THE COMPOSITION OF MOVEMENTS TO COME

AESTHETICS AND CULTURAL LABOR AFTER THE AVANT-GARDE

STEVE PHEN SHUKAITIS
The Composition of Movements to Come
New Politics of Autonomy
Series Editor: Saul Newman

In recent years, we have witnessed an unprecedented emergence of new forms of radical politics—from Tahrir Square, Gezi Park, and the global Occupy movement, to Wikileaks and hacktivism. What is striking about such movements is their rejection of leadership structures and the absence of political demands and agendas. Instead, their originality lies in the autonomous forms of political life they engender.

The *New Politics of Autonomy* book series is an attempt to make sense of this new terrain of antipolitical politics, and to develop an alternative conceptual and theoretical arsenal for thinking the politics of autonomy. The series investigates political, economic, and ethical questions raised by this new paradigm of autonomy. It brings together authors and researchers who are engaged, in various ways, with understanding contemporary radical political movements and who approach the theme of autonomy from different perspectives: political theory, philosophy, ethics, literature and art, psychoanalytic theory, political economy, and political history.

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Aesthetics and Cultural Labor after the Avant-Garde

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Let’s Take the First Bus out of Here

A User’s Guide

You are holding in your hands a book on political strategy, albeit quite a strange one. “A book on strategy?” you mutter to yourself. That can’t be correct. After flipping through quickly, it seem to include loads of discussions about various art movements, some currents of politically oriented cultural production . . . but, surely, just bringing together some pretty pictures and fancy-sounding theory doesn’t make a book on strategy, does it? Odd or not, this is precisely it: a book that attempts to rethink and rework the space where strategy occurs as an ongoing socialized process. It is a process that takes its cues from artists and dreamers rather than from generals, politicians, and other po-faced figures more commonly associated with the easier connotations of strategizing. To this you might raise an objection: Why even talk about strategy? Is it not the case, in the wake of the Occupy movements, the proliferation of horizontal and networked forms of social movement without top-down leadership, that strategy is an anachronistic concept, a concept that’s better left behind? I have a bone to pick with that set of assumptions.

This book comes out of reflecting on a set of experiences and political encounters, starting from the rise of the antiglobalization movement in the late 1990s. During this time it became quite common, one might even say hegemonic, to argue for the importance of a diversity of tactics within movement organizing. This notion continued to spread and very much has become a form of activist common sense. The logic of embracing a diversity of tactics allowed for the more confrontational approaches in protests with more legally acceptable and permitted ones. In certain ways this is quite logical, as it can be quite sensible to want to create a plural form of antagonistic politics such
that different forms of political action can coexist, even if their partisans are
somewhat unsure about the motivations and drives of other positions. Simi-
larly, in recent years much discussion has centered on micropolitical proc-
esses, tactical media, and forms of everyday subversion. All of this has been
very important and has brought attention to forms of politics that were often
ignored or overlooked.

But something about it is disquieting: namely, the hesitation even to dis-
cuss questions of strategy. Within this new form of shared common sense, it
is usually desired, and encouraged, to want to find moments of connections
and resonance between different struggles—even more so after the rise of
social media, where seemingly every political moment is shared and re-
tweeted, even if this process of social mediation oftentimes becomes mistaken
for the political itself. But simply advocating a position of endless connec-
tion, politics as a vast and seemingly infinite series of networked connections,
is not the formation of strategic orientation. Strategy is not the unfolding of
endless options but the consideration of contradictory and mutually exclusive
necessities.

Anarchist and autonomous milieus are very reticent to discuss questions
of strategy. Often this position is without very good reason, for the world is
burdened with a history of less-fortunate associations with a top-down mili-
tary logic, or with a tightly controlled attempt to centralize party formation
and leadership. And these are the very things that autonomous movements
from Occupy to the recent student and anti-austerity movements have so
often been trying to leave behind or get rid of. They thought they were gone,
only to find their return the day after the day after the revolution. So why,
then, bring these concepts back into play as a way to frame a book of autono-
mous theory and politics? Is it not the case, as Duane Rousselle and Süreyyya
Evren claim (2011: vii), that the autonomous politics have seen tendencies,
significantly inspired by anarchist and postanarchist thought, to decentralize
politics movements, ones that motion toward tactical rather than strategic
action?

This unwillingness even to raise questions of strategy comes up against its
own limits and has its own problems, even if they are not the same problems
of top-down forms of command. In autonomous politics, a lack of coordina-
tion and organization can lead into a hippie dropout politics, or minimal
cohesion and splintering of the core of the political. Or it can lead to the
creation of a political vacuum, where the more decisively authoritarian per-
spectives will take over the center of the political. But even this is getting too
deeply mired in the problem for what is just a preface, a user’s guide to how
to approach this text, which will get us dug into it much more deeply before
hopefully finding a way out.
What this book proposes to do is to revisit the question of political strategy, of the social processes of strategizing, but from another angle altogether. Let’s take as a starting image the one provided by Andrei Codrescu (2009): a chess match between Tristan Tzara, one of the founders of the absurdist-anarchist art movement Dada; and Vladimir Lenin, a determined and all-too-serious exiled leader of the Bolshevik Party, in Café de La Terrasse in Zurich, Switzerland. The year is 1916, and war continues to rage on with all of its bloody insanity. What has brought these two figures together, in this café, to a game of chess? Do we know that it happened? And if it didn’t, what does its very possibility tell us?

The image of such an encounter is striking. Borrowing from Codrescu’s description, on one side of the board Tzara plays the game for “chaos, libido, the creative, and the absurd”—whereas Lenin counters with a deployment of his energy for “reason, order, an understandable social taxonomy, predictable structures” (2009: 11–12). Between these two contestants, it is clear where one would typically think strategic thought is occurring: in Lenin’s brain, in his calculations, obsessions, and plotting. Clearly Tzara’s behavior, like Dada itself, seemingly is random and absurd. It’s Dada-ist after all, no? We associate Dada with the clowns, performers, and mystics. It is the communist militant, the Bolshevik, who is much easier to understand as a shrewd and thoughtful political strategist. And historically, given the victory of the Russian revolution, it is easy to understand why. And for that reason an urge to revisit that perspective is not surprising, whether to “repeat Lenin” (Žižek, 1992), or otherwise to draw from and expand on such a perspective some other way.

This book proposes to revisit the question of political strategy, but from the other side of the table. What if Tzara’s actions, in the approach of Dada, were not random nonsense, but a way of strategizing through collective creation and artistic activity? What if the practices themselves pursued by Dada were viewed as containing an implicit approach to political strategy? What if artistic practices were approached, as Krzysztof Zarek suggests, as a force field where “forces drawn from historical and social reality come to be formed into an alternative relationality” (2004: 7)? That is to say, not that Dada itself is a form of strategy to be repeated necessarily (although a good deal can be said for that), but rather that the forms of artistic practice contain within themselves a method of forming spaces for approaching strategizing from another direction—not from the perspective of the all-too-serious general or bureaucrat, but from the wisdom of the clown, the fool, and the mystic? What kinds of spaces and forms of subjectivity are animated by the operation of avant-garde artistic practices as spaces for strategizing together? What could we learn if we took this idea—that artistic practices contain
implicit approaches to strategizing—and followed it through other movements, times, and practices? What could we find within the sometimes apparently random words, gestures, and practices of artistic avant-gardes? This would not be to bring the question of strategy to artistic practices from outside, but to attempt to elaborate from the knowledge they already contain—teasing it out of the practices themselves.

**THE WINTER OF DISCONTENT VERSUS PUNK ROUTINE**

Each atmospheric state in this zone corresponds to a diagram of forces or particular features which are taken upon by relations: a strategy. If strata are of the earth, then a strategy belongs to the air or ocean.—Gilles Deleuze (2006: 100)

To elaborate forms of political strategies for artistic and cultural practices may be an idiosyncratic approach, especially given that the goal is not to claim that any of the particular practices here possess some sort of transcendent or all-knowing understanding of the situation their protagonists found themselves in. Rather, this absence of a transcendent position, this having to make do and work from the constraints of an impossible present, is what gives value to the practices developed. These are the visions not of the general looking down from the hill, but of the private trying to make sense of the situation from the muck at the bottom of the trench. Or to riff on Deleuze’s words quoted here from his book on Foucault, they are not founded upon the solidity of the land, the grounding of the earth—but rather contingent attempts to find a way to build a home upon the sea, or to live in the air. Ultimately, the task may indeed be impossible—although much is produced in efforts to live through the impossible.

Foucault likewise puts forth what he describes as a strategic conception of knowledge in 1975–1976 lectures, which are collected as *Society Must Be Defended* (2004). As Foucault quips in the summary notes at the end of his lectures, when Marxists discuss class struggle they tend to concentrate on investigating class rather than struggle. Or, to put it another way, Foucault points out the tendency in Marxist thought to structural analysis rather than to focus on the subjectivities created through cycles of struggle. This issue can be addressed by using ideas drawn from more autonomist perspectives that start from the emerging political antagonisms and subjectivities of struggles, although they occasionally commit the opposite error and forget to consider the structural conditions under which these struggles emerge. In this book, rather than explore the sociological nature of strategic processes, we
will elaborate on what Foucault refers to as “the strategic method concerning struggles” (2004: 281).

For Foucault, this strategic perspective is essential for analyzing the relationship between power and knowledge. This focus on the strategic composition of knowledge thus becomes a way into questions of domination that unfolds through genealogies of struggles in ways that bring together “erudition and local memories, which allows for historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics” (2004: 8). The strategic composition of knowledge is not found in the strata of the earth, or in the heavens, then, but in the constantly negotiated relationship between them, between the sea and the land. Strategy is the shore, either for departing or arriving, but always in motion. The question of strategy, of the strategic composition of knowledge, forms the way that we can approach the much broader and even more daunting questions of the relationship between art and politics in social movements, which has a long and varied history.

More pressing than attempting to map out these varied histories, though, is to draw from them a consideration of what this relationship could be today. What are the strategic lessons of the avant-garde today, especially if we are well past the heyday of the historic avant-gardes, and likewise quite past the time of the so-called neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s? Do these notions have any meaning today? Perhaps. If so, significant translation will need to be done to work from the genealogies of particular movements and social composition to a more general framework.

The most fitting image I’ve come across to illustrate this relationship between history, social territory, and a sense of strategic politics and orientation was provided by Patrick Reinsborough in his wonderful but often overlooked article, “De-colonizing the Revolutionary Imagination,” for the Journal of Aesthetics & Protest more than ten years ago. In it Reinsborough is making a case for the importance of radical imagination, for a politics based around taking direct action at the point of assumption, and for developing more strategically focused radical politics. This is a very useful intervention, precisely because he does not want to oppose the development of radical imagination and creativity in strategic thinking, but to understand that it is a strategic orientation that underpins and makes possible the expansion of imagination. Collective strategizing enlarges the possibility of acting and being in the world, of affecting and being affected by others, which forms the material basis of creative social practices.

In the most striking passage from the article, well worth quoting at length, Reinsborough describes how this strategic orientation is best understood as a long-term process and uses the image of a raptor to illustrate it:
In part it was inspired by a profound strategy insight I received while watching a circling bird of prey. The raptor seemed to spend hours calmly drifting on the breezes, waiting and watching, then suddenly made a lightning quick dive to seize its prey. Had I only witnessed the raptor’s final plunge, I might not have realizing that it took hours of patient surveillance for the raptor to be in the right place to make a seemingly effortless kill. I was struck by what a clear metaphor the raptor’s circling time is for what our movements need to do in order to be successful. Social change is not just the bird of prey’s sudden plunge—the flurry of direct confrontation—but rather the whole process of circling, watching, and preparing. (2003: 38)

This passage is relevant on a number of levels. The focus here is not just the moment of swooping in the all-too-easy to fetishize moment of conflict, but rather the importance of being on the breeze that the raptor partakes in, keeping its eyes open and fixed upon the territory. Similarly, one could say here that the raptor has a quite intense affective relationship with the territory, a literal “bird’s-eye view.” It does not mean that the raptor is focused and aware of every minute detail of the territory it surveys; rather, it has honed particular capacities for perceiving and responding to the territory in ways that benefit, preserve, and extend its life. The sense of a strategic orientation in aesthetic-political practices elaborated in this book is much the same: teasing out ways that particular interventionist art practices respond to and are formed by the affective social and historical territories in which they are formed and operate from. And from that drifting we can ask, what affordances do these particular practices allow in relationship to the territories in which they are operating? How are they shaped and formed by the grounding beneath them? And yet they are, as Deleuze would remind us, strategies that are truly of the air, or the ocean, and not of the ground, or the strata beneath it.

The strategic reading of artistic practices understands them primarily as compositional practices. That is to say, it explores what kinds of social movements, organization, and interaction they make possible. How do collective artistic and cultural practices take part in what Ranciere would call the redistribution of the sensible, shaping what can be said and how it can be said, and what forms of collective reorientation to and reshaping of the political does that make possible? To ask such questions is to subject artistic interventionism to a different set of criteria than those typically used for an art historical, anthropological, or sociological reading. This book advances an autonomist-compositionist reading, approaching collective practices as opening up and providing a space for strategic thought and orientation, in a way that is different from all of the less palatable connotations of strategy. Given this quite large task, it is not surprising that what follows is not a complete
mapping of the histories of avant-garde art and politics by any means, but something closer to what Raoul Vaneigem refers to when he says in his account of Surrealism that he is describing not a tradition, but rather "a somewhat serendipitous tracery of theories and practices constituting a kind of map of radical refusal" (1999: 7).

**OVERVIEW OF THE TEXT ITSELF**

Having briefly introduced the perspective to be developed in this book, let us now turn to the territory of the text itself. The overall book is composed of three main movements. Following this preface, or user’s guide to the book, is an introductory chapter of class composition and the avant-garde. This chapter introduces the key themes of the book, in particular the concept of class composition, and expands it to focus on aesthetics and artistic production. It points forward the perspective of understanding avant-garde currents as forms of “laboring otherwise” through the modulation of aesthetic sensibility and shifts in forms of organization and sociality. This forms the core of the book that is explored through the three following movements and the strategic relationships they create between artistic practice and concepts: territories (the practice of psychogeography, in the work of the Situationist International (SI) and those drawing from it), art/work (in the histories of the art strike and approaches to art as labor), and institutions (drawing from the activities of the Neue Slowenische Kunst, or the NSK, and its methods of overidentification).

The first movement, “Territories: Psychogeography,” is formed around Situationist International. The Situationist International has been one of the main reference points during the past forty years or more within social movement organizing, cultural studies, social theory and philosophy. Although the SI have been understood in many ways as inheritors and elaborators of a unorthodox Marxist politics drawing heavily from the history of the avant-garde, relatively little attention has been paid to the specifically strategic dimension of their thought and practice. This is surprising, particular in Debord’s case, given how much his work also draws from the history of military strategy. The first chapter examines the strategic aspects of Debord and the SI’s thought and politics and how they rethink the nature of strategy through collective forms of aesthetic-political practice.

The following chapter considers how psychogeography can be used as a point of crossover with the autonomist focus on the shaping of labor practices, and how the work of the SI can complement this. This chapter proposes
to bring together concepts from these traditions, working between the Situationist concept of psychogeography and the dérive, with autonomist writings on the shaping of the metropolis. Drawing on the autonomist concepts of class composition analysis and conducting a workers’ inquiry, it will be suggested that they can be combined usefully with psychogeographic investigations and methods in order to understand the shifting terrain of surplus value production within the metropolis and, based upon an analysis of these transformations, to develop new forms of political action and ways to sabotage the accumulation process.

The next movement, “Art/Work: Sabotage,” follows on investigating the changing nature of the urban fabric, in particular the ways labor has moved outside the factory space and infuses the entire space of the metropolis, which is now configured as a factory space. “Everyone is an artist,” proclaimed Joseph Beuys. Beuys, an inheritor of the avant-garde desire to abolish the separation between art and daily life, argued for the realization of a multitude of forms of creativity throughout many areas of social life, or forms of social sculpture, as he called it. What can we make of this goal in an age of semiocapitalism, where the dream of everyone as an artist has been realized in perverse form as “everyone is a worker” all the time? That is to say, where the relationality sculpted through the circuits of an always-present network culture are rendered into opportunities for capitalist valorization, all YouWork and MyProfit? This movement explores the way that artistic practices and interventions model shifts in social interactions, prefiguring transformations in the production of and circulation of value.

In doing so it engages with iterations of the relationship between art and value. It argues that art produces value not through exchange itself or through labor understood in a traditionally Marxist sense, but in how it renders value out of the labors of circulating ideas, images, and affects. It then considers possibilities for the sabotage of value within circuits of artistic value production, such as in the regeneration of cities through an arts-based economy. Finally, it returns to the history of the work refusal, taking it as an inspiration for rethinking a politics of artistic and cultural labor. In autonomist history and theory, the refusal of work is frequently invoked but seldom expanded upon in a significant manner. From the celebration of laziness to mass industrial strikes, work refusal takes many forms.

This chapter develops an expanded autonomist conception of work refusal, understanding work refusal as a compositional practice and arguing for analyzing it through the forms of collectivity and social relations that it creates. Based on this analysis, a form of “zerowork training,” or a pedagogy of learning not to labor, is proposed as a process through which antagonism and
refusal can be further socialized. Learning not to labor sits at the junction of the refusal of work and the refusing of the social energies of such refusal back into supporting the continued affective existence and capacities of other forms of life and ways of being together, as practice and as a form of embodied critique.

The third movement, “Institutions: Overidentification,” follows by drawing on the work of the Slovenian art movement Neue Slowenische Kunst. First, it explores the work of NSK’s musical wing, Laibach, and their usage and fusion of avant-garde and fascist aesthetics as a form of cultural and political intervention into collective imagination. This chapter examines the formation of overidentification as a strategy of cultural-political intervention uniquely suited to the 1980s Yugoslavian context. The question, then, becomes how a strategy of overidentification either creates or restrains the possibility of intervening within the creation of collective imaginaries within the present. Overidentification is, thus, a fitting tool for developing methods of intervention for contexts marked by a high degree of ambivalence and for finding ways to recompose a politics in and against these conditions.

From there, the next chapter turns its attention to the work of NSK’s fine art collective, IRWIN. It explores the influence of Russian icon painting on the early twentieth century avant-garde, and through that on the work of IRWIN and the NSK more generally. Although the Russian avant-garde sought new ways to bring art into everyday life, to use art to reshape society, it also drew upon histories and practices of icon painting to step outside a representational role for the arts even while attempting to disavow the metaphysical assumptions at work in such traditions of religious iconography. In this split between sections of the avant-garde, we can see a number of important questions not just about the relationship between art and politics, but also about the influence of icons and religious metaphysics in finding ways to answer those questions. Tracing the relationship between the Constructivist concern with faktura, or the material properties of composition, and the influence of icon painting, highlights the aesthetic combat between worlds, inner and outer, taking place within artistic practice. The embrace or disavowal of the metaphysics of icons was important for the Russian avant-garde, and thus was likewise important for the NSK as it took up and reprocessed ideas and motifs from them. By revisiting this split within the Russian avant-garde, and the varying ways that it drew upon the influence of icons, the NSK has used these tensions as materials for their continued development and renewal of artistic-political practice and its ambivalent relationships with the institutional forms that both support and constrain it.
RETURN TO THE THIRTY-SIX CHAMBERS OF
THE PERENNIAL AVANT-GARDE

In the early 1970s Gerald Sykes wrote a book that was mostly overlooked at the time and has become even more ignored since. This is quite unfortunate, because *The Perennial Avant-garde* is quite interesting, even more for the way that it tries to present a rather complex and nuanced analysis of the changing relationships between art, labor, and politics through the format of a novelistic narration, rather than a more traditional and easily approachable analysis. Through the book the various characters involved attempt to articulate what they are experiencing but lack the words for, and thus fail to describe. Broadly, they register the shift of the avant-garde from the realm of aesthetics, understood as a branch separate from everyday life, to it forming a series of vectors within an emerging cultural-aesthetic-service economy. The vivid mythmaking and challenging practices that characterized the avant-garde through much of the twentieth century seem to have given way to it functioning as an adjunct to marketing and design, rather than continuing to think it is possible to pose some genuine alternative to the present, to create a rupture in everyday life greater then a nice bit of street theater, an event that will just be noted and then brought back into the stabilized frame of the banal.

This registers in two different ways. One is an acknowledgment of the growing economic importance of the avant-garde, as in the “overproductive economy” it is suggested that “the avant-garde label is needed now to embellish the consoling myth that humanity, despite its many new misgivings, is still going forward” (1971: 235). It becomes a consolation; although the avant-garde might not be a total challenge to the structure of everyday life, it can still exist as a form of craft, as a market of authenticity, and thus still provide the basis for some way of life. Maybe even this is just a false hope, one that cannot stand dealing with the truth that the end of the avant-garde has come (which was much discussed at the time), as this is more distressing then the death of God. Instead, it is concluded that if the truth of the predicament of the time was recognized, it would be seen that the avant-garde is just “one more of many lures being used to entice them into what they call the rat race” (1971: 239). Is this the case? I must admit, I cannot tell. Perhaps even the category is not worth preserving, more than one hundred years after the declared death of time by the Futurists. But let’s hold off answering that question: It would seem that if a “perennial avant-garde” exists, it functions precisely by glossing over how it is constantly re-created, so it can continue to pretend it is new again. The real question isn’t whether it’s something old,
something new, something borrowed, or something blue, but rather what can be done with any currency that remains.

NOTES

1. The notion was originally formulated by Howard Zinn in the late 1960s. For more on the concept, see Zinn (2002) and Feigenbaum (2007).

2. Thankfully, in recent times this reluctance seems to have weakened, as evidenced by the explicit addressing of questions of art and strategy in the 2012 “Truth Is Concrete” festival in Graz (which led to the production of a handbook of artistic strategies); or how in the UK, Plan C has initiated discussions and gatherings around the notion of formulating “directional demands.” For more on this, see Steirischer Herbst Festival (2012), Maltzacher et al. (2014), or truthisconcrete.org. For more on directional demands, see Milburn (2015), or refer to the website of the “Fast Forward” gathering that is formed around this concept, http://www.weareplanc.org/festival.

3. I must confess to a certain almost kneejerk reaction to the revival of arguments for the formation of political vanguard and Leninism as a strategic orientation. Having said that, some versions of this approach manage much better to address some of the limitations of vanguardism as historically expressed, and they should be taken seriously. Most notable among these is Jodi Dean’s book *The Communist Horizon* (2012), which is particularly interesting for its working through communist notions of desire and attempt to rethink party formation as a contingent and flexible response rather then an attempt to impose a preset program from above. This could be linked usefully to work Antonio Negri (2014) did in the 1970s reworking Lenin in relationship to changing notions of class composition, thus arguing that the vanguard model is a response to a certain form of class composition of the early twentieth century, one that needs updating as that changes. Negri today is in a position that is close to what Dean is advocating. A useful discussion about the changing nature of networks, social movements, and leadership (or its absence) can be found in Nunes (2014) and Sutherland, Bohm, and Land (2014).

4. To suggest this goes against a pattern of interpretation that views Dada as being purely negatively oriented, such as when Charles Esche and Will Bradley suggest that if “the Constructivists and the Bauhaus represented the most developed modernist attempts to reframe the idea of art in the service of collective social ends, Dada represented the rejection of all such utopian ideologies” (2008: 15). I would argue against that interpretation, suggesting that a utopian ideology is at work, even if it is not immediately apparent.

5. Dafydd Jones (2006) argues that Dada can be credited for developing in the West a nonartistic theory of art. This is perhaps parallel to the way that Lenin is often credited, for instance by Althusser, as developing a nonphilosophical theory of philosophy.

6. This book grows out of my previous book, *Imaginal Machines*, which looked at the emergence of imagination as a collective capacity developed through social interaction, using an autonomist framework. Although it is not necessary to have that book in order to appreciate this one, you may find that certain aspects of the relationship between artistic practice, politics, and imagination (for instance, around questions of recuperation, worker self-management, the politics of precarity, and the influence of affect and socialist
feminism) are not explored here in-depth, but have been explored in this previous book, which is available as a free download at http://www.minorcompositions.info/?p=40.

7. The division of the book into three sections is not mysterious or random, but rather follows from an engagement with Asger Jorn’s notion of triolectics (2002). Although trying to pin down Jorn’s precise meaning is nearly impossible, the main function of triolectical thinking is to undercut and undermine the pretensions of dialectical reasoning, and to do so with a good measure of pataphysical absurdity. Triolectics is best known in the present in the version of three-sided football, where the addition of a third team to a game of football changes how it is played in more profound ways than might be apparent upon first encountering the changed form and its apparent humor. In three-sided football, the game is won not by scoring the most points, but rather by preventing points being scored against you. Similarly, the strategies employed shift from those of a contest between two opposing teams to a situation that favors ever-shifting and changing alliances, taken on and tactically discarded. The introduction of the third element undercuts the stasis in the continuing locked competition between the two. Similarly, this book will attempt to move debates and discussions based around binary dialectical relationships (for instance, between art and labor, art and politics) by cutting them against a third term that will transform the terms of the debate in question. It is perhaps a nonsensical strategy, but one that contains its own Zen Dadaist wisdom.
Chapter One
Introduction
Class Composition and the Avant-Garde

Revolutionary strategy is not something extra. It is an essential part of the study of the class relation. Though this relation is constantly shifting, though the nineteenth century is long gone, the two-sided nature of capital remains. Its analysis is not simple, but at the same time we have no vested interest in reveling in the supposedly incomprehensible complexities by which “professional Marxists” obscure the meaning of Capital.

—Harry Cleaver (1979: 64)

For all intents and purposes, the opening quote can illustrate that Harry Cleaver invented autonomous Marxism with his 1979 book Reading Capital Politically. This might seem like a strident and strange claim, living now decades after the death of the author, or the effacement of the subject rubbed out on the beach by the waves. Thus to claim that someone invented a new tendency of politics might seem even a bit laughable, if not delusional. Cleaver’s invention of autonomist Marxism was much like the way Marx acted as midwife to Marxism, which is to say that his actions helped to enable a process that was already in motion to carry forward—not that he was the sole actor and instigator involved. The genius of Marx was not to act as a sole source of politics and analysis, but rather to draw from all the thought, creativity, and discontent found within the workers’ movement of his time, which he then further developed in his myriad writings and speeches. The image of the author as sole figure conceals the manner in which underlying networks of knowledge and conversation—what Marx (1973) would call the development of the general intellect—flow above, around, and through the author as a device of expression. Cleaver’s invention was not a summoning from nothing, but rather a bringing together of a whole series of debates,
Chapter One

conversations, and analysis circulating through social movements of his time, and drawing them together in a new way.

With Reading Capital Politically, Cleaver helped to introduce into the English-speaking world a number of currents of dissident and heretical Marxism that were developing through the mid-twentieth century. Cleaver drew from the work of figures such as C. L. R. James and the Johnson Forrest Tendency, and recent currents of Italian Marxism developing outside the existing communist parties and trade unions. It’s interesting that Cleaver was not really intending to write a book of social history, or trace a lineage of political thought. His stated purpose was to develop a set of concepts and an approach that would be useful in elaborating a political-strategic reading of the first chapter of Marx’s Capital. The reading of that chapter fills the second part of the book, although interestingly enough it seems that Cleaver’s text was read more for how it lays out and describes a series of connections between different social movements and the ways they could be understood as connected. This is a role that Harry has continued to take up in his writings in the decades since, drawing similar lines of resonance through the Zapatistas (1998).

The underlying connection that Cleaver makes is very simple but highly necessary: the recognition of autonomy. This is especially important when working within a Marxist framework, which historically has tended to subordinate all claims of the political importance of a given struggle to an overarching claim of the dynamics of class and exploitation as the primary and foremost contradiction to be addressed. This is not what Cleaver seeks to do; he argues against it. Rather, his argument is that when trying to understand the importance of radical black politics, feminist struggles, indigenous movements, and other emerging political formation, the starting point is from an acknowledgment and recognition of such movements’ autonomy and importance on their own terms. This is to say, feminist politics are not important as they contribute to an understanding of class and exploitation (which they could and do), but are approached on their own merits and validity. Cleaver’s insight is to start from and draw out the possibilities of such antagonistic moments from this recognition of autonomy. He describes this as a strategic reading of social dynamics, and it is an argument that will be central for the development of this book.

This is part of what I would argue is the key contribution and defining insight of autonomist Marxism, or autonomism more generally: the desire to not preclude in advance the emergence of new social subjects, even and especially from unexpected positions or social locations. It is an approach to the political, a search for new forms of radicality, that does not want to shut down in advance its possible territories. One can see how this insight operated in
the activities of the early operaisti figures during the 1960s in Italy. Rather
than paying attention only to the activities of unionized workers, or those
located within organized political parties, attention was paid to the outbreak
of wildcat strikes and expressions of discontent and rebellion by workers who
were not involved in the existing forms of organization, whether parties or
unions. The autonomist perspective enacts what Mario Tronti describes as a
“reversal of perspective” (1979), drawing out the experiences and insights of
those who have been excluded from existing and constituted forms of politi-
cal organization. The core autonomist insight is that the emergent moment,
and movement of antagonism, is thus also an epistemological opening—one
that should be the point of starting analytical work. This is echoed by
Deleuze’s quite similar or constant argument that “the final word on power
is that resistance is primary” (2006: 89). If the tendency is for Marxist analy-
sis to be burdened by what J. K. Gibson-Graham would describe as its overly
capitalcentric nature (2006), Tronti’s reversal of perspective is to start from
the moment of antagonism as a foundational perspective. This practice of
starting from the moment of antagonism as its basis is broadened into a
framework of class composition analysis understood as the ongoing interplay
between the technical composition of labor in operation and the political
composition of forces in motion.

The autonomist notion of class composition connects with what Cleaver
describes as developing a strategic reading of Marxist concepts, by which he
means that he does not wish to attempt some impartial understanding of
them, but rather that he seeks in Marx’s thought weapons for use in class
war. For Cleaver the importance of this strategic reading, as opposed to a
tactical understanding, is that it “allows us to grasp the basic form of the
class war, to situate the different struggles which compose it” (1979: 10). In
arguing this, Cleaver puts forward a very specific notion of a strategic read-
ing, one that reserves this possibility for the position of the working class. Thus,
in doing so Cleaver rejects philosophical readings of Marx or the approaches
that start from an attempt to grasp the dynamics of capital in a more analytical
or structural way. Opposed to these, Cleaver rather proposes a reading that

self-consciously and unilaterally structures its approach to determine the meaning
and relevance of every concept to the immediate development of working-class
struggle. It is a reading which eschews all detached interpretation and abstract
theorising in favor of grasping concepts only within that concrete totality of struggle
whose determinations they designate. (1979: 11)

A strategic reading is to grasp the class compositional dynamics of a situation
immanent to the unfolding development of that social composition. It is pre-
cisely not to attempt to seek some exterior vantage point from a neutral analy-
sis that can be conducted. This might seem to go against the use of the image
of bird of prey in the preface, for it might seem that the hawk is indeed in a
removed and transcendent position.4 But this is not the case, as the distance
does not mean a removal from the territory, but rather a relationship to it.
Similarly, Cleaver argues that the demand that each category be explicitly
related to class struggle is not a reductionist framing, an attempt to reduce
everything to class struggle. Rather he argues that class struggle is not “independent, outside cause of the categories and relations”—it is “the confronta-
tion of the capitalist class’s attempt to impose its social order—with all its
categories and determinations—and the working class’s attempts to assert its
autonomous interests” (1979: 65). The strategic reading has no outside from
which to operate. It seeks to compose a moment of variability, whether in
terms of speed or time, from within the ongoing dynamics of class formation,
decomposition, and recomposition that are at work. This is not a failure to
find a transcendent position to operate from, but rather to claim that this is
not even possible if it was desirable, as Cleaver proposes that there “is no
third, objective point above the struggle, because revolutionary activity
reveals the other side everywhere” (1979: 65).

STRATEGIC READINGS AND
THE AVANT-GARDE

The goal of this book, then, following what Harry Cleaver proposes, is to
develop a strategic-political reading of avant-garde artistic practices.5 One
might be tempted to call it Reading the Avant-garde Politically, to follow a
similar format in the arrangement of the title. Similar to Cleaver’s desire to
distinguish his approach to reading Marx from other forms of more philo-
sophical or structurally oriented Marxism, here this will take the form of
drawing a distinction between more art historical or sociological approaches
to understanding the avant-garde. That is not to say that nothing is of use
within art history, sociology, philosophy, or other areas.6 Indeed, much can
be gained by drawing widely from different areas, and this text would suffer
severely if it did not do so. As Guy Debord has suggested (1983: 182), any
area of knowledge that has become autonomous to itself, such that it only
needs to answer to the criteria it has set to justify its own relevance, is a
worthy candidate for collapse and destruction.7 This could be argued about
the ways that the current architecture of disciplinary boundaries operates
within academic knowledge production—where it is precisely the mainte-
nance of the boundaries that often serves to block the generation of continued
inquiries not bounded within already circumscribed categories. In this book
the approach adapted will be more akin to the approach that Kojin Karatani
(2005) describes as “transcritique,” which for him is found working between ethics and political economy. Here the transcritical work will take place between an analysis of aesthetics, culture, labor, and the formulation of the political that such makes possible.

This is precisely the point that Franco “Bifo” Berardi makes for why he rejects using the category of “operaismo” to name the current of autonomist Marxism from Italy with which he is associated. For Bifo the essential theoretical contribution consists in “the reformulation of the problem of political organization in terms of social composition”—a reformulation that “abandons the Leninist notion of the Party as collective intellectual and leaves open the notion of the intellectual itself” (2009: 64). This is what underpins his rejection of “operaismo” as a term, precisely for the way it can be seen to involve an implicit reduction of who is being referred to: the workers. Bifo proposes what he describes as a “compositionism” as opposed to operaismo, as the focus expands from a focus only on labor to draw from a multitude of realms and forms of knowledge—arguably pushing forward the perspectives underpinning autonomist thought and taking them further. For Bifo, understanding the process of social recomposition, at both material and imaginary levels, “resembles much more a chemical composition than the mechanical accumulation of organizational forms” (2009: 143).

Although this book will devote attention to tracing lines of historical influence between different trajectories of avant-garde art production, exploring the social context in which the practices explore operate, and so forth, this is not the main task. The purpose here is to return constantly to the image of thought, and orientation thinking, provided by the metaphor of the circling hawk. The question for any avant-garde practice thus becomes a compositional question: What does it make possible in the process of social composition it is embedded from and emerges out of? How does it contribute to the political practices and activities that it is related to? The analysis developed here will follow on in the way that Deleuze (1995) gestures to when asking very “functionalist” questions about avant-garde practice: looking at what they do for the social milieus they operate in, more so than asking what they mean.

