

4. Art

(with Michael W. Wilson)

Non-imperial art must be as rigorous as a mathematical demonstration, as surprising as an ambush in the night, and as elevated as a star.

Alain Badiou, Thesis 12, *Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art*

The backdrop against which art now stands out is a particular state of society. What an installation, a performance, a concept or a mediated image can do is to mark a possible or real shift with respect to the laws, the customs, the measures, the mores, the technical and organizational devices that define how we must behave and how we may relate to each other at a given time and in a given place. What we look for in art is a different way to live, a fresh chance at coexistence.

Brian Holmes, *Escape the Overcode: Activist Art in the Control Society*

Art and religion are both concerned with meaning. And yet, the social function of both activities has been called into question throughout the modern period. In fact, the modern period is largely defined by the replacement of religion by art. If this replacement coincides with the rise of capitalism, this is not accidental – the utility of art and the category of aesthetics in maintaining social order is crucial. The production of affect (usually along the lines of reinforcing a sense of awe) was a chief function of art in the service of religion and would subsequently work as a kind of distraction and escape from the brutality of capitalism. Indeed, throughout most of human history, religion and art were inextricably linked. The rituals of the former produced the masterpieces of the latter. Not until Westerners scrutinized this process, first in Greece and then in Europe during the Enlightenment, did the category of art begin to emerge - liberated from its enslavement to religion only to find itself functioning in a propagandistic capacity for power. Art, as a category, is at once self-evident and elusive. The label is given to both the result of artmaking (the *object* of art, a noun) and to the act of making itself

(*artfulness*). One may produce *art* objects and one may master the *art* of conversation. In both cases, we are confronted with an exceptional case – the result of a subject engaging in an activity with great care, inspiration and devotion beyond everyday utility. In fact, the origins of art may be traced to the existential concerns of the earliest humans. If the objects we make and use reflect our values, then the widespread production of “Venus” figurines during the Paleolithic period – with their exaggerated reproductive organs - seem to indicate a concern for fertility, or life – expressed through the creation of a symbol. Art was/is a primal response to death anxiety. It can reflect upon death because of its status as a surplus activity. Art and religion share nothing if not a concern with materially-unjustified, but existentially vital representation.

In the Western world, art labored in the service of religion until the European Enlightenment, when philosophers and scientists began to think of God as a Great Designer, whose creation worked according to universal natural laws of reason. *God* was the Artist, and human art more simply a reproduction of divine nature. However, in the early nineteenth century, a dramatic reframing of aesthetic and teleological understanding of religion along the lines of art began to occur. This shift was brought about by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*.

When he first wrote his masterpiece, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant believed that it was not possible to write a critique of aesthetic judgment, or taste. He thought that artistic judgment was completely subjective. But in the late 1780s, he achieved a breakthrough that led to his “critique of taste” and eventually to his *Critique of Judgment*, published in 1790.¹ In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant says that purposive beauty, first in

¹See John H. Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.46.

terms of a work of art, and second in terms of the beauty of nature, shows a plan, or a striving of the world as a whole, that harmonizes nature and freedom. “So there must be a basis *uniting* the supersensible that underlies nature (the subject of the First Critique) and the supersensible that the concept of freedom contains practically (the topic of the Second Critique),” and this is not given directly but indirectly by means of aesthetic and teleological judgment.²

Basically, Kant claims that when we judge a work of art to be beautiful, we cannot objectively say that it is beautiful in the same way that we can say a leaf is green or $2+2=4$, but we affirm that any rational observer would necessarily come to the same conclusion using the same criteria of beauty. Part of what makes a work beautiful is its evidence of overall design, and Kant works from the design of the artwork to the design of the artist - or “artistic genius”, and finally from there to the idea of an analogous design in nature. **What beautiful works of art, artistic genius and nature share is the expression of a purposiveness or goal-oriented behavior, but one cannot demonstrate an objective or absolute purpose or end itself.** Beauty is composed of the “free play” of understanding and imagination in such a way that it is necessarily a subjective judgment, but it possesses a claim to universality or universalizability in its very purposiveness. It is the striving toward a purpose that is important, and art offers a way to glimpse the purposiveness of nature that is distinct from scientific investigation.

