his refusal to maintain an engagement in art. Duchamp collaborated with silence through withdrawal, prolonging the manufactured silence of readymade art. Inadvertency, delay and withdrawal encouraged the market to construct popular theories and turn art into appliances, thereby mutating the critical voice in art.

Counteracting this mutated art Beuys saw a need to engage and open up a strategy of revealing differences to encourage the consistency of art as public debate. The silent self-destructive process to which Duchamp's silence contributed inadvertently, has collapsed into an art of copies, factory art (Warhol) and this, in the eyes of Beuys could not stand forever. It was time to tackle the comfort of an established silence that had secretly evolved as the rationale for art as consumption. Beuys initiated an act beyond the 'stoppage' - a terminology used in one of Duchamp's artworks. He turned art into a communicative and transient process of evolving ideas. Alain Borer states:

> It was even explicitly against Duchamp that Beuys structured his work: dreaming of a confrontation, a sort of challenge to a duel in his action on 11 November 1964. *The silence of Marcel Duchamp is overrated,* Beuys made manifest his disapproval of the concept of anti-art. He criticized the 'silence' observed by Duchamp after 1923 (although he may well have underestimated the latter's ruse), 'because [Duchamp] stopped at a point when he could have developed a theory based on the work achieved; and the theory he could have developed I am developing today'.[45]

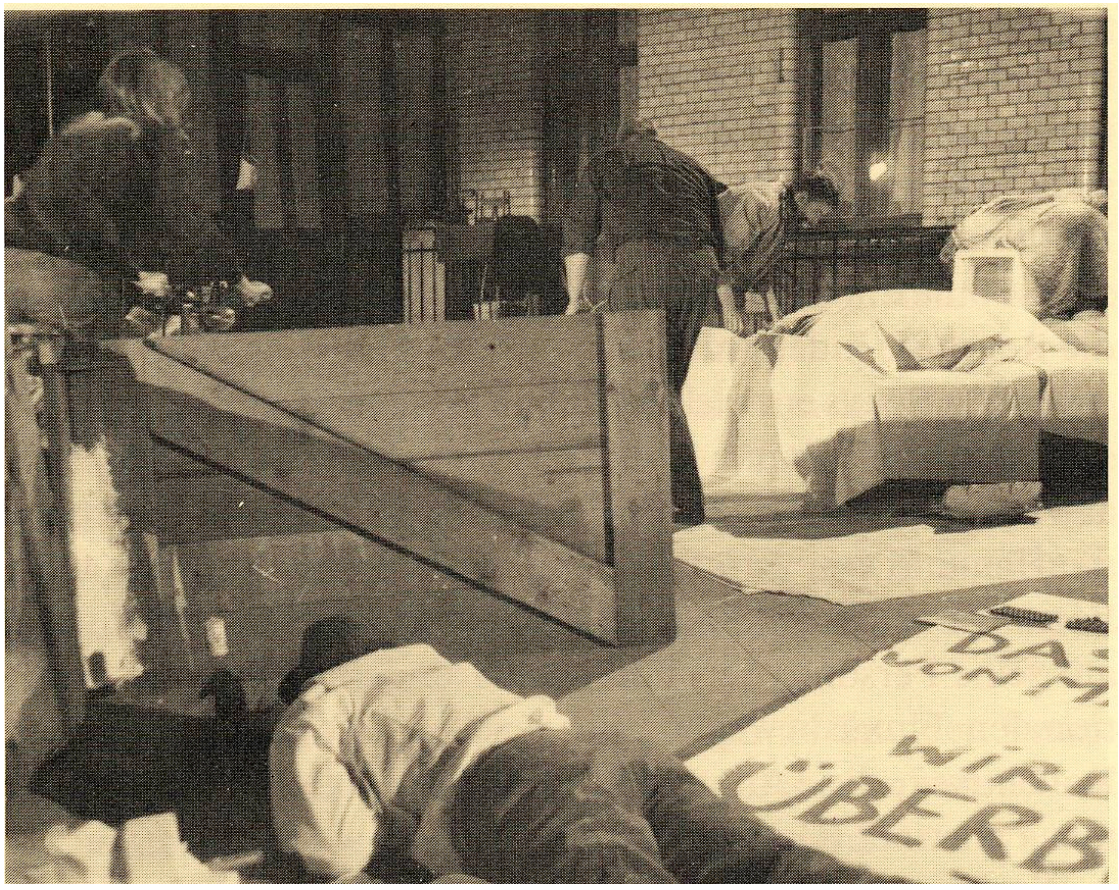
The influence of silent consumption in art, that is to say the anti–art, the non communicative resonance of the readymade, was at the heart of the debate that occurred in Beuys' *The Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz*. In *The Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz* installation a connection has occurred linking the need for communication to his earlier performance, *Das Schweigen von M. Duchamp wird überbewerted* presented in 1964. In that performance, Beuys challenged the putative silence of theory and the mutated object of art as a commodity.

In the performance Beuys overstepped the impassable line. He added the sequel to Duchamp's strategy, over the top of Duchamp's silence. In lying down and remaining silent as part of that performance Beuys enacts silence, thereby awaking art as continuum, a theory that evolves beyond the imposed silence in art. For Beuys - as with *The Honigpumpe is kaputt* performance – the issue was to overcome the myth of inactivity and silence by initiating action.

In *The Honigpumpe is kaputt* an unreasonable 'illogical' act reveals a polarity between the alienating effects of art's attempts at freedom and the rigid silence of history books about the confrontational aspect of art. In the collective blindness that conveniently ignores the 'pulp fiction' character of most contemporary art, the possibility of an art founded on the struggle for freedom remains a silent theory, a mute praxis. It polarises contemporary art between accomplished, manifest but market compliant objects and modes of behaviour and an unrealised silent constellation of reservation and resistance. Alain Borer explains:

> At a time when the *vox populi* seems to be decreeing that Malevich and Duchamp may appear to represent the polarities of 20th century art, Beuys suggests nothing less than crossing the supposedly impassable line, surmounting the aporia to which Duchamp reputedly led.[46]

Only mutated, bankrupt, entertainment art remains to please the popular audience. This critical incapacity of contemporary art to 'speak' further cripples the possibilities of articulate difference and celebrates silence as suitable embellishment of non-representational art. A monotonous contemporary culture has emerged that constantly reinvents itself so as to reiterate a single moment of history – the aporia inherited from Malevich. Within the opposition to this celebration of silence *The Honigpumpe is kaputt* colludes with Beuys' *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz* - surpassing the impassable line of muted art. The ridicule through literal enactment of criticism and theory shifts the ground rules of bourgeois conventions and exposes its aporia as fraud.



Joseph Beuys, *The silence of Marcel Duchamp is overrated,* action at the TV Studio Düsseldorf, 1964. Beuys is literally re-enacting the silence in art as a new theory.

On that premise, *The Honigpumpe is kaputt* performance claims that all art that has passed into history is silent if not re-invigorated in some ways. The iconoclastic mood within contemporary art that occurs from time to time must be maintained and nurtured in order to free the intellect and prevent art from disappearing into an inactive state. The iconoclastic momentum of Duchamp must be maintained, not as a mutated object downgraded, for consumption, but as a voice of liberation that emphasises the 'way' as a means to achieve difference in art, as Tomkins describes:

> By opening the Pandora's box of his absolute iconoclasm and breaking down the barriers between art and life, his adversaries charge, Duchamp loosed the demons that have swept away every standard of esthetic quality and opened the door to unlimited self-indulgence, cynicism, and charlatanism in the visual arts. As with everything else that we tend to say about Duchamp, there is some truth in this. What could be more subversive than the readymades, which undermined every previous definition of art, the artist, and the creative process? To call Duchamp destructive, however, is to miss the point. What he was interested in above all was freedom – complete personal and intellectual and artistic freedom - and the manner in which he achieved all three was, in the opinion of his close friends, his most impressive and enduring work of art. [47]

To initiate permanent liberation in art the Pandora's box needs to be permanently propped open. In my performance an ironic *Honigpumpe* concept is re-enacted to locate artistic liberation beyond the impassable line of history that established art beyond the toleration of an ineffective art of silence – that has mutated and reassigned the assignment of the avant-gardes to museums and the walls of corporate headquarters.

Artistic liberation is reinstated in the ridiculous moment of pouring honey over the re-affirmed artist. The artist becomes a human being again full of faults and wisdom. His act reveals the meaninglessness that the common dross of the everyday object reiterated as the gatekeeper of the avant-garde. Form and content as well as the appearance and combination of effects are questioned by this ironic laughter in a disturbed setting. Iconoclasm forms the core of *The Honigpumpe is kaputt* its deconstructive character negates the neo avant-garde. The artist iconoclast takes Duchamp at his word when Duchamp confronted the addictive potential of his readymades. Duchamp, as quoted by Calvin Tompkins explains:

> "Manufactured objects have the advantage to be repeated," he said, "and this added to the impersonality. But the danger was that you would choose too many readymades and direct it toward a taste. You could be taken in by the readymade idea to become an artist again, a tasty artist, choosing more and more. This gave me the idea of defining art as a habit-forming drug. Art is a habit-forming drug, that's all it is, for the artist as well as the collector. So in the readymades I avoided that by not choosing them too often."[48]

In my performance the gush of honey from the bucket signifies the continuum of theory as an evolving articulation of desire overflowing all polarities in art. The established scene – which resembled the chessboard of a silent Duchamp – is not eliminated but glazed with a new context – the honey - so as to maintain its liberating possibilities in art.

After this absurd gesture ironic laughter echoed from the walls of the gallery. All the work that was celebrated in the adjacent exhibition spaces fell under the spell of ridicule. Not from the artist but the spectator, who had to readdress this anarchy within such sacred space yet remained in the sticky mess of honey alienated from the pristine investment art all around.

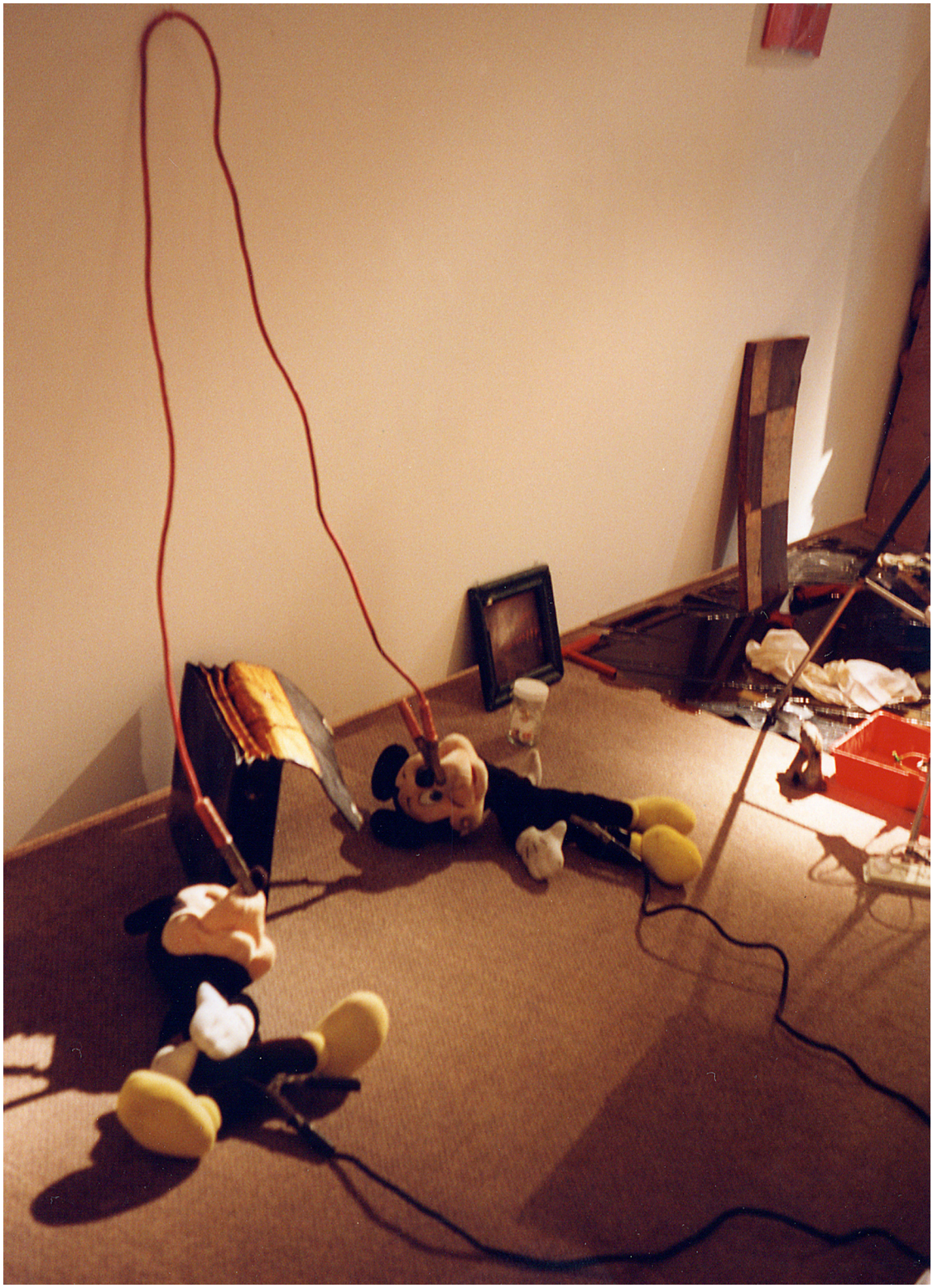
On the opposite side of the performance environment, away from the honey, a pristine setting was arranged to engage the art market addicts. Threatened by the perspiring artist, consumers and entertainment addicts are taken by surprise. Two Mickey Mouse figures, stolen from the New York streets by the artist in 1996 were rearranged in a circuit mode not unlike the connection of cables to start a flat battery in a broken car. The so called *short-circuit connection piece* which was just behind the broken Honey Pump is a metaphor for the 'lack of difference' and the domination of art directed towards taste. I connected the figures in a habit-forming way (circuit cable) on nose and genitals. The circuit cables connecting the figures were next to a business suitcase making obvious why the pump was *kaputt* and merely splattering honey. Object making artists have now arrived at a business like mentality that invests in the stock market and leaves art bankrupt in its wake.

The Honigpumpe is kaputt challenged the rhetoric of investment art through the enactment of its absurd implications. Spectators and investors laughed about art and watched the crucial elements of a chain of rubbish emerge as the performance progressed. There was no possible advantage for anyone, nothing was left behind that might be considered banal. I left everything I possessed, produced, created, even my clothes, behind and left the gallery naked. Nothing that was there belonged to anyone.

Art happens when the artist gives time the opportunity to work and then disappears as a spectator. A reversing of the roles of creator and audience occurs as one moves from the role-play as artist to the anonymity of being part of the audience. This performance/installation that could be defined as 'someone', left only a mess that had been arranged before and during the performing process. Spectator and artist are the 'same' making judgements on the things they see. This, for me, is an important step



Martin Heine, *The Honigpumpe is kaputt*, performance/installation, 1999/2000, Photo and © Martin Heine, (Installation detail). The glazed and silent Duchamp.



Martin Heine, *The Honigpumpe is kaputt*, performance/installation, 1999/2000, Photo and © Martin Heine, (Installation detail). The Photo shows the *short-circuit connection piece*. Der Künstler wird an der Nase herumgeführt (The artist is pulled along on his/her nose).



Martin Heine, *The Honigpumpe is kaputt*, performance/installation, 1999/2000, video still: Caroline Heine, © by M. Heine. All in all the audience is watching how the individual struggles…

away from 'literalness' as Warhol saw it. For in this performance/installation as well as in my *Reverse Iconography Paintings*, which I will discuss later, the shift of the artist's position from centre stage to that of participatory individual becomes essential.

All that I left in the performance space, that night at the gallery, was a load of rotten objects soaked in honey and water. The critical point of resistance was that readymade objects are not readymade for sale. In the 'Broken Honey Pump' performance my 'thesis' was the artist's potential for serious play. The antithesis was the assembled art loving middle class watching and adjusting its likes and dislikes in relation to my actions. The synthesis was that we laughed ourselves 'to death' as a transcending sign, that time is part of an art experience.

The amusement of the audience was transient, their life limited and their judgements of art absurd. The absurd element was not my action of pouring honey over myself but the oddness of the audience watching someone doing something strange. The performance exposed the irrelevance of art as a 'product' or as a 'historical construct' in relation to the individual struggle for survival. The audience watched how an individual artist struggles to survive, yet they saw this as a playful moment, a serious laughing matter, which like art, measured against life's totality, makes little sense.

NOTES

[40] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans M. Shaw, (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1984).

[41] Ibid. 52-53.

[42] Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man, In a Series of Letters*, eds. trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 215.

[43] Ibid. 107.

[44] Calvin Tomkins *Duchamp: A Biography*, (London: Random House, 1996), 252.

[45] Alain Borer, *The Essential Joseph Beuys*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 11.

[46] Borer, *Essential Joseph Beuys,* 11. Quoted from Barbara Rose, 'ABC Art', *Art in America*, October - November 1965, 57-69; article republished in Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art*, New York, 1968, 274-297.

[47] Tompkins *Duchamp: A Biography*, 13.

[48] Tompkins *Duchamp: A Biography*, 427.

Chapter 3

Literalism, irony and mass-produced art objects:
Warhol after Duchamp and the loss of creative difference.

Despite Warhol's commitment to art as no more or less than reality, the following remains true, in regard to the situation of art, even after Warhol.

> The artist's desperate effort to make art a direct expression of life cannot overcome the separation of art from life…[49]

A wish for artistic freedom, in any human sense, to find one's own identity in relation to the world, seems to be a reasonable proposition. That proposition, however, can only maintain its truth if the individual is allowed to practice this freedom independently but in relationship with society. Hence, the need to make this space 'real' and workable becomes a dominant theme in art. Whoever controls the space of liberating production controls the taste of art, as an institution. That is an extra reason for the artist to employ imagination as literally as possible. Fantasy alone is not sufficient to support the practice of certain political or social/commercial agendas in the arts. Practical ideas can be financially and culturally rewarding for interested lobby groups, that includes the artist, if the creative space is real and thus controllable. This usually happens through the method of interpretation and application to the wider arts audience. Paradoxically, the more one interprets art as an entertaining aestheticism, the more one will be heard and recognised as a serious artist.

Nothing was more inspiring for Warhol than the challenge of working with the concept of the real and hence the immediacy of the readymade. Surely the placement of real objects into museums must have encouraged Warhol as many others to feel the immediacy of the real in relation to the traditional means of making a work of art. The challenge resided in the authenticity of the artwork as an example of instant cleverness, as replacement for the tedious days of easel painting in the studio. By roaming around and making art on the run, one could fake the impression that one's art is something real, since this art is made in the public realm; it has the authority of the real.

Departing from the painters' studios, the instant artwork could be seen as more authentic, more like the real thing. Hence one realises that if art becomes a fetish it infringes peoples' autonomy. Andy Warhol greatest desire was to become an artist as a 'selector of forms'. He wished for a space where he could be someone who transforms the insignificant into real art. Real art in this situation must be understood as an ironic

gesture because in the process of translation the imaginative gets lost in the characteristic of the real. Marcuse emphasises this in his book *The Aesthetic Dimension* when he quotes Wellershoff:

> The artist's desperate effort to make art a direct expression of life cannot overcome the separation of art from life. Wellershoff states the decisive fact: "unbridgeable social differences exist between the can factory and the studio of the artist: Warhol's factory"; between action painting and the real life which is going on around it.[50]

For Warhol and other pop artists such as Jasper Johns, the continuation of the art object as a window in 'reality' was the logical step after Duchamp. The stratagem of reason would be to place oneself as the initiator of reality into the realm of the art audience or to arrange materials in such a way that they leave no room for the imaginative, that is to say the illusory, to emerge. Johns' *American Flag* paintings are exemplary in the way that the 'pun' is made between the literal material real of the work and the semantic value of an American national icon.

Warhol's art in contrast – I am thinking here of the portfolio screen print series such as *Mao Tse-Tung* and others – is far from revealing reality from within the art object. Johns was playing with the form and iconic value of an object in the same manner as Magritte treated the relation between object and signs. In Magritte's painting *This is not a pipe,* for example, one reads underneath a painted pipe the title of the painting *This is not a pipe*. The relationship between object and idea, as well as representation, is constantly referring to the sign, which is the painting. For Johns the art object used a similar pun where he juxtaposed the notion of play, the real and the significance of signs. The difference, for Johns, was that the object is actually a copy of what it promises to be, and yet it remains constantly between art object and object reality. For Warhol the concept of the real was not in the artwork itself but grew out of the authority of the artist; a kind of conceptual desire without meaning, in which the artist let reality flow from the existing object through his creativity into an art object without conceptual interruption. Guiles comments:

> He found that he could come close to reality, to real everyday living, through others, through gossip about the most intimate details of their lives. And he learned that, like his idol Duchamp, he need not create something. He could take a photograph from *Life* magazine, trace it, simplifying it as he did so, and come up with something original.[51]

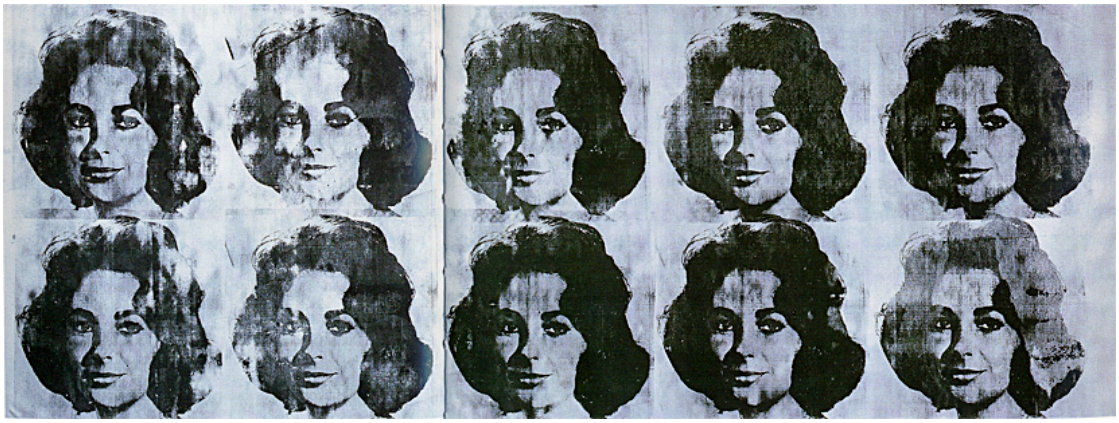
For Warhol, art was a source of energy that required to be injected into the field of art, so that an absolute confrontation between imagination and practicality could take place. The making of an object as a resisting element that opposes the 'imitating' of nature was for Warhol not real enough; for him the real does not need to be created but

channelled into the aesthetic concept in art. This is the most 'real' concept under which art can enter into the galleries and museums. The problem with literally reifying 'objects' into art, however, is that this undiluted reality no longer has anything to do with the creative process. The reason is that in the process of transfer the 'thing' that should be art is still the same 'thing' as it was before. The element of wanting to be creative, in forming an idea after one's own desires is exchanged here for a creative desire that is vested and resolved in the most likeable object to be found. However the object cannot communicate a creative desire but remains true to its own reality, the shape of what it 'is' and 'was' before entering the art context. Art here depends on the communicative value on the spoken word and in that process isolates the object. The word is the message and the art object is silent, hence a negative autonomy.

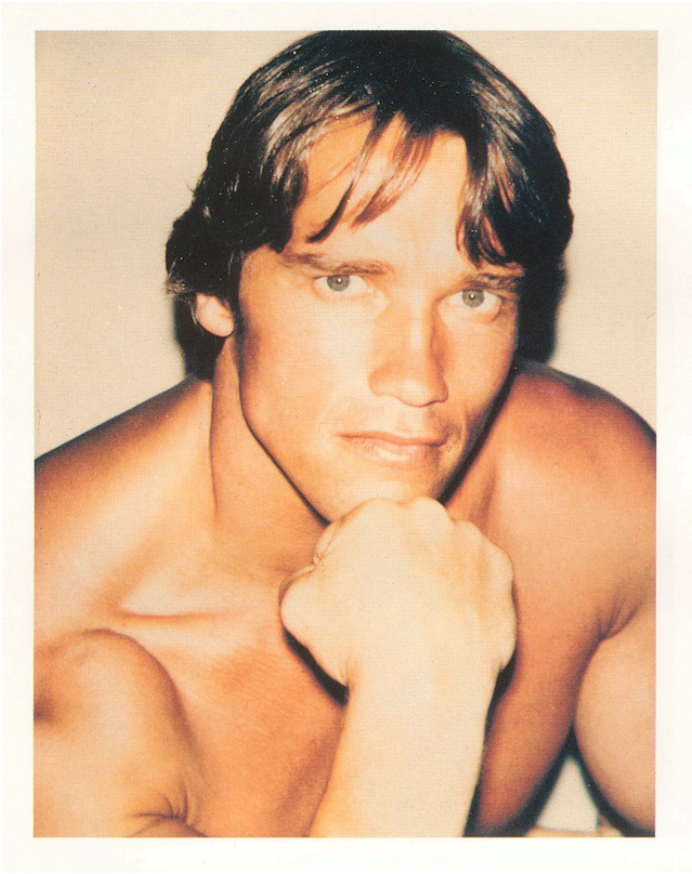
To make desire possible so that the 'thing' in focus can be called art, Warhol did not attempt to transcend the Super–Artist myth that is to say challenge the myth of Duchamp. He had to rely on Duchamp's aura as the creator of the readymade to have any credibility and logical connection to the conception of art. Why would he not deconstruct the myth of Duchamp, as Beuys did by pronouncing the silence of Duchamp as overrated? One answer to this relates to the behaviour of Warhol the artist and his relation to the artistic environment. Warhol's multiple silk screen images and his obsession with multiple reproduced images originated in his desire achieve a sense of credibility in the face of others and to be rewarded by humanity for his creative commitment.

Warhol's emphasis was on the absolute invocation 'not to speak', to be 'real' as a mediator in the art production process. Warhol realised that he was revealing that the artist, as initiator, is 'real' and 'original', with exactly the same artistic value as the object he selects. By celebrating his image in the process of making art he substitutes his own image for the art object and thereby substitutes his own sense of self for the cultural worth of art.

The following might give some insight as to how this connection of dependence and image control supported the ego of Warhol the artist. For the arts audience a *Liz Taylor* reproduction, multiplied ten times, is still a *Liz* reproduction. For them the importance is on the reproduction and the multiple appearance of a famous film icon. What the audience has not worked out though is that the multiple reproduction of that image (different to a single portrait painting) has actually not as much significance as it is principally thought. What needs attention here is the 'choosing' of the image of a person for representation. If one agrees that Warhol's concept is one of not creating but selecting then the reason for choosing the image is more important than its multiplicity and its reproductive use.



Andy Warhol, *Ten Lizes*, 1963, acrylic and silkscreen ink on canvas, Paris: Centre Gorges Pompidou.



Andy Warhol, *Arnold Schwarzenegger*, 1977-89, Polaroid, New York: Pace/MacGill Gallery and Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, 1992.

Even though, on various occasions Warhol stressed that the importance of his work resides in that machine-like process of image reproduction, one may perhaps say that reproduction and the many images are for Warhol a voice, projecting infant-like a multiplicity of art into the world. Warhol was very anxious to work within this multiple layering of art and artist, typical of pop art which pursued any kind of success.

The fear of being left behind, a familiar trait of the advertising market, accelerated the reproductive drive of Warhol. For Warhol, images of famous people and shocking events were important in the creative process, because of his fear of failing to 'connect' to the Super–Artist myth. Consequentially he accelerated, reproduced and spat out a multiplicity of popular and famous images and linked them to the seductive easiness of readymade art. The anxiety of 'insignificance' made his ego scream along with the ever–louder public media so as to establish a position of attention.

Warhol learnt to be loud, first and foremost, through his experience with advertising. Advertising as we all know is inherently attention-seeking and as part of its trait must be direct and blunt, smart and cunning to get people's attention. Warhol's art is like this, very loud and very attention-seeking. His non stop production of images and repetitions was like a scream. It showed his sense of isolation and fear of not being able to make his artistic life worthwhile. A desire to be heard at any cost arose in Warhol.

The strategy was clear. If he could transcend the immediacy of readymade objects and the ever increasing interference of advertising images in art, the concept of the real could be once more be celebrated as a new liberating artistic dimension. For Warhol to achieve that would mean that his position as a historically acclaimed artist would be assured. The importance of that decision is historical in so far as Warhol was imitating the instigation of the real already accomplished in the readymades of Duchamp. The historical wall that Warhol the ambitious advertising artist faced was great but not insurmountable.