We’re strict functionalists: what we’re interested in is how something works, functions—finding the machine . . . The only question is how anything works, with its intensities, flows, processes, partial objects—none of which mean anything. (Gilles Deleuze, 1995: 21–22)

What kinds of social movement, of organizing potentials, are created though the practices? These are not questions of meaning but intensities,
flows, and processes. This is to approach avant-garde aesthetics not from a perspective of Kantian universalism, but more from exploring the continued distribution; and distribution of the sensible (to use Jacques Ranciere’s phrase) takes part in an ongoing process of social movement formation. How do avant-garde practices shift what is said, and how it can be said? What moments of affective contagion are transmitted through avant-garde practices? As Gavin Grindon suggests, the autonomist notion of political composition is important precisely for the way it “identifies as political moments of otherwise invisible or illegible performative social relation. These are often primarily affective, emotional, sensory and possess a fugitive history in official discourses, even as they compose more visible social struggles” (2011: 86). To approach avant-gardes from this angle is also to shift the criteria of success—moving from questions of aesthetic success to those of collective composition. Richard Kostelanetz argues that the basic measures of avant-garde work are “aesthetic innovation and initial unacceptability” (1993: ix). A compositional analysis would start from this but include how these dynamics connect to broader processes of class structure, to dynamics of social and political composition. How do avant-garde practices take part in facilitating a process of collective composition—of changing the relations between bodies and minds in movement? By asking this, it is perfectly possible to come to the realization that bad art can be connected to good politics, and as more often observed (often through the connection of fascism and avant-garde currents), really interesting and compelling art can be paired with reprehensible politics (Hewitt, 1993).

But perhaps we are getting a bit ahead of ourselves. Perhaps it would be best to take a few steps back before proceeding and to ask more basic questions. What is meant today by the avant-garde? What is the avant-garde today? Or, more fundamentally, is there even an avant-garde today, or is this a concept and framework that has been surpassed, as Hilton Kramer (1974) claims? Or worse yet, the avant-garde has become a cliché, where it finds itself reduced to “existing as an unfolding reaction to its own history,” as Adam Parfrey claimed almost twenty years ago (1987: 115).

I tend to agree with the claim that Marc Léger makes: The absence of the avant-garde today is only apparent; instead of being a readily socially visible, “the avant-garde idea continues to operate as the repressed underside of contemporary forms of extradisciplinary practice” (2012: 2). It does seem anachronous to suggest that political struggle could have a leading or vanguard point, one that would be advanced in the artistic and cultural sphere by daring forms of artistic practice. So what does it mean to discuss the avant-garde once it is detached from all the metaphysical and political baggage that is
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historically attached to it, much of which is explicitly rejected by the autonomist current of politics? Or perhaps more troubling, it might not be possible to detach the notion of the avant-garde from such baggage, from associated notions of historical progress and development, that it might be associated with (Allen, 2016).

Against this worry the gambit employed in this book is that it is possible to separate strategic thinking from this historical-political baggage. I would argue that today it is not the role of the avant-garde to take up a leadership position in social struggles. It never was. When F. T. Marinetti published the first Futurist Manifesto in *Le Figaro* on February 20, 1909, it included the statement, “Time and space died yesterday” (1973: 19). Thus, even from this first moment, it can be seen that the notion of leading time, of bringing forth radical political change at the cusp of history, has been rejected because its position is simply implausible, even laughable. Although there is much to disagree with in Marinetti’s arguments, much can be said for how he follows the claim about the death of time (years before the so-called neoliberal declaration of the end of history) with the argument, “We already live in the absolute.” The question then becomes finding a way to inhabit and make livable this absolute—how to act from a position from which there seem to be no good options.

Avant-garde practices have no front line today, precisely because the entirety of the social has been subsumed by strategic vectors of exploitation by capital. If there were an avant-garde practice today, it would not be cast in some vain quest to find the upmost point of capitalist development in order to develop an aesthetics that would create a rupture of this regime of the sensible. Rather it is the constant quest to experiment with the materials found within the present. Wherever you are now, right now as you read this, is a front line in the unfolding war to shape the subjective experiences of all those who find themselves subordinated to, or attempted to be subordinated to, the global empire of Capital (Hardt and Negri, 2000). To attempt to find a front line is unnecessary when all points are already within a front line. The question then is what practices allow the creation of ruptures of the present from within the front lines we already find ourselves in. Today the avant-garde becomes, as Antonio Negri (2012: 56) argues, not a form of moral duty, progressivism, or militancy, but rather a constructivist nihilism, a set of techniques helping to bring about a redistribution of the sensible.

To argue such is to continue to transform the orientation of the avant-garde as has been typically addressed within aesthetic and art historical writing. The avant-garde is then not only found within artistic practice, even if that historically has been its most common home, but across a whole range of
activities through which aesthetics takes part in the operations of social life. This is even more the case today when forms of aesthetic and cultural labor, the formation of tastes, immaterial goods, and other symbolic forms of production have moved much closer to the center of economic life, at least within significant sections of the overdeveloped Western economies. As Donald Kuspit argues, today art is “no longer the privileged domain of aesthetic experience” (2004: 11), but a transversal vector that is shared across work, leisure, play, and almost all spheres of human interaction. Today aesthetics is not a rarified realm separate from everyday life, but a field of encounters and interactions spread across it, resulting in a form of “everyday aesthetics,” to borrow Yurik Saito’s apt phrasing (2010). This could be seen as the very success of the historical avant-garde’s clamoring for the integration of art and life, its movement into the everyday, proclaimed from the Dadaists through the Situationists. But that raises this question: What has been the price of this movement? What have been the effects of the integration of art and life? A free-form explosion of creative production as liberated time? Or the development of new forms of labor practices, a more intense and thorough going of subjective exploitation? An autonomist-compositional analysis of the avant-garde distribution of sensible practices is not premised on just repeating a desire for art and life together, but understanding what forms of social recomposition are made possible, or prevented, by how they are brought together.

AVANT-GARDES AS PSYCHOSTRATEGIES

One of the first overall theorizations of the avant-garde as a specific phenomenon was developed by Renato Poggioli in his 1968 book *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*. From a compositionist perspective one of the interesting arguments that Poggioli makes is found in his statement that he will be studying the avant-garde not as genre or form of art, but as “common psychological condition, unique ideological fact” (1968: 4). What distinguishes the avant-garde here is not a shared style, or even necessarily anything to do with aesthetics or artistic practice—but a shared disposition to practice: the drive to open spaces of ruptures with the present worked out through artistic practices. It is also interesting that Poggioli argues that the connection between the avant-garde art (or art more generally) and politics cannot be established in advance, a priori, but only after the fact, from the stated positions and politics of those involved.

In arguing this, Poggioli goes against arguments that would seek to associate any particular practices, whether art as scandal or as social participation,
with having a certain kind of politics attached to them. He further suggests “each specific avant-garde is destined to last only a morning” (1968: 223). After this has passed, if it continues to repeat the same gestures, to carry on in the same practice, then it is doomed to be turned into its opposite. Theories are made to die in the war of time, as Debord would say (and will be explored in the next chapter). I would go further then Poggioli and suggest that it is not just that politics of any avant-garde practice cannot be establish in advance, but they are even more unstable. Even in retrospect the politics of a given practice are not pre-given, but are constantly composed and recomposed in their context as they are narrated, understood, deployed, and mutated.

Despite certain reservations about Poggioli’s argument, his approach to the avant-garde as a shared psychological state is quite valuable, precisely for the way that this foregrounds how the avant-garde is about a process of social composition more than an aesthetic practice. This fits rather well with the compositionist-strategic reading being developed here. After Poggioli it is Donald Kuspit (2000) who has followed the implications of this focus on the avant-garde as a shared psychological condition to the fullest extent. Kuspit argues that the entire history of the avant-garde is formed around a series of what he describes as psychostrategies that aim to restore the sense of self for artists who have been destroyed by the advent of industrial modernity. These psychostrategies remain ambivalent, however, being both defensive and assertive, characterized both by an attempt to regain a sense of self, and on that very sense of loss. Kuspit thus describes a range of these psychostrategies (2000: 72–85), from a projective identification with a material or signature substance (as can be seen in the Constructivism’s focus on faktura and materiality) to attacks on the crowd’s perversity. They can range from an embrace of hallucinating despair and delusion, to attempting to ascend into a heaven of pure art focused on abstract and transcendent form (as can be seem in Suprematism).

Kuspit’s cataloging of these psychostrategies is interesting, precisely because throughout the continued claims of avant-garde to the new and unprecedented one can find often similarly underlying shared motivational structures and compositional structures—and often multiple versions of them operating at the same time. But from an autonomist analysis, focusing too much on whether an avant-garde practice is truly new and unprecedented is in some ways beside the point, and is not what matters in the first place. What is of more interest is what effect the practice has on the social composition of the milieu in which it is deployed. Thus a new and innovative practice that does serve to facilitate further development of social movement is indeed inert even if aesthetically pleasing, and a repeated gesture that still retains a
capacity to enact a social affect is still a resonant possibility, a potential that has not yet been spent. It is thus perhaps not surprising that Kuspit describes how modern art becomes a series of “continuous discontinuities” (2000: 42–43), where previous practices and methods are liberally recycled and reused, even if this is paired with a claim to uniqueness and newness. For Kuspit, the avant-garde is in search of novelty, because when it has no conception of ethics, politics, or life overall beyond its own particular practices, it thus constantly seeks newness to revive itself.14 Contrary to that argument, we will explore in this book what happens when the avant-garde does connect itself to a sense of ethics, a political orientation, and modes of laboring. Although this clearly is not the case for all avant-garde manifestations, what is of greater importance is what these transversal connections create when they do exist.

ART ACTIVISM AGAINST ART

Most discussions of the avant-garde tend to follow Peter Burger’s (1984) framing in distinguishing between the classic or heroic periods of avant-gardes in the early to mid-twentieth century, as opposed to the rise of neo-avant-gardes during the 1960s. They seemingly were doomed to only repeat similar gestures and practices, but without anywhere near the same political effectiveness . . . and oftentimes no longer contesting the status of the artistic production or striving to have any political intent beyond a search for the new. But as Karen Kurczynski points out, Burger’s narrative and framing completely ignore movements such as the Situationists, who continue the avant-garde project but not as a mere repetition of earlier manifestations (2014: 5–6). This overly glib narrative, of course, has a good number of exceptions. But it is fair to say that since the 1960s the avant-garde has been more or less pushed aside as an active term of political engagement, with more recent discussions of the relationships between art and politics being framed around art activism,15 socially engaged practice, or interventionist art (Thompson, 2012; Bishop, 2004/2012; Esche and Bradley, 2008).

As Gavin Grindon (2011) suggests, two most common framings are used when discussing activist art: a formal approach that focuses on the move toward more explicitly collective practices; and a more critical and historical one that tends to analyze the revolutionary ambitions of such avant-gardes, with a focus on their failure as the dominant narrative. This can likewise be seen in recent writings that have been influenced by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s work on how management theory and practice has absorbed post-68 critiques of top-down forms of organization and turned them into the
governing “new spirit of capitalism” that animates post-Fordist forms of flexible organization (2005). In this framing the avant-garde becomes, as Paul Mann gestures, one of the mechanisms of the general organization of social forces: the production of the new, first as marginal, and then brought into broader social processes, but in a way that strips out the antagonistic politics and motivations that initially underpinned it.

The avant-garde is one mechanism of a general organization of social forces that operates in large part by means of the careful distribution of differences, imbalances, oppositions, and negations, and that regulates them through a variety of more or less effective discursive agencies in the so-called public sphere and along the margin itself. (Paul Mann, 1991: 113)

This book, against the laments of defeatism, whether in art historical terms or the recuperation of political antagonisms by capital and its lackeys, will take another approach. Rather than falling into a narrative about the failure of the avant-garde, Grindon suggests that one could look to its successes. For Grindon this requires going back to the notion of art’s autonomy, but broadening that to consider how this declaration of autonomy could relate to broader conceptions of autonomy found within social movements. How could and does the celebrated (and villified) autonomy of art relate to assertions of the autonomy of labor power? Grindon argues that the declaration of art’s autonomy is connected to “an ambiguous and perverse ideological valorisation of labour-power” even if it is not appreciated as one (2011: 83). This is the direction that much discussion of the relationship between art and labor has taken, showing that artists have been pioneers in developing new forms of laboring practices and their management in their practices; workers have innovated forms of self-management and self-organization that are now taken as the hegemonic form within the creative and flexible post-Fordist economy.

Against this conception, Grindon argues that a refocus on how the avant-garde is approached can have important consequences. His approach is to situate the radical avant-garde within the history of labor studies, using the autonomist class composition to analyze how changes in artistic practice can likewise be understood as shifts in labor forms and methods. In doing this Grindon draws connection between ways that autonomist labor politics are frequently based not on the celebration of the dignity of work and its embrace, but on attempts to refuse and escape from work—to avoid being dominated by labor. The connection to be made between art conceived of as labor and autonomist labor politics is precisely around the notion of refusal—and how forms of refusal relate to practices of self-abolition. In autonomist theory the struggle of the working class is only possible precisely
to the degree that the position of workers is not fully subsumed into capital. Antagonism and rebellion are argued to flow not from a celebration of the glory of labor, but from anger at being reduced to mere labor. The goal of class struggle is not to celebrate and preserve the working class, but to abolish the working class as a group of people caught within a subordinate position in a system of power. Thus it can be seen that the drive of avant-gardes to negate their status as artists (Burger, 1984),\textsuperscript{18} which can also be seen as a thread connecting Dada, Surrealism, through the Situationists and more recent currents, can be connected with the working-class drive to strive toward power through self-abolition of the existing subordinated condition. Grindon argues that connections exist between these differing forms of refusal and self-abolition as the artistic refusal of the position of the artist throws the notion of the “artist” into question:

Avant-gardes often did not conceive of themselves as a vanguard of artists leading the way, but as artists refusing the role of artists. This rupture with the idea of art was bound up with a rupture with the idea of work, which became a common theme among avant-garde groups, for whom dissidence was a matter of disidentity. The abolition of art was first a self-abolition. (2011: 84)

The avant-garde refusal of the position of the artist was premised on the refusal of this position as an advance guard of developments in labor power and working practices. Although this might seem at face value a far-fetched claim, close connections can be seen between how avant-gardes from the Surrealists through the Situationists have paired a critique of the position of the artist with a politics of work refusal. That these two elements would come together is not coincidental, but it flows from the realization of the value of artistic activity as a kind of labor power, which must be refused in order to be liberated from the demands of capital accumulation and valorization.

\textbf{HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS: ART AND AUTONOMISM}

Another way to approach the overlaps between strategic-compositional analysis and the avant-garde is to look at the concrete, historical overlaps between art production of autonomist movements. At first glance this is a strange idea, given that the origins of autonomist movements are mainly in Marxist-oriented labor movements, ones that are more well known for their history of wildcat strikes and factory occupations then they are for anything that would typically be thought of as art production. But that is not so worrisome, as the point would not be to declare that strikes or factory occupations constitute a
form of relational aesthetics or social sculpture (as amusing as that would be), but rather to understand more generally what sorts of links, connections, and resonances flowed between artistic milieus of the time and autonomist movements. But as Antonio Negri (2013) suggests here, perhaps this engagement with art was through the activities of early autonomists, living in (or as art) rather than more commonly assumed forms of dealing with art.

Although we did not deal directly with art, we were living in art. (Antonio Negri, 2013: 208)

Speaking more broadly, Marco Scotini has characterized the art scene of 1960s Italy as alternating between models of integrating with or opposing the industrial society from which it arose. This could be seen in what he describes as a “pessimistic extreme,” represented by figures such as Piero Manzoni and Pier Paolo Pasolini, and an opposite but complementary “optimistic extreme” including figures such Francesco Lo Savio and Italo Calvino (2010: 67).19

In a more recent article in New Left Review, Mario Tronti, looking back over the early history of autonomism, brought focus to an interesting array of aesthetic connections that typically have not been appreciated in any significant way. For Tronti the aesthetic dimensions of early autonomism were not in the production of specific pieces of art, but in how broader aesthetic considerations influence styles of communication. This could be seen in the style of writing adopted for publications, which Tronti describes as a high style of writing that is “chiselled, lucid, confrontational, in which we thought we grasped the rhythm of the factory workers in struggle against the bosses” (2012: 119). This is an interesting claim: Tronti is saying here in that their inquiries and writing about factory conditions, the reality of labor exploitation, they did not merely try to grasp them at a factual level or in the content of the writing, but also at the level of form. This would mean to turn the suffering of factory line labor, and the anger it was arousing in the workers, into the very structuring of the writing. Tronti argues that each historical passage, each configuration of political and technical composition of labor, requires finding a different mode of symbolic expression that corresponds to it.20 He further elaborates:

the boys who stood outside the gates of the Mirafiori factory in Turin in the early morning went home at night to read the young Lukács’s Soul and Form. Strong thought requires strong writing. A sense of the grandeur of the conflict awoke in us a passion for the Nietzschean style: to speak in a noble register, in the name of those beneath. (2012: 120)
Here we have a compelling example of aesthetic concerns informing early autonomism, although in a way that might not be apparent without knowing the backstory. If indeed the occupying workers were going home at night to read Lukács, much in the same manner Jacques Ranciere describes the role that worker-poets played key roles in development of the labor movement in nineteenth-century France, it would be speculation to suggest what they made of Lukács’s exploration of the “mystical moment of union between the outer and the inner, between soul and form” (1974: 4). But it would not be hard to see how he was trying to bring together a sense of tragedy, an epic scale sense of conflict that Tronti describes as Nietzschean in style, with the huge outbursts of labor unrest occurring within the factories. Thus it no surprise that early autonomist publications likewise drew from a visual history and imagery of previous moments of intense social and political conflict, including Bertolt Brecht and Vladimir Mayakovsky, as well as the Surrealist Paul Eluard and baroque sculptor Johann Baptist Babel. Early autonomist publications, much like the Situationists, also employed the uses of comic strips, developing the figure of “Gasparazzo” to represent the striking southern Italian workers (Pizzolato, 2008).

One could draw a different history of autonomist movements, looking at the ways that engaging with and drawing from artistic practice transformed how they functioned. These connections become much more obvious and explicit going into the 1970s, where the movement of 1977 in Bologna borrowed imagery and images from Dada and Surrealism, at one point proposing to initiate a movement of “Mao Dadaism,” where the absurdity of Dadaism would be merged with an autonomous media politics and the scale of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. This approach fed into the founding of Radio Alice, one of the first pirate radio stations in Italy, which until that point had been only under state (and political party) control. What is most interesting about Radio Alice is that it did not just discuss the concerns and politics of autonomous movements, but it became a direct participant in them. For instance, during demonstrations Radio Alice would be conducting live interviews with participants and providing information about the movement of police. In this way the autonomous media politics of the autonomous movements of the 1970s, which is perhaps best known in English through the writings of Franco “Bifo” Berardi, took up the argument that Tronti made that each historical passage needed to develop its own means of representation and symbolic repertoire. This argument could be extended further to look at the role of aesthetics and artistic production in the German autonomien (Katsiaficas, 2001), or any of the movements that have taken influence and inspiration from autonomist currents. Trying to describe and catalog all these resonances is beyond the scope of this particular project, as interesting as it
would be. What is more the point is that aesthetic practices fed into autonomist politics, sometimes directly, and other times in a more indirect fashion. In all of these cases we can see what Witz and Warhurst refer to as “aesthetics as organization” (2003).

**ART AS AN EXPRESSIVE ONTOLOGY OF LABOR**

Today this avant-garde is not moral duty, progressivism, ideological militantism, and suchlike. No, the new realism is much rather the witnessing of an era of despair—a punk constructive nihilism—expressive violence and reversal of mystifying techniques of communication. (Antonio Negri, 2012: 56)

One of the most sustained engagements, at a theoretical level, between artistic labor and autonomism can be found in the writings of Antonio Negri. This is somewhat paradoxical in that the arts, or even cultural labor generally, have never been a primary focus for Negri, who for the most part has been much more focused on broader questions of the changing nature of politics, labor, and the state. Nonetheless he has turned to questions of art repeatedly during more than five decades of writings (Murphy, 2012). Although significant pieces of Negri’s writings on artistic matters have not been translated, such as his massive book on the nineteenth-century poet and philosopher Giacomo Leopardi, other materials have found their way into translation. Most notable is a book of letters on art and labor that he wrote during the 1980s while living in exile in France, which more recently has been translated under the title *Art & Multitude* (2012).

One of the most striking arguments is not an argument at all, but a perhaps overly neat and clever schematic diagram where Negri draws connection between modes of production and labor practices with modes of artistic production, particularly in terms of the development of style and genre. He first suggests a connection, roughly between 1848 and 1870, between the rise of the “professional worker,” or the highly skilled craft worker with a significant degree of control over the control of the labor process, and the rise of realism in representation (for instance, in the work of someone such as Gustave Courbet). Following from there he argues for a connection, over the period between 1871 and 1914, between capital’s response to increases in contestations of the divisions of labor (through the emergence of unions and spreading of strikes), the emergences of self-management in the labor, and the development of impression. Third, he suggests in the period between 1917 and 1929, as a response to the Russian revolution in the arts, expressionist and experimental abstraction develops; as for Negri the forms of abstraction developed within these artistic practices mirror and respond to
the increasing abstraction of labor. The period between 1929 and 1968 is identified with the emergence of the “mass worker,” or the deskillled worker who performs repetitive labor in the factory system, thus losing the degree of autonomy exercised by the professional worker. For Negri, during these periods abstraction becomes more analytic. Finally, he suggests a still open-ended and current period starting in 1968, during which Negri identifies the figure of the “socialized worker,” or the worker whose position involves engaging with communication, affects, and symbolic work, as becoming the dominant form. This is argued to be connected much more closely to an aesthetics of experience found, for instance, in the rise of conceptual and performance art, or the popularity of social sculpture and art as social practice.

This schematic classification is striking for a number of reasons. In arguing this, Negri takes the analysis as having long been one of the key arguments made within autonomism, that the development of capitalism is really a response to insurgences of the working class rather than capital’s self-directing capacities, and moved it to the domain of artistic histories and genealogies. This is very similar to the way that someone such as Jacques Attali (1984) has argued that forms of artistic practice change their form in relationship to economic conditions, but actually prior to them. Thus for Attali change in artistic production has almost a prophetic role, prefiguring coming broader changes in cultural labor, production, and the economy more generally. This argument has been taken up by other figures who focus on the changing nature of labor in cultural production, such as Lasch and Urry (1993), who likewise argued that the changes in production food within arts and entertainment industries prefigured broader patterns that emerged later in the rise of financialized and flexibilized post-Fordist economics.

But differences here are both key and important. In making this classification, Negri is not falling back on an older Marxist model of economic base and superstructure, where the economic base is determining the superstructure. This would frustrate and confuse his argument, as it would require for the dependent economic infrastructure at the same time to be able to transform itself first, while at the same time being determined in the economic base that supports it. At the very least this argument would minimally recast the relationship between base and superstructure, or perhaps more interestingly transform the very model itself. Commenting on Negri’s writing, Alberto Toscano (2009) has argued that here we have a principle of correlation for art and labor that does not stem from the form of base and superstructure but from an expressive ontology of labor, where both art and politics have labor as their common source. The correlations between art and politics
are thus based on tracking them to their common root, which is the form of laboring practice they relate to.

Although such a schematic is still perhaps a bit overly neat in its reading of both artistic and laboring genealogies, it does have several notable advantages. Most important, it helps to step outside of the all-too-easy tendency to fall into romanticism about the labor of art, where it is assumed that artistic practice has some sort of inherent anticapitalist or countereconomic basis. This is not always argued openly, but it is found buried within the notion of the “starving genius artists” who pursue their craft despite having little to no hope of economic sense or security to be provided from it. Or it can be felt in the idea that if “you’re doing what you love, then it’s not really work”—as work is counterposed, thought to be the opposite, of self-directed and self-fulfilling creative practices. And in this way the image of artistic labor, of the artist as a kind of ideal worker who is not really working, underpins this romantic conception of artistic practice. Negri rejects this, suggesting that art is not some special reservoir of autonomy and does not provide an outside to capitalist production and its measures. Against this romantic reading of artistic practices, Negri argues that they must be understood in relationship with labor and its transformation, and thus rather than being considered outside of capitalism, they can only be understood “in its ‘insideness’ . . . the artistic mode of production was flattening out and aping the capitalist mode of production” (2012: ix). This seems especially true for more current conditions where art and value production are increasingly intertwined, and during which forms of artistic value production have spread more generally across the economy and social interactions. Negri, however, does not want to restrict this analysis to current conditions, or to development of forms of immaterial labor, even if the focus has been on developing this kind of analysis. These connections will be returned to again in the second section of the book, where they will be explored more. But for now the main point to be made is that for Negri this close connection between art, labor, and politics is based on the changing nature and potentials of laboring practices, and that as such it needs to be approached carefully to understand what it reveals. The changing shape of artistic practices and labors is then not only important for what they tell us about labor within the arts, but also more broadly for the overall changing conditions of class composition, labor, and politics.

Despite Negri’s antiromantic take on artistic labor, which at times seems to contradict his better known near constant and almost delusional optimism about changes in labor and politics, Negri does offer a way that art can be understood in revolutionary manner. For Negri this is based on distinguishing between artistic production, its value, and the value produced within surplus
value production for capital. Negri argues that art can be distinguished to the extent that “artistic labor is liberated labor, and the value produced is, consequently, an exceedance of being freely produced . . . artistic labor is the index of the human being’s inexhaustible capacity to render being excedent—labor liberated” (2012: 48–49). At first glance this would seem to fall right back into a romantic conception of artistic labor. But Negri is arguing here that the capacity for artistic labor to act as this excessive and inexhaustible capacity is not found within itself, but in the conditions in which it is situated. Artistic labor produces a surplus, and it is produced because the surplus is greater than required by mere survival. But it does not guarantee freedom or autonomy, which is found if it becomes possible for artistic labor to be excessive to the regimes that govern it. Autonomy is not guaranteed by the form of labor, artistic or otherwise, but the social composition in which the labor is embedded. Thus Negri argues “in this epoch of ours, there will no longer be avant-gardes but only a surplus of being which we try to appropriate” (2012: 95).

 CONNECTIONS AND MACHINES

This is the machinic function of the avant-garde, after the avant-garde, explored in this book as a form of surplus that needs to be understood as such and struggled over. It is the surplus of sociality, of labor, of creativity . . . although often found involved in artistic and political practices it is not only found there, but through different areas of social interaction. The avant-garde becomes what Cesare Cesarino refers to as the “surplus common” (2008), where surplus is found in the form of living surplus of resistance. The avant-garde is thus not one thing, and certainly not only a particular artistic or aesthetic sphere, but anywhere this surplus of vitality emerges and shows itself, whether in labor, art, politics, or any number of diffuse everyday interactions. In much the same way that Harry Cleaver did not necessarily invent anything himself when he brought together a constellation of traditions and practices, based around the recognition of autonomy, which he would draw together through a form of politicized reading, the task would be the same here. The compositionally focused reading of avant-garde practices seeks to explore moments where this surplus of being is found, and explore what it produces in that situation, and from that how it might be possible to rebuild forms of social recomposition from these moments of possibility.

The process of teasing out moments of possibility and recomposition from artistic-political practices, developed through an autonomist reading of them,
overlaps very much with the way that Gerald Raunig frames the relationship between what he describes (in a Deleuzian-autonomist manner) as revolutionary and artistic machines. If through much of the twentieth century the drive was to incorporate the formation of these artistic or revolutionary machines fully into the other, this has been abandoned in favor of making connections between areas that do not seek to subsume the other. This is what Raunig conceptualized through the idea of the concatenation of art and politics, the creation of transversal connections across areas, in which “both overlap, not to incorporate one another, but to enter to into a concrete exchange relationship for a time” (2007: 18). This means abandoning the lingering avant-garde dream to integrate art totally into everyday life, for it very well may be that has happened already, and not quite in the liberatory manner the avant-garde would have wished. A dialectical sublimation of art into revolution maintains a hierarchical relation between them. The task is more finding a way that temporary overlaps and connections serve to make possible other kinds of politics, relationships, and aesthetics.

The abstract machine creates a new reality, constructs new ways of being, but although inseparable from this innovation of existence, it has no being . . . The abstract machine doesn’t represent anything because nothing exists outside of its action, it is what it does and its immanence is always active. In the middle of things the abstract machine is never and end; it’s a means, a vector of creation. (Stephen Zepke, 2011: 2)

After the avant-garde the avant-garde becomes another form of abstract machine, as Stephen Zepke would say, but still a vector of creation, which if kept open can unfold from within itself new strategic modes of becoming.

NOTES

1. The framing of Cleaver’s book in many ways seems to be formed around making a response to Althusser, in particular his concept of waging a “class struggle in philosophy.” Cleaver wants to counter this philosophical reading, which he completely objects to and suggests can only function in the interest of capital. In a particularly amusing chart mapping the intersections between the various perspectives that Capital can be read from, Cleaver goes as far as to suggest that it is impossible for a philosophical approach to contribute to the necessary tasks of class struggle. In doing this he takes Althusser’s notion of a symptomatic reading, and his claim that there is “no such thing as an innocent reading” (1979: 14) and turns it against Althusser, namely, to suggest that a more philosophical reading is basically complicit with continuing exploitation by capital. Although I do not find this strident version of the argument all that convincing, as it does seem that some philosophical projects clearly do contribute to the tasks of class struggle and social recomposition, even if one wants to reject Athusser’s version of this. Cleaver does not
include any discussion of the relationship between aesthetics and class struggle, and likely would lump such in with a more philosophical approach to reading Capital to be rejected (and thus would likely not find much of use in this book project). Nonetheless, I still find Cleaver’s framing of these matters interesting, even if his work seems to disagree with the basis of what I’m attempting to do with this book project.

2. This is much in the same way that publication of Empire by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri would bring these ideas and this approach to an even wider audience upon its publication in 2000. Similar work was done by journals such as Telos, which published autonomist materials during the 1970s, as well as the important work of Ed Emery’s translation and publishing work in Red Notes (1979).

3. For a more general history of autonomous Marxism in the Italian context, see Wright (2003 and Edwards (2009).

4. For an interesting exploration of some of the tensions and problems in the dichotomy between immanence and transcendence in relation to the political, see Mandarini (2010).


7. Or as Ken Wark would reframe this strategic relationship to knowledge: “Unlike the scholar, the strategist is not the proprietor of a field of knowledge, but rather assesses the value of the forces aligned on any available territory. The strategist occupies, evacuates or contests any territory at hand in pursuit of advantage. Where philosophers came of late to concern themselves with endless green fields of ineffable traces and immanent virtualities, strategists take their chances against mundane necessity” (2013: 176).

8. Although it is true that as autonomist thought develops through the 1970s it is the category of the worker that is constantly expanded and mutated, for instance by bringing into consideration unpaid domestic labor, migrant labor, and other forms of work, it is still possible that this could be an issue if existing associations with who is included in the status of “worker” are brought along. A constant tension in the development of autonomist thought is the throwing into question and expansion of work and the categories of workers while still using these categories. This dynamic continues in debates around immaterial and affective labor, which develop directly out of similar debates that occurred during the 1970s.

9. This could be usefully connected with Esther Leslie’s writing on the connections between nature, art, labor, and the chemical industry (2005). This would be a quite fitting example of Bifo’s argument for a compositional analysis where class functions at a literally chemical level, with broad ranging consequences that play out within art and culture as well as within industrial production.

10. Although a more philosophical aesthetics is not the main focus of this text, it should be observed that other ways to approach Kant and more universalistic aesthetics would be worth explore further, even if they are outside the boundaries of this current project. For more work in this direction, see Wayne (2014) and De Duve (1996).
11. For more on the relationship between affect, art, and class composition, see Grindon (2010) and Shukaitis (2009, chapters 5 and 6).

12. This section owes a good bit to conversations with Liam Weikart, whom I’d like to thank for his insights.

13. Kuspit also elaborates in another text (1994) how these psychostrategies veer over a tendency to form cult-like social formations around “star” artists.

14. Given the amount of attention paid to novelty (as well as historical importance) within the evaluate judgments of the art market, perhaps it is easy to forget that artistic production was not always regarded as collectors’ objects. As Giorgio Agamben (1999: 33) reminds us, to think such during the Middle Ages would have been viewed as monstrous, as the work of artistic production (which was not often thought of as artistic production per se) was subordinated to the spiritual and religious functions involved. In this context, the subjectivity of the artist was identified with the materials of artistic production. Perhaps in this sense there are avant-garde currents that are not really a total rupture from what has come before, as much as a return to earlier approaches. This will be returned to in discussions of Constructivism, particularly in the ways that the NSK draws from earlier traditions of icon painting as filtered through the Russian avant-garde.

15. Interestingly enough the first known usage of the word “activism” was by Lajos Kassak (Hungarian avant-garde artist) in 1919, in the journal Ma, which referred to itself as an “activist art journal” (Benson, Forgács: 2002).

16. For a more general background on the relationship between art and class, see Hadjinicolou (1978), Guttsman (1997), and Taylor (1978).

17. Work refusal, as practice and perspective, will be returned to in the second section of the book, where it will be explored as a possible response to the ever increasing demands of a cultural work-fueled economy.

18. Richard Murphy (1999) argues that Burger’s framework is based on Dada and Surrealism rather then broader and more inclusive versions of genealogies, one that, for instance, would include expressionism within it (which is Murphy’s focus). Although there is something to be said for broadening the genealogies of the avant-garde, Burger uses a strong line of connections and influence between the movements to frame his work, which could arguably form the basis of a compositional chain of influences. This is more interesting in terms of the political effects that flow through such a series of movements, and thus is deservedly a major focus, even if framing could be broadened further.

19. For more information broadly on Italian art during the 1960s to 1970s, in particular its relationship with politics, see Cerizza (2010) and Coles and Rossi (2013).

20. An interesting counterargument to Tronti’s claims about the close connection between aesthetics and autonomism is provided, strangely enough, by Negri, who suggests there was little practical connection between their activities and those of contemporary artists and designers. In a recent interview, when asked about connections between the autonomists and Italian avant-gardes of that time, for instance Archizoom and Arte Povera, Negri replied, “there was so little dialogue between us”—with the only real practical interactions being when artists support autonomist activities, such as donating works for benefit sale. There are interesting tensions between Negri’s claims that the main point of engagement with the arts was based on money, and yet that they were living in art, even if not directly through practical cooperation with artists. For more on this, see Coles and Rossi (2013).
21. Intrigued by Tronti’s argument, I asked Silvia Federici what she thought of it, particularly given that Silvia both was influenced significantly by these political currents and wrote her Ph.D. dissertation during the 1970s about Lukács’s aesthetics. Silvia indicated that she very much agreed with Tronti’s suggestion, and that aesthetic theory was quite important for the early autonomism, particularly through the activities of literary theorist Asor Rosa. Rosa is best known for his 1965 book *Scrittori e popolo* (“Writers and People”), which has not been translated, though currently Matteo Mandarini is working on a translation of the book.

22. It is an interesting to note that the 1963 Italian translation of *Soul and Form* was translated by Sergio Bologna, who was a key figure in early operaismo, although not a great deal of his writing has been translated. For more, see Bologna (1980).

23. For more on this, see Cuninghame (2007) and Berardi (2009a).

24. For an overview of this work, see Murphy (2011).

25. In an article on the architect Rem Koolhaas, Negri goes so far as to suggest that not only is artistic activity not outside of the market, today “there is no longer any hope of grasping a use-value beyond the circulation of exchange value” (2009: 50) either in the arts or elsewhere.

