

**The Turn from the Turns: An Avant-Garde
Moving Out of the Centre (1986–93)
—Helmut Draxler**

Which Narrative?

Claiming one's own artistic trajectory as belonging to the avant-garde involves making intrinsic as well as extrinsic assumptions. Intrinsic in the sense Theodor W. Adorno invoked when describing the material state or developmental condition of art,¹ and which – to follow this logic – has to be assessed with the benefit of hindsight, historically, and expressed in each new artistic production. The avant-garde, in its intrinsic newness, escapes social determination and thus – collapsing intrinsic into extrinsic qualities – indicates a path for social change. Today, many claims continue to be made on the basis of such an idea of the avant-garde, whether in relation to art understood as research, as technology, as social service or as political activism. However, for the most part, the crucial problem of how to relate an artistic practice to its material (intrinsic) and social (extrinsic) conditions seems no longer to be considered relevant; such practices imagine themselves in a post-historical situation, where they can exist and circulate without restriction from the moment they are accepted within the art field. A historical perspective, understood more as the unfolding of a problem than as the propagation of a solution, is hardly anywhere recognisable, and not acknowledged in terms of either intrinsic or extrinsic factors.

Of course, Adorno's argument is itself historical. Incorporating the 'advanced world spirit' (*Weltgeist*) from the Hegelian tradition, it is deeply rooted in an idealist understanding of a philosophy of history and its universalist and progressivist implications. As such, it does not readily function with the postmodern, postcolonial and feminist discourses that have gained widespread currency since the 1980s precisely in rejecting such assumptions. Despite this limitation, however, Adorno's argument is still valuable in posing the challenging question of how to relate contemporary art practices to certain artistic traditions as well as to changing social conditions. Only within this double set of relations can the actual commitment of a specific art practice be grasped.

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¹ Adorno defines the intrinsic and irreversible conditions of any artistic practice as the material or technical state of art; any substantial artistic contribution has to address that state, and therefore its historical moment. The argument is directed against any idea of 'free' artistic creation, as well as against unconditional appropriations of historical materials. The category of the new is precisely articulated in this way, through material (intrinsic) form, and as such simultaneously reveals its extrinsic qualities (those determined by apparently external, non-intrinsic conditions – for instance, social context): 'The more the [compositional materials] bear historical necessity in themselves, the less they are immediately legible as historical traits. In the moment when the historical expression of a chord can no longer be discerned, the chord demands that the sounds surrounding it do justice to its historical implications.' Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music* (trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006, p.31.

What has changed since Adorno's times? In the first place, the development of an ever more global art field, which, as a social condition, has meant the emergence of a differentiated social sphere within which art is essentially negotiated in terms of specific discursive and institutional conditions. For Adorno, individual artistic achievement (his notable example being Arnold Schoenberg's) is what bears immediate social consequence; nowadays, however, there is always a mediated social space that must be acknowledged. Artistic practices are always already framed by the specific conditions of the art field, which at the same time enable and obstruct them in their specific productivity. Even the most direct or immediate attempts to engage with the world are symbolically, culturally and economically marked by these conditions. Therefore, extrinsic reasons do not just refer to the world as it is or should be, but to a specific social sphere allowing individual access to that world, and shaping the perspectives, the speaking positions and the phantasmatic visions of one's own role within it. To me, the insistence on finding solutions instead of posing problems, which we witness today, has to do with the flourishing of a system of differentiated social spheres, with the art field constituting only one amongst many – amongst, for instance, the specific social spheres relating to the fields of science, politics or law, to name just a few. Particular to the field of art seems to be that ideologically it tends to overlook its own specificity in taking itself still as a representation of the world as such; therefore everything seems possible within its confines except the questioning of these conditions.²

What about the intrinsic reasons? For an artist to see herself or himself following a clear line of artistic succession, or to draw a logical (positive or negative) conclusion from the genealogical essence of a series of works, has undoubtedly become difficult. The postmodern condition implies the absence of direct tradition; it must be understood as a rupture which distances us from history altogether. This has resulted in an obsession in contemporary art with historical content, materialised in re-enactments, retro fashions and recollections of past events that merely reveal an absence of its own historicity. However, Europe in the eighteenth century had already reflected on the experience of the thread of tradition being torn apart.³ Modernism and the notion of the avant-garde can be understood as attempts to overcome that experience and to build a tradition of the new to essentially negate the problem – the problem that there is no inner logic, no reason or founding principle for history, which is the constitutive condition of history itself. History as a symbolic form emerged precisely when the absence of a guiding principle became palpable. That is, history is not

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² For a more detailed discussion of the relationships between the fields of science and art, see my essay 'A Culture of Division – Artistic Research as a Problem', in metroZones (ed.), *Faith is the Place: The Urban Cultures of Global Prayers*, Berlin: b_books, 2012, pp.124–29.

³ This is essentially the argument in Werner Busch, *Das Sentimentalische Bild, Die Krise der Kunst im 18. Jahrhundert und die Geburt der Moderne*, Munich: C.H. Beck, 1993.

identical with tradition; it is the imagined loss of tradition that is the reason for history. And, because of this, it constantly demands a reflection and a reinvention of its own historicity.

The story I want to tell in this essay is a story about these changing conditions for artistic practices since the 1980s, exploring in particular the intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for these changes as well as the relations between the two. These conditions include the historical narratives and the social imaginaries of those practices, and their art historical or art critical accounts. Hence, the guiding question will concern why it has become so difficult to narrate art history since the 80s – art history in its entirety as well as specific developments in art since that decade. As a narrowly woven bond between art and history, certain ideas about the intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for art's development have always been embedded in the academic discipline of art history. Precisely those ideas are considered suspect today, and art history is seen as a narrative form slithering into an ongoing crisis. Raising an art-historical claim might only be possible today after separating art and history as symbolic categories – to a certain degree in order to envision their specific historical and social character. Their relation can be conceived only within a loose connection, and not as a direct entanglement.

For contemporary art practices that means there is an imperative not to embody the most advanced state of art history (in a Hegelian and Adornian tradition), and instead to explore the space in between art and history, between the intrinsic and the extrinsic. This is precisely a call to work on their difference and to create situations and historical references, and thus to link what I will identify as the main categories of the time: the *discursive* and the *exhibitionary*. The history that can be extracted from this will be a history not of heroic achievements, but one concerning a series of intense investigations around ruptures and discrepancies, which will engage the ethos of the avant-garde, even as a post-modern or post-mortem avant-garde.⁴

The Discursive and the Exhibitionary

In 1983, the art historian Serge Guilbaut published a study on the origins of New York modernism under the title *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*. He described a series of largely successful cultural, political and financial manoeuvres aiming to develop a 'vital centre' that shaped a hegemonic, liberal and commercial 'art world' immediately after World War II. Framed by a formalist discourse and operating from the institutional battleship of the Museum of Modern Art, New York would provide the rest of the world with rhythmically changing new waves of avant-garde art for several decades.⁵ When Guilbaut's book was published, his description of New York

⁴ See Thomas Elsaesser, 'Film als Möglichkeitsform: Vom "post mortem" – Kino zu mindgame movies', *Hollywood heute. Geschichte, Gender und Nation im postklassischen Kino*, Berlin: Bertz+Fischer 2009, pp.237–63.