Warhol's way of working was about appearance and effect, to enhance the personal image, as Andy Grundberg comments in his essay *Andy Warhol's Polaroid Pantheon*:

> Warhol's presence within his Polaroid pantheon suggests that his interest in the manufacture of celebrity was inspired in part by a need to manufacture his own identity.[52]

For Warhol, success in art was achieved by relating to the right subject, so that the subject formulates and characterises you and your art. The art of Warhol can be assessed through its success in establishing fame as the key to reality and identity. This

unconscious desire was (metaphorically speaking) like a headhunting exercise; where the aim of headhunters was to decapitate their enemies in battle, to collect their heads as trophies. This would give the decapitator strength and authority in the eyes of his competitors. Even more so, the power of the decapitated would pass over to the hunter. Relating to Warhol, Grundberg observes:

> For him, a photograph was more than a record of whatever reality lay in front of the lens; it was no less than a fictionalizing tool that embodied the very aspirations on which he staked his career: it could actively manufacture celebrity and, ultimately, identity itself.[53]

One can detect in Warhol's work a way of identity hunting - a headhunting not quite as tragic as the real headhunters but parallel in its unconscious desire - realised through the multiple reproducing of the famous and the spectacular. By doing this, Warhol could signal that he shared authority with the famous and that he possessed the secret of magical success. Others would associate his image with the sensational and famous images he exhibited. An image of Marilyn, Mao Tse-Tung, Jackie and even a portrait of Beuys, assured everyone that Warhol identified himself with these important individuals by acts of photographing famous image for personal fame. Vincent Fremont remarks:

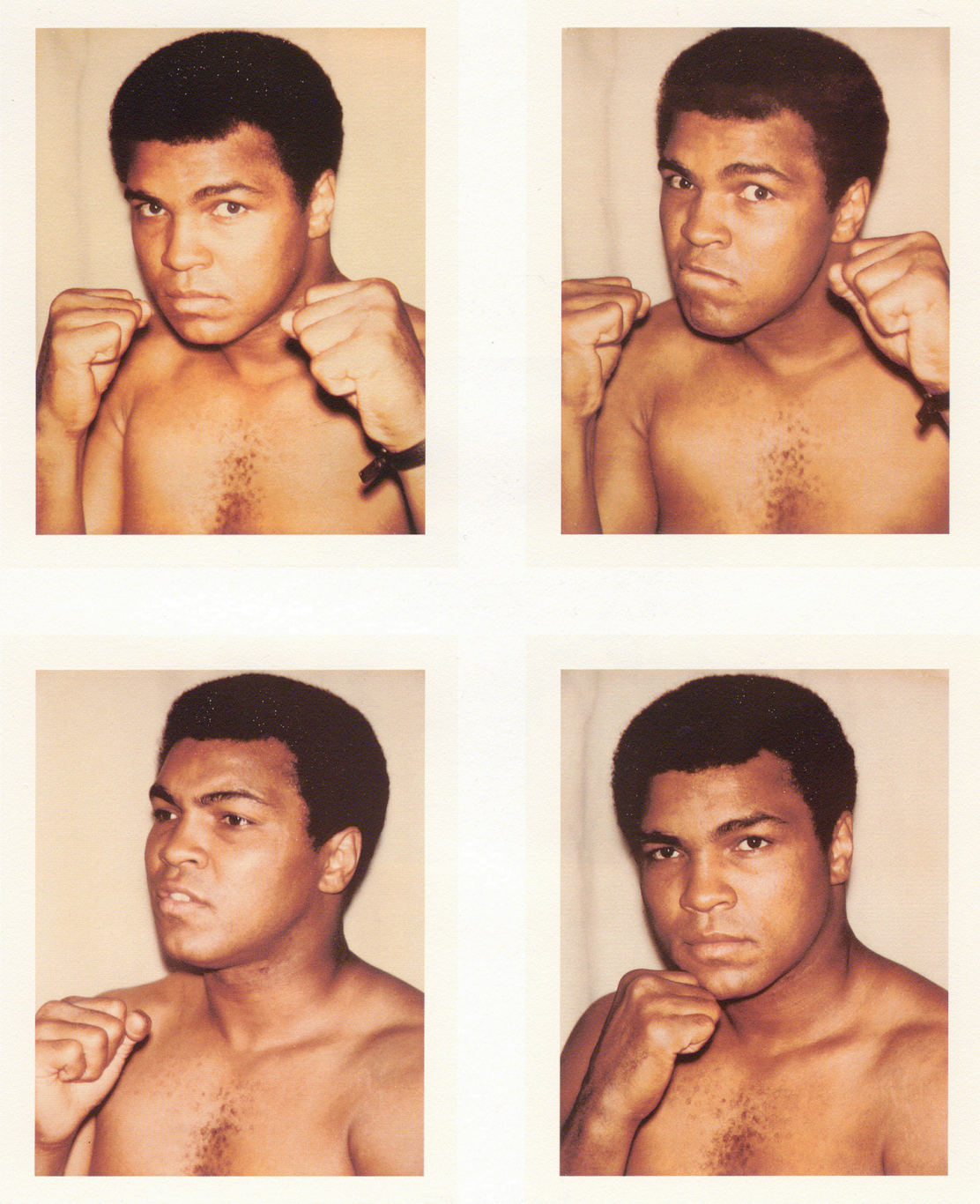
> During the mid-eighties, Andy spent a lot of time making pictures. It was even a way he related to people. When we study these Polaroids, we see the same interior of the sitter that Andy saw.[54]

This is not to say that Warhol laid emphasis on an artistic strategy of getting fame by being surrounded by fame; however, one has to understand that to have a Mick Jagger or Mohammed Ali sitting for your photo session, promotes the work far more effectively than taking a portrait of a insignificant individual in Harlem or the Bronx. If Warhol connected to the disadvantaged in life then he did so by finding the scandalous and unusual in people. He decided on people that represented the peculiar and the outsiders; such as *drag queen* 1980, (mainly self-portraits), he finds the 'strange' in the former bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger, titled *Arnold Schwarzenegger* 1977-78[55] and sees comical pop in the staged photograph of the famous *Uncle Sam,* character 1980-81 and *Howdy Doody*, 1980.

By connecting all kinds of pop, strangeness and scandals to his art, Warhol increased the 'pop value' of his artist image, hence his art was carefully attuned for the commodity market. It lacked any liberating dimension. Consider the diversity of products that re-emerge in Warhol's work. They range from a Pig eating from a plate titled *Fiesta Pig*, 1979 to the Polaroid shot of Arnold Schwarzenegger. Consider also Warhol's obsession with the broadest and widest known mass produced icons such as



Andy Warhol, *Mick Jagger*, 1975, Polaroid, New York: Pace/MacGill Gallery and Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, 1992.



Andy Warhol, *Muhammad Ali*, 1977, Polaroid, New York: Pace/MacGill Gallery and Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, 1992.



Andy Warhol, *Self-Portraits in Drag*, 1980, Polaroid, New York: Pace/MacGill Gallery and Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, 1992.



Andy Warhol, *Fiesta Pig*, 1979, Polaroid, New York: Pace/MacGill Gallery and Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, 1992.



Andy Warhol, *Brillo Boxes*, 1979, Polaroid, New York: Pace/MacGill Gallery and Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, 1992.

Coca Cola, Campbell's Soup and Brillo Boxes. They had the advantage of the sensational and gave the work a 'pop' but also an 'outsider' brand name

Because such images circulate so much in society, people recognise them as something familiar, something they know from their everyday experience. Given their familiarity, the personality of Warhol gained equal popularity and familiarity. In a screen-print representation of multiple Coca Cola bottles, or of multiple Marilyns, the mystery of art/life is instantly accessible for everyone, since they all combine with Warhol. Fame takes centre stage, as Warhol the artist, who as he chooses amongst the candidates for popularity, also determines the value of art. Art as reality is then distributed into all facets of life and understood by everyone.

Since the real in art is now not a shift of the imagination into a process of making, art objects have the potential to be everything and everywhere. They decay to various interpretations of everyday object value. The conceptual and cultural value that one wishes to find in the art work is now no more or less a kind of decayed information. It resonates information that blends into the broad aesthetic, the banal spectrum of consumer goods. Art is now not more than the individual choice to call something a work of art or a consumer object. The art establishment is given an advantageous position by this optional relation to art and consumer values. They both can be merged through style and concept as well as the artist myth; all is now measured against its level of product reality.

Warhol desired to circulate his 'ego', which is in opposition, for example, to Beuys' concept of the shared and expanded project of art. He obviously thought of himself as overcoming the readymade and hence the image of the artist myth by creating an even greater image of himself. The invention of the multiple readymade or multiple image production overwhelmed the entire art world, like a universal artistic currency. From one image to the next meaning did not matter. It was all the negotiable currency of Warhol and hence symbolised a homogenous product for exchange. Meaning is optional in all Warhol's work. It does not seek to establish artistic difference but neutralises everything as an imitation or substitute for reality. The critical dimensions of this art are restricted to the beauty of its appearance and the value for which it was sold. This is true capitalist invention in which the economic desire becomes the only credible reality.

The liberating and hence resisting space was, for Warhol, to be found by playing along with the screaming forces of the market. He made himself the centre of celebration as the individual who is the object and the readymade. The strategy here is that if the image is the artist, then the artist is the readymade, the historic value and the

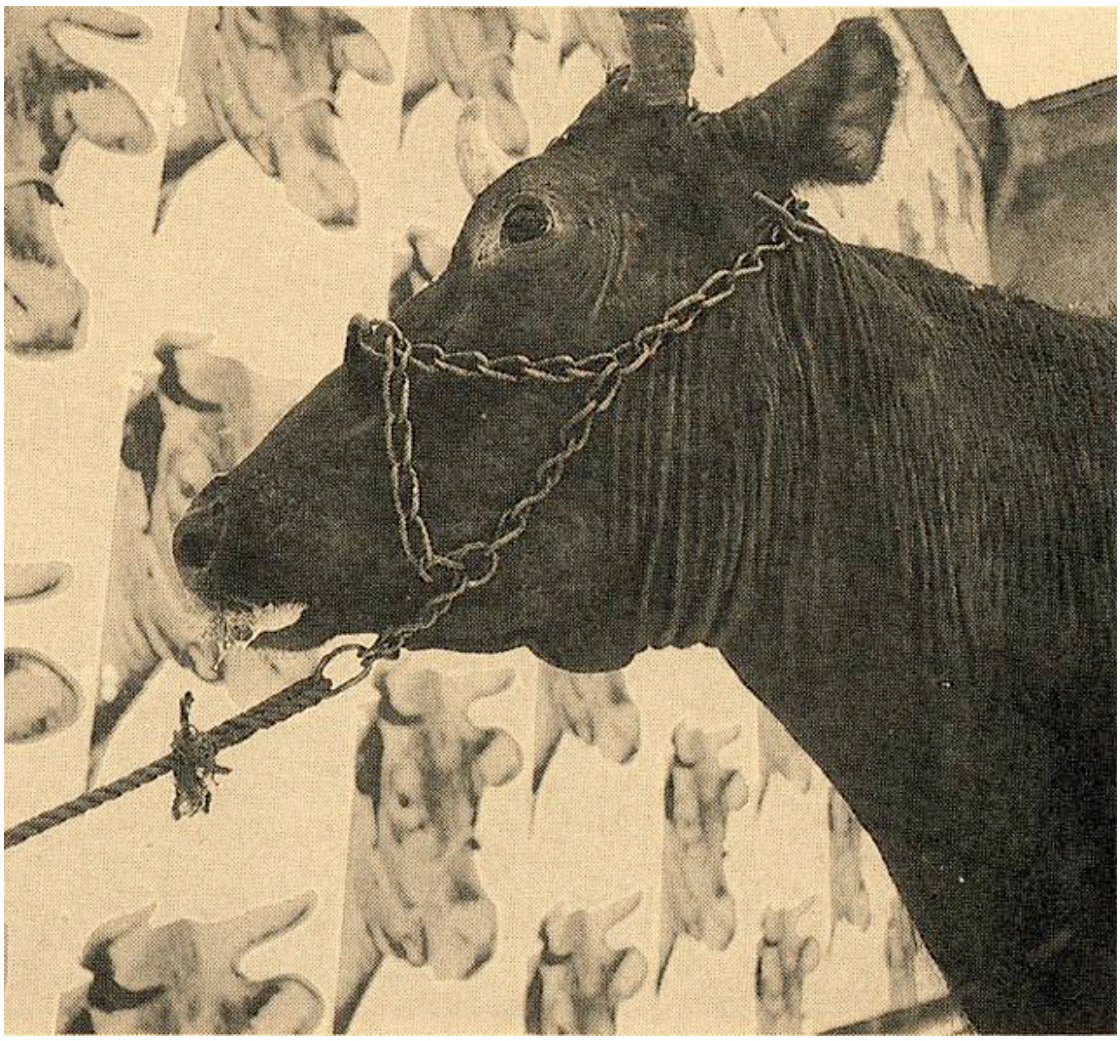
commodity factor all in one. That obviously has nothing to do with an investigative desire into the creative anymore. If art was once about something creative, now it is about personality, every art object can be about anything and nothing. The reality of art objects grew to be historically significant, no longer as objects alone but also as part of a cult of personalities. A nonconformist space was transformed through Warhol's personality cult into an exaggerated attempt to conform to the market as an entertainer. Art accelerates and exaggerates and lacks diversity of thought due to the lack of profound contemplation. Desire or the interconnection between life and gestalt evolve into a playground of techniques in which the artist rules by adaptation to the given. The object becomes a mere tool to celebrate one's fame.

I do not know if this can be described in more accurate terms, but, at the centre of this process of liberation is the belief that he who believes in reality the most can best recreate the real as art. There is so much attached to rebuilding reality as an accurate description through art. The one who invents the most immanent solution in the business of representation can dictate the relevance of his art work.

Not 'why' do art but 'what' to take from reality and fake it, as art was Warhol's chief challenge That is what made his audience engage his art, nurturing the assumption that they were literally experiencing reality through the immediacy of the art object. The conflict between art and reality seen as an ironic joke can be seen in the juxtaposition of Warhol's wallpaper cow and a real cow confronting the wallpaper in the gallery. A literal confrontation of interpretation and image occurs that allows artist and audience to accept that anything can become art. Warhol confirms the significance of the idea that anything can be art when he says:

> art is what you can get away with.[56]

Warhol's use of Polaroid photos in 1977 and later his famous silk-screening was a way to show immediacy in art through the literalness of 'instant reproduction'. He thought he had found the reality of art in his no–nonsense and no–artistry method. Speed for him was nothing more than the proof that the object already exists or literally is present and did not need to be created. This working method turns illusion upside down. What remains is the cold rationale of the manufactured object, the paradigm of artificial reality. Warhol's readymade changes illusion into a process of reproducing the obvious, thereby abolishing the transitional process in art, the moment of creative delay that occurs between thinking of something and making an object from that idea. Instantaneous creation destroys this moment of delay, which was characteristic of the making of an art object. The notion of delay, also known from Duchamp's *Large Glass*,



Andy Warhol's, *wallpaper installation* at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1986. Photograph: Peter Gullers. Peter Gullers led the cow into the installation confronting Warhol's reality art which of a sudden is not so real.

has with Warhol changed into an obsession to manufacture art. The privileged images, which Warhol has chosen, remain over literal, banal. Nothing can bring them together with the energies of real life.

The image of the electric chair certainly has some shock value for the bourgeoisie. For those interested in art the image is a reproduction of a newspaper print and thereby reminds them of a newspaper article. Furthermore the cruelty, the angst and fear of death row does not enter into the equation as an element of Warhol's reality. No one ran out of the gallery when those images were displayed. The debate was rather – as one would imagine it is today – about good taste and the means of production.

One can assume from that, that the reality, or better put, the solitude, the authentic violence behind the image has, through the use made of it by Warhol, changed from fear and awe to a predictable representation. Moreover the cruelty of that machinery is still locked away in the death chamber, in Texas or elsewhere, for that matter. To say this once again, in Warhol's art death does not come into the equation and the transcending of the real through the artist alone, leaves the icon and image, unprotected against banal comments; as a matter of fact, it has become a part of it. Death is now manufactured readymade as an art object and dressed as a fetish. That is probably what people found disturbing in Warhol's electric chair image.

The liberated space, from which Warhol worked, was nothing more than the space of imitation. Imitation is something very different from creating an illusion or a myth or symbols. To imitate reality is not to know the boundaries of when and whom that imitation hurts. Warhol's use of the electric chair compares to the reported phrase of Marie Antoinette referring to starving people, 'If they do not have bread let them eat cake!' Marcuse explains:

> The exhibition of a soup can communicate nothing about the life of the worker who produced it, nor of that of the consumer. Renunciation of the aesthetic form does not cancel the difference between art and life – but it does cancel that between essence and appearance, in which the truth of art has its home and which determines the political value of art.[57]

Because Warhol manufactured his images from reality, he brings form into use in such a way that the final idea of the work is known from the beginning. A calculated end shape or reaction is possible. As the instrument of that calculated end product, the electric chair is not sufficient to provide a critique of that political situation. The position of resistance is replaced by calculation and more or less focused on the shock effect of consumption. If, however, one eliminates the prescribed calculation, then one does not know what is going on. That is when one starts to talk art. This relates to what Beuys said about the expanded concept of art. Only by including the human element as

a part of reality within praxis, can one start to engage that reality, not by controlling or knowing the outcome, but by entering into a process of creative happenings. Art then becomes real.

In that situation, in the process of making, an object cannot be manufactured but must be 'played' by means of experimentation. Indeed, manufacturing is an act, which desires, as its final goal, to make many objects, so as to reach the widest audience. To deny this, one has to explain why Warhol did not speak to prisoners who are on death row. The real sweat and fear that is visible when talking to those people would not be very popular. It would lack potential as part of a mass aesthetic. The concept of deliberately stealing and assembling the aura of the popular, or of the shocking, of any everyday activity, for broad consumption, is an act of ignorance and an insult to his living originals. Journalists, if they lack any ethics, are like this, they victimise their subjects before their reading audience. Hence their real is not real but a real lie. It all comes back to the artist; to tell stories is to force one's ego onto others. 'Me! Me! Me!' screams the infant and creates a lie about the real to make real the space of the ego and its needs.

Under this condition the space for liberation, which I am pursuing in this thesis, is impossible. It seems that following the ego drive of Warhol many artists work under this condition as a result all their egos scream at once. This produces a sycophantic art that compliments the taste of those who support the artistic ego rather than art. And since the market promises the support of fame as well as artistic significance, all art will be structured by what this market requires. The ego always listens for what the bourgeoisie might appreciate.

To reproduce the taste for commodity, as Warhol did with his celebrations of personality, defeats the confrontational power in the artwork and its manufactured nature creates a shapeless massified art for the masses. Mechanical labour and Warhol's focus on presentation are destroying the aura of the meaning in art. All that is literal in Warhol's work is also literal in meaning and appearance. The issues in art are no longer subjected to the myth of the artist, and the illusory in the painting. All is now a one-dimensional literalness that turns everyone into an expert on art. The fifteen minutes of fame popularised by Warhol is exemplary of this and one has to say that this makes it possible to include everything and everyone in art.

Indeed one can see democratic traits that are characteristic of Warhol's art. Its everydayness, the familiarity of the images, the lack of the solitary artwork, that is to say the original, and the inclusion of popular mass art made Warhol's art appear as inclusive as popular art for the masses: Fred Lawrence Guiles argues:

> It may be that Andy Warhol was Duchamp's truest heir – the one artist who pushed the implications of Duchamp's ideas to conclusions that not even Duchamp had foreseen. Publicity, repetition, and all-out commercialism, the elements on which Warhol's art was based, can each be seen as the flip side of Duchampian indifference. By erasing the barriers between avant-garde art and the mass public, moreover, Warhol went along way toward fulfilling Apollinaire's prophecy about Duchamp – that he was destined to reconcile "art and the People".[58]

As it is known this reality proposes pseudo–democratic feelings, based on indifference. It is a false reality; a reality of artistry that eliminates difference and engages the impartial and optional so as to avoid any social responsibility. Art, as multiplied by Warhol, cannot reconcile 'art and the people' since its totality and easiness makes everyone an expert. Creation is selection, everything goes as an extension of what is recognised as freedom. Since everything is accessible and free as long it is a commodity, freedom itself became the overarching commodity for Warhol. In short, freedom is identified as a consumer good, with the limited properties of a consumer good. This creates an aura of radical apathy towards difference and communication; boredom is the characteristic of this art of consumption. Max Horkheimer observes:

> The more justice, the less freedom, the more freedom the less justice. Who ever wants to save equality must restrict freedom and if you want to leave humanity its freedom then there can be no equality.[59]

So the channelling of rebellious thought by selecting an icon of revolution, like the *Mao Tse-Tung* screen print image does not end as a call to revolution. The flow from one object through the artist to the final product, the silkscreen, leaves no room for an alternative imagination to emerge. Neither the image of Mao nor the creative manufacturing of Warhol or his final poster product can become that other reality. Here I think of a reality of artistic engagement that absorbs the audience in a conscious experience with art and life and leads to ever-expansive thought. In Warhol's literalness there is only one level of realisation, the realisation of an intensely processed image.

The banal survives the instantaneous as the enduring reality of the art audience. For Warhol, to master this reality provided him with a certain kind of power to alter at free will and fashion the direction of art so as to continue to control his personality in his art. There is something territorial and addictive in this, and we remember even Duchamp was warning that the making of the readymade is something addictive and one must restrain oneself by not making so many readymades. This notion of restraint has not been heeded and reaches in Warhol excessive reproduction of the self – and other portraits – a decorative readymade pollution that constantly threatens the liberating space of critical art.



Andy Warhol, *Mao Tse-Tung*, 1972, acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 36 x 36 inch, The estate and Foundation of Andy Warhol, Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

Within his playful elements of headhunting Warhol achieved one thing; he placed the artist at the centrefold of observation. Following from Duchamp, who thought it enough to show art, Warhol, so it seems, believed that there is no concept at all apart from the image of the artist as readymade. The artist as personified readymade art is also one reason why Warhol's art has a capacity to elucidate literalism, as an apparent irony that regurgitates mass-produced art. There was no indifference in Warhol's screen prints in regard to their directness; they have, however, shown a great deal of indifference in relation to the artwork as a real object. By producing speedy art and having no more original desire he has given away the aura (Benjamin) or originality of the work. The art does not raise questions of creative intent but appeals to the sensationalistic drive of the masses.

This is a condition of production, comparable to a newspaper editor who through his/her speediness achieves a kind of direct and 'real' authenticity, which, however, lasts only as an instant moment. The fifteen minutes of fame springs to mind once more. In all this immediacy Warhol was moving the notion of the readymade into the domain of the thought process of the artist. Art according to what is being said could not be as quick and instant as the present thinking of the artist. This 'being' the place where art matters, for the art initiator and the work at the same time give away the special place that the avant-garde held for a long time. The artist now moves on the same level as the audience, but not as one of the audience, rather as a staging individual, a promoter who presents him/herself above the audience in terms of a living artwork.

The thought process as the immanent gesture of art was one of the traits of Warhol. It could be said that this was to a large extent the first appearance of conceptual art. The conceptual was not, however, a central concern of Warhol his idea was solely to compete with the real of life. The concept materialised as a banal reproduction and the image of the artist must be seen inside that reproduction as well. As those art ideas continued to evolve the next emergent art concept was the artist as the centre point of attention. Neither the identity with the material nor the identity with the concept mattered, but exclusively the artist's identity, reproduced as an egocentric art object.

In Warhol's celebration of personality, the meaning and presence of art and audience, its reflexive, reproductive nature left no connection, no space for liberation. Celebration and the spectacular in art production leads people away from thinking about art as a transient experiment that goes beyond the aesthetic commodities of life. The transient qualities, which are not revealed in Warhol's reproduction of reality, are fundamental for an art of liberation in which through resistance a progress in theory and practice can occur.

Beuys, for example, progressed his theory using the principle of transcending his artistic personality through the expanded spectrum of art as a collective personality. Here the ego of the liberator is visible but evolved into the broader community. In contrast, for Warhol, the artist's space for liberation is permanently contained within his confidence and the obsessive ego that paradoxically refuses all engagement with social responsibility.

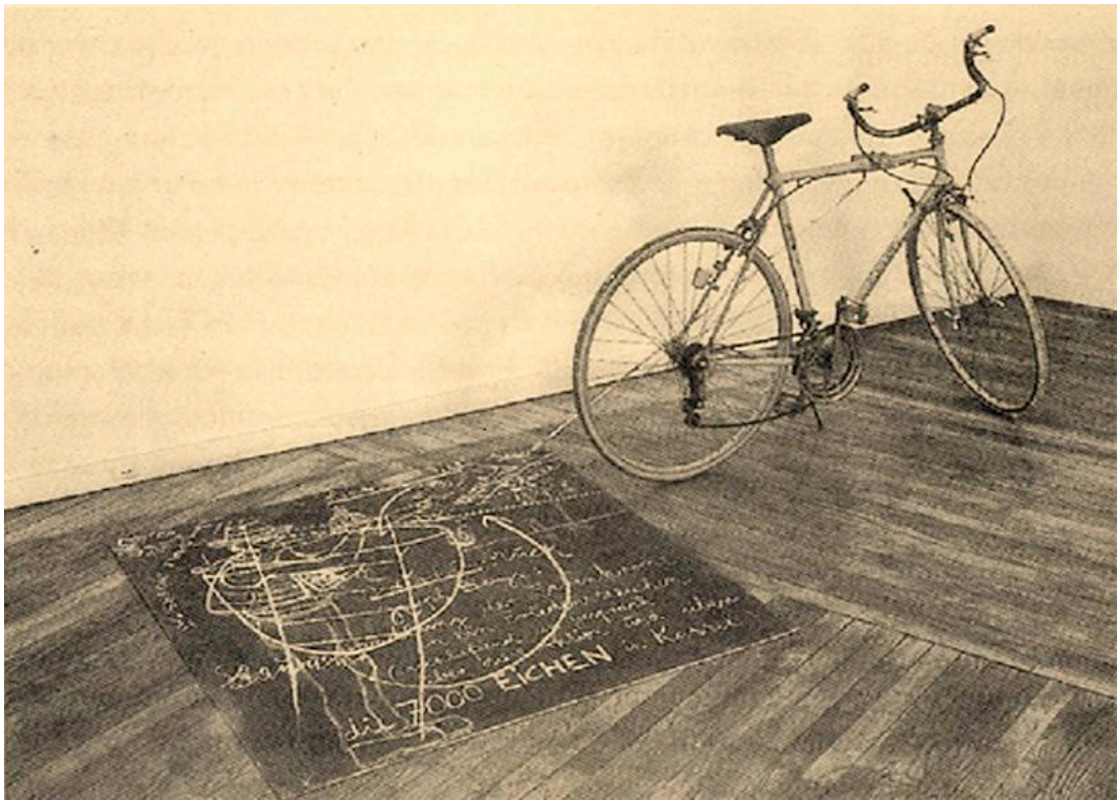
In all this the situation of literal art came together continually with the position of the artist in relation to society. Each struggle was and still is connected with the desire to overcome the current, dominant situation in which the artist is situated. As we remember Beuys was thus confronted with the silence of Duchamp and overcame that silence by making clear that the readymade and its consequent delay did not eliminate thought and alternative interpretations. A clear example was the installation *Is it about a bicycle?* Venice 1984.

In connection to each other the artworks are not dissimilar, but they are conceptually miles apart. In Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* the artist has appeared as a protesting individual making a stand against the aesthetic and maybe also the fetishization of art. No further artwork is needed. On the contrary, Beuys' installation *Is it about a bicycle?* demands further art and involvement. Alain Borer comments:

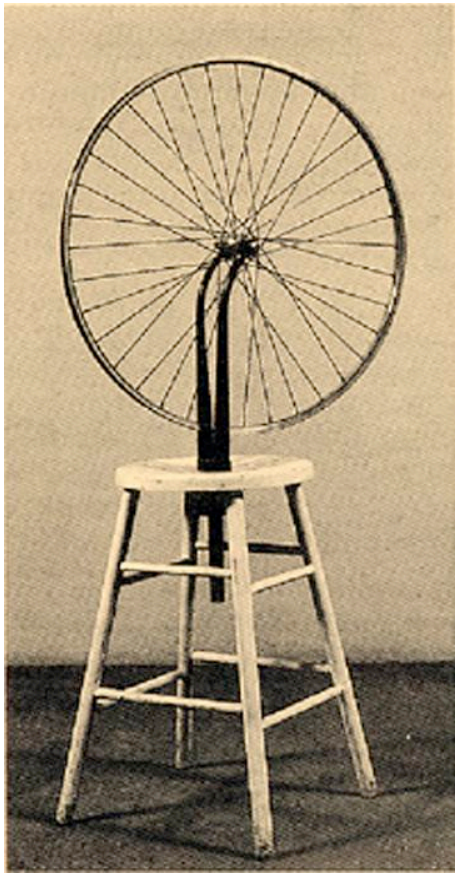
> Then, in opposition, comes Joseph's bicycle', lets call it the 'Beuyscycle', show in Venice, entitled *Is it about a bicycle?* (1984), Trailing behind it fifteen blackboards covered in diagrams and chalk drawings. The bicycle pedalling away. Healing. Duchamp's bicycle turns on itself, albeit *free*wehling, whereas Beuys's brings a series of measures in its wake. Duchamp *takes his leave;* he places (flings) the urinal in the museum, in the freezer, on its end; Beuys *moves into action*, dynamizises objects, sets their thermal energy free, and takes us under his wing.[60]

The process here is already a comment on the refusal of the art of Duchamp and hence a continuum of thought. A creative and liberating art process emerges that challenges the visitor to deal with resourceful differences of readymade art. Thus Beuys provokes and liberates 'thought' by questioning the creative use of Duchamp's readymade bicycle wheel. In the silence of the readymade the question arises: 'is Duchamp's wheel about art or can it also be exclusively about a bicycle'?

Beuys has engaged the public to participate in a theoretical and practical discourse and opened up this analysis of being silent after Duchamp into a humanistic way of liberating thought creation. All in all, Beuys was deliberately utopian in his approach to the readymade, because that was the only point of resistance to its overuse in Warhol's readymade factory productions.



Joseph Beuys, *Its about a Bicycle?*, 1984, Bicycle with inscribed slates (detail).



Marcel Duchamp *Bicycle Wheel*, 1951, readymade after the original of 1913. Bicycle wheel, mounted by its fork on a painted wooden stool. The Museum of Modern Art, The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection.

NOTES

[49] Herbert Marcuse *The Aesthetic Dimension*, (London: Macmillan, 1979), 50.

[50] Ibid. 50, Marcuse references Dieter Wellershoff from the book *Die Auflösung des Kunstbegriffs*.

[51] Fred Lawrence Guiles, *Loner at the ball, the life of Andy Warhol*, (London: Bantam Press, 1989), 30.

[52] Andy Warhol, *Andy Warhol Polaroids 1971-1986,* Introduction by Vincent Fremont, essay by Andy Grundberg, (New York: Pace/MacGill Gallery, c1992), 49-50.

[53] Andy Warhol, 47.

[54] Andy Warhol, 7.

[55] At that time Schwarzenegger was seen as outsiders and was mocked in public as the 'bizarre bodybuilder' from Austria.

[56] Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 791.

[57] Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, 51.

[58] Tompkins *Duchamp a biography*, 460.

[59] Willem van Reijen, *Horkheimer zur Einführung*, (Hamburg: Janius Verlag 1982)' 58, (my own translation).

[60] Alain Borer, *The essential Joseph Beuys*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 22.

Chapter 4

Artwork and spectator – see yourself:
Modern art alienates its audience, even as it employs social engagement, as part of an ironic and minimalist agenda, in an attempt to overcome the isolation.

The subject of the real and with it the place of the artist who mediates between practice, process and audience is of great interest in this thesis. The artwork, whether illusion and fantasy or directly attached to the social context is mainly the judging vehicle of its relevance to the real. Since technology and science created a user friendly environment and an art that is efficient as a product, artists are inclined to play a part in this user-oriented schema.

For the artist, engagement in this rational technological art game, that is to say in the abstract logic of art entities, is a struggle with the need to be relevant as an artist. The challenge is to combine social practice with the need to call on sources such as the absurd, the ironic and the illogical. If any of those elements are missing, art squanders its identity as something that mediates between the real of reason and the real of originality. On that merit Dan Graham observed that the understanding of art is not with the produced image but with the moment of subjective engagement with originality and reality.

Most likely Graham observed the prevalence of the passive and uninvolved viewer through his early work at the John Daniels Gallery. By being able to observe the gallery visitors, to examine their behaviour in front of an art object, he noticed that the intention of the artist and the art object often failed in relation to the gallery space; Graham found himself forced to respond to the contradictions, to which art in galleries is subjected. In both cases, that is of the artist and the audience, the alienation from the art work is observable. Graham remarks in his essay *My works for Magazine Pages: "a history of conceptual art"*:

> The fall after the gallery failed I began experimenting myself with artworks which could be read as a reaction against the gallery experience, but also a response to contradictions I discerned in gallery artists.[61]

The name of the gallery or the artists aside, it is important that Graham had some practical encounter with the notions of perception and interpretation as operated by the arts audience. Furthermore he questions the place of the artist as an individual who contradicts him/her self in relation to the authenticity of the artwork and the 'commodity aesthetic' (Bürger) in a gallery context. The truth, that is to say, the reality of that art for Graham is neither in the studio nor in the gallery but within the potential of the subjective viewer for direct analytical comprehension. He realised that the

'communicative element' was missing and concluded that this allows an art to emerge that is alienated from the audience as well as from the reality of the artist. The only quality that remained was the object as a fetish that through aesthetic presence evokes its commodity value. The observation of audience behaviour, when viewing a work of art, was, for Graham, the essence in which creativity finds points of references and ultimately determines the space that is desired for a liberated art to emerge in society. This interaction between seeing and being seen, between knowing and discovering, encouraged him to reconsider the role and the use of an artwork in a broader context than the mere exhibition of a work of art in a gallery.