26. Connections could be drawn out between the conception of surplus that Negri puts forward here and that developed from the Situationists, who, as Frances Stracey suggests, “developed and deployed a different, decidedly non-Marxian, valorization of surplus as part of their model of a revolutionary, creative practice” (2014: 41). For the SI, surplus was to be found not just within the labor process, or the clear production of surplus value, but all moments of excess, from play to love and adventure. Contrary to Stracey, however, I would suggest that this is not necessarily a non-Marxian model of surplus, but one that also draws upon what Gavin Grindon describes as Bataille’s “affective materialism” as well as more traditional Marxist understandings of surplus (2010).

27. This could be connected usefully to broader frameworks for the analysis of surplus, such as Bataille’s notion of a general economy (1991), or Asger Jorn’s framing of the political as “surplus fellowship” (2002: 137).
TERRITORIES

Psychogeography

Figure 1  “Destruction of RSG-6.” Situationist International (1963).
Chapter Two

Theories Made to Die in the War of Time

In a 2007 seminar Giorgio Agamben described a conversation he remembered having with Guy Debord, a conversation that Agamben believed to be about political philosophy until Debord interrupted him. Debord objected that, although Agamben very well might be a philosopher, he himself was not; he was a strategist (2007). What can be made of this assertion? Over the past four decades the ideas of Debord and the Situationist International, of which he was a founding member and key figure, have achieved a vast influence within social movement organizing, cultural and artistic production, and a number of academic disciplines and areas. Although Debord’s work is most typically understood as a bringing together of the artistic avant-garde with Marxism, this has perhaps been done too narrowly, or in a way that leads to overemphasizing particular aspects to the disregard of others. For all of the ways that Debord draws from the ideas of figures such as Georg Lukács and Henri Lefebvre, his work is also filled with materials taken from military history and theory, from the work of General von Clausewitz and Sun Tzu to the scenes of famous battles. They are scattered throughout Debord’s writing and cinematic production, bringing along a constant aura of war, death, and loss:

But theories are only made to die in the war of time. Like military units, they must be sent into battle at the right moment; and whatever their merits or insufficiencies, they can only be used if they are on hand when they’re needed. They have to be replaced because they are constantly being rendered obsolete—by their decisive victories even more than by their partial defeats. Moreover, no vital eras were ever engendered by a theory; they began with a game, or a conflict, or a journey. (In girum imus nocteet consumimur igni 1978)
This looming sadness and moroseness, what Mario Perniola (1997) describes as Debord’s Nietzschean sense of grand style, contrasts sharply with the insurgent joyousness that characterizes the work of the other most well-known Situationist figure, Raoul Vaneigem. Debord’s icy style, its continual undermining of any naturalness, is not simply artifice but is rather fundamental to Debord’s approach to art and politics. And this style is key to understanding these methods of intervention as part of an overall approach to revolutionary political strategy.

In this chapter I consider Guy Debord and the Situationist International as strategists. Many of the key elements of Debord and the SI’s practices and ideas can be understood not only as artistic-political interventions, but also as methods articulating strategies of collective subjectification through these practices. As Vincent Kauffman (2006) suggests, the tendency is to enter Debord’s world and to evaluate it exclusively from one perspective—for instance, only in relation to art history or as a part of a particular historical moment of revolutionary politics. This ends up re-creating a specialist understanding of the Situationist International, which seems paradoxical given that their entire approach was premised on trying to undermine such divisions in knowledge and social interaction so as to make possible a complete transformation of society and everyday life. The point is not to deny the importance of aesthetics, politics, philosophy or Marxism in favor of strategy as the analytic key. Rather, it is to make a case for a specifically understood form of strategizing that is based on rearticulating a relation between aesthetics, politics, and labor. Thus, rethinking the SI in a strategic framework is less about a process of hermeneutic exploration of the SI’s core concepts and more about looking at how the SI’s activities operate as unorthodox forms of strategy.

This chapter attempts to develop an understanding of strategizing as a form of artistic-political intervention immanent to the artistic and political milieu in which Debord and the SI existed. And from that it becomes possible to reconsider the politics of strategy itself, as Debord proposes in the *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978). Theories are not made to exist eternally, nor can they. Rather, they are the advance guard entering a battle, a strategic-aesthetic conjunction that is sacrificed for broader gains in a cultural war of position.

**EXPANDING THE FIELD OF STRATEGY**

In what sense can Debord and the SI be understood as strategists? At first glance they have very little connection with what is traditionally understood
as strategy, at least within the domain of organization studies. There are clearer connections to traditions of military strategy, which Debord and the SI learn from while transforming through their adapted application as artistic-political tools. For instance, if one were to understand their approach in the typology of approaches outlined by Richard Whittington (2000), their work would connect most closely with the classical tradition of strategy, one that is focused on planned calculation and analysis, and is underpinned by the idea of a coherent, rational subject that is capable of anticipating events:

Through commercial mechanisms that control cultural activity, avant-garde tendencies are cut off from the segments of society that could support them, segments already limited because of the general social conditions... the essential point is always the renunciation of a comprehensive contestation and the acceptance of a fragmentary work susceptible to diverse interpretations. (Debord 1957: 9)

In terms of social movement politics, it is clear that the intent of Debord and the SI is to develop an approach to strategizing from below, as part of building what Raoul Vaneigem describes as the “federation of the tacticians of everyday life” that the SI sought to create; it is from there that strategy becomes the process of “collectively building the launching-pad of the revolution on the tactics of individual everyday life” (1994: 262–63). It is in this sense that Debord and the SI are best understood as strategists as described by Smircich and Stubbart, as those who approach strategizing through the creation of common symbolic universes and worlds to be enacted; strategists “create imaginary lines between events, objects, and situations so that events, objects, and situations become meaningful for the members of an organizational world” (1985: 26). The SI’s approach is very much one of enactment, striving for a poetic transformation of everyday life rather than the transformation of politics, economics, or social relationships in a narrower sense.

In this way Debord and the SI depart from classical approaches to strategy. Rather than assuming that a preexisting rational subject will strategize, their approach is to enact conditions under which this strategizing subject will emerge. Iwona Blazwick describes the SI’s history as being composed of three main periods: (1) Starting from a laboratory phase of experimenting with the construction of collective subjectivities during the 1950s and early 1960s; moving to a (2) detonator phase, where they served to provide the explosive cultural materials that contributed to the ignition of May 1968; followed by (3) a period of fallout and disbanding during the 1970s (1989: 7). Although strategy typically assumes the persistence of the strategist in time, the SI’s approach is somewhat paradoxically based on undercutting
their own position and abolishing themselves after the situations for the emergence of a strategizing collective subject emerge. Debord (2001: 15) argued that both the founding of and the dissolution of the SI were equally revolutionary in their own time. This resonates greatly with the history of nonstate communism and political currents formed around the idea of mass assemblies rather than vanguard parties or cadres of leaders. And although this might seem a rather difficult or obtuse argument to use as the basis of strategizing, it is the approach that has filtered down through the present, informing and resonating with political currents and movement such as the Arab Spring and the recent occupation movements around the world. In these examples what is seen is the occupation of space, such as a public square or a building, to create the time and space for the emergence of new forms of collective subjects, rather than a politics formed around already given demands that are agitated for.

Debord and the SI also draw greatly from the history and wealth of Marxist politics while also rejecting or reformulating key aspects of them, particularly the centrality of the party and its assumed strategic position. For instance, the orthodox Marxist politics (such as those held by the French Communist Party at the time) already have a given rational subject—namely, the proletariat. The proletariat emerges through a linearly defined historical teleology. Once the proletariat becomes aware of its position, it can then act to transform it. In this way much of the discourse of party-based Marxism can be argued to comprise a particular strategic discourse about creating the conditions for that realization: The workers will come to understand their conditions of exploitation and thus will band together, join the party, and act to transform those conditions. Debord and the SI depart from this argument on multiple levels; they are less certain that a given antagonistic social position, such as a clearly delineated working class, already is the locus of strategy and social conflict. That doesn't mean that the SI is giving up the notion of class struggle or its potential to create revolutionary conditions. Rather, the focus shifts, following sociologist Henri Lefebvre’s (2002/2006) exploration of everyday life, to exploring the spaces and the creation of situations for the emergence of a collective subject that would be adequate for and capable of formulating and strategizing what is to be done. This could be thought of as an inductive approach to strategizing. Although the SI doesn’t abandon the idea of a coherent strategizing revolutionary subject, their task is to find the conditions that will produce the emergence of that subject—for instance, in the creation of workers’ councils. This is not the approach of a vanguard that initiates conflicts and then commands them from its privileged perspective, but an argument for what the SI understood as initiating a kind of social detonation. The initial conflict would multiply and extend itself
through the proliferation of workers’ councils, occupations, and situations, from which further strategizing occurs.

One way to illustrate this reformulation can be grasped by comparing the notions of strategy held by Carl von Clausewitz (1997) and Michel de Certeau (1984). Whereas von Clausewitz is the archetypical figure of a kind of older, romantic, and perhaps even Hegelian approach to strategy that Debord holds onto, the work of Michel de Certeau is best known for how questions of strategy are thought about in social movement politics in the decades following the rebellions of May 1968. Von Clausewitz (1997) understands tactics as the particular methods or means used in any particular combat, whereas strategy is the combination of combats toward the ultimate objective of the war. De Certeau (1984) reframes this distinction using strategy to describe a locus of force relations that form a particular space and delimit it, where tactics are interventions employed by actors to intervene in spaces they do not control. In other words, tactics are the weapons of the weak trying to find ways to intervene in spaces formed and controlled by strategy. For de Certeau it is not the connection between different tactics that creates an overall strategy. Strategy is the process of domination that forms particular spaces, most often in the form of institutions and law, which de Certeau tends to view rather negatively. Tactics, not surprisingly, are viewed more positively. Although the SI’s focus on everyday interventions and the creation of revolutionary situations might seem to be a perfect bridging point between these two figures, one that mirrors how de Certeau argues for the abandonment of strategy as a form of domination in favor of diffuse networks of tactics, it is not so clear-cut or simple. Debord and the SI do move the terrain of political intervention much more toward focusing on everyday interactions taking place in spaces not of their own formation or control, but this is for the task of initiating situations in which an emergent revolutionary subject can strategize from. This contrasts sharply with de Certeau’s framing, which tends to identify strategy with forms of domination and thus precludes the idea that revolutionary social movements should be engaging in strategic formulation, lest they become part of the mechanisms of domination themselves.

To return to Agamben, we might say that the SI’s approach to strategy draws heavily from military history, transforming it into aesthetic-political tools for evaluating the changing conditions and possibilities of radical politics in the present. Debord maintains a connection to an older sense of strategy and military conflict (making most references to battles and military thought from the nineteenth century) but does so precisely as a way to rethink present conditions. Agamben comments that Debord’s work should be used “as manuals, as instruments of resistance or exodus—much like those
improper weapons that the fugitive picks up and inserts hastily under the belt” (2000: 74). In this description Agamben echoes Deleuze and Guattari’s (1994) understanding of the strategic potentiality of elaborating new concepts as creating new lines of flight: of strategy as a form of fugitivity, rather than as formulated from the commanding heights of generals and government figures. But in describing Debord as a strategist, Agamben adds that his work should also be understood as the work of a peculiar strategist, one “whose field of action is not so much a battle in which to marshal troops but the pure power of the intellect” (2000: 74). Indeed, even for all of the references and imagery of battle and war Debord employs, it is clear that he is using these images more for thinking through and about conflict rather than as practical methods to be applied directly. Agamben notes the usage Debord makes of a particular quote from von Clausewitz (which Debord uses more than once): “In every strategical critique, the essential thing is to put oneself exactly in the position of the actors; it is true that this is often very difficult” (1991: 3). The goal of strategy, which is integral to Debord’s self-understanding as well as his self-presentation, is putting oneself in the place of the emerging collective subject, which is to say a process of conceptualizing agency in a given situation. For Agamben, Debord’s approach is not just what is discussed by figures more commonly associated with strategy, but understanding what underlies conditions of agency in a given situation. In this sense one can find these fugitive weapons of strategizing as much in the history of philosophy as in political theory. The process that delimits the spaces in which strategies are formed varies widely, but the strategic operation of understanding that space in order to act in it is in many ways similar.

In this way Agamben shows how Debord and the SI broaden the field of strategy by providing tools for understanding the processes of revolutionary subjectivation in contemporary capitalism. At first this framing might seem strange, but it makes sense when taken in the context of Debord’s analysis of spectacular society and the domination of life by commodity dynamics. If Debord (1983) and the SI are known for one concept, it would have to be the idea that today we live in a society of the spectacle. But to make reference to spectacle in the sense Debord employed is not simply to indicate the heightened development of media flows, or advertising and consumer culture, which have gained a greater prominence and power within everyday life (although this is certainly true). As Debord stressed often, the society of the spectacle is not a thing or an object, but the condition where relations are mediated by images; it is the becoming-image that emerges at a certain stage of capital accumulation. In other words, it is not simply the proliferation of media forms and technologies, but the transformation of social relations through the transformation of how they are mediated. Although Debord and
the SI’s hold onto some relatively orthodox Marxist assumptions—for instance, that culture and social relations are ultimately determined by economic conditions—this focus on spectacle, appearance, and technology prefigures key themes that have been developed around the ideas of immaterial and cultural labor, biopolitical production, and cognitive capitalism. If we live in conditions where the most productive element for capital is the production and control of knowledge, then these considerations are not only theoretical-philosophical ones, but also the changing conditions of capitalist production itself.

Debord and the SI provide a set of tools for rethinking the question of strategy during a period of the transformation of social and economic in the spectacular society. The strategic interventions developed for any given time or situation, as mentioned in the introduction, are not eternal but are formed in relation to their conditions. Returning to examine how Debord and the SI approached strategy in their period is not an argument for recycling their formulations as if they would retain the same effectiveness for today, but to rethink strategizing for the conditions of the present. It seems clear that Debord’s analysis of the power of the spectacle more than anything grows more accurate by the day; even the forms that spectacular domination takes continue to develop. As Jack Bratich (2007) argues, Debord’s relation with strategizing develops most prominently in his later work, where he focuses on the effects of counterintelligence and heightening of security measures. These topics are most applicable to the technologies of spectacular domination that developed in the war against terror and that continue to operate in the current media climate. This is much the same angle taken by the Retort Collective, who in their book *Afflicted Powers* (2005) sought both to renew and to expand an analysis of the operations of political power and media today using Debord and the SI’s categories. In doing so, they managed to leave behind some of the Marxist assumptions that the SI held onto, even while claiming to break from them.

If every strategical critique requires putting oneself in the position of the actors in a given situation, as Debord quoting von Clausewitz claims, and developing strategy out of this situation and interventions in everyday life, what are the particular methods that Debord and the SI employ to bring about these conditions? It is not, as one might suspect, a history of the SI or Debord’s life and work that has only recently been discovered. Rather, it is the dynamics mentioned earlier: that is, by tending to view Debord and the SI from a limited perspective, perhaps only from one angle, the particular strategic dimensions of many aspects of their work and ideas have previously been passed over. That is now what we will turn to: to look at how many of the best-known ideas of Debord and the SI contain within them a particular
strategic orientation. In particular, in this chapter I will examine this process through three main areas:

1. Dérives and Psychogeography
2. The Politics of Communication
3. The Game of War

This is not to say that these are revolutionary strategies in and of themselves (as sometimes is thought, much to the disappointment of anyone who employs them thinking this is the case). They are strategies for the formation of spaces where revolutionary subjectification becomes possible in a way that does not foreclose at the beginning what the emergent strategic subject could be. In the same way that Colectivo Situaciones (2012: 43) describe what they call “insurrection without a subject,” the SI developed a series of methods designed around what I would call strategizing without a subject, or strategizing to enable the emergence of the subject that will then strategize.

DÉRIVES AND PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY

Of all of the practices the SI is known for, the notions of the dérive and of psychogeography are perhaps the most famous. Paradoxically, they also are in many aspects the least understood. The basic notion of psychogeography is “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals” (1955). Similarly, the basic idea of the dérive is as a form of drifting through a territory to investigate its forces of attraction and the shaping of experience and emotion in that territory. At this level of generality, how the SI uses these concepts and other strands of psychogeography that are different in notable ways from the SI overlaps a good deal. These include Ian Sinclair’s (1997) and Stewart Home’s (1991) more literary influenced versions (which at times overlap with a more occult approach to mythology and local history): “these strange circuits continue, the river that is all rivers, the jungle that wants to break through the paving stones” (Sinclair, 1997: 73) An expanded psychogeographic practice can be found in the feminist reworking of the dérive as a practice of militant research as explored by the Madrid-based collective Precarias a la Deriva (2006). The influence of the SI can also be seen in the development of mapping as a political research practice developed by Bureau d’études and by the 3Cs Counter-Cartographies Collective.8

These other understandings of psychogeography and the dérive tend to neglect the specifically strategic dimension of these practices. It is not that
they are oriented to attempting to understand the effects of capitalist accumulation and the shaping of the city simply in and of itself, either as a form of sociological research or artistic practice. Debord and the SI both specifically reject the study of the everyday as a form of sociological description and as a form of artistic practice (which informed part of the split in the SI in the early 1960s, as the early emphasis on artistic in relation to politics practice was rejected in favor of a more directly political practice). Rather, the dérive is a method for understanding the psychogeographic nature of a territory, which is the SI’s attempt to formulate an approach to strategizing in that territory under conditions of spectacular capitalism (Gilman-Opalsky 2011). The value here is not in the practice itself, but insofar as it contributes to this larger question. It is this element that typically gets lost. To put it another way, the psychogeographic mapping is taken as the territory itself, rather than as a tool for transforming and acting within that territory, or, more importantly, for finding a northwest passage out of it.

To look again at the practice of the dérive and psychogeography from a specifically strategic angle brings out how in some ways they are drawing more here from military figures, such as von Clausewitz, than the expected artistic ones, such as the proto-surrealist poet Arthur Rimbaud (1988). For instance, one could argue that they connect closely to how von Clausewitz (1997: 55) describes the importance of developing an intuitive grasp of territory, which for him is an act of imagination. It is the nature and shape of the territory that provides the basis on which conflict will take place. The SI, however, move the question from physical territory to the terrain that becomes the main area for conflict in late modern capitalism, namely, in the production of media, images, symbols, information, and their modulation. As Merlin Coverly argues in his history of psychogeography, “far from being the aimless empty-headed drifting of the casual stroller, Debord’s principle is nearer to a military strategy and has its roots not in earlier avant-garde experimentation but in military tactics where drifting is defined as a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus” (2006: 97). Thus the dérive becomes a strategic device for a kind of reconnaissance into the changing territories of the city. This explains why the SI, although admitting the importance of chance encounters in the early stages of these practices, also emphasized that chance would become less important as the practices developed more. In finding ways to understand the changing flows of power and movement in the metropolis, the SI intends that the psychogeographer should be less engaged in an aesthetic practice and more acting, in Coverly’s description, as a “foot soldier in Situationist militia, an advance guard sent out to observe enemy territory” (2006: 97). The goal is this understanding of the changing nature of the territory and the possibility of intervening in it.
This is especially the case given the importance placed on the city, where, as Andrew Hussey suggests, Debord thought that the arbitrary separations between work and leisure would be overcome in a poetic totality (2001: 90). Unfortunately, as with many of the SI’s ideas and practices, this strategic element is often forgotten, rendering what’s left as a harmless artistic practice or quaint method for investigating local history and geography. This will be returned to in the next chapter, which will explore the possibility of bringing psychogeography together with the broader autonomist tradition, and from there reworking it as practice for investigating the continued shaping of labor practices and political possibilities that are based upon them.

**THE POLITICS OF COMMUNICATION**

Debord and the SI are also very well known for their politics of communication, which are based on trying to escape from the objectification of language, described by Vincent Kauffman:

> Debord’s work consisted essentially in a form of speech that deflected any form of interpretation, or any response at all, for that matter, like a shouted insult, asking nothing more than its own realization, or its dissolution in a common struggle. (2006: 251)

The problem of communication is that within conditions of spectacular capitalism communication becomes what they describe as “false communication,” less about any genuine interaction and more about the policing of roles and maintenance of borders and boundaries. This is perhaps not too far from the insight that motivated Deleuze and Guattari (1994) to declare that what was needed was not more communication but less, and, more importantly, resistance to the present conditions governing the function of that communication. Similarly for Debord and the SI, communication, understood within a strategic framework, is more based on finding ways to interrupt and tear apart current modalities of communication and their role in the operations of power. The strategic use of language pursued by the SI attempts to find ways to resist its role within mediation, to tear itself away from representation and directly into political practice.

This is the argument that underlies the practice of détournement, or the rearrangement of preexisting aesthetic elements (or ideas) in new contexts in a way that changes their meaning. Détournement is, in other words, using the elements from capitalist media to transform the intended meanings into something more subversive or antagonistic. This plays an important part in the SI’s success in communicating their ideas, precisely because of how by
reappropriating forms that were not usually used for political communication, such as comic books and popular media culture, they found ways to turn elements of spectacular media sociability into tools critiquing them from within. This extended not just to their print publications (such as their eponymously named journal), but also played a key role in the films produced by Debord (including the 1973 film version of *Society of the Spectacle*) and the reworking of a martial arts film by René Viénet into *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* (1973). However, the problem with this is much along the same lines as with the notions of psychogeography and the dérive: the subsequent neglect of the specifically strategic elements of these practices.

Although the idea of *détournement* as part of a politics of communication has been widely influential within social movements and cultural production since the 1970s, for the most part the use of these ideas almost entirely neglects the underlying reasons. *Détournement* shifts from the SI’s version, in which it functions as a kind of strike against representation or a monkey wrench in the system of image production, into becoming just another form of communication, albeit a more clever one. Thus culture jamming, which is perhaps the most widely known practice to claim a heritage descending from the SI, becomes just another form of image production. The best possible instance of this is the magazine *Adbusters,* although the same dynamic can be found in much contemporary street art guerrilla marketing. *Détournement* for the SI was not about finding more clever ways to communicate, but sabotaging the possibility of meaning making: the less coherent, the more effective. The point was not to communicate the content of radical political ideas, but to interrupt the functioning of communication so that conditions for actual communication could emerge (for instance, in the form of student and workers’ councils as emerged during the events of May 1968). Perhaps such a tactic can be used in a bounded way before its normalization moves it from sabotaging communication to just another form of it. And this would explain that, although it may have been quite useful strategically during the time of the SI, one could argue that its potential, or at least its novelty, has since declined.

In this way it can be seen how Debord’s writing and cinematic production are strategically oriented attempts to develop further the practices of *détournement* after the initial fading of their usefulness in the period after May 1968. The emphasis in his films is more on ideological juxtaposition than aesthetic merit. For him focusing on aesthetics in and of themselves would lead back to a dynamic of separation and depoliticization, the very one the SI worked to undermine. In the same way that *détournement* is more about sabotaging meaning rather than crafting it, Allyson Field argues that Debord’s approach
to cinematic production was not intended to perfect the image, but to “radically undermine the conventions of constructed meaning” (1997: 67). Debord’s films are, therefore, difficult to watch, intentionally so, precisely because they are premised on this attempt to sabotage the conventions of meaning making, and through that to transform the relation between the spectator and the film. Thus, when the showing of his first film, *Howls for Sade*, in 1952 resulted in a violent reaction from the audience, this was not an unfortunate consequence of the film but its very purpose: an undermining of the forum for image production (the cinema) and through that a reshaping of the relation with the audience. This is the strategic dimension of Debord’s cinematic production: to generate conflicts in which it becomes possible to intervene. As Vincent Kauffman describes it, Debord “did not make films to give people something to see but to force his enemies to reveal themselves and repulse their attacks” (2006: 236). It is perhaps for this reason that, although Debord would reject the role for himself of a philosopher or a writer (in a literary sense), he would embrace that of professional filmmaker, precisely for how he strategically employed this role and the production-destruction of images as part of an overall approach to social conflict. Debord began this first film, containing no images, with an announcement of the death of the cinema, and proceeded in the following years to wage a war to recapture the territory of the image as a strategic weapon for further conflicts.

Debord’s relation to his writing is very similar to his relation to his cinema production: It is primarily a tool for conflict rather than for the production of polemics and responses. It is less about trying to establish truth in any sense and more about silencing enemies. Thus after the killing of the film producer Gerard Lebovici (who was a close friend, supporter, and business partner of Debord), an event in which Debord was not involved but resulted in his being smeared a great deal, he wrote *Considerations on the Assassination of Gerard Lebovici* (2001). This was not to establish the truth of the events and Debord’s place in them, but to turn the situation into something that could be used: that is to say, to use the word as a way to regain lost territory, much in the way his cinematic production sought to sabotage the production of meaning and reclaim the image for conflict. Kauffman likewise describes Debord’s approach to writing as an “index of an imaginary that makes use of language for conflict and polemic” (2006: 212), one that forms the basis of one of the most systematic attempts in literature to focus on writing itself as a form of strategizing (rather than one of conveying meaning), or as a larger project of rethinking strategy within spectacular capitalism.

Perhaps it is the failure of earlier approaches to communication, both in cinema and in writing, that led to the shift in Debord’s relation to communication and strategy later in his life. Although Debord and the SI’s strategic
relation to communication, its stress on sabotaging the production of meaning so that other communicative situations might become possible, provided one way of thinking through a politics of communication whose basis was a critique of the alienating dynamics of the present, this largely faded as a horizon of possibility for Debord during the 1980s. In these later writings, such as *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1998), a focus on strategy emerges even more strongly than it had previously. Debord affirms completely his earlier analysis and argues that more than anything the conditions and dynamics he diagnosed have grown more intense. Thus the politics of communication he argues for is both more cautious and more audacious, warning that it is important to remember whom one is speaking about and with, and about what one can be open.

Debord’s argument shifts toward advocating communication as “necessary incomprehensibility” in order to avoid the mechanism of spectacular control and domination that previous efforts failed to evade. Debord takes up themes similar to that developed by his wife, Alice Becker-Ho, commenting in his autobiography that the “gypsies rightly contend that one is never compelled to speak the truth except in one’s language; in the enemy’s language, the lie must reign” (1991: 10). At first this may seem like an admission of defeat, that one cannot communicate directly or openly, and on one level perhaps it is. But, more importantly, it is the continuation of Debord’s concern around strategy, rethinking a politics of communication when previous attempts have failed. In this sense, both Debord’s later writing, and even more so Becker-Ho’s (2004/2014) work on argot, gypsy slang, and the “language of the dangerous classes,” connects to the practices of escaped slaves and peasant rebellions that figures such as James Scott (1990) and Robin D. G. Kelley (2002) have theorized through the notion of infrapolitics. That is to say, it takes lack of public visibility, not necessarily as something that is undesirable but as also possessing potential for renewing social conflict and authentic communication beneath the gaze of spectacular visibility.

**THE GAME OF WAR**

Karl Marx remarks somewhere that the great events of revolutionary history occur twice: the first time as fighting in the streets and fields; the second as tabletop encounters. (Class Wargames 2008: 1)\(^2\)

*The Game of War* is perhaps the clearest example and illustration of the role that thinking, particularly through images and frameworks of war, plays for Debord specifically, and more generally the SI. In many ways Debord’s game closely resembles the class strategic games designed by companies such as
Avalon Hill and Simulation Publications: a gridded board, different pieces (infantry, cavalry, communication units), with conflicts determined by the rolling of dice. Although Debord’s war game has previously played a fairly minor role in understanding his work, this has begun to change over the past few years with the translation and publication of the book that Debord and Alice Becker-Ho wrote about the game, as well as production of a commercially available version of the game for English-speaking audiences by Atlas Press (Debord and Becker-Ho 2007). Although the development of a war game might seem a relatively small detail given the scale of historical events and information about Debord and the SI, I would argue for considering the importance of the game and the strategic approaches underlying it as key, precisely because of the importance that Debord attributed to it. Even if one comes to the opinion that Debord’s war game is not important, it is still central to understanding his conception of how his work and efforts would be regarded by history and spectacular representation, and what he considered important within such a limiting, or perhaps even deforming, framework:

And so I have studied the logic of war. Moreover, I succeeded, a long time ago, in representing the basics of its movement on a rather simple board game: the forces in contention and the contradictory necessities imposed on the operations of each of the two parties. I have played the game and, in the often-difficult conduct of my life, I have drawn a few lessons from it—I also set myself rules of the game for this life, and I have followed them. The surprises of this Kriegspiel [war game] seem inexhaustible, and I fear that this may well be the only of my works that anyone will dare acknowledge as having some value. (1991: 63–64)

Here we can see several important elements. Among the most obvious, Debord claims that the rules of warfare, which he has succeeded in representing in the form of a board game, have provided a source of inspiration for how he has lived his life. This game, through the forced consideration of contradictory necessities, provides an inexhaustible supply of surprises, materials for further consideration, such that it may be the only element of Debord’s work that is acknowledged to have any value. Given Debord and the SI’s constant and keen consideration of the role and importance of recuperation (or the cooptation of radical politics), it seems clear here that this “fear” is perhaps not really a fear at all, for Debord likely had already anticipated, or at least considered, how his work and the activities of the SI inevitably would be taken up by the mechanisms of cultural appropriation.13 Arguably, then, with such a statement Debord is less concerned about the role that his war game might take in such an appropriation and more indicating that the role is greater than might appear at first glance. From there one must ask how this game came to be so important to Debord.
Debord patented the game in 1965. He formed a company in partnership with Gerard Lebovici in 1977 to make war games. It was not until 1987, after the death of Lebovici, that a book was produced based on the game, consisting of an essay by Debord and a recording of a particular game played by Debord and Becker-Ho. Its importance, however, is not contained within these basic details about its creation, or in the construction of the game as an object (which does not differ significantly from any number of similar strategy games). The difference, and importance, is how Debord’s war game embodies and plays out a number of theoretical and political concerns that inform the rest of his activity and that of the SI. Perhaps the greatest innovation is in how strategy for the game is less based on trying to overpower one’s opponent decisively and more on the necessity of interrupting channels of communication. Conflicts in the game take place between equally matched forces, thus moving the form of strategy from wearing down the opponent through protracted conflict, to success through interrupting communication and mediation. In an essay on the game, Debord quotes Marcus Hieronymus Vida’s poem on chess: “Scacchia Luds: Ludimus effigiem belli” or “what we play is a representation of war” (2007: 9). Conversely, it is not a large step to say that, based on Debord’s understanding of spectacular sociability, war itself is conducted through representation and mediation. This consideration is built into the rules of the game. Or as Debord comments on the importance of communication for strategy within it, an army whose battle lines are the same as its communication lines “will quickly lose its tactical maneuverability in engagements” (2007: 19).

Debord’s war game is thus a strangely out-of-time exercise that is perfectly in step with its moment. At face value it draws from the wars of von Clausewitz and Napoleon, but it draws from these conflicts in a way that is more fitting through encouraging the strategic thought necessary to a highly mediated present where communication has become the key element of political conflict. For this reason, Debord attributes such a great importance to it. For instance, he admits that certain elements of chance (weather, terrain, the morale of troops) are left out of it; even with those reservations, he claims that the game “accurately portrays all factors at work in real war, and more generally, the dialectics of all conflicts” (2007: 26). Whether this claim is believable is open to debate, but key here is the way that Debord uses the framework of the war game to open a space for strategic thinking. This is all the more effective for its very “out of time-ness,” for how it draws from an older form of conflict and war to open possibilities for rethinking strategies of conflict in the present. That is, it opens an abstracting operation where it is more possible to engage directly in a strategic terrain of thought. This strategic core, which one might call the meta-strategic nature of Debord’s
work, is the most important feature. For this reason, McKenzie Wark claims that *The Game of War* is a major rather than a minor aspect of Debord's work, precisely how it operates as a “diagram of strategic possibilities of spectacular time” (2008: 29), through how this moving of strategizing onto a new terrain of consideration opens a new space for reconsidering strategizing in these transformed conditions.

Debord develops and works with *The Game of War* primarily at a historical point in the wake of May 1968, a point where the playing of games and swarming is thought to operate outside the overly regimented nature of social conditions and is thus directly political. *The Game of War* is successful insofar as it draws from an earlier stage of war and conflict to develop tools for strategizing in a different context. Its success is open to debate.\(^{14}\) That is to say, the usefulness of *The Game of War* would not be based upon a pure repetition of its operation, merely playing the same game again and again (if such were indeed possible), but upon how the surprises that Debord claims are built into it shift the formation of the game itself based upon the temporal and conflictual terrain of the present. By modeling antagonism in a simulated system, one that shifts its coordinates through repeated use, Debord’s war game approaches something more of a pedagogical tool than typically is expected of a war or strategy game today.\(^{15}\) Given the nature of Debord and the SI’s other activities, this is not so surprising. It is in this vein that Class Wargames, quoted at the beginning of this section, have taken to organizing public performances and events based around the game. In the same way that the dérive, psychogeography, *détournement*, and so forth may appear at face value to be almost silly and random activities with little ultimate lasting value, but actually have built into them much more developed approaches to strategy, Debord’s war game builds into a strange commitment to images of war and conflict the mechanisms for reworking the labor of strategic thought.\(^{16}\)

**THE HACIENDA MUST BE DESTROYED**

What can we learn from all of this? The work of Debord and the SI is often, and correctly, understood as occupying a key place in the continuing evolution of radical political thought, as bringing together forms of a heterodox Marxism with the legacy of the artistic avant-garde. Contrary to figures such as Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), who argue that forms of political and artistic critique become separated in social movement politics, the work of Debord and the SI is based precisely on this fusion of art, labor, culture, and politics. They also represent a moment of fusing together elements from the
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communist tradition, such as the importance of and emphasis on workers’ councils, with everyday life and interactions as a focus of political intervention. The emphasis on councils and directly democratic forms is not based on a formalist fetishizing of democracy itself, but on an understanding that councilist forms operate through abolition of the forms of representation found within unions and political parties. These moves are very important in creating a kind of shift in the strategies and orientation of autonomous political movements in their operation, as well as a shift in how these movements relate to the process of strategizing.