Kant’s work on beauty fueled the Romantic movement in Germany, which fastens upon the artistic genius expressed in a work of art to indicate the genius of nature and its beauty, which exceeds scientific and philosophical calculation. Artists and theorists such

²Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), p.15 (emphasis in original).

as Friedrich Schiller, Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel, Johann Gottfried von Herder, and Friedrich Schleiermacher all participated in this movement in the late 1700s and early 1800s. As the philosopher of religion Mark C. Taylor puts it, “during the 1790s, art displaced religion as an expression and indication of spiritual values.”³

This displacement and to a certain extent replacement, at least for some intellectuals, of religion had a number of different implications for art. First of all, Kant’s work, especially the *Critique of Pure Reason*, called into question traditional understandings of representation. For Kant, representation is a complex process, and it involves mediating sense impressions with categories of human understanding, directed or legislated by reason. Furthermore, the development of technological devices for visual and audio reproduction during the nineteenth century, combined with the philosophical results of the Kantian critique, led to a crisis and a breakdown of natural representation. The breakdown or decomposition of the work of art characterizes much of twentieth century painting, including impressionism, pointillism, expressionism, cubism and abstract expressionism. Modern Art becomes defined by its various means of expressing the *truth of non-representation*.

In order to capture this decompositional aspect of modern art, however, a category other than beauty is required. Beauty shows the harmony between art and nature, but this harmony that Kant tried to reestablish in the *Critique of Judgment*, which was exploited by Romanticism, is severely compromised by the deconstruction of representation in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. At the same time, there is another important concept in the Third Critique that is extremely significant for the later development of art, and this is the

³Mark C. Taylor, *Confidence Games: Money and Markets in a World Without Redemption* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p.98.

sublime. The sublime results when imagination overwhelms understanding, and pushes representation to and beyond its limit, giving rise to a feeling of disorientation and negative purposiveness. The sublime is a special case of a judgment of taste, but in contrast to beauty, the harmony is strained if not broken by the ability of imagination to proceed to infinity. At the same time, in a moment of crisis, reason steps in to restrain and redirect the disturbing force of imagination to what are ultimately moral ends, which reestablishes a purposiveness.

According to Kant:

In presenting the sublime in nature the mind feels *agitated*, while in an aesthetic judgment about the beautiful in nature it is in *restful* contemplation. This agitation (above all at its inception) can be compared with a vibration [*Erschütterung*, trembling], i.e., with a rapid alternation of repulsion from, and attraction to, one and the same object. If a thing is excessive for the imagination (and imagination is driven to such excess as it apprehends the thing in intuition), then the thing is, as it were, an abyss in which the imagination is afraid to lose itself. Yet, at the same time, for reason's idea of the supersensible this same thing is not excessive but conforms to reason's law to give rise to such striving by the imagination.⁴

For Kant, nature's might gives rise to the feeling of the sublime—the moment when someone views the incredible power of, say, a waterfall—and gives in to the excessive power of imagination to try to comprehend the magnitude of such an overwhelming force. The force of nature as experienced in imagination is negative and crushing to

⁴Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p.115 (emphasis in original).

human dignity, but then reason reasserts itself, elevating human rationality above nature's might simply by reflecting upon the ability of human reason to think such a force (from a safe distance).

At the same time, Kant is clear that the sublime is not primarily an object, but a relationship between human mental faculties, and it is this relationship that can be said to characterize much of modernist, avant-garde art. Refusing a simple harmony, early to mid-twentieth century art follows upon the sublime, pursuing the breakdown of natural representation and experimenting with the limits of artistic and aesthetic form. But there are other influences at work. The Enlightenment saw the ascendance of science as the guiding discipline. Scientific thought brought industrialization and the wholesale transformation of the social order and art began to attach itself to these transformational movements, which brings us from Kant to Nietzsche.

In stating the death of God, Nietzsche addresses not the factual existence of a divine entity, but a bankruptcy of belief in members of society. Confronting the issue of religion as a sociological phenomenon, Nietzsche states, "it seems to me that the religious instinct is indeed in the process of growing powerfully--but the theistic satisfaction it refuses with deep suspicion."⁵ Living in the midst of a society preoccupied with its historic past, Nietzsche declared this preoccupation a hindrance to individual growth. This historical analysis has its root in an age-old class division between the aristocratic or noble class and the common or plebian class. The former is capable, through the power and autonomy they hold, to act willfully and with a degree of impunity. The latter lives in an oppressed state, unable to exert its will in the same manner. Nietzsche believes that

⁵Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (quote is from *Beyond Good and Evil*) (New York: Random House, 1968), p.256.

the noble person is able to recognize his worth through his freedom of will and the opposite is true of the plebian. Out of a natural resentment of his station, the plebian turns to Christianity (and its sanctification of the oppressed) to affirm his worth. In this way, the plebian reaps revenge through a God who will “damn” the oppressors in the end. However, because the plebian has taken no action, only rationalizing his suffering, he is in effect willing nothing at all.⁶ Real godliness lies in the active implementation of one's will.