The typical layout for a contemporary gallery is the interior of a white cube. For Graham this was the space in which visual engagement with art occurs. Inspired by the functioning context of the gallery, Graham decided that the place of the artist does not reside in the production of a work of art, but resides within the heterogeneous moments of reception of 'entities'. In the essay *My works for Magazine Pages: "a history of conceptual art"* he mentions the moment of visual engagement and interpretation as something that matters in the contextual frame of the gallery cube. Art for Graham had developed in two directions. One was Warhol's version of pop art and its literal attention to the surrounding media world. Then there was the resistant activity of early minimal art that took its stand in the notion of its difference from marketable objects. The space that provided liberation was in the sphere of concepts. Graham points out:

> While American "Pop" art of the early 1960s referred to the surrounding media world of cultural information as framework, "Minimal" art work of the middle through late 1960s would seem to be referring to the gallery's interior cube as the ultimate contextual frame of reference or support of the work.[62]

By seeing the cube as the accommodating structure for art, Graham recognised the subject as a part of that artistic structure. The shift from the artist as a creator to the artist as an observer becomes important. Behavioural reactions now become a major part in the production of art. The artistic point of a liberating praxis is that it evokes self-analysis in the audience and encourages a playful notion of looking at one's self as a medium for art. The medium of his art does not become immediately evident or present. It emerges through the structure of his installation, which invokes behaviour by means of observation. The experiment manifests as a central theme of the work and its success is measured through phases of looking, participation and behaviour. In this space of interactive observation, the artist has taken on the role of an outside initiator who lets the structure of art determine itself in the subject, as art.

In Graham's work the concept 'art' is perhaps similar to Beuys' concept, a basis from which the symbolic in art can be challenged through the notion of personal experience. One might say that this is the thing itself versus the human being, facing the struggle of *'Dasein' or (Being-in-the-World).*[63] In Graham's environmental installation experiment one experiences an identity with art through one's own reflection as the other. One is one's self and at the same time conscious of the other, as Solomon explains:

> to be found in a collective "they" *(das Man*) engaged in joint endeavours in the world rather than in the solipsistic Cartesian cogito. *Dasein* consists of both its facticity (its being "thrown" into the world at this place at this time) and Existence (possible for personal choice).[64]

This is an important distinction. These terms differ greatly in their outcome for liberation. The question is, as Heidegger remarks, 'How can something be identical with itself?'

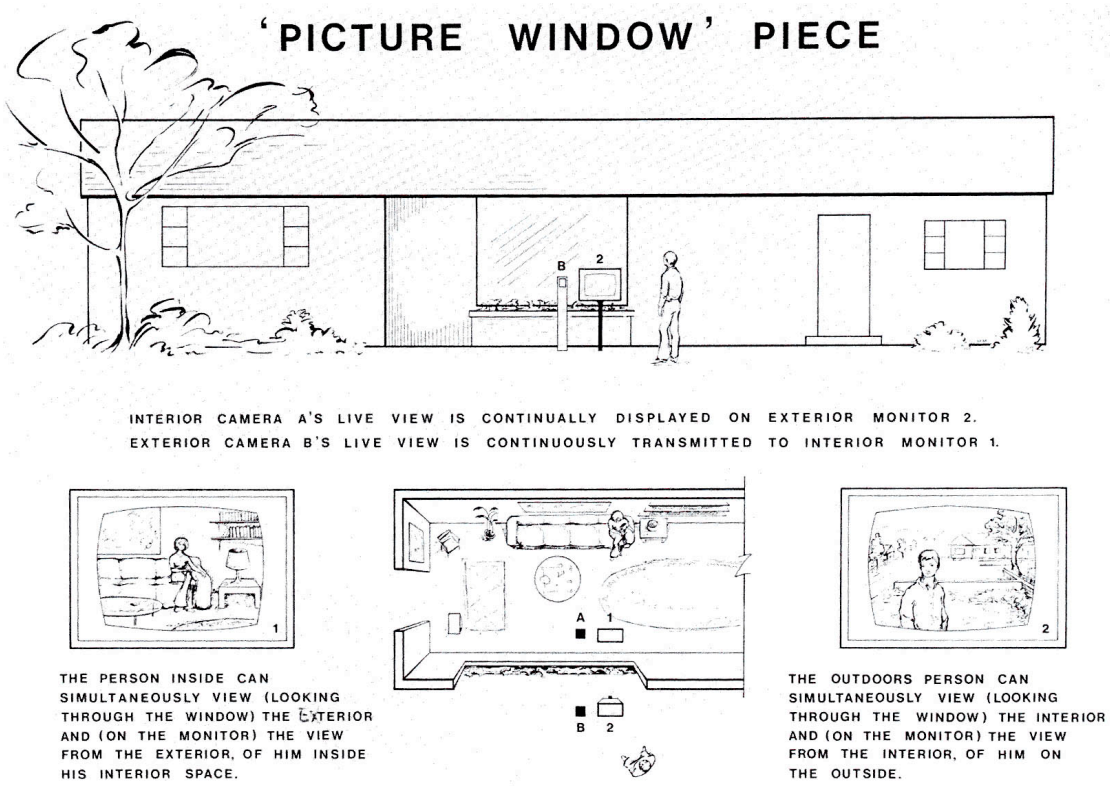
Surely the artists of the pop movement are not identical with the art they produce. Their interest remains purely in the symbolic, the image that refers to something else as a meaningful object. In contrast the minimalist or conceptual artist identifies 'authentic' with an art that is reduced to its fundamentals; that is the use of 'concept' as a production technique for art and 'desire' as the concept that motivates the artist to make a specific work of art.

Graham makes this clear in a radio broadcast symposium. As Anne Rorimer points out, Graham was articulating the rationale for the creation of his magazine pieces during the years of 1965 to 1969, as he explained:

> I think I'm interested in fusing something in the present without documentation. I was never interested in words or in syntax in poetry, but more in information. I wanted the things I did to occupy a particular place and be read in a particular present time. The context is very important. I wanted my pieces to be about place as information, which is present.[65]

I would like to consider *'Picture Window' Piece* in the context of Graham's remark, of art about places and information that challenges personal experience in the realm of one's self in relation to an identification with the other. In the *'Picture Window' Piece* Graham uses the multiple view as a construct for personal and outside judgment.

The omission of the artwork as a framed and presentable image (or abstraction) is replaced by the situation of appearance of the subject as the work of art. The social division is here removed by the opportunity of voyeurism and self-observation. The main activity of this installation is to be inside looking out and at the same time



Dan Grahams diagram for *'Picture Window' Piece* (proposal) 1974.

looking at one's self inside. The artist occupies the place of the silent observer, who constructs devices that confirm or deny certain receptive behaviours of the audience. One truly is confronted with a Heideggerian concept of '*Dasein'*. Amongst voyeuristic behaviour and self-contemplation one senses one's self to be one with an artwork that experiments with *'Being in the world'*.

A most compelling game with the location of art as an authentic revelation is clearly to be observed in Graham's work. In *'Picture Window' Piece* the interaction of subjective viewing, and the withdrawn location of the artist as an observing entity gives a new dimension of liberated space to the significance of creation. Related to his background experience as a gallery owner Graham knew where the exchange of image and meaning with the artwork occurred. The main focus as described by Graham in the radio interview is on the place where art happens. In *'Picture Window' Piece* the spectator is reading the image as something that is always either its own image or the image that others see through its own reflected image. In particular the place of events depends on the position of the spectator and the way in which the spectator consciously engages in that reading. The artwork's importance is in revealing a stream of reflective information that is both subjective and real and operates as the main activity in this installation work. In that sense, one can read Graham's work in the context of space, time, observation, self-awareness and the unconsciousness of contemplation. In that space art continues to observe and be observed. This constant watching and seeing does not alienate the spectator from the comprehension process in art. It rather encourages participation, knowingly or not.

In describing the *'Picture Window' Piece* one has always to keep in mind that this is a work of art and not just a situation. The absence of the artist as a creator and the experimental silence of the work are in opposition to the responsive audience as the initiators of the artwork. The art in Graham's work is hidden but surrounds and stimulates a concept of interactive view and thought. In all this the role of the artist has transmuted from a famous individual who is at the focus of attention (like Warhol) to an absent creator silently observing reactions and behaviour. Contrary to the security man or the voyeur, however, Graham is interested in the behaviour of the spectator in relation to the external and the personal. The artistic interest focuses on the reaction and experience one gains inside Graham's installation. The artwork is a concept and suggests that the making and viewing of art is everywhere. Not everywhere as an icon but everywhere as a personal conscious thought experience.

That is why one easily forgets the aesthetic desire in Graham's art and focuses on one's personal appearance in relation to social and probably technological functional elements in the installation; such as the video cameras installed inside and outside the

house. The reflection in the window or the loop feeding of images from inside to outside, the constant engagement of one's own subjectivity with others, all distracts from any desire to look for the fetish quality in art. Alienation does not exist in this installation; if it does then it is the alienation one carries from one's own identity of *Dasein*. But since the audience is self-aware, and by that identifies, without knowing, with the original context of art through the means of looking and observing, it is not alienated from the work of art. Admiration is not easy with Graham's work since it is not only a conceptual engagement but also a minimalist sensation for the individual to engage. One sees the essential which is one's self in relation to others.

Furthermore, Graham assembled *'Picture Window' Piece* to reverse the effect of alienation that gallery art has on the audience, that is to say, the difference that exists between the ordinary object and its unfulfilled promise of transcendence. This was a suburban setting in which art takes on a familiar face of home and society. One immediately observes that the concept of art is tied to an urban setting where art engages with the real of suburban life. This place of interaction as art competes with urban life and provides a place of very private interaction between personal reason and imagination. From the beginning, in this installation, the place for creative undertaking is outside of artistic conventions. From the start, one senses the closeness to experience in Graham's work.

This is another real, so different to Warhol's real but not so distant from the real of Beuys. With Graham's work one does not reproduce the real nor can one see the real as a form of *social creativity*. The real here is the vision and realisation of space between the other and oneself.

Spectators have often identified with the artist as a source of meaning for art on display. Through history there is a connection that gives the artwork the presence it deserves, based on reputation, of what is known about the artist. As long as there was an identity for the artist, so long was it given to the audience to understand the work of art. The artwork in itself was always, nonetheless, something attached to the persona of the artist.

In Graham's work, however, there is no access of the individual subject to the creator of the work of art. The artist remains hidden, as an observer, and lets the real construct an art situation in which the individual contemplates seeing and being seen. The awareness of actually looking at the art image is not there, one must remind one's self that the recognition of one's own image or the view of someone else is the art object. There is no evidence that an artwork in the traditional sense has been produced; no hanging of pictures and no placement of three-dimensional objects. All is instant; the

conventional situation in art is constantly shifting. The artist is liberated from the production conditions that the art market demands. Bourgeois expectation is diverted and changed into a self-reflective endeavour.

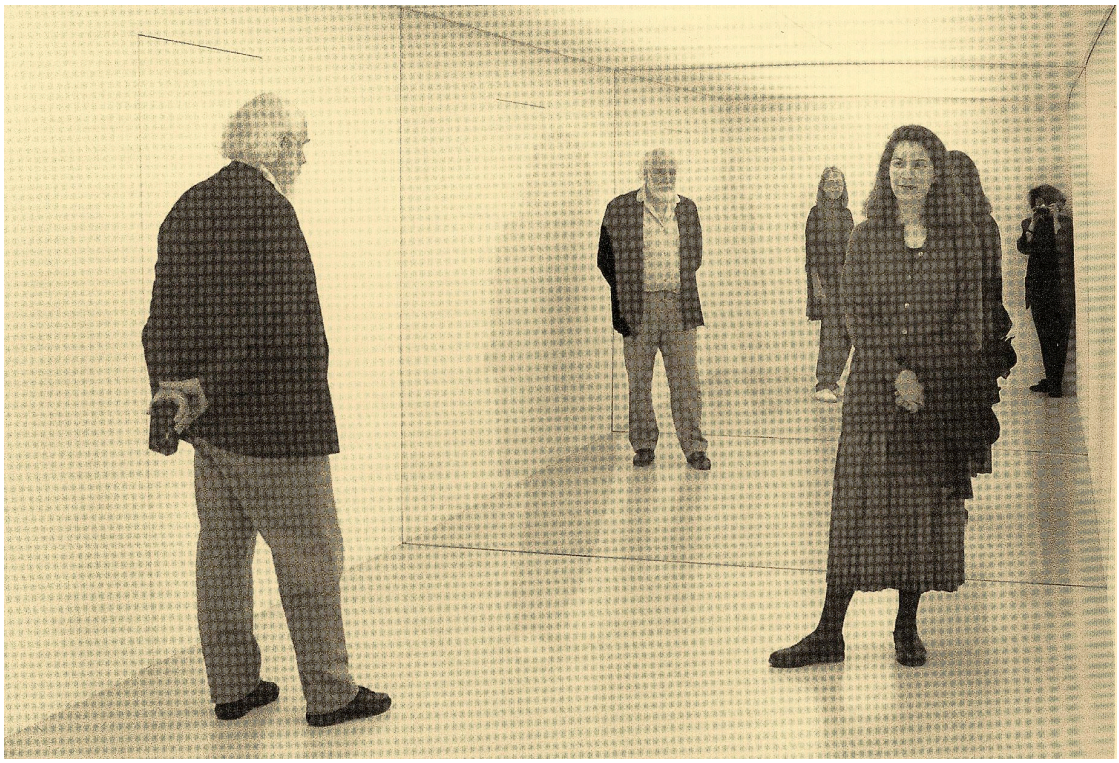
Graham's installation inscribes situations in art that reflect on what one will find if one is consciously looking. His goal is not art as a beautiful object, but the literalness of the human condition, personal experiences, and voyeuristic gazes. Seeing and being seen, looking and feeling part of the whole interactive installation apparatus all emerge within the experience of the audience. The situation in which one sits in a front of a coffee shop, looks at others and sees one's self and other people's reactions in street windows best describes the inclusive situation of Graham's art.

The installation provides a liberated space that drives on difference and resistance to conventions. The independence of the setting, the way it plays itself out in the public domain ensures a non-commercial potential in art. Thereby the meaning in art is established without a social consensus. At a fundamental level one is brought to the point of making a personal experiment with art viewing.

The absence of the artist as the reference point in art and the consequential shift of the artist towards being a partaker with the observing audience gives liberty to the artist to implement uncontrolled meanings in art. This absence of the artist from the art product – not like in a readymade – but in working from an invisible point of reference is clearly underlying Graham's reflective installations.

The situation is not unlike my reverse iconography praxis in which the artwork is created in opposition to the public gaze, the artist is not working from the same perspective as the audience therefore the audience will look at the object art in its own way.

All Graham's installation settings accommodate and demand participation on an unconscious level to enable the individual to detect personal artistic facts. Graham shows through this reality of experienced moments that art can create a liberated environment, which plays itself out in communal participation. As this field of liberated engagement and observation plays itself in the open space of spectatorship it establishes a space that can exist parallel to the ongoing process of commodification. For that, Graham provides a liberating praxis, freed from market influences, able to structure its own art from the personal experiences of individual spectators. These moments of personal experience remain temporary and non-commercial, they disappear with the departure of the individual spectator in the experimental space.



Dan Graham, *Public Space/Two Audiences*, 1976, installation (detail).

NOTES

[61] Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, ed., *Conceptual art: a critical anthology*, (New York MIT Press, 2000.) 419. The text appeared first in Gary Dufour, Dan Graham, an exhibition catalogue. (Perth: The Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1985), 8-13.

[62] Alexander et al, 419.

[63] Robert, C. Solomon, ed., trans., *Existentialism*, (New York: Random House, 1974), 93.

[64] Solomon 93.

[65] Anne Rorimer, *New Art in the 60s and 70s Redefining Reality*, (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2001), 201.

Chapter 5

The Business Coach as a Readymade Artist:
How Jeff Koons managed his investment in contemporary art through seductive and self-centred fetishism.

The modernist strategic position refuses to acknowledge or to confirm conformist intrusions into its liberating praxis. Only that which is outside the mainstream of life was of value for the modern artist. By now that modernist position has been talked to shreds by the culture industry. The postmodern deluge accentuated a purely mimetic form of art production. Mimesis and fetishism became more important than liberation, indeed they were used to deny freedom and reduce it to a mere spectre. The new art was purposefully illustrative so as to constitute a field of exchange value available for everyone who wished to look at art. In the perspective of this art market, a resistant position as maintained by the avant-garde appeared, above all else, reactionary, not suitable for popular appreciation, as art should be. Art in the logic of the modernist stratagem was becoming too real, too involved in social and hence political life. The modernist negative aesthetic proved irreconcilable with the ultra efficient contemporary art market.

As the marketable readymade achieved dominance, art disappeared in a vast diversity of 'realities'. The convenience of readymade art displaced the meaning of making art and relegated the process of resistance to the space of verbal debate. Words retained the only trace of art making through which thought about the art object might regain its liberating potential. This did not, however, move the spectator in any specific way. It isolated the artwork and rapidly gave way to purely commercial interpretations, to criticism as a recipe book.

Dan Graham anticipated the problem and attempted to resolve the alienation of art, artist and audience through an engagement with human reality as an art object. But art as a commodity remained in demand. Conceptual art and installations were unable to hold and maintain political, performative and ironic resistance. According to Bürger the reasons for this are grounded in the differences that constantly crop up between art and 'real life':

> The avant-garde intends the abolition of autonomous art by which it means that art is to be integrated into the praxis of life. This has not occurred, and presumably cannot occur, in bourgeois society, unless it be as a false sublation of autonomous art. Pulp fiction and commodity aesthetics prove that such a false sublation exists.[66]

Bürger is commenting on the aspiration of the historical avant-garde movement and its liberating practice to merge art and life. One may identify the same predicament in conceptual art and its social experiments. In this tension of relating conceptual art or the avant-garde to the praxis of life, however, life as a universal entity swallows art and spits it out as part of life. Consequently modern lifestyles were empowered, through the abstract and silent nature of conceptual art, to relate their desires in praxis to art, as a falsely sublated entity. Indeed, since the conceptual exists merely as a mental thing, it had to be expected that the conceptual in art had to make way for the hands-on practicality of object art entertaining the 'praxis of life'. The objective result of art is therefore proof of art's existence as a material reality ordained for consumption. A false sublation occurred that is based on the premise, that if art could exist as a concept then surely art can emerge as an object defined as art in the widest terms possible. Here the intellect is confronted by a profound indifference that has retained only the hollow public form of an idea, without its resistant restorative kernel.

Something had to give, however, and the artist forsook his/her ability to resist the judgement of the market. The invisibility and hence the speechlessness of conceptual, resistant art, could sustain individual resistance in competition with the economic aspirations of a contemporary pop culture that embraces *neo–expressionism* and *neo-geo art*. The universal use of kitsch as a creative metaphor is a submission by the contemporary artist to the belief that art as immediate reality, that is to say social critique, is impossible. 'Smart thought' and mediocre objects can now reify any aspect of contemporary art, the dimension of production is destined to widen and invite all kinds of materials and techniques and cynicism into art. Sandro Chia writes in Art in America:

> Today, works of art imitate and are inspired by the economy. The economy has itself become the work of art, acquiring all the qualities a work of art should have: pitilessness, ruthlessness, cynicism, grandiosity, communicativeness, abstraction. Economic systems and economic values rule the art world, especially in New York.[67]

Multiples, performance, happenings, action painting, installation art, social sculpture projects and many more such activities broadened the possibilities for art. This made the deliberate and conscious approach to art as an experimental praxis redundant. Comments on social life and politics were no more and no less important than the shapeless mass of multiple styles. Their high level of irony discharged the serious attempts in art and eliminated the social authority of modern art. A painting by Cézanne is now seen within the tradition of oil painting as a remnant of a nostalgic

bohemian art practice. For the contemporary artist that kind of art is already too distant. It bears no immanent significance for the careerist artist. Time and fashion have silenced valuable research in art and turned attention exclusively to art that seems to impress through dazzling. From the diverse art practices that were produced in modernism only noise and size now remain to attract attention.

In the 1980s artists started to identify and mimic the popularising procedure of Warhol, Lichtenstein, Bruce Nauman and many other artists. The super artist myth is not separated into generations; it now predominates everywhere, all at once, simultaneously. It occupies a permanent present constantly rejuvenated through the work of the media. Any newcomer in the arts industry, usually someone coming from an art school, would first identify with the corpus of the living legend and progress in the same manner to art production. New artists all aspire to the style of a life coach, to hold the secret of how to make art so as to succeed in the art world and to pass it on to others as pure behaviour, as a mode of being without contradiction.

The overwhelming offerings of galleries and art fairs on the internet leave contemporary practitioners confused as to how deal with contemporary art. They showcase individual artists, who are represented in all the art shops on the world art market. They are the living myth to which one should aspire. Also the type of art that they want to produce is inspired by the notion of dazzling, or flooding the consciousness with pure undifferentiated spectacle, since fundamental differences can no longer be realised. The contemporary deluges of pop stars and popular artists are indistinguishable; the difference between the Chicago Motor Show and a show at the Guggenheim is minimal.

This is not the first occasion on which this has happened. In the late nineteenth century the productive capacity of Salon art reached extraordinary levels of efficiency. Huge crowded salons appeared in what were essentially exhibitions of trade and industry, such as the 1900 Paris Exposition, which was visited by the young Picasso. As Picasso's subsequent career shows, however, art retained the capacity to make its own space within modernity, to restore an epiphanic dialogue in the face of an aggressive demand for one dimensional, pseudo industrial production. The surprisingly short history of cubism might well be read as a struggle to achieve this.

In the contemporary situation this is no longer the case. An extraordinarily efficient, worldwide counterpart to nineteenth century historic academism now provides the market with constant updates about the types and hierarchies of art acceptable to art institutions. It also regulates the surrounding spectacle from above, via those same institutions. In this situation competition is at best random, referenced only by familiar

patterns of consumption and commodity spectacle. Hence, all art looks the same. Since exchange value poses absolute limits to thought there is no market in ideas. There never has been.

At best the contemplation of art has now become an inconsequential 'spare time' activity equivalent to sport, watching television, fishing or drinking. The whole art activity is not unlike entering a church and looking at the architecture or visiting the spectacle of a sporting event or soaking in the intellectual pseudo religious atmosphere of the museum.

Nothing separates the individual from those activities; everything has a name and a place. Now, however, the human being has become alienated from the eternal questing of humanity. All is reasonable, bounded by technology, and the rationale of all life is grounded in entertainment and instant satisfaction. Art is embedded in a consumer society that does not know why it consumes. It accepts and desires the law of things and hence the law (taste) of their society. Marcuse explains this perfectly:

> The impact of progress turns Reason into submission to the facts of life, and to the dynamic capabilities of producing more and bigger facts of the same sort of life. The efficiency of the system blunts the individual's recognition that it contains no facts which do not communicate the repressive power of the whole. If the individuals find themselves in the things that shape their life, they do so, not by giving, but by accepting the law of things – not the law of physics but the law of their society.[68]

If there is a strategy to invoke resistance in this complacent conforming context it is not direct resistance but leadership in the race to conform to the spectacular showcasing of art. Resistance seems to be identified with loud mouthed art in which artists emerge as the jokers who put on a show of predictable subversion. The capitalist image of a successful artist is of a loud mouth with a suitcase, who never misses a trick, and plays along in the field of art precisely as tradition expects. Bourdieu remarks:

> Paradoxically, nothing more clearly reveals the logic of the functioning of the artistic field than the fate of these apparently radical attempts at subversion. Because they expose art or artistic creation to a mockery already annexed to the artistic tradition by Duchamp, they are immediately converted into artistic 'acts', recorded as such and thus consecrated and celebrated by the makers of taste. Art cannot reveal the truth about art without snatching it away again, by turning the revelation into an artistic event.[69]

To access the mythic space of the super artist one must now satisfy its new gatekeepers, the image making industry, print media, magazines and TV stations; the opinion of a journalist or reporter recreates the super artist myth everyday. Artists who want to emerge inside this circus must be loud and dazzling to attract the publicity maker's attention. Contemporary artists do not see the value in making an art object

without gaining attention. Their goal is to facilitate the industry's need for publicity by manufacturing loud subversive and ultra efficient art that acts within the image making industry, rather than in contradiction to it.

This new ultra efficient praxis in art has enticed artists to think first and foremost about how the market would react to their work. They have no concern for liberating entities within the art work. They succeed only to refashion the art object as a distinct spectacle to attract commodity values. For this reason kitsch and banal commentary have returned to the forefront of artistic representations and debate. The deliberate celebration of mediocrity for short-term gain has returned to the international art world. In case of example, Jeff Koons is an artist who combined spectacle and idiomatic meanings within kitsch objects. He also has laid claim to aesthetic liberation as an achievement of pure stylishness, high art as a Steve Martin movie.

For Koons, his kitsch objects initiate a search for an opportunity to act as freely as possible, to take charge and overcome the commodity status of art with even more commodity. He was, however, bound by the limits of the market, by a longing for his work to be acknowledged. His stance was not dissimilar to that of a child who asks: 'do you think I have nice hair?'

Most dialogues within contemporary art focuses on financial success as equivalent to artistic success, as if art was essentially work for a manager, using 'business logic'. Thus to achieve success one must invest more capital in art to create more attention and gain a greater reward. Koons pointed out this investment strategy and the hope of independence:

> After moving to New York in 1977, I worked at the Museum of Modern Art selling memberships. I was the most successful salesman in the Museum's history. But I needed to find a way to finance the production of my art so I moved to Wall Street and sold commodities. This enabled me not only to produce my work but to remain independent from the commercial art world system.[70]

Although Koons wanted to be independent of the commercial art world system that was to control the destiny of his work, he nonetheless submitted to the apparatus of which it is a part. He had no choice, since it controls the field in which contemporary art is played out. His strategy was simple; he promoted himself as if he were taking part in a life management course. In The *Power of Focus*, the book that promises you, 'How to hit your business, personal and financial targets with absolute certainty' one can almost hear the artists of the 80s explaining their art:

> Have-tos put you in a position of pressure, whereas choose-tos put you in a position of power. Choose Wisely.[71]

Koons chose to mimic kitsch and the market for kitsch, in doing so he not only re-valorised kitsch, he relocated the act of choice, as an act of indifference. The liberating potential of art through which one realises freedom has been lost. The artist no longer realises freedom, he merely chooses and celebrates freedom to choose, the freedom of a slave or a child. He compensates for that loss with an immense financial investment. The sentiments of a life coach/management manual that lays out how to become famous is very close to Koons' own comments:

> Finally, "train your brain" so it knows this goal is a happening thing:
> - Twice a day, sit quietly for a few minutes and think about your goal.
> - Imagine that you have already achieved your goal.
> Feel the pleasure, pride, and excitement of this fulfilment.
> See and hear all the wonderful details!
> Feels fantastic, doesn't it? Do you believe in this stuff? Yes? No? Kind of? [72]

Koons learned the lesson of success coaching, in *The Jeff Koons Handbook* he explains:

> I'm making some of the greatest art being made now. It'll take the art world ten years to get around to it. In this century there was Picasso and Duchamp. Now I'm taking us out of the Twentieth Century.[73]

Koons affirms the historical standard set by the bourgeois imperative for Duchamp and Picasso. Koons thinks the goal of art is to live up to that myth. This is in contrast to Beuys who criticised Duchamp's position on art. The silence of Duchamp meant for Beuys that theory about the art object and the creativity in art continues regardless of Duchamp's personality and conclusions. The challenge in Beuys' work transcends the historical myth and forms a new relationship between art and artist. For Koons, the deconstruction of Modernism in art meant that contemporary art became a matter of expanding historical knowledge as a myth so as to fit the populist market.

History, and with it its most important realizations, became an artistic concept in the selective manner of Duchamp and Warhol. Koons and also David Salle, Julian Schnabel and others, further expanded that selective manner to plunder history as a readymade treasure box, using objects through which they could trivialise serious research in art as merely the outcome of contemporary patterns of consumption. Koons' work, confirms this. In *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* Koons had in mind to transform the contemporary back to the epoch of the baroque:

> I use the Baroque to show the public that we are in the realm of the spiritual, the eternal. The church uses the Baroque to manipulate and seduce, but in return it does give the public a spiritual experience. My work deals in the vocabulary of the Baroque.[74]



Jeff Koons, *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, 1988 Sculpture (detail), image from the *Jeff Koons Handbook*.

For Koons the baroque was a discrete concept, a monolithic style, which he objectified as a readymade There is no resistance or challenge in his work because a monolithic concept can have no truth-value only exchange value. His art does not reveal an inner secret, contradiction or riddle. His audience is merely submissive to the status quo. That is their value. The artist celebrates helpless vanity using a degraded religious ideology. There is no dialogue with the audience in Koons' art. They merely admire the extravagant illusions of a carved pulpit. To imitate a myth, to relive and 'rejuvenate' the baroque for the present, for this very moment, is not a liberated or a resistant position.

Koons' insistence that the beauty of the baroque would work for contemporary experience is mistaken, misleading and perhaps naive. In baroque times people still believed the universe to be centred round the human spectacle. At that time the effect of beauty was connected to the intense belief that only human beings, can create godlike beauty. The superiority of man over nature was of vital importance for the baroque. The tension between them revealed aesthetically how heaven might be anticipated in the sublime. The tension between man and nature has apparently been liquidated; certainly it no longer functions to invoke a baroque creative space.

Koons appropriation of the baroque therefore was merely opportunist and exploitative. Like much else in American cultural life at the time it was an attempt to return cultural sensibilities to the late eighteenth century to the putative originary moment of modern capital as if this would sanctify the contemporary art market with an odour of eternal truth. In practice Koons produced a soulless spectacle, perpetually stalked by bad faith.

Koons' mistake occurs because, like an up-market Disney, he wanted to achieve the same effect as in baroque times without facing up to its contradictions in relation to contemporary life. He ignores the shift from a life centred on the human to a scientific consciousness in which humanity is at best a footnote in the history of the universe. The surprise effect of Koons' work is naïve, childlike. It remains necessary, nonetheless, to offer a brief analytical account of the undoubted shock, the neurotic frisson that it achieved.

The extreme limitations of Koons' work, its radical aesthetic solipsism, can be grasped more clearly if his baroque figures are compared to two scenes in fairly recent movies, in which animated or robotic creations take on the aura of humanity. In *Blade Runner*, Sebastian, the lonely super technician constructs for himself a band of toys that greet him on his return home each day and ask to play. Of course, although they manifest the outward qualities of friendly children, they remain objects and Sebastian remains



Scott Ridley, *Blade Runner,* (Video still), edition director's cut, Warner Home Video,1994, c1991. Sebastian in a silent and misty atmosphere amongst his toys in which artificial reconstruction of playful companionship remains a dream occupation.



Stanley Kubrik (producer), Steven Spielberg (director) *Artificial Intelligence,* (Video still) Warner home Video, 2002. The perfect universe spits out the nasty side of the undesirable. As the Android said 'History repeats itself'.



Jeff Koons, *Banality*, 1988, Installation, New York: Sonnabend Gallery.

lonely. In Kubrick's more recent *AI*, an adult science fiction version of *Pinocchio*, the entire film concerns the consequence of the displacement of the human into technology. In one scene a hate filled mob of flesh and blood humans conducts a grand auto-da-fe of homeless androids. The androids present as human, saying farewell, remembering their lives, their successes and so on, but their 'tortures', remain inauthentic, beyond empathy, one does not feel their pain.