This is significant enough in itself, although it is far from the only innovation Debord and the SI make in this regard. Great attention is also given to not wanting the SI itself, after having rejected the organizational form of the Leninist party, to become another node of ossified power that only serves to hold back the insurgent energies of rebellion at best, or more likely to operate as a key point for the recuperation of antagonistic social energies. As the quote from Vaneigem gestures to, Debord and the SI thus reject a vanguardist model of party building along with a faith in anarchist versions of spontaneity in favor of a model that emergent organizational forms, such as workers’ councils, will provide the space for emergent strategizing:

Hierarchical organization and its counterpart, indiscipline and incoherence, are equally inefficient. In a traditional war, the inefficiency of one side overcomes the inefficiency of the other through purely technical superiority; in revolutionary war, the tactical poetry of the rebels steals from the enemy both their weapons and the time in which to use them, thus robbing them of their only possible superiority. But if the guerillas begin to repeat themselves, the enemy can learn the rules of their game . . . if not destroy[ing] at least badly damag[ing] a popular creativity which has already hobbled itself. (1994: 261)

Another key feature of Situationist strategizing is adoption and transformation of the traditionally Marxist notion of the proletariat’s self-abolishing role. In the usual Marxist sense this is how the proletariat, as a class, will end its subordinate position, thus abolishing itself through class struggle. The SI applies this logic to the idea of the revolutionary organization itself: It will only be successful by abolishing its existence as a distinct and separate organizational form. The role of the SI is indeed to act as a catalyst and contaminator of certain ideas, but insofar as it is successful in that role it must also strive toward its own self-dissolution within the milieu it is helping to animate. Given the emphasis on strategy and coordination, this might seem quite counterintuitive. Surely, one might think, a focus on strategy would translate into the creation of a form of organization through which this continual reshaping of the radical imagination, of the composition of new forms of social
movement, could occur. However, this approach would not be fitting for such a task. It is perhaps contrary to the argument of someone such as the organizational theorist Martin Parker when he says that “organizational structure is politics made durable” (2002: 22). For Debord and the SI, their politics is made durable precisely not through the creation of organizational structure, at least in a traditionally understood sense, but through the willing embrace of self-abolition of the organizational form and its constant and discontinuous renewal. The organizational approach that Debord and the SI articulate might appear, then, to be rather similar to Hakim Bey’s idea of creating Temporary Autonomous Zones (2003), but I would suggest that it is closer to what Mario Tronti describes as the “organizational miracle” (1979). What Tronti means by this somewhat strange sounding phrase is nothing supernatural. Rather, he is suggesting that insofar as forms of organization adopted by labor struggles, or social movements more generally, are turned against themselves by the workings of capital, it is of little surprise that the protagonists in these struggles abandon these organizational forms so that they are not constrained by the organizational forms themselves. The continuity, then, is paradoxically maintained in its integrity by the discontinuity of the visible organizational form. The organizational form dies so that vitality of a movement can carry on.

This is the very idea in the quote from Debord’s film In Girum Imus Nocte Consumimur Igni that began this chapter: organizations, ideas, and theories are only made to die in a war of time, which is to say, in the course of social and political struggle. Their radicality is not inherent, but it exists in their ability to intervene in a given composition of social forces, to affect a particular terrain of conflict, and so forth. Debord and the SI are clearly not the first by any means to argue that the value of an idea or practice is context bound. But this approach is unique in how it brings together an approach to strategy that works between the notion of strategizing without knowing in advance the subject of strategizing, councilist forms of organization, and the necessity of organizational self-overcoming and merging with the radical milieu. Likewise, one could elaborate a concept of the “autodestructive organization” based upon Gustav Metzger’s approach to autodestructive art (1996). Perhaps more practically one finds examples in the choice of the Provos, the mid-1960s Dutch anarchist movement, to dissolve rather than slowly burn out (Kempton 2007), or in the declared “death of the hippy” that tried to enact a similar effect in the San Francisco Bay area (Stansill and Zane 1997). This runs counter to what one would expect from traditions of strategizing in the sense of how various approaches break down. By putting forward an approach to strategy based on both an emergent and self-abolishing subject, Debord and the SI work with the idea of a collective mythical subject that
must anticipate and desire its own negation as a precondition for the emergence of effective strategizing. And this would be effective in the sense of finding new avenues for political recomposition through and against the dynamics of recuperation.

If the cry of revolutionary boldness is formed around those who are nothing but should be everything, Debord and the SI’s approach to strategy works curiously through the notion that it is only through maintaining a relation to nothing that becoming anything worthwhile is possible. How else can one take the arguments of a movement that would claim that its best known ideas were not its ideas at all but those, as Debord and Sanguinetti (1990: 12–14) would describe it, that were inevitably and already within the minds of the working class? The SI’s role, then, was not to have ideas but to contribute to making them active, acting as a catalyst—which is another way of saying that their role was essentially a strategic one, to reorient the play of forces on a given terrain. In this light it makes sense to revisit the ideas and practices of Debord and the SI: not to rediscover the particular strategies that can be applied in the present, but as strategists whose formulations reveal valuable lessons about how to strategize about aesthetics and politics. By appreciating the strategic shifts that Debord and the SI enacted, and the value they had within their time, it becomes possible to learn from their methods in context, rather than trying to repeat or re-create them without taking into account the nature of present conditions, which are different in many ways than forty or fifty years ago. Historically the SI shifted their sphere of operation from the avant-garde to radical politics. Thought strategically, this would not be an argument necessarily for repeating this again, but to ask what other zones of operation would be more suitable for enacting a recomposition of radical imagination in the present. As McKenzie Wark argues, the strategist is not the proprietor of a field of knowledge, but “assesses the value of forces aligned on any available territory” (2008: 28). Ivan Chtcheglov once said “the hacienda must be built” (1981). The strategic approach of Guy Debord and the SI shows paradoxically that the hacienda must be destroyed, burned down even, so that a new territory may be found among its ruins.

NOTES

1. Debord (2001) also wrote that among the titles often attributed to him are only two that he accepts: theoretician and enragé (who were historically associated with the left wing of the Jacobins in the French revolution, but whose name was taken up again in the student-worker revolts in Paris in May 1968).

2. For examples of the continuing influence of the SI, see Plant (1992), Home (1996), King Mob Echo (2000), Duncombe (2007), CrimethInc (2001), Notes from Nowhere
(2003), Retort (2005), Merrifield (2005), Wark (2011), Wollen (2008), and Garrett (2013), as well as publications such as *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* and *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*. More recent work has tended to expand its focus drawing from the SI without only being focused on them, including Gilman-Opalsky (2011), Wark (2011), Shepard and Smithsimon (2011), and Jakobsen and Rasmussen (2011/2015). The SI was likewise broadly influential in the antiglobalization movement and other related movements more recently. For an overview of some of these currents, see Grindon (2009). Tracing this continuing influence is an epic task, particularly given that much of it is visible through various underground forms of art and cultural production. For attempts to assemble a bibliography of these, see Ford (1996) and Goaman (2003).


3. The title of this film, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, translates from Latin as “We go wandering at night and are consumed by fire.” In Latin it is a palindrome, as well as a clever reference to the Situationist practice of the dérive and patterns of excessive living. The script of the film can also be found in Debord (2005).

4. For more on Debord’s sense of style and its political function, see Cooper (2013) and McDonough (2007). This chapter mainly focuses on Debord’s approaches and ideas. Recent writing on the SI, including Wark (2011) and Jakobsen and Rasmussen (2011), has shed more light on the SI’s other members and their milieu.

5. Admittedly, this is somewhat of a sketch of a position that the SI rejected rather than a full elaboration. The role and purpose of the party is an intensely debated one, which could easily fill a number of books to explore fully. My purpose here is less to give a full depiction of these debates and more to indicate what the SI was reacting against, perhaps somewhat unfairly at times, in their development of a nonparty-based form of organizing and strategizing.

6. For an overview of psychogeography, see Andreiotti and Costa (1997). For more recent updates to psychogeographic practice, see Richardson (2015). For information about iterations of psychogeography not connected with the Situationists, consider Alfred Watkins’s notion of “ley lines” (which did influence more esoterically inclined currents of psychogeography and the London Psychogeography Society in particular), as well as the work of Howard Stein and William Niederland (1989). Stein and Niederland and people working with him frame psychogeography much more in relation to psychoanalysis, exploring the relationship of self to place and psychological nature of territory, but without connections to artistic practice, the dynamics of capital accumulation, and so forth.

7. For more on the relationship between the Situationists and the occult, in particular alchemy and the hermetic tradition, see Mandosio (2014) and Elder (2013). An analysis of Duchamp’s connection with alchemy and the occult can be found in Moffitt (2003).

8. For more on Bureau d’études, see http://bureaudetudes.org. For more on counter-mapping, see Casas-Cortes and Cobarrubias (2007) as well as www.countercartographies.org.

10. For more on the events leading to and after May 1968 in relation to the SI, see Viénet (1992). For how these events were relating to other radical currents at the time, see Rosemont and Radcliffe (2005).

11. For more on Debord’s relationship to filmmaking, see Smith (2013).

12. For more information on the Class Wargames Federation, see Barbrook (2014) as well as http://www.classwargames.net. See also the Radical Software Group’s digital version of the game at http://r-s-g.org/kriegspiel.

13. On this matter I would tend to agree with McKenzie Wark’s formulation that perhaps the problem is not the recuperation of the SI, rather that this recuperation has been partial or incomplete (2008: 43). An interesting example (and the first as far as I can tell) is how the SI’s work was taken up within design, such as being discussed in the influential book by Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver, Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation (2013 [1972]). Jencks and Silver include a discussion of psychogeography, which they view as a method for understanding “perceptual districts” in the city (2993: 34), in a broader context of considering how new techniques developing within art and design could influence urban planning.

14. Arguably, it is useful as a tool for rethinking strategy in conditions of swarm-based conflicts precisely because of how it places emphasis on conflicts in communication (rather than overwhelming force). This emphasis on communication as the primary dynamic connects to previous arguments about the transformed role of communication in production, politics, and culture more generally.

15. One might be tempted to ask, “Why do this through images of war; why not in another form?” This is another instance where what appears to be a stylistic question contains within it a deeper level of strategic orientation. As Debord comments, the “world of war presents at least the advantage of not leaving room for the silly chatter of optimism. It is common knowledge that in the end everyone is going to die. No matter how fine the defense may be in everything else, as Pascal more or less put it, ‘the last is bloody’” (1991: 69). In this way, Debord and the SI’s usage of war imagery is somewhat similar to Franco “Bifo” Berardi’s near-apocalyptic pessimism (2009) that runs counter to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s (2009) revolutionary hyper-optimism. Lost battles act as stand-ins for class struggle, the confrontations on which history turns, and on which history might turn otherwise. Debord is obsessed by and thinks through images of war because they are where freedom and servitude are determined.

16. For an interesting take on the relation between war, empire, games, immaterial labor, and strategy, see Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009).
Chapter Three

Metropolitan Strategies,
Psychogeographic Investigations

We are bored in the city . . . or so proclaimed Ivan Chtcheglov in his 1953 essay “Formula for a New Urbanism” (1981). With this striking call, Chtcheglov set out with his other comrades and fellow travelers to explore new ways of adventuring through the city, imagining and encountering it, and from that to provoke moments of social rupture they hoped would upturn and reshape the entire social and political fabric. This adventure, initially inaugurated in the form of the Letterist International (Cabañas 2015), and developing in the 1950s and 1960s into the Situationist International, sought ways to contest Fordist capitalism by fusing the history and strategies of avant-garde arts, Marxist politics, and a focus on everyday interactions that was more ludic while not losing its sense of the necessity continually to embody and elaborate political strategies.

Meanwhile, in the Italian context of the 1960s and 1970s, a form of heretical Marxism flourished, developing from the seemingly spontaneous massive wildcat strikes of migrant industrial workers who were just as discontent with unions and left-wing political parties as they were with the dehumanizing nature of the assembly line. They called not for the dignity of labor or for higher wages, but for exiting the factory and the refusal of work altogether. During the 1970s these struggles moved from the factory to the territory of the city itself, expanding from a focus on the wage/waged labor to a much broader contestation of social reproduction, housing, culture, and creativity. Far from putting forward demands of “work for life,” precarity itself was celebrated as positive and beautiful, as an escape from the drudgery of the industrial system.

Both of these strains of politics and theory continue to provide inspiration for the constant rethinking and reformulation of methods and approaches for
confronting capitalism. But they also require some reworking, as the Fordist capitalism that they were contesting has changed dramatically since then. We might say that far from being bored in the city, or crying out to refuse work and exit the productive process, these very methods and ideas are blocked off today in the shifting conditions of neoliberal post-Fordist capitalism. The forms of play, desire, and collectivity the Situationists worked from have been rendered into new forms of capital accumulation. Imagination, creativity, and revolt itself have been put to work through the cultural industries, while sites of political antagonism are celebrated as heritage and branding for cities. Capital increasingly relies upon forms of free labor and self-directed sociality that are necessary to its reproduction even while not directly controlled by it. Likewise, many attempts to escape from work find themselves captured and rendered into new forms of laboring activity, whether through social media networks, the gathering of geolocative data, and the continual shifting of management practice that turns discontent with work into new forms of humanistic management techniques that deepen the level at which discipline operates by appearing to remedy and address the frustrations with work itself. In short, we have become what Peter Fleming and Carl Cederstrom describe as “dead men working,” unable to escape from meaningless and everlasting forms of work (2012). And beyond this, we also work in our sleep, says Rob Lucas, who suggests that the only real escape from work for us now would be serious illness, our body going on strike (2010).

In many ways this is not a new story. It is what Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) described as the “new spirit of capitalism,” where the ideas and energies of artistic and social critique have been separated from each other and turned into devices for the reconfiguration of continued exploitation. The Situationists likewise warned that half making a revolution only served to prepare one’s own grave. And the autonomist tradition has as its core the notion that capital develops precisely through how it can find ways to turn moments of social antagonism into new modes of accumulation. But despite the near inevitability of some dynamic of recuperation occurring, this still tends to leave social and political movements disoriented when it occurs, leading to a sense that what Colectivo Situaciones call “the times of impasse” (2011) has been reached.

The stories of depotentialization hold some truth. Any radical politics can only claim such a status, effectiveness, for how it intervenes in a particular social and historical situation. Nothing about a particular idea or tactic is inherently radical; it is its embedded and particular effects, how it is lived and elaborated, that gives it this character. Thus it should come as no surprise that claims, ideas, and actions formulated to contest a particular mode and
moment of capitalist development would not necessarily have the same importance or value within the present. But that does not mean they possess no value; rather, what is necessary is working out and reformulating them in ways that address the present conjuncture(s).

This chapter brings together concepts from the Situationists, such as the practice of psychogeography and unitary urbanism, with recent writings on the shaping of the metropolis today. It also takes up the autonomist concepts of class composition analysis and conducting a workers’ inquiry, suggesting that it can be combined usefully with Situationist ideas about forging new tools for contesting neoliberalism. Insofar as the current configuration of neoliberal capitalism is dependent upon apparently free forms of sociality, on free labor, imagination, and creativity, upon the operations of the metropolis itself, it becomes all the more important to investigate the ongoing shaping of these activities—and from this approach to elaborate new political strategies. For instance, if the metropolis were a factory, how would it go on strike? If all of everyday life and communication is put to work, how can we throw down our tools? And if capital attempts to recuperate all forms of radical politics in order to turn them into new energies for continued accumulation, is a strategy of concealment or incomprehensibility one way to escape from these dynamics?

LOST IN THE CITY WE FIND OURSELVES

The notion of psychogeography (as well as many other ideas of the Situationists) appears frequently within political and artistic discussions. Indeed, they circulate to the point of cliche, in the process becoming almost completely emptied of content. Interest has even been shown in the use of psychogeography as a research method for business research (Knowles 2009), where it is used to develop an expanded perspective on how organizations are experienced. The dérive is reduced to a leisurely stroll, perhaps accompanied by secondary musings about the nature of the spectacle, a dash of literary activity, with some local history thrown in for good measure (Baker 2003). This process is, of course, a hollowing out of the concept. Psychogeography for the Situationists was primarily not an aesthetic activity, but more than anything a strategic approach to understanding the forces shaping the city and from those finding points of intervention within it. At times it verged on a nearly military framework, working to gain an intuitive understanding of the territory and its layering of images, affects, and circuits of capitalist valorization.
Today we find ourselves in a condition of ever-intensified spectacular sociability: all of life put to work in webs of biopolitical production, overwhelming communicative and media flows, and the reshaping of the metropolis through culture-led gentrification. More than ever, well-developed psychogeographic investigations are needed to comprehend the shaping of the metropolis and the possibilities for political action this offers. But this is not a task for the carefree wanderings of the flaneur; it is, perhaps, better suited for what Ian Sinclair (1997) has described as the superseding figure of the stalker, the one who knows where he is going but not why or how.

Against this emptied-out conception of psychogeography remains the idea that it contains two, if not more, key strategies. The first would be to enact a process of defamiliarization from the routines and relationships to everyday life. Georg Simmel suggested well over one hundred years ago that the intensity of experience found in the metropolis tended to stimulate a kind of blasé attitude from its inhabitants, one developed in order to protect oneself from overstimulation (1950). This is because confronted with the vast complexity and speed of everyday interactions, to engage fully with all of them would require all of one’s mental resources and energies, if not more than they are capable of. Social routines and interactions are based a great deal on finding ways to deal with and work through this otherwise overwhelming complexity. In many ways, the arguments Simmel made a century ago could easily be argued to be just as relevant in the conditions of contemporary spectacular capitalism (Gilman-Opalsky 2011), and even more so with the intensification of communication and media flows.

Psychogeography, in particular through the practice of drifting, or the dérive, is a method of breaking from this formulaic interaction with the everyday. It is an attempt to bring to conscious attention all of the dynamics and patterns of attraction and repulsion with the environment that remain submerged to the everyday by routine relationships. The dérive becomes a way that getting lost, of opening up how one is affected by the world, brings to the fore all the richness (and horror) of the everyday that is typically not paid attention to. In some ways, psychogeography could be understood to be an extension of how the Surrealists drew from psychoanalytic ideas in their exploration of the unconscious, creativity, and desire. As Andy Merrifield comments on the practice:

As they shifted in and out of public spaces, they were intent on accumulating rich qualitative data, grist to their “psychogeographical” mill, documenting odors and tonalities of the cityscape, its unconscious rhythms and conscious melodies: ruined façades, foggy vistas of narrow, sepia-soaked streets, nettle-ridden paving stones, empty alleyways at 3 a.m., menace and mayhem, separation and continuity. (2005: 31)
The difference with psychogeography is that the terrain in question is not an individual mind, but the substrate of subconscious elements dispersed through the territory of the metropolis. In this way it is inherently much more a social practice.

This “getting lost to find the world again” is the aspect of psychogeography that is more readily grasped in the continued reception and circulation of Situationist ideas and practices. But what tends to get lost in this reception is the second and more directly strategic aspect of psychogeography: the emphasis on what new political possibilities these practices open up and make possible. For the SI, psychogeography was not simply valuable in itself as some sort of phenomenological investigation, or even as a sociological research method. Rather, its focus was to understand the ways in which the continued accumulation of capital were shaping the nature of the city, thus affecting their relationship with the environment and the structuring of the everyday. And from this understanding of changes in value production and accumulation, the rendering of surplus for capital accumulation, it was thought to be possible to find new ways to interrupt this ordering of the everyday and its avenues of exploitation. The dérive and psychogeography are thus forms of reconnaissance, gathering information of the territory in which tactics of everyday resistance are to unfold.

McKenzie Wark (2011) develops an interesting strategic appreciation of psychogeography, arguing that it sought to pose a form of lived time that does not accept the binary division of work and leisure. This division between work and nonwork time is accepted both by labor and capital, where it is in the interest of capital to extend and intensify the workday, and in the interest of labor to shorten it (or at least extract higher wages). Often, this shared focus on productivity functions as a point of mediation between apparently conflicting interests, one in which the apparent representatives of working-class struggles take on more of an accommodating function to the needs of capital (Seidman 1990). Wark suggests that the Letterists and the SI started from a different conception of time, one “resolutely based on non-work” (2005: 25). This can be seen in what Debord considered his first major work, the painting of the slogan “Never work!” on a Parisian wall, a theme that was carried on through the activities of the SI. Here we can see a close, resonant connection with themes developed by the Italian autonomists, who likewise argued not just for reduction of working hours or higher wages, but for the abolition of work altogether.

For Wark, the dérive thus becomes “the practice of lived time, time not divided and accorded a function in advance, a time inhabited neither by workers nor consumers” (2005: 25). But here we can see also what prospect the SI, despite themselves, posed for capital, in the ways this collapse of work...
and nonwork, of play and labor, forms the basis of new patterns of work and capital accumulation. In some ways, all of the creative industries hype around new media could itself be understood as a perverse form of the SI’s dream to collapse together completely art, play, labor, and everyday life. The key aspect missing from this, though, is the abolition of capitalism. To collapse work and leisure without an abolition of capitalism, without a complete transformation of everyday life, is to reinscribe the problems of alienated labor at a deeper level of subjectivization. As Andy Merrifield argues, “work-as-fun justifies non-stop toil, dreaming of riches and stock options, of hot dot.com start-ups, where hippie 20-somethings play Frisbee while they put in eighteen-hour days” (2005: 140).

This is not to cast blame on the SI by any means, for it is clear on many levels they were aware of this dynamic, even if not the particular forms it would take. Rather, it is to suggest that the SI’s methods were formed in relationship to a particular moment of capitalist development. Thus, it is necessary to see how they could be adapted to the changing situations of the present. The use of psychogeography to open and defamiliarize the world, and from there to develop new political tools, remains a useful and productive approach—as long as it understood that doing could (and likely should) reach different conclusions and understanding precisely because of the shift in the political terrain, the nature of capitalism, and so forth. A desire to collapse work and play into a new version of the everyday doesn’t mean the same thing where that has already occurred, but as a method to intensify and extend the workday. Nonetheless, the practices that the SI proposed for investigating the everyday, their dérives and psychogeography, retain their value as ways to approach these transformed conditions, albeit it in a different way. A renewed form of psychogeographic practice could benefit greatly from drawing on the autonomist class composition analysis.

**OPEN COMPOSITION AND AUTONOMOUS INQUIRIES**

In the Situationist approach to psychogeography, a two-way movement is opening a terrain of struggle in order to sketch a new map of political subjectification, but one that does so without foreclosing possible directions for future mutations in that form of politics. When the SI began their investigations into the changing psychogeographic nature of the city, they could not have figured in advance what kind of political practices would emerge from these investigations. If pressed in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when they were most heavily using these techniques to predict what directions a radical
political movement would take it, it is very unlikely (nearly impossible) they would have imagined the events of May 1968 and the alliance between the student and workers’ movements. Very likely, given their intellectual and political background, they would have been much more focused on an expansion and radicalization of the existing labor movement, and on the role that forms of artistic (and anti-artistic) practice could have in this expansion, rather than considering student politics as a possible detonator or catalyst of a larger social explosion. But the benefit of the approach employed is that it remained open to possibilities that could not have been foreseen in advance, and even managed to prepare tools for political actors that could not have been anticipated. The eruption of the events of May 1968 saw the practice of occupations come to constitute a political territory in itself, from which other modes of being in the city, forms of life, and desire emerged.

This dual sense of finding spaces for a new politics but keeping them open to the unforeseen can be compared to the autonomist notions of technical and political class composition. Roughly speaking, technical composition is the forms of skills, knowledges, and abilities found within a given labor process. Political composition is the subjective experiences and possibilities for political transformation held by the working class at a given point. Clearly, the relationship between these two is close, but it is not one where either side can be understood to the other in a reductive way. The autonomists understood very clearly that the working class is always more than its particular position in the overall labor process (Carlsson 2008); it is constantly overflowing and exceeding its enforced position with more desires, potentials, and directions than could ever be contained within that class relationship—whether this be for escape, security, or revolution.

In practice, the autonomist notion and analysis of class opened and expanded the notion of class itself. Whereas more traditional party-based forms of Marxism remained fixated on the industrial working class (such as the French and Italian communist parties), or basically factory workers, as the anticipated political subject, autonomists expanded their focus and understanding. These struggles began by trying to work from and with the eruption of wildcat factory strikes; they subsequently and quickly spilled beyond the factory gates into the fabric of the city itself, as well as into the university. In the student movement, struggles over health care and housing were intense; the feminist movement put forth a very strong challenge to the notion of what counted as work by raising the question of gendered labor and social reproduction. Although it might be tempting to understand all of these “new social movements” as being quite different from the labor movement, at least in the traditional sense, at its best the autonomists understood these movements not as something distinct or opposed to working-class movements, but
as an extension of them. This is due in large part to the key concept of the social factory, where capital has developed to a point where it attempts to extend its control throughout the social fabric. A consequence of this argument is that struggles occurring outside the factory gates still occur within the larger process of the factory-ization of society, and are thus still part of contesting the production of surplus value.

A class composition analysis thus asks questions about the expanded forms of social labor existing within the social factory: Which labors keep the social factory operating? What forms of value are created within this expanded mode of accumulation? What territories exist within it, and how are they shaped by their position within circuits of accumulation? The autonomist method of investigating these questions took the form of a workers’ inquiry. Originally conceived of by Marx as a way to investigate factory conditions in the late nineteenth century, this was adapted and configured to the needs of the Italian situation. This approach drew heavily from sociology and industrial relations to explore the changing nature of work conditions. A key aspect involves starting from the realization that oftentimes the needs, desires, and conditions of workers’ are not actually known—and cannot be presumed in advance. This is especially the case for a situation such as Italy in the 1950s to 1970s, which was undergoing profound and dramatic economic and social transformations.

The purpose of a workers’ inquiry, however, was not strictly sociological (Roggero 2011; Shukaitis 2013). Its goal was not to map out and understand new configurations of class and power in a disinterested manner. Rather, it was to work from within the forms of discontent that presented themselves to find ways to intensify their antagonisms and to formulate new politics based upon them. The language used to describe this process was often quite abrasive; someone such as Mario Tronti would argue for a formulation of a partisan inquiry into conditions, a purely one-sided investigation founded on class hatred. This was far from the supposedly objective and politically neutral form of social science the autonomists often drew from in addition to Marxist thought and politics.

In some ways, it is much the same question the Situationists investigated through their practices. In both cases, we see approaches that are opening up to new forms of political practice outside the boundaries of traditional leftist politics, outside the activities of the union and the political party. Both Situationists and the autonomists are seeking to understand the changing terrain of politics and capital accumulation, and from that understanding to tease out possibilities for new political subjects. One could tease out how both approaches understand their situation using different but roughly comparable concepts in numerous ways. For instance, the autonomist concept of the
social factory (as well as the idea of real subsumption) is in many ways roughly comparable to the Situationists’ concept of the spectacle, insofar as it expresses a new mode of capitalist accumulation where all of society is mediated through the production of imagery as surplus value. Psychogeographic practice can be understood as an investigation into the changing conditions of the city, which was also much the goal and focus of class composition analysis in its approach to investigating the condition of labor in the social factory. Both traditions focused on investigating conditions within a social terrain, the changing conditions of capital accumulation, and what new strategies for contestation could be found within these conditions. A further consideration of how these approaches might be used jointly would be valuable for finding new tools for sabotage within the metropolitan factory.

SABOTAGE WITHIN THE METROPOLITAN FACTORY

In recent autonomist writings, the focus has been greater on the city understood as a kind of productive space in itself, or a kind of metropolitan factory. Likewise, the focus has been on the city as a space of struggle within radical political thought more generally, which can be seen in ideas such as claiming a “right to the city,” which emerges directly from the writing of Henri Lefebvre (Harvey 2012). For the autonomist tradition, and those picking up and adapting its conceptual framework, the approach to the changing nature of the city is more particular; it brings together the changing conditions of dispersed forms of labor with the changing nature of political practice and social movement formations. This can be seen most clearly in the writings of Hardt and Negri (2009), who argue that the modern metropolis is to the multitude what the factory was to the working class: a primary site for the production of the working class, its internal encounters and organization, and for the expression of antagonism and rebellion. As opposed to this bounding of the productive space within the factory walls, Hardt and Negri suggest that the “contemporary productive activities of the multitude, however, overflow the factory walls to permeate the entire metropolis, and in the process the qualities and potential of those activities are transformed fundamentally” (2009: 250). These productive activities are not just forms of labor as traditionally understood, but also the varied instances of affective and immaterial labor, artistic and creative practices, and all the dispersed flows of labor that exceed the boundaries of any particular capitalist organization but are becoming all the more essential to the reproduction of capital. Even
within traditional management and organization analysis, this poses a problem of capitalist discipline, in that firms are forced to rely on the free self-organized activities of workers whose labor they do not control directly.

In marketing practice and management, this problem is addressed through the framework of the cocreation of value, where it is understood that the active participation of consumers, their circuits of feedback and creation, are directly productive of value. But the difficulty here is that “the interactive and interdependent nature of value co-creation processes challenges traditional management practices. . . . Value co-creation requires an ability to engage ‘the extended enterprise’ by managing across and within customer and supplier value creation processes” (Payne et al. 2008: 93). Here we can also see a perverse echo of some SI themes, where the emphasis of active participation (as opposed to the notion of spectatorship or passivity) is embraced—not as a tool for liberating or bringing about new forms of political composition and subjectivity, but for organizing a free labor force for the purposes of marketing and branding. This vast reservoir of free labor (Terranova 2004) is all the more valuable in how it is often not even recognized as work, how it is both pleasurable and embraced by people even while being rendered into vast sums of revenue through social media and digital marketing (Zwick et al. 2008). It was the economy’s new “hidden abode” of labor, one that has spread out beyond the circuits of both the high-tech and cultural economy (Böhmland Land 2012).

It is this conjunction and changed value production that bringing together psychogeography and class composition analysis in a more concerted way can help to address. The Situationists investigated ways that the accumulation of capital transformed the environments on multiple levels, from the physical shaping of space to the mental and emotional environments. When capital has extended its circuits of valorization through the city in much more pronounced ways—for instance, by orienting around creative industries and city policies—the shaping of the city is embedded directly within the changing circuits of capital accumulation. One downside of the SI’s approach was that its totalizing analysis left little room for appreciating more subtle differences in transformation of capital accumulation. Once the spectacularization of the everyday life and the city had been declared, it left little room for appreciating the changing nature of the spectacular forms sociability was taking. In this sense the practices of the dérive and psychogeography, which are much more connected with the earlier phases of the SI’s activities, provide a better framework for analyzing the shifting configurations of everyday life than the more brazen and charismatic analyses that they are well known for.

The purpose of bringing together autonomist class composition analysis and psychogeography would be to develop an approach for drifting through
and understanding the new territories of value accumulation in the city configured as a factory space. What are the possibilities for political recomposition within these circuits? If capital is drawing from an expanded terrain of value production that relies upon immense amounts of free labor, what possibilities are there for disrupting accumulation within these spaces? Even more important, perhaps (even if somewhat dispiriting), what processes and dynamics are blocking moments of political recomposition? Although the inherent radicality and social cooperation found within some forms of immaterial labor have prompted a great deal of discussion, often it seems they have not led to the kind of political outcomes or collectivity that one might have expected. The basin of immaterial labor, far from bursting forth with new communist militants, seems to be inhabited by people who might be characterized by a high degree of possessive individualism, more concerned about the nature of their practice, and with very real questions of surviving within the challenging conditions of the city itself, more so than with questions of collective conditions of struggles (Shukaitis and Figiel 2015). Robert Hewison suggests that could be because “creative workers, especially, are persuaded that they are free because the transformative nature of their work—making the ‘new’—appears to give them personal autonomy” (2014: 5). Perhaps their position within circuits of labor and reproduction tends to block, or preclude, forms of collectivity from emerging, as Bifo has suggested (2009). If this is the case, then, what is needed is a closer investigation of the dynamics through which these blockages occur in order to sabotage the process.

A number of projects are developing an approach along the lines of what has been suggested so far. This is not to suggest that they are ideal moments by any means, but rather that they develop practices that go in useful directions. One could look at the activities of Precarias a la Deriva (PAD), a Madrid-based feminist collective formed in 2002 in response to the call for a general strike. For women working in part-time, precarious work, the proposal of going on strike did not make sense. What would it mean to go on strike in those conditions? How could they do so without undercutting their own conditions of survival? How would it be possible to go on strike over conditions of care work? PAD thus carried about drifts within the circuits of gendered labor and social reproduction they were enmeshed in. In this sense, the dérive became not a tool for investigating the overall metropolis, but particular circuits and spaces within the city, and how they were being transformed: a tool for mapping out one’s own working conditions, networks of support and relations—and, most important, searching for what kind of politics, what kind of agency, or active refusals, are possible from within these positions (2006).
The Countercartographies Collective (or 3Cs) is a project based in North Carolina that has drawn from the history of mapping and autonomist politics to analyze the changing shape of academic labor. Similar to PAD’s formation in response to a labor politics that did not seem adequate to the conditions of the present, 3Cs formed to investigate what kind of labor politics might be possible within the space of edufactory (2007, 2009). What flows of labor, resources, and collective intelligence exist within the university space? More recently 3Cs carried out a mapping of these flows in relation to Queen Mary University in London, particularly focusing on questions of labor and migration. This project included developing a board game that could be used as a pedagogic-political tool (Countermapping 2012). How might the different forms of labor and social life within the university, from adjuncts to janitors, students to tenured professors, relate to each other in a manner that could create common grounds of understanding and political action?

In the UK, the Precarious Workers Brigade/Carrot Workers Collective has been organizing for several years on issues of precarity within cultural and creative work, particularly focusing on the questions of unpaid cultural labor in the form of internships. This has taken multiple forms, from working with graduating art students warning them about the conditions they likely face when entering the creative industries, which led to the production of a counter internship guide (2012), to the coordination of a people’s tribunal on the question of precarious labor. Although the focus has been much more on the question of unpaid labor, both within the cultural industries and more broadly, the activities of PWB are distinct in that they are not formed around a legalistic claiming of rights. Rather, PWB attempts to create spaces for political recomposition, of open subjectification through the conditions of shared precarity, rather than through attempting nostalgically to reclaim the position of some lost golden past for creative workers that was ensured through state protection.

It is clear from these brief examples that the forms political recomposition would take within the metropolitan factory are significantly different from those employed within previous industrial struggles. Organizing around arts and cultural labor, in circuits of immaterial work, would necessitate a different approach—in the same way the call for a general strike might not be the best tactic for precarious workers. The conditions of creative labor within the metropolis are oftentimes extremely individualizing and isolating, where freelance workers find themselves moving from café to café, project to project, with no common space where they encounter others facing similar conditions. The purpose of bringing together psychographic drifts with class composition analysis is not to propose in advance any particular tactics for countering these conditions—rather, it is to suggest that not enough is known
about the particularities and compositions of these situations, and that any radical politics worthy of the name must begin from working within and against them.

FROM ARCHIVES TO THE EVERYDAY

The practices of walking and drifting have been taken up in a much different way by the Walking Archives, an Argentinean project of art history coordinated by Eduardo Molinari, mapping that traces the continuing legacy of colonial power and domination. In particular, with their project The Soy Children (2012), the goal became to map unseen social and economic relationships that were having immense impact on the environment—for instance, the ways in which the biotech economy, particularly through the production of genetically modified soy crops, could be shown to have immense impacts on culture and politics in Argentina far beyond agriculture. Molinari suggests that the biotechnological approach of genetic recombination has directly filtered through into transforming modes of cultural production and politics, creating new circuits for the operations of political and economic power: “today’s neoliberalism needs a transgenic culture” (2012: 5). The Walking Archives draws from psychogeographic practices such as the dérive, combined with archival investigations and curating of artistic events, and traces these networks of power and influence and makes them visible (Molinari 2011; May 2012).