⁵ See Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

as the hegemonic centre of art's production and commerce was still convincingly apt. Of course, modernist and avant-garde inspired movements were continuing around the globe, but they remained dependent on New York for recognition. Just as Brancusi had to move to Paris from Romania at the beginning of the twentieth century in order to become Brancusi, during the 1960s and 70s moving to New York was thought a wise career step.

Yet only a few years after Guilbaut's publication, things had changed dramatically, charting a direction that could be described as 'how New York lost the idea of modern art'. New York today may still be an important marketplace for ideas and works, but it is definitely not the hegemonic centre of a hierarchically structured 'art world'. Today's globalised contemporary *art field* might rather be described as a combination of multiple and highly diverse – if often overlapping – spheres of interest, uniting academic research and political activism with a world market based on project culture and regular art fairs and biennials, deeply involved in the neoliberal competition between cities and regions, and hence representing cultural economics on a global scale.

To narrate the transition, it might be useful to start with an exhibition that was perhaps the last to fit within the New York-based hegemonic model of the avant-garde, according to which a coherent historical reading traced the artworks back linearly, especially to the readymade via its different forms of adaption in postwar American art. 'Art and its Double: A New York Perspective' opened in late 1986 in Barcelona and early 1987 in Madrid, at the respective Caixa de Pensiones in these two cities.⁶ It was curated by Dan Cameron and included work by artists from the Pictures Generation, such as Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine and Cindy Sherman, assembled alongside the latest 'object-oriented ontologies', from artists such as Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach and Robert Gober. New York was, however, already a 'perspective' rather than a self-evident climax, and the focus was more on repetition than newness; or rather, repetition was supposed to be the new thing within the context of simulative and affirmative strategies drawn from French postmodern theory.

Only a few months earlier, New York's New Museum hosted a show with largely the same (local) artists – including Koons, Lawler and Steinbach – but the 'perspective' was completely different. Curated by Brian Wallis, the exhibition 'Damaged Goods: Desire and the Economy of the Object'⁷

⁶ 'Art and its Double: A New York Perspective', Fundació Caixa de Pensions, Barcelona, 27 November to 11 January 1987, and Madrid, 6 February to 22 March 1987. The exhibition featured Ashley Bickerton, Sarah Charlesworth, Robert Gober, Peter Halley, Jenny Holzer, Jeff Koons, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, Matt Mullican, Tim Rollins and K.O.S., Peter Schuyff, Cindy Sherman, Haim Steinbach and Philip Taaffe.

⁷ 'Damaged Goods: Desire and the Economy of the Object', New Museum, New York, 21 June to 10 August 1986. The exhibition included Judith Barry, Barbara Bloom, Gretchen Bender, Andrea Fraser, Jeff Koons, Justen Ladda, Louise Lawler, Ken Lum, Allan McCollum and Haim Steinbach.



'Damaged Goods: Desire and the Economy of the Object', New Museum, 1986. Clockwise from left: Allan McCollum, *Perfect Vehicles*, 1986; Jeff Koons, *New Roomy Toyota Family Camry*, 1983; *New Shelton Wet/Drys Tripledecker*, 1981; Louise Lawler, *Two Editions*, 1986; Haim Steinbach, *announcing something*, 1986. Exhibition design as artist contribution by Judith Barry. © the artists. Courtesy the artists and Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles

borrowed its title from a song by the British post-punk band Gang of Four, and through them invoked a Situationist-inspired critique of consumer culture. Against the simulative interpretation highlighted in the Barcelona/Madrid show, 'Damaged Goods' maintained a *representative* approach, indicating a very different attitude towards the historical and social conditions of individual works. Two contributions worked on a paratextual level rather than delivering objects to the exhibition: Judith Barry's exhibition design and Andrea Fraser's exhibition tour. Working in close cooperation with the curator and the participating artists, Barry created a *parcours* through the show, relating individual works and interfering with their alleged autonomy. Using the artworks in an eccentric way, Barry's design highlighted possible relations among the diverse representative, theatrical or functional forms of presentation.⁸ Fraser's tour in the guise of museum educator Jane Castleton was the first such performance in her career.⁹ She guided her audience through the New Museum's lobby and discussed the building's security system, gift shop and restrooms, but allowed only a glimpse into the actual show. Thus, in referring to the actual infrastructural, social and economic conditions of the institution as well as to the more-or-less individual desire of a professional subject (the docent educator who is 'supposed to know'), Fraser was enacting a discursive intersection rather than an individual character, merging feminist, socio-analytical and psychoanalytical aspects.

Besides demonstrating two different and 'new' approaches to the production of contemporary art, these two examples of practice refer to two specific analytical categories, the *discursive* and the *exhibitionary*, which can readily be extended to other practices as well. I would maintain that these two

⁸ For a detailed analysis, see my 'Ambivalence and Actualization: Exhibition Design as Artistic Practice', *Texte zur Kunst*, no.72, December 2008, pp.126–31.

⁹ The script for *Damaged Goods Gallery Talk Starts Here* (1986) is included in Yilmaz Dziewior (ed.), *Andrea Fraser, Works 1984–2003* (exh. cat.), Cologne: DuMont, 2003, pp.240–43.

notions are more useful in understanding the specific transformations of practice in the late 1980s and early 90s than more commonly discussed concepts from the late 60s and early 70s, such as 'site specificity' or 'institutional critique'. In contrast to the structuralist idea of language as the basic symbolic condition of any culture, the discursive is concerned with a way of speaking: language within the social arena, indicating the performative aspect of language itself. Discourse is also how theory has established itself as a major symbolic form since the 80s, when theory became understood not as the only way of 'truth speaking', as in Adorno, but as performing precisely the absence of that possibility. Discourse always already implies a plurality of theoretical positions. Likewise, for artistic practice the perceived lack of historical necessity seemed to demand discursive references. By the 80s it was no longer enough to turn elements of language into art – as in the high times of Conceptual art – but a script might nonetheless be produced and performed, either in an actual performance or enacted through another mediated or exhibited form.