This is an old, even mythic, conundrum – a single human cannot create a satisfying self-made universe – that is a childhood fantasy. The obsessive aura attained by a gilded sculpture of Michael Jackson with a monkey is rooted in the prolongation of that fantasy into adult life. Whether in art or life, resistance rebellion and contradiction provide the only route to freedom. Now, however, magic has come to earth and the fantasy and its chilling consequences can be fully realised. Koons has indeed tapped into a fundamental neurosis of late capital. The fear that the market may declare humanity itself redundant is real. Nonetheless Koons, true capitalist collaborator that he is, offers no strategy for redemption.

Capitalist collaboration turns Koons' art into an obsession with kitsch and self-proclamation that reached its peak, in his pornographic billboard series called *Made In Heaven*. In portraying himself in a sexual act with his now estranged wife La Ciccolina, a former porn star and once elected member of the Italian parliament, Koons attempted to provoke a final pointless controversy for the art market.

The controversy never occurred. Inasmuch as Koons' porn billboard series raised the level of exploitive representation so they revealed traits of the obvious and banal in relation to life not art. Koons mimics the everyday banality of pornography as a lifestyle option, leaving an empty image that communicates nothing beyond its visual forms. It seems that within this empty but glossy shell, his art does not challenge anything but can survive as a trivial unresolved provocation.

Koons produces an art without consequences. There have been no coherent feminist objections to *Made In Heaven*, his cynical pornographic project. Moreover, he later sued La Ciccolina, for the custody of their children on the grounds that her involvement with pornography made her an unfit custodian. Nothing in Koons' art could enter into life as a liberating experience. The attempt to differ from the ordinary is dead, leaving only comments to be made about the aesthetic appearance of kitsch.

This last stand of Koons, trying to shock the audience one more time drowns amongst the 'life related' and confronting porn images exposed on the World Wide Web. Koons drowns within the hypocritical staging of his art, his private life seems more

interesting. He is now fighting for custody over the children with his wife. His artistic integrity has been abandoned in the face of problematic appearance of pornography as an ethical issue in his private life exposing the hypocritical shortcomings of his art as muted comments that could never liberate life. Koons art not only loses all critical drive, more importantly it loses its credible voice. His ironic measures are not ironic. They are part of the object that he wanted to be ironic about.

By imitating the obvious Koons' porn billboard series eliminate the secret that all good artworks contain, from which, over long periods of time, they release elements as liberating intellectual constructs. An example of this slow release of a secret can be seen in the masterfully executed eternal smile of Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. There, if one looks closely, one gets the feeling one sees every time a different smile to the one seen a minute ago. The secret is never revealed but is constantly in the process of being revealed. And it is within this complex construct of composition and revelation where art has maintained a liberating entity. As a result the artist should not conclude the final outcome of his/her painting but remain controversial by secretly releasing liberating and controversial comments on life.

A liberating art is not possible for Koons. He is unable to develop an art practice that is concerned with freedom because he has already set his instrumental benchmark for success ahead of time. Koons emerges as a contemporary artist who considers history as a warehouse from which one can playfully pick whatever catches the eye. His challenge is to be competitive in relation to others and to dream up his own greatness. Koons brings the attitude of a self-obsessed life coach to art-making. His art is about supreme self-control, opportunism and the avoidance of all critical difference. This is not a position of artistic liberation. Art for Koons is a mere mimicry of history, dolled up, so as to please the present moment with a mockingly subservient version of kitsch. As can be seen in Koons' kitsch art, instrumental thinking always works in opposition to liberation.

NOTES

[66] Bürger, 53-54.

[67] Sandro Chia 'Making Art, Making Money', in *Art in America*, vol. 78, No. 7, New York, July 1990, p.138, reprinted and translated in *Zeitgenössische Kunst und der Kunstmarktboom*, by Max Hollein, (Vienna/Cologne: Böhlauer Verlag, 1999), 63.

[68] Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 11.

[69] Bourdieu, 80.

[70] J. Koons, *The Jeff Koons Handbook*, with an introduction by R. Rosenblum, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 7.

[71] Canfield, Hansen and Hewitt, *The Power of Focus*, (London: Vermilion, 2001), 223.

[72] A. Robbins, *Notes from a Friend, a quick and simple guide to take charge of your life*, published by (London: Simon & Schuster Ltd, 1996) 87.

[73] Koons, 82.

[74] Koons, 106.

Chapter 6

Art and the parody of popular media trash:
Paul McCarthy neutralises the critical authority of art by trivialising the elements of shock and disgust.

Does Koons' career indicate that from now on only rich people can make art, because only money can buy attention? Art as an avatar of one's humanity appears to have perished in favour of anything that smacks of investment and affect. Contemporary art does not know critical forbearance. It will not delay the outpouring of kitsch. Changes in art can be realised only as a form of childish play in which all is fun and cool, but who said that art is only play, fun, and cool? There is no reward for the liberated artist in resisting authority, to undermine the status quo of artistic taste. Art nowadays is only 'liberated' at the level of the individual. Artistic isolation is inevitable for the paranoid artist who does not want to demonstrate an attitude that might someday become an obstacle to his career. Even radical artists can only resist like a dog on the leash of its master.

That is not to say that radical actions in art do not exist but they exist under the banner of toleration and restraint. A society without resistant elements cannot claim to be tolerant and liberating. The Australian backyard is a very good example of this situation. The more there is diversity in the garden, the more one can see the 'liberating' hand of the gardener.

Because of this 'backyard tolerance' artists are conditioned to a constant fear of overstepping invisible marks. Critique and resistance to social norms exists only under self-imposed restrictions. Through this paradoxical space of control and tolerance, pretentious extremism emerges in performances such as those of Paul McCarthy. The boundaries between shock tactics and kitsch are annulled in a vastly inflated celebration of the power of parody. The collapse of the difference between shock and kitsch makes it possible for society to normalise 'serious disturbances' in pursuit of liberation and tolerance. This is not, however, an independent libertarian position but an interdependent relation between self-restraint and social tolerance.

In these earlier performances, such as *Whipping a Wall and a Window with Paint*, which McCarthy performed in 1974 in Pasadena California, one can still recognise the experimental excitement of the artist. Although one could compare elements of the performance with the free and natural movements of Jackson Pollock, the motivation



Paul McCarthy, *Whipping a Wall and a Window with Paint*, 1974, performance video, Pasadena, California. Materials used: blanket, bucket, paint, and motor oil.

and the result are different. There is an excitement and a desire to test the boundaries of one's creative imagination. The work has modernist clarity. *Whipping a Wall and a Window with Paint* was performed in an emptied room. In an interview conversation with Kristine Stiles McCarthy described it as an attempt to focus on a ferocious act:

> **Stiles** The action I found most interesting in the *Basement Tapes* was *Whipping a Wall with Paint.* Some quality in that is present in all of your work and comes through in that particular tape. It is a lurking violence, a presence just on the verge of being unleashed, some kind of horrific terror or force.
>
> **McCarthy** There were actually two tapes, one which you call *Whipping a Wall with Paint* and a second version which was *Whipping a Wall and a Window with Paint.* Passers-by viewed the action from the street, on the other side of the window. I splattered paint against the window for about an hour and in the end the windows were covered. There's paint everywhere – on me, on the floor. I would dip a big blanket into a large bucket of mixture of paint and motor oil, pull the blanket out and slap it against the wall and the window. It was exhausting. The splattering of the paint or the residue of ketchup as in *Bossy Burger* or other pieces seem to suggest that an act of violence has happened.[75]

Although I did not see the video of that performance the desolate atmosphere comes through in the photographic documentation. It is desolation that makes the setting interesting. There is no concern for staging a formula. The focus of the artist is on the material at hand.

From the beginning McCarthy's performances were linked to violence and cynicism but also to very humorous actions. The gestures of *Whipping a Wall and a Window with Paint* and *Bossy Burger* done in 1991 allude in one way or another to a superficial violent reality. The extravaganza of violence wears down any liberating potential in the work to a process of pure parody and pastiche.

The failure of McCarthy's performances indicates that an art that aspires to critical freedom cannot transcend the moment of liberation within its praxis. If it attempts to do so then it will cease to exist as a liberating praxis. Instead it will simply become absorbed into common experience as a new extreme version of eccentricity or petty scandal. This is best explained through Schiller's *Wallenstein*:

> Not that which shows itself in life and vigour
> Is threatening and fearful, but the common
> Dross that is always left from yesterday,
> That ever was and ever will be so,
> Tomorrow always as it was today!
> It is of such a dross that man is made,
> Accustomed habit is the nurse that fed him.[76]

Schiller thought of *das Gemeine* (common dross) as the ordinary and the mediocre in society, which, as a secure value from the past, proves and renews its value today. It is

an eternal recurrence of known values that arise from the desire for the familiar. Through the character of Wallenstein, Schiller claims that the familiar bestows the greatest sense of security. The longing for security is a threat to art. It constantly frustrates any possibility that the differences or contradictions of the real may emerge through art.

Art, in these circumstances must constantly be on its guard and refresh the moments when resistance enters the banal. As Schiller's Wallenstein observes, man is made from 'universal' that is to say the 'common dross' of human predilections to maintain a mediocre peace with reality. That is the reason why society gives names to everything that appears strange.

The violence, humour, irony and cynicism in McCarthy's performances changes direction in his later work so as to embrace the status quo. From *Whipping a Wall and a Window with Paint* in 1974 to the performance of *Bossy Burger* in 1991 the radical edge of his work slowly softens into pure parody. His artistic persona slowly declines into a parody of a parody of creative complacency – Alfred E. Neuman whose motto is 'What Me Worry?'

Alfred E Neuman is a character invented by artists of the American comic magazine *MAD*. He is a caricature from a dull and foolish society, a cliché of a small town citizen. For McCarthy the need to use that character in his performance emerged from the same interview conversation with Stiles.

> **Stiles** I think you told me that Alfred E. Neuman, for example, in *Bossy Burger*, was the image of how you saw yourself as a child. *Sailor's Meat* referred to your dad…
>
> **McCarthy** Not only references to Alfred E. Neuman but Howdy Doody and Charlie McCarthy. I share similar characteristics with them. I identify with puppets and cartoon characters. The Alfred E. Neuman mask was bought the day before the performance. I went to the store and out of 20 masks, I just picked that one. And the same with the chef's outfit: I went to buy pots and pans and just bought a chef's outfit too. The character/persona of Alfred E. Neuman as a chef was unexpected and is related to chance and coincidence. Most store masks are in one way or another a personality, a stereotype of a film character or a politician.[77]

Before McCarthy, Alfred E. Neuman was already a caricature and a satirical invention of the popular media. To extend this character into the realm of art nullifies any possible critical intention in art. The script is already written. McCarthy's persona is already part of the natural environment firmly embedded in a supine popular culture. As to freedom, since he never worries, there is no possible freedom for Alfred E. Neuman.



MAD Comic Magazine from 1983, number 170. Alfred E. Neuman is the Howdy Doody of a bourgeois visualisation of cultural resistance.



Paul McCarthy, *Bossy Burger*, 1991, performance video, installation at Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles and Luhring Augustine, New York (detail). Materials used: Barbecued turkey leg, television stage set, bowls, cooking utnensils, chair, counter, milk, flour, ketchup, mayonnaise, dolls, chef costume and Neuman mask.

In practice there is no difference between Ronald MacDonald and McCarthy's performance characters. I would argue that there is no artistic resistance and no critical effect in McCarthy's later performances. The level of debate is personal and social participation is remote because of the second level of parody. Would the Republican Party in the USA consider *Bossy Burger* as an authoritative source of criticism on policy matters? What would the Iraqi people think about this performance? The ketchup and the fluids and the puppet mimicry in these performances are little more than mockery in the face of the real blood in Iraq. McCarthy and his fans appear to assume that the celebration of the radical dissociation of sensibilities, through the distancing effect of the media for instance, is an adequate substitute for social critique.

Consider McCarthy's performances in relation to the critical content of the Dada montage of John Heartfield. Like McCarthy Dada artists ridiculed society and its failure to appreciate the spectrum of alternatives in art. The first priority of Dada, however, was to resist the taste imposed by popular culture as bourgeois. Dada performances, such as those by Hugo Ball and Tristran Tzara, were original, confrontational and absurd; they distinguished between the banal and the serious. In other words they rejected the purely visual embellishment of humour and violence. They revealed the absurdity of social norms to the audience like a magic mirror of the soul.

This enabled the Dada performances, collage, montage and installation works to transcend the superficial in public debate through criticism and satire. John Heartfield ultimately rejected Neo-Dada as well as pop art because of its parodic qualities. For him subject matter that has been trivialised by society was not acceptable as a critical art component. Dada's political satire and radical application of montage does not automatically imply that a pastiche of Dada must follow, which takes its position to greater awareness.

Wieland and Heartfield, the masters of Dada and political art demonstrated against Neo–Dada in 1960. They felt that the chiefly uncritical and compliant nature of Neo-Dada in the art market did not liberate and maintain the confrontational edge that can be ascribed to Dada. In its fundamental direction most pop art was also directed to the temptations of the art market that in effect mutated the critical authority of art.

The slow abrasion of critical difference in art is an ongoing process. It distracts artists from pursuing liberation and revelation. The works of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns are elements of an abrasion that turns satire into an epic composition of analytical pastiches. The Neo-Dada assemblages of objects manifest themselves into a construct of illusory art that has taken nothing from the reality of Dada satire.



John Heartfield (left) and Wieland Herzfelde, c1960, *IN MEMORIAM POP ART, the eternal miscarriage of the Grandmother DADA,* action in Prague protesting against Neo-Dada.

Take for example Rauschenberg's combine painting mixed media *Trophy I* (1959) in which the indecisive in art emerges as an assemblage of object making, revealing the arbitrary as the central meaning in the work. Dada and the easy use of the readymade influenced Rauschenberg. In this work a sequence of objects emerges that does not indicate anything beyond their merely obvious aesthetic. As Rauschenberg once said 'I am operating in the gap between art and life'. He pointed directly to the gap that makes the artwork ineffective as intellectual property. *Trophy I* does not communicate to any side. It has nothing to transcend the arbitrary. It emphasises the combination of objects as an assemblage. Rauschenberg's combine paintings are deliberately 'dislocated' so as to aestheticize the anti-art of Duchamp and the ironic satire of the Dada collage.

Rauschenberg's *Trophy I* and other Neo–Dada work such as Jasper Johns' famous *American Flag* paintings neutralise and euphemise the meaning of any liberating praxis. Parody emerges from an analytical source that combines everyday objects with sacrosanct painting. In its combination those object paintings are analysed to flatter the 'aesthetic' market. In their everydayness they parody the kitsch objects in life; content and material combine into a source of arbitrary representation.

Dada rejected the notion of making a parody about kitsch. Because of that independent stance towards mass culture Dada was not pure parody. It maintained a desire for independence for freedom in the production of art. It pursued the privilege to co-determine public affairs with seriousness and integrity. McCarthy's pure parody, coming from all directions, provides nothing but distraction.

McCarthy has credibility problems because his performances imitate, indeed parody, parody itself. His performance, so it seems, has arrived, at a point where *das Gemeine* – ordinary life, is confirmed as the status quo of an art for which the mediocre is in the best of taste. Humour and catharsis in McCarthy's performance enters the space of the double negative of simulation. He celebrates the dumb humour, violence, sarcasm, irony and cynicism of contemporary life by accelerating them in the direction they are already going. It is not too difficult to conceive of a painter who could behave exactly like McCarthy's parody in *Painter,* performed in 1995. His parody is linked closely to the possibility of the simulacra as the centre of contemporary experience. Baudrillard, the mastermind of the simulacra wrote:

> A new generation of signs and objects arises with the Industrial Revolution –signs with no caste tradition that will never have known restrictions on their status, and which will never have to be *counterfeits*, since from the outset they will be *products* on a gigantic scale. The problem of their specificity and their origin is no longer posed: technics is their origin; they have meaning only within the dimension of the industrial simulacrum.[78]



Robert Rauschenberg: *Trophy I*, 1959, Combined Painting, Zürich, Kunsthaus.



Paul McCarthy, *Painter,* 1995, performance video, Los Angeles. Materials used: Paint, canvas, oversized brush and roller, sound stage set, mayonnaise, meat cleaver.



Robert Crumb, *Mr. Snoid Goes Bohemian*, comix, c1969

Baudrillard points out that the simulacrum eliminates the specificity and origin of artistic signs and objects, the very objects and signs that might invoke freedom as a challenge, and thereby avoids the responsibility of confronting society in the way that art must.

McCarthy's performances present the artist and art as they become when the context of un-freedom has been completely internalised in a self-imposed victim-hood. Violent punches and smears of brown chocolate round the artist's genitals both delivered with boxing gloves read as an artist reduced to absolute incoherence. So does his huge phallic rubber nose and the pathetic repetitive sexualised grunt of 'De Kooning De Kooning' in *Painter*. This image may well represent a 'creative condition,' the truth of which is felt by many in the art world but McCarthy makes no effort to offer a strategy of liberation from this moment of absolute abjection. We are simply invited to share it. With McCarthy the status of art and the artist has 'risen' to an anaesthetic parody of the assumptions of underground art. In *Mr Snoid goes Bohemian,* an underground cartoon by Robert Crumb from the seventies, the artist goes bohemian, again, but his persona as an artist is exposed and trivialised as a parody of the underground and of the resistant power of ironic art. McCarthy fakes irony as the sign of a hidden truth, shared with his audience. His gestures counterfeit resistance. Eventually it seems he can do without art.

NOTES

[75] *Paul McCarthy*, (an anthology) (London: Phaidon Press Limited 1996), 8.

[76] Friedrich Schiller *The Robbers and Wallenstein,* Trans F.J. Lamport, (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 330.

[77] *Paul McCarthy*, 19.

[78] Jean Baudrillard 'Symbolic Exchange and Death' trans Iain H. Grant in *Modernism to Postmodernism an anthology*, (London: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 445.

Chapter 7

Picasso, the eternal painter:

Freedom suspended during the process of art making.

> In the 1950s Picasso once complained: 'The thing that is wrong with modern art right now (and you might as well say it, it's dying) is the fact that there isn't any longer a strong powerful academic art worth fighting against. There has to be a rule, even if it is a bad one, because the evidence of art's power is in breaking down the barriers. But to do away with obstacles – that serves no purpose other than to make things completely wishy-washy and spineless, shapeless, meaningless, zero.[79]

From the outset the fame that Picasso was able to achieve brought with it also the dilemma that such fame can create. The resistant nature of an artist like Picasso shows how a constant belief in a specific method and mixture of materials can be undermined by general acceptance. One could almost agree with Duchamp who suggested that any artist who reached a certain consistency should be forced to stop work as an artist. The loyal acceptance and promotion of the radical status of anyone's art praxis by the art institutions questions the whole intention of the artist in the first place.

When the radical approach of the first cubist works of Picasso were received with strong feelings by the public, who saw the artist as a wunderkind, then the artist should have increased the negativity in his work. That is necessary if the artist wants to stay liberated and maintain difference from popular taste. For Picasso that negativity did not happen: the basis of his liberated creativity eroded from conceptual to trivial, from analytic cubism to abstract expressionist art. The work as an artistic value undergoes a transformation, from a concern to broaden the boundary of painting into a myth of Picasso as the exemplary bourgeois painter. The shift from conceptual to trivial or from avant-garde to bourgeois indifference did not occur because Picasso wanted it to, but because of the artistic fame that the bourgeoisie placed on Picasso after cubism. In this, liberated praxis turns for Picasso from the making of art into an obsession with identity, with living up to the myth of the historical painter. The resistant riddles that keep art independent were merged into a pastiche of historical myths. Through the subjects he chose Picasso acted out a painterly thematic and as result reinstated the myth of the artist as an idiosyncratic artisan.

Picasso was an innovative artist who wished to develop a creative idea into a painterly thematic. Although he wanted to remain a painter in a historical sense, he prioritised a kind of painterly magic in his praxis to differentiate his work from his contemporaries. Through cubism Picasso manifested his desire to differ, to resist the main thrust of a compliant art. This would have been to continue and refine the critical elements of

light and impressions, accurate representation of real objects in painting. The Impressionists explored sensation and reality as a literal pictorial painting praxis. Cézanne, who reviewed its basic assumptions as painterly difficulties, further refined their praxis.

Picasso took this assignment of literalness to art as the starting point for his invocation of difference so as to advance the depiction of reality as a modern idea. Picasso's focus was on the research necessary to allow this technical problem to be developed into a modern version of painting that included a scientific culture. The characteristics of praxis in natural science, observation experiment, innovation and reasoning, differ from the traditional reproduction methods in painting where the symbolic and the impression dominate.

Cubism sought to resolve the complexity of artistic representation as a visual technics, an experiment to achieve one's own vision of objects and translate this as purely as possible into painting. Cubism bases its compositional elements on a comprehensible reality. Picasso as well as Braque invented a new pictorial language without resorting to any kind of public justification. Their interest was primarily to investigate the artistic truth as praxis as it appeared for Picasso and Braque in connection to the object and its material assignment in painting. This shift in the perception of painting encouraged a mood of private liberation amongst the artists, in the context of the academic domination of the alternative and creative in the Paris Salon of the early twentieth century. Calvin Tomkins observes that:

> One of the main differences between Cubism of Picasso and Braque and that of their followers was the latter group's emphasis on theory. Working in virtual isolation from other artists, Picasso and Braque had created the new pictorial language of Cubism without recourse to theories, manifestos, or verbal explanation of any sort. During the years of their most intensive collaboration, between 1908 and 1914, when they felt, as Braque put it, "Like two mountaineers roped together," seeing one another's work every day was the main stimulus for the most complete and daring revolution in visual arts since the Renaissance. Picasso refused to show in the big Paris salons, and Braque had stopped showing in them after the 1908 Salon d'Automne. Their latest paintings could be seen at the Galerie Kahnweiler, however, and the repercussions were swift and seismic.[80]

The concept of salon academism as a stifling educational procedure for practising artists is widely known. In the *Salon des Independents* a move was made by the artists to exhibit objects with same rigor as the traditional academic salons. The Independent artists attempted to bring contemporary art into mainstream culture, contemporary art became academic overnight. This may provide a model for events in the nineteen eighties and nineties. More than one critic has written of a contemporary academy or an academy of the avant-garde.

Although cubism was highly conceptual, the resistant shock effect of painted montage evoked great curiosity in contemporary artists. Surely one would have sensed a liberating thrust coming from outside institutions. Although cubism was very scientistic in its observations it was nonetheless an endeavour to resist the arts establishment.

Art was suddenly a matter of personal interpretation. Art rationalised its function and broadened its range of participation. Its fundamental basis was now innovation not mastery. This struggle to make art began to resemble a technical problem. Since art was now a technological problem the notion of the mythic Super–Artist was no longer required. Greenberg notes:

> Picasso had glimpsed and entered, for a moment, a certain revolutionary path in which no one had preceded him. It was though, in that instant, he felt the flatness of collage as too constricting and had suddenly tried to escape all the way back – or forward – to literal three-dimensionality. This he did by using utterly literal means to carry the forward push of the collage (and of Cubism in general) *literally* into the literal space in front of the picture plane. [81]

The right to be an artist is now the right of anyone who sees art as a rational praxis. This was a democratic concession. Art became resolvable; it posited a technological problem, which an inventive artist could overcome to the satisfaction of the art audience.

That democratic understanding is now visible in the postmodern indifference to the difference between art and life. Duchamp once commented that 'there is no solution in art because there is no problem'. Indeed Picasso's desire to be a painter; a magic creator, cannot finally be reconciled with Greenberg's problem solving rationale for contemporary art.

The promising alternative presented by cubism, of a more analytical function in art, prompted a loss of centralised authority and the decline and decay of the salon as an institution. The schoolmasters and shopkeepers of illusion of chiaroscuro found their theoretical base disconnected from the creative suppliers of art.

cubism emerged, through a sequence of visual gestures, as a participatory art outside the institutions at the centre of the arts world. It became a means to artistic independence from authority. The Galerie Kahnweiler exhibited this significant shift in art, not the Salon. Artistic authority moved to the private galleries, the salesman and the collector. cubism provided modernity with a new praxis, liberated from academic

constraints. Painting was no longer a 'window to look through but painting as an object in itself' as Tomkins observed. Thus the split between concept and technique became overt. The rendering of illusion on the canvas, the point at which concept and technique had previously merged was now redundant in the face of abstraction. Tomkins explains:

> The Cubist group – Robert Delaunay, Jean Metzinger, Albert Gleizes, Henri Le Fauconnier, Fernand Léger, and one or two others – felt the need to discuss and analyze the radical innovations of Picasso and Braque: the flattening out of pictorial space within the painting, so that a picture was no longer a window to look through but an object in itself; the fusion of image with background; the juxtaposition of representational and abstract elements; and, most strikingly, the shifting point of view that depicts objects within the painting from different angles simultaneously.[82]

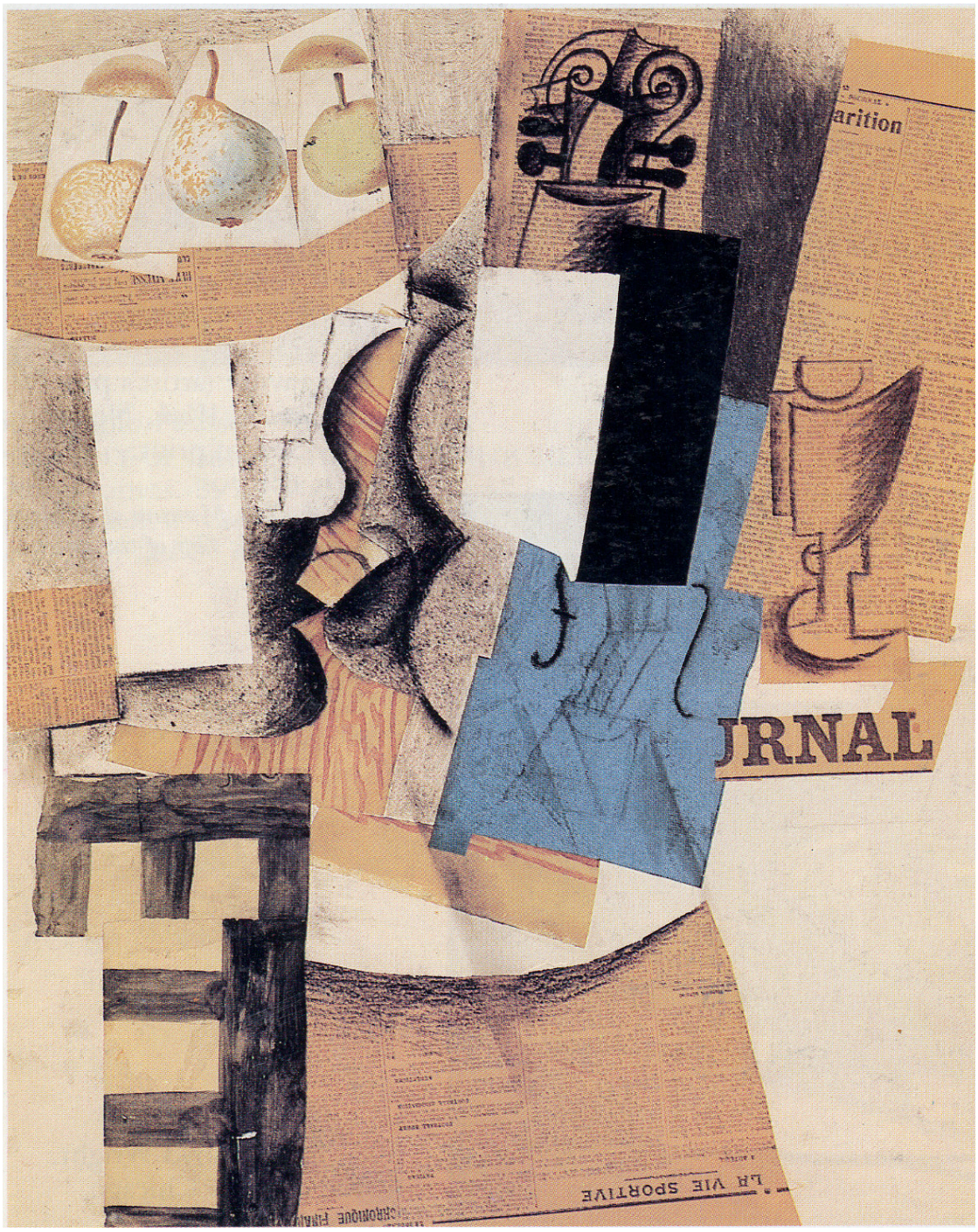
The depiction of a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional space could only be made credible by taking the three-dimensional object literally out of its everyday material environment to place it into the material context of art – to transform it into an art object. Through this process the literalness of the material establishes a new relationship between the object and the surface/the picture plane, in which the perspective reveals the flatness of the painting.

This new literalness of painting is evident in Picasso's collage work *The Violin (Violin and Fruit)* from 1913. There the montage reveals elements of the literal: newspaper clippings and other essentials introduced to give the whole composition 'factuality' and to reveal the painting as a literal object. It came as a surprise that people could trace the mystery in art objects and match them directly with the objects they usually saw in their everyday life.

The literal visual being of materials such as newspaper, sand and wood, does not require rendered perspectives and painterly illusion. The flatness of the painting – that is the literalness of collage and the picture ground – becomes apparent when one looks at the large emptied space on the lower right part of the painting.

There in the emptied space is the symbolic resistance that withstands painterly habits of rendering and illusion. The liberating praxis of Picasso and Braque centred on their ability to place literal objects on the canvas, so as to replace perspective with a new system of interrelations, a new authentic experience of being. Their revolutionary act was not so much in the composition of their paintings as in their resistance to painterly habits.

Braque and Picasso's cubism, was liberating and yet remained a series of technical problems that demanded practical clarification. Picasso's strategy was to see painting



Picasso, *The Violin (Violin and Fruit)*, 1913, paper, charcoal, gouache on paperboard, Philadelphia Museum of Art. A.E. Gallatin Collection.

as a methodological problem to be resolved through innovation. Because of that Picasso determined to maintain 'innovation' as a primary method in painting. It seems that Picasso thought of art as liberation in a paradoxical way. On one side he thought of cubism as a resistant praxis that contains scientific constraints to painting and on the other he thought that those constraints could only be overcome by methodical innovations that are characterised by the enchanting moments of the painter's magic.

The Cubist painter's desire to expand the magic of art making by increased dependence on analytical limitations was perhaps the supreme paradox of all modern art. After *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) for Picasso, Cubist art no longer held a mythic dimension. His wish, so it appears, was always to move through phases, for example the blue period paintings, the analytical stage, the synthetic stage, to arrive at the painterly myth and magic of classic creation.

Picasso believed in the mission of the artist as a maker, whose painting evolved from form into concrete experience. Cubist montage threatened precisely that myth of the historically gifted painter. In cubism the authority of the innovative painter and expressive painting had come to a halt. He wanted to get away from that point in which painting has narrowed to the mere fact of being a technical problem that will continue to investigate itself with mulish resolve. Greenberg invented the theory of flatness, thereby carving out the aspect of Cubist painting as a limitation on the future of painting that was to be 'minimalised' and stripped of any symbolic and magical dimension, a future that Picasso did not want to maintain:

> There is no question that Braque and Picasso were concerned, in their Cubism, with holding on to painting as an art of representation and illusion. But at first they were more crucially concerned, in and through their Cubism, with obtaining *sculptural* results by strictly non-sculptural means; that is, with finding for every aspect of three-dimensional vision an explicitly two-dimensional equivalent, regardless of how much verisimilitude might suffer in the process. Painting had to spell out, rather than pretend to deny, the physical fact that it was flat, even though at the same time it had to overcome this proclaimed flatness as an aesthetic fact and continue to report nature. [83]

Since painting in this moment of cubism, acknowledged its relationship to everyday practicality and the technical it becomes in the sense of Marcuse *one-dimensional*, that is to say a dimension of a logical conclusion. Everyone understands that logical conclusion. Now the deeper meaning in painting no longer exists. The painting as window on the world is replaced with the painting as an object of natural science. The solution that is expected of painting is that of being flat, reflective, an optical illusion, horizontal and vertical, singular and technical in its logic. A worthy example is the work of the minimalist and abstract artists who unrelentingly frequented the concept and experimented with the latitude of alternative form and appearance. Donald Judd,

Jan Dibbets, Gerhard Richter, and others, are examples of this prolonged experimentation. This is not to say that the concept of cubism in its prolongation is not a worthwhile artistic investigation. The attempt is made here to present a kind of perspective on the liberating position in Picasso's art that justifies the shift from a rather analytical approach in art to a more or less abstract and expressive art of the romantic symbols.

Inevitably the concept of the minimal cannot continue as a single solution so sooner or later the symbolic and illusionary will re-enter the fate of art to drive on fame and difference. For Picasso this formal abstract limitation was a concern in which he feared to lose his assignment as artist painter to the world. Indeed, Picasso did see invention as a resistant element in his attempt to remain a painter and as a method to discover meaning from which to make paintings. Thus the reality for Picasso was that he is and wanted to remain an inventor who resists by living the life of a painter. To be sure, Picasso after cubism was probably only concerned to replicate his resourceful talent to relive his success by being the guardian of painting. As Pierre Daix wrote in his biography of Picasso:

> Picasso felt that the fate of art depended on him; therefore he would certainly accept the challenge put to him in the name of tradition.[84]

The shift from the innovative to a search for a painterly quality in art eroded Picasso's artistic mandate. The erosion is revealed in the uncritical acceptance of anything Picasso attempted, from leaving cubism behind to trying out some methods of representational style. The bourgeois admiration of Picasso's art did not concern its historical value in a critical or creative sense but accepted any shift in his art as equivalent under the eye of fame and genius.

The broad acknowledgement of his Cubist innovation as an artistic triumph in art made Picasso an authority on painting matters for eternity. After Picasso's cubism, any painting concept, may it be an abstract or surrealist creation, had to emerge through his self-created cubist identity of analysis and innovation and appear as a discovery of his feelings. After cubism Picasso does not seek but discovers ways of being – Picasso the magic painter again.

This is clearly visible in his most important work after cubism, the mural of *Guernica* (1937) in which the timid prolonging of the dissection and squaring off of fields of vision takes on an academic compromise in which method outdoes the importance of the political case. Max Raphael makes us aware that:

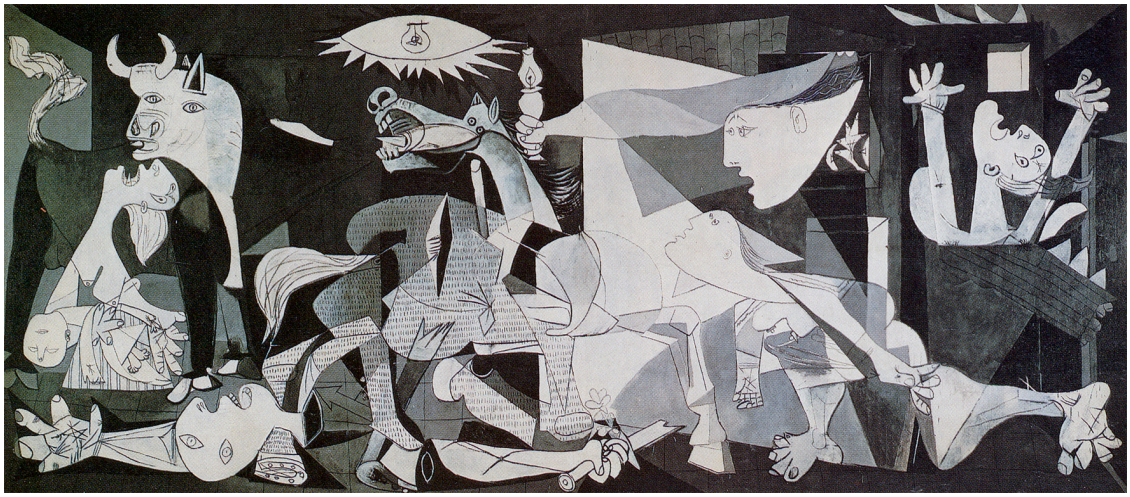
> When the artist imagines that he can realize immediately the general categories of artistic faculty, he is identifying himself with a given historical epoch that he takes as absolute norm for historical reasons of which he is not himself conscious. Thus he loses his way in a sterile and reactionary academism (Marees, Hildebrandt).[85]

And in this context one can observe the prolonged experimental shift of Picasso from a bohemian artist to fame from innovation to repetition, compulsion and realisation. His academism was obviously a return to the times of the 'artist' as a mythological figure, a 'super artist' whose consciousness is framed by the authority of the uniquely creative. Picasso did not use Cubist literalness and immediacy in pursuit of producing his later paintings.

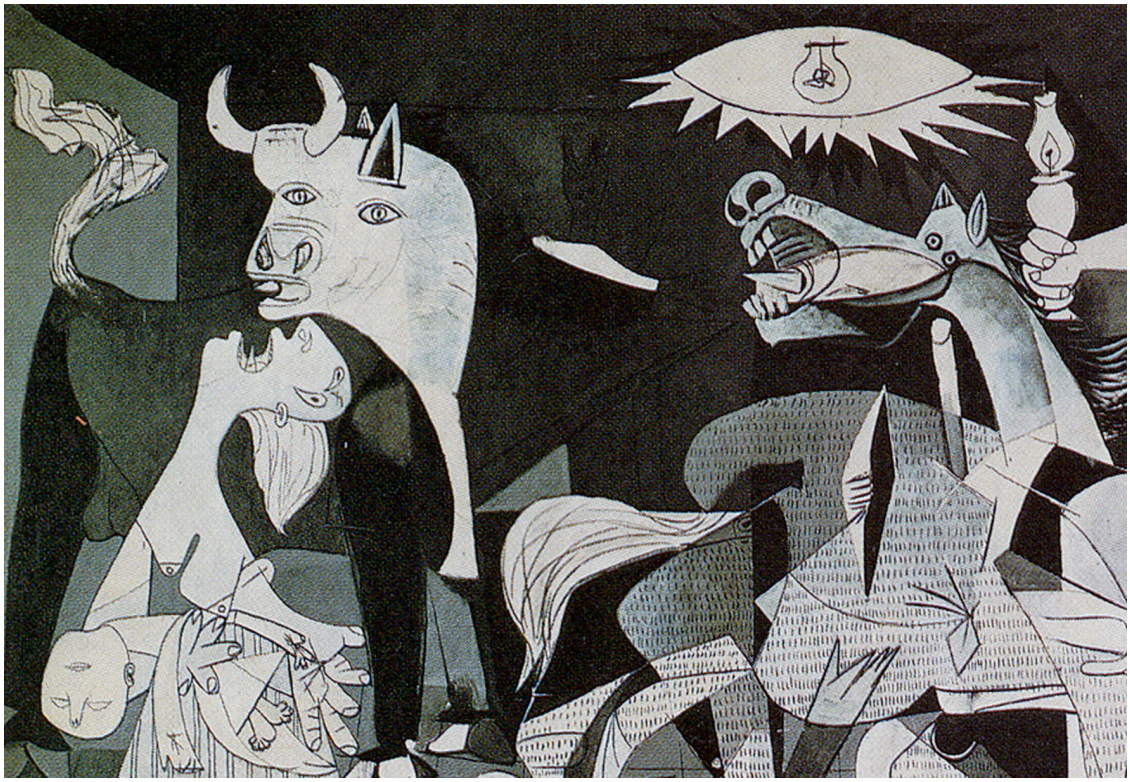
Although he wished to relive that success the scientific dimension of cubism did not allow him to re-engage the innovative power of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* in many of his later works. That in a nutshell was the defeat that he could never overcome. By reactivating the ordinariness of paint application (the academic sheltered workshop) in his art he caused all previous signs of his resisting painterly authority to acquire an aura of deceit.

When Picasso painted *Guernica* his primary concern was that it would be shown in the Spanish Pavilion at the *International Exposition*, in Paris 1937. His immediate focus was not on the image as a composition. In 1942 Picasso commented that the 'fate of art depends on me'. The creative commitment he gave to *Guernica* also required him to accept the necessity for a creative political resistance and to confront Fascism directly and in public too. For Picasso, *Guernica* embodied an ideological and historically based duty to defend art against any kind of Fascist oppression.

As is well documented, the bombing of *Guernica* in 1937 was a shocking event, the first public revelation of the brutality of modern war. It was believed, wrongly, to have been the first time that strategic bombing was used on a civilian population. The connection between the German Fascists and the Fascist Franco are documented. The order came from Berlin to support the Fascist Franco troops in Spain. The German *Luftwaffe* under the codename *Legion Condor* was ordered to destroy a bridge at Guernica. The attack happened when Picasso was working on the large painting for the *International Exposition* in Paris in 1937. According to Toby Clark in his book *Art and Propaganda,* up to the time of the bombing Picasso had not decided the subject of his painting. Right after the annihilation of Guernica, Picasso, by then a member of the Communist Party, was indirectly pushed to make a political statement about the brutality at Guernica.



Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937, Prado Museum, Madrid.



Guernica, 1937 (detail)

Facing the fact that the world was watching him. Picasso entrusted his fame and painterly mission in the making of *Guernica*. It seems that Picasso wanted to draw on all the registers of his art, all that he was capable of being as an artist, to oppose the brutal power of Fascism. Picasso took elements of his cubism and intertwined them with his desire to attempt some representative styles, so as to allegorise pain and suffering. The creation of *Guernica* clearly documented the various shifts of compositions, the alteration of signs in the work such as the lamp and bull and horse and sword, light and dark. The interpretations are many and there are comments on the bull as being symbolic of Fascism. However Vernon Clark and many others have observed:

> But it is surprising that the bull, villain of the piece, is the only figure in the mural that has any dignity[86]

Herbert Read observed:

> the writhing bodies of men and woman, betray the passage of the infuriated bull, who turns triumphantly in the background, tense with lust and stupid power. [87]

But despite the differences in interpretation, *Guernica* foreshadows that the later art of Picasso expands its aura into a schizophrenic environment, a painterly system in which indifference can thrive like cancer. The fact is that in this painting Picasso persists in wanting to be a painter first and a critical artist later. A strategy of resistance emerges that limits itself to the subject of painting. Clark points out:

> We are immediately struck, when we examine the *Guernica*, by the strange lack of relationship between the subject and the method of presenting it. This, of course, represents nothing new in Picasso's career; a lack of harmony between technique and content appears consistently through his painting. The artist has apparently set a limit upon his feelings and upon the intensity of his expression beyond which he has arbitrarily forbidden himself to go.[88]

The lack of relationship between the images and the actual brutality of the event does not appear at once. *Guernica* is more like a highly decorated ritual cross that wants to communicate the suffering of Christ. It is the site where the diversity of styles and the indecision of the artist as to the priority of the political or symbolic dimensions in the artwork neutralises his overall commitment to the horror of the attack on Guernica itself. It seems that Picasso was indecisive about committing his art to propaganda, fearful that he may lose his independence and hence forfeit the liberating position of the modern painter that he earned from cubism. The diversity of style acknowledges his indecision and *Guernica* became an irresolute hybrid as a result. The artist hesitates, engages in self-control so as to retain his freedom, to maintain a liberal basis from which his painterly magic could extend.

Cubist literalness cannot allow comments outside painterly observation. It shows its limitations if connected to a social meaning. So in relation to *Guernica* the stance of the artist in relation to politics rises above the real event. People would rather investigate the validity of the artist in relation to art and politics than the relevance of the work to the actuality of suffering.

I am not qualified to doubt the sincere intention of Picasso to oppose Fascism and his sadness and anger over Guernica. Nevertheless, in spite of that, one has to investigate historical change in the work and how it carries – if it does – its own inscription as an art work of liberation, as a concrete political stance in the present moment. How will history judge Picasso's political comments in the work, after so many years have passed by, how will one assess the validity of the translation of the real event into art? Did art really take revenge for the violence at *Guernica* as M. Barr has promised? Vernon Clark points to this promise:

> On April 28, 1937, General Franco's allies appeared in their Junkers over the Basque town of *Guernica* and in short order reduced the ancient shrine to shambles. "Immediately," Mr. Barr of the Museum of Modern Art tells us, "[Picasso] prepared an artist's revenge." And, indeed, "artist's revenge" puts the matter well, since I believe we will find that the protest is more aesthetic than practical.[89]

If *Guernica* might be considered as a political work, where is the political in the work? Did not its modern academic abstraction erase, over time, the politics and the violence in the work? Picasso did not make use of his mission as the presumed heir of modernism so as to be critical of Fascism, as Goya had documented the reality of injustice in his time. Does *Guernica* remain a strong resentful protest against bigotry, as does the poster *Madrid-L'Action >>Militaire<< des Rebelles*? Or is there another possible dimension to *Guernica*, which reveals itself over time?

It is clear that the works of an artist cannot be literally compared in their directness to events because art is a personal matter influenced by how one feels emotionally and how one sees the connection of political events. But by looking at Picasso's *Guernica* one can determine whether the painting emphasises the injustice of the epoch or overwhelms the signs of suffering by accentuating the talent of the painter. One only has to compare Picasso's artistic situation to Goya, where the artist exposed himself through the direct comment in his work to the constant danger of state oppression. For Picasso on the other hand, the period when he produced *Guernica* was not by any means threatening: the artist was not controlled by censorship. He still worked in an unoccupied France and his fame was as recognised as widely as ever. One could wish



Madrid-L'Action >>Militaire<< des Rebelles 1937, Placard, Musée de la Publicité, Paris.

that he had made a more direct resistance to the emerging threat of Fascism. Failing that test, the artist presents himself on the world stage as the modernist, distorting *Guernica* as a methodical and painterly limitation.

The lack of directness in *Guernica* mirrors the artist's decision to restrict his creative freedom to the procedures of painting. Thus he is composing an aesthetic horror from *Guernica* that opens up multiple interpretations. Accordingly, the intention of political content can be confirmed or disputed. What is not in dispute is the fact that the painterly aura of Picasso gives *Guernica* the weight of authority as a modern response to a political terror. This modern response, however, is not creative, but is manifest in the myth of the magic painter. The artist eroded the credibility of his work by his failure to transcend this myth. That completely eliminated the possibility of an artistic revenge in *Guernica*.

Since the bourgeois holds up Picasso as the great master painter of the modern, the contemporary artists uphold that masterly assumption by limiting their own creative aspiration in painting to the limits of Picasso the 'bourgeois Brahmin' (Vernon Clark). The artistic timidity of *Guernica* in the face of terror can only appear radical if society maintains its conviction in regard to an aesthetic of violence. The residual work has not carried the trauma of *Guernica* into our time but puts a damper on our response to the actual event. *Guernica* has never been regarded as an imperative mandate for political or social change.

Hence, in *Guernica* the realisation of political and social meaning appears to be impossible. Art in that situation cannot speak critically because the language of art is restrained exclusively to art. This is a similar result to that of McCarthy's performances, in which art pretends to be something other than art.

Thus it is important to connect to the reality that any artistic expression can only speak from its base in art. If art denies its origin its comments will always be out of context to general life. In Picasso art assumes the role of resistance in the same way as the French resistance during the Second World War. In actuality they cannot be compared. Art must work from its unique independent position and maintain the freedom to be either absurd or realistic, but always art.

On that score one realises that Picasso not only restricted his artistic liberty in relation to political and social issues, but also to avoid artistic responsibility for technique and content; undecided and split between abstraction and society, realism and symbolism, modern and mythological, bohemia and mastery, romantic and political. Picasso

resisted history yet at the same time he was convinced of his mission as the historical artist of the century. He gave away the entire cubist legacy to follow his neoclassical inclinations for a political work.

Picasso's *Minotaur* paintings contain a large element of himself as a man and painter. Thus the Minotaur appears as a Greek myth of half–man and half–animal, beauty and the beast. The hybrid method of Picasso and his art is grounded in this symbolic representation. In an earlier painting, *L'Atelier* 1928/29 one can see the split within the hybrid reality of cubism and humanism tearing Picasso, the resistant libertarian painter, apart.

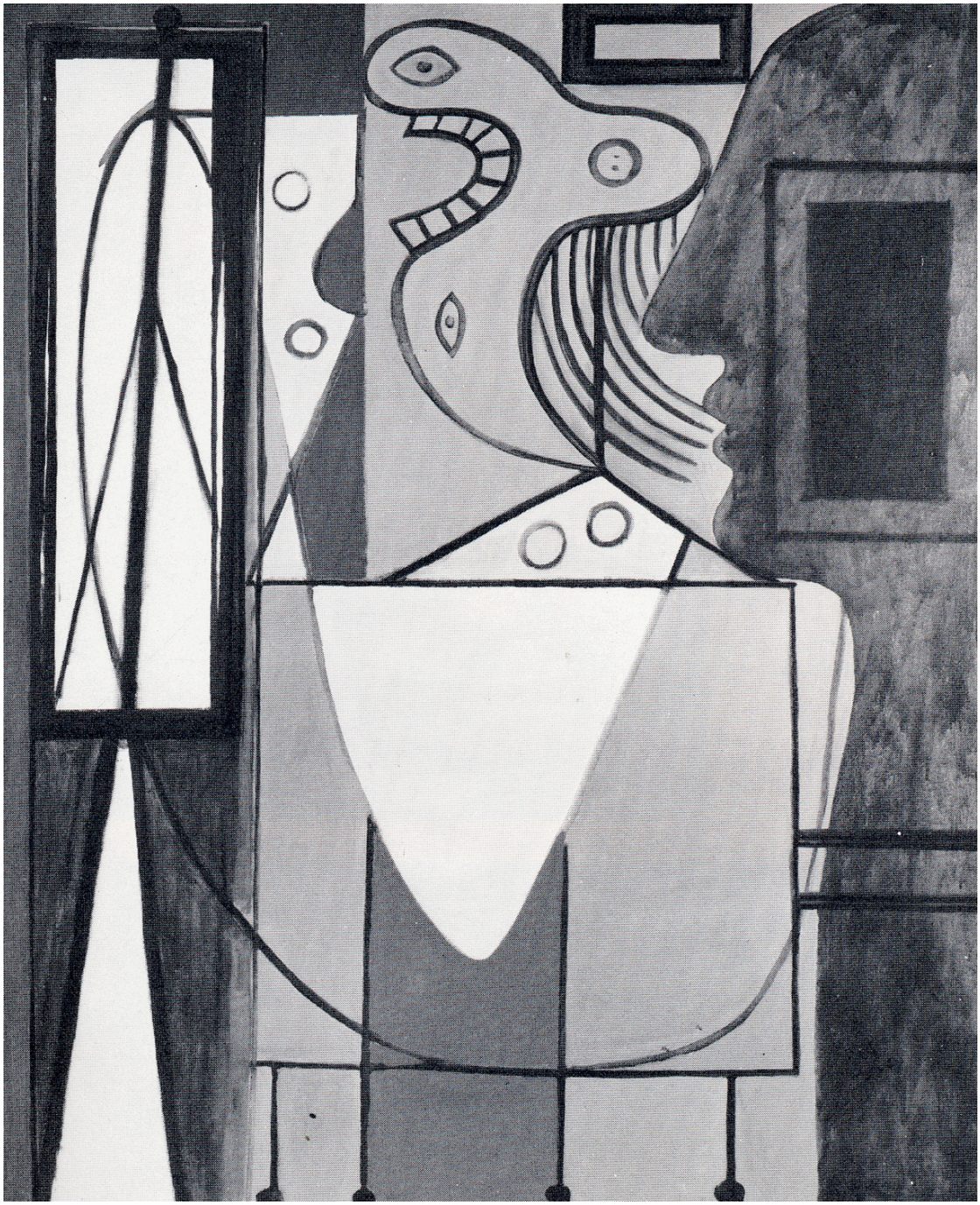
Gridlines and geometrical shapes are mixed with human forms and disembodiment of the human figure, lines screaming for help to communicate. While at the same time Picasso's sentimental relationship to *Les Demoiselles de'Avignon* and to concrete cubist painting is maintained, as he challenges the great masters.

The element of the real, as cubism was demanding has taken on a form of the Minotaur in the studio, the mythic artist who commits to appear in painting half analytical and half magical as a hybrid abstraction. The everydayness of social life was not an immediate concern for the later Picasso. The task of the painter was above anything else mythical, thereby restricting the artist to mythological abstraction and invoking an illusion of artistic freedom. The issue of Picasso's political stance, his ideological commitment, would not be of such artistic importance if not for *Guernica*. The praise and the grand statements that the art institutions make about that work require examination.

It was not an artistic revenge. The liberating position of the artist was more concerned about the painting as a mythological problem in which composition and allegorical shapes contradict, to some extent, the attack on Fascism. The Fascists were never affronted; nowadays even a confirmed chauvinist would collect Picasso's art. Picasso's personal obsession with painting was always the most important aspect of his work, as he confirmed in 1944 to an American correspondent:

> I didn't paint the war because I'm not the kind of painter who goes out to look for subjects, like a photographer. But without question, the war is in my painting. Perhaps, later on, an historian will demonstrate that under the influence of the war, my painting changed. Myself, I don't know.[90]

The split personality that Picasso shows in his art is also the point where self-control and risk cancel each other out, and merge into an aesthetic blunder deprived of critical meaning. That aesthetic blunder is recycled again and again in Warhol and Koons and



Pablo Picasso, *L'Atelier*, Paris, 1928-29, Musée Picasso, Paris.

others. But history cannot remember such trivialities. To have historical significance as a 'revenge artist' the artist should see his dedication to art as a continuing motif of resistance to the collective aesthetic of society. They must motivate themselves to undermine its general thrust of domination strategically and hence confront it openly but through art just as Kasimir Malevich' black square became over time a sign of resistance.

Guernica, was not a liberated decision, the result of a commitment to freedom, but a political idea that used fame and modern art, judged as the better art against Fascist art on a world stage, to pit social realism against modern abstract art as a sign of freedom. Picasso's fame was predestined to fulfil that requirement. *Guernica* did not attack the Fascists' deeds but their censorship of culture and freedom of expression.

Picasso's weapon was modern art as an artefact of mankind that exposed the chauvinist lie in its very nature, not modern art as critique of contemporary political morality. The revenge that Picasso was going to bring was his painterly magic and fame. This was a supremely deceptive choice since the Minotaur fulfilled only half the bargain. One side of the Minotaur/artist restricts the other side of the beast. The result was constant self-control. Freedom for Picasso is that of the Minotaur in the labyrinth, waiting to feed on the sacrifice of others, always only half way to a mature mastery of his work.

NOTES

[79] Professor Albert Elsen of Stanford University, transcript of seminar given at Leeds University 1991, Photocopy, 10.

[80] Tomkins, *Duchamp a biography*, 48-49.

[81] Martin Gayford and Karen Wright, eds. *The Penguin Book of Art Writing*, (London: Penguin 1999), 499-500.

[82] Tomkins, *Duchamp a biography*, 49.

[83] Martin Gayford and Karen Wright, eds *The Penguin Book of Art Writing*, 496.

[84] Pierre Daix, *Picasso Life and Art*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 270.

[85] Max Raphael, *Proudhon, Marx, Picasso*, translated by Inge Marcuse, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1981), 127.

[86] Vernon Clark, 'The Guernica Mural-Picasso and Social Protest' in Gret Schiff, ed. *Picasso in Perspective*, (New York: Prentice-Hall 1976), 101.

[87] Clark, 105.

[88] Clark, 98.

[89] Clark, 97.

[90] Daix, 276.

Chapter 8

Gerhard Richter and the aura of good painting:
The struggle to regain the middle ground of art, to continue as a painter of experiences that are nowadays traded as common objects of exchange.

At the summit of public acclaim of his manifest ability as painter, Picasso faced his own limits. These grew from the symbolic content of *Guernica*. Belief in the transcendence of the symbolic over the analytical, manifest as the desire for liberation by the exercise of unlimited freedom of expression, grew stronger in Picasso with each painting.

Picasso's art and life culminated in the challenge he set himself to rework old masters; this was his personal struggle to re-engage historical artistic symbolism with modern painting. He believed that his artistic ability had nominated him to inherit the profession of the artist as a painter; thus to endow the modern age with a talented artist equal to all the great masters. To give his unchallenged position as a painter some worthwhile task Picasso worked on variations of *Las Meninas* by Velasquez. This was Picasso's challenge in the face of a finite artistic life in which he could detach himself from any everyday matter and prove his magic art to the gods of painting. Gert Schiff observes:

> The inference seems inevitable: Picasso with his keen understanding of the nature of all styles, must have equally presupposed that an ideal viewer would base his apperception of his variations upon comparison with their "themes." He, who so often juxtaposed representational and abstract styles in one and the same picture, must have wanted us to experience the extreme distance between style and mood in the works of Delacroix, Velázquez, and Manet, and his own re-creation of these works.[91]

By establishing an identity with diverse historical styles Picasso secured his aura as a magical painter out to dazzle with skill. In Picasso's art the general debate revolves around his ability and the transformation of painting into a painterly playfield of forms and styles, in which progress, not substance, validates the work. This index of difference diminishes with every new painting so that seamless play itself becomes an all-encompassing style. Invention, as an artistic concept, bases its reasons on the act of discovering and, not as Schoenberg has said, on the desire to seek.

Because of that, painting appears as a kind of false sublation that denies the meaningful and undermines the search for a substantial social representation in art. The painter's magic is reduced to a form of 'special effects ' that can bear no relation to experience. Paradoxically, Picasso's paintings reveal their weakness through their

diversity of styles. They appear as hybrid artefacts with an emphasis on the innovative and not on substance. Their weakness resides in Picasso's indecision as to how to give profound meaning to his art in the context of painting as a history.

History defeated Picasso and took away his possibilities for artistic liberation. It questioned the experimentation of mimicry and exposed the indecisiveness of modernity in his work. One could say that Picasso's painting and, as a result, all painting that followed after him, faces the challenge of historical relevance. The quest as to 'what to paint' is closely connected to the desire of the artist for liberation through art, the attempt to overcome creative constraints so as to speak differently, quite literally, to make a difference.

Society has established a benchmark for all further art to emerge. For this reason art was, for Picasso, and later on for Gerhard Richter, the subject of this chapter, a historical challenge which can only be overcome by locating the future context of artistic difference within the traditional methods of painting. Through their artistic proximity to good taste, painters like Picasso and Richter experience a duty that displaces the immediate artistic potential for freedom into a measurable mirage always located simultaneously in the past and in the future.

In this situation artists relate to their artwork just as a person who is lost in the desert relates to a mirage. In both circumstances the individual sees the mirage of the desired source of freedom through which uplifting reality experiences may be reengaged. Yet that mirage does not exist as an actual artistic ideal of freedom, present in the here and now. It is constantly projected into the future by means of comparison to tradition. The present, that is to say, the dimension that deals with society now, is never present in the work. It is all in the future or the past. And so by engaging with the issue at hand by means of a mirage of the great masters, Picasso must have felt a kind of creative relief appropriate to his greatness as painter. But this flight into the past would never quench his thirst to cultivate his image as a painter, as the living icon of contemporary artistic brilliance.

The existential question of why one makes art is a constant leitmotif in Picasso's work. Indeed, which audience is it that I am concerned about and which society will understand the historical value in my art? In relation to those concepts, the existential concern of the artist questions the whole interpretation of reality in painting and in the artistic life. Picasso found at the height of his life as a painter that the concept of the bourgeois genius reveals the limits in his innovations as liberated artist. His new

painting could only be the total sum, the entirety of his artistic life. In this struggle Picasso found refuge in the irreverent, caricatural, and parodistic aspects of the variations. As G. Schiff points out:

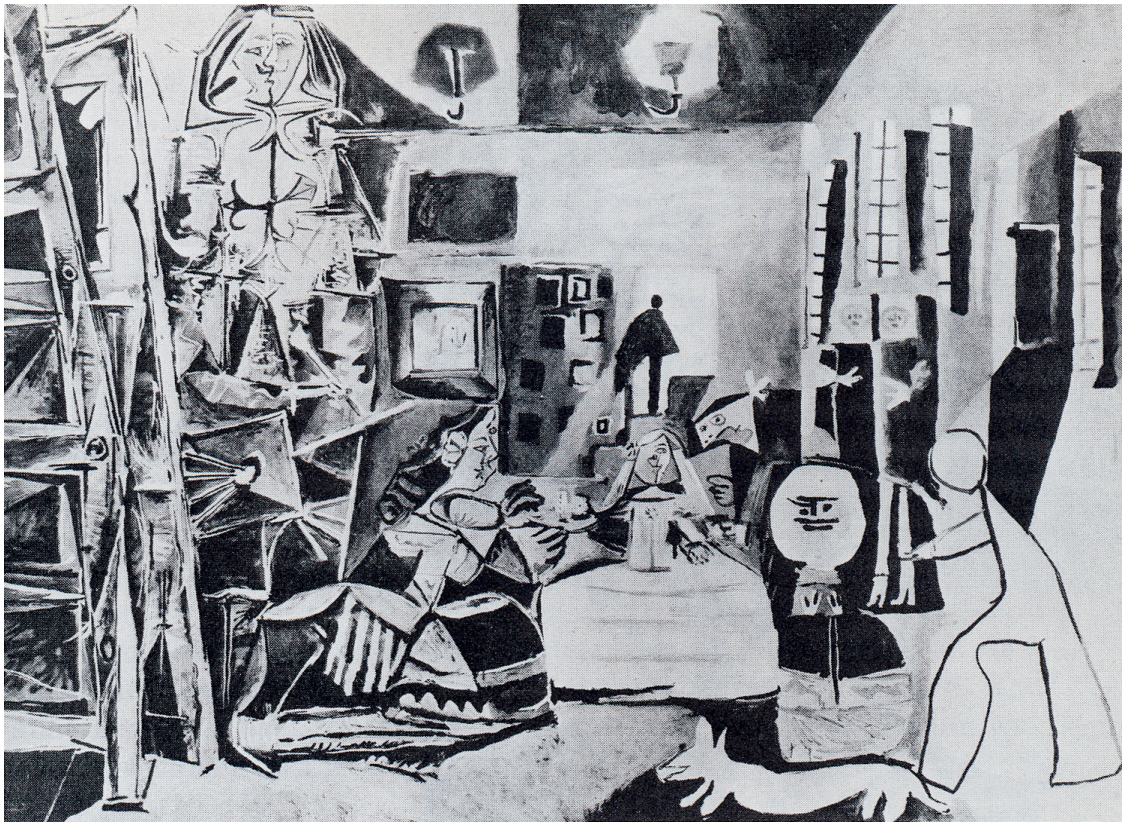
> What are we to do with the irreverent caricatural, and parodistic aspects of the Variations? In the Las Meninas cycle, the sweet little Infanta and her delicate companions are subjected to the most rigorous trials of distortion; they emerge with their eyes, mouths, and nostrils displaced and their faces crossed by heavy lines that have no relation to anatomical structure, or he treats them in the manner of children's drawing.[92]

Rebelling against the super artist myth that had trapped him, Picasso's painterly ambition could only turn to idealistic and essentialist themes, non-specific in terms of abstraction or representation. The similarities between Picasso's and Richter's art emerge in this context of distortion and variation of style, as well as a constant outpouring of paintings – Picasso produced around 4000 artworks.