Molinari began The Walking Archives as a project in the 1999, starting from a visit to the National Archives. Initially, Molinari went there to look for specific materials on rituals around the transfer of political power in Argentina: namely, in the transfer of powers between presidents (through the handing over of the ceremonial sash and staff). Although he did not find the specific materials he was looking for, Molinari was struck by the aesthetic qualities of the materials and their mode of display, which led to a drastic change in his practice. Thus, he spent a great of time in the archives during that year, abandoning his practice as a painter, and instead assembled a repertory of images drawn from archival materials. Although he would later combine these materials with other found and created forms of imagery and information, initially the purpose was to find from the realms of history a way to generate “non-subordinate dialogue with the official narration of history” (2012: 2). Eventually, this historical quest led Molinari to exit the archives, based on the realization that this non-subordinate would require the generation of new materials, which he sought through a series of drifting encounters and explorations.
The created archive consisted of three main types of materials: copies of sources from the National Archives, photographs Molinari took on his drifting investigations, and what he described as “junk documentation” in the form of scraps of found print media (magazines, books, newspapers, etc.). These materials, which over the years have filled between fifty and sixty boxes, are thus combined and recombined into the published forms that are created to document Walking Archives as an ongoing project. The recombination of archival materials with scraps of media and imagery gathered during the wandering investigations is interesting from a psychogeographic angle: It shows that Molinari’s engagement with a territory is not only on the physical level. Rather, we could say that he is engaging with the territory of history, or historical inheritance; the territories and contemporary media production; and with his physical movements. As Molinari emphasized in an interview, working between the National Archives and his psychogeographic drifts is important because for him it’s “not about repeating chronologies or ‘historic truths,’ but about creating approaches and poetic accounts” (Mayo 2012: 66). This intermedial working between materials creates a fold in which history can be experienced in multiple ways, and experiences and materials bridged across, to move around and reconstruct narratives of history. In this way, through the Walking Archives the “march of history” appears more like a wandering itinerary, rather then moving from point to point in something that could be taken as a rational, preordained, and sensible development.

The circulatory engagement with history allows Molinari to engagement with the development of Argentina on different levels at the same time. At the most visible level, his activities are exploring how neoliberalism has reshaped Argentina, how it has reshaped its geographies, economy, and socialities. But by working through the archival materials as well as the present conditions, Molinari connects these with much longer-term trends and dynamics such as can be found in the lingering effects of primitive accumulation and colonialism in the area. In 2010 Molinari took part in the The Potosí Principle exhibition, which explored this as an explicit focus—the historical connections between the production and circulation of images across the globe, and how that connects with the dynamics of the colonial—as well as how these interplays between economic domination and exploitation are played out on the artistic and cultural level. For Molinari, this underpins the importance of working across archival and current materials; he works from the understanding that the legacy of colonialism (for instance, in the treatment of indigenous populations) consists not just in controlling and brutalizing populations, but also in the continued attempt to gloss over and erase the history of this brutalization:
Memories become relevant if they enable us to convey potentialities and splendors, as if we were mules—persistent animals, able to go through difficult and dangerous grounds. Memories that put places, people, generations in contact, conveying that which doesn’t exist yet, but may exist. (2012: 10)

This forms part of a broader current of political practices in Argentina that are based on trying precisely to undo this disappearing of history—for instance, around the history of the military dictatorship during the 1970s and 1980s (Colectivo Situaciones 2010).

In these ways Molinari takes up psychogeographic practices from the Situationists, but he does so in a way that significantly expands and enriches them as an artistic-political approach. For Molinari, drifting as a practice is about the literal crossing of a space, as well as the narrative structures that underpin how space operate: They are both routes and actions (2011: 22). That argument leads Molinari to make one of his most interesting moves, one that rejects a whole host of currently popular theoretical and artistic tropes: namely, his rejection of the idea of the nomadic artist. This seems quite strange given that the very name of the project, Walking Archives, would almost inherently imply a certain of nomadism. What Molinari rejects is how the nomadic conception of artists helps to underpin a conception of artistic practice that is out of time, not really rooted in history or place, aside perhaps from a few weeks here and there in the global biennale circuit. His historical and psychogeographic investigations use movement, but precisely to argue against what he describes as “the hegemonic paradigm of the Argentina of the nineties” of the out of time and place artist (2012: 3). Rather, movement is used to investigate the circuits that carry and reproduce memories, histories, and forms of power. It is in this sense that he truly does continue psychogeography as a project for investigating the formation of territory as a means to develop tactics to change it, rather then to aimlessly wander in it as an aesthetic practice.

This is precisely why much of Walking Archives as a project, much like Precarias a la Deriva’s work, is focused on investigating everyday routes and travels. The goal of psychogeography still is to find an escape route from the everyday, a northwest passage, but this is only possible by engaging with the continual shaping of the everyday in ways that go beyond bohemian late-night wanders through the streets. Everyday routes are those traveled by the movements of food, water, workers, media flows: the logistics that support continued life and existence. These are less romantic than other forms of drifts, but perhaps because of that all the more important. These routes are the provenance of logistics, which has come to occupy an ever more important role within the workings of post-Fordist capitalism.
The work of the *Walking Archives* takes part in elaborating what Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle describe in their recent work on transformation in mapping practices as the “logistical image,” one that can “open onto an aesthetic and political inquiry into the conjunctions between circulation and abstraction” (2015: 213). In attempting to map the changing routes and logistics of life in Argentina, Molinari takes up Bifo’s concept of semiocapitalism (2009), where the manipulation of signs and symbolic meanings comes to occupy a central role in the production of value for capital. This is what leads Molinari to an analysis of biotech and the production of genetically modified goods, because it is the production of soy crops that has come to occupy an extremely important role in the Argentinean economy, primarily for export. Not surprisingly, soy production thus comes to play a very important role, as an asset of interests to be defended, in Argentinean politics, even if their workings are quite opaque. As Molinari argues

> to get close, physically, to a field transformed by biotechnology and agribusiness, to know its scale, proportions, smells, colours and above all, to try to inhabit—at least for a short time—the invisible world of transgenic plantations, my wishes faced something unexpected: the soy-world has a pleasant appearance, full of green, stillness and immensity. However, something strange escapes the field of vision, an escape from our senses to another part of the body that punches us in the stomach. The soy-world is full of black holes, of passages to another and no place. What remains unseen is what defines it, in perfect tune with the very notion of the transgenic. (2012: 66)

Indeed, the production of transgenic soy crops now takes up 50 percent of cultivated land (more than eighteen million hectares). The *Walking Archives* takes up its drifts attempting to investigate what routes and travels operate within the circuits that support this immense production of genetically modified soy, which Molinari describes as the “soyaization” of Argentina and the formation of a “soy rhizome.” This is the basis of the transgenic culture that neoliberalism needs, as Molinari draws the connections between the importance of symbolic manipulation and recombinant at linguistic and cultural levels with similar processes that are involved in genetic modification.

This draws a close connection to the argument Bifo makes about how class composition can be seen to act as a molecular concept, where new mutations emerge at the micro level, in almost a chemical way. By exploring the connections between shifts taking place in arts, politics, agriculture, and politics, Molinari attempts to develop a practice that can draw these links. This is an immense and complicated task, precisely because of the multiple areas that it spans. Molinari is also reticent about the role of museums and cultural institutions, which he suggests can operate as washing machines for cleaning
and purifying the social conflicts taking places through the continued dynamics of colonialism and exploitation, whether at chemical, political, or social levels. For Molinari, semiocapitalism is seen to be operating as a level of recombinant biotechnology and manipulation, which is linked and resonates with a broader process of privatization and transformation of the cultural fabric. The Walking Archives are intended as an artistic-political practice to investigate these changing conditions of class, power, and politics, as well as to find a method for rebuilding a form of social composition that can act in and alter these conditions. This is how Molinari’s work can be understood as continuing and expanding psychogeographic practice, mapping the fields of power that shape everyday life, and then attempting to find a way to inhabit them such that other forms of collective practice can emerge, sustain themselves, and build to change the everyday itself—at the same time moving outside the limited confines of the art world that are now adjuncts to the transgenic culture of semiocapitalist value production. In doing so the Walking Archives seeks to “track down those dreams and their desires for liberty at the heart of the metaphors present in many works of art in the cultural history of Argentina” (2012: 10), and to turn those dreams and desires, found in drift, into maps to northwest passages exiting from the domination of everyday life.

In one of the few exhibitions staged by the Situationists, Guy Debord wrote over the painting of fellow SI member Pinot Gallizio “Abolition du travail aliene” (Abolition of alienated labor). Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen argues that this could serve as a mantra for the SI, that the creativity “the artist was endowed with in bourgeois society had to be set free and generalized” (2011: 98). In this sense, it was not all that paradoxical that the SI both celebrated and despised the role of the artist. It was not so much that they were opposed to the existence of creative practice, play, or imagination—for this is exactly what they wanted to expand in revolutionary directions throughout everyday life. But this is precisely their objection to the restricted role of creativity within the figure of the artist (although the same could be said of the restrictive role of the creative class or cultural industries). For the SI, art had to be realized throughout the everyday, not just within the separate realm of the art world.

In the conditions of neoliberal post-Fordist capitalism fueled by creativity, play, and desire, art has moved beyond the separate realm of the art world. Unfortunately, the effects of this artistic sublation have been somewhat less than liberatory. In these conditions it no longer makes sense to make recourse to play and creativity in the same way, assuming that liberating them will drastically transform everyday life. In reality, it is precisely a continued attachment to such claims that may bind people even tighter to their own
domination. The task of finding new methods for contesting neoliberal capitalism starts not from continually recycling the ideas of previous revolutionary movements without adapting them to the current conditions. Rather, it starts from understanding how the demands of previous movements have shifted patterns of life and labor—and by drifting through this metropolitan factory and its circuits of valorization, finds new ways to sabotage these very circuits.

NOTES


1. For a consideration of early modernist poetry in relationship, in particular its ability to facilitate the spontaneity of the multitude, see Nickels (2012).

2. For more on this, see Hardt and Negri (2009), Pasquinelli (2009), and Plan B Bureau (2009).

3. For more on this, see Siebert and Wilson (2013) and Perlin (2011).

4. For instance, see Gil and Pratt (2008), Ross (2009), and Standing (2011).

5. For more on this exhibition and project, see the accompanying catalog, which is quite extensive and contains wide-ranging historical and current materials (Creischer, Hinderer, and Siekmann 2010).

6. One example of a quotidian shift on routes is in the rise of toll roads: “In accordance with the privatizing experience of the 1990s, a new modality appeared in our ways of circulating and traveling: toll roads. To circulate we need an authorization or we must pay . . . tolls organize the functioning of the recombinant transgenic culture” (2012: 46). But again, for Molinari these tolls are not just operating on the roads, but also are likewise played out within the economy and society more broadly, and within the functioning of cultural institutions.

7. For some interesting critical commentary and analysis on logistics, see Cowen (2014). Cowen argues that over the twentieth century, logistics moved from its previous position of being subordinate to strategy and strategic planning to a position where now logistical concerns drive and determine strategic planning. Or, as she frames it, “logistics has come to lead strategy and tactics: it has gone from being the practical afterthought to the calculative practice that defines thought” (2014: 30).

8. Toscano and Kinkle also suggest that the rise of landscape aesthetics, which they connect with art in the 1970s, can be interpreted as “as the thematization of the spatial, material and experiential impact of capital’s rising organic composition” (2015: 236). Although it would be difficult to understand the *Walking Archives* as landscape, nonetheless interesting connections could be made between exploring changes in geographic and logistical routes within the changing composition of capital accumulation—for instance, in the usage of biotech and genetically modified food production.
ART/WORK

Sabotage

Figure 2  “Artist at Work.” Mladen Stilinović (1977).
Chapter Four

Can Creative Practice Break Bricks?

The unrest of change, assuming theatrical form as a spectacle, transforms the city into a penultimate opportune occasion for mastering unrest itself. . . . The impermanence of the city affirms the active capacity of the collective to be self-fashioning and, simultaneously, its anomic recognition of the perishable character of all that comes to be, showing in this way the limits of a finitude which is typically celebrated for its works and achievements, while being denigrated for its failure to master creation itself.

—Alan Blum (2003: 232–33)

Gazing down upon the city, looking at the development of the metropolis, one is struck by many things, from the permanent unrest of perpetual change Alan Blum discusses, to the decay of its aging infrastructure. Perhaps one of the more obvious things, regardless of what one thinks of the process that led to its development, is that it’s often rather ugly. Ugly not just in the way it looks (jungles of concrete and steel), but even more so in what it does: how the city operates as a factory, isolating people from each other, channeling social relations into prescribed routes and preventing others from forming, transforming our relationship with nature, and so on. David Harvey, the renowned Marxist geographer, responded to this observation with the comment that it was “really quite a strange thing that the bourgeois has no imagination,” no sense of creativity that can devise anything more appealing in its domination and transformation of the social space and the urban environment.1 This may seem a minor point or trite observation. What does it matter how aesthetically appealing, how well designed, an area is, given more crucial questions and ongoing issues of communities being displaced, workers being exploited, and the nature of social life being shaped by the needs of capital? This is true enough to a degree. But what is interesting about such
an observation is the process it hints at and what this can tell us about the
development of capitalism today and our struggles to shape social life and
interactions otherwise.

Whether the bourgeoisie has any creativity is debatable (Marx himself
marveled at the inventiveness of the ruling class in transforming social real-
ity, albeit usually for the worse); this is not so important, precisely because
it is so skilled at stealing the imagination and creativity of others. This is
precisely what the history of the transformations of the city, and society more
generally, shows us. Social and political movements, new artistic develop-
ments and quarters, as soon as they arise (sometimes even before they arise)
are seized upon by real estate developers, urban planners, and policy makers
to create the image of a new hip district that will boost real estate prices,
attract more desirable residents, and so forth, in a virtuous spiral of capitalist
development. This process of gentrification, led by or inadvertently spurred
by developments in artistic and social creativity, is an old one. When Albert
Parry wrote his history of Bohemia in the United States (1960), he paid close
attention to the relation between artists and the rise of the real estate market
in the 1960s and 1970s. But in Parry’s case the decades in question were the
1860s and 1870s rather than the rise of loft living, to borrow Sharon Zukin’s
description of the reshaping of lower Manhattan during the 1960s and 1970s
(1989). The point of raising this is not to sulk over this process or mourn that
so much creative energy fermented by often-antagonistic social movements
gets turned into mechanisms for further accumulation. Rather, the question
is making sense of it, and making sense in a way that further clarifies this
process for political and social organizing.

In recent years, within radical theory and organizing coming out of
Europe, Italy and France specifically, a focus on the metropolis as both a
space of capitalist production and resistance to it has emerged. This is based
on an argument developed over many years within autonomous social move-
ments that we live in the social factory, that exploitation does not just occur
within the bounded workplace but increasingly comes to involve all forms of
social interactions that are brought into the labor process. In the social factory
our abilities to communicate, to relate, to create and imagine, all are put to
work, sometimes through digital networks and communications, or through
their use as part of a redevelopment or revitalization of an area based on the
image of being a creative locale. Given this argument, it becomes possible to
look at the rise of the discourse of the creative city and the creative class,
most popularly associated with its development by Richard Florida, and then
seized upon by large numbers of urban planners and developers. The rise of
the idea of the creative class is not just a theorization of the changing nature
of economic production and social structure; it is, or, at the very least, has
become a managerial tool and justification for restructuring the city space as a factory space.

But to read Florida’s arguments, such as in *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2003) or *Cities and the Creative Class* (2005), is to encounter a very strange managerial tool. It is quite strange in that although at face value his work seems to describe empirical phenomena—namely, the development of an increase in prominence of forms of labor that are primarily premised on creating new ideas and forms rather than physical labor—whether that is the case is not the main issue. The creative class is not a homogenous or unified whole; even in Florida’s description, it is marked by an uneven development of the forms of creative labor engaged in (for instance, in distinguishing between a “super-creative” core of science, arts, and media workers from the “creative professionals” and knowledge workers who keep the necessary organizational structures running). It is not, then, that they necessarily describe an empirical reality or condition, the existence of the creative city, but a form of mythological social technology of governance: to bring it into being by declaring its existence. In other words, the question is not whether the creative class exists, but what effects are created through how it is described and called into being through forms of governance and social action based upon these claims. Planning and shaping the city based on a certain conceptualization of the creative potentiality of labor, or the potentiality of creativity put to work, is not an unprecedented or unique development, but it is the latest example of capital’s attempt continually to valorize itself through recuperating the energies of organizing against it.

The argument that all of society and social relations are being brought into economic production leaves out a crucial question—namely, what are the particular means and technologies through which social relations are made productive? How are aspects of social life outside the recognized workplace brought into the labor process? What are the technologies of capture that render the metropolis productive? This is precisely what the creative class is: a social position that formalizes the process of drawing from the collective wealth and creativity of the metropolis and turns it into a mechanism for further capitalist development. It is what Zukin (1989) describes as the advent of an artistic mode of production where mixed residency and industrial space usage is accompanied by the intermingling as art through life, and work all throughout life. In the industrial factory it was generally very easy to distinguish clearly between those who planned and managed the labor process and those who were involved in its executions, between the managed and the managers, the owners, professionals, and subordinate labor workers who were of interest only for their ability to work, not for their ideas. But in
today’s postindustrial service economy, these distinctions become increasingly hard to make. The passionate and self-motivated labor of the artisan increasingly becomes the model for a self-disciplining, self-managed form of labor force that works harder, longer, and often for less pay, precisely because of its attachment to some degree of personal fulfillment in forms of work engaged in, or a “psychic wage,” as Marc Bousquet (2008) refers to it.

To use the language developed by autonomist movements, what we see in the rise of the creative class, both as empirical description and as discourse for the management and shaping of the city, is a shifting of class composition. The metropolis is a constant site for the transformation of technical and political composition of labor. The rise of the creative class is formed by a convergence of a set of dynamics, including demands put forth by workers for more fulfilling kinds of humane and engaging labor rather than repetitive meaningless tasks. The rejection of the factory line and factory discipline that emerged during the late 1960s was met during the 1970s by managerial attempts to create jobs that were more fully engaging for the worker, but in doing so also more fully exploited the laboring capacity of the worker. Similarly, campaigns of community organizing and neighborhood renewal undertaken by social movements around the same time (such as in the lower east side of New York) were then used by financially backed real estate speculation to kick-start a renewed process of capital accumulation based on land values. The point of identifying and analyzing these relations of social contestation and capitalism is not to lament them, but rather, when one thinks about them compositionally, which is to say looking at the relation between contestation and accumulation, understanding how the city functions as an expanded factory space broadens the terrain for disrupting capitalist domination of social life.

Capital depends on a certain kind of glide for its continued development. Capital is not real; it has no body and certainly no imagination—it can create nothing on its own. What capital increasingly relies on today is the movement of ideas and creativity through networks of social relations, cooperation, and communication that already exist. What capital needs is a process through which this dispersed creativity already in circulation can be harvested and put to work in the renewed production of surplus value. The bourgeoisie, then, exists not in the form of the factory owner, the one who owns the means of production, but rather the figure that renders the diffuse productivity of the metropolitan factory into forms that can be exploited. Capital is reproduced through profit making that has become rent: by attempting to restrict access to this social creativity rather than through its ownership. The creative class and its dispersal through the rise of the creative city/cluster is the process through which the siphoning off of social imagination is managed, the way the pleasure of being in common becomes the labor of living together.
Understanding how capital attempts to turn its glide through social space into capturing profits does not mean that no options are left for interrupting and breaking these circuits of accumulation. If anything, the points where capitalism is open to disruption have multiplied exponentially. Insofar as we are engaged in the labor of circulation and imagination necessary to keep a parasitic economy alive, we are also located precisely at the point where it is possible to refuse to continue to do so. The subversive potentiality of any creative art or artistic production, then, is not simply its expressed political content but the potentiality it creates for interrupting the circuits of capitalist production that it is always already enmeshed in. In the metropolitan factory, the cultural worker who thinks she is autonomous simply because no foreman is barking orders is just as capable of having her passionate labor co-opted, perhaps all the more deeply insofar as the labor discipline is self-imposed and thus made partially imperceptible. Through understanding the social technologies of rendering the city as a unified social fabric of production, it becomes possible to develop further strategies of refusal and resistance that find avenues for creative sabotage and disruption throughout the city.

RECONSIDERING THE ART STRIKE

What, then, is to be done, when it seems that nothing can to be done? That is, how is it possible to recompose strategies for social movement and subversion within the space of a metropolitan factory that has found ways to turn the practices of antagonistic cultural production into levers of further accumulation of capital? Perhaps the question becomes less one of what is to be done and more of what is to be undone, or action through antagonistic not doing: in short, to reconsider the notion of the strike for cultural labor.

Everyone is an artist. This seems a simple enough place to begin: with a statement connecting directly to Joseph Beuys, and more generally to the historic avant-garde’s aesthetic politics aiming to break down barriers between artistic production and everyday life. It invokes an artistic politics that runs through Dada to the Situationists, and meanders and dérives through various rivulets in the history of radical politics and social movement organizing. But let’s pause for a second. Although seemingly simple, this one statement contains much more than presents itself. It is a statement that contains within it two notions of time and the potentials of artistic and cultural production, albeit notions that are often conflated, mixed, or confused. By teasing out these two notions and creatively recombining them, perhaps something might be be gained in rethinking the antagonistic and movement-building potential of cultural production: to reconsider its compositional potential.
The first notion alludes to a kind of potentiality present but unrealized through artistic work: the creativity that everyone could exercise if they realized and developed potentials that have been held back and stunted by capital and unrealistic conceptions of artistic production through mystified notions of creative genius. Let’s call this the “not-yet” potential of everyone becoming an artist through the horizontal sublation of art into daily life. The second understanding of the phrase forms around the argument that everyone already is an artist and embodies creative action and production within his life and being. Duchamp’s notion of the ready-made gestures toward this as he proclaims art as the recombination of previously existing forms. The painter creates by recombining the pre-given ready-mades of paints and canvas; the baker creates by recombining the ready-made elements of flour, yeast, and so on. In other words, it is not that everyone will become an artist, but that everyone already is immersed in myriad forms of creative production, or artistic production, given a more general notion of art.

These two notions, how they collide and overlap, move toward an important focal point: If there has been an end of the avant-garde, it is not its death but rather a monstrous multiplication and expansion of artistic production in zombified forms. The avant-garde has not died. The creativity contained within the future-oriented potential of the becoming-artistic has lapsed precisely because it has been realized perversely in existing forms of diffuse cultural production. “Everyone is an artist” as a utopian possibility is realized just as “everyone is a worker.” For this, indeed, might be the “art of the future,” but certainly not as Nikolai Tarabukin would have imagined it (Kuric 2010: 242). This condition has reached a new degree of concentration and intensity within the basins of cultural production: the post-Fordist participation-based economy where the multitudes are sent to work in the metropolitan factory, recombining ideas and images through social networks and technologically mediated forms of communication. We don’t often think of all these activities as either work or art. Consequently, it becomes difficult to think through the politics of labor around them, whether as artistic labor or just labor itself.

The notion of the Art Strike, its reconsideration and socialization within the post-Fordist economy, becomes more interesting and productive (or perhaps anti-productive) precisely as labor changes articulation in relation to the current composition of artistic and cultural work. The Art Strike starts with Art Workers Coalition and Gustav Metzger and their calls to withdraw their labor. First, the AWC called for a strike in 1969 to protest the involvement of museum board members and trustees in war-related industries, as explored brilliantly by Julia Bryan-Wilson (2009). Gustav Metzger then called for a strike of a minimum of three years, from 1977 to 1980, although he notes...
that almost no one noticed (which, perhaps, is not so surprising when you go on strike by yourself). Metzger’s and the AWC’s formulation of the Art Strike was directed against the problems of the gallery system. This conception was picked up by Stewart Home and various others within the Neoist milieu, who called upon artists to cease artistic work entirely for the years 1990 to 1993. In this version, the strike moves beyond a focus on the gallery system to a more general consideration of artistic production and a questioning of the role of the artist.

In the most recent and presently emerging iteration, Redas Dirzys and a Temporary Art Strike Committee have been calling for an Art Strike currently as a response to Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, becoming a European Capital of Culture for 2009. The designation of a city as a capital of culture is part of a process of metropolitan branding and a strategy of capitalist valorization through the circulation of cultural and artistic heritage. (In Vilnius, this has played out through figures such as Jonas Mekas, George Maciunas, the legacy of Fluxus, and the Uzupis arts district.) In Vilnius we see the broadening of the Art Strike from a focus on the gallery system to artistic production more generally, and finally to the ways in which artistic and cultural production are infused throughout daily life and embedded within the production of the metropolis. The Art Strike emerges as a nodal point for finding ways to work critically between the two compositional modes contained within the statement “everyone is an artist.” It aims to reclaim the histories of sabotage and work refusal, particularly in connection to the activities of artists and artisans, which Ranciere (2011) has explored:

Against the hymns to liberating labor, this resistance relearned the subversive virtues of working just to live, as well as those of anti-production — work badly done and sabotage. (174)

This becoming-artist of all suits capital is just fine, as it evolves by turning emerging political compositions into technical compositions of surplus value production. Similarly, the aesthetic politics of the avant-garde find the political compositions they animate turned into new forms of value production and circulation. The Art Strike becomes a tactic for working between the utopian not-yet promise of unleashed creativity and the always-already but compromised forms of artistic labor we’re enmeshed in. In the space between forms of creative recombination currently in motion and the potential of what could be if they were not continually rendered into forms more palatable to capitalist production, something new emerges. To repropose an Art Strike at this juncture, when artistic labor is both everywhere and nowhere, is to force that issue. It becomes not solely a concern of the one who identifies (or is identified) as the artist, but a method to withdraw the labor of imagination and
recombination involved in what we’re already doing to hint toward the potential of what we could be doing.

Bob Black, in his critique of the Art Strike (1992), argues that far from going on a strike by withdrawing forms of artistic labor, the Art Strike formed as the ultimate realization of art, where even the act of not making art becomes part of an artistic process. Although Black might have meant to point out a hypocrisy or contradiction, if we recall the overlapping compositional modes of everyone being an artist, this no longer appears as an antinomy but rather a shifting back and forth between different compositional modes. Whereas Stewart Home (1991b) has argued repeatedly that the importance of the Art Strike lies not in its feasibility but rather in the ability to expand the terrain of class struggle, Black objects to this on the grounds that most artistic workers operate as independent contractors and therefore strikes do not make sense to them. Although this is a concern, it is also very much the condition encountered by forms of labor in a precarious post-Fordist economy. The Art Strike moves from being a proposal for social action by artists to a form of social action potentially of use to all who find their creativity and imagination exploited within existing productive networks.

But ask the skeptics: How can we enact this form of strike? And, as comrades and allies inquire, how can this subsumption of creativity and imagination by capital be undone? That is precisely the problem. As artistic and cultural production become more ubiquitous and spread throughout the social field, they are rendered all the more apparently imperceptible. The avant-garde focus on shaping relationality (for instance, in Beuys’s notion of social sculpture), or in creative recombination and détourment, exists all around us flowing through the net economy. Relational aesthetics recapitulates avant-garde ideas and practices into a capital-friendly, service-economy aesthetics. This does not mean that they are useless or that they should be discarded. Rather, by teasing out the compositional modes contained within them they can be considered and reworked. How can we struggle around or organize diffuse forms of cultural and artistic labor? This is precisely the kind of question explored by groups such as the Carrotworkers’ Collective, a group from London who are formulating ways to organize around labor involved in unpaid forms of cultural production, such as the unpaid internships sustaining the workings of artistic and cultural institutions.

In 1953, Guy Debord painted on the wall of the Rue de Seine the slogan “Ne travaillez jamais,” or “Never work.” The history of the avant-garde is filled with calls to “never artwork,” but the dissolution of the artistic object and insurgent energies of labor refusal have become rendered into the workings of semicapitalism and the metropolitan factory. To renew and rebuild a politics and form of social movement adequate to the current composition
does not start from romanticizing the potentiality of becoming creative through artistic production or working from the creative production that already is, but rather by working in the nexus between the two—in other words, to start from how the refusal of work is reinfused into work, and by understanding that imposition and rendering, and struggling within, against, and through it.

SYMPHONY OF THE SURPLUS/VALUE

On November 7, 1922, Arseny Avraamov, standing on top of a tall building in the city of Baku waving two flags, conducted one of the most ambitious artistic works imaginable. *The Symphony of the Factory Sirens*, the piece Avraamov had been commissioned to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the Russian revolution, far exceeded the scope and form involved in almost any other symphony. It was not played by a small group of trained musicians; it involved choirs of thousands, a flotilla on the sea, twenty-five locomotives, the artillery of an army battalion, and all of the factory sirens of the city that had been tuned to be able to play “The International” and “The Marseille.” What Avraamov strove to accomplish, and arguably did, was to celebrate the liberation of the city precisely by playing on the entire city as instrument. He did not want to create the spectacle of liberation, a piece that is moving but leaves most as passive observers, but rather as one that mobilized everyone in the city using the instruments and abilities at their disposal.⁴

On a much less epic scale, on August 22, 2010, net artist and provocateur Heath Bunting launched “The Heath Bunting Collection.” In an apparent attempt to secure his own future artistic production and that of other nonselling artists and render it into a medium and store of value, Bunting began issuing promissory notes in quantities ranging from ten to one hundred fifty Euros, backed by the reserve of the Heath Bunting Collection.⁵ In this arrangement Bunting continued to hold 49 percent of the work, which functioned as a capital reserve. The Heath Bunting Collection attempts to hold 51 percent of its collection authored by Heath Bunting. According to Bunting, given that the value of art is defined by the relationship between the artist and the audience, in some ways the work itself becomes insignificant. What is fundamental is the social bond, or social value, in the relation, which serves as a basis for exchange, and in the case for the deliberation of a certain kind of value.⁶

In such a way, Bunting playfully⁷ explored an idea that seemingly was done in a much more deliberate way in the launching in December 2010 of the Art Exchange,⁸ a stock market for artistic works. Based on a stock market model, the Art Exchange creates a platform for the collective ownership of
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works, with shares available from ten to one hundred Euros. For a 5 percent commission, the Art Exchange secures the right to issue shares for a set period of time. Among the initial pieces on offer for investment from the Art Exchange is Sol LeWitt’s 1998 piece Irregular Form, as well as work by Mike Kelley and Galerie Hussenot. The apparent plan of the exchange is to target people who previously invested in blue chip stocks and other forms of collective investment, in part based upon the tax-free state of art in France. Although at face value this may seem to be just a clever scheme to avoid tax, the directors of the exchange claim that their aim is to inspire more people to become collectors. As commented Caroline Matthews, the operations director, “For some people, mixing fine art and finance goes against their principles, but perhaps they will see things differently in the future” (Azimi and Shaw 2010).

Anthony Davies (2010) suggests that this is not all that surprising as a gesture, but makes good economic sense, for during the economic and financial crisis a narrative emerged around art markets focusing on how they were not affected by a loss of faith in the viability, but rather experienced continued growth. The arts acted as “a stable anchor much lauded by a general and specialist press fixated on art fairs, biennials, record auction sales, and the purchasing exploits of the rich . . . [an] allegedly crisis-free, miracle market” (2010: 257). This is not a new phenomenon, but it continues with the development as an alternative investment market during the late 1990s, which benefited from the fallout of the tech bubble. Previously, art investment funds existed during the 1970s, such as the London-based, Swiss-backed art Modarco, and Artemis, which was founded by Swiss banks.

What unites these moments? How can we understand the connection between an epic symphony, designed to celebrate a revolution and take part in the building of a new socialist society by playing the city itself as a productive ensemble, with processes of securitizing and valuing artistic works? This is precisely the connection I want to explore in this chapter, one that might not seem obvious at first.

I want to explore the way artistic practices and interventions, such as the “Symphony of Sirens,” model social and relation practice that prefigure transformations in the production of and circulation of value: in other words, to look into what Diedrich Diederichsen (2008) has theorized as artistic surplus value. But as Esther Leslie has argued (2011), when theorists subject art to matrices of value, whether economic or sociological, the result is not necessarily moving any closer to a “law of art value” as much as gaining an uncomfortable insight into art/criticism’s crisis of worth within an exploitative and celebrity-driven culture industry. In that sense, I’m less interested in trying to engage in an analysis of value production in art so it can be
settled once and for all, in some sort of metaphysical manner. Rather, I’m interested in how particular models of valuation inaugurated in artistic practices assist in the emergence of new kinds of what autonomist theorists would describe as moments of class composition, or new forms of political possibility that emerge as a result of antagonisms found within the labor process.

**VALUE, ESSENCE, COMPOSITION**

Directly discussing value formation is always difficult, perhaps even more so when discussing how artistic labor produces value. Questions of value production often stand in as a proxy for providing the basis for politics, lending legitimacy to certain kinds of interventions or modes of organizing in Marxist politics, or providing the prime logic for decision making within capitalism. In this sense, one can say that in the same way labor power is more than itself, the question of value production is always more than itself, precisely because of how it connects to other concerns and realities. And in some ways this serves to explain the difficulty in approaching it, for as Diederichsen suggests, paraphrasing Marx, “Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labor into a social hieroglyphic . . . this hieroglyphic speaks of something, but it is impossible to tell by looking at it what it is speaking of” (2008: 22).

Although it involves interesting questions about whether certain forms of labor or interaction produce value, or whether an overall crisis of value production exists, I’m not going to concern myself with them here. My goal is more to use concepts and tools provided by the tradition of autonomist Marxism, or post-workerism, to analyze how the value produced by artistic labor facilitates shaping of social and class composition. Class composition analysis focuses on how moments of working-class insubordination are the driving and primary factor shaping the development of economy and state. Class composition analysis focuses, then, on the relation between the skills and knowledges involved in the overall labor process, or technical composition, and how they connect to the forms of political antagonism and collectivity that exist within and against the existing situation, or political composition.

The question here is the forms of social valuation produced by artistic practices and intervention. Or, taking up the argument of Peter Burger (1984), it would be to ask if the role of the avant-garde has been to attempt to bring art back into daily life, what modes of interaction and value were produced by this movement? In Burger’s narration of the historical avant-garde, this becomes a story of a rejection of traditional art institutions and formats that results in transforming the logic of the art institution and art practice more
generally, as it comes to value other forms of artistic practice and production than it had before. Antagonism is converted into new forms of artistic productivity, in some ways quite similar to the argument made by post-workerists that antagonism and exploitation shape new modes of production and accumulation. Thus, we could say the goal here is to analyze composition in a dual sense: both in terms of how the developing modes of class composition shape production, and how forms of aesthetic composition are connected to and embedded within this process.

This is not, however, to fall back on an argument that artistic practices are merely reflections of underlying economic structures that determine them, as would likely be the case in an older style of Marxist analysis that relies on a base-superstructure model. As Jacques Attali (1985) argued in his important book *Noise*, modes of artistic precede and can forecast broader changes in economic interactions. Pascal Gielen has expanded this argument with his recent work on the artistic multitude, arguing that the art world served as social laboratory for the development of the post-Fordist work ethic (2009). The purpose of examining changing modes of value and production in the art world is not necessarily to remain in one’s concerns in the art world. In fact, the tendency is too great for discussions of art and labor to remain with the circuit of concerns of the art world exclusively, rather than considering how these interactions have become more generalized and expanded beyond the art world. This is what interests me: the generalization of modes of value production and interaction developed from within artistic practice to more general modes of social being.

Taking a compositional analysis view holds value when considering the shaping of artistic labor and value. To give one example, one could reconsider the rise of conceptual art and minimalism, as described by Lucy Lippard in her book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (1973). To consider this from a compositional perspective gives a new view; it’s not just a question of a particular moment in art history, but how that moment of art history connects to broader questions of transformations in labor and society overall—for instance, in the development of new modes of working with information, affects, and interactions. It could be argued that conceptual art prepares the ground for the emergence of new forms of immaterial labor, as information work.9

But perhaps we are again getting ahead of ourselves, as is easy to do in such a consideration of issues. Taking a step back, we can return to what seems to be a quite basic question. When we speak of value being created in an artistic process, value being created by artistic labor, how exactly is that value created? I would argue that talking about value production in artistic labor is particularly slippery, and that the slipperiness of this discussion can
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easily lead one back into an almost neoliberal conception of value production, one that could be held despite the stated intentions of the person who is making claims about artistic labor.