This affirmation of life or final self-overcoming is a state in which the exceptional man most fundamentally replaces God with himself. If one actively wills to power, the result is self-awareness, understanding, and self-created meaning. False meaning (from tradition) in life is replaced by the acknowledgement of true human psychological instinct and its potential for ultimate meaning. But this ultimate meaning is an aesthetic, rather than moral one. If "God" is dead, humans are forced to either *live* a lie or *create* a meaning for existence. Because humans desire this anyway (but are reluctant to realize it out of fear), a process of self-overcoming must occur.

Desire is the key to the aesthetic act of self-overcoming. Because Nietzsche is revealing the bodily/material origin of superstructural phenomena—religion, ideology, art—the only discipline that he deems sufficiently grounded in the base is art—because it is thoroughly grounded in sense perception and the body. Art is both the supreme activity and the model for self-overcoming—becoming the overman. The overman has achieved a dynamic tension between the Apollonian beauty of harmonious, rationally achieved proportion and the sublime ecstasy of the Dionysian dissolution of boundaries. Like

⁶See the “First Essay” of *On The Genealogy of Morals*. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1957), pp.24-56.

Schopenhauer, Nietzsche (in his earlier texts) affirmed the primacy of the tragic form of art. This form is privileged because of its ability to generate a sublime experience in which the "veil of Maya" is torn away and the boundaries between self and others dissolve. There is a kernel of liberation to be found here and artists will seize on this formulation to justify the transgressive anti-art actions that come to constitute the late 20th Century avant-garde (1960-2000).

Nietzsche's replacement of religion with art and the aesthetic proves to be extraordinarily influential to avant-garde artists throughout the 20th century and the individualistic heroicism (or its ironic post-modern variants) he advocates remains the dominant model of official art production in the early 21st Century.

While Kantian notions of beauty and the Sublime informed much theorizing on the nature of academic art and Nietzschean thought influenced canonical modernist art, a counter-movement of aesthetic production reacted to the hideous prospect of industrial capitalism and imperial warfare. In the early 19th century, French socialist Saint-Simon detailed a new form of Christianity, shorn of dogma, that took the elimination of poverty and suffering as its core purpose:

Let us unite. To achieve our one single goal, a separate task will fall to each of us. We, the artists, will serve as the avant-garde: for amongst all the arms at our disposal, the power of the Arts is the swiftest and most expeditious. When we wish to spread new ideas amongst men, we use in turn the lyre, ode or song, story or novel; we inscribe those ideas on

marble or canvas... We aim for the heart and imagination, and hence our effect is the most vivid and the most decisive.⁷

The twentieth century sees the emergence of a materialist interrogation of the category of art that began during the industrial revolution. Armed with the revolutionary analyses of Marx and Freud, avant-garde artists began to dissect the complicity of art production in maintaining a class hierarchy, nationalistic sentiments, psychological repression and economic inequality. The Dadaist movement, a reaction to the unprecedented technological slaughter of WWI, aimed to liberate irrational impulses in order to overcome the tyranny of reason in Western civilization. Using performance, collage, appropriated sculpture, street theatre and nonsensical production in various media, the Dadaists created the template for avant-garde practice in the twentieth century. After World War I was declared in Europe, a number of future Dadaists, including Hans Arp, Hugo Ball, Marcel Janco, and Tristan Tzara established what the author Hakim Bey describes as a "temporary autonomous zone" in Zürich, Switzerland, which remained neutral throughout the war.⁸

While in Zürich, many of these artists and writers continued to publish and exhibit their works; having taken strong anti-war views themselves, their art enacts and reflects this disgust towards the activities of the rest of the continent. In addition to being anti-war, these artists began an avant-garde tradition of anti-art – embracing an anti-sublime. If the sublime embodies a set of cultural and social aspirations aimed at transcendence,

⁷Reprinted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (editors), *Art in Theory 1815-1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p.40.