The exhibitionary does not just refer to the 'white cube' exhibition space as it was addressed in installation art after Minimalism, but to the different cultural practices engaged by exhibition-making, with design being just one. These cultural practices include ways of arranging and presenting objects or displaying information; ways of addressing, assembling and guiding people; and ways of interacting symbolically with those objects or information via conversation, education, marketing or critique. They concern the production and distribution of specific public values in an ongoing exchange between the institution and its audience, and thus constitute one of the key elements of contemporary cultural economics. What Walter Benjamin called 'exhibition value'¹⁰ can be grasped in those cultural practices of the exhibitionary: instead of indicating a general public sphere automatically regulating individual access to a common world, these imply a loose network of competing, increasingly culturally specific and at best semi-public spheres, which buffer individual ambitions and social demands. The contemporary art field generates plenty of these spheres, contributing involuntarily to social segmentation and differentiation, and thus turning the exhibitionary into its own essential condition.¹¹ It is this condition which is addressed in artistic practices like Barry's or Fraser's.

Yet not only in theirs. The period of the late 1980s and early 90s is specifically interesting, in retrospect, for how modes of artistic practice developed in order to explore the discursive and the exhibitionary as two separate categories, and also to relate them. For example, Fareed Armaly's early magazine projects

¹⁰ See Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936), *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn), London: Jonathan Cape, 1970, pp.211–44.

¹¹ I have extracted the term 'exhibitionary' from Tony Bennett's notion of 'the exhibitionary complex' as first articulated in his essay of that title in *New Formations*, no.4, Spring 1988, pp.73–102, and later developed in his book *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, London: Routledge, 1995.



Fareed Armaly, 'Orphée 1990', installation view, Maison de la Culture et de la Communication (MCC), Saint-Étienne, 1990. Photograph: Cyrille Sabatier/Jean-Pierre Thien © and courtesy the artist

Terminal Zone in 1987 and *R.O.O.M.* in 1989, or his exhibitions '(re)Orient' in Paris in 1989 and 'Orphée 1990' in Saint-Étienne in 1990,¹² were based in a certain mode of producing and presenting discourse, referring to cultural- or postcolonial-studies methods and transforming them into a presentational, or exhibitionary, format.¹³ Rather than reproducing existing discourses pedagogically, in a purely illustrative manner, Armaly's work directed research tools towards the exhibition situation itself, and vice versa. Questions concerning the historicity of presentational forms and institutional exhibition formats were raised to address their implicit political meaning (or the 'political unconscious', according to Fredric Jameson).¹⁴ For example, the fact that art museums and academies might be grounded in colonial and nation-building fantasies was brought to the fore, with such ideological foundations shown to underwrite social exclusion and violence as problems reaching far into the artworks presented in such institutions. The question of how an artistic practice could and should function within those material and symbolic conditions became crucial; how to work within those conditions and reflect on them at the same time? Articulating that kind of ambivalence was not possible through new, discrete works that would be displayed within the given framework (which is why the door to the main exhibition space in 'Orphée 1990' was locked),¹⁵ nor through an academic text

¹² Fareed Armaly, '(re)Orient', Gallery Sylvana Lorenz, Paris, 7 October to 4 November 1989, and 'Orphée 1990', Maison de la Culture et de la Communication (MCC), Saint-Étienne, 13 July to 18 August 1990.

¹³ For a detailed analysis of those works see my essay, 'Die Gewalt des Zusammenhangs. Raum, Referenz und Repräsentation bei Fareed Armaly' ('Coercing Constellations: Space, Reference and Representation') in Helmut Draxler (ed.) *Fareed Armaly*, Berlin: b_books, 2007.

¹⁴ See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982.

¹⁵ Armaly's project restored the MCC foyer to its original 1970s form, reinstalling the furniture, carpet, light fixtures and glass doors leading to the exhibition space (which were locked for the duration of the exhibition). A full-size model of the



Group Material, 'Democracy: Education' at Dia Art Foundation, 1988. © the artists Courtesy the artists and Four Corners Books

describing the representational sphere of an institution's visual and textual culture. Armaly opted instead to link a 'script' to a constellation of institutional conditions, and vice versa. Through installation art, exhibition design and montage methodologies, the exhibition became the real medium for visualising the discursive and also for showing the exhibitionary itself as both the limiting and enabling condition of his own institutional performance.

Similar approaches are evident in the work of other artists who gained prominence in the late 1980s and early 90s, including Renée Green, Mark Dion, Fred Wilson, Christian Philipp Müller, Stephen Prina and Tom Burr.¹⁶ Works such as *Case I–IV* (1990) and *Color Paintings* (1990), by Green and Dion respectively, took up Marcel Broodthaers's critical museum investigations of the 70s, shifting his installation strategies involving archival order and metaphors of power towards the implicit imperialist and racist narratives of scientific and artistic display. Wilson 'mined the museum' with

— mirror seen in Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée* (1950) was installed in the exhibition space, visible through the doors, and on the foyer walls were hung children's drawings produced in a MCC workshop led by the artist, based on imagining and then drawing a door in the MCC; a doorway leading to the MCC's framing workshop, normally closed to the public, was also opened up and led to a further audiovisual installation.

¹⁶ This is not only a generational history. You can find the discursive in Dan Graham's essays, which became highly influential during this period and refer to a broad array of cultural, architectural, urbanist and design practices. Moreover, those discursive elements are kept strictly in tension in the exhibitionary and almost formalist agenda he was pursuing in his pavilions at the time. The so-called 'site reflexivity' of John Knight's 1980s projects – from the *Museotypes* (1983) to *The Right to be Lazy* (1986) and *Une Vue Culturelle* (1987–88), the latter also at the MCC, Saint-Étienne – were also shifting the exhibition site towards its discursive conditions. And even Joseph Kosuth, in his turn towards Ludwig Wittgenstein's language games, was shifting interchangeably between language and exhibitionary registers (see, especially, the show curated by Kosuth 'Ludwig Wittgenstein, Das Spiel des Unsagbaren', Secession, Vienna, 13 September to 29 October 1989).

the ghostly presence of slavery (1992–93),¹⁷ and Müller, Prina and Burr queered modernist and avant-garde strategies by reconstructing them in their underlying ambiguity. Müller's show 'porte bonheur' in Saint-Étienne in 1989 had a programmatic stance that referenced and parodied a purely spatial intervention in the manner of Michael Asher's early 70s projects: he added flower boxes planted with lucky clovers to cement structures he had built to mirror those on the ceiling above.¹⁸