What are the main models of value production and labor? For the sake of simplicity, I’m going to argue here that there are mainly two approaches; then, perhaps not so surprisingly, I’m going to make an argument for expanding a third form. The first approach would be to argue that value is created through the process of exchange itself. That is to say, value is the product of a social exchange, the outward expression of valuation of whatever goods and services are discussed. Value in this sense is created within the process of exchange itself rather than being a formal characteristic that existed before the exchange process. Perhaps the best expression of this can be found in the work of Georg Simmel and, more generally, in neoclassical conceptions of value production and utility developed within neoclassical economic thinking but generalized since then (2004).10

Contrasted to this, one could pose a more traditionally Marxist conception of value, which is that value is the substance produced by labor power, which is then valorized by circulation and accrued eventually into the further development of capital accumulation. Although this is admittedly a very crude rendering of complex debates around value production, the essential aspect for consideration here is that value is an attribute related to labor itself, and thus value production occurs prior to exchanges happening within the marketplace. This is Marx’s point about trying to understand commodity production not from analysis of the market and its appearances, but in relation to the labor and value practices that happen within the hidden abode of production.

Here we should also pause to gesture to models of value production that have extended and developed these ideas in quite fruitful directions. In particular, David Graeber’s anthropological model of value production is a framework for evaluating the importance of actions and modes of being that are already in motion (2001). His work is formed by bringing together Marxist political economy with the ideas and work of Marcel Mauss, and provides a way of thinking value in a broader sense. This has been taken up by Massimo De Angelis (2007), who expands this into a framework of value practices and value struggles around ways of living. And it could be further expanded along the lines that Bruno Gulli has sketched in exploring how labor functions as a core concept for social and political ontologies (2005/2007). Gulli proceeds from his poetic conception of labor to a politics that recuperates what political economy often forgets: culture, care, and ethics of singular becomings not determined by economic value.

The main reason why I bring up models of value production is not that I want to get into a long exploration of them as much as to point out that they
seem to have difficulty when being applied to understand the way that artistic labor produces. Or I should say that Marxist approaches of value production come into the greatest difficulty. This can be seen when you take the clichéd scenario of any recent news article that discussed how a particular work by this or that master artist has sold for some new and unprecedented amount. If value is produced by the labor necessary for the creation of the piece, whether a piece of steel or a painting, it does not make sense to say a piece would contain more value one day than any other, particularly when the artist has been dead for decades, if not centuries. In this case it would be easy enough to take such instances as a kind of false bubble effect of capitalist market relations that bears no semblance to the substance of value contained in the work. There might be some truth to this, but there’s more to it than just this.11

The value produced by the labors of circulation is what underpins the social evaluation of worth or significance of whatever is in question. In other words, the value does not reside in the object or work itself, but in that labor necessary to create and sustain the social perception of its worth. For the work of the old master that is now valued in prices beyond all reasonable imagination, it is not simply that the piece itself has magically accrued value. Rather, a whole industry discusses and evaluates the importance of artists and their work, displaying and exhibiting them, commenting and discussing, cataloging and curating, building histories, all the work that creates what Howard Becker very rightly describes as “art worlds” (2008). The labors of circulation thus are the labors that curators, commentators, galleries, art sales—in short, all the figures that make the art world work, that make images and ideas circulate—take part in. This is precisely the point that Isabelle Graw makes when she describes critics as marketers, which is to say as boosters of art value, thus participating in a form of labor that amasses symbolic value that can be translated into economic value on the market (2010). Thus, it is not the case that a piece through its own self-acting action has mysteriously managed to increase in value through its own effort. This is a mystical conception of value, art, and labor. Rather, it is the way that the diffuse labors flowing through art worlds come to attach themselves to particular pieces, or to be rendered into market prices of these works.

VALUE AND THE ARTISTIC MODE OF PRODUCTION

In thinking about the labor of circulation and how that produces value in art work, what I find most useful is less the importance of that dynamic specifically in the art world itself and more what happens when such ideas are
spread beyond the boundaries of the specifically artist economy and become a more general dynamic—or as Chin-Tao Wu has argued in her book *Privatizing Culture* (2002: 120), the way art, the business world, and politics have entered a “clandestine symbiotic relationship” through which those enmeshed in the overlapping of these networks (for instance, the Saatchis) find themselves in an ideal position to transform economic capital into cultural capital as well as cultural capital into economic capital, all mediated through the circulatory auras of the art world.

This could be described, following the work of Sharon Zukin (1989), as the rise of an artistic mode of production, one based on using the same dynamics of circulatory labor in the remodeling of lifestyles, neighborhoods, and ways of life into a generalized mode of value production. It can be recalled that Zukin’s work examined the transformation of Manhattan in the 1960s and 1970s as former industrial spaces were taken over first by artists who used them as combined studio and work spaces. This is the emergence of the loft economy and transformation of lower Manhattan from an industrial space to another form of production. This is when a sign proclaiming “artist in residence” was displayed not for the purpose of advertising some snazzy new program, but rather to inform the fire department that they were people living in these industrial spaces (which they would not have assumed otherwise).

This use of former industrial space for mixed use, the complete combining of living and working into an integrated mode of artistic production, becomes a key model for schemes of urban renewal and development based around the cultural cache of the arts. It forms a mode of gentrification and development that is applied far beyond the context of New York, being used to fuel property development books in many other locations. In Zukin’s description of this process in New York, the main victims of it were not the local residents, but more the worker from the workspaces that were displaced. More important, artists stand in as a proxy in the gentrification process, with the bohemian lifestyles afforded by these spaces serving as a model of imitations for the middle class. Artists find themselves acting as inadvertent proxies for real estate booms and investment. They also further develop modes of combining work and life that by the impossibility to clearly separate them serve as a way to intensify and deepen forms of labor and attachment to work when they are generalized beyond the arts economy specifically.

Böhm and Land (2009) have explored this argument, specifically looking at the ways that notions of value are shaped within cultural policy discourse and how they have shifted. They argue that in the United Kingdom over the past fifteen years how value in the cultural economy is conceived has shifted, from an earlier conception that the value of the arts is in their potential to
generate revenue to one of forms of indirect value creation, such as generating creativity, fostering employability and social inclusion, and other such conditions.  

In recent years, arguably the shift has been away from this indirect model of artistic value creation back to the direct production of revenue. The ongoing economic and social crises have certainly contributed to this trend, or perhaps more accurately provided a convenient explanation for it. Regardless of changing trends in arts and cultural policy, it is this social value of the arts and cultural labor more generally, how they take part in renewing social bonds and sociality, which is precisely not recognized or rewarded. As Randy Martin argues, the connection created by the artwork is the work of art itself. Art makes exchange possible but is not of it (1990: 83)—and, therefore, paradoxically falls out of the accounting of the labors involved in maintaining the conditions, the very forms of sociability, that make possible exchange itself.

**AN ARTISTIC MULTITUDE IN THE METROPOLITAN FACTORY?**

The metropolis is to the multitude what the factory was to the industrial working class. The factory constituted in the previous era the primary site and posed the conditions for three central activities of the industrial working class: its production; its internal encounters and organization; and its expressions of antagonism and rebellion. The contemporary productive activities of the multitude, however, overflow the factory walls to permeate the entire metropolis, and in the process the qualities and potential of those activities are transformed fundamentally.

—Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2009: 250)

As can be seen in this quote from Hardt and Negri, in their continued work and elaboration of an autonomist analysis of labor and politics today, the metropolis is considered an important space. In keeping with the long-standing themes of autonomist analysis, this becoming-factory of the city is not simply a question of the changing nature of labor relations, but also of the politics connected to these forms of labor. For Hardt and Negri, the dispersed forms of immaterial labor that flow through the metropolis connect to their argument for new kinds of political subjectivity in the form of the multitude. In relating shifts in the arts and cultural economy, connecting this to the broadly autonomist framework, we can say that arts and cultural labor developed and fostered these forms of diffuse creativity and labor in the city before they became to be applied more broadly in the economy, particularly
through the creative industries and the rise of the information and knowledge economy.\textsuperscript{13}

This is the argument that Pascal Gielen makes in his book \textit{The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude}: that the modern art world has played a central role in the movement of ideas of creativity, innovation, and flexibility into workings of the economy and labor markets more generally. As Gielen suggests, “the social structure of the early modern art world was one of the social laboratories in which the current Post-Fordian work ethic was produced” (2009: 2). This is precisely why a class compositional understanding of the arts economy is so important, not just for understanding the functioning of the labors involved in the arts world, but also in how the labor process developed in this art world was then generalized outside of it. This description in some ways parallels Boltanski and Chiapello’s description of a similar process of modeling and then generalizing a new labor process formed around projects, creativity, and flexibility. Gielen argues that the protagonists of creative labor move from a rejection of the horrors of enforced labor and attempts to escape from it to a position where it could be said “Freiheit macht Arbeit”—(freedom makes work)—for “such an ethic of ‘creative’ freedom is eagerly adopted by temp agencies that advertise temporary contracts in terms of the ‘freedom’ they allow” (2009: 53).

In the metropolitan factory, management has become redundant, as the organizational forms necessary and fitting for these forms of labor are immanent to them. In such conditions management becomes little more than the role, not of producing anything, but harvesting what is already in circulation, extracting value and imposing measure on what it does not directly control. This is a paradox: Attempting to manage performance in a cultural economy dependent upon free labor, for much of the labor that is necessary and integral to the overall labor process is not directly under the control of the organization. Under these conditions performative labor and its management have become, as Jon McKenzie argues, much more an art of management that owes more to drama and theater than it does to traditional notions of “management science” (2001). The virtuoso labor of performance management in the metropolitan factory then becomes the ability to modulate, intensify, and alter the circulation of labor and creativity within the productive basin of the metropolis. The management of labor, then, is not the actual organization of the labor itself, but the ability to offload the costs of labor to self-organized forms and to extract surplus value from them.

Returning, then, to Avraamov’s symphony provides more than just an interesting historical example. I would argue that the model of value production and sociality that are suggested by Constructivist practices and ideas still contains profoundly unrealized potential. As commented by CrimethInc, \textit{The}
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Symphony of the Factory Sirens demonstrates what is possible when art/cooperation is thought of as central to life rather than as belonging to the private/leisure sphere (2001: 126). But the question, then, becomes how to organize and sustain the surplus sociality generated through these emergent forms, whether they become the basis for reinventing society itself, are harvested into a basin for the accrual of personal artistic value and reputation, or transformed into a new market for art value and aesthetic accumulation. Historically, the art world, and the work of art itself, have provided a laboratory for developing new forms of capital accumulation, the intensification of labor, and precisely because of that, as a space for rethinking methods and tactics for sabotaging and disrupting those very processes of accumulation.

NOTES

1. David Harvey’s speech took place at the “City from Below” conference that was held in Baltimore in 2009. For more information on this, see the issue of the Indypendent that was produced out of it at https://indyreader.org/content/city-below-introduction.

2. For more on Duchamp, in particular his ready-mades, in relationship to changes in value and labor, see Roberts (2007).

3. An interesting possible point of comparison for rethinking and expanding the notion of an art strike could be with the idea of the “human strike” as theorized by Paris-based artist Claire Fontaine (2013).

4. To hear an attempt at reconstructing what this performance might have sounded like, see Various Artists, Baku: Symphony of Sirens—Sound Experiments in the Russian Avant Garde (Surrey: ReR Megacorp, 2009).

5. For an interesting discussion on the unexpected yet essential relationship between irony and capital, see Bajorek (2008). Although Bajorek focuses on these themes in the writings of Baudelaire and Marx, Bunting’s engagement with the aesthetics of currency and the monetization of his own future art production carries on directly from their explorations of such themes.

6. For more information, see http://www.wuw2010.pl/download/BUNTING_TEKST_WUW.pdf.

7. For anyone who would think that both of these examples are just absurd, we can invoke the claim made by Andrei Codrescu about the value, and perhaps continuing currency, of Dadaist absurdity: “Dada, too, is a form of mystical currency, but it likes to think of itself as too radical for narrative and parable, and too agnostic to take itself seriously” (2009: 11).

8. For more information, see https://www.aexchange.net.

9. For more on this argument, see Alberro (2003) and Vishmidt (2004). Another interesting angle on this would be to explore the ways that the advent of the “post-studio” artistic labor process was thoroughly enmeshed with these transformations in a more general social embedding of labor. On this, see Davidts and Paice (2009).

10. For more on this, see Jacob Oser (1975) and Heilbroner (1999).
11. Or take another, perhaps silly, example involving Pokémon cards. Once I was having a discussion with the younger brother of a friend who was at the time about ten years old. He was showing me his most valued Pokémon card, which in his excited telling of its various attributes also told me that it was worth $75. I asked him why was it that this card was worth $75 when all of the other cards were available for much less. His answer to this, spoken like a true Marxist economist, was that this particular card had obviously taken seventy-five times the amount of time (and thus labor) to produce. And in a certain absurd way, I could admire the logic of the response, especially given that it was from a ten-year-old. But what might have been a clever response for that moment does not contain an adequate understanding of value. What it does gesture to is the notion of value production that I want to explore, which is the form of value created by the labor of circulation.

12. For more on this, see Brouillette (2014).

13. If we return, then, to all of the debates on the creative class and creative city, with such a perspective they can be appraised in a new light. What is the creative other than the dispersed management function immanent and necessary to the labors of circulation? If, following Hardt and Negri’s argument, the metropolis has become the productive factory space, creative labor is the form of cultural logistics that keeps supplies moving in the creative economy. And as Andrew Ross (2009) has pointed out, the main source of revenue for this creative economy that extracts profits from the rents on shared resources has been through the fueling of a gentrifying property boom that is premised on extracting value from the cultural aura of an area.
Chapter Five
Learning Not to Labor

What is, or what can be, the meaning of refusing work today? The refusal of work is a concept and practice—an approach to and understanding of the political, not an incantation. It is one of the most popular and widely circulated concepts associated with anarchist and autonomous politics, and also one of the most misunderstood. In the English-speaking context it is far too easily understood as primarily individualistic, along the lines of a clichéd hippie dropout culture. But, historically, work refusal has taken many forms, from mass exodus from the factory and wildcat strikes to attempted individual escape plans. The point is not to exclude any one form from consideration, but to see the relationships between them: how different modes of refusal work together to animate new forms of social composition. In that sense, refusal oftentimes serves more as a provocation or a utopian demand, in Kathi Weeks’s (2011) sense, than something elaborated in an expanded way.

If we are to approach reformulating autonomous politics today, it is from this understanding: to engage with concepts not so as to precisely understand them but rather to productively misunderstand them—to bastardize and rework them in present conditions, which have shifted greatly since the period of the 1960s and 1970s. And these shifts are not just temporal but also political, economic, cultural, and so forth. If the current state of political discussion is marked by the hegemony of Italian theory, as Matteo Pasquinelli (2011) has suggested, then mutating and reworking the key concepts of the autonomist is even more important so that they do not become ossified by their preservation. One could go so far as to propose that today it is necessary to develop a kind of “zerowork training,” to learn how to not labor, rather than to fall back on previous assumptions about refusing work.

Indeed, what form could such zerowork training take? That is a question for consideration here, as well as to ask its method—to rework the notion of
the refusal of work in an expanded framework that is adequate to the changing conditions of the present. Paul Willis in his classic book *Learning to Labor* (1982) analyzes how British lads’ attempted refusals of school discipline and educational advancement fit them for another form of control: namely, the reproduction of the class relationship as they are then sent off to work in the factory. In other words, the refusal of a certain type of social structure is part of interpellating them into the industrial class structure. Today, it seems that many of those factories are gone, at least from much of the United Kingdom and Europe, and with them much of the social antagonism of industrial labor. Where, then, to find the kinds of practices fitted to learning not to labor? How can we develop this kind of zerowork training?

**A PLURALITY OF REFUSALS**

An important realization to start from is that the refusal of work is not a single thing, but rather a concept that brings together a plurality of different kinds of refusals. These range from the nonconformist preacher William Benbow’s (n.d. [1832]) call for a “grand national holiday” (a month-long general strike) during the 1830s, to anarchist provocateur Bob Black’s (1986) call for the “abolition of work” in the 1980s. The refusal of work as a concept brings Guy Debord—who embraced as a political slogan Rimbaud’s call to “Never Work!”—together with collective refusals to work, wildcat strikes, and acts of sabotage prominent in factories in Europe and the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s. Such conditions led management consultants and union bureaucrats to wonder out loud, *Where Have All the Robots Gone?*—which is also the title of a book from that time analyzing the origins of wildcat strikes and sabotage and linking them less to specific demands around wage increases than to the rise of the “anti-authoritarian worker” (Sheppard and Herrick 1972). We can see the refusal of work as a key and important focus in the writing and discussions to emerge from Italy in the 1970s, but more broadly than that, it can also be connected to how Jim Koehline and Ron Sakolsky (1994) have explored (with others) the idea of “going to Croatan,” or forms of escape from modern civilization. And we can also look at the hobo dream of the “Big Rock Candy Mountain,” where they hanged the jerk who invented work (Gorgut 2011). An entire history of work refusal as expressed in popular culture could be written, starting from Gid Tanner’s “Work Don’t Bother Me” through the history of Saint Monday, or not showing up to work on Monday as a claimed form of religious observance (Seidman 1990).
In these examples, many different forms of practice with different ideas and different interactions are involved. Much as Walt Whitman put it, work refusal is a multitude unto itself, filled with possibilities, potentials, and contradictions. It is not one thing or one approach. In that sense, it might be impossible to trace an exact genealogy at all, or an account of the lineage and influences between different times and spaces. It is rather a shared sensibility transmitted through an undercommons of submerged social practices and spaces. It is part of what Greil Marcus (1989) described, in his elaboration of the connection between the insurgent aesthetics of punk and the medieval heresy, as “the secret drift of history”—a drift that remains secret to those who make it. In these infrapolitical histories, the development of a politics often unseen and not encoded as political constant process of translation exists between infrapolitical insurgency and the development of collective imagination.

In that sense, when we discuss the refusal of work, only part of the story is usually considered: namely, the aspects that are most socially visible. Something always remains hidden, tucked below the gaze of power. Although more often than not that is a benefit to many forms of social resistance, rather than a downfall, for the purposes of this chapter we are considering the moments when these subterranean social currents burst through the surface and openly declare themselves. These are the moments when Marx’s old mole emerges from the burrows into the sunshine of social antagonism, and most important are the effects this has upon emerging social compositions. The Midnight Notes Collective (1992: xii–xiii) has defined working-class struggles precisely as those that “attempt to reduce the unpaid labor capital appropriates throughout the social circuit.” The refusal of work plays a key role in fermenting class struggle as it provides a framework for moving from discontent to action, underpinned by a concrete utopian desire to reduce and, if possible, eliminate the influence of work over social life.

This is the center of an autonomist refusal of work: a perspective that focuses specifically on the compositional elements of that refusal. The twin concepts of political and technical composition, which are of great importance for understanding what makes autonomist Marxism distinct from other forms of Marxism (Wright 2003), likewise are important in understanding work refusal as a compositional practice rather than as an individualistically oriented gesture. Jason Read (2011), in his analysis of the affective composition of labor, has argued that the autonomist hypothesis—or refocusing on working-class revolts rather than on capital as the motor of transformation—is only possible through an understanding of class composition. Otherwise, such a reversal of perspective—calls for the radical possibility of the present divorced from an understanding of material and political
conditions—risks falling into a form of idealist invocation, a millenarian call or prophetic gesture. The same could be argued for the refusal of work, that it is only possible when approached through a compositional framework: to work from material conditions and practices and the kinds of political and social formations they enable and support.

A compositional analysis of refusal thus is not concerned with just the actions and practices of refusal itself, but how these actions and practices are socially embedded and what effects they produce. Such an analysis asks questions such as these: How is the refusal of work deployed as a practice? How is it understood? What social energies do varying forms of refusing work enact? And this analysis considers, perhaps most importantly, the affective dimensions of those refusals, focusing specifically on the forms of care, social reproduction, and organization that exist to sustain and support the continued self-reproduction of refusal. This consideration of the affective and relational dynamics of refusal moves beyond notions of individualized “dropping out” precisely because any attempt to escape from capitalist logic is only possible through the animation of affective relations capable of reproducing the sociality produced by that refusal. This moment—the negativity of refusal, the drive to escape—carries within it another moment of being together with others, a moment that enacts a different mode of social becoming. This is the movement of refusal that leads to the re-fusing of common life and energy back through the social.

REFUSALS AND TYPOLOGIES

The autonomist feminist tradition—oftentimes ignored in the histories of autonomism (and even more so in recent debates that draw from them)—offers much to the reconsidering of work refusal. It is this history that Kathi Weeks has brought back into her focus with her work (2007/2011), by revisiting the socialist feminism tradition and what it can bring to questions of work, politics, and refusal today:

But what if feminist political analyses and projects were not limited to claims about who we are as women or as men, or even the identities produced by what we do, but rather put the accent on collectively imagined visions of what we want to be or to do? (2007: 248)

Although these contributions might seem negative at first glance or to be based on concerns over the limitations of certain forms of social and political practice, I suggest that only through understanding such limitations and blockages is it possible to work around them. In her article “Where Is
Jocasta?,” Alisa Del Re (1996) argues that forms of refusing work that do not take into account the dynamics of social reproduction have a tendency to reinforce and reinscribe labor demands upon women who are most involved in the tasks of social reproduction. We can imagine this dynamic in terms of women being left to keep the house together and provide support during a strike. In other words, this creates a negative affective recomposition of labor in the way that the tasks of social reproduction fall upon some people and not others. A different approach is necessary to understand class itself: one that is much more compositional in the sense of being formed through ongoing antagonism and conflict rather than as a fixed identity or status. This more fluid and flexible version of understanding class has been developed within the autonomist tradition more generally, although for some reason it has not seemed to filter through into more recent debates on immaterial labor.

One of the best perspectives for this rethinking can be found in the work of the Madrid-based collective Precarias a la Deriva (PAD), originally formed in 2002 in response to a call for a general strike in which many found it quite difficult to participate because of their positions in precarious and gendered forms of labor. This made it difficult, if not impossible, to strike without causing harm to themselves or others. PAD’s approach thus starts from a rejection of understanding changes in work by analyzing its technical composition—for instance, by distinguishing brain workers from chain workers. Their typology starts from forms of political composition corresponding to the forms of labor—in particular, with different kinds of refusal associated with the varying forms of work. This is a key insight: namely, refusal is not one thing, but the form of refusal varies according to one’s position in a broader labor process and by social positioning. Precarias a la Deriva (2004) breaks work into three main categories:

1. **Jobs with repetitive content**: telemarketing, cleaning, textile workshops; little to no subjective engagement with the task; conflict takes the form of generalized absenteeism, dropping out, sabotage

2. **Jobs with varied content, vocational/professional work**: nursing to informatics, social work to research; subjective implication with the task performed is high; conflict is expressed as critique of the organization of labor, its logic of articulation, and the ends toward which it is structured

3. **Jobs with content that is directly made invisible and/or stigmatized**: the most paradigmatic examples are cleaning work, home care, and sex work; conflict manifests itself as a demand for dignity and the recognition of social value
This is a useful framework for approaching work refusal, not as one thing but as a practice closely connected to broader changes in the labor process. Thus, rather then lamenting that the heroic years of mass wildcat strikes by industrial workers have seemingly ended (although debate is ongoing, depending on where you’re looking), the question is to look at the multiple forms that refusal takes in the current composition of the workforce and, then, based upon that understanding, to find ways to work between these different patterns of subjectivation, encouraging from that the emergence of new forms of political composition.

EuroMayDay and the organizing around precarity can thus be understood as one attempt to rethink political organizing in such a fashion. Although it was often critiqued for lumping together forms of work that seemed to have little to do with each other from a technical perspective, this was precisely the point. One could make a similar argument for the functioning of the more recent Occupy movements: It is not that they share an assumption about the subjective position of all involved and seek to work from that position, but that they seek common grounds for politics despite the variety of positions and experiences of the participants.

REFUSAL AND CULTURAL LABOR

If we take seriously Precarias a la Deriva’s notion that different forms of refusal relate more generally to varying positions in the labor process, this would be a good reason to digress into a discussion of cultural labor. By cultural labor, I refer mainly to the kinds of jobs that have been discussed as relating to the creative class, the media and cultural work, artistically oriented professions, and related ideas. These forms of work have generally been understood in relation to debates around immaterial labor. Much interesting work has been written about them from multiple perspectives. But, for the moment, I’m most interested in thinking about how the perspective that PAD proposes could change the way we think about these kinds of jobs, both sociologically and politically. From a compositional perspective, the importance of the forms of cultural labor is in the way they shift the politics of work from a direct refusal of work to embracing it.

In PAD’s categories this is a shift from the first type of work to the second, a move from work that is repetitive and leads to pure refusal to vocational work that is more critiqued than refused. Richard Neville makes a number of insightful observations about this in his book *Play Power* (1971), which explores the dynamics of 1960s counterculture. In countercultural projects, “work is done only for fun, obsession, hobby or art form,” which transforms
Learning Not to Labor

every “Monday morning into a Friday night.” Neville describes such ventures as mostly undercapitalized, leading to a precariousness that makes it necessary for those involved to “work hard at not working.” Although searching for enjoyment and freedom motivates the subjective composition of such projects, he notes that “the laxity of the (non)working conditions is beyond a shop-steward’s dream (or nightmare?). Gone are contracts, time clocks, fixed holidays, strikes, division of labor and doing things in triplicate” (1971: 213). Or one can look at the role that a greater emphasis on cultural labor played within the squatting milieu of Amsterdam in the mid-1980s. According to the history of that time written by Lynn Owens (2009), it involved a shift from a politics of pure refusal to one that tried to negotiate spaces for autonomy in production and community by arguing that having these sorts of spaces is valuable, both from an economic and a cultural angle.

In an overall shift and transformation of class composition, the most important aspect is how the shift enacts a broader change in the relationship to work, in particular the higher degree of subjective investment in work itself. In some ways this is a new version of Joseph Beuys’s famous statement that everyone is an artist, except that it has now been realized as everyone is a worker, all the time, everywhere. This is a logical outcome of the culture-based regeneration model that Andrew Ross (2008) explores, where increased attachment to work substitutes for the dwindling of other forms of remuneration. And the higher degree of subjective involvement with and relationship to the work itself has tended to lead away from a refusal that takes the form of pure refusal—or even that of union organizing—and more toward forms of individual critique and the discussion of conditions:

Art products are the objects of intense financial speculation; cultural productions are top hit-makers in the jackpot end of the New Economy; “cultural districts” are posited as the key to urban prosperity; and creative industries policy is embraced as the anchor of regional development by governments around the world on the lookout for a catch-up industrial plan. (32)

At some level this has been seen as the absence of labor politics from many forms of cultural labor. Cultural politics has become a form of political entrepreneurship more than anything else. But this seems a bit unfair in the sense that one can also approach these changes as shifts in the form of refusal rather than its absence altogether. And from an autonomist perspective, that seems much more encouraging.

Recent debates on shifts in cultural labor and politics and on work within the arts economy have tended to focus specifically on the changing nature of work within the world of arts and cultural production (Lovink and Rossiter 2007). Much can be gained in this kind of exploration. But I would suggest,
from a compositional framework, that most interesting is how the changes in relationship to work that have developed within arts and cultural work have expanded beyond that particular sphere into much broader patterns. This is the argument made by Pascal Gielen (2009): The arts world becomes a laboratory where the post-Fordist work ethic is developed and then generalized beyond it. One could make similar arguments concerning the role of what Greg Sholette (2010) calls the dark matter of the arts world, or the necessary but undervalued mass of labor that sustains the functioning of the arts economy without being celebrated, or the increased importance of internships first in the cultural sector and then more generally. Here we have the same dynamic: a different relationship to work is developed (for interns, often very little or no pay) based upon a high level of subjective involvement, a process of subjectivation through the work. And this relationship and its intensified forms of exploitation are then generalized beyond the arts and culture world—for instance, by making the recipients of social benefits engage in free labor in order to maintain their benefits. In these cases we see a change in the form of labor, in the refusal involved, and in the overall social composition created.

**RENEWING THE ART STRIKE**

Finally, let us return to considering the art strike as a possible way to think through the refusal of work, where conditions include a high level of subjective involvement in work itself. Although the idea and practices associated with art strikes are generally little known, I suggest they provide an interesting way for rethinking questions around labor politics today.

Historically, the art strike has come about in four main iterations, with variations among them. The Art Workers Coalition issued the first call for an art strike in the 1960s in New York City (Bryan-Wilson 2009). It brought to light the connections between the art economy and the war economy, through the role of people such as the Rockefellers in supporting both. It commented on the Vietnam War as well as on issues of racism and exclusion in the art world. Its main focus was thus the politics of the institution, and in many ways it could be understood as a form of institutional critique (Alberro and Stimson 2009; Raunig and Ray 2009). This is in some ways quite similar to Gustav Metzger’s call for 1977–1980 to be “years without art.” For these three years, Metzger produced no work, apparently going on strike by himself, likewise with the idea that such a strike could create the potential to change the institutional structures of the art world. Stewart Home and the Neoists took up the call for an art strike again from 1990 to 1993, with the
specific goal of disrupting the role of the artist itself. Thus it was less focused on the institution and more on the position of artists generally. And finally, during the past few years, calls for an art strike have been coming from Lithuania, organized by Redas Dirzys and the Temporary Art Strike Committee. The focus of this iteration is the role of Vilnius as a creative city, as Vilnius recently was named one of the European capitals of culture for a year. The goal of this strike is thus to disrupt the functioning of the arts in a cultural economy.

In each of these iterations, the scope of the action or strike call has expanded, from the role of the gallery and arts institution, to the role and position of the artist, to the place of creativity in the economy more generally. In this way, the art strike directly takes up the theme that seems to underpin practices of work refusal more generally, as it works between the utopian promise of possibility found in human labor, the wealth that can be produced and is already in motion, and the compromised and exploitative forms that work takes. The art strike doesn’t seek to do away with this tension but works with it. Stewart Home (1991b) once argued that the importance of the art strike is not in its feasibility but in the ways that it expands the terrain of struggle. That would be even more the case today. This argument was echoed recently by Paolo Virno (2009) in an interview discussing the relationship between art production and social movements. Virno suggests these connections are less significant within the content of artistic production than through creating new forms of interaction and new public spheres, especially those that are separate from the state. Given the ever greater enmeshing of creative activity in people’s everyday lives (and not just in terms of paid employment), it would seem difficult, if not impossible, to throw down the tools of creative labor without also throwing down one’s own life in the process. If we are at a point, as Marina Vishmidt (2009) claims, where selling labor-power to live is conflated with life itself, it is indeed a tricky dilemma, one that cannot be solved quickly or easily:

Resistance has never been more internal, and more inadequate, to the material conditions that support its realization (as value)—this is notable in the currency of critique in contemporary art, for instance, even and especially when it addresses itself to the evils of exploitation or the aporias of emancipation. Selling labor-power to live has never been more conflated with life itself—this indeed conjures away any disparity between capital and labor, when they become indiscernible as variables in the compulsions of life as it is.

A useful suggestion for extending the notion of the Art Strike can be found in Eugene Holland’s proposal (2011) for a “slow motion general strike,” or gradual withdrawal from institutions and social relations of domination,
which is ultimately what the Art Strike proposes, especially at a point where it has become impossible to separate the difference between “art” production and more general creativity infused throughout everyday life.

Croatian artist Mladen Stilinović has returned to this theme throughout his decades of work. First, Stilinović proposed to reclaim one’s being and energy through laziness rather than through labor. This can be seen most clearly in his 1977 piece “Artist at Work,” which comprises a series of eight images of Stilinović in bed in his pajamas, apparently in a condition of doing nothing at all. In a Yugoslav context where productive labor was constantly celebrated as a virtue, the key foundation of building and maintaining a socialist society, this can clearly be seen as a provocation and challenge. The theme carries through Stilinović’s work as he celebrates laziness as being necessary and integral to artistic activity. Conversely, Stilinović derides artists who are not sufficiently attentive to developing their own capacity for laziness, referring to them as mere “producers” rather than artists. But a subtler point underpins Stilinović’s celebration of nonwork: precisely, that laziness is a form of artistic labor rather than an escape from labor.

This comes out most clearly in his 1993 work “Chinese Business,” in which a series of collages explores the question of whether artists can ever truly go on holiday. The work provocatively asserts that it is impossible for the artist to ever stop working, that the apparent refusal of productive labor that Stilinović explores through his work at the same time represents the development of new forms of artistic labor and production. The outside of labor sought through artistic laziness has become another form of production rather than an escape from it.

Another way to approach this is from the observation that real subsumption as a condition, if it should come to be true, is such that pointing out that condition would no longer produce any political effect. In other words, if all of life has become part of an overwhelming labor process—the social factory—then the condition of naturalizing the expanded exploitative work relationship is taken as a given rather than experienced as something that is disturbing or could nurture an antagonistic relationship to that condition. This is along the lines of what Franco “Bifo” Berardi (2009b) calls the necessary alienation that precedes a compositional moment and new forms of struggle. But it seems clear, given the changing composition of labor and the shifting ground of politics, that new forms of necessary alienation leading to new antagonistic movements would not likely be similar to those that Bifo describes as having occurred in the 1960s and 1970s. We might look instead to what he describes as the pathological and overwhelming nature of immaterial labor (Berardi 2009a)—the condition of those who find themselves “dreaming in code” (Lucas 2010)—rather than to industrial alienation.
In short, looking to the dark side of the multitude may help to understand the potential for new forms of subjectivation: to look not just at the conscious activities of labor and politics, but also at the ways that sociality is put to work more generally, such as through the use of geolocative data and mobility (Scholz and Liu 2010). Most importantly, this means to look for new routes of political recomposition, not just in the obvious moments of labor and politics, but also through understanding blockages to emerging social composition. Working from the blockages of composition is not to mourn them or to fall into a melancholic trap, but rather it is to realize that new moments of social recomposition emerge from the decomposition of what has become before. It is to embrace what Frederic Jameson (2010: 13) calls the cynicism of the intellect with the utopianism of the will.

**THE SHAPE OF REFUSAL TO COME**

For at the sight of work—that is to say, severe toil from morning till night—we have the feeling that it is the best police, that it holds everyone in check and effectively hinders the development of reason, of greed, and of desire for independence. For work uses up an extraordinary proportion of nervous force, withdrawing it from reflection, meditation, dreams, cares, love, and hatred. . . . And now, horror of horrors! it is the “workman” himself who has become dangerous; the whole world is swarming with “dangerous individuals.” (Friedrich Nietzsche 1997: 174)

To conclude, let us return to the beginning. It seems today that work is, as Nietzsche argued, the best policeman. It holds a function of governing social life, even when its role in adding productive value seems to slip away, and we find ourselves in the position of what Peter Fleming and Carl Cederstrom refer to as “dead men working” (2012). It might seem that in times of biopolitical production, where the policing function of work is thus the policing function across all of life, the refusal of work is the refusal of life itself. Not surprisingly, this leads to some rather dismal-sounding conclusions about the possibility of autonomy and social recomposition. Although I can appreciate a certain degree of questioning of assumptions surrounding the potentials of immaterial labor and of networking (as has been circulated in debates emerging from autonomism over the past decade), I’d nevertheless argue that there’s no reason to follow such arguments to rather dire conclusions. Stefano Harney suggests that an alternative can be found most readily within the black radical tradition, which takes up this problem of refusing work when one’s life is the work. For Harney (2008), this “is the dimension of original exodus; this is the practice of fugitivity found within the black radical tradition, the escape that does not need to go anywhere but remains escape.”
The project to be undertaken instead is to take a more compositional approach to understanding and working with different forms of refusal. That is, to ask certain questions: What form of social surplus is produced by a particular refusal? What form of collectivity? And following from that, what circuits of value production and valorization is the refusal enmeshed in? What is the notion of value and of social collectivity embodied in the refusal, and how does it respond to circuits of capture and accumulation?

Bernard Marszalek, in the new introduction to Paul Lafargue’s classic text *The Right to Be Lazy*, hints at another important direction: namely, that the opposite of work, and what is produced by its refusal, is neither leisure nor idleness. Rather, for Marszalek (2011: 19) the opposite of work is “autonomous and collective activity—ludic activity—that develops our unique humanity and grounds our perspective of reversing perspective.” A compositional approach to work refusal is thus not a question of doing nothing, but of developing the skills, capacities, organization, and collective becoming that make possible and sustain these ludic activities and social wealth. In short, this is the very form of zerowork training that we need today: a pedagogy of learning not to labor, not as a form of individual refusal, but as a socialization of refusal. This is the argument that Stanley Arnowitz and Jonathan Cutler (1997: 21) make concerning the history of labor struggles for shorter hours: such struggles enable increasing freedom from work and act as a strategic locus for organizing. This locus is capable of embracing the entire working class and creating collective resources to respond to capitalist offensives. Learning not to labor sits at the junction of the refusal of work and the re-fusing of the social energies of such refusal back into supporting the continued affective existence and capacities of other forms of life and ways of being together, as practice and as a form of embodied critique.

Having now come to the end of the second movement of this book, focusing on art and labor, we will now turn to something completely different—namely, engaging with the politics of institutions. This will be explored through the work of the Yugoslavian art movement Neue Slowenische Kunst. Arguably, the NSK’s work sits precise at this junction of refusal and the re-infusing, but they approach it from a much different angle. The NSK breaks from the historic avant-garde strategies explored thus far, which attempt to open a rupture with the present through the creation of something new and unprecedented. The NSK focuses on the creation of a “retro-avant-garde,” reactivating the potential left in previous avant-garde movements and practices that remain.
NOTES


1. For a more general history of avoiding and escaping from work, see Gini (2003), Jones (1986), and Koehline and Sakolsky (1994), Campagna (2013), and Seidman (1990).

2. Simon During (2010) suggests that literary production and culture, once divorced from the spiritual realm, provides tactics for escape from the domination of work. This is backed up by Henri Lefebvre’s (1997) declaration that he became interested in thinking about work refusal not because of a political tradition, but after reading a science fiction novel, *City* by Clifford Simiak.

3. This dynamic can be seen at work in the film *Made in Dagenham* (Cole 2010), in which male workers deride and dismiss the validity and importance of striking female Ford workers based on the assumption that ultimately their incomes are not necessary for social reproduction but are merely additional to the necessary wages of the male workers.

4. An interesting parallel could be drawn between Stilinović’s work and that of Lee Lozano, in particular her “General Strike Piece” and “Dropout Piece.” For more on these, see Lehrer-Graiwer (2014).

5. For more on Stilinović’s work, see Engqvist et al. (2012) and, more generally, Vidokle (2011).

6. According to Allen Ruff (1997, 194), in 1917 the U.S. Postal Service banned the sending of Lafargue’s text, along with many others, including Marx’s *Wage Labor and Capital.*
INSTITUTIONS

Overidentification

Figure 3  “Organigramme.” Nueu Slowenische Kunst (1986).
Chapter Six

Fascists as Much as Painters

In 1987, Laibach, the musical wing of the art collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (New Slovenian Art, or NSK), released a reworked version of the Queen song “One Vision.” Although it was inspired by their participation in Live Aid and espoused a somewhat vague left liberal message of unity and world peace, it was vastly transformed in Laibach’s reworking. Although their lyrics about there being one race, vision, and solution might easily be passed over as innocuous, or not even noticed in the context of a performance by Queen (1985), their submerged obscene meaning becomes readily apparent when translated into German and played along in a droning, militaristic style. Laibach’s version of the song, far from being a cover or simple copy, through its transformation of the song, draws out and amplifies the grotesque parallels between the pleasures of pop culture and fascist modulation of crowd emotion through propaganda and epic-scale theatricality.1

Why did Laibach do this? Are they fascists? If it looks like, talks like, and acts like a fascist (Laibach is famous for always remaining in character), do not be fooled, for it may be a fascist after all. But Laibach’s performances (as well as the work of the rest of the projects within the NSK) are premised on undercutting such a clear-cut distinction through their use of totalitarian aesthetics and bastardization of nationalist themes. They are, and claim to be, fascists as much as Hitler was a painter. Laibach and the NSK operate by adopting the imagery of fascism and state power and pushing it to its limit, recombining it with other elements and traditions, exploring how these connections play out in unexpected and unforeseen ways.

This approach—adopting a set of ideas, images, or politics and attacking them, not by a direct, open, or straightforward critique, but through a rabid and obscenely exaggerated adoption of them, is referred to as overidentification. Although the concept was developed within the theoretical armory of Lacanian psychoanalysis (and, later, further developed by thinkers such as
Slavoj Žižek and various cultural and political activists), it was the NSK that through their work forged it into a tool of cultural subversion and sabotage to be deployed within the ideologically charged context of post-Tito Yugoslavia. This chapter examines the formation of overidentification as a strategy of cultural-political intervention uniquely suited to this context. Is overidentification useful as a strategy of political intervention for a time marked by the presence of cynical distance within the cultural and social sphere, or have the various phases of transition that have occurred since Laibach’s founding rendered such methods ineffective? Perhaps it is possible to refound a critical politics and strategies of intervention drawing from the work of Laibach and the NSK, transforming their methods and ideas to the conditions of the present.

THE EXPLANATION IS THE WHIP AND YOU BLEED

Laibach, a Slovenian avant-garde musical performance group, was founded in 1980. They were one of the founding members of Neue Slowenische Kunst in 1984, along with IRWIN (painting) and Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater (who subsequently changed their name to Noordung). Although this chapter will focus primarily on Laibach’s work, motifs, ideas, and images are frequently shared, developed, and elaborated by the various branches of the NSK, whether independently or as part of joint ventures. Since its inception, the NSK has expanded to include philosophy, planning, architecture, and many other aspects that are part of its now proclaimed status as a “global state in time.” In addition to the collective development of shared themes, the various collectives composing NSK emphasize the collective nature of the project, not crediting individual members for aspects of the work and frequently changing the composition of the members involved in any given production. As a musical project, Laibach mainly is associated with forms of industrial music (as well as neoclassical and martial styles), evolving during the career from a very harsh and abrasive sound during the early recordings to one at times involving multiple layers of electronics, heavy metal, compositions arranged in the form of national anthems, and most recently interpreting a series of Bach’s fugues. But Laibach, and the NSK more generally, have achieved prominence, notoriety, and infamy perhaps less for their particular aesthetics as much as the historical meanings and recontextualizations of the various elements used in their performances and productions. The name “Laibach” itself, for instance, has been the German name for Ljubljana for
ages, but its more recent historical association is its imposition during the fascist occupation.

The work of Laibach and the NSK frequently draws upon the aesthetics of totalitarian and nationalist movements, forging a kind of totalitarian kitsch by fusing elements from varying and completely incongruent political philosophies. For instance, the NSK logo is a combination of Laibach’s cross logo (borrowed from Russian supremacist artist Kasimir Malevich; it was used as its primary public reference point during the years when the name Laibach was banned in Yugoslavia), John Heartfield’s antifascist ax swastika, an industrial cog, and a pair of antlers (with the base of the design featuring the names of the founding collectives). Even in this small example, one can see an ambiguous and strange merging of elements, the way the antifascist emblem becomes ambiguous and is transformed within a composition where the relation of the elements to each other changes the meaning contained within each of them. Laibach and the NSK do not employ such elements in gestures of repetition, but rather treat them as ideological and aesthetics ready-mades (in the Duchampian sense) whose combination creates ambiguous and disconcerting effects.

Laibach/NSK’s usage of historical and political ready-mades and images in their work obscures and conceals as much about their origin as it reveals. In this way, they render audible and amplify their submerged and hidden codes and desires, or what Žižek refers to as the hidden underside of systems and regimes. This approach to the use of borrowed historical and political elements forms the basis of what Laibach/NSK refer to as retrogardism, or the formation of the monumental retro-avant-garde. The basic idea is the nonrepression of troubling or undesirable elements of historical and social regimes in their work. Rather than repressing them, they are highlighted, as they argue that the traumas affecting the present and the future can only be addressed by tracing them back to and through their sources, working through and processing them. As Alexei Monroe argues in his analysis of their work, it is not an approach based on constructing a new future by negating the past (which, in general, is the usual relation to time found within avant-garde artistic practice), but rather “retrogardism attempts to free the present and change the future via the reworking of past utopianisms and historical wounds” (2005: 120). Rather, the impact and effect of Laibach/NSK’s work is based on the effects produced by the disjunctive synthesis of troubling historical elements and the radical ambivalence contained within them when recontextualized.

As has been argued by Žižek and others, existing socialist democracy was sustained by a set of implicit (obscene) injunctions and prohibitions. Thus socializing people into practices of not taking certain explicitly expressed...
norms was a necessary process. Tactics of overidentification, as employed by Laibach and the NSK (as well as more broadly within the Slovenian punk subculture of the 1980s that gave birth to the genre of “state rock,” or punk music incorporating elements as the discourse of self-managed socialism as critique through overidentification), work precisely by taking the stated norms of a given system or the arrangement or power more seriously than the system that proclaims them. This operation occurs not through addressing the law itself per se or by breaking prohibitions (a more straightforward form of transgression), but rather teasing out the obscene subtext that underpins the operation of the law and supporting social norms. A strategy of overidentification, in order to be effective, “transcends and reactivates the terror of the social field... the spectral menace of totality gives the phenomenon sufficient ‘credibility’ to sow doubt and disquiet” (Monroe 2005: 79).

This is precisely how Laibach/NSK’s work functions, through giving an impression of totality (by claiming the status of the nation, or the state, or of being a global state in itself) in a manner that lends a degree of credibility to the menacing and disconcerting nature of their aesthetic production.

As Susan Buck-Morss (2002) explores in her work on transitions within collective imaginaries and the fading away of mass utopian visions, dream worlds become dangerous when they are used instrumentally by structures of power, which is to say, as legitimation devices and discourses. But these rhetorical structures of legitimation vary in how they are translated into dimensions that dominate the visual field. Broadly speaking, Buck-Morss maintains that strategies connected to nation-states are formed around a primacy of space in their imaginal functioning and by the rhetoric of class war, which she argues are formed around notions of time and history. She claims that protagonists in class struggle are not spatially delineated: “the terrain of class war, as civil war, is spatial confusion” (2002: 24). If this analysis is correct, avant-garde movements, working in alliance within movements of class struggle, should move from a status of constituent to constituted power: in other words, from class struggle to state making. In Buck-Morss’s framing, this would entail a change in the structure of rhetoric and visual legitimation, and is perhaps part of one reason (among many) that early avant-garde movements found themselves in a precarious place: forced to choose between keeping to their core principles and often traumatized by the compromises involved by working within the conditions of state legitimation in a postrevolutionary situation. Buck-Morss argues that socialism failed because it mimicked capitalism too faithfully.

Conversely, one could argue that avant-garde artistic movements failed when they were caught in these changing conditions of legitimation. It is
when, as Boris Groys (1992) suggests, the project of sublating art into everyday life, which is to say, preserving it while negating it as a separate and autonomous domain or area (the idea of art for art’s sake), was transformed. For Groys, this is the move from the avant-garde idea of art as everyday practice into something else: a “total art of Stalinism”—in other words, where the avant-garde desire for the reshaping of the totality of everyday life as an art form was perversely realized as the drastic reshaping of life in a truly most dramatic fashion by the Stalinist state. Laibach and the NSK work by turning this process of mimicry against itself, disarticulating the potency of the dream world and utopian promise of communism that had become embedded within a discourse of legitimation and mixed with the lingering presence of totalitarian and authoritarian elements. They also work to excavate the trauma experience of the avant-garde during this transition within legitimation strategies of the structures of artistic expression within state structures. Often, the constituted forms of power existing with state structures are based upon the ability to draw from the energies and constituent power of social movement, of utopian dream worlds, and render them into zombified forms of state legitimation (Shukaitis 2007). NSK/Laibach’s interventions were so powerful within the Yugoslav context precisely because of how they amplified and made visible this process of rendering dream worlds into discourses of state legitimation, from the mythified versions of Slovene history to the continuing use of partisan imagery and themes. These interventions provide through their disconcerting effects ways to work through both the continued presence of authoritarianism and utopian energies, as well and how they are completely enmeshed and intertwined in the workings of existing social imaginaries and political discourses.

Laibach’s work incorporates a good deal of official Yugoslav discourse on self-management and social democracy, using at times sections of Tito’s speeches and audio recordings, as well as particularly resonant forms of Slovene history. It is this reworking of Slovenian and Yugoslav history that invested their early works with such potency, through the way these familiar ideas were made strange and even incomprehensible to audiences through their fusing and juxtaposition with other elements (for instance, by fusing them with Germanic imagery and phrasing, which was anathema to nationalist groups). Laibach’s response to this, particularly in relation to the continued controversy over its use of the name that was said to dishonor the “hero city” of Ljubljana, was to continue to adopt a stance of complete identification with Slovenia and Slovene identity, and thus to frame controversy and rejection of Laibach as the rejection of Slovenia itself. This creates a form of ambivalent identification in which Laibach both bastardsizes (in their critics’ views) Slovene identity and at the same time engages in a militant assertion
of that very Slovene identity (at points even declaring the German to be a subset of the Slovene). Through the politics and practices of overidentification, Laibach and the NSK hint at the possibility of breaking the very process of identification, which is why they were so disconcerting for many political actors in Slovenia in the 1980s.

Laibach and NSK’s politics and practices of overidentification are displayed in unique and quite fascinating ways in their organizational practices, or at least the claims they make about their organizational practices. This is exemplified in their detailed structure from the NSK organigram 1986, which takes the logic of alternative forms of institutionalization to an almost absurd extreme. The organigram shows at least ten different departments in addition to a number of assemblies, councils, and organs, all paired with or ruled over by the statement of “immanent consistent spirit” that covers and directs all of the activity of NSK. This claiming of and overidentification of overly complex, arcane, and nearly incomprehensible state-like structures was observed by the *Rough Guide to Yugoslavia* to bear a striking resemblance to the diagrams used within school textbooks to explain the country’s bafflingly complex political system and structures (Dunford et al. 1990: 244). Through this, the spectral menace of totality is activated, for in the case of the NSK it clearly is spectral, because the NSK is composed of many more organizational components than it has ever possessed as members. This becomes more so in projects such as the “State in Time,” in which the claiming of a state structure existing purely in time is enacted through overidentification with the organizational form and structure of states (IRWIN 2014). Nowhere in Laibach and the NSK’s work is there a clear-cut statement on organization, only an exploration of its ambivalences and possibilities; this approach “does not support a utopian or dystopian organization, but the fantasies of audiences that need to imagine that such possibilities still exist” (Monroe 2005: 113).

The first phase of Laibach’s work is based on the usage and working through of elements and histories that are particularly resonant and provocative within a Yugoslav and, specifically, Slovenian context, but often have little to no meaning outside of it. This perhaps comes to its highest point of concentration in the 1986 NSK joint production *Krst pod Triglavom* (Baptism under Triglav), which was a monumental drama roughly based on the history of the forced Christianization of the Slovenes, interspersed in NSK fashion within many other layers of history and processed through the imagery of the avant-garde (for instance, the re-creation of Vladimir Tatlin’s proposed monument to the Third International as part of the set design). This production, which took place in a large state-sponsored theater, is interesting not just in the merits of its internal aesthetics, but also in how it illustrates that
changing status of Laibach and the NSK within social context (particularly
given the greater importance of state backing and commissions within socialist systems). That is to say, it makes the transition of Laibach/NSK’s work from its emergence within alternative and subcultural milieus to an acceptance, even if tentative and grudging, by state authorities. It marks what Monroe refers to as the Laibachization of Ljubljana (2005: 155), or the process of confronting and reworking cultural boundaries and norms that occurred during the 1980s, from the point of the banning of Laibach appearing under its chosen name, to their international success by which Laibach’s fanatical identification with Slovenia came to be realized when they were recognized as the most successful Slovenian artists.

Laibach’s rise to prominence in the mass media, especially internationally, occurred at a time where attempts were being made to shift the image of Yugoslavia closer to one of a Western humanist democracy. Laibach’s presentation of itself with a cold neo-totalitarian front functioned both to invoke forms of authoritarian legacies and images that the Yugoslav government wanted to reject and, at the same time, become the most prominent and aggressive assertion of Yugoslav (and particularly Slovene) culture on a global stage (although the fusion of Germanic elements and imagery within Laibach’s imagery meant that they were often taken by casual music fans to be German, even more so during the 1990s with the rising popularity of German industrial bands). Laibach’s success showed that it was “actively connected to the zeitgeist, but specifically to those subterranean, unforeseen elements repressed by mainstream consciousness” (Monroe 2005: 75), specifically the lingering presence of authoritarian, fascistic elements, totalitarian, militarism, in the self-management system itself.

This period marks a transition within Laibach’s work. It is a shift from an early phase oriented around interventions drawing heavily upon local histories and references to one oriented to broader audiences, global cultural flows, and media environments. It is this logic that underlies Laibach’s reinterpretation of the Queen song that began this chapter as well as all the other covers and reinterpretations that Laibach have engaged in. In their reinterpretation and reworking of the Queen song, Laibach are not attributing any particular political agenda to Queen per se, but rather are engaged in a process of amplifying the ambivalences that are already contained within Queen’s performance. It is not that Laibach brings a fascist aesthetic to bear on a Queen song, but there is a similarity and underlying dynamic between totalitarian mass mobilization and capitalist mass consumption. Laibach’s work is premised upon amplifying and bringing out this underlying ambivalence and tension, to present this strangeness back to an audience as a reflection and fracturing of the structures and imaginaries by which the crowd has been
constructed and constructs itself. Although the reinterpretation of the Queen
song is the most striking, a similar process and logic underlies other reinter-
pretations, such as their versions of the work of the Beatles (1989), Europe
(1994), and Opus (1987). More recently, Laibach, extending the global state
in time project, have taken to reinterpretting the form of the national anthem

This contrasts sharply with the forms of artistic production that Charity
Scribner describes in her book *Requiem for Communism* (2003). The exam-
ple that Scribner explores, from Krzysztof Kieślowski to Rachel White-
read’s empty space and resin sculptures, seem affected by an almost
involuntary melancholy or mourning. For Scribner they capture accurately an
affective state, where the perceived failure of creating a workers’ state or
welfare state is mourned, but not necessarily in a way where mourning leads
to the idea that they can be repaired, rebuilt, or that even anything can be
done about the situation. In this sense, an attachment lingers, but without any
of the potential remaining. Scribner documents artistic forms where lingering
attachments persist to a symbolic universe that has lost its potency to reshape
forms of collective imagination that could reshape the world: They are barren.
The work of the NSK and Laibach is almost exactly the opposite of this in
how it engages with existing symbolic sets. Far from holding onto an aesthet-
ics without potential in their work, what remains only seems to be attachment
to previous sets of symbols and ideas precisely because of their lingering
transformative, albeit ambivalent, potential. The idea of the retro-avant-garde
is based precisely on the task of reactivating the residual potency residing in
ideologies and aesthetics long thought (or even wished) to be dead.

Laibach’s reworking and transformation of other artists’ materials render
them into totally different compositions in terms of their feel and nature
through relatively minor changes in tone, orchestration, and lyrics. This
approach is along the lines of what Deleuze and Guattari (1986) discuss as
the formation of a minor literature, one based not on the development of a new
representative form of language but rather working within the existing major
languages and turning them against themselves to create strange new forms.
Laibach and the NSK’s artistic productions, as they take part and intervene
in the Yugoslav and regional social political context (and beyond that), create
the basis for the formation of what could be described as a minor politics
(Thoburn 2003) and the minor composition of social movement (Shukaitis
2008). It is a minor movement in the sense of not trying to create a new
language and form of its own, but rather to hollow out a space where mean-
ings are transformed within the dominant languages and social norms. Lai-
bach’s reworking and fusing together of widely differing pre-given aesthetic
and ideological elements, sources they treat as ready-mades to be transformed through recombination, can be understood as a particular form of what the Situationist International referred to as *détournement*. *Détournement*, literally translated “embezzling,” involves the combination of preexisting aesthetic elements and ideas. Although *détournement* has often been understood in a rather watered-down way in terms of forms of culture jamming based on witty recombination and mixing of elements that work based on a fairly easily recuperable form of critique, the work of Laibach and the NSK is much harder to make palatable. Most *détournement*-based culture jamming relies upon maintaining a kind of critical distance from the elements used, whereas Laibach’s work functions through a total and fanatical identification with obscene subtext of the elements they employ. In this sense, Laibach return to a much deeper sense of *détournement*:

> He who has material power, has spiritual power, and all art is subject to political manipulation, except that which speaks the language of this same manipulation. (1982, quoted in Djuric and Suvakovic 2003: 574)

Their recombination of ideas, images, and politics does not simply recombine them, but it acts to transform the potential of the elements used to create meaning in relation to each other, and through that acts as a form of semiotic sabotage in the public sphere, at times critically damaging the ability of these symbols to operate.

**STRATEGIES OF OVERIDENTIFICATION**

Let us step aside from Laibach and the NSK’ s particular cultural and political interventions to consider the role and practice of overidentification more broadly. Overidentification as a practice of political intervention could function as the unifying nodal point of a Lacanian left (Stavrakakis 2007/2008), if such a thing existed (Cederström 2007).\(^6\) Since the period of Laibach’s rise to international attention in the late 1980s, this approach to cultural intervention has been adopted more broadly within political organizing and can be identified in the activities of groups such as the Yes Men, Michael Moore, Christoph Schlingensief, Reverend Billy, the Billionaires for Bush, Yael Bartana, and many others. The argument for such strategies is that, in the current functioning of capitalism, the critical function of governance is to be more critical than the critics of governance. In short, it creates a way, as Laibach claims, to exit from being an object of political manipulation through an adoption of the codes through which that manipulation operates. Functionaries in a system of power, by presenting themselves as their worst critic, thus
deprive critique of its ammunition and substance, thereby turning the tables on it. This is to go beyond both the arguments put forward by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) that critique has been subsumed within capitalism and within the autonomist politics that forms of social resistance and insurgency are the driving motor of capitalist development (rather than being reactive to it). This hints at the possibility that strategies for the neutralization of the energies of social insurgency are anticipated even before they emerge, or what Mark Fisher (2009) describes as “precorporation” (rather than recuperation). It is in this context that a strategy of overidentification is argued to be of particular value, throwing a wrench in the expected binaries of opposition and response.

The most worked-out conceptualization of overidentification as a strategy of intervention was developed by BAVO, which is an independent research project focused on the political dimensions of art and architecture, primarily based on cooperation between Gideon Boie and Matthias Pauwels.7 Based in Rotterdam, BAVO’s initial efforts responded to attempts to apply culture-based regeneration, such as has been employed in the continued reshaping of Amsterdam as a creative and bohemian, yet ultimately gentrified, location (2007b). It is this particular role reserved for artists in a cultural-led regeneration process—as being both central to it, yet unable to do anything but voice an ultimately pointless form of dissent—that leads BAVO to reconsider what might be a different strategy of artistic-political intervention. Overidentification for BAVO becomes another way to reformulate dissent when previous forms of cultural-artistic intervention have become integral to the very social processes they are ostensibly objecting to in the first place.

Their takes on these matters are far-ranging, as can be seen by the varied contributions and examples they gathered together for their edited collection Cultural Activism Today (2007a). BAVO uses the concept of overidentification to draw together and theorize forms of cultural intervention that would easily appear to have no connection to each other at face value, such as Reverend Billy’s anticonsumerist Baptist preacher antics with Christoph Schlingensief’s staging of an event where asylum seekers are voted out of Austria in a Big Brother-style reality television program. Despite the variety in forms these interventions take, the approach bears an underlying similarity. From this BAVO draws out a few key points illustrating their perspective.

BAVO suggests that we are living in post-political times, where it is possible for artists and political actors to say anything, but what is said does not matter. This describes the way artists are integral to economic and social interactions, as creators of value and new ideas, but nevertheless totally disempowered when they take on any role other than that. However, a certain degree of criticalness is held as necessary and desirable. Today, it is argued,
artists are expected, even demanded, to play something of a critical function, as long as one does not go too far in that function—in other words, to question the fundamental ideological coordinates underpinning social relations, as by doing so “one is immediately disqualified as a legitimate discussion partner, treated like an incompetent, ignorant imbecile who stepped out of line and should better stick to his own field of experience” (2007a: 19). From this they argue, following Karl Kraus, that when forced between two evils, one should take the worst option: that is, to abandon the role of pragmatic idealists and to work to force an arrangement of contradictions to their logical end. In their words,

Instead of fleeing from the suffocating closure of the system, one is now incited to fully immerse oneself in it, even contributing to the closure. To choose the worst option, in other words, means no longer trying to make the best of the current order, but precisely to make the worst of it, to turn it into the worst possible version of itself. It would thus entail a refusal of the current blackmail in which artists are offered all kinds of opportunities to make a difference, on the condition that they give up on their desire for radical change. (2007a: 28)

One can certainly argue about the nature and details of this proposal. BAVO adopts such an approach as they argue that other possible strategies, such as working on the grounds of marginal positions or creating forms of exodus, have already been anticipated and accommodated by systems of capitalist governance, and therefore no longer are useful as disruptive strategies (2007a: 29). Within this context, the work of groups such as the Yes Men becomes more interesting, precisely because rather than putting forth forms of critique that can easily be brushed aside, their tactics of fanatically identifying with the neoliberal agenda pushes them further along to obscene but logical developments of such ideologies. This is the same stance the Laibach and the NSK employ, one based not on critical distance but erasure of such distance. And it is through this erasure of distance that the Yes Men’s opponents are thrown off guard, precisely because, as BAVO describe it, this form of intervention forces them to betray their articles of faith and passionate attachment to a neoliberal agenda as the obscene subtext is made clear and “makes it [the WTO]—rather than its critics—appear weak” (2007: 30).8

A strategy of overidentification thus provides one possible antidote to what Peter Sloterdijk (1998) refers to as cynical reason, or a condition where people know that something is fundamentally wrong but continue to act as if this is not the case. It is this cynical distance that Jeffrey Goldfarb (1991) diagnosed as so prevalent in the United States, creating a sort of “legitimation through disbelief,” although one could easily argue that this is much more widespread and just the condition that a strategy of overidentification aims to
address and intervene within. One can certainly contest the desirability and effectiveness of such an approach, and such strategies have and continue to create a great deal of debate within political, artistic, and academic circles. Nevertheless, even if the conclusion is eventually reached that such activity is not an acceptable choice of interventionist strategy, it nonetheless seems valuable to learn from, especially in making a transition out of a time frame or frame of mind that is paralyzed to find any method of intervention because all strategies are already caught in varying webs of power and therefore argued to be compromised. A strategy of overidentification operates precisely by turning this already-caught-ness into an advantage by deploying and redirecting energies of capture and constituted power against themselves.

Žižek, in an essay on Laibach and the NSK, comments that the reactions of the left to them has initially been to take their work as an ironic satire of totalitarian rituals, followed by an uneasy feeling based on not knowing whether they mean it. This is usually followed by varying iterations along these lines, wondering if they really do mean it, or whether they overestimate the public’s ability to interpret their multiple layers of allusion and reference, and thus reinforce totalitarian currents. For Žižek, these are the wrong questions to ask and angles to take. Rather, it is a question of how Laibach and the NSK, as well as a strategy of overidentification more broadly, intervene in a social context marked by cynical distance. From this perspective he asks:

What if this distance, far from posing any threat to the system, designates the supreme form of conformism, since the normal function of the system requires cynical distance? In this sense the strategy of Laibach appears in a new light: it “frustrates” the system (the ruling ideology) precisely insofar as it is not its ironic imitation, but overidentification with it—by bringing to light the obscene superego underside of the system, overidentification suspends its efficiency. (1993)

What could this mean for the politics of artistic intervention that projects such as Laibach and the NSK are working within? To approach it from another angle, Jacques Rancièr has made the argument that the history of relations between political and aesthetic movements is one of confusion between two ideas of the avant-garde embodying competing conceptions of political subjectivity. Thus for Rancièr the very idea of a political avant-garde is “divided between the strategic conception and the aesthetic conception” (2004: 30), which has consequences in how the attempt by artistic-political interventions to reshape the distribution of the sensible (to use Rancièr’s phrasing) plays itself out. One could argue that the history of avant-garde movements is based precisely on trying to erase the boundaries between an aesthetic and a strategic approach to politics—for example, in the
way that the Situationists formed a political praxis around creative interventions and aesthetic disruption in the fabric of everyday life. The avant-garde has tended to operate through a declaration of the new, of an announcement of the new distribution of the sensible (which is often taken for granted to have occurred with the initial manifestation of the movement in question), and through the operation of new forms of social and political praxis.

The work of the Laibach and the NSK, as well as others working with a strategy of overidentification, takes a different approach. The efficiency of this obscene submerged power that Žižek identifies works precisely because it is formed around something that everyone knows but that no one can say they know, at least openly. It is the shared secret that cannot be openly expressed and creates commonality through its lack of open acknowledgment. This is very much the role for aesthetics that Ranciere describes, somewhat paradoxically as “the police,” which functions in the administration of what is said and what can be said. As a strategy of political-aesthetic intervention, overidentification does not simply declare the content of the submerged obscene forms of power, to act to reveal them as straightforward critique. This would not be effective in such a situation precisely because the conditions are already known by those involved. Overidentification operates, then, through taking the claims embedded in the situations more seriously than taken by the system of power administering them takes itself, and pushing that to its limit, and if possible beyond it.

The question remains, however, to what degree a strategy of overidentification is marked by the conditions that led to its emergence. If overidentification was effective in its ability to disrupt circuits of meaning and the social imaginary within a particular social and historical context, it does not necessarily follow that it will operate similarly in other, possibly significantly different, situations. Might then a transition within the imaginary of a politics formed around aesthetic interventions premised upon overidentification be necessary? This is perhaps what one sees in the development of Laibach’s work, which moves from operating as a disruptive mechanism in and against the Yugoslav national imaginary during the 1980s, but then changes direction following the disintegration of the country.

For instance, during the 1990s the NSK launched the “State in Time” project, where it claims to have created a global state and system of governance that is not based in physical space but only in time. This is a movement away from a strategy of disruption of one imaginary toward a new form of imaginary disarticulation, and it can be seen in some ways more to be based on a nostalgic identification with the state form that has been torn apart than an act of overidentification. In other words, it had become possible for Laibach and the NSK to transition from disarticulating the Yugoslav imaginary
through overidentification and to begin a more positive assessment of the state dynamics it had fused itself to. This is perhaps not so surprising when one takes into account Sharon Zukin’s argument that it is only possible to fully aestheticize a system or relations of production once it has passed its moment as the hegemonic form of production (1989).

Let us return to the questions of what a strategy of overidentification is ultimately based on, what does it accomplish, and to what end. Although it is tempting to brush off questions of the difference between parody, satire, and overidentification, this would be a mistake: It is precisely in these differences that overidentification as strategy achieves its unique function. This conflation of overidentification and related concepts would be especially tempting precisely in how humor and satire have been taken up in the United States by the left as a response to the politics of fear-mongering—for instance, in the increased prominence of Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show*, Stephen Colbert and *The Colbert Report*, and the satirical newspaper *The Onion* (Day 2011).

Colbert serves as an example of how these related phenomena seem to overlap through the way he adopts the style and composure of a right-wing news anchor to undermine the political right through parody and imitation. But this is what makes what Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart do different from overidentification: their position is never ambivalent. Viewers are unlikely to think what is being said is serious, which is much different from the activities of Laibach and the NSK, where ultimately their position is left open and is thus unsettling. Overidentification as a strategy operates through avoiding this closure, even if it is a closure that would be reassuring rather than leaving the audience unsettled.

To frame this difference in terms that owe more to a Deleuzian approach to aesthetics, one could say that overidentification is based upon engaging the virtual within the actual rather than assuming or trying to create a position on the outside from where critique can operate. Conversely, parody and satire function by assuming a place exists that is not complicit with the forms of power engaged. Parody and satire thus work by expanding or enlarging this social distance as a basis for critique, oftentimes to quite useful effect (Kenny 2009), whereas overidentification works precisely by collapsing the distance as much as possible, by rejecting the idea of a position of noncomplicity to engage with fields of power. This is to work, for instance, by teasing out the antinationalism contained within nationalism (which Laibach do in their *Volk* album), or the underlying fascist crowd dynamics within the pop anthem (as Laibach did in much of their material in the 1980s). In this difference, based on not being able to assume a distance from power, that Laibach uses strategies of overidentification, which open new conditions for critique and intervention within the social precisely through their apparent collapse.
The question of transition and intervention within the social imaginary is transformed if one works an argument such as the one made by Guy Debord (1998), that rather than a sharp and total distinction between Western capitalism and Eastern communism, the question is of the difference between the workings of a diffuse and concentrated spectacle—in other words, not of totally different forms, but rather of particular compositions of a similar underlying dynamic of power and exploitation. Any attempt to shape a new form of social imaginary for revolutionary politics that takes as a given this demarcation would be bound to fail precisely because it has misapprehended the configuration of political, economic, and social forces that it is operating within. From this perspective, overidentification as a strategy takes its value precisely because it does not assume any clear difference between configurations of power and does not try to operate by claiming a space outside of the present in which it finds itself.

The question, then, becomes of how a strategy of overidentification either creates or restrains the possibility of intervening within the creation of collective imaginaries within the present. One can perhaps stumble toward the position that overidentification provides another wrench in the conceptual toolbox for refounding and reformulating critique. It provides a possible answer to the dynamics analyzed by Peter Starr (1995) in his exploration of the dynamics of failed revolt in post-1968 political thought. Starr argues that modern revolutionary thought is premised upon radical breaks and departures from the past, one that suppresses previous notions of return and reappearance of social forms. It is this dynamic of reappearance that gives way to fanatical obsessions with dynamics of recuperation, as they run counter to the narrative structure of revolutionary politics. Starr argues that the ultimate direction laid out in post-1968 thought moves toward a notion of impossible and total revolution, and thus failing moves toward forms of cultural politics based on subtle subversion. A strategy of overidentification works through the remaining utopian energies and traumas of the past, opening other avenues for reformulating critique (Goddard 2006). A strategy of overidentification enacts a transition away from considering the problems to be avoided by considering them as possibilities to be exploited.

The applicability of overidentification is not founded upon its straightforward and unproblematic nature, but precisely because of its very ambivalence. Overidentification becomes a way not to provide a completely worked out solution or direction to the problems posed by the current political situation, but rather works to refuse the closure enacted by the existence of roles and positions through which dissent is accepted and desired, even if it is ultimately powerless to affect any significant change. To the degree that capitalism and the state (whether in liberal democratic, bureaucratic collective, or
any number of other possible forms) derives its continued existence by drawing from the energies and creativity of social resistance, one can say that this dynamic is ambivalent for all sides involved. And if we are living in an “age of fantasy,” as Stephen Duncombe (2007) argues, overidentification is a fitting tool for developing methods of intervention for contexts marked in their very nature by a high degree of ambivalence. Overidentification becomes one way to work through and against the problem that the autonomist hypothesis (resistance to capital provides capital with its future) poses: by refusing the pre-given role of an accepted but subordinated politics of resistance. Overidentification responds to the problem of “precorporation,” where culture preemptively formats and shapes desires according to its logics of accumulation but demands that the appearance of resistance continues. In such a situation, overidentification abandons the role of the loyal resistance by pushing the internal contradictions of power to their limit, making the best out of choosing the worst option. Although this frustrates desires for easily known, clearly marked boundaries, the conditions addressed are those that comprise politics today: a hyper-mediated, networked sociality where the overwhelming flows of information, ideas, and immaterial labor threaten to resurrect desires for stability and the imagined security provided by forms of archaic social attachments and identification, whether in the form of renewed nationalisms, religious fundamentalism, or paranoid reactionary forms of identity politics. Overidentification is a strategy for rearticulating the imagination of a radical politics, not through a form of critique that attempts to stand outside the present but that operates through pushing forward the contradictions and intensities found with the mutating networks of collective imagination in the present.

NOTES

An earlier version of this chapter appeared previously as “Fascists as Much as Painters: Imagination, Overidentification, and Strategies of Intervention” (2011), Sociological Review 59(3): 597–615.

1. For a good analysis of fascist aesthetics in relation to the avant-garde, see Hewitt (1993).

2. For more on Laibach and NSK’s work in relation to this history and development of the avant-garde, see Djuric and Suvakovic (2003), IRWIN (2006), and Badovinac (1999).

3. For interesting engagement with Žižek’s work and Žižek-ian themes within organization studies, see De Cock Böhm (2005, 2007), Contu (2008), and Fleming and Spicer (2007).

4. One can see a parallel between development of state rock in Yugoslavia (bands such as O! Kult and Panktri) and developments in the British post-punk scene, such as
Public Image Limited claiming to be a communications and production company, or artists moving toward an adoption and overidentification with yuppie aspirations as technique of critiquing them. A number of artists, particularly Joy Division, Human League, and Magazine, drew from state socialist and totalitarian imagery in their work, employing a tactic creating ambivalent effects, although perhaps nowhere nearly as disconcerting as Laibach and the NSK’s work (Reynolds 2005).

5. The field of literature on politics and practices of identification, identity, and the politics of organization is wide-ranging. For a good overview, see Pullen and Linstead (2005). For an exploration of the politics of disidentities, see Harney and Nyathi (2007).

6. For more on the development and use of Lacan within organization studies, see Vanheule and Verhaeghe (2004), Roberts (2005), and Vidailllet (2007).

7. For more information on BAVO, see http://www.bavo.biz.

8. BAVO takes up and expands the conception of overidentification from how it was developed by the NSK and Laibach. In their formulation, it becomes a more expansive notion, one that aims to be useful outside the particular context from where it was developed. BAVO summarizes the most salient features of a strategy of overidentification as being based on these elements:

1. Its effectiveness is based on sabotaging dialectics of alarm and reassurance, drawing out the extreme and obscene subtext of a social system, and eliminating the subject’s reflex to make excuses for the current order to inventing new ways to manage it better;
2. quickly shifts between different positions, overstating, mocking critique, and producing internal contradictions and points of tension that cannot hold together;
3. sabotages easy interpretations of unproblematic identification either with or against the intervention, making it difficult to be recuperated in any direction;
4. aimed precisely against the reflection to do the right thing;
5. creates a suffocating closure within a system of meaning or relations, preventing escapes from the immanent laws and relations of that system (2007a: 32–37).

9. For more on this, see Berardi (2009), Dean (2009), Barchiesi (2011), and Standing (2011).
Chapter Seven

Icons of Futures Past

According to art historical legend, the 0.10 Exhibition in Petrograd in December 1915, otherwise known as the Last Futurist Exhibition, or the first exhibition of Suprematism, was marked by a great deal of tension. It was so marked that the exhibition, which was designed to celebrate the best of the avant-garde, nearly didn’t happen. Vladimir Tatlin accused Kazimir Malevich’s new work of lacking professionalism and being an embarrassment to the art community, leading to Malevich’s new works being sequestered within their own isolated room. The tensions continued to mount in the run-up to the exhibition’s December launch, culminating in a fistfight between Tatlin and Malevich at the opening. If available sources can be believed, the fight was broken up by the Russian-French Suprematist-Constructivist painter Alexandra Exter.

These brewing antagonisms and divisions within the Russian avant-garde can be interpreted and understood numerous ways. At the most banal level, they could be a product of a contest for dominance and attention within art circles, a conflict over who would be the leading light of the milieu. More profoundly, they can be understood as sitting on the fault lines of a deep-seated division within the avant-garde, a division based on ongoing debates about the role of politics in relation to aesthetics and the function of representation in artistic practice. Although the desire to move art from a representational practice into direct intervention in the everyday could be said to be shared broadly, there was far less agreement on the best way to go about accomplishing such. Malevich’s attempt to answer these questions through the development of Suprematism provided one possible answer, but one that earned the rancor of Tatlin and others, questioning whether his retreat into an aesthetics of the absolute and pure form did escape the problem of art as representation.

Although these divisions and differences might not have been the most significant at the time, such questions would come to take on a more pressing
significance in the artistic politics of postrevolutionary Russia, in the context of the development of Constructivism and Productivism, and then as the moment of possibility opened by the revolution would come to be swallowed up in the rise of Stalinism and the enforcement of socialist realism as the only acceptable style and approach. Within fifteen years the Suprematism that Malevich espoused would shift from being critiqued by his comrades to being absorbed into what Boris Groys (1992) refers to as the “total art of Stalinism”—to the point that Malevich would find himself discreetly smuggling Suprematist aesthetics into his work in the early 1930s, work that would not be seen outside Russia until nearly fifty years later.

In this particular moment of art historical ephemera, within these tensions and debates of the avant-garde, we can find something that is quite significant for the NSK and has continued to inform the Slovenian group’s approach and practices for many years. If we understand the approach of NSK’s work as revisiting previous historical traumas and events to excavate their continuing resonance and influence, then their work can also be seen to intervene in reprocessing these very antagonisms by trying to remediate between various factions of the Russian avant-garde. Rather than accept the avant-garde divisions between an interventionist constructivist practice and a mystical and escapist Suprematism, NSK’s projects have found ways to revisit and revitalize moments of art historical materials as ready-mades that can be deployed to affect unexpected disturbances within the present. *He who has material power, has spiritual power.*

Tatlin and Malevich may have come to blows at the opening of the 0.10 exhibition, but this does not prevent a more productive fusing of elements from their work. This conjunction can be seen through many of the elements used within NSK, from the combined use of Suprematist symbols (the Malevich cross and Black Square) with Constructivist themes and elements. This can be seen in the way that the epic 1986 theater and music production of *Baptism under Triglav* opens with a reconstruction of Tatlin’s Tower, the planned but never realized monument to the Third International, which is followed by the repurposing of Suprematist motifs juxtaposed against productivist imagery, fascist aesthetics, and folkish motifs. As the NSK spelled out in their 1991 book, this overall approach is guided by “not so much a matter of exclusivity and rational decision of a person’s will, but rather of necessity brought to the fore from numerous reflections of impersonal and Suprematist forces” (8).

For this chapter, I would like to look at a particular aspect of these impersonal forces. It is curious that, during the 0.10 Exhibition, Malevich hung the Black Square painting in the corner of the room. By doing this, he deliberately chose to exhibit the work in the place usually reserved for hanging a
religious icon in Russian domestic space, encouraging the perception that emptiness and the void of the black could be understood not as an absence, but as something more profound. As described by Norbert Lynton, Malevich “displayed it [the Black Square] like an icon, hanging it across the ‘beautiful corner’ of the room allotted to Suprematism—the corner diagonally to one’s right, looking from the entrance, traditionally reserved for a family’s main icon or icons when the location was a home” (2008: 46). It is perhaps this implicit use of the icon’s metaphysics underpinning Suprematism that provoked the ire of Tatlin, whose work was much more oriented toward a direct engagement with material conditions and developed its aesthetics from them. Tatlin and many other figures within the Russian avant-garde were likewise influenced by traditions of icon painting, even though they employed and used these influences in a very different manner.

In this split between sections of the avant-garde, we can see a number of important questions not just about the relationship between art and politics, but also about the influence of icons and religious metaphysics in finding ways to answer those questions. As Benjamin Buchloh (1984) commented more than thirty years ago, tracing the relationship between the Constructivist concern with faktura, or the material properties of composition, and the influence of icon painting highlights the aesthetic combat between worlds, inner and outer, taking place within artistic practice. I argue that the embrace or disavowal of the metaphysics of icons was important for the Russian avant-garde, and thus was likewise important for the NSK as it took up and reprocessed ideas and motifs from that earlier movement. The influence of icon painting via the Russian avant-garde is most pronounced for IRWIN, but this dimension works its way through multiple departments of the NSK, even if in different and varying manners. The Russian avant-garde, and the avant-garde more generally, is most often understood to be rejecting a mystical metaphysics of art or its importance, even while the influence of icon painting exercises its influence. By revisiting this split within the Russian avant-garde, and the varying ways it drew upon the influence of icons, the NSK has used these tensions as materials for their continued development and renewal of artistic-political practice.

**ICON PAINTING AND THE AVANT-GARDE**

As Andrew Spira (2008) argued, tensions between Constructivism and Suprematism focused on their differing conceptions of art’s purpose and artistic method. Malevich developed a kind of transcendent existentialism aiming toward the expression of the absolute, an approach tending to lead art
out of this world. For the Constructivists, art became more rooted in the
world, aiming to shape and develop the everyday. The Constructivist rejec-
tion of aestheticism and easel painting led them to embrace an almost total
subordination of art to functional purposes (2008: 117). This divergence ges-
tures toward profoundly different conceptions of artistic practice and its
social role, one that leads one to ask, very much as IRWIN explored in an
important series of works, “Was ist Kunst?”—what is art? This tension, this
question, remains unresolved and resurfaces persistently time and time again,
as when the Situationist International split in 1962 largely around the very
question of art’s political purpose, whether it should possess a domain of its
own or be dispersed through everyday forms of politics of practice (Wark
2011; Stracey 2014). Echoes of these debates can be found more recently in
the way that Peter Hallward (2006) argues against the value of Gilles
Deleuze’s ideas, suggesting that his concepts are not applicable for ongoing
political practice precisely because of how they (perhaps much like Male-
vich’s Suprematists works) lead one out of this world rather than deeper into
a struggle over it.

It is in this conjuncture and its repetition that the influence of icon painting
is at its most interesting. To an extent, icons point toward one possible way
for artistic practice to step out of the representational and decorative function
previously assigned to the arts. For in icons, it can be argued, it is not that
God is represented, but rather that the direct presence of the divine is embod-
ied in the icon. Or to put it more glibly, icons do not represent God but are
immanent to and a part of God directly. Thus, interactions with icons provide
a portal or form of mediation directly with the transcendent nature of the
divine. The irony is that for parts of the Russian avant-garde, this ability to
move from representation to direct presence was only possible by embracing
the icon’s underlying religious or metaphysical premises, which was difficult,
if not impossible, for many of the avant-gardists involved.

Icon painting was influential most obviously for Malevich, but also more
broadly for Alexander Rodchenko, Lyubov Popova, Marc Chagall, Vladimir
Tatlin, and Wassily Kandinsky. Their varying responses to the icon’s meta-
physics chart the ways that artists embraced or employed the icon’s influence
in their practice, from an obvious and direct influence, to functioning more
in the background of a work’s production. Icon painting was a key influence
in Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova’s development of Rayonism,
which, following their interaction with Futurism, focused on the emission of
light from objects. They based their notions of perspective and composition
through the representation of energies, in a manner reminiscent of the ener-
gies thought to be seen emanating from holy objects (Parton 1993). A less
obvious influence can be seen with Nikolai Tarabukin, who in addition to
writing a key manifesto of Constructivist aesthetics, From the Easel to the Machine (1982 [1923]), also drafted a book on the philosophy of icons. Within a single figure, such as Tarabukin, we can observe how a variety of approaches developed to bridge the rooted and the mystic, even if they coexisted with some tension. As Spira (2008: 80) has commented, similarly rich parallels can be seen between this influence of icon painting and that of “primitive” art on Cubism. As this parallel suggests, icon painting provided something external to the present, an “outside” in relation to which the reworking of artistic practice becomes possible, albeit one that does not necessarily entail an exit from the world itself (such as in the form of religious transcendence).

Norbert Lynton (2008) has shown how Tatlin likewise drew greatly from this history of icon painting, even studying under a professional icon painter, but used this influence in quite a different manner. Tatlin’s engagement with icons, much like his work overall, focused not on their mystical or transcendent quality, but on the elemental qualities of their construction. This was important for Tatlin as he moved from painting to the development of painterly reliefs and other forms of intervention, in which the influence of icons can be seen. The most obvious examples are his 1915 Corner Counter-Relief, which consists of a wooden panel encrusted with metal sheets that was hung in the corner of the room, much like Malevich’s placement of the Black Square. The work was even constructed out of the same materials often used for the creation of icons. A similar influence of icons can be seen in Tatlin’s 1916 work The Month of May. This influence led Nikolai Punin to argue that “the influence of the Russian icon is undoubtedly greater than the influence upon him [Tatlin] of Cezanne or Picasso” (Lodder 1987: 110). Despite this apparently shared influence, the role of the icon for Tatlin is quite different from that for Malevich. Nonetheless, it is significant that Tatlin was developing works most directly influenced by icon painting at the same time that Malevich was preparing to launch Suprematism, showing that it is perhaps the closeness of the artists’ positions and mutual influences that might have led to their disagreements and splits more than the distinctions between their works.

THE BECOMING-ICON OF NSK MOTIFS

In this context we can examine how the repeated motifs the NSK employed come to take on an icon-like dimension. Over time the avant-garde became more abstract aesthetically, through relying on the continuing emotional resonance of repeated figures and motifs. This is the function played by some of
NSK’s most commonly used motifs, such as the stag, the saucer, the sower, and the Malevich cross. Each becomes abstracted from its original context, and through redefinition and re-creation comes to take on new characteristics and meanings within the context created by NSK’s work. As Andrew Spira argues, icons function as images through which access to another world is possible: “Worshippers do not pray to icons but through them, the icons function being to raise our spiritual state and serve as a channel for transcendental communication” (2008: 51). Thus, it is not that NSK’s motifs are inherently iconic; rather, when they are treated in such a manner, removed from their initial context and forced into a new one, they can begin to function as icons—not as a medium to be communicated with, but as the medium through which new forms of transcendence might become possible.

IRWIN explains this quite clearly in their elaboration of how they employ the Malevich cross as “a method of translating this culture into consciousness, its mimesis. Our culture nails us into the center of the cross, into a crossing point of mad ambitions of the East and West. It is an empty space, geometrically defined, but its significance has never been completely clarified. It is here that we materialize our own ideas” (1991: 122). The becoming-icon of the Malevich cross is not because it represents something directly, but because it opens up a space, an emptiness, through which IRWIN can articulate and clarify their analysis of aesthetic, political, and spiritual issues. Although Malevich most commonly placed the Black Square in the corner of the room, in the position of the prime icon, IRWIN has tended to place work based upon the image of the sower in this position. The sower was the prime and dominant motif used in the 1987 Slovenske Atene (Slovenian Athens) exhibition, for instance, in which an image most commonly connected with Eastern European folk cultures held the central focus in IRWIN’s mythic gaze. Boris Groys claims that strategies of the artistic avant-garde eliminated the distinction between artwork and profane things (2008: 33). IRWIN and the NSK’s activities use the same process in reverse, working to draw out the revolutionary and sacred dynamics of the profane artworks through their operations as icons.

Here we can see that NSK’s treatment of their chosen themes and motifs in an iconic manner fulfills multiple functions and operations. The juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated aesthetic elements—constitutive of NSK’s method of emphatic eclecticism—can function to highlight the continuing resonance of currently disavowed imagery. By using this tactic, the NSK demonstrates the continued power of fascist aesthetics and imagery, whether operating within the ideals of the nation-state or within pop culture. The two most notable examples of this iconic operation of demystification are the
well-known scandal involving the “Youth Day” poster designed by New Collectivism, and Laibach’s appropriation and modulation of pop culture songs from the late 1980s onward. But this is a demystification of a peculiar kind: It does not directly state what is being demystified, or make a direct critique, but uses the continuing resonance of multiple sets of images in ways that denaturalize and make them strange, and through forcing them to expose their implicit ideological contents.

By comparison, IRWIN’s processing and sanctification of motifs in their work function in a similar yet somewhat different manner. On occasion, their paintings reveal a similar kind of ideological monkey wrenching through juxtaposition, as in Malevich between Two Wars (1984) with its fusion of Suprematism, pastoralism, and fascist kitsch. But another element is also at work here. Take, for instance, the way that IRWIN’s exhibitions frequently invoke the 0.10 Exhibition as a template and inspiration, reiterating its layout and design in the form of the exhibition as well as in the content of the works, and, we could argue, constantly revisiting the lingering trauma of the separation of the artistic-political from the implicitly spiritual or mystical. IRWIN’s relationship with the motifs they used is not just one of demystification or recapitulation, but of reframing; and through this constant re-creation, IRWIN sacralizes those motifs within their altered context and operation. A good example of this can be seen in the use of Edwin Landseer’s 1851 painting The Monarch of the Glen: It is first reappropriated by Laibach, who used it on the cover of Nova Akropola in 1986. It is then developed and mutated in a large number of IRWIN’s painting produced in the years following, including Deer-Icon pieces in 1986, 1988, 2000, 2003, and Stag (Conditions of Bourdieu) from 2003, which maps a schematic diagram of the relations between social space, fields of power, and cultural production over the figure of the stag.8

IRWIN’s constant re-creation and reuse of such motifs, then, is not just a political operation cutting through the language of ideology, but one that attempts to recover a submerged religious project within the alliance between the Russian avant-garde and communist politics. IRWIN thus takes up the suggestion made by Norbert Lynton, who associated Tatlin’s Tower with church architecture. As Lynton argues, the “Tower was intended to announce, promote, and serve the new religion of Socialism . . . the Tower signals the new dawning of a new age by symbolizing St John the Baptist” (2008: 212–15). Briefly, we can turn away from the Russian avant-garde to consider more in-depth the NSK’s ‘State in Time’ project (mainly associated with IRWIN), in particular looking at its 2010 Citizen’s Congress, to consider whether it can play a similar role in moving from a fusion of avant-garde elements into a tool for announcing a different type of future (Monroe 2011).
TEMPORARY HEGEMONIC ZONES

In the book *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Gilles Deleuze outlines an understanding of aesthetics, primarily through literature, where the role of artistic production merges with that of diagnosis. This is a point where the task of literary criticism hybridizes with that of critique, leaving both of them renewed, even if a bit unsettled by the process. Although it is almost impossible to encapsulate succinctly the NSK’s activities, we could perhaps describe them best as creating aesthetic apparatuses for collective diagnosis. Its work—spanning music, theater, philosophy, and statecraft—has diagnosed multiple forms of repressed and sublimated desires lingering in the collective imagination: from the continuing but unacknowledged appeal of totalitarianism operating within the Yugoslav state, to the fascist dynamics found within the dynamics of pop culture. NSK has operated an aesthetic diagnosis through artistic-political practices based on overidentification as a strategy—that is, to take a system of ideology more seriously than it takes itself, and through doing so to unearth the hidden, obscene elements and social interaction that provide an unspoken function of social cohesion.

The activities of NSK over time have evolved toward a more general critique and recovery of the aesthetics of the state form. Although NSK’s oeuvre involves a high degree of work with state aesthetics, this has been particularly pronounced since the launching of the State in Time project in 1992. The State in Time was declared to be an infinite state existing only in time, and thus lacking any physical boundaries or territories. Thus, it was claimed that it would make the NSK state the first “global state of the universe,” existing only in the workings of time, or perhaps in the territories of the collective imaginaries animated by the various events NSK would hold, such as setting up temporary embassies and post offices. Since its inception, the NSK State now involves more than thirteen thousand citizens, where the status of citizenship was conferred by applying for a passport either at an NSK event or through its website. After years of existing primarily as a virtual entity, this October the NSK State held its First Citizen’s Congress in Berlin as a process to examine itself and evaluate its workings.

The congress was held at the iconic Haus der Kulturen der Welt (House of World Cultures) and was accompanied by a corresponding exhibition of materials created as part of the State in Time project and a selection of NSK Folk Art, or materials created by citizens of NSK and those inspired by it (some of which had been displayed previously at the Taipei Biennale). The event was organized by IRWIN, the painting wing of NSK, and Alexei Monroe, along with a host of others. It was funded by the European Commission Culture Fund (who apparently remarked that they understood the congress to
be a rather clever form of irony) along with the Berlin Capital Cultural Fund and the Slovenian Cultural Ministry. Even if the NSK State only exists in time, the territorial basis of its funding support seems to have grown appreciably. The Slovenian state now regularly promotes the work of NSK and Laibach, which, aside from the writings of Žižek, is probably their most successful national export. I attended the congress as a delegate, one of thirty who had been chosen in spring 2009, when all NSK citizens were contacted and invited to apply to participate in the congress. The application consisted of a fairly in-depth set of questions asking for impressions about the role and importance of the NSK State, how it had affected citizens’ lives, and possible routes for its future development.

It is difficult to characterize the conference as a whole. The days consisted mainly of working sessions for the three smaller groups the delegates were divided into, and the evenings were filled with public talks, film screenings, and other events. Although I had no idea what to expect, it quickly became clear that those attending the event had a wide array of political and aesthetic perspectives. The organizers, who, perhaps, were all too aware of this, cautioned against making assumptions about the perspectives of others. This is certainly sensible in a gathering involving attendees from the far left and far right, but it may inadvertently have led to an air of excessive civility. The days’ debates vacillated between philosophical debate and model UN session, or perhaps between a fanboy event for NSK/Laibach enthusiasts and a cultural theory conference. The constant presence of a Slovenian film crew also injected the proceedings with an air of reality TV, as debates on the future of the NSK State trundled on.

These ongoing sessions, although sometimes strained, also involved a number of quite interesting and (at least for me) unexpected points of debate. For instance, how does the NSK State relate to micro-nations? Is the NSK State a micro-nation? Although members of the NSK State have previously participated in micro-nation themed events, such as the 2003 Summit of Micro-nations in Helsinki, a consensus emerged that the NSK State was not a micro-nation because micro-nations by definition are small, limited entities. Conversely, the NSK State, being an infinite entity, could not be considered micro. Thus it was argued that to engage in diplomatic relations with micro-nations would be to belittle the status of the NSK State, reducing it to marginal phenomena, rather than continuing to proclaim its infinite and totalizing nature. To some extent, attempting to reproduce such a debate outside its context renders it absurd, although it does provide a small glimpse into the functioning of the kind of totalizing, almost involuntarily Hegelian rhetoric that discussions of the NSK State take. Likewise, discussions were extensive
about the composition of the citizenry and how it breaks down along demo-
graphic and geographic lines, and how it might become a more inclusive
project. But this begs the question of how useful it is for an artistic project,
whose territory is time and the workings of the imagination, one that rejects
the operations of liberal democracy itself, to become more inclusive in any
more commonly understood sense.

Although a primary purpose of the congress was to produce new directions
for the NSK State, perhaps something like crowd-sourced state planning, the
outcomes reached were not particularly innovative. The statement pro-
duced, the “Findings,” as they were called, were rather tepid, reading rhetori-
cally as Laibach-lite. Is a tepid consensus any better or worse than a false
consensus? The main outcome basically was to affirm the founding principles
of the NSK State and further interest in turning the NSK State from a virtual
aesthetic entity into an ongoing project embraced by its citizens, or in turning
that heretofore symbolic but empty signifier into something more substantive.
Despite the somewhat uninspiring nature of the outcome, the final statement
did include several interesting reformulations of the relation between states
and time, the conjunction of depersonalized aesthetics and governance, as
well as the paradoxically clever idea that “Freedom of choice creates trauma;
lack of freedom of choice creates trauma. The NSK State acknowledges the
right not to choose.”

A similar dynamic of cautious but not overly striking innovation character-
ized the pieces in the NSK Folk Art exhibition and poster competition. Some
of the pieces developed new iterations of existing themes, but for the most
part they stayed close to the aesthetics that NSK has developed for several
decades, meshing imagery from the history of the avant-garde with industrial,
fascist,totalitarian, and Slovenian themes. Much of this was quite interesting,
perhaps even quite startling for individuals who first come across these
reworkings and hybridizations with no background information, but it did not
seem to produce anything near the constant stream of creativity and innova-
tion that is assumed to flow from crowd-sourced modes of participation and
artistic production. By far the most interesting piece in the exhibition was a
poster created by Bertrand Binois, which was a map of the world where
overlapping perpendicular layers of gray created darker sections that evoked
the Rorschach ink blot test. This moves beyond recycling previous tropes and
hints toward ways in which the NSK State might function in the future: as a
kind of critical-clinical diagnostic aesthetic for assessing the functioning of
state imaginaries.

This idea emerged as a theme in a number of the congress sessions: that
the role of the NSK State was less important in itself and more in how it
developed tools that could be used in different locations and situations to
excavate suppressed, obscene shared traumas. Although this proposition is interesting, I am uncertain how far this could go outside the original context and historical conditions marking the formation of NSK. For instance, could such a strategy of overidentification be employed usefully within the United States?14 One argument about NSK’s role in 1980s Yugoslavia is that by taking on and pushing right-wing nationalist positions to an extreme, particularly while combining them with foreign elements, their performances and aesthetics served to make these positions unusable. Would this tactic work in the United States? It might be seen that any attempted ideological monkey wrenching of this kind, far from sabotaging a section of the political spectrum, could just as easily create new platform ideas for the Tea Party.

This also suggests a possible limit to the congress as a format for interaction, particularly as a space for developing strategies for social and political intervention relevant beyond the context of the NSK State itself. Or to put it another way, if NSK applies the principle of the monumental retrograde to tease out the residual potential of aesthetic and political movements long thought dead, aside from keeping alive a constant process of ideological recycling, how does this lead to creating tools for intervention? NSK has often described the State in Time project, following the idea of Joseph Beuys, as a form of social sculpture. The congress itself could, then, be seen as a moment of taking forward the idea of social sculpture in an interesting way, creating a space where the virtual relations created by the State in Time are transformed in actual form as the project is taken on and run by its participants. This would be the social sculpture coming to sculpt itself, moving from a position of social sculpture in itself to social sculpture for itself. But how far can this process go? What innovations and creativity are produced out of this move? The outcomes of the congress tend to indicate that this might be limited, or at the very least more difficult than anticipated.

Although the congress produced interesting examples of how NSK State citizens have taken up and articulated the NSK State in new ways (including Christian Matzke’s Maine-based Retrograde Reading Room or Charles Kraft’s NSK dinnerware), the congress also showed how a participatory platform and convergence of varying backgrounds and ideas does not necessarily produce anything new or interesting.15 Or to put it another way, although the gurus of the post-Fordist creative networked economy might fetishize relationality and participation, the formal process of collaboration emerging from projects attempting to make relational aesthetics genuinely participatory does not in itself guarantee interesting results. The focus of the congress discussion was ostensibly charting new directions for the project; what was produced was more a reaffirmation of its founding principles, the groping toward a droll kind of constitutionalism and formal procedural mechanisms
necessary to opening up a collective process to those not physically in attendance (assuming that other people would even want to be involved). The problem with this, at least for me, is that it was not very inspiring. What interests me in the NSK State is how it operates to create cracks in state imaginaries and processes of identification, the audacious proclamation of its own infinite and total nature in absolutist terms that seemingly had been left behind, rather than the ability to merge art into everyday life as participatory bureaucracy.

Perhaps one of the most promising, if fittingly ambivalent, signs that the NSK State still has the potential to unsettle and create significant effects in the world came through one of the most difficult of the conversational threads running through the congress. It can be summed up in one word: Nigeria. For most of the State in Time’s development, the number of citizens increased at a relatively slow but steady pace, connected mainly to the activities and travels of Laibach and IRWIN. Thus, the geographic distribution of citizens was spread mainly across Europe and the United States, with the most significant clusters in the United Kingdom, Germany, the United States, and Slovenia. Starting in 2004, then picking up in a major way the following year, this pattern changed dramatically. First in small numbers, then in the hundreds and thousands, NSK started receiving applications for citizenship from Nigeria and neighboring areas. It gradually became clear that many individuals were attempting to acquire an NSK State passport in the mistaken belief that it would grant them the ability to travel to Europe, to move to Slovenia or, quite strangely, to move to the “country” of NSK. Even more problematic: This was happening not just through people applying directly to NSK, but also through networks of middlemen falsely claiming to represent NSK. These networks of intermediaries often made claims about the ability of the passport’s use for travel, in the process raising false hopes and extorting quite significant amounts of money.

This leaves the question of how to respond to such a situation. Similar dynamics have affected various micro-nations, some of which, such as the State of Sabotage and the Conch Republic, project a façade with a much less passably state-like appearance. Whereas some of the projects confronted with this question stopped producing passports as part of their practice, NSK chose a different response. Rather than stop the passport production activities altogether, in addition to taking much more care to stress that the passports were not for travel, they took out radio and newspaper advertisements in Nigeria clarifying the purpose of their project. They also conducted a series of interviews with Nigerians in London to understand more clearly what the passports meant to those who were trying to acquire them for travel. In July of 2010, IRWIN participated in a project with the Centre for Contemporary
Art in Lagos, Nigeria, titled *Towards a Double Consciousness: NSK Passport Project*. This allowed IRWIN and NSK to respond to what easily could have been a quite distressing problem in a more sensible way than stopping the project altogether, or refusing to involve participants in the State in Time from Nigeria. If the goal of the avant-garde was, and perhaps still is, to merge art and everyday life, it is clear that this does not always go the way that might have been expected or hoped for. The outcomes of artistic projects that spill over into directly political and social forms often do so in messy and ambivalent ways. One could suggest, then, that a politically responsive political-art practice, rather than trying to imagine forms of intervention free of contradictions or unpredictable effects (if that would be possible or desirable), would create ethical relations within the unforeseen effects generated when the artistic, political, and social recombine in unforeseen ways.

If one understands the history of institutional critique as the interrogation of the fields of power and operation of art galleries and museums, the strategy of overidentification could likewise be understood as a form of institutional critique. But this would be an institutional critique that takes the state form itself, in its most absolute and impossible form, as the object of critique. Just as Boris Groys has pointed out (2008) that the historic avant-garde, by eliminating the difference between the art work and the profane thing, leads directly to the building up of museums, the monumental retrograde activities of NSK have led to building a Slovenian state from within the Yugoslav state. The State in Time project was created during a period when Yugoslavia was falling apart, being torn up by horrendous genocidal tensions and violence. At that moment, creating a state without territory, without ethnicity, one that thus sat above all the conflicts of time, was a utopian gesture. Whereas Hakim Bey’s roughly contemporaneous concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone became popular for thinking about the creation of evasive spaces between and outside states, the State in Time project negotiated a relationship through the state not by evading its attraction, but by working through and against it. The project arguably forms autonomous zones, but creates them precisely as what Alexei Monroe has quite cleverly termed “Temporary Hegemonic Zones,” or zones of autonomy created from hollowing out state logic from within.

But it is the word “temporary” in the concept of a Temporary Hegemonic Zone that points both to the potential and the limits of the NSK State moving from a virtual to an actual entity. During the closing ceremony of the congress, a member of Laibach commented that during the 1980s they had very much wanted a Slovenian state, but that once it came into existence it was much less interesting or desirable. The formation of the State in Time was one way out of this conundrum, shifting these desires to an impossible terrain,
which leads one to ask whether the most disappointing move would be to try to create the NSK State as an entity? Would this create another, even deeper, level of disappointment in the sense that any realization of a total and impossible state could only be partial? Perhaps the entire congress was doomed, from the beginning, to fail. In that sense the most promising outcome was not the official findings but the counter-statement that was also read at the closing statement denouncing the whole process (and, paradoxically, redeeming it through this denunciation):

The state is the manifestation of Kitsch. We hereby disassociate ourselves from your coffee-scented dog-breathed manifestations and unilaterally declare the dissolution of ourselves and the elimination of time through the timelessness of Kitsch. We find your bourgeois adoration of time and form repulsive and degenerate. Suborn yourselves to your pathetic creation in time at your own risk. 19

Although this so-called Atomic Declaration of Dependence took the form of a rather caustically humorous invective, it displayed a greater understanding of the event than any other made during the entire event. A constituent assembly for an impossible totalizing state, by only being able to realize it partially, would thus necessarily betray it. The only possible fidelity to be found in realizing the project of an absolute state would have to bring together its constitution and dissolution in the same moment or, better yet, to open a rip in time where the destructuring force bends time itself so that the State of Time collapses even before it has constituted itself: only through an impossible act of constituent self-negation. This is what is written in Latin on every passport: “Ama nesciri,” or “love the unknown, the obscurity.” If the simplest Situationist act was attempting to abolish dead time, the NSK State in Time realizes that act by bringing together the absolute state form of time itself with its simultaneous abolition, and by doing so the constituted state never occurs. 20

OUR TIME IS NOW, NEVER TO COME

The hegemony cemented after the Russian revolution ostensibly disavowed the spiritual and mystical content that might be associated with it, even if it was obviously employed in certain key parts of postrevolutionary society (as in the cult of Lenin). 21 Although NSK’s activities are known mainly for how they make possible a recapitulation of submerged political dynamics, the use of icons as influence and motif points toward another approach through which this submerged dynamics of mysticism and spirituality can be worked through. In the catalog to the Dream Factory Communism exhibition, Boris
Groys and Max Mollein (2003) suggest that socialist realism, as it took over and suppressed the dynamics of artistic politics raised by the Russian avant-garde, came to function much in the same way that emerging consumer culture and mass marketing did in Western capitalist democracies. Just as the rise of this marketing helped to create the corporate soul and the desiring machines of the new consumer for the West, socialist realism functioned as the dream factory of the new man for the Soviet state. Elements of the mystical operate in both cases, whether through the mysticism of commodity fetishism, or through Stakhanovite labor fetishism. In both cases, the potentialities opened by the upