

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### political strategies:

#### public character and political content

The most important factor in the temptation to make use of the work of art for political ends is the fact that it presents itself in the form of publicly accessible symbols. The writer, artist or composer offers to a public as large as possible works most often prepared or developed in intense privacy and isolation. This paradox of the publication of the private, most flagrant in the fruit of collective labour that is the *auteur* film, also affects the political dimension that a work of art may have. The more unequivocal its political message, the less distinctively individual its specifically artistic characteristics. Conversely, the more the work develops its own formal and compositional universe, its own technique and materials, the less easy it is to find in it a clear political intent. The artistic medium lends itself neither to denunciation pure and simple nor to the recommendation, in the form of propaganda, of any political preference whatever. Every attempt of this kind threatens to backfire.

When, under the title *Oil Painting. Hommage à Marcel Broodthaers*, Hans Haacke presents a portrait of a smiling Ronald Reagan, set in a gold frame and lit from above, the intention is clear, especially when one finds

opposite, separated by a velvet rope and at the other end of a red carpet, an immense mural photograph showing demonstrators opposed to his nuclear policy.<sup>37</sup> But why is the irony so quickly exhausted, transformed into a tedious counter-cult of a film-character set against the background of a society of the spectacle? In his taste for monumental forms, the artist shows himself to be fascinated by the emblems of power, by Mobil Oil and Mercedes, the undisinterested patrons of art whose racist actions he is right to denounce. He correctly emphasizes that it is difficult to speak of a 'politically non-engaged art' and that 'any public statement, including of course any artistic statement, has . . . social consequences, and this goes too far for those that do not firmly identify themselves as "engaged"'.<sup>38</sup> But this classic argument suggests a synonymy between 'artistic statement', 'social consequences' and 'politically engaged art'. Employing a strategy of culpabilization developed in the inter-War years, it calls on every artist not only to anticipate the social consequences of his/her work but, in addition, and above all, to clearly articulate his/her political position. The fact that the work of art intervenes in the public realm is understood to require that there must remain no ambiguity about one's commitment. As a result, no doubt, of the institutionalization of contemporary art, the exhibition space is seen as a 'court of public opinion'.

Yet nothing guarantees the supposed identity between the public and the political. No artist can predict the social consequences of his/her work, and explicit 'politicization' is not necessarily the most effective method of securing the desired socio-political effect for it. The fact that every artist evidences a certain attitude, if not specifically political then at least socially

37 For a reproduction, see Brian Wallis (ed.), *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), p. 135.

38 'Zur Soziologie der künstlerische Strategie. Ein Interview von Hans Haacke mit Stefan Römer', *Texte zur Kunst* 8 (December 1992), p. 52.

identifiable, does not mean that the *thematization* of this attitude is the most artistically rewarding option. On the contrary, a manifest political intention threatens to cloud the socio-political experience to which the work testifies and which underlies its specific force. Today's confusion between the two terms is the symptom of a kind of exasperation of the notion of political art, this being short-circuited by the greedy tolerance of the institutions. The development of institutional heteronomy depriving political position-taking of the legitimacy that it might have had when the artist had no safety-net and risked a fatal fall at every step, it must henceforth find its justification in a relevance that is both political and aesthetic.

#### aesthetic principles and the political

The adoption of political positions may also play a role in adding value to the work. The 'political' importance attributed to a work, can, in fact, confer on it a secondary value more easily accessible than its aesthetic quality. Faced with the standardized or idiosyncratic characteristics of a great many works of contemporary art, the ability to grant them political or social significance is any easy way of re-establishing the public value of the work of art, compensating for the difficulty of finding aesthetic interest in it. There results a curious gap between what works actually symbolize and the secondary meanings attributed to them by critics or by artists themselves. This has been particularly true since the sixties and seventies.

Judd carefully distinguishes between political and aesthetic principles, without for all that denying the political issues at stake. He wrote, on the one hand, in 1975, that 'art, dance, music and literature have to be considered as autonomous activities, and not as decorations upon political or social purposes. Only in China and Russia is it still 1935.'<sup>39</sup>

On the other hand, reacting to the exclusion of Haacke from an exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in 1973, Judd wrote to the museum's director: 'You can't refuse to show one kind of art. Any political statement, either by declaration or by incorporation into a context, can be art. You renege on every kind of art when you refuse to show a kind that is political.'<sup>40</sup> He thus rejected both the decorative subordination of art to political imperatives and the exclusion of political position-taking, given that it 'could be art'.

There is often something artificial about the relationships established between certain works and the political concerns of the time. What each of the artists proposes, the art critic Germano Celant wrote of the work he marshalled under the label of 'Arte Povera', is 'a possible socio-cultural strategy in which revolutionary and gnoseological processes shatter the system of industrial dictatorship. Today, in fact, the daily context is a "stage" on which intellectuals, students and workers "act", uprooted and isolated, as yet without making any affective connection with reality.'<sup>41</sup>

Such an intention is hardly detectible in the works themselves. For Arte Povera, as for European art in general, opposition to American art seems to have been a powerful motive: it was a question of 'creating an alternative to the modular and standardized procedures of Minimal Art'.<sup>42</sup> If for Judd political position-taking is a possibility of art, for the Europeans of the six-

<sup>39</sup> Donald Judd, 'Imperialism, Nationalism and Regionalism' in *Complete Writings 1959-1975* (Nova Scotia: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), p. 222.

<sup>40</sup> Donald Judd, 'Complaints: Part II' in *Complete Writings 1959-1975*, p. 208.

<sup>41</sup> Germano Celant, 'Azione Povera' in *Arte Povera, Art Povera*, trans. Paul Blanchard (Milan: Electa, 1985), p. 89. [Translator's misreading of last phrase corrected.]

<sup>42</sup> Ann Hindry, 'Quelques questions à Germano Celant', *Artstudio* 13, special issue, *Regards sur l'Arte Povera* (Summer 1989), p. 34.

ties and seventies the 'formalism' of the Americans was unacceptable. Europe seemed bound to express a consciousness of history in its art:

Impossible here for artists to vindicate the cube and the line, steel and Plexiglas, and even more so to celebrate great stormy skies, frozen desert wastes. Impossible for them to exalt the cultural specificity of TV and the media. Everything is entangled and mixed up . . . artifice and . . . nature. What remains is the experience of disorder and unexpected combination. What lasts is the sense of the ephemeral that haunts everywhere, thanks to these ruins and these remnants.<sup>43</sup>

In reality, rather than counterposing the Europeans' history to the Americans' ahistoricism of forms and materials, the Italians mobilized a primitive nature and a culture equally 'un-European': Zorio's canoe and javelin and Merz's igloo; the nature reconstituted by Penone from its worked forms; Kounellis's caged animals, plants and materials; Anselmo's granite, magnetic north and lettuce all introducing a confusion of bric-à-brac into the exhibition space; nomadic furniture as in Beuys's winter garden and menagerie. The neon political slogan from General Giap that glows on Merz's igloo transforms a military strategy into an insoluble artistic paradox with no possible application. The mirrors in which Pistoletto captures our voyeurism and Paolini's variations on classical motifs have little to do with the primitivism and 'poverty' of the other members of the group assembled by Celant. Only an abstraction can serve to identify a commonality between these disparate investigations: the affirmation of a *heteronomy* opposed to the 'autonomy' and conceptual pretensions of the Americans, seen as 'Protestant' and uncritical with regard to capitalist technology and economy.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Germano Celant, 'Un art nodal' in *Arte Povera*, trans. A Machet (Villeurbanne: Art éditions, 1989) p. 29.

In France, the Supports/Surfaces movement, concerned like Minimalism to deconstruct the easel painting, decomposed it into its material components, the unstretched canvas and the stretcher here taking the place of the 'boxes' and 'slabs' of the Americans. Here too a radical political discourse was associated with art practice, Marcelin Pleynet, in the Althusserian heyday, playing the role of Germano Celant. But rather than the Italians' heteronomous primitivism of nature or culture or the Americans' exploration of industrial forms and materials, the dominant model in France posited an identification with craft production, with the labour of worker and peasant. As Bernard Ceysson put it:

Materials and ways of working always refer to the canvas, to painting, showing that the introduction of new materials only displaces the questions raised by an art practice, without overcoming the contradictions. In the use made of materials by Supports/ Surfaces, these are not denatured by their subjection to a poetics. It is very far from the 'Romanticism' of Arte Povera, simultaneously primitivist and technophile in the tradition of the Futurists. The acceptance of their ageing—their development in accordance with their material natures—does not express, for example, an anguish at the passage of time, an anguish that Minimalism crystallizes in its preference for shiny, smooth, neutral materials assembled to produce simple volumes, primary structures, presented as calm blocks, installed here on Earth for eternity.<sup>45</sup>

Like Haacke and Judd, like Beuys, whether on account of their politics or the triviality of their materials, Supports/Surfaces came into conflict with the

<sup>44</sup> Germano Celant, *Identité italienne: l'art en Italie depuis 1959* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, 1981).

<sup>45</sup> Bernard Ceysson, 'Propos à développer, à partir de Supports/Surfaces, l'exposition accrochée . . .' in catalogue *Supports/Surfaces 1966-1974* (Saint-Étienne: Musée d'Art Moderne de Saint-Etienne, 1991), p. 24.

institutions: 'The members of Support(s)/Surface(s) challenge the cultural structures supposed to determine the conditions of production and reception of art, establishing painting as a commodity value. Outside the institutional framework, the works "deposited" in various places—beaches, forests, quarries . . . can develop their autonomy and specificity.'<sup>46</sup> In general, this conflict, characteristic of contemporary art in the process of its institutionalization, is played out within the institutions themselves; the attempt to outflank them explains in part the short life of the movement and the ensuing reintegration of the now separated artists into the institutional system.

### the sixties turn

Despite their cultural rivalries, contemporary art movements thus exhibit a number of common features essentially associated not with their political positions but with the institutional changes that have taken place in the field of art since the Second World War:

1. The formal experimentation of the earlier avant-gardes is now pursued in a decisively non-revolutionary social context and with the support (even subsidy) of the institutions, both private and public, of a society based on the market economy and liberal democracy.
2. This institutional status creates a void in the legitimacy of the neo-avant-gardes, one filled by discourses of secondary political legitimation, first censured, then increasingly tolerated by the institutions.
3. Since the fifties, contemporary art has been characterized by a change of scale, inaugurated by Abstract

<sup>46</sup> Introduction by Y. Aupetitallot, *ibid.*, p. 15.

Expressionism, in which the artwork becomes a counterpart of the same size as the viewer, or even bigger. This art is no longer made to decorate the bourgeois interiors in which works by Picasso, Matisse, Kandinsky or Max Ernst still found their place. It is an art of public exhibition, and, inevitably, more and more an art of public commission, a monumental art that has its parallels with the art of power and display that predates bourgeois domesticity—the decoration of churches and palaces—but this time in the name of an 'autonomy' 'guaranteed' by the democratic State, its regions and municipalities, its great organizations and corporations. If 'installation, as a fully institutionalized practice, seems to be suffering an expansionist delusion, according to which convincingness is a function of the area they succeed in occupying,'<sup>47</sup> this is also because 'installation' has always been the very type of a 'subversive' art that could not exist without institutional support and which embodies the relationship of forces between the artist and the institution *within* the latter.

4. This change of scale goes along with a radical anti-illusionism that underlies the adoption of three-dimensionality as against the pictorial surface, which leads from the painting as object to 'environment' and 'installation'.
5. Whence a tension between ostensible impersonality and an equally marked personal idiosyncrasy, the contemporary artwork compensating for its quasi-industrial, primitivist or naturalist depersonalization with personal

<sup>47</sup> Buchloh, *Gerhard Richter*, vol. 2, *Essays*, p. 57.

myth; the singularity of the artistic vision, vanished from purposely impersonal forms and materials, returns in the identificatory investment of the objects.

Contemporary art risks becoming aesthetically unintelligible, by virtue of either a formal language too standardized or signs which rather than attaining the status of symbols remain no more than personal or collective emblems. But contrary to the expectations of traditional aesthetics, which has never stopped demanding that contemporary art produce 'humanly significant symbols', there on the frontier of this unintelligibility one finds the most important concerns and issues of contemporary art.

As Fried said of Minimalism, in a remark that is equally true of most contemporary work, whether by Judd or Warhol, Kosuth or Beuys, Arte Povera or Supports/Surfaces, works of art 'must somehow confront the beholder—they must, one might almost say, be placed not just in his space but in his way.'<sup>48</sup> For Fried, this is a sign of 'theatricality', a negation of pictoriality that precisely did away with any 'object' pure and simple and thus with any stagey effect of theatre.

In his *Aesthetics*, Hegel defined the move or 'advance' from sculpture to painting in terms of the power of sublimation of the pictorial surface.<sup>49</sup> And in the art that succeeds Abstract Expressionism, the retreat from such sublimation is motivated by a new 'experience', one that the sculptor Tony

<sup>48</sup> Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 15–16.