⁸Hakim Bey. *TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Autonomea, 1985) http://hermetic.com/bey/taz_cont.html

the anti-sublime of Dada and many of the other avant-garde groups of this period embody a mocking refusal of such 'nobility' in culture. Taking their cues from the mocking and irreverent Nietzsche of *Ecce Homo* rather than the tragic sublime Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy*, this tendency finds form in the Cabaret Voltaire – a celebration of irrationality and satirical cacophony that ecstatically attempts to confront the nightmare of Western history instead of aspiring to become its official propagandists. Indeed, when the founding Dadaist Hugo Ball senses the imminent absorption of the movement into the cultural system of the time, he leaves the group in despair for an isolated monastic existence – returning to Catholicism. Dada's core innovation, however, remains a legacy that continues to yield vitality to the confrontation with the apocalyptic spectacle of capitalist imperialism.

The anarchistic and oppositional ethos of Dada gives way to the more formally-structured avant-garde of Surrealism. Taking their inspiration from Marx and Freud (and Dada), the Surrealists' emphasis on the unconscious and dream logic released moments of repressed anarcho-socialist yearning. Andre Breton and Diego Rivera claim in their passionately-contradictory “Surrealist Manifesto” that:

True art, which is not content to play variations on ready-made models but rather insists on expressing the inner needs of man and of mankind in its time – true art is unable not to be revolutionary, not to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society. This it must do, were it only to deliver intellectual creation from the chains which bind it, and to allow all mankind to raise itself to those heights which only isolated geniuses have achieved in the past. We

recognize that only the social revolution can sweep clean the path for a new culture.⁹

Surrealism never produced a sustained opposition to the industrial capitalism it opposed and by which it was ultimately absorbed - as their formal experimentation (like most avant-gardes) produced a spectacular set of styles that could be used to gain audience attention and sell goods and services. However, the utopian sublime at which they gesture becomes the core concern of the cultural force known as Situationism in the 1950's and 60's - a movement that continues to produce some of the most potent critiques of contemporary culture.

In a postmodern context, we see a return of form, actually a proliferation of forms that marks the postmodern sublime – as artists attempt to challenge the dominant culture by exceeding its logic. Virtual reality is the dislocation of reality due to the excess of reality, hyperreality, simulacra and simulations, as seen in the work of Jean Baudrillard.¹⁰ Art loses its essence apart from other forms, and embraces its interrelationship with media, culture, money and society in movements such as Pop art (Warhol), art as business, investment, capital, and performance art.¹¹ With Happenings and later Relational Aesthetics, an apparent dissolution of art into everyday life gives way to newly designated territories for capitalist accumulation.¹² Our revolutionary claim, however, is

⁹Andre Breton and Diego Rivera, “Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art,” available at http://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/works/rivera/manifesto.htm

¹⁰See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra & Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

¹¹See Taylor, *Confidence Games*, Chapter 1, pp.17-53.

¹²See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronda Woods (les presses du réel, 2002).

that lurking beneath all these capitalist phenomena, is the formless-giving-form of an emergent communism. The shadowy presence of an anarcho-communist sublime underlies and prefigures the apocalypse of capital that is embodied in its own processes of self-understanding.

In 1957, Gabriel Vahanian published a book entitled *The Death of God*, urging theology toward a recognition of atheism as a powerful current within society.¹³ This inversion of theology is accompanied by an inversion of art and culture. In the same year, Guy Debord wrote the founding manifesto of Situationism entitled “Report on the Construction of Situations.” In this text he calls for “the construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality.”¹⁴ Debord cites the Dadaists and Surrealists as precursors, but calls for a cultural engagement that is explicitly political. In Debord's view, art must begin to directly confront the affective production of capitalism by re-arranging the social relations within which they are reproduced. The task of artists is to create revolutionary actions that free subjectivity from the sublime force of capital.

As the Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton explains:

There is ... a “bad” sublime for Marx, along the lines of Hegel’s ‘bad’ infinity: it resides in the restless, overweening movement of capitalism itself, its relentless dissolution of forms and commingling of identities, its confounding of all specific qualities into one indeterminate, purely quantitative process. The movement of the commodity is in this sense a

¹³See Gabriel Vahanian, *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era* (New York: George Braziller, 1957).

¹⁴Guy Debord, “Report on the Construction of Situations,” in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Bureau of Public Secrets, 2007), pp.25-46.

form of 'bad' sublimity, an unstoppable metonymic chain in which one objects itself to another and that to another, to infinity. Like Kant's mathematical sublime, this endless accumulation of pure quantity subverts all stable representation, and money is its major signifier.¹⁵

Trying to escape or confront the "bad" sublime of capitalist spectacle and the many ways it shapes subjectivity becomes the primary focus of avant-garde art to the present day. Re-imagining social creativity has been the impulse behind such enduring visions as Fluxus, activist video, art video, many forms of performance, collective art practices and the interventionist work of the past couple decades.

Over the course of the 1990s, the term "intervention" was increasingly used by politically engaged artists to describe their interdisciplinary approaches, which nearly always took place outside the realm of museums, galleries and studios. A decade later, these "interventionists" continue to create a body of work that trespasses into the everyday social world – although these acts are rarely accorded the privileged discourse of contemporary art or cultural institutions.¹⁶

The French anti-psychologist Felix Guattari, collaborator with Gilles Deleuze and a major influence on the counter-cultural expressions that have defined the leading edge of art practice over the past four decades, speaks of an "aesthetic paradigm" that must take back the media and other instruments for constructing collective subjectivities. In Guattari's view, an ethically and politically-informed re-invention of all aspects of life, social organization and language is vital for the survival of the species and the planet. In

¹⁵Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991), p.212.

¹⁶An exception might be *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere*, MASS MoCA's 2004-2005 summer exhibition, opened May 29, 2004. The exhibition surveyed recent and current interventionist practices, showcasing the work of 29 artists and collectives. See http://www.massmoca.org/event_details.php?id=38

the face of the growing pressure of what he calls "conservative reterritorializations of subjectivity", the role of art must be:

an activity of unframing, of rupturing sense, of baroque proliferation or extreme impoverishment, which leads to a recreation and a reinvention of the subject itself. A new existential support will oscillate on the work of art, based on a double register of reterritorialisation (refrain function) and resingularisation. The event of its encounter can irreversibly date the course of an existence and generate fields of the possible "far from the equilibria" of everyday life.¹⁷

This "rupturing of sense" is a materialist moment of a re-imagined sublime. In Guattari and the most vital contemporary art, new forms of living, working and playing are sought with the goal of producing a more life-affirming collectivity. These activities might involve the mapping of capitalist power, neo-situationist public gestures or media interventions. Alongside these eruptions of collective activity is re-investment in shamanic modes of art-making in the style of Joseph Beuys - using the 'cult of personality' character of the role of "artist" to speak to social issues from a mystical vanguardist perspective. "Only on condition of a radical widening of definition will it be possible for art and activities related to art to provide evidence that art is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power," claims Beuys. He continues:

Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deadline: to dismantle in order to build A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART. This most modern art discipline - Social Sculpture/Social Architecture - will only reach fruition when every living

¹⁷Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-aesthetic Paradigm* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p.131.

person becomes a creator, a sculptor, or architect of the social organism. Only then would the insistence on participation of the action art of FLUXUS and Happening be fulfilled; only then would democracy be fully realized. Only a conception of art revolutionized to this degree can turn into a politically productive force, coursing through each person, and shaping history.¹⁸

Paradoxically, this vanguardist perspective is mirrored in the thoroughly materialist tradition of academic Marxism, where cults of personality have grown around central "genius" figures. While forms of collectivity are often dismissed as irrelevant next to the ultimate goal of total revolution, is it not possible to imagine the two as co-extensive? Eagleton, who, while underlining the importance of the aesthetic in producing repressive structures of social convention and cultural capital, finds hope in a kind of Communist Sublime which, we suggest, is a similar sort of "ethico-aesthetic paradigm" to that of Guattari. "Certainly communism, unlike the conventional sublime, is not shapeless and amorphous," writes Eagleton. "But this identity of form and content is so absolute that the former effectively disappears into the latter; and since the latter is no more than a continually self-expanding multiplicity bounded only by itself, the effect is then one of a certain sublimity."¹⁹ Eagleton believes that a socialist revolution is the immediate goal and that the content of such a revolution is "excessive of all form" - an "unrepresentable sublimity."

What is in question here is the whole concept of a representational aesthetics.

Previous revolutions have been formalistic, engrafting a factitious "phrase" or form onto

¹⁸Joseph Beuys, "I Am Searching for a Field Character," *Energy Plan for the Western Man: Joseph Beuys in America*, compiled by Carin Kuoni (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990), pp.21-23.

¹⁹Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p.217.

their content; but the consequence of this is a dwarfing of the signified by the signifier. The content of socialist revolution, by contrast, is excessive of all form, out in advance of its own rhetoric. It is unrepresentable by anything but itself, signified only in its “absolute movement of becoming,” and thus a kind of sublimity. The representational devices of bourgeois society are those of exchange-value; but it is precisely this signifying frame that the productive forces must break beyond, releasing a heterogeneity of use-values whose unique particularity would seem to refuse all standardized representation. It is less a matter of discovering the expressive forms “adequate to” the substance of socialism, than of rethinking the whole opposition—of grasping form no longer as the symbolic mould into which that substance is poured, but as the “form of the content,” as the structure of ceaseless self-production.²⁰

In Eagleton's view, there is no possibility of constructing provisional sites of such sublimity within a Capitalist system. "If there are still political radicals in a century's time, it will be a grim prospect. There is no way, then, in which the diverse uses to which men and women will turn their emancipated powers in a socialist future can now be imaged; such a process defies representation, and is in that sense sublime."²¹ But if we imagine the process of revolution itself as a form of sublime becoming, the visions of Guattari and Eagleton can be seen to form a working synthesis.

As the edge of this synthesis of Eagleton and Guattari, what we are calling a sublime form, a formless form that defies representation, takes shape. This is a form that is common, as Hardt and Negri put it in their works; it is communistic despite the virulent controversies and contestations that have occurred over this term. Thinking is a sculptural

²⁰Ibid., pp.214-215.

²¹Ibid., p.216.

process, as Beuys puts it, and art is a thought process where both are material and materialist insofar as they take shape and form. The “field of social sculpture” becomes “a new ‘machine’, one could say—as an energy carrier.”²² Although Beuys expresses his ideas in more idealistic terms, he suggestively claims that “the concept of art must replace the degenerate concept of capital,” in the sense that “capital is human capacity and what flows from it.”²³

The shape of a sublime form, or a form that is not opposed to sublimity and unrepresentability, is suggested by Catherine Malabou’s conception of plasticity. Although Malabou’s notion of plasticity is elaborated in reference more to Hegel’s philosophy and contemporary neuroplasticity rather than art, its significance lies in the understanding of a concept of form that contains sublimity within itself. According to Malabou, plasticity indicates a form that possesses three characteristics: the ability to give form, the capacity to receive form, and most importantly, an explosive plasticity, the charge of an auto-destructive aspect of form itself. Malabou says that “plasticity is also the capacity to annihilate the very form it is able to receive or create,” and this would be a sublime element of immanent to form that works to unground itself.²⁴ Furthermore, in her book *What Should We Do with Our Brain*, Malabou posits the brain as the locus of what in a more traditional Marxist sense is called history. She claims that there is a “connection between the role of genetic nondeterminism of the brain and the possibility of a social and political nondeterminism, in a word, a new freedom, which is to say: a new meaning

²²Joseph Beuys, *What is Art?* trans. Matthew Barton and Shelley Sacks, ed. Volker Harlan (Forest Row: Clairview Books, 2004), p.20.

²³Ibid., p.27.

²⁴Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, trans. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p.5.

of history.”²⁵ The brain is not simply a biological organ, but the site and sign of creative transformation that exceeds capitalist flexibility, from which she is clear to distinguish plasticity.

Plasticity itself is a form of social and biological sculpture, a new form of art that is not “art for art’s sake” but a directly political and material form of art, based on what we are calling the Communist sublime. The three modes of plasticity, but particularly the third destructive mode, “contribute[s] to the formation of political subjects that challenge the given distribution of the sensible,” to put it in terms of the political philosopher Jacques Rancière.²⁶ Malabou calls for a “biological alter-globalism,” or *altermondialisme*, an alter-worldliness that is opposed to the devastatingly superficial capitalism that goes by the name of globalization. Rancière does not use the term plasticity, but in his political aesthetics he invokes “the meta-political idea of global political subjectivity, the idea of the potentiality inherent in the innovative sensible modes of experience that anticipate a community to come.”²⁷ This potentiality is the plasticity of the world, which is also a work of art, but a work informed and un-formed by the Communist sublime.

The dematerialization of art over the last two centuries parallels the dematerialization of capitalist accumulation strategies. The financialization of the economy under neo-liberal economic de- and re-regulation has been mirrored by a move toward valorizing the conceptual management style in contemporary art. The professionalization of art over the past thirty years has coincided with the need for an affective labor force responsible for maintaining the production of novelty. This is a

²⁵Ibid., p.13.

²⁶Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), p.40.

²⁷Ibid., p.30.

difficult task in an increasingly media-saturated landscape and the stakes grow higher as the psychic tolerance for sensation steadily increases. It is the task of art under such conditions to resist its own instrumentalization by capitalist forces and to re-materialize in the streets, the networks, the institutions and the bodies of artists themselves. Art must become fugitive and multiple—*plastic/plastique*—disappearing and refusing to participate when tactically necessary— sabotaging, attacking and occupying sites of power in order to re-distribute resources and attention when possible.