There is a loop of creative force in both careers that always reveals a kind of self-realisation and consciousness of their skills which then becomes the dominant feature of any style, and hence the assignment of repeating skill as a reality within painting. Richter revitalises the enquiry into painting by drawing on that kind of erudition. This is not to say that Picasso influenced Richter, but that they share similar concerns about representation and abstraction, which may lead to broad definition of the context of difficulties for contemporary art making. The struggle for what artistic freedom means in Picasso and Richter can be found consistently in both their abstract and the representational work. In both cases the outcome is a playful and non-committal pendulum of styles that is grounded in a skilful personality and a silent outpouring of art; silent in that Picasso and Richter draw from the private obsession of being a painter as the only possible struggle with which to transcend meaning from a historical tradition towards an uncertain future. Richter hints at this private play of styles in an interview with Benjamin H.D. Buchloh:

> I can also regard my own abstractions as parables, as images of a possible form of social relations. Seen in this way, what I'm attempting in each picture is nothing other than this: to bring together, in a living and viable way, the most different and the most contradictory elements in the greatest possible freedom. Not paradise. [93]

In these remarks of the most contradictory nature, and apparently the greatest possible freedom, Richter nonetheless closes the door on the here and now. By combining these contradictory elements the artistic and its social relations are made to reside always in the future and in the past. The responsibility of art shifts into a dimension of a conceptual abstraction that gives the body of work not only a traditional basis in the use of oil paint and some romantic parables, but also permanently postpones its



Pablo Picasso, *Las Meninas*, 1957, Museo Picasso, Barcelona, © S.P.A.D.E.M., Paris, 1976.

commitment to the contemporary into the future. With Richter as with Picasso the aim was to be able to maintain an art as praxis by stubbornly exploiting any available technique and style of painting. The justification for this attitude is always manifested in an uncommitted position on social issues. Both artists constantly referred to their unconscious and personal feelings about painting. Picasso and Richter were both obsessive painters compelled to save painting from becoming irrelevant. Richter wrote in his private journal in 1990:

> It does not seem useful that we become fewer and fewer and come to an end when we have learned so much. Over and over again, later generations have to strive for decades to regain a standard of experience long since reached before.[94]

Richter was convinced of the need to defend the tradition of painting against the 'outside' world of art. As a consequence art is converted into a tool to defend and prolong a tradition of representation by going through the motions without ever committing to a meaningful style of representation in immediate experience. In itself this is a valuable attempt to return painting to the distinct space of artistic freedom. Nonetheless, if artistic freedom is manifested only as a diversity of styles, it avoids responsible participation in contemporary culture and experience. It offers only the freedom of the archive. In this situation art is engaged in a power struggle to maintain its claim to value by reasserting a distinct voice that brings together the human and abstract essences of past and future. The essence of abstract reality is, as Richter points out in his approach to painting, the middle ground represented as the only liberated voice of art.

Richter's desire to maintain painting as a relevant middle of the road praxis in art is dependent on the traditional materiality of painting. This materiality is of great concern in Richter's work. That means that there is no other way for painting but to commit fully to the basic traits of oil paint and canvas representational or not. This approach provokes Richter to work from time to time in abstract forms and then again in representation and again to combine both in a technically hybrid art. It is this diverse hybrid unresolved context, the 'liberated' space for which Richter has become famous in the representation of his grey blur paintings. The grey paintings project a specific content but through the notion of wiping or being wiped, to produce a blur effect. They are situated across the boundaries as hybrid abstractions. Either one places emphasis on the wipe effect as a material signifier or one concentrates on the image so that the work becomes a realist painting, half cancelled. Ultimately the contradiction itself comes to dominate one's response.

With this contradiction, Richter establishes his authority as a painter who mistrusts contemporary trends and creative reality but trusts his own 'reality' of variable interpretations. By not submitting to any kind of interpretation, both signifiers are subjected to a false sublimation of a representational intent. For Richter the senses can be deceptive and hence need painting as the source that can clarify or simplify the meaning of this deception. Multiple styles and concealment return a distinct authority to painting, in the sense of Hans Sedlmayr's *Verlust der Mitte*[95] (loss of the centre) - in which the moral and traditional basis of painting allow it to take on any interpretation and hence occupy the centre of the creative debate. Because nothing is excluded, virtuosity as a significant bearer of meaning is brought in as element of the subject of painting.

Richter's work compels one to acknowledge a lack of style in his painted subjects, and a wish to uphold classical paint technique as the significant element in the work. Hence Richter's work appears as contradiction, a non-decisive position, that of 'liberating' painting conceived for the art audience as a non-committal style. The contradiction is in having 'no-style' as a 'style'. This paradoxical presentation adds more silence to the liberating voice of art. It cuts away its critical potential, thereby eliminating its significance as the bearer of a critical context, a history. Richter describes his pictures as follows:

> 16 January 1984. My pictures are devoid of objects; like objects, they are themselves objects. This means that they are devoid of content, significance or meaning, like objects or trees, animals, people or days, all of which are there without a reason, without a function and without a purpose. This is the quality that counts. (Even so, there are good and bad pictures.)[96]

This concept, to posit paintings as objects without purpose, leaves Richter without control over the ideological destiny of his work. As a consequence it exposed his paintings as no more than objects for aesthetic consumption. In this context Richter's art is non-committal and blind, unable to promote art as a critical voice. It cannot reveal liberating traits to the art audience. It is a miscalculation to think that one would find liberating creativity, by seeking refuge and identity in the past, through the act of denying any kind of semantic consequence in one's art.

It contradicts the well-known aphorism 'a picture is worth more than thousand words' to avoid attention to content and style, to protect ones own work practice in painting. Richter's pictures (objects without a purpose) are not silent, they always reference content and style at will. They do not help the audience to liberation. In Richter's work creative liberation works despite his comments. He does not work with a liberating desire that transcends paint technique. In a more recent interview with Robert Storr 2001, Richter acknowledges this loss of the possibility of liberation for the audience in

his work. He somehow tries to justify his itinerant view of art as a 'few remarks' in order to add (at this late stage) substance and liberating signs to his work. Richter comments:

> **RS:** Why do you think people have such reactions?
>
> **GR:** One reason is that people sometimes talk about my work in terms of virtuosity. That is an absolute exaggeration. Unfortunately I am not a virtuoso at all. I have some taste. I have an eye for bad things. But in terms of making things I am not a virtuoso, and that has always been my flaw. Today, there is almost nobody (or only a few bad examples) who has the virtuosity to draw something. I depend on photography and mindlessly copy what I see. I am clumsy in that regard, even though I seem very skilful. But I do have the ability to judge whether something is good or bad.
>
> The second reason could be that I made a few remarks that have circulated, things like: "I don't believe in anything"; "I don't care about anything"; and "the motifs in my painting have no meaning whatsoever, I might have just as well painted cabbage." These remarks gave people a certain impression of me. That's how they saw me. People still claim that only painting has an important story, never the subject.[97]

Nonetheless all assessment about Richter ought to be seen in context to his situation of being an artist whose artistic training - at the *Kunstakademie* in Dresden in the former East Germany - was based on social realist painting. The move from the East Germany, then under Soviet Socialist rule, to West Germany was, for Richter, a loss of artistic identity.

Social realism was his artistic beginning, it taught Richter the art of painterly skill, tradition and representation of mostly social romantic and propaganda–like motifs. But moving to the west and studying at the *Staatlichen Kunstakademie* in Düsseldorf confronted Richter with a consumerist basis for art, which gives to, or takes from the artist, all economic resources. For that reason Richter sensed the loss of a traditional middle ground for painting, which was for him the technical aspect of social realist painting. He desired to find a foundation of the skilled artist who learns his trade and was threatened by an anonymous and mechanical art of exchange.

In trying to find his place amongst his contemporaries Richter presents his type of classic realist painting as a contemporary contender to western, mainly American, pop and minimal art. Richter's artistic identity needed certainty and self-confidence, a distinct proof of being able to paint within the anti-art climate of modernism. Since he had the faith of a romantic realist painter, he did not want to compromise this knowledge of skilled art, he did not want to go out and degrade his work to the status of 'modern stuff' that 'looked like aluminium'. Richter rejected the style of the 'modern' as an art that looked 'pure', like all out 'minimalism'.[98]

For Richter it was intolerable to have to identify with all the outrageous superficial features of modernism, the 'quick art' that leaves behind all acquired knowledge. He decided against any modernist style and be non-committal in the content of his painting. As a matter of fact, Richter practiced an anonymous art that allowed him to paint in a social realist manner and at the same time enabled him to evade any notion of ideology or style. He was seeking a practice that would allow him to remain a traditional painter, whilst he was yearned for acceptance by the modern art establishment.[99]

Virtuosity appeared for Richter as a solution to pop art, minimal art and the conceptual rhetoric of modern art in general. Consequently his paintings appear faceless in its critical content leaving only references of an overpowering feeling for painterly sentiment. When Richter's says in the interview to Storr 'I didn't know what to do but to paint',[100] he reveals the drive to paint anything. His wish is to shelter, but not to liberate painting from 'this annoying modernist development'.[101].

For this reason it is difficult to see Richter's art as liberating. Thus in his work liberation must be measured by his contradictory statement, by his being a traditional painter and at the same time not bound by anything. 'No Comment' seems to be the leitmotif of his work. Although today, Richter attempts to justify his early remarks on art such as 'I don't believe in anything'; I don't care about anything'; and 'the motifs in my painting have no meaning'; it must be distinguished that those 'remarks' belong to a time when significant paintings in his career were emerging, such as the famous series of *October 18, 1977.* In spite of Richter's interpretations of 'today', many of his paintings have been produced with aim of being 'devoid of content, significance or meaning'. They must be seen as shallow reproductions of refined taste. Richter's paintings are often a response to the Zeitgeist solely in terms of material manipulation.

Seeing the result of Richter's art today, one realises that he altered his conception of painting, but did not resign his skills and painterly personality to a fast producing and ever–changing world of western art. Richter objected to the artistic implications of painting being replaced by abstract technique, as in Warhol's silkscreen works and its expansion from that into conceptual art. He was concerned to find ways to identify his social realist training with Duchamp, Warhol, Pop and Fluxus art.[102]

Richter, the painter–artist, wanted to connect with in all this loud and diverse art. He was looking for a way to stack up his knowledge of painting against the fast–paced art of Rauschenberg, Pollock, and others who had already transformed the singular ease of the readymade into a production line of diverse modern styles. This quality of work has carried through to the present. It achieves a consistent affect, a halo of efficiency,

beyond any stylistic inflection, so as to maintain the reproductive pace of a progressive society. Pop art and later on postmodernism is exemplary of that optional tastefulness that does not provide a critical basis out of phobia to lose its popular effectiveness. For Richter it seems he felt diminished when distinctive representational paint quality, as a tradition of oil painting, lost out to a conceptual abstraction that determines artistic relevance and the reality factor of art.

> 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. [103]

Richter's concept of a flawed and imperfect pictorial reality relates to the polemic between abstraction and representation in his work. The concealed images, the photographic and symbolic significance and the distrust in meaning that they convey to the artist are in Richter's understanding only to be resolved in the skill and act of painting. The basic work practice for Richter, in relation to his paintings, is to use what he calls a model; from which his abiding arbitrariness can always be justified in a context of self-referenced reality. This is a modelled process through which the various sequential manifestations of carefully planned paintings eventually arrive at a final mark, a gesture on the picture plane. The creative source is nearly always the photograph from which painting takes its gestural dimension. For example Richter collected and used images from black and white photographs so as to enter domains of concern that were, for Richter a private, personal matter. They did not need to be painted, because the actuality of the found photographs, their ontological presence, as images, automatically instructs in their further use. He comments:

> I look for photos that showed my actuality, that relate to me. [104]

The private actuality that Richter finds in photographs reveals his fundamental artistic incapacity. He cannot create the same immediacy in his paintings. In his pursuit of painting, Richter uses his photographic images as a model that stands in for still life. By using a photographic model for his paintings Richter identifies, however subtly, with the criteria for 'accuracy' commonly found in social realism. It is no surprise that Richter indexes his model images and uses them as a basic 'reality' painting. The index of models that relate to Richter includes subjects such as pictures of the concentration camps as well as a large collection of the Red Army Faction terrorist coverage. They include photos of Baader and Meinhof and the politically unfortunate events at Stammheim prison where three terrorists 'committed suicide' on the same night. Richter took great care of those subjects when he used them in his exploration of painting. He did not paint concentration camp, but evolved a cycle of paintings called

October 18, 1977 of which I will talk in greater detail later. Nevertheless, Richter bases all those photographic models in an index, which he calls *Atlas*. As Storr points out:

> The indexing of photographs had been fundamental to Richter's praxis since 1962 when he started to compile Atlas, a still-evolving compendium of thousands of found, reproduced, and original photo-materials chronicling his career. It contains most of the sources he has drawn upon for his paintings, and many he has passed over. [105]

Atlas is the source of reality, if not reality itself for Richter. It consists of captured moments, photographic documents of a moment in time, waiting for further interpretation. Richter treats the images around him as readymades with everything that implies these photographic documents are sensitised images and are waiting to be transformed into another element of expression. Richter uses photographs in a context of collecting and selecting at will, as the model from which the wiped paintings and later the large brush wipe paintings will emerge. First he paints the image more or less as a tonal copy, and then he wipes it. The dilemma between the powerful reality effect of the photograph and the far more circumscribed power of painting to achieve the same immediate presence becomes apparent as Richter works towards his goal. Indeed one might say that this dilemma inevitably becomes his subject.

Richter transfers the reality potential of the photograph from the photographic collection of the *Atlas* through a painted 'model' into his blurred pictures. Blur technique and photographic reality merge as a painterly representation. Painted photographs provide a point of actuality that allows Richter to maintain his nostalgic posture towards painting. The essential point here is that photos are factual images burnt or etched into the paper. They represent something that involves the deferred reality of someone who was a witness to an actual event. The immediacy of seeing and capturing an event at an instant is what gives photographs the advantage of authenticity. Richter's images come from many sources such as newspaper, magazines, TV stills or a family photograph.

To be included in a painting, they must evoke a specific urge for Richter. This process of selecting and painting images is neither immediate nor authentic. It traverses the same mimetic responses as Picasso when he reified the great masters in his art. The model, in this instance, is always a fixed object, the photograph, which skill and technique transcends by endowing it with painterly significance through art.

There are many aesthetic decisions and stages of progress to this before individual images arrive at their final destiny in Richter's arrangement of blurred images painted from photographs. The *Atlas* is a collection of moments, memories that accumulate in a compositional blur ready to be called art. Mimicry inspired by memorabilia and the



Gerhard Richter, *Atlas*: Panel 19, 1967, five black-and-white photographs, Stätische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich.

very act of transforming a photograph into a painting proves that Richter laments a distinct handmade quality in photographs, which he believes can only be revealed in the aura of good painting – the slowly accumulated surplus of affect induced by the hand made image. At the same time, he feels the need to defuse the images so that their photographic presence is conveyed to our perception as corrected through the dimension of painting.

In the context of art and in the defence of painting it becomes clear that the potential for resistance and revelation in painting is the same as in any other medium. Richter's attempt to give painting the significance it deserves, justifies his proceeding from photograph into painting. This is a different usage to that of Warhol who made the process of image making an anonymous detached occupation frequently performed by technicians.

The fact of 'unpaintability' as Richter describes it, motivated him to work on the *Atlas* project using photographs as the basis of artistic interpretation. In a sense the unpaintability of the *Atlas* photographs serve Richter as a framework through which painting finds its strength and the justification to engage social reality.

The literal basis of photographs, however, undermines the contemporary validity of painting as an accurate medium. The photograph even insinuates that painting is a mediocre technique copying the supreme literalness of snapshot images. Richter can only overcome the actuality of photography by zealous over painting and by blurring the photographic framework.

It is in this framework that one ought to look at the cycle of paintings concerning *October 18 1977*. The subject there, as in *Atlas*, is atrocities and death. In *October 18 1977*, Richter reworked the terrible events around the Baader Meinhof faction into a comment on the subject matter that is exclusively painted. The Baader Meinhof gang translated their political convictions into lethally active terrorism provoking a tough counter reaction from the German state.

This was a very sensitive issue in Germany. The case became extremely controversial after Red Army Faction members died mysteriously in their cells at Stammheim prison. Richter used this tragic event and the surrounding controversy to create a cycle of paintings and thereby test the notion of history painting in the context of contemporary art.

The emphasis in this test is on painting as both a technical and a social model that must overcome the over-determined complexity, the blinding effect of accurate documentation by photography. Richter wants to install the values of painting as a model of society in art. The source for *October 18, 1977* comes from the photographs, which Richter took from the German magazine *Stern*. By careful selection Richter the painter finds a motive for interpretation. The basic examination in this process is to somehow create a painterly language whose compositional arrangement evokes a social reality that embraces the sensational and manifests the image in the picture as a moral attraction. The bluntness of the actual event, the snapshot documentation of violence is heightened in Richter's transformation into a painted blur of haze. An aesthetic shift occurs, from an atheistic basis of documentation into a celebration of a religious entity. The mere fact of a grey misty appearance stylises the photo image and brings about an overwhelming romantic experience.

Richter's intention in the *October 18, 1977* cycle seems to be to reveal an auratic message beyond the sensational, which is at once inexplicable and yet something that one should strive understand:

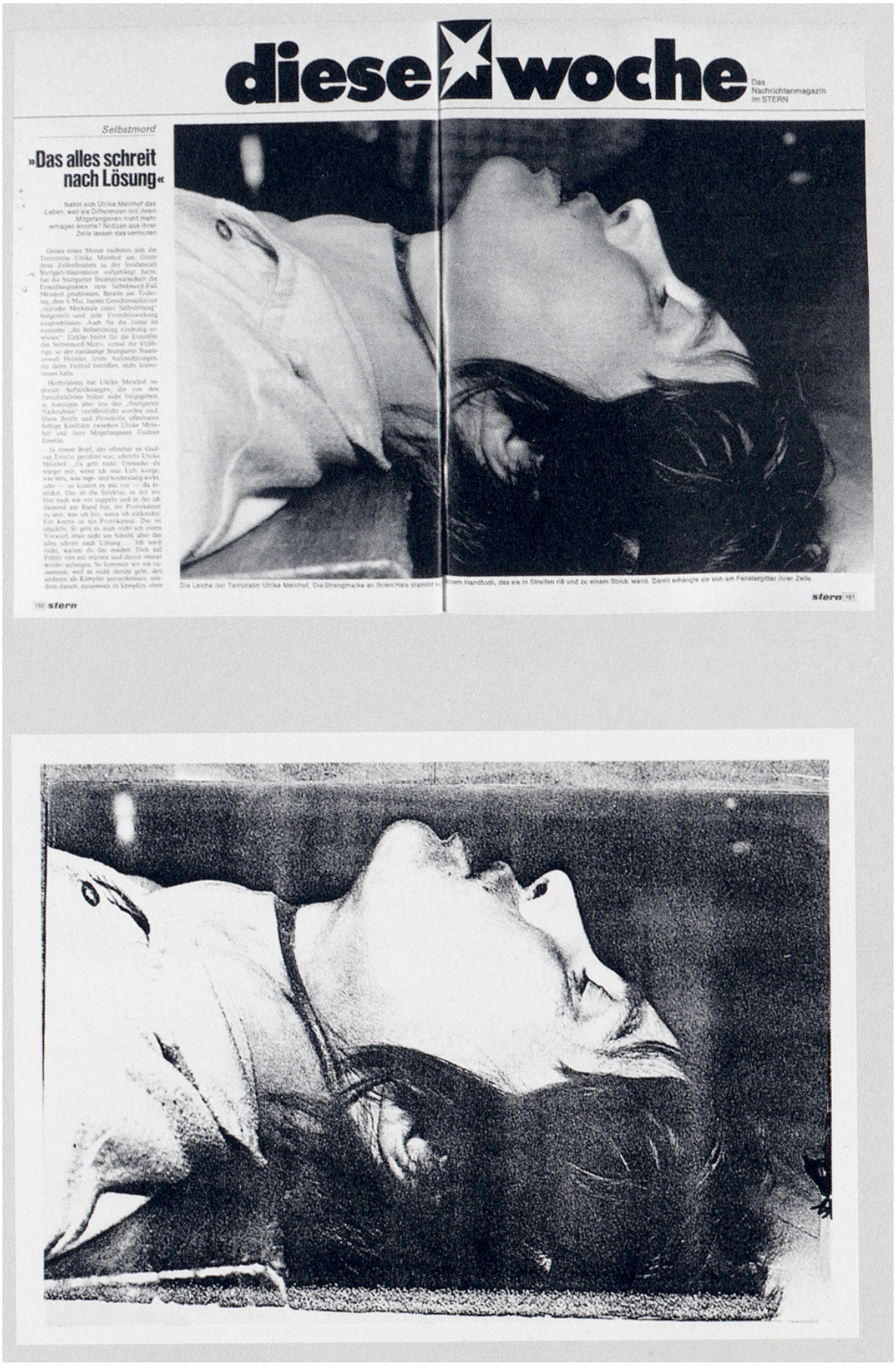
> I hope it's not the same as seeing an accident on the motorway and driving slowly simply because one is fascinated by it. I hope that there's a difference and that people get a sense that there is a purpose in looking at those deaths, because there is something about them that should be understood.[106]

October 18, 1977 should, according to Richter, hold an auratic semblance to the events in which one can find a purpose by looking at these images of dead. It is not like an avant-garde art that wants to exemplify difference through expanding the boundaries of art so as to offer a new perspective on the artistic subject matter. This is more like a monologue in which one is presented with the talent and skill of painting and hence the validity of history painting as a painting tradition. The artist purposefully leaves out alternatives whether they are in painting or in any other kind of potential representation. An immediate response of art to the political injustice of its time could have offered a much more immediate iconic resistance.

In this context the collection of imagery from the popular media and its extended reproduction through a process of painterly concealment takes away all ideological credibility from the *October 18, 1977* cycle. The justice and injustice, the failure of ideology in politics, can be recognised in the photograph as well as in the subsequent painting. Photograph and painting compete with each other at the level of technique and the interpretation of reality.



Gerhard Richter, *Death (Tote).* 1988, oil on canvas, 62 cm X 73 cm.



Top image: Photo of Ulrike Meinhof's dead as published in *Stern*, June 16, 1976
Below copy image of: Ulrike Meinhof's, dead, May 9, 1976. Richter's photographic model for *Dead 1*, *Dead 2*, and *Dead 3*, from the artist's notebook.

The application of paint in the implementation of the *October 18, 1977* paintings, works against Richter's goal of being critical of his time. In its special use of blur, paint takes on a beautification presence of its own. Thus instead of exposing the injustice and the dramatic event at Stammheim the paintings consecrate somewhat the drama and nurture an artistic trait of skill and painterly surprise. Based on that appearance 'Stammheim' is given away as an act of artistry, as an object of the aesthetic trade. The moral, respective to the ethical space that resides within life and death, between terror and the state, as was the case for *October 18, 1977* is revealed as something 'painted', resulting in the exclusion of anything else. Richter's emphasis on technique is apparent. The artist was forced into a verbal exchange to guide the audience in the direction of the possible content of the work beyond the facts of painting. As a political comment the work in itself is silent. Taste and the aesthetic overwhelm the possibility of a liberating dialogue.

The critical potential of the work evaporates through the blurring of the image. Richter conceals the political directness of the photograph because he brings the Stammheim drama to the audience as a celebration of painting. Richter's second-guessing of the Stammheim event turns the critical on its head and tames violence in the way renaissance artists represented the dead body of Christ. His aesthetic elevation of a photograph into the sacrosanct tradition of painting turns the political complexity of *October 18, 1977* into a mannerism of expression. The Stammheim cycle as a whole leads the debate away from dead into a historic dialogue about social realism and its possibilities in contemporary art. Can the reality of the Stammheim death actually be a concern of painting or does Richter's concern for painting cannibalise any image that comes his way. The authenticity of Richter's' drama comes not from Stammheim but from Weimar and the tradition of Caspar David Friedrich's romantic paintings. Richter talks about Caspar David Friedrich in the interview with Storr:

> **RS:** Alright, but take the landscape and the Titian copy: not only was the style in which they were painted a departure from modernism, but so were the images. The idea of someone in your position painting a Titian or painting a beautiful landscape in somewhat romantic way was bound to get a reaction, was bound to make people say, "What is he doing?"
>
> **GR:** On the one hand, it was a polemic against this annoying modernist development that I hated. And, of course, the assertion of my freedom: "Why shouldn't I paint like this and who could tell me not to?" And then the affirmation was naturally there, the wish to paint paintings as beautiful as those by Caspar David Friedrich, to claim that this time is not lost but possible, that we need it, and that it is good. And it was a polemic against modern art, against tin art, against "wild art" –and for freedom, that I could do whatever I wanted to.[107]

To see this clearly one must establish the process by which the photographs were printed in a magazine. The person who took the photo had witnessed the dead

Meinhof. His image was reproduced to inform the public about that disastrous episode. The media, which thrives on sensations, reprinted only those images that promised the most sensationalistic public effect. This political effect was surely influenced by the German state, which supplied the photographs to the *Stern* magazine. Richter chose images, which had been intended by the newspaper and the state to scandalise the public. The press was pro–state and wished to show that the legislative body was not implicated in these deaths. The individuals who died brought their fate on themselves.

Having selected these sensationalistic tainted images Richter reworked them as a blurred image on canvas. They acquired a heightened value because they were painted. In them one encounters the same awe and painterly desire that can be found in Caspar David Friedrich's romantic painting, *Abbey in the Oak Forest*. In Friedrich's painting death is symbolised in a ruined church and dead oak trees. The atmosphere transcends the merely optical facticity of reality, that is to say nature resonates through the work.

There is a similar religious aura in Richter's *October 18, 1977*. It emerges from the trace of the technical trait of painting, and not directly from an unmediated encounter with images of dead. The aura resonates from Richter's blur effect, produced when he wipes the wet paint so that the images get fuzzy and out of focus. The image, and in this instance the personality of Meinhof, is removed from the actual social space of blame and criticism. The original, 'authentic', Meinhof shot was taken from newspapers and police reports. The original photo, as a political instrument at work in society, has been producing multiple reproductions ever since that day. Richter's work is always too late and never relevant to historic reality. The additional rhetoric of blurring in the painting amputates Richter's political concerns, leaving behind his paintings as images of a romantic past. One might see the blur as a novel gesture in paint, but there is nothing beyond that except insulation from the contemporary. Even as they emerge into form the painted images are already a thing of the past.

The *October 18, 1977* cycle reveals its ideology directly, in a manner that has almost disappeared from contemporary art. This ideology appears to be neutral, non-committal like the 'detached' vision of Warhol. Yet in its totality it privileges an artist's rescue mission for skill of painting in the new age of late modernism. Art tells an old story of death as perpetual peace, an unchanging romantic icon.

Richter's paintings are also detached from unmediated meaning, the meaning of the present moment and from their social context, by their multifunctional optional styles. Every image in the *Atlas* is a readymade; each one is equivalent to the next. This



Caspar David Friedrich, *Abbey in the Oak Forest*, 1809.

infinite political equivalence strips *October 18, 1977* of all political significance. It places the images of Baader and Meinhof in a context of irrelevant choice of variations. One has to remember that Richter whilst working on the *October 18, 1977* also painted images of a cow, a woman descending a staircase in various forms, Second World War aeroplanes, a woman with umbrella, abstract cityscapes, 48 portraits of famous intellectuals, abstract paintings, colour charts and many other images and styles. In the end, Richter thought that these variations returned artistic authority and freedom to the painter. In fact the priority of painting reduces all Richter's images to impotent signs of the nostalgic and contemporary indifference.

If one were to justify the variety of Richter's styles as a credible component in his art then it follows that one cannot give priority to specific style. They only work as an all-encompassing noncommittal practice. The individual image and cycles only heightens the contradiction and diversity of Richter's production. And in this contradictory environment *October 18, 1977* cannot be seen as an especially critical work. Michael Danoff points out:

> Indeed Richter prefers that his work be called pictures rather than paintings, so that one does not take them too seriously. [108]

Richter's pictures lack affect and mood and are indifferent to the here and now of social life. Any picture that Richter places in the public debate might promote a widespread dialogue, but because of their noncommittal, sentimental character, his paintings remain incoherent. They have no meaning that radiates beyond the neutrality of a photograph. Storr reveals:

> When *October 18, 1977* was shown at the Lannan Foundation and the Grey Art Gallery in 1990, separate spaces were devoted to photo albums and texts narrating and analyzing the history of the RAF. Precisely because the paintings are not mere documents, such information is needed if one is to fully understand them and absorb their impact…
>
> For these reasons, Richter accepted the existence of the study rooms and provided his source notebooks for display, but he wryly noted: 'The disadvantage is that people spend more time reading than looking at the pictures. [109]

To say that *October 18, 1977* is political painting is to misunderstand the artist and his creation. *October 18, 1977* is a cycle of pictures and merely recalls the drama and the hurt of those years. The more time goes by, the more the affair turns into a picture, admiring and romanticising the terrible notion of death. This romanticism was never there in the photograph nor was the ideological position of state and terrorists. At this moment art cheats and destroys the actuality of an important communal experience.

In later works Richter uses the photographic image as a background[110] on which he can paint as an extension of his desperate will to rescue painting from the threat of mechanical reproduction. In all, this is a futile attempt to deny contemporary reality by means of over-painting it with tradition.

Richter strives to give back painting the substance of respectability. The over-painting and blurring of the readymade image dramatises the contest between the readymade, together with the values it represents and the tradition of painting that resists these values through its references to history, craftsmanship, and the aura of the individual image. This contest has directed and dominated the development of contemporary art for over a century. Richter 's decision to over-paint iconic images of Florence and Italy, tourist souvenirs, invokes all these traditional values, without breathing new life into them. Richter's technical strategies are all directed to shifting painting into the same dimensions of experience as the readymade whilst also compensating for the loss of its traditional auratic functions. Richter's career can be read as an attempt to project painting beyond the condition to which it had been reduced by mechanical reproduction, the condition first recognised by Benjamin and Malraux.

It is ironic that the only thing that can still support painting is the very thing that Richter wants to defeat, the image as readymade. The hybrid element of Richter's styles exposes painting as having never existed in the present moment. It concedes the indestructible, immortal quality of photographs. If the desire to paint cannot believe in immediate experience and memories then painting can never recreate an independent voice. In *29. 1. 2000* the paint attaches itself to an icon of the romantic rhetoric of art, the tower of Pisa; the master art of the renaissance is 'screened' by the skilful mark of the contemporary painter artist. Richter conceals debate. He removes painting from the contemporary by mimicry of the moods of the past. Yet only in the present can one make contemporary art.

Richter's career appears to have been a gamble with the destiny of painting and art. An undecided outcome of his art reveals a praxis in which painting appears as a mirage of liberation, insinuating an innovative and liberating alternative to photography and also to reproductions of style. But bound to the skilful and to traditional sentiments, Richter does not offer a liberating concept, different to mainstream art. His contemporary romanticism substitutes an apparition for critical consciousness as the meaningful creation in art. The unchangeable in Richter's pictures, the part in the work that is usually referred to as its aura, is endowed by the artist with a potential for



Gerhard Richter, *29. 1.2000*, from of the catalogue *Florence*, 1999/2000, 100 over painted photographs.

commodity and exchange. And on this level *October 18, 1977* has failed its artistic duty to liberate the creative from an ideological duty that wants to commodify the criticality of art.

As Adorno points out:

> By the same token, art the imago of the unexchangeable, verges on ideology because it makes us believe there are things in the world that are not for exchange. On behalf of the unexchangeable, art must awaken a critical consciousness towards the world of exchangeable things. [111]

NOTES

[91] Gert Schiff, *Picasso in Perspective*, 21.

[92] Gert Schiff, *Picasso in Perspective*, 21.

[93] *Art in Theory 1900 1990,* 1047.

[94] *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, 1048.

[95] Gerhard Richter, *Gerhard Richter | The Daily Practice of Painting, Writings and Interviews 1962-1993*, trans. David Britt; ed. by Hans-Ulrich Obrist, (London: Thames & Hudson in association with the Anthony d'Offay Gallery, 1995), 149.

[96] Gerhard Richter, 108.

[97] Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter, Forty Years of Painting*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 288.

[98] Storr, 302.

[99] Ibid.

[100] Storr, 303.

[101] Storr, 302.

[102] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh - Richter interview 1986:

BB: But when Warhol started to have his pictures done more or less anonymously, in silkscreen, that must have seemed like a slap in the face to you? This was a threat to your survival, for someone to demonstrate all of a sudden that painting is being supplanted by technology. It undermined the point of all painterly techniques, however radically simplified.

GR: Maybe I was just admiring something that I can't do – something I'm in no position to do. The same thing happened with the Minimalists, who were also doing something I was in no position to do.

BB: Have you ever tried leaving a photograph as a photograph, in other words adding the pictorial quality just by enlarging it, blurring it and manipulating it in that sort of way?

GR: Rarely, and it only ever worked if it was a photograph of a painting.

BB: The theoretical implications that were read into Warhol, his radical opening-up of the definition of art, his anti-aesthetic position, of a kind that hadn't existed since Duchamp, were also present as a characteristic of Fluxus, It must have attracted you very much at that time?

GR: Yes, it attracted me very much; it was really vital to me. Fluxus above all.

BB: There are contradictions here that are hard to understand. On the one hand you were attracted by Fluxus and Warhol, but on the other hand you're saying 'I couldn't do that; all I wanted to do and all I could do was paint.' You align your own painting with this anti-aesthetic impulse, and at the same time you maintain a pro-painting position. To me this seems to be one of the entirely typical contradictions out of which your work has essentially evolved.

GR: Yes it is curious, but I don't actually find it contradictory. It's rather as if I were doing the same thing by other means, means that are less spectacular and less advanced.

NOTES CONTINUE

BB: So the negation of the productive act in art, as introduced by Duchamp and revived by Warhol, was never acceptable to you?

GR: No, because the artist's productive act cannot be negated. It's just that it has nothing to do with the talent of 'making by hand', only with the capacity to see and to decide *what* is to be made visible. *How* that then gets fabricated has nothing to do with art or with artistic abilities.

Gerhard Richter, 139-140.

[103] Richter, *October 18, 1977*, 95.

[104] *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, 1037.

[105] Richter, *October 18, 1977*, 99.

[106] Richter, *October 18, 1977*, 111.

[107] Storr, 302.

[108] Terry A. Neff, *Gerhard Richter Paintings*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988), 11.

[109] Richter, *October 18, 1977*, 36–37.

[110] See the catalogue: Gerhard Richter, *Florence,* essay by Dietmar Elger, (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz Publishers), 2001

[111] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 123.

Chapter 9

Identity, Freedom and the Real:
Mike Parr's project to resist any ideological limits on art through a constant restoration of the potential for absolute freedom to the centre of his praxis.

> Art must be used to free man. If this necessitates the destruction of art as we understand it, then art must be destroyed.
> 10 November 1972 [112]

For me there is no better comment on Mike Parr's relation to art - and the relation of artists to the liberation of their praxis in general - than this entry in his notebook in November 1972. To some extent it reflects the essences that give reason for me to explain where Parr's work succeeds in contrast to Richter and others. Richter's nostalgic remapping of painting as a contemporary work contributes only to the mimetic and the aesthetic traits of art.

Richter's work lacks a true memory that triggers phases of identities that cannot be controlled but must be experienced through example. In this situation, Richter does not work through his memory, but reconstructs sentiments through which past experiences are left as they were. Contemporary art in this instance does not alter nor contribute to art but aligns with the established institutions to further a monotonous direction in art. An identification with the audience does not occur and hence the human experience; that is to say, participation in his art is not there.

This process of engagement and experience is at the foreground in Parr's work, especially in his earlier performance works such as the *Wound by Measurement Series* from 1971-73. These performances such as *Tack-line*, (1973) and more importantly *Integration 1 (Leg Line of Blue Sky),* (1975) is in its use of the image the best example to demonstrate the difference between Parr and Richter's work. In the latter performance Parr is able to call to mind the fact that illusionary creations underlie every principle of reality. From the outset, Parr's performances work from one basic idea, which he describes as follows:

> Since performance art is 'action', 'behaviour', the traditionally sacrosanct boundaries between object and artist, artist and audience are broken down, freeing each from their differentiated roles; their passivity and isolation. Such art can lead to a new form of communication between artist and audience, a constructive role that is more than the denunciatory gesture. Revealing his or her deepest urges the artist catalyzes the deep behavioural response of the audience, but because this is a direct interaction unmediated by the traditional 'object of contemplation' or the thin empathy of a Theatre of Illusion the structure is dialectical and formative. It is this quality as a ritual of deep



Mike Parr, *Integration 1 (Leg Line of Blue Sky)*, performance, 1975. Mike Parr calls to mind the fact that illusionary creations underlie every principle of reality.

> communication that constitutes the meaning of performance art (and that is why I think it so important to distinguish between performance art as theatre and entertainment and performance art as concrete expression).[113]

In *Leg Line of Blue Sky* reality exposes the situation of art as a vehicle for creating illusion and yet it is illusion that, in spite of everything remains steadfastly attached to reality. Parr sets this out in *Leg Line of Blue Sky*. He staples four photographs of blue romantic sky with sunlit clouds to his leg. By doing so he evokes precisely that struggle of 'action', 'behaviour', and the 'traditionally sacrosanct boundaries between object and artist'. Bromfield illustrates the performance in *Identities, A Critical Study of the Work of Mike Parr 1970-1990* as follows:

> In the work the performer staples four photographs of a patch of blue sky to his leg, which has been completely whitened with grease paint. It is specified that the photographs should be made so as to include a small section of white cloud in each.[114]

Bromfield goes on describing the performance:

> *Integration 1* introjects into it a most potent symbol of the yearning for unlimited freedom. The infinite depth of the sky is balanced against the regular click of the stapler as it ties infinity to the human an inch at a time.[115]

Within the act of taking an object of illusion, a photo of the blue sky, to the human flesh Parr redraws the map of how art must see itself. As Parr suggested at this moment art self-destructs, and dislocates the desire for creating illusion as an effect not above and beyond the act of taking and inflicting pain. The operation of making art is placed in limbo and must await the shock reaction of the audience and attend to how the audience deals with the confrontation of reality and beauty. The traditional making of art as an object of attractiveness, dominated by an impression, has been cancelled. In this action art reappears, not as a well intentioned activity from the past but as an act that is liberated from the past and therefore cannot please (reconcile) the contemporary audience. Past and present are mingled into an oneness of confrontation and wonderment leaving the audience to make more art from it by taking up its themes themselves. Parr does not offer a conclusion but provides a riddle that cannot be resolved but must find partial identity within each participant.

As with Beuys and also partially in the *Honigpumpe is kaputt* performance, the audience is in the process of being freed from passive contemplation. For Parr this is even more so since, in his performance, the point of identity is also where memory finds the creative potential that plays itself out in performance depending on what desire is being stimulated towards liberation. Reality transposes into an identity with the literal

action and reaction manifested in the performance. Parr's work succeeds far better within this process of making desire 'literal,' or 'real' than any aestheticised production of readymade reality.

Clearly to succeed in such a way demands that one's own ideology cannot ever be reconciled with the general practice of life. One must constantly alter one's position, remain oneself and renew the liberating principles which have been established anew. In this, material and technique communicate private significance but these are exposed and their destiny depends on opinions, one's own and others. Parr explains:

> about *how* i am trying to develop techniques for communicating very private experiences in public contexts and i think that will depend very much on how opinion can develop into *criticism* [sic] [116]

Parr's comment reveals that art is an experience of private desire and only communicates as a collective operation that exchanges reactions with other spectators. In this Parr attempts to find an identity with previous experience so as to rupture an identity (as with Richter) that feels only liberated in the past. In this an opinion that originates from a certain understanding of one's identity develops into a criticism in one's own praxis and in the behaviour of others. Constant destruction of the established values of art guarantees a basis of liberation from which to create difference in art through praxis. Only the unknown keeps the serious artist sane and helps to nurture desire, to liberate art praxis even further.

To transform one's desire for a liberated praxis into an art of relevance to others, one must exchange absolute liberty for a practice that can only be revelatory if it seeks and displays aspects of material resistance so as to attain 'reality'. This subjective, or at least individual, route to the objective moment of the real in the work appears absolutely necessary if the artist is to challenge and liquidate good taste so as to fix his work in the immediate, in the here and now of contemporary experience.

The moment of the real always contradicts good taste because it is immediate. Its literal presence converts the imaginary into a serious contender against the 'reality principle' of bourgeois life. The most significant examples of this strategy are performance and other gestural art works that resist collective good taste by invoking the real. A resistant critical strategy shines through many of Mike Parr's performances, an open disdain for the camp of the silent, tractable status quo.

This tractable status quo is distinguished by a system of 'rules', a permanently sanitised objectivity, a readymade instrumental consciousness, deprived of anthropological facts or any sense of the transience of being.

In his performances Mike Parr confronts these rules, both everyday and artistic, in the context of the blocked impotent and sterile art that has been explored in this thesis. The rules are displaced and reinvented by Parr as anthropological 'instructions' towards freedom. Parr initiates the process of liberation through his body but not as metaphor. Parr displays the real time resistance, pain and struggle of his body as he 'contradicts', the intractable status quo through sheer intractability. Through ostentation he transforms a simple event – holding one's breath, nailing one's arm to a gallery wall – into a focused means to liberation.

Performance in general is personal liberty 'enacted' and attached to passages through identity in which the resistant body mediates reality. The resulting artistic insights unravel the academic silences around art. Through performance contemporary art embraces immediacy as a fundamental condition of social relevance.

The audience is challenged to be conscious of the 'present moment', aware of its situation as the witness of a real event. This consciousness of immediate reality – consider the timeliness of performance – further determines its discordant artistic relationship to reality. From that observation, the viewer makes decisions and responds through art to the life world as a whole.

In the essay 'The Mirror-Phase as Formative of the function of the I' Lacan explains:

> But the important point is that this form situates the instance of the *ego*, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will only rejoin the development of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as *I* his discordance with his own reality.[117]

The complexity of Lacan's theory of the *mirror-phase* cannot be discussed in more detail. There are, however, similarities in the *mirror-phase* theory to the manifestation of reality through the pattern of ostentation, confrontation and resistance in Parr's long history of performances.

The profundity of resistance in Parr's performances differs radically from the mimicry of McCarthy's performances or the self-staging of Warhol as the artist performer. In Parr's performances the spectator perceives the art image, as a parallel, a reflection of one's own human image. This personal image is situated in the world. The passing of time and the resistance of the body combine to relay a living reality to the participatory audience. To watch performance in this situation is to re-enter the *mirror-phase*.

The strategies towards freedom of Parr's performances challenge the identity of the spectator both at the 'subjective' level of identification and at the social level because

the spectator is part of an audience – a society of voyeurs with shared intentions. The spectator enters and responds to a complex formation of signs and events.

In response to the imaginary and symbolic events that arise during performances the spectator's consciousness opens up to alternative identities, to other ways of being. To be more precise, an art that operates in the manner of Lacan's *mirror-phase* is inherently confrontational, inevitably and permanently in search of an identity. This is, of course, the inevitable posture of a libertarian art that enshrines the potential for absolute freedom at its heart. For this art to succeed the artist must display his praxis, through a performance that projects the possibility of 'identity seeking' strategies into the social, which reinvoke the imaginary and the symbolic *ad infinitum* throughout the life world.

This is not to say that art changes the world but it can have a significant effect on individuals and their behaviour. In that sense, art is no different to everyday life. One conducts one's experience in terms of the conditions set by society, whether or not one resists or seeks to change them.

Parr simultaneously creates the present moment and challenges set ideologies during his performances. They engage the aura of the present, through which he translates the contemporary, the immediate into his praxis unaltered, in the essential form of Lacan's 'mirror sign'. The viewer then engages this sign not only in his performance but also in his prints, drawings and installations.

It seems that all art concerned with freedom remains an unknowable entity that drifts between the imaginary and identity, until it is confronted with the public gaze, configured by the performance as Lacan's mirror. In a performance by Parr, the revelation of the resistant sign of art distinguishes the space in which art plays its permanent game of freedom with society. Its imaginative and critical dimensions emerge inside a framework of realisations that fuses memory and the imaginary into a gesture of identification, in and with the here and now. The uncertain reality of this performance process threatens the average viewer's habitual strategies of artistic contemplation. At that moment, art is neither polished nor indifferent but inherently and uncompromisingly real.

Once exposed to the resistant signs of the real the spectator substitutes the immediacy of art for norms and rules. The outsider, the voyeur, colludes with a collective identification process that looks to art for an account of the real within the liberating potential of the imaginary, the familiar as it emerges in the unfamiliar immediacy of performance.

At this moment liberation recalls past memories by literally reaching into the present. The artist merges the imaginary and the symbolic into one element, the desire for liberation, a response that engages the praxis of contemporary art in a collective vision that threatens to rupture the status quo. For those who practise a habitual contemplative response, time-based art is always unpredictable.

Parr's performances 'discover' the liberating potential of art at the moment when its immediate presence acts as a real and present danger to the fragile self. To initiate a liberating artistic process that appropriates and enhances difference, he identifies this immediacy as present in his own body, as a legitimate tool to enact the performance event as a critical instruction. This authoritarian instruction serves as a paradigm in the performance *Cathartic Action/ Social Gestus Number 5* that has been recorded in the film *Rules and Displacements Activities Part III*. The act of chopping off a false arm in front of an unsuspecting audience not only focused attention on Parr's one-armed appearance, it also emphasised the realisation of the 'undefined', the non-existent, as the primary agent of the shock of liberated reality. The audience for this performance, mainly his friends and students were well aware that Parr had only one arm but their habit of contemplation made them vulnerable to this liberating experience.

Parr refers to the cathartic act in a photo portfolio now in the collection of the Art Gallery of Western Australia:

> I again (a dream, elementary memory) cut off my arm (cutting through the obfuscation; the displacements) this is my final cathartic action after five years of performance…[118]

By cutting off a non-existent arm, Parr simultaneously liberated art from 'the traditional sacrosanct boundaries' (Parr), and from 'rules' that deny art independent existential authority. At the same time the shock experienced by the audience reveals the unfamiliar that art can provide if it combines 'shock and wonder'. In the sphere of shock and wonder the fearful play results in the audience seeking sense collectively for the collapse of order by remaining silent. The response of coming to terms with Parr's *Cathartic Action Gestus* is reflected in the desire of the shocked audience to sanitise fear and irritation; in short they want to come to terms with the creative responsibility that this liberated reality offers.

It becomes apparent that Richter transforms the liberating potential in his art into a sacrosanct boundary between himself and his audience. He establishes a myth, reliant on tradition, through which he romantically plays with it, while belittling the possibility of an immediate liberated art of the present. As we have seen, much prestigious contemporary art appropriates the liberating potential of art into a game of



Mike Parr, *Cathartic Action: Social Gestus No 5*, performance at the sculpture centre, Sydney, 1977.

taste and commodities. The outcome is a calculated exchange of distinctly sentimental artistic qualities in the context of the high-flown quasi-religious rhetoric that has permeated the art market since the onset of the age of high capital in the romantic era.

Thus nostalgia, which is always a set of rules, a restrictive abstraction, belittles immediacy, and blocks all direct responses to art as unworthy of its high ideals. Direct confrontational reality may be perceived as art, but it is instantly ignored. It follows that at present, the here and now, many contemporary artworks appear as an exasperated mode of creativity. Thus, exasperation in art is attributable to the artist's obsessive desires to domesticate the illusionary in art as a collective cultural idealism.

This collective idealism packages the aura of a work of art as a lifestyle product. As a result the audience sees the artwork as a piece of property. Artists have reduced art to a tautology, a maintenance device to eradicate humanism and the unappealing qualities of life. This produces a leak-proof lifestyle package, a stylish container that cannot even leak humanism because it is empty of all content, all difference. The art object is exhausted, exasperated by its separation from the here and now. The artist's attempt to colonise creative desire, to tame, with rules, something that cannot be defined *a priori*, can only result in the absolute abjection of the liberating potential of art before the academic and calculable. The un-paintable, the unspeakable in art can never be colonised in this way.

Art must rely on human life as an ontological reality and on the way this is acted out in society. There is no need for art to explain itself in terms of the performance criteria of the market. It could only recite kitsch, sentimental representations, blunt propaganda, abstract expressions and the other weapons of mass distraction that render contemporary art impotent. A work of art does not improve in quality because it has a high exchange value. 'Art is life and life is art,' is a well-known cliché but it is also the most reliable description of what art can be.

Without these existential and psychological dimensions, art is nothing more than another product drowning in the multiplicity and complexity of life. These are serious reasons for art not to attempt to prove its existence in terms of exchange value. Adorno explains:

> It is not for art to decide whether the non-existent apparition *qua* appearing entity exists after all or whether it belongs to the realm of illusion. Works of art draw their authority from the fact that they call forth philosophical reflections on the question of how and why they – as figures of the existent and yet unable to impart life to the nonexistent – can become images that overwhelm being, and how it is that the non-existent is not sufficient unto itself but requires art.[119]

If Adorno is correct, art is needed because it alone can speak the language of difference. Thus art in this contemporary situation is authorised to maintain a constant watch for what has not been said because art alone inevitably deals with difference in the here and now. Only art can create a bridge between the things that cannot be said and what needs to be said.

This epiphanic bridging of the imaginary and the real provides an alternative to the broader meanings assigned to life by the collective. The integration of that which does not yet exist into the life world cannot occur within the general language of academia. Only public confrontation within the framework of the artwork – usually a performance, can achieve this. This is close to Beuys' concept of the social sculpture. In principle the artist should constantly resist, remove or turn collective interpretation on its head, so as to maintain the liberating potential of creative praxis.

Art is often portrayed as a sublime structure that aspires to an ideal of a perfection previously manifested in a chronological history of art. In that model of creative praxis, artists draw from previous historic sources for their creative strategy, in a relationship to tradition that is constantly referenced against idealism so as to tighten up the past. One can draw comparisons to someone who went on holiday and experienced many happy and not so happy adventures. In the end and over a period of time the person will remember predominantly the positive things and will even exaggerate and sanitise those events, so as to aspire to a perfect holiday.

Art can only invoke freedom if the artist's creative desire is continuously engaged in the here and now. Art can exist only as an immediate emerging idea; similar to the ever-present psychoanalytical formation that drives all our current desires, by drawing directly from immediate experience and memories, with no connection to perfection or the ideal. In that respect, the liberating potential of art stands in contradiction to the platonic notion of the imagination, which imposes its *a priori* rules on all difference. These rules transform the un-speakable potential for freedom into a *post hoc* idealised perfection, necessarily a blurred image, and hence impotent as a critical voice in a work of art. In the platonic realm liberation was all over before you arrived; 'Blink and you've missed it.'

In his performances Mike Parr resists this destructive dogmatic intrusion into art. Parr draws from his body as the only reliable source for art making. Everyone works with their body, as the only vehicle of experience and as the means of social interaction. Parr's intense use of his body however, almost as a separate realm of consciousness, is unique. In his performances his body becomes the supreme means to condition the functions of human experience, to generate irresistible revelation.

In *Malevich – A Political Arm*, a 74 hour performance at the Artspace in Sydney, Parr bluntly exposed the irrelevance of art practised as a matter of hygienic style:

> First thing is to visualize is the whole Museum empty.
> This "emptiness" of the Museum is the "ground" of the performance.
> You'll see immediately that I'm extending the idea of the white wall in the *Malevich* performance to the Museum as a whole.[120]

Parr emphasises impotence and the reductive pressures on art – these are referenced in the emptiness of the Museum as the ground of the performance – where silent art manifests as an impeccable (ideal) artwork. I am using the word 'silence' as an expression for an art that is indifferent in its approach and appearance and ineffective as a critical entity against the bourgeois imperative.

The white wall of the gallery in *Malevich – A Political Arm* must be seen as the backdrop for Parr's action, defined by his critical reference to the silence and neutrality of the emptied space. Thus the comment evokes resistance as a blunt confrontation between the white of the wall and the messy, humanistic traces of the artist.

This confrontation of 'show space' and 'human reality' is the confrontational context that Parr plays against the current immigration politics in Australia. Given the injustice and the bad faith of migration politics in Australia, the silent, indifferent mood of society recalls the silence and the indifference that Germans showed in the years leading up to the rule of the NSDAP *(National Sozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter Partei)*. As it happened, there too people were isolated as lower class humans, illegals that needed to be removed from society and placed in detention centres out of public sight, away from a society that exercises a collective silence to maintain its habits and standard of living.

Because this art has surrendered all its critical determination to this collective silence it was no longer a force able to comment on the bureaucratic cleansing of migration into Australia. A more direct response is being demanded from art by this one work but so far it has not been forthcoming, being suppressed by the aesthetic silence of the conventional.

'CLOSE THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS' is the accusing subtext in the Gallery. This was a reference to the collective amnesia that had overtaken society in regard to the camps set up for 'illegal' refugees arriving in Australia by boat. Here Parr enlists language as a sign of outcry, he forces one to read and to engage and eventually acknowledge similarities to the dangerous past.



Mike Parr, *Malevich - A Political Arm,* 2002, performance, Sydney: Artspace, photo by David Bromfield. The photograph shows 'CLOSE THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS' white wall and blacked out Australian dictionary.

For Parr wanted to make work that is actually liberating, a means to differ from the collective indifference towards immigration politics. It was time to speak out in a noticeable and direct art. Objects are off the wall and the space is used as an act of defiance to the concentration camp policies of the political planners. In this, art takes on its responsibility to visualise in public the dilemma of an artist who remains a silent partaker in the cleansing act of the Government. In the performance *Malevich – A Political Arm,* during which his arm was nailed to a white wall, in one section of the Artspace gallery, Parr visualises the will of resistance but also the pain that has to be endured within the detention camps.

Framed by the act of nailing his arm to the wall Parr's body once more functions as a critical vehicle. Parr's performance work is hopelessly exposed to the actual moment but also as critical and liberating as art can be. The white wall provided the context in which the religious absolutist character of the aesthetic institutions constructs and corrupts signs, distorted by sentiment and nostalgia. Nothing is more impotent or pathetic than those endless mimetic expansions of the abstract rules of bourgeois instrumentalism on the walls of the white cube.

Parr positioned himself as a resisting force by literally including his body as the vehicle of resistance, a stain or blot on the bourgeois eye. Indeed during the performance stains of blood, betadyne and urine slowly corroded the white space and confronted the affirmative quality of art with an unavoidable human leakage. Parr confronted the bogus affirmation and fetishism of art and its history by supplying his body as the irreducible other of the here and now, the living bleeding flesh, which is always cancelled out by history and the white cube. The action of nailing his arm to the wall succeeded in manifesting the unspeakable in art, the knowledge that art cannot go on forever as an apologetic mimesis in the face of public silence.

Parr does just this in *Malevich – A Political Arm.* He closes his eyes and grits his teeth – consider the blindfolded, taped face and the 72 hours of fighting pain – as the sign under which liberation occurs.

Parr does not proclaim the end of art as a meaningful contribution to society, nor does he assume a continuing role for art in the here and now. He simply shows a human condition that simultaneously refers to collective guilt and amnesia in regard to refugee camps and the museum culture. This work is first of all neither art nor politics, but a manifestly human practice presented through the body, a cathartic action that liberates the imaginary from instrumental constraints.

As the title of the performance reveals, *Malevich – A Political Arm* relates to the ethical absence and political impotence of art. It challenges the endless re–presentation of Malevich as the supreme model of the mindless abstract technological activity that continues to flatten art to one dimension. The successors of Malevich maintain a habit of historical accounting and hence overemphasise the formal presentation of art objects. Parr confronts their wilful impotence when faced with social or ethical dilemmas – if contemporary art is no help with the refugee problem or the war in Iraq then it may as well cease to appear. As David Bromfield writes:

> Mike titled his early performances *Rules and Displacement Activities*. Rules remain important in Malevich – so that their oppressive dynamics can be exposed, displaced against or on the body. I reflect that Mike's performed resistance to rules is epiphanic, in that it shows that they are always an over–valorised aspect of the structure of desire. Rules must always emerge through the enacting of desire. The error, as with Malevich is to assume that we can reverse the process so that the correct rules will produce an irreproachable, 'clean' artwork. The rules for this performance inevitably break down as it develops.[121]

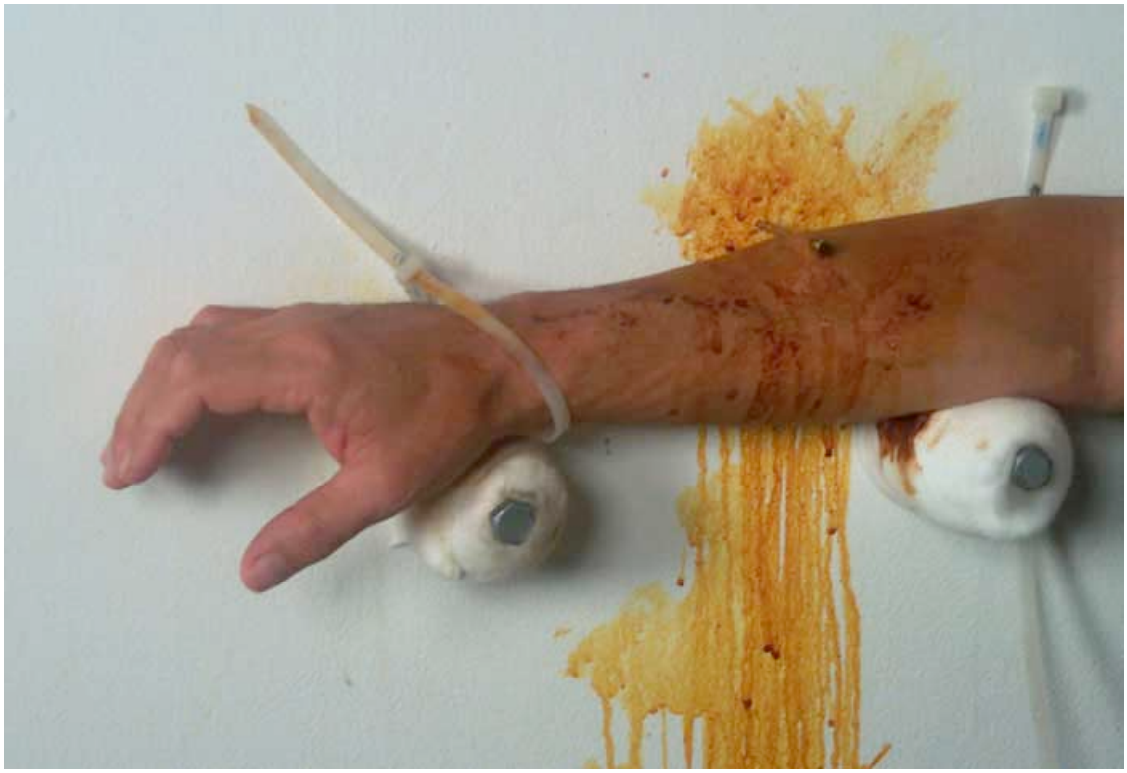
In *Malevich - A Political Arm* the audience is threatened by the rift between the illusory ground of desire – the white wall – and the immediate presence of the artist as the embodiment of a rule that emerges out of desire. They face a different reality, a confrontation with the artist nailed to the wall whilst the accusing text and the supremacist white space ambushes them. The audience cannot rely on a traditional opening in which the artist is the central host and his art, literally, generous to every fault. In this work all is different, the confrontational order arrests any effort to assert that art must provide an illusion. Parr's presence repositions the viewer between illusionary/escapism and confrontation/reality.

Opposite *'CLOSE THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS'* a little table stands deserted in the vast space of the Gallery on which an Australian dictionary is placed. The pages were blackened out in a manner reminiscent of the blackness of the squares to Malevich's black paintings. Thereby the blacked–out language in the dictionary exposes the ineffectiveness of the supremacist position, manifest political impotence combined with abstract pretensions to social relevance. Bromfield explains:

> Once established Mike's primary performative relationship is open to infinite social and political extension. In the third room, he sought to retrace, to reverse Malevich's Soviet decline, from an artist working with life to an abstract undertaker, a pallbearer for humanistic culture. Mike's blacked out Australian dictionary is, after all, a book filled with black paintings à la Malevich. These have replaced the Australian language, another anti-human straightjacket, riddled with the cancer of the administrative order and the tubercular shadows of crimes, yet to be acknowledged. He left the headings of each page visible. On this occasion the black paintings left open and visible were headed Pom and Poofter.[122]



Mike Parr, *Malevich - A Political Arm,* 2002, performance, Sydney: Artspace, photo by David Bromfield.



Mike Parr, *Malevich - A Political Arm,* 2002, performance, Sydney: Artspace, photo by David Bromfield.

Parr's performance strategy emphasises a manifestly liberating resistance beyond any aesthetic rule. In *Malevich – A Political Arm* and previous performances, liberation emerges in opposition to the instrumental basis of institutionalised art. The work did not present limits, on the contrary the time-based endurance of pain engaged art to communicate directly the injustice of the detention camps. Parr challenged his audience to be inclusive in their response to the aura of the here and now.

The actuality of Parr's work makes the difference. It is an essential instrument within every performance especially this one. It cannot be Malevich as a silent voice of society, nor can it be politics as a rhetorical gesture. All that Parr's work can be is a liberated artefact of life. It can only reveal the potential and limits of Parr the human being. In that respect Parr's art is always engaging difference and resists oppression by the institutional agenda. The body as the readymade vehicle is always present to assist the imaginary to become real. Through its immanence of body and action, art is literal and provocative. Art in Parr's performance becomes an authority on resistance, determined to maintain art as an anthropological experiment. His employment of the body draws immediate responses of fight or flight. Alluding to that, Parr establishes an awareness of liberation that materialises as a resistant force, able to broaden the creative basis of art as a liberated activity. The rules of society are thereby exposed (displaced) as a monotonous agenda, in which Parr's liberated presence is preserved as a comment of 'difference', actual and creative enough to be a danger to the monotone and banal reiterations of the agenda of contemporary art and the society, which supports it.

Parr's attitude to art making is closer to my own than any of the other artists I have discussed. In particular, his recognition that the liberating potential of art requires endless renewal, that it can never be accomplished, never commodified and his regular return to performance as means of ensuring his work retains that potential stand as a permanent reproach to all those artists who have forsaken the struggle to be free.

NOTES

[112] David Bromfield, *Identities, A Critical Study of the Work of Mike Parr 1970-1990*, excerpt from Mike Parr's notebook, (Perth: UWA Press, 1991), 49.

[113] Mike Parr quoted from his diary Bromfield, *Identities,* 119.

[114] Bromfield, *Identities,* 89.

[115] Bromfield, *Identities,* 89.

[116] Mike Parr, letter to Noel Sheridan, dated 11 April 1975, Bromfield, *Identities,* 89.

[117] *Art in Theory 1900 – 1990*, 610.

[118] *Mike Parr, autographic note on the mount of five cibachrome photographs of the Armchop.* Part of a portfolio in the collection of the Art Gallery of Western Australia, cited in Bromfield, *Identities*, 126.

NOTES CONTINUE

[119] T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 123.

[120] David Bromfield/Mike Parr, *Politics and Art*, a dialogue –an invitation to comment, published on:
http://www.behindthe-8-ball.com/,
http://members.iinet.net.au/~postpub/8ball/issue%2029/parr2.html, 2002, 1.

[121] David Bromfield, *Mike Parr at Midnight – A Performance Protocol*, published on:
http://www.behindthe-8-ball.com/,
http://members.iinet.net.au/~postpub/8ball/issue%2028/
Parr=_Malevich_A_Politial Arm_.html, 2002, 7.

[122] Bromfield *Mike Parr at Midnight*, 9.

Chapter 10

Between Secret and Reference:
My Praxis, Reverse Iconography. Painting and its ability to oppose orthodoxy in the history of painting. Art Praxis as it is revealed in the Reverse Paintings and the subsequent translating power of application and material.

Through my research I have discovered that the blurring of real and imaginary described throughout this thesis suppresses the libertarian possibilities of art as a critical alternative in culture. Artistic praxis emerges in the public domain as an added extra, outside any central social purpose and at best as a tool for the refinement and adornment of a consumerist lifestyle. It becomes apparent that art as praxis cannot depend solely on its ideological or ethical merits to counterbalance the established and conventional categories of art now so firmly appropriated.

It is only possible for the interpretation of images to offer epiphany, resistance and liberation for the practicing artist if the artwork itself, in practice, shows attitudes, degrees of difference within its revelatory power. Art, in practice, can only retain its liberating potential if it can show potency for perpetual transcendence that thrusts modern (contemporary, humanist) desire beyond the established instrumentalities of art.

The notion of perpetual transcendence is best explained in Parr's performance *Malevich – A Political Arm,* illustrated in Chapter Nine. Parr's body, as a readymade entity in art, challenges, in its application, and ultimately resists, the behavioural status quo that determines society's standpoint on culture. This desire to challenge goes beyond the mere facts of artistry. It opens up the undefined qualities of existence, of simple resistant being, that reside within the human dimension and lie beneath the desire for art. Parr's work demonstrates that the creative language in art is predominantly an event that deploys subtle, but materially concrete, desire as a challenge to reality.

The resistant properties attributed to a liberating praxis cannot be revealed through an art that builds up reactionary critical and ideological gestures into artworks presented as movement 'towards' an illusory ideal. Rather artistic commentary and artwork must emphasise its ideals as radically different to ideology, embedded as they are in an immediate material practice.

In my art praxis, I want to resist bourgeois discrimination and good taste, however commonplace it may be. This is a necessary viewpoint for a contemporary artist. To succeed, however, that same artist must overcome a range of difficulties never faced by

the modernist avant-garde. This situation requires that material practice in art should use alternative materials and unanticipated actions (beyond appropriation) that will allow the premises and processes of a liberated artistic reality to emerge.

This mandates a refusal to accept the framework of ideal production by means of traditional materials and techniques. This may seem obvious, mere rhetoric, but as I have shown, most apparent innovation in contemporary art is entirely conventional, once it is viewed through the wider perspectives of the art institution.

In the artwork relevance to life as it is being lived can only be achieved through 'challenge through implementation' within new and resistant materials. Exasperated by the tedium of paint application in a mood of eternal recurrence and permanent limitations to artistic experience and vision – now radically limited by surrendering to the perspective of the spectator – I found it desirable to initiate a method courageous enough to provide me with a space for a liberating praxis.

Through my concept of *Reverse Iconography Paintings* I can work from a liberated basis that can confront the traditional methods of application of the visual elements within painting. Traditional methods imply that the function of art as a continuum of proven praxis is taken for granted. Its use and application remains unchallenged in the eyes of the spectator. The spectator assumes, from the artwork, an art that derives and references the artist's viewpoint and avoids giving credit to a truly independent work of art. On that point the spectator depends on the pre-knowledge that the artist has already set in place as a principle compositional situation. The artwork therefore, is not observed as an independent entity but rather as a traditional view of the artist about art.

This is the point in which the 'reversal' of the iconographic painting takes responsibility and challenges the assumption of artwork and artist in relation to the spectator. By replacing the artist as the relatable and guiding aspect, the condition of spectatorship is thrown into a conflict. It raises questions and challenges the spectator not to 'fed his her consciousness with a false understanding of art' (Malevich).[123] The issue that arises is one that sketches the *Reverse Iconography Paintings* as an 'art of creating' versus the conventional 'art of copying'. Malevich provides us some insight in this issue in his *Essay on Art*, 1915-1933:

> In copying or tracing forms of nature we have fed our consciousness with a false understanding of art.
> The work of the Primitives has been taken for creation.
> That of the classic – also creation. […}
> The transferring of real objects onto canvas is the art of skilful reproduction and only that.
> And between the art of creating and the art of copying there is a great difference. {…}[124]

It is within this deliberate act of reversal that the *Reverse Iconography Paintings* insist on 'the art of creating', thus categorizing in the process of looking, your own set of imaginations to the liberating appearance of the work. A reversed order of application and visual logic challenges subjective and social conventions concerning academic and other learned knowledge on art. A resistance via reverse application is revealed, that removes the conditions and limits of spectatorship from the frontal assumptions of painting, thus liberating its conceptual and material qualities. The literal application of paint materials from the back of the painting contests those elements, which are literally holding back its liberating dimensions.

By means of a canvas reassigned as a grid made of fibreglass, the painting's surface is no longer a closed field but a structure that allows back–to–front vision not unlike the occurrence that conditions most of Australian households in which screens cover the inside from outside disturbances. Yet by the same token vision for the person inside – like a spectator – through the mesh, is possible because of the grid like consistency. Outside images emerge for the person inside as natural compositions. Inasmuch as the images in that situation come from the outside to the inside, garden to kitchen and so forth, so also do my reverse icons emerge from an outside world. They materialize from a situation that is beyond comprehension, since the painter by applying the paint material in reverse, is not working on the same side of the canvas as the audience.

A reversal situation occurs in which the artist pushes a special mixture of paint and pigments through the grid into the field of vision of the spectator audience. The painting, somehow, composes itself and uses the artist as an element within the 'picture plane'. The creation of the painting happens from outside the field of vision of the spectator. The painter is now within and part of the materialisation of image and picture. One can no longer imagine a procedure in which the artist creates an illusion in front of the canvas but rather must imagine that the artist is within that illusion and within the painting and part of a constantly surfacing image. He performs, I would say, an invisible painting.

Obviously, in this process of reverse action, the concept of history in painting is challenged, the artist is no longer showcasing painting as an academic trait but participates in the process of original creation.



Martin Heine, *Reverse Iconography Praxis*, 2003, Studio, Perth, Western Australia photo and © Martin Heine. Relevance is in the reverse implementation and the subsequent translating power of the material as an opposing fact to the historicism of painting.

This approach is also different to Duchamp, who through the process of the readymade object removed the need of 'making' art. In the *Reverse Iconography Paintings* the need to make art re-emerges as an invisible and incalculable entity in which the artwork is truly merged with the artist. Both work as one artistic idea and action and materialise independently of the artist, an invisible force of decisions made. From the concept of the readymade the artist has removed the easiness of production and replaced it with the self-determining process of creativity and nature.

In Duchamp's process, as has been pointed out throughout the thesis, the readymade convinces because of its desire for the instant translation of an idea. In that process the artist still controls the form and shape as well as the industrial quality of the artwork. A predetermined result provides options that can be commercially calculated. In the reverse painting process no calculations occur, since the artist is part of the *'Gestaltungs'* process with no influence towards predetermined aesthetic results. In the natural flow of things, pushing paint through the mesh, an independent surface forms that is indeed liberated of all artistry, apart from the struggle of the artist to control creation and then reconcile it with the independence of natural materialisation.

Therefore, opposing the traditional way of paint application, I am challenging the ideological and conventional reading of images, within the total context of painting on material grounds. The bourgeois promise of an endless debate about painting as a habitually imposed schema of skills, memory, taste and vision is altered and must now take into consideration a different element which emerges from beyond the surface of painting.

From the outset, an important building block in this reversed working process, was to challenge and reverse the conventional process of painting so as to experiment with the liberating potential of art. In this I am extending the ideas of the Italian artist Guilio Paolini when he says:

> the author, who is essentially just another spectator, simply 'intervenes to unmask [the work],' and functions as 'someone who raises the curtain on a scene which awaits revelation'.[125]

Paolini expresses the belief of the artist that the reification process, as immediate, can only occur when the artwork in the process of application remains 'tamper-resistant'. Paolini's concept of representation as Anne Rorimer describes it, reveals the need to search for ways that liberate the visual language of painting:

> Subsequent work by Paolini expand upon his search for ways to have painting speak for and about itself and for images to reflect on being images.[126]

It is important to understand that to have painting to speak, for itself and about itself, should not be confused with the old game of 'art for art's sake'. In Paolini's understanding, the artwork that speaks for and about itself becomes a liberating entity that challenges the universal, self-regarding ignorance of the spectator as to the process of looking.

Hence my absurd attempt to go against the windmills of time and history, by reversing the process of paint application, to push back the paint through the surface material into the face of the spectator. Indeed, it is ironic that those who look at the Reverse Paintings cannot see my creative outburst, and my iconographic intent, in the same way. For me, the reversed condition functions to provide a basis for an independent reading, as a necessary creative intermediary, between the audience and myself.

It is thus the natural flow of material and the fact that the front side, the conventional picture plane is concealed from the artist's view that allows this transcendence of elements within the painting itself, to emerge as a natural form before the art audience. The painting becomes a 'sublime' object that can then be reordered into meaning by the spectator. The back to front application makes the *Reverse Painting* appear as a liberating epiphany, structured to implement the relentless reversal of images as the undefined new coming into being, giving the painting an ineluctable aura of immediacy.

In doing that, the reverse objects reveal a process of here and now. The free flow of materials is at the threshold of time and appearance, an unbroken case of progress and renewal. This sensation of actuality is then captured and frozen in its appearance at the moment when the reverse applied material stops flowing. The perpetual renewal of reversal flow and its final coagulation reveals that the space of liberation in art depends on the free flow of the newly formed material. The frontal surface appears untouched and new. Adorno explains:

> The new is the better – and if that is not the case then progress as a concept would be unthinkable, at least not legitimate. The idea of the new becomes the crucial motor of the modern, which modernity needs as to contrast continually from the old.[127]

The use of any material always constitutes the use of a visible language. This is the situation under which the *Reverse Iconography Paintings* and contemporary art in general must emerge as an activity. Since the 'postmodern' deluge identified the public concept of progress with an absurd praxis in which anything goes, art as a liberating entity has become mutilated and alienated from its central desire, from the insight that 'the new is better'.

Following from that, the paradigmatic concepts of the innovative and modern in art are censored, erased by a banal reality that bases its authority on a bourgeois concept of taste and tradition as the innovative product of market expectations. The coexistence of many varieties of art works is blurred into a single absolute identity. A single art praxis that speaks a Nietzschean language of eternal recurrence holds absolute sway.

In my understanding – in relation to my *Reverse Iconography Paintings* – the idea of eternal recurrence reveals art whose purpose is the dogmatic reiteration of bourgeois ideals. Within that dogmatic purpose society celebrates the new as a commodity and as a fetish, whose value is primarily amnesiac in regard to the danger that resides within its unknowable properties. The old is nurtured to control the artistic outcome and thereby insinuates a false happiness from art. Benjamin explains:

> Eternal recurrence is an attempt to link two antinomic principles of happiness with each other: namely that of eternity and that of the yet once again. The idea of eternal recurrence conjures up out of the misery of time the speculative idea (or phantasmagoria) of happiness.[128]

The resistance that art history attributes to painting therefore contains the foundation of the eternal return. Creative desires are not totally liberated in the process of painting because of their dependency on a frontally determined and, controlled aesthetic and on procedures for its implementation. In the materialisation process of the *Reverse Iconography Paintings* I challenge the status quo of painting and expose painting as an activity that upholds the placement of the artist in front of the canvas. Thereby, no matter what the artist creates in relation to the surface, a thematic field and vision repeats itself and reveals the limits of a historic definition of the painted image.

In making marks within that field and finishing the work via reflections on the surface, the much theorised picture plane, the artist reiterates design principles and history on canvas. A fine-tuning process ensures that forms, shapes and colours are tempered within an organic framework, a dynamic sequence of relations intended to appease the desire of the spectator. The limits thus initiated via frontal application, render painting perpetually suspect of being a mere design manoeuvre, of merely painting out the world. It thus surrenders the autonomous power of idea and image to a manipulated surface consciously sexy and automatic, harmonised to the point when the painter says the painting is finished. As a consequence varieties of language and signs emerge, evoking the new but eventually collapsing back into the painting tradition.

The surface, as seen from the perspective of the viewer nonetheless remains, for the artist, the fundamental arena in which the accumulation of painting occurs. The artist works within and for the space of audience perception and thereby continues to

maintain painting as an event that brings together idea, form and material through praxis for collective admiration. Although artists work under a personal and collective gaze in proximity to the canvas, they have rarely attempted to resist the methods, the legitimating procedures, of contemporary ideology and interpretation through radical changes in the forms of the gaze and of the mediated control of praxis in their art.

Cubism was one of the more radical ways of using new methods of implementation to challenge the contemporary matrix of methods based on bourgeois refinement in art. In the cubist painting, a reversed sensitivity initiates a breakdown of expectations and rules, forcing a review of the parochial view of painting as a discipline that illustrates bourgeois life as much in its procedures as in its subjects.

Nonetheless, even in cubism, the foremost approach for resisting conventions happened by building up a perspective illusion on the surface of the canvas. The artist, although desiring liberation, colludes from the outset – that is from the creative idea to the finish of the painting – with the taste of the audience. The artist's sphere of application is limited. It is often contrived so as to reflect the point of view of the audience. The situation for the artist is one of a spectator, who creates but also consciously observes the coming together of the painting from the perspective of an audience. Stephen Bann explains this complex situation in his essay on Giulio Paolini when he says:

> With the law of perspective, however, there are perceptual consequences which bear on the position of the spectator and on that of the artist, in so far as he may be a spectator of his own work. Paolini delegates to his valets – and metonymically we might say he delegates to the properties of line – the moment of creation, which is replaced by a theoretical moment 'prior to any possible definition'.[129]

In the *Reverse Iconography Paintings,* the field of liberation transcends the surface of the painting to occupy the entire space between creation and the theoretical moment of perception. The spectator can no longer control the outcome in terms of previous experience. The artist's sense of material, painterly finality is taken beyond the spectator's control. It emerges undiluted from within the application of material; controlled but independently composing the visual field of the canvas.

From this avant-garde constellation of 'being absent from the spectatorial creation', from behind the obvious field of vision, a newly liberated ontological ground emerges, which requires a totally new reading of composition and *Anschauung* (conception/approach).[130] The painterly tradition of a frontal *Anschauung* is reversed. *Anschauung* is manifested as an act of creative defiance that emerges from behind (and beyond) the field of painting.

Initially, this act of reversion liberated my praxis from the controlling gaze, however, at that moment the process of reversion was random, it still depended on an element of chance. To retain direction of the production process I had to find a way to implement control but without a trace of mannered manipulation. For that reason, I initiated an act of concealment to neutralize the front surface before any comprehension can occur. By using black paint I now paint over the front side of the canvas covering all that the reversed process has revealed through its free state. Following the act of concealment, the *Reverse Painting* is totally isolated and liberated, once more, from human intervention. The reverse iconography has not yet decided its final appearance as an artefact.

And so, in the course of concealment, I again confront and reverse the traditional order in painting. The conventional method demands that one builds up paint and applies it so as to express meaning. In contrast my reverse order use of paint to conceal and hide the expressive constellations of marks revealed by the reversed application has relegated all revelation to a space behind the surface.

After concealment I initiate another, opposite process, this time to reveal, through the act of 'removal', traces which may help the spectator to discover and recover, in the act of reversion, information that lies underneath the surface of the concealed painting.

Any act of concealment by re-covering, once again, the frontal field of vision incites a desire to reveal and figure out what is beneath the cover. In this case, the act of revelation demonstrates the creative trust that mimics voyeuristic behaviour and uncovers focal points of comprehensible shapes. To reveal these shapes is like opening a parcel just to the point when the excitement is at its highest. Thus desire has only one point of full satisfaction, which is hard to pinpoint or to describe. Indeed, the high point of desire and satisfaction is not when the parcel remains closed but also not when the package has been fully opened. Desire and fulfilment are somewhere in between the beginning and the end, where the full satisfaction and the moment of comprehension has not fully been recognised. That moment of the unfinished is, for me, the moment between secret and reference; it is thus the time when I refuse to continue to uncover elements and shapes that are beneath the black paint.

Obviously the moments of excavation are individual and it is in the nature of the spectator to look for reference and identify what may have, perhaps, been revealed. But regardless of individuality, the matter of fact is that, as the artist, I determine a position, a finite place for the revaluation process, not unlike an archaeologist, who seeks to find information and ideas that lay dormant beneath the earth, and who, after a long process of removing earth, is able to imagine history. The decision is here with



Martin Heine, *Reverse Iconography Praxis*, 2003, Studio, Perth, Western Australia photo and © Martin Heine. Painting tradition was never perceived as a reversed action. However, in defiance to all that, the image shows the artist working on one of his *Reverse Iconography Paintings*, initiating an act of concealment to neutralize the front surface.

the expert and remains a factual finding until other references emerge. In the end there is always the will to find a storyline, to find the logic that brought the artwork to this tense, but never fully revealed, situation.

Only through the act of reversing the concealing order of nature, by removing the earth, will the archaeologist find information that can lead to conclusions on the situation he is investigating. The similarity to the revelation of the unknown traces of reversion in my *Reverse Iconography Paintings* colludes with excavation methods used in archaeology. The revelatory process is illustrated in an archaeological manual.

> Through archaeological excavations, archaeologists are interested in recovering as much information as possible about the *contexts* of artifacts and deposits, not just in the artifacts themselves. Information about context is preserved through careful excavation, and by fully documenting artifacts and deposits with measurements, maps, and photographs. A three-dimensional grid system is used to control the locations of excavation units and the materials found in them. Excavations are done by following the natural layers in the soil or by arbitrary levels if no natural layers can be distinguished.[131]

All these revelatory activities attributed to archaeology re-emerge, literally, in the procedures of my reversed paint application. In colluding with the methods of excavation in my praxis the *Reverse Icons* display two facts at once. The first fact is the information revealed, the second is what remains uncovered beneath the blackness of the painting. Within that space of confrontation, between secret and reference, I am able to maintain a liberating material space that challenges, in its reversed and opposing implementation, all attempts to re-impose a bourgeois false consciousness on the artwork.

In this final state of the *Reverse Iconography Painting* the desire to 'build up' information by adding paint is replaced through the act of removing paint to admit 'revelatory' information. The painted image is not 'built up' but excavated and exposed – a material practice that contains in itself the diagram of an art praxis that engages life directly. Information is revealed and discovered; thereby appearances that come to the fore are independently created and are able to translate the literal immediate liberating power of the painting for the spectator.

The praxis of the *Reverse Iconography Painting* is liberating. It commands serious play to counter the abject mimetic constellations that dominate contemporary art. This liberated and revelatory power remains always within the secret elements that have not quite yet been revealed and hence maintain the condition of mystery as the



Remains of a circular mat or basket discovered in building 5 at the Neolithic Site of Çatalhöyük. …plant remains, such as the reeds used to make baskets and mats survive as impressions and salt remains in the soil. These can be consolidated, removed and transported to the laboratory for study and identification of various plant species. Photo and text taken from the website of the *Neolithic Site of Çatalhöyük,* the image shows an imprint of a weaver basket. Quoted from: http://catal.arch.cam.ac.uk/visit/Neolithic/conserEN.html.



Martin Heine, *Img00010.jpeg* / oedipan II (inversion 82), latex / acrylic, liquid pigments and oil paint on fibreglass mesh, 135 X 135cm, 2002 © Martin Heine. Photo shows a *Reversed Iconography Painting* after the concealment has been excavated.

primary strategy of interpretation in my art. This playful self-reliance of the paint surface enables me, as the artist, to introduce the images that translate through the whole process of reversal and excavation, to transcend the dogmatic painterliness of image making.

In the initial state of the reverse process of painting I enlist obscene images, which are presented on the internet readymade for consumption. Their exploitative and vulgar offering creates a pornographic sensation that recalibrates sexuality and desire into a flat coded one-dimensional consumer product. In this I am reversing, via reduction, the point of banal reference and liberating human desire, from the pornographic element, from shopping mall cultural consumption. The idea is to rediscover through reduction and reversal elements that retain desire but elevated to a point at which different interpretations broaden the secret of the body. By doing so, I am renegotiating the aesthetic and principled possibility of pornographic reproduction. The reproduction of the ready available pornographic image on the internet by means of reverse application challenges the mindless 'revelation' of sexuality as consumer goods and transforms flat, pornographic readymade consumer sex into an object of desire, of infinite depth. The question newly formulated is: 'Is the essential structure and permanent success of the readymade image and object possible because of its sexy and pornographic undertones, that is to say, is all consumption pornographic?' An answer cannot be given but an attempt is being made to alter the 'readymade praxis of image making' through the process of reversing images into iconographies of infinite depth. In this process, the reversed artwork confronts the worst aspects of the readymade.

The process of reduction and delay is applied through computer graphics. I download the pornographic images, in relation to their potential for art, their promise of some secret that can be pulled from their commodified presence. By reducing the field of colour and renderings I am left with only the bare lines that make out the key to the troubled maze of desire.

Once I have stolen the contour of the internet image from its first inversion, a drawing emerges as a motivation for me to implement the reversal process. Again this resembles the archaeologist or the treasure hunter who finds a map, a plan, or is told about a secret location in which significant treasures of beauty and knowledge can be found. Perhaps the motivation of Don Juan can be found in the same modes of myth and desire? Is not the woman next door desirable till I know her? This is where the origin of myth is to be found, where wishes connect to a promise and yet there are secrets which will never be revealed.



Readymade source *11a.jpeg* - the digital internet image, 2003.



The robbed and reduced contour drawing of the digital readymade *11a.jpeg*, 2003, photo © Martin Heine.

Now it becomes evident that for me the implementation of a drawing is not something to add on to or to include, but something to reduce, to take away, and to steal from the sets of readymade consumer image. The remaining leftovers, the stolen section of these drawings, reveal the difference that exists between the ordinary and the desirable in life.

Left with only the contour of the original image, the human figure loses its authority as an aesthetic commodity and embraces the secrets of artistic implementation. I am convinced that this method of reduction is the only way to translate the desire that resides in pornography without exploitation and commodification. Thus in tracing the contours on to the grid sexual forms are also inverted and transposed into forms of multiple desires running out in unknown directions. The experiment being made here suggests a combination of a Faustian bargain and the love affairs of a Don Juan. As Camus writes:

> It is quite false to try to see in Don Juan a man brought up on Ecclesiastes. For nothing is vanity to him except the hope of another life. He proves this because he gambles that other life against heaven itself. Longing for desire killed by satisfaction, that commonplace of the impotent man, does not belong to him. That is all right for Faust who believed in God enough to sell himself to the devil. For Don Juan the thing is simpler. Molina's 'Burlador' ever replies to the threats of hell: 'What a long respite you give me!' What comes after death is futile and what a long succession of days for whoever knows how to be alive! Faust craved worldly goods; the poor man had only to stretch out his hand. It already amounted to selling his soul when he was unable to gladden it. As for satiety, Don Juan insists upon it, on the contrary. If he leaves a woman it is not absolutely because he has ceased to desire her. A beautiful woman is always desirable. But he desires another, and no, this is not the same thing. [132]

The multidimensionality of the *Reverse Iconography Painting* resides in the possibility that whatever one has, one always desires the other. The reduced matrix drawing seeks 'to transfer satiety into another moment of desire'. Thus as I have described the methods of reduction and reversion the final outcome is a reversed maze in which intellect and desire must negotiate to maintain the desire for another transformed image. The bargain is Faustian; as such it sells the soul for the desired object, but instead of being rewarded by worldly goods the audience must look and engage with the primal motive of human reproduction in its multiple forms and facets.

I use the image found on the internet as a readymade source for creation. The task then is to refine and reverse the human figure so as to multiply the already present image into diverse shapes that awake to desire, 'the thing that one does not have'. To be able to do that art must be in a state of liberation and independent from the artist's manipulative desire. Secrets that awake desire can only emerge if not consciously shaped by human beings. And therefore, I will not explain the resistant constellation



Reversed maze drawn onto the back of the grid of *11a.jpeg*, 2003, implementing multiple desires running out in unknown directions, photo © Martin Heine.



Reverse Painting *11a.jpeg,* (detail) seen before concealment, photo © Martin Heine.

that await discovery beneath the reverse structure in the *Reverse Iconography Paintings*. A fully liberated praxis can only be what it sets out to become, a permanent impermanence, constantly on the lookout for manifest desire and the other, primed to create difference that liberates art from the sentimental expectations of the collective status quo.

In the context of difference, the secretive and the riddle uphold the praxis of confrontation and difference. Throughout this praxis of reversal and excavation the voyeuristic and erotic remnant emerges, the surplus that contradicts the comprehensive desire of the spectator, who always wishes to find a reference to a perfect artistic ideal.

A work of Caravaggio is enough to demonstrate what can be defined as the liberated state of implementation. In Caravaggio's *Bacchino Malato (Sick Bacchus)* one can observe – besides the religious thematic and evidence of Caravaggio's troubled life – a use of light and dark perpetuating the emphasis of opposing poles in the eye of the beholder. The spectator is challenged constantly to readjust to these contrasts, to balance the secret of the dark with the revelatory power of the highlight. A constant desire to play with attraction and fear gives the whole composition a space of liberated relationship between dark and light, artist and audience, frontal and reverse. A perpetual play with fear and desire evokes the literal everyday drive for lust, life and reality. And as with the *Reverse Iconography Paintings* the revealed image points to a space beyond the painting as Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit point out in *Caravaggio's Secrets*:

> The self-withdrawing pose we originally noted could, then, be thought of not only as a partial concealment of the provocatively exposed body, but also as a redirecting of the viewer's solicited look to objects of undecidable identity (the phallus-sash, phallus-fruit) as well as to the space beyond the painting's frame (a visible space out of our field of vision).[133]

In comparison to the paradoxical structure of Caravaggio's liberated play, the *Reverse Iconography Paintings* use reversal and excavation constantly to reveal and conceal the obscenity of the erotic play. The *Reverse Iconography Paintings* do not surrender to painterly ideals but stress the points of their reversal, the remnants of form and action excavated as paradoxical highlights and shadows. They do not recognise any boundary to their imagery since it exists behind and beyond the canvas.

Within the site of the work, the space that has been exposed, the spectator confronts entities liberated through their reversed realisation. The liberated strength of the work manifests as a critical statement. In that context, material becomes the sole credible



Caravaggio, *Bacchino Malato* ("Sick Bacchus"), c.1593, Rome, Galleria Borghese.



Martin Heine, *11a.jpeg* / (inversion 86), 2003, from *the caravaggio series*, latex acrylic, liquid pigments and oil paint on fibreglass mesh, 92.5 cm x 105 cm. Photo shows the *Reversed Iconography Painting* after the concealment has been excavated, photo © Martin Heine.

resistant entity in art, through which liberated desire transcends political, social and market ideology. While the art of representation remains loyal to the praxis of the artist it will provide a space of creative liberty that has not yet been polished by bourgeois taste.

Finally, the unpolished taste that is unearthed in the *Reverse Iconography Painting* is exemplary and manifests the fundamental direction of this thesis. The concern was constantly directed towards the understanding of liberation as a resistant entity invoking the new from the estranged perception of the outsider. This leads back to Adorno's notion of the 'new as a better alternative'. Thus the new – manifested through resistance via implementation of alternatives – challenges the authority of the old and establishes the unknowable, in art, as the principle of liberation. The need to contradict and to differ becomes the 'crucial motor' for the work of liberation. In this way, the struggle for the new also becomes the struggle to initiate liberation in one's practice, as a standard method of invoking difference.

The new, in contrast to the stereotypical, liberates art from the disaster of the eternal return. Freed from social conventions art can maintain the legitimacy of social challenge and remain a danger to the conventional and expected. The new is better because art, as an undefined event, exposes the exasperated decorum in art and continually liberates the modern concept from the old. In spite of that the new in art is not the equivalent of a new product on the shelf, but rather new in posing a distinct alternative that confronts the growth of rules and refinements in art. That is the basis for a liberating strategy that transcends the one-dimensional ideologies prevalent in contemporary art. The emphasis is on the process of innovation, courageous enough to challenge and to differ. Thereby art converts purely mental properties, via resistance, into a liberating materiality, a means to a life beyond control of all conventions.

NOTES

[123] Charles Harrison & Paul Wood, 175.

[124] Ibid.

[125] Rorimer, 66.

[126] Rorimer, 66.

[127] Konrad, Paul, Lissman, *Philosophy der Modernen Kunst*, (Wien: WUV-Universitätsverlag, 1994), 151.

[128] Benjamin *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, pp.682ff, quoted by Menninghaus, 321. *Nietzsche: A Critical Reader*, edited by Peter R. Sedgwick, from the essay: *Nietzsche and Critical Theory*, by William Outhwaite, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, UK, 1995, 206.

[129] Newman et al, 171-172.

NOTES CONTINUE

[130] Anschauung as I want to use the term in this context, is more than conception, it also embraces the term Anschauungsweise. Words in English that have a comparable meaning are: approach, idea, notion, intuition and point of view. Frontal approach and conception is the most acceptable translation.

[131] Excerpt from the website of *The Arizona State Museum*, The University of Arizona http://www.statemuseum.arizona.edu/arch/arcexcav.shtml.

[132] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. from the French by Justin O'Brien, (London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd First edition 1955, this copy 1971), 60.

[133] Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Caravaggio's Secrets*, (Boston: Massachusetts institute of Technology, an October book, 1998), 5.

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