Most significantly, however, the relation between the discursive and the exhibitionary can be seen in two extraordinarily influential projects that arguably inaugurated the very format known today as the 'project exhibition':¹⁹ Group Material's 'Democracy' (1988–89) and Martha Rosler's 'If you lived here...' (1989), both commissioned by Dia Art Foundation. These projects referred neither to discourse in a strict theoretical sense, nor to the exhibitionary in a purely artistic sense. Rather, they were directed towards activist and alternative practices. Both involved so-called 'town meetings' – open public discussions on issues such as homelessness or sexual politics in light of the AIDS crisis. The exhibitions, despite including actual displays of imagery, did not exhibit 'social aesthetics' in the model of the productivist tradition, but they were certainly exhibitions, and as such became influential beyond the '(imagined) age of unalienated exhibition', as Yvonne Rainer phrases it in her introduction to the two publications resulting from the projects.²⁰ It is precisely the social within the exhibitionary that is at stake: assembling artists and 'neighbours', or just people more generally, in order to discuss social issues; providing those discussions with information beyond mainstream media and artistic practices; and arranging, designing, qualifying and performing that information. The discursive lies in the background, pointing the questions posed towards specific content; and the discursive sits in the foreground, in the voiced debates, interfering with the exhibitionary situation, turning one of New York's leading art institutions, the Dia Art Foundation, into an 'alternative project space'.²¹ By gathering people, information and objects in defiance of the exclusionary and elitist logics of the established art world, the 'project' came into being as the defining exhibition category of the time.²²

¹⁷ 'Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson', The Contemporary and Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, 3 April 1992 to 28 February 1993.

¹⁸ Christian Philipp Müller, *The Ceiling on the Floor*, in 'porte bonheur', Maison de la Culture et de la Communication, Saint-Étienne, 8 June to 13 July 1989.

¹⁹ Examples of the 'project exhibition' are: Marion von Osten and Kathrin Rhomberg's 'Projekt Migration' (Cologne, 2005); von Osten's 'In the Desert of Modernity' (Berlin, 2008); Alice Creischer, Andreas Sieckmann and Max Jorge Hinderer's 'The Potosí Principle' (Madrid, Berlin and Bogota, 2011); and Anselm Franke's 'Animism' (Antwerp, Bern, Vienna and Berlin, 2010–12) and 'Global Prayers' (Berlin and Graz, 2012).

²⁰ Yvonne Rainer, 'Preface: The Work of Art in the (Imagined) Age of Unalienated Exhibition', in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Democracy: A Project by Group Material*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1990, pp.xvii–xix.

²¹ Julie Ault (ed.), *Alternative Art New York, 1965–1985: A Cultural Politics Book for the Social Text Collective*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

Since the 1990s a real *project culture* has emerged, usually emphasising and focusing one of these crucial aspects – the exhibitionary, the discursive – and not as a new wave of avant-gardism but through a social network. We might consider, for example, the sociality of the artists' communities at work in the highly influential constellation known as the Berlin 'Zusammenhänge', seen in particular in the programme for the Shedhalle in Zürich from 1994 under the curatorial responsibility of Renate Lorenz and Marion von Osten.²³ For me, however, the more interesting and promising projects are those that try to combine different layers of the discursive and the exhibitionary: for example by investing in questions of how discourse can be performed and exhibited; how the academic conference format is adapted within art contexts; how individual and collective ambitions can relate; or how the different roles of artist, curator, activist and administrator can commingle without losing the intrinsic specificities of each. At the core of all these questions is the development of artistic practice itself, alongside the self-conception of theoretical, curatorial or critical practice. In project culture, reflecting on the possible fusion of differences, rather than allowing their total confusion, has become decisive. Is there still something recognisable as an artistic practice distinct from critical, curatorial, activist and administrative approaches, and can its history be told? Or, to borrow a euphemism of the 90s, is it all just 'cultural production' in different shades?

Exodus from the Centre

My enquiry here is only tangentially about the history of project exhibitions. My primary concern is how such history relates to the changing conditions of the art field as evident in the global dimension of contemporary art today. For example, have individual artists' practices been able to reflect that change in productive ways? Between a universalist and linear conception of the historical necessity of artistic practice, on the one hand, and a global scene filled with apparent singularity, on the other, it has become necessary to insist on the specificities of historical moments, locational conditions and artistic practices, understood mainly as symbolic procedures merging the historical and the locational, the discursive and the exhibitionary, and performative and reflexive moments within their own understanding of practice.

Doubtless, there are many discrepancies between the different approaches, productions and intentions concerning the self-understanding of historical moments, locations and practical agencies, but a common element –

²² Of course, there were projects already in the 1970s, but as of the 80s the term seems to have acquired a new and specific meaning.

²³ Project groups like WochenKlausur in Vienna tried at the same time to loosen the ties with the exhibitionary altogether. Their aim was to intervene 'directly' into the social sphere by turning artists into social activists; but precisely in wanting to overcome the art world they remained symbolically embedded within the cultural and economic conditions of the art field in a wider sense. And even if they had succeeded in cutting off all symbolic and economic connections with the art field, they probably would not have found themselves in reality as such, but rather within the regime of another field – the social field.

with attention turned precisely towards moments, locations and practices – may be identified in 1980s New York, where there were specific relations between intrinsic and extrinsic factors in the consideration of art practice. This is the case with the work made by a group of former students from the Whitney Independent Study Program (Gregg Bordowitz, Joshua Decker, Mark Dion, Andrea Fraser, Jason Simon and Renée Green, as agitated by teachers such as Craig Owens, Benjamin Buchloh, Simone Forti and Yvonne Rainer) and by others, as already mentioned above. But why did this history stray from becoming just another New York-based wave of the avant-garde? These artists were taking up issues from previous waves of avant-gardism – largely those of the late 1960s to the mid-70s, and specifically of the ensuing Pictures Generation – and perceived themselves to be working in such a tradition, producing a new aesthetic turn. It just happened to be a turn away from such turns in avant-garde history. Ever since, and especially within the global contemporary today, there seems to be no longer any place for turns.

This shift beyond turns has to do with the concurrent de-legitimation of New York as the hegemonic site – as the centre of the art world. Perhaps in historicising New York's approach to modern art in 1983, Guilbaut's book was already questioning the city's naturalised position and the idea of a hierarchical art world altogether. And, in 1984, on the occasion of "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern' at New York's Museum of Modern Art, critique intensified concerning one of the core myths maintaining the hegemony; namely, that modern art is somehow releasing 'primitive' or provincial art towards a universal destiny, which is incorporated into the museum's own prerogatives.²⁴ In the ensuing years, it is possible to identify a sort of 'self-provincialisation' within New York itself. Group Material's and Martha Rosler's town meetings helped to transform the image of New York away from its being the 'hyperreal'²⁵ centre of the world and into its being an urban setting devastated by disastrous neoliberal politics. The New Museum made efforts to reach beyond the established art world, working against its marginalising tendencies and focusing instead on the minority politics of an 'invisible centre'.²⁶ Postmodern, postcolonial, queer and feminist readings developed beyond the purely deconstructive critique of formalist modernism and addressed the avant-garde's own entanglement in progressive and universal narratives. A fundamental contradiction became palpable in almost all of these emerging practices and projects: between an artist's advanced discourse and practical ambitions in search of a new avant-garde, on the one hand, and the implicit

²⁴ See James Clifford, 'Histories of the Tribal and the Modern', *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988, pp.189–214.

²⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty speaks of a 'hyperreal Europe' in D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994, p.27.

²⁶ Russell Ferguson, 'Introduction: Invisible Center', in R. Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West (ed.), *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990, pp.9–14.



Renée Green, *Import/Export Funk Office*, 1992, installation view, Galerie Christian Nagel, Cologne. © the artist. Courtesy the artist and Free Agent Media

consequences of this discourse on the other – the questioning of those progressive ambitions was always also part of the hegemonic narrative.²⁷

Moreover, the expanding art field of the 1980s increasingly demanded that artists travel from one site to the next, and some artists made constant travel their way of life. New sites emerged through the newly funded biennials, and in Europe this frequently meant an emphasis on festivals and spaces for contemporary art in small towns.²⁸ At the same time, SoHo, which had been embraced as the spiritual centre of the New York avant-garde at least since the 1960s, began to lose its 'alternative' quality, with lessening claims to be a site of intense intellectual, artistic and political exchange, becoming more and more dominated by market logic and gentrification.²⁹ Consequently, in the minds of some younger artists it became mandatory to leave New York in order to maintain the ethos of the avant-garde. Within the European

²⁷ Further indicators of a loss of New York's control over the idea of the avant-garde might also be seen in Rasheed Araeen's journal *Third Text*, started in 1987 for the purpose of programmatically questioning the hierarchical relation of centres to peripheries, or Boris Groys's 1988 book *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin. Die gespaltene Kultur in der Sowjetunion*, which narrates an uncanny history of the classical avant-garde movements of the 1910s and 20s in terms of their entanglement in phantasies of total power and control. See B. Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (trans. Charles Rougle), London: Verso, 2011.

²⁸ The Bienal de La Habana began in 1984, with the Istanbul Biennial starting three years later. The 90s saw the inauguration of biennials in Dakar, Gwangju, Johannesburg, Montreal, Porto Alegre, Sante Fe, Shanghai and Taipei, among other places, with equivalent events established simultaneously in Europe in Lyon and Liverpool.

context, traditional cultural centres did not profit from the changing contemporary art situation. Most significantly, modern art did not return to Paris. Even in the 1950s, the European avant-garde had been thriving in highly 'provincial' contexts: between Krefeld and Nice, Arnhem and Kassel, and on to Wiesbaden, where Fluxus had its first festival. The decentralised cultural politics of Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Scandinavia were spreading throughout the continent, and perhaps Manifesta, the itinerant, pan-European biennial that first took place in 1996, is its logical outcome.

Europe, however, was not completely and productively lost in provinciality. In the mid-1980s, Cologne began creating its own model of a centre, at least for a short time: a centre mainly for social and discursive exchange. With the foundation of the Cologne Art Fair in 1967, the city gained increasing importance as a marketplace for contemporary art, hitting its peak with the success of painting's revival in the late 1970s and early 80s. Cologne became a magnet for artists and gallery owners from all over Germany and beyond; and a different idea of the avant-garde emerged, focused more on integrating painting into an avant-garde narrative than on rejecting it. History painting became the crucial field of struggle, enabling references to disastrous German history in general, as well as to its representation in media campaigns and art world politics. From Gerhard Richter, Anselm Kiefer and Joerg Immendorff, to Martin Kippenberger and Albert Oehlen, different formal approaches towards history painting developed, indicating a variety of political ambitions and positions at the same time. During the mid-1980s, Kippenberger and Oehlen cultivated an aggressive post-punk attitude, embracing the unorthodox Situationist Asger Jorn as their hero, and acting against the previous generation's pacifying acceptance of both history and a smooth-functioning art world.³⁰

In 1990, with artists like Fared Armaly moving to Cologne,³¹ Christian Nagel opening his gallery there and *Texte zur Kunst* being founded locally by Isabelle Graw and Stefan Germer, the city became a meeting point between New York and German ideas of the avant-garde. What seemed to be radically different trajectories became highly productive in a specific network of exchange, with the exhibitionary and the discursive shaping the dispersed

²⁹ Colin de Land and his American Fine Arts gallery perhaps represents the last outpost of the old spirit.

³⁰ In 1984, the collaborative exhibition of Kippenberger, Oehlen and Werner Büttner 'Wahrheit ist Arbeit' ('Truth is Work') exemplified their almost anarchist position (which Diedrich Diederichsen has called a 'virtual Maoism') and developed their otherwise exclusive interest in painting and collage even further in the direction of the exhibitionary and of projects. Kippenberger's 1987 exhibition 'Peter' at Galerie Max Hetzler emphasised that development, integrating a network of assistants into a sort of collective authorship. Artists like Michael Krebber and later Merlin Carpenter emerged out of this context.

³¹ And there meeting artists such as Josef Strau, Michael Krebber, Jutta Köther, Michael Clegg, Cosima von Bonin and many others moving in and out of the city, including John Miller, Stephen Prina and Heimo Zobernig, to name just a few.



'Kontext Kunst', Graz, 1993:
Kunstlerhaus, installation view:
Clockwise from left: Stephen Prina, *Galerie Max Hetzler*, 1991; Rudolf Stingel, *Instructions*, 1989, *Untitled*, 1992, *Untitled*, 1992; Renée Green, *The Pigskin Library*, 1991; Kasimir Malevich, *Three Suprematist Icons*, 1985; Louise Lawler, *Bought in Paris, New York, Switzerland or Tokyo*, 1986; Julia Scher, *Superdesk*, 1993.
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Universalmuseum Joanneum/Archiv
Photography: Neue Galerie Graz –
Universalmuseum Joanneum

debate. Andrea Fraser's first exhibition at Galerie Christian Nagel in November 1990 contained a black binder that assembled research materials about American-German economic and cultural politics after World War II, inscribing her own individual approach to cultural production within those historical conditions.³² Renée Green's 'Import/Export Funk Office', also at Christian Nagel, in 1992, required that the gallery function as a project space, where she arranged Diedrich Diederichsen's collection of black American popular culture in order to highlight overlaps with her own collection – thus emphasising cross-cultural traffic at the heart of a critical self-assertion.³³

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Among German artists the exchange is also clearly notable, but, in comparison with those from the US, it was mostly directed towards a self-reflexivity of artistic means and codes of subjectivity. Michael Krebber's cultivation of a hyper-referential, appropriationist, fan-like approach became increasingly concerned with painting, while exploring exhibitionary modes – involving the presentation of, for example, empty vitrines, or the work of other artists – thus aspiring to a position beyond medium specificity, reacting to the social demands of the art field in a dialectical way. Similar moves towards the discursive and the exhibitionary can be found in the work made by Cosima von Bonin, Jutta Köther and Heimo Zobernig at this time.³⁴

³² This material was nicely represented, spreading over a wall, in Fraser's recent retrospective at the Museum Ludwig, 21 April to 21 July 2013, where it directly opposed 'masterpieces' of the New York avant-garde, from Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns to Andy Warhol and Tom Wesselmann.

³³ See Kobena Mercer, 'Archive and Dépaysement in the Art of Renée Green', in *Renée Green, Ongoing Becomings: Retrospective 1989 – 2009* (exh. cat.), Catalogue Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne and Zürich: JRP-Ringier, 2009, pp.21–26.

³⁴ Especially in Zobernig's show at Villa Arson in Nice early in 1991, the exhibitionary and the discursive were intrinsically tied to each other. See my 'Constructivism as Allegory: Sculptural Discourse, Methodology and Aesthetic Practice in the Work of Heimo Zobernig', in *Heimo Zobernig* (exh. cat.), Cologne:

The project space Friesenwall, inaugurated by Stephan Dilleuth and Josef Strau in 1990 in Cologne, also integrated discursive and exhibitionary moments. But, in contrast to New York precedents, and although there were projects directed towards audiences beyond the art world's typical purview (for example, providing a venue for the Gray Panthers, an elderly persons' activist group), the main focus, as for the whole Cologne scene, remained an artists' community that lived a romantic and bohemian lifestyle that levelled the differences between (commercial) gallery and (public) project cultures.

My own project, 'The Message as Medium',³⁵ which consisted of monthly contributions by ten artists to the Viennese newspaper *Der Standard* and to the financial magazine *Cash Flow* between October 1990 and June 1991, is perhaps the first group 'exhibition' that endeavoured to cover this Cologne scene. In bringing together the practices of artists coming from the US (including Armaly, Clegg & Guttman, Dion, Fraser and Prina) with those of European artists (Werner Büttner, Krebber, Thomas Locher, Müller and Zobernig), it attempted to unite US and European avant-garde ideas. The project was conceived as an 'exhibition' in two media formats – the newspaper and the financial magazine – rather than as 'direct' media interventions. Through its durational aspect, it also emphasised competition between artists as to how far the limits of the two media could be pushed in controlling content and form.³⁶

Times of productive exchange, however, did not last long. Again, there are intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for this. The huge differences within existing understandings of artistic practice and the importance given to critical discourse and ideas of communality did not disappear in Cologne's shabby beer bars. And, as with every avant-garde claim, its social attractiveness produced immediate counter-reactions, generating social dynamics far beyond individual intention or control. Although the whole 'movement' had some level of institutional success, the crisis of the art market since November 1989 was felt more and more directly, limiting possibilities and enforcing competition. Already in 1991, the Basel Art Fair decided to withdraw from promoting experimental work while favouring a strategy of 'classifying' the heroes of the 1960s, mainly Minimalist and Pop artists, and ever since it has defined the contemporary through similarity with and confirmation of those historical avant-gardes. Another external reason might be that the de-legitimisation of New York as a centre concerned Cologne also – in the moment it perceived itself as a centre. Increasingly, the political ambitions of the Cologne scene's participants (especially the specific form in which critical discourse and bohemian attitudes had merged so productively

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Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, pp.394–400. Regarding von Bonin and Köther, see Isabelle Graw, *Die bessere Hälfte. Künstlerinnen des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts*, Cologne: Dumont, 2003, pp.92–144.

³⁵ See <http://www.mip.at/projects/botschaft-als-medium> (last accessed on 14 April 2014).

³⁶ See my 'Articulatory Practices (The Message as Medium)', *Parkett*, no.29, 1991, pp.160–62.

within *Texte zur Kunst*) were questioned again. As early as 1992, Armaly's invitation card for his show 'Contact' at Christian Nagel announced: 'No opening!'. In listing other non-Germanic names from the local telephone book, selected from around his own name, a completely different kind of community from the bohemian art crowd was at least evoked. And within the post-unification context of spreading German nationalism, from 1993 a more direct and locally based idea of political activism, directed mainly towards migrational and refugee politics, seemed for many to be more urgent than avant-garde problems.

In 1993, multiple projects and events in keeping with this spirit took place on a much wider European art stage, among them 'Kontext Kunst' at the Neue Galerie in Graz, 'Sonsbeek 93' in Arnhem, 'On taking a normal situation...' at the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst in Antwerp, the Austrian pavilion at the Venice Biennale and 'PROJECT UNITE' in Firminy, France.³⁷ Simultaneously, a small critical event named 'Trap' took place in Berlin, attacking the specific Cologne mix of art and politics.³⁸ 'PROJECT UNITE' was curated by Yves Aupetitallot in a Unité d'habitation designed by Le Corbusier and built in 1967 in Firminy, a small industrial town next to Saint-Étienne. 'PROJECT UNITE' can be taken up as exemplary in its integration of discursive and exhibitionary elements – in addressing the limits and possibilities of any avant-garde approach concerning its intrinsic historical and extrinsic locational or contextual reasons. Perhaps because of this, the project was received negatively.³⁹

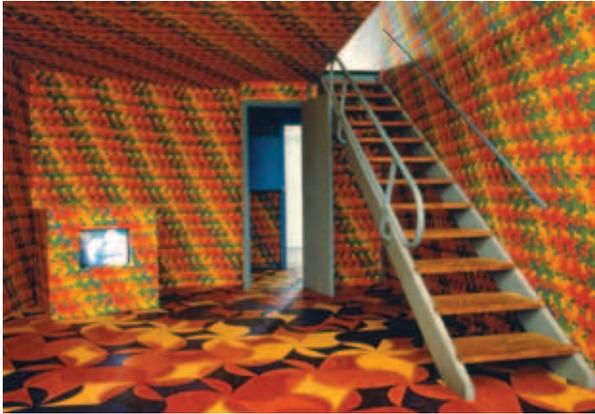
At the time of 'PROJECT UNITE', the Unité had long been established as a paradigmatic location for poor, migrant and working-class cultures across Europe, and only half of the Firminy building was still inhabited, with its

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³⁷ 'Kontext Kunst. Kunst der 90er Jahre' ('Kontext Kunst: The Art of the 90s'), Neue Galerie im Künstlerhaus, Graz, 2 October to 7 November 1993, was curated by Peter Weibel and featured over thirty artists, among them Fareed Armaly, Andrea Fraser, Stephen Prina and Heimo Zobernig. 'Sonsbeek 93', Arnhem, 5 June to 26 September 1993, was curated by Valerie Smith and included Michael Asher, Alighiero e Boetti, Stephan Dilleuth and Mike Kelley, for instance. 'On taking a normal situation and retranslating it into overlapping and multiple readings of conditions past and present' was curated by Yves Aupetitallot, Iwona Blazwick and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev within the framework of 'Antwerp 93'; described in its accompanying literature as 'An Exhibition on Exhibiting', it included installations by Judith Barry, Mark Dion and Renée Green as well as a historical overview of 'artistic events that took place in the progressive Antwerp between the years 1958 and 1969'. The Austrian pavilion at the 45th Venice Biennale, 13 June to 10 October 1993, was commissioned by Peter Weibel and featured Fraser, Christian Philipp Müller and Gerwald Rockenschau. 'PROJECT UNITE', Firminy, 1993, was curated by Yves Aupetitallot and featured over thirty artists.

³⁸ See Buero Bert (ed.), *Copyshop: Kunstpraxis und politische Öffentlichkeit*, Berlin: edition ID-Archiv, 1993, pp.214–15.

³⁹ See, for example, Hal Foster, *Return of the Real*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996, pp.196–97 (from his essay 'The Artist as Ethnographer'), and Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London: Verso, 2012, pp.195–206.



Jim Isermann, *Project Unité*, 1993, screen-printed cotton and laser-cut linoleum. Installation view showing apartment interior, 'PROJECT UNITE', Firminy, 1993. © and courtesy the artist

infrastructural features – such as shops and educational and sports facilities – slowly falling out of use. Taking place on one floor of the empty half of the building, most of the projects in 'PROJECT UNITE' were presented in individual residential apartments, which therefore maintained their 'autonomy' and communicated, in their communal appearance, the character of a group show; the building was thus utilised as a temporary 'exhibitionary complex'. All the invited artists, architects and designers – mainly from the US, Germany and France – were encouraged to reflect on those architectural, urban or social conditions, and to seek collaborations with each other or local inhabitants.

Aupetitallot rejected a direct public or social art approach, insisting instead on the fact that Le Corbusier's housing development claimed to generate a micro-society by architectural means and therefore offered an allegorical framework for reflection – not so much on the utopian dimension of modernist aesthetics but on how social difference can be negotiated by artistic practices within a wider historical and cultural context. Thus, both Le Corbusier's formal and conceptual allure, on the one hand, and his patronising attitude towards the inhabitants of his designs, on the other, were still haunting the building and challenging the exhibition project. In close exchange with some of the artists, mainly Armaly, Aupetitallot conceived a project which focused not on finding solutions 'out there' (meaning outside the art field), but on posing problems concerning the social contact, moral legitimacy and artistic possibilities on the heels of a highly ambitious modernist project. The exhibition overall made no claim for a community between artists and local inhabitants, and adopted no utopian stance towards a new formal totality: it didn't pretend to overcome differences of any sort. Instead it offered a subtle exploration of differences and common grounds between modernism and the contemporary, as well as between the harsh local living conditions of the residents of the Firminy Unité and those of the internationally travelling artists, as two very different forms of migrational identities.

Some of the artists' projects were focused on the problems of the architecture itself, as 'commanding' a certain way of living (in the work of Thomas Locher, for example, by means of a linguistic analysis of architecture's discursive tropes) or for its lack of privacy owing to the thin walls (Christian Philipp Müller) and insufficient number of closets (Tom Burr). The strongly visual exchange between the inside and the outside of the building, its imaginary role as a socially coherent 'machine' within a natural environment, became the starting point for Mark Dion's collaborative project with Art Orienté Objet, examining the decayed part of the building as an ecological system on its own, recuperating the utopian space through nature once more. Other projects focused on the social functions of the building, such as Martha Rosler's series of video interviews with the inhabitants, *How Do We Know What Home Looks Like?*, or Regina Möller's *Doll's House*, which turned Le Corbusier's rooms for children into miniature models for more flexible use. Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler focused on domestic cleaning, producing a household cleanser with a scent of 'monumentality'. Pointing out the early 'misuse' of the apartments through appropriation, Jim Isermann commented on the inhabitants' use of wallpaper by creating his own modernist version to cover the walls, while Renée Green reflected on the artist's status as an alienated 'intruder' by transforming one apartment into a highly private space full of references to her own family's living situation. Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and Anne Frémy changed their apartment into a very transitory living environment referencing temporary and migrational forms of architecture.

Aupetitallot was interested in media intersections rather than 'direct' social work. The exhibition included a television environment in one apartment, featuring an artist's video programme curated by Jason Simon. Posters were produced by artists, mostly painters (John Currin, Peter Doig, Michael Krebber and Cosima von Bonin), who reacted with emblematic signs to the significance of Le Corbusier's purist approach. Against the implicit total control over design in that approach, aspects of decoration, design, media and their appropriation by artists and residents alike were courted curatorially, especially in a section devoted to Victor Vasarely's devices for self-made artworks; but also in projects such as Jasper Morrison's *The World Slide Show*, Judith Barry and Ken Saylor's *(Home)icide: House of the Present*, which focused mainly on constantly morphing, computer-animated models of the apartment displayed on several computer stations in addition to a magazine documenting domestic fantasies and concepts of home, and Philippe Parreno's fiction film *La Nuit des héros (Night of the Heroes)*, about an eccentric art historian living inside the Unité. Fareed Armaly's collaboration with Radio Ondaine, a station based in the Unité building, integrated social and media elements with artistic and cultural media, and was inspired by a common interest in Rai Music. Clegg & Guttman's trading platform for music cassettes could be read as a highly allegorised model for alternative means of exchange; similarly, Heimo Zobernig's conversion of an apartment into a café could be understood as purely functional, but the exhibitionary context allowed for the functional to be perceived as something allegorical in itself. And Stephan Dilleuth's documentary on curator Valerie Smith's

'Sonsbeek 93', of the same year, linked 'PROJECT UNITE' to that exhibition. In all these projects it was impossible to separate issues of architecture (Nigel Coates and Stewart Helm took part), design (Tony Arefin and ABR Stuttgart were contributors) and media from social entanglements.

On the whole, the works in 'PROJECT UNITE' indicated neither a pure 'othering' from a universal ethnographic point of view – making local inhabitants into informants about difficult living conditions (and extracting symbolic surplus from that) – nor the business-as-usual attitude of an international art world. From a curatorial perspective, it was anchored in the local so as to focus on its intersections with the global, the modern and the contemporary; it prioritised interdisciplinarity and the coexistence of varying exhibition formats (group show and thematic show, intervention and programme). 'PROJECT UNITE' did so while performing and reflecting its own conditions, localising and historicising itself, not through a 'unifying' strategy, but in posing 'unity' as a still-haunting question in and through negotiating difference. As a case study for what was called 'Context art' (*Kontext Kunst*), at the time it indeed may have failed. But precisely in comparison with Peter Weibel's 'Kontext Kunst' exhibition at the Neue Galerie in Graz – which has become notorious as an attempt to label the whole scene under that title and to establish it as a new 'turn' (and, in so doing, designating the works almost exclusively as a sort of sculpture) – the difference made by 'PROJECT UNITE' becomes obvious. It was precisely not about a new art form being aware and in control of its context as its specific symbolic capital, but rather a project integrating different generations, disciplines and localities and thus creating a meaningful constellation directly out of a multiplicity of contradictions. Insisting on the problematic conditions of its own appearance in terms of social difference as well as its dependencies on the quickly changing economic and cultural relations of the expanding art field, 'UNITE' did not represent a movement but rather staged an ongoing conflict of artistic self-assertion in terms of its projects' discursive and exhibitionary potentials.

Therefore, the discursive and the exhibitionary should not be understood in terms of style – as available and recognisable patterns that can be easily followed or opposed in the name of pure practice, materiality or process. Rather, they function as a kind of horizon for all kinds of practice. The difference I want to stress here lies in the capacity to address that horizon and to reflect it within one's own practice, whether as artist, curator or critic. Within those practices we can recognise specific forms of a post-avant-garde methodology, based not so much on models of transgression, but on forms of displacement and condensation. As such, they are neither interested in the specificity of a medium nor in a complete overcoming of all traditional forms, but in specific ways of shifting and relating media to form, and situations to references, in all their historic, social and local dimensions.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ I have tried to describe that methodology in many articles dedicated to the works of particular artists. See, for example, 'Coercing Constellations: Space, Reference and Representation', *op. cit.*; 'Displaying Design: Situation and

These methodologies can only keep their peculiar tensions and critical potential if they neither get lost in the *mise en abyme* of discursive referentiality nor disappear within the seductions of a purely spatial presence. This means there cannot be any reconciliation between the discursive and the exhibitionary in terms of a universal truth moment. Only as particular and conflicting moments, localities and agencies do they make sense.⁴¹

Coda

I will end my story here, at the moment when 'Culture in Action' simultaneously staged the exhibitionary and the discursive, in its own way, in the American Midwest. A lot could be said about the exodus from Cologne after 1993, about people moving from there again to New York (Müller, Köther, Charline von Heyl), and even more so on to London or Berlin.

Decisive, however, seems to be that no new centre has emerged so far, no more Chicago than Cologne. Is this for good or bad? In 1994 Pat Hearn opened the first gallery in Chelsea and a new, previously unimaginable success story of New York's commercial world emerged, while London and Berlin became discursively influential yet highly decentralised centres, dispersing artistic productivity in many different directions. Similar conglomerations are nowadays present around the globe, and of course it is to be celebrated that the Central and Eastern European, Latin American, African and Asian avant-gardes have appeared on the art-historical map. But still, something seems to be lacking – a specific way of integrating ambitious art and critical projects, of focusing on the reflection of historic and social conditions on one's own speaking position, of providing the contemporary and the global with a conceptual, aesthetic and allegorical moment. We require a situation of approving and validating such efforts and not just replacing them with every new biennial.

Reference in the Work of Angela Bulloch', in *Prime Numbers: Angela Bulloch* (exh. cat.), Vienna, Oxford, Tilburg and Toronto: Secession, Modern Art Oxford, De Pont Museum voor Hedendaagse Kunst and the Power Plant, 2006, pp.9–26; 'Modernity as a Modality: The Condition of Photography According to Christopher Williams', in *Christopher Williams, Program* (exh. cat.), Braunschweig: Kunstverein Braunschweig, 2006; and 'Or: The Last Bourgeois', in *Michael Krebber* (exh. cat.), Vienna: Secession, 2005, pp.5–7.

⁴¹ My own curatorial work at the Kunstverein in Munich (1992–95) tried to explore the conflicting moments of history, locality and agency in 'solo' shows (by Andrea Fraser, Christian Philipp Müller, Adrian Piper, Martin Kippenberger /Albert Oehlen / Werner Büttner, Christopher Williams and Louise Lawler), as well as in project exhibitions including 'Die Arena des Privaten' ('The Arena of the Private', 1993), 'Die Utopie des Designs' ('The Utopia of Design', 1994), Stephan Dilleuth's 'Sommerakademie' ('Summer Academy', 1994), Renate Lorenz and Stephan Geene's 'Game Grrrl' (1994) and Group Material's 'Market' (1995). The idea of a 'discursive exhibition' is still haunting me – see my recent exhibitions 'Shandyism: Authorship as Genre' at the Secession in Vienna (2007) and 'The Content of Form' at the Generali Foundation in Vienna (2013).

This is not, however, supposed to be another story that moves into endgame. The question remains, do we really need the avant-garde or require a centre? And anyway, how do these two concepts relate to each other, especially if the avant-garde is understood as historically and socially coherent, a sort of 'supreme fiction' stating its own importance?⁴² Precisely within the global conditions of the contemporary, the question of what an avant-garde could be becomes crucial, not in rejecting the local and the particular once more, but as a sort of regulative idea about the meaning of any locality, its implicit potential to become an imaginary centre, perhaps among multiple centres. Between the spreading of a 'bad' pluralism and the insistence on one's own phantasmatic claims, the avant-garde only makes sense as a reflection of its own intrinsic as well as extrinsic criteria. As such, it needs history. Because only in history can its main agenda become visible: not in repeating the radical moments and reiterating art's implicit hegemonic codes, but in reinventing itself constantly as an ongoing reflection on and performance of the moment – the locality and its own agency as artistic practice – in order to grasp and question the changing living conditions within today's art field.

⁴² See Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology*, London: Verso, 2012.