<sup>49</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 2, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 797–8: 'In sculpture the god confronts our vision as mere object. But in painting, on the other hand, God appears in himself as a spiritual and living person who enters the church and gives to every individual the possibility of placing himself in spiritual community and reconciliation with him.'

Smith illustrated by a car journey along a highway in the course of construction, at night, with 'no lights or shoulder-markers, lines, railings, or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats'.<sup>50</sup> This was an aesthetic experience, but one which for him 'did something . . . that art had never done.' 'Its effect,' Smith continues, 'was to liberate me from many of the views I had about art. It seemed that there had been a reality there that had not had any expression in art,'<sup>51</sup> but which for the artist had the importance of an aesthetic experience of the highest order, worthy of being acknowledged as such. 'The experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized. I thought to myself, it ought to be clear that's the end of art. Most painting looks pretty pictorial after that.'<sup>52</sup> The artist did not realize, however, that such an experience was made possible only by a particular state of the 'world of art'; it needed Abstract Expressionism, Rauschenberg, Johns and Stella to have explored previously unimaginable possibilities of aesthetization for a discovery such as Smith's to become possible, communicable and significant within the aesthetic realm; Duchamp's readymade, a mechanical subversion of the artistic cult-object rather than a fascinated exploration of the world of non-art, would not have been enough.

The three-dimensionality of the 'new works' that Judd discusses in 'Specific Objects'<sup>53</sup> is intended to confront us with such experiences at the boundary between art and a reality not 'socially recognized'. The artists of the sixties sought to communicate an experience that could be rendered

<sup>50</sup> Tony Smith, cited in Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, p. 157, from Samuel Wagstaff, Jr., 'Talking to Tony Smith', *Artforum* 5 (December 1966), pp. 14–19.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Donald Judd, 'Specific Objects' in *Complete Writings 1959–1975*, pp. 181–9.

in painting only through illusionistic representation, and this precisely was incapable of suggesting the non-art aspect that is essential to it and which confers its provocative character on the repetition of a module. It was this same conviction that had already led Klein to look for the actual imprint of the real, of body, fire and rain; that moved Beuys to experiment with the fat and felt associated with a personal myth; that drew Warhol to images from advertising and photographs from magazines; that drove Anselmo to move blocks of granite around within the exhibition space, and Penone to deconstruct the worked natural object to bring out the tree in its earlier wild state. It is a question in each case of transgressing the frontier of the aestheticizable and bringing into art a limit experience generated in contact with an anonymous material that has become of obsessive interest to the artist.

It is this same discovery of a new aesthetic territory, until then excluded as unworthy of art on account of its raw and uncultivated character, which creates the tension between anonymity and personal idiosyncrasy. In so far as these materials are foreign to the universe of art as traditionally conceived, it is their entry into the life of the *artist* that legitimates their place there: their contact with Klein or with Beuys in the course of decisive experiences, the age of twenty-two shared by Penone and the tree, the impress of the body and breath in terracotta that gives solid form to these vital expressions. In contrast, the anonymity of the American work testifies to a much firmer belief in the artist's power to transform modern industrial forms and materials into art, detaching them from their everyday, utilitarian functions; it might be too that the Americans were less nervous in the face of a technology demonized by certain European philosophers.

The Europeans' reaction to American art looks like a mixture of jealousy, chauvinism and a most often misdirected ideological critique.<sup>54</sup> The

rejection of Minimal Art, dismissed in the name of existential or political concerns, only imperfectly disguises European indebtedness to its discoveries—its new vocabulary of three-dimensionality, its impersonal materials, and its way of occupying space, without frame or plinth to mark the boundary of art. And the idiosyncratic gesture and personal myth insisted on by Klein, Beuys, Fabro or Penone is precisely what the Minimalists had abandoned in breaking with the pathos of Abstract Expressionism and with everything personal and familiar; it is what was ironized too in Lichtenstein's *Brushstrokes*.

If the Europeans were right to oppose Minimal Art, it was not on the political grounds often put forward as they endeavoured to regain for European art the centrality it had enjoyed before the advent of Communism and Nazism, but for aesthetic reasons. For there is not *one* type of experience that is in itself of greater relevance to art than any other: there is no universal language of art. The 'universal value' or exemplary success of a work is always tied to a singular realization without which its coherence will not be a matter of art—of a vision and its analysable materialization—but rather of geometry or of conceptual logic. For example, what distinguishes Judd's boxes from comparable geometrical modules is their human scale

<sup>54</sup> See Donald Judd, 'Ausstellungsleitungsstreit' in *Écrits 1965–1990*, trans. A. Perez (Paris: Daniel Lelong, 1991), p. 224: 'The Americans have never dominated Europe. It's a false problem. All countries are still turned in on themselves in matters of art, and they distrust what is done elsewhere; consequently, certain countries react by denouncing the supposed imposition of American art. This self-enclosure leads to mediocre art. Some North American artists, during a certain time, produced better work. This work was recognized, although inadequately . . . These artists [Pollock, Newman, Rothko, Still] got no support in the city where they lived, New York, and they were certainly not supported by the American government, as seems to be suggested. They were all poor, and most of them didn't live long enough to benefit from the new market for art. The work done in the United States has nothing to do with American imperialism.'

and their position in space, the materials and colours, the equivalence of solids, voids and transparencies, all these making them invented objects that have never before existed, and no use for anything except perhaps to intrigue a human viewer, who becomes aware of his own spatial reality, his own mass,<sup>55</sup> his morphological incapacity to recognize identical elements arranged in space as what they are.<sup>56</sup>

While some have discussed Minimal Art in terms of 'positivism',<sup>57</sup> others have believed it possible to rescue it from this by claiming for it an unconscious symbolism which, from beyond the tautological visibility of the forms—'what you see is what you see'—'looks at us'.<sup>58</sup> But neither the depthlessness of a Judd or a Carl Andre, nor the emphatic profundity of a Beuys who hopes to regenerate society with the theosophical energies of his art, are in themselves artistic qualities. What count are certain eloquent constellations that come to function as symbols capable of fixing themselves in memory.

More than any political message, what is important are the indirect effects of that which has found symbolization in forms and materials, that which derives from the work of the artist as such, rather than of the ideology or political messenger that s/he might also be. Just as much as Beuys's *Homogeneous Infiltration for Grand Piano*, an expressionist image of

55 See Thierry de Duve, 'Performance ici et maintenant: l'art minimal, un plaidoyer pour un nouveau théâtre' in *Essais datés 1*, p. 201: 'When a visitor walks on a Carl Andre checkerboard, he walks on something that speaks of his own human condition, minimised, reduced to the sheer *a priori* that makes him a thing among things, but a thing that knows it: a being whose existence is a burden.'

56 Ibid., p. 181.

57 See Eric Valentin, 'Beuys: mélancolie saturnienne et arc-en-ciel', *Artstudio 4*, special issue *Joseph Beuys* (Spring 1987), p. 43.

58 Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons*.

art consigned to the military ambulance, Judd's stacks and Andre's grids and checkerboards are emblematic of an art that was able to innovate and so accede to the specific experience of its age only by breaking with painting and sculpture to bring us face to face—beyond the boxes of stretcher and plinth raised to the status of artworks—with the unsuspected, revelatory qualities of anonymous objects in space. Without recourse to any referential suggestion, as deployed by Beuys in his therapeutic substances or by Warhol in the melancholy and narcissism of a celebrity infinitely reproduced, the Minimalist work derives its coherence from what it eliminates.

The inaugural phase of Conceptual Art seems to abandon the last vestiges of illusionism in radicalizing the hiatus between conception and realization found in Minimalism: '1. The artist may construct the piece. 2. The piece may be fabricated. 3. The piece need not be built.'<sup>59</sup> But this text, displayed in an exhibition space or published in a catalogue, does not escape plasticity. Kosuth's *One and Three Tables* (1965) presents a form of genesis of Conceptual Art: to a photographic image of the table, a 'classical' representation, he juxtaposes the real table, a three-dimensional object exemplifying itself, and then a dictionary definition of a table that reduces the object to a linguistic 'concept' visually exemplified. Here is the 'change . . . from "appearance" to "conception".'<sup>60</sup> For Kosuth, 'works of art are analytic propositions.'<sup>61</sup> All that counts now is the idea, as defining what counts as art—as Judd says, 'If someone calls it art, it's art.' Naming seems to sum up artistic activity as such, stripped of inessentials. And

59 Lawrence Weiner, 'Statement of Intent' in Gerti Fietzek and Gregor Stemmerich (eds), *Having Been Said: Writings and Interviews of Lawrence Weiner 1968–2003* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2004), p. 21.

60 Joseph Kosuth, 'Art After Philosophy', in Gabriele Guercio (ed.), *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings 1966–1990* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1991), p. 18.

61 Ibid., p. 20.



indeed, works of art offer no 'information regarding matters of fact': they have no documentary function. But self-authorizing declarative definition is not enough to make a work of art. This is shown by the 'photostats' of dictionary definitions, with their own characteristic plastic qualities in which one recognizes Kosuth's 'style'. In a second phase of his work, he tried to give this essentially linguistic form a socio-political function by using billboards (*Text/Context*, 1979) to post reflections on text, reflections more or less abstract and hence relatively ineffective, mistakenly claiming that that 'understanding signification' offers a 'key to understanding the political life of this society'.<sup>62</sup> It is only later, in a third phase of his work, that Kosuth takes full account of the plastic aspects of his use of language for pictorial or architectural purposes (*Zero & Not*, 1986) in the service of his philosophical ambitions. But, apart from the use of writing, this aestheticizing practice no longer has much to do with the initial programme of Conceptual Art.

During the seventies, American Formalism lost the certainty that until then had followed from its sense of 'specificity'. For Greenberg, it was the pictorial surface that was the specificity of painting. For Stella and Judd, it was the three-dimensionality of the canvas, and then of the object. For Kosuth, it was the idea of the work per se. Critics like Rosalind Krauss have thought it possible to draw a parallel between the abandonment of illusionism for this focus on specificity and the linguistic turn in philosophy that rejected the inarticulate interiority of the mind in favour of a public meaning crystallized in language. What is central to these (Kosuth's) works, she wrote in 1975, is 'their insistence on the exteriority, the publicness of the space in which verification and meaning reside. They are, one would say, visualizations of a linguistic space that is fully

<sup>62</sup> Joseph Kosuth, *Interviews 1969–1989*, ed. Charles Le Vine (Stuttgart: Patricia Schwarz, 1989), pp. 98 and 104.

non-psychological—the attempt to picture a world unmediated by the idea of a protocol language, a kind of necessary purging of the fantasy of privacy from his art.'<sup>63</sup>

The American art of this period shares the scientific ideal of analytic philosophy. But *all* traditional art of quality has in fact a symbolic 'exteriority' that makes it legible without reference to its creator's psychology. Certain modern currents, such as the Bauhaus, Soviet revolutionary art or the American art of the sixties, have aspired to a plastic grammar that nullifies the artist's subjectivity. But this is only one of the exasperated forms of the search for artistic legitimacy that characterizes the art of the period. The phrase of Judd's, taken up again by Kosuth—'If someone calls it art, it's art'—does little to hide the difficulty: the self-certification of the artist who believes he can bypass the critical judgement of others leads to a criterial lacuna that Judd, in his important writings of the eighties, would himself attempt to fill. It was at this time that American art, much later than the European, tried to provide art with political legitimacy or personal myth. Alongside Haacke there appeared young artists such as Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger who threw themselves into a political activism based on a feminist sensitivity to everyday violence and discrimination, engaging in an identity politics that put into question the privileged position of art made by Western white males.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, video-makers—men for the most part, like Bill Viola and Gary Hill—pushed to an extreme the scrupulous and grandiloquent examination of the artist's own body. The biologist of a human life stripped of language, Viola draws on family photographs to peer as closely at possible at his own

<sup>63</sup> Rosalind Krauss, 'Sense and Sensibility: Reflections on Post '60s Sculpture', *Artforum* 12/3 (November 1973), p. 48.

<sup>64</sup> See Claude Gintz, 'Ailleurs et autrement', in *Ailleurs et autrement* (Nîmes: Éditions Jacqueline Chambon, 1993), pp. 73–96.



mortal body suspended between the death agony of his mother and the birth of his own child, while Hill (*Crux*) makes a Christian symbol of his own limbs as they move through forest leaves. Whether through the political emphasis of the LED displays or the narcissistic strain of a video image magnifying the artist's vulnerable body, recent American art has sought legitimacy in the experience of the mortal body and the subversion of the discourse of advertising and propaganda.

As the final consequence of the institutional integration of art, one sees the development of a subtle collaboration between artist and institution, mobilizing substantial resources to transform the museum into a self-destructive and self-denouncing space.<sup>65</sup> The violence of the denunciation is balanced by the generosity of the funding, the institution hoping to be commended for an open-mindedness that sometimes verges on masochism.

The German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of 1993 illustrates the paradoxical nature of the current relationship between art and politics; between American and European art. Under the title *Germania* (1993),<sup>66</sup> the US-based Haacke, invited by the German curator, took advantage of the commission to deliver a monumental denunciation tailored to the site and occasion of the exhibition. Above the entrance, an enlarged replica of a Deutschmark dated 1990, the year of reunification, takes the place of the eagle of the Reich.<sup>67</sup> Recalling Hitler's visit to the Biennale of 1934, Haacke

65 Gintz talks of *in situ* practices 'whose institutional success would immediately reveal their perfect congruence with the new exhibition technologies, and which would go astray in search of the conquest of space by signature and the establishment of a total environment.' Ibid., p. 10.

66 For this see Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke, *Free Exchange* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), which has discussion at pp. 125ff. and illustrations at pp. 117–23. Haacke's explanatory text, published on the occasion of the exhibition, is entitled *Bodenlos*: literally 'ground-less', meaning bottomless, unfathomable, unbelievable or incredible.

67 Perhaps a reference to Habermas's essay on 'Deutschmark nationalism'.

then hangs at the top of the stairs a photograph of that sinister occasion, framed in black—the same ironic denunciation as earlier applied to the presidents of the United States. Within the thirties pavilion, whose marble floor had been broken up, visitors found themselves making their way across the shifting, unstable debris, which clattered horribly underfoot.

The ambiguity of this very characteristic work of Haacke's derives from its monumentality and from the institutional context from which it profits. Its monumentality is ambiguous in its deployment of the grandiloquent, propagandistic scale of the madness it denounces in taking over the space offered by the official organizers. And the institutional context denies the very message of the work; for what is this society—a heap of rubble—that offers commissions to artists by whom it knows it will be denounced, and which the artist himself knows expects only that? This society is not just—morally—a heap of rubble left by Hitler, but also—politically—a democracy, ambivalent as it may be, like every other democracy that has ever yet existed, that cannot do without a critical art, and which indeed subsidizes it. The weakness of the work is its inability to incorporate this ambiguity. The conclusion to be drawn from this installation goes far beyond the point intended by the artist himself, revealing a political message weakened by its association with a collusive commission even as it takes itself to be radically subversive. This ambiguous message provokes a reflection as melancholy as it is critical; and it is this, perhaps, that is today the only 'political' effect a work of art may hope to produce. But the sense of scandal that is intended so finds itself neutralized.

'When it succeeds,' says Robert Storr in an interview with Eleanor Heartney, 'committed art makes people unhappily aware that the deeper

68 Eleanor Heartney and Robert Storr, 'Rien n'arrive par l'art', *Art Press*, special issue, *L'histoire continue* (1992), p. 54.

causes of social problems . . . are not obvious.<sup>68</sup> He distinguishes such an art from one that 'reduces politics to an illustration or a slogan': 'W. H. Auden was right: "Art makes nothing happen." But far from signifying that politics has no place in art, this means that here, as in every other domain of experience, art offers us the possibility of imagining and scrutinizing things on which, in a certain context, we have no grasp.'<sup>69</sup> This assessment, that makes contemporary political art a witness to impotence, is no doubt more lucid, in the present context, than the blind self-assurance of any denunciation that claims to be effective. Storr connects the pertinence of any 'commitment' to a high standard of reflection: 'Art is in no danger so long as standards of reflection is high.'<sup>70</sup> There are reasons to think that a political art that wishes to go on the offensive without losing this intellectual lucidity requires a higher degree of politicization of the context. It is on the basis of shared historical experience that political art is capable of having a more or less substantial impact. The historical experience of today is however characterized by an atomization and a resignation that lend little support to such artistic activism.

'Anything that disturbs people's sense of complacency is political,' says Bruce Nauman,<sup>71</sup> an idea that seems to be shared by many contemporary artists. He speaks of the anger he feels, more especially at our 'capacity for cruelty'.<sup>72</sup> He wants to make 'an art that aggresses against the viewer . . . because that way people are forced to pay attention'.<sup>73</sup> He endeavours to

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>71</sup> Bruce Nauman, interviewed in Kristina McKenna, 'Art Carny: Like a barker outside a fun-house, Bruce Nauman lures viewers into his challenging and disconcerting art', *Los Angeles Times* (27 January 1991), p. 84.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

disturb them aesthetically through his lugubrious stagings of cut-off heads, grimacing faces on video screens, neon signs that subvert and unmask stereotyped language. Neon and TV screen—advertising media addressing themselves to the individual—are thus turned into means for the public articulation of private thoughts and feelings which in the ordinary way have no place in the world of advertising and stereotyped television series. It is a matter of inverting the operation of the media and in this sense a 'political' hijacking or subversion of these languages.

Haacke is more specifically political. He attacks monuments (the German Pavilion in Venice, built during the Nazi period) and symbols (the Deutschmark in place of the imperial eagle) that have precise political connotations, with photographic evidence in support. He reduces to ruins a marble floor, a symbol of the unsteady ground on which the new Germany hoped to establish a normality impossible to achieve given the unforgettable past. The political content is unambiguous and even, from an artistic point of view, somewhat laboured. Nauman's revolt is skin-thin and ambiguous, bringing with it no precise political denunciation but rather an anthropological pessimism, yet it is aesthetically more subtle and disturbing.

Very far from Haacke's massive spectacle, more specific than Nauman's malaise, Gerhard Richter's *18 October 1977* cycle intends no particular 'mobilization' and issues no call for vigilance. As in his first works based on photographs, Richter takes the readymade aspect of photography as the springboard for an 'objective' expressivity. The photographic document—intimate record or advertising image, family snapshot or scene-of-crime shot—becomes the emblem of a post-historic age. Extracted from the family album where a repressed history lies in sleep, *Uncle Rudi* (1965) stands there smiling in his double-breasted Wehrmacht greatcoat. To this, Richter counterposes fragments of an equally elegiac beauty: significant others,

romantic landscapes with distant horizons, still lifes, colour samples arranged so as to suggest emerging forms, the power of a gestural painting freed from any object, imaginary spaces, images of glaciation, of incandescence, of geological strata, mirrors, grey monochromes. This elegy of modernity demystifies what remained utopian in Duchamp's devastating irony: *Ema*, Richter's reply to *Nude Descending a Staircase*, is the artist's wife, whose photographic representation breaches only the taboos of the avant-garde; similarly, in their elegance and matter-of-fact simplicity, the *4 Glass Panels* stands to the *Large Glass* of Duchamp's *Bride Stripped Bare* as Carl Andre's checkerboards to Tatlin's *Tower*.

In his series on the death in prison of members of the Baader-Meinhof group, Richter paints what seems to him have been the fate of a politics of emancipation that allows itself to be caught up in an escalating violence. Working from photographs of the prisoners found dead in their cells, the crowds attending the funerals, an arrest in the open street in the course of a police siege, a sardonic confrontation, the record-player used to hide a gun, an empty cell, an image of unknowing youth, Richter leaves the viewer free to reflect on the aporias of radical political activity, 10 years after the prisoners' bodies were released to their families.

Most of the works that emerged from the sixties turn exploit aesthetic qualities foreign to both traditional and modern art (from Impressionism to Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism). They prefer to situate art at the frontier with non-art, with depersonalized forms and materials or with personal idiosyncrasy, in both cases at the limit of the communicable—untilled lands open to aesthetic symbolization. The notion of achievement disappears; the aesthetic satisfactions available are of the order of appropriation, with the integration of the most aesthetically recalcitrant realities. To account for this, recourse has been had to the Kantian notion of the sublime,<sup>74</sup> as if the non-art aspect were assimilable to the overwhelming mag-

nitude or violence of nature which for Kant reminds us of the moral greatness of our reason. But the aestheticization of the limits of experience, whether depersonalized or idiosyncratic, is not adequately explained in the terms of a theory which, like Adorno's, in the end assigns philosophical tasks to art. It is better to see contemporary art as evincing a new openness to excluded experience, as an extension of the subjective world to include that which had seemed irremediably heterogeneous.<sup>75</sup> Yet even this interpretation is no more capable of informing a discriminating judgement of works of art. So long as art is defined in terms of a general philosophical or social function, the innovation, implications and success of any individual work remain secondary to the common task of emancipation or critique. Like art in general, committed art has to be justified in terms of aesthetic criteria quite independent of its political effectiveness. And such criteria distinguish each particular work from the general trends or movements to which it belongs, whether motivated by a rejection of Modernism or by a cosy huddling-up under the banner of Contemporary Art.

<sup>74</sup> See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 252–5, and Lyotard, 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde' in *The Inhuman*, pp. 89–107.

<sup>75</sup> Albrecht Wellmer, 'Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation: Adorno's Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity' in *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics and Postmodernism*, trans. David Midgley (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 102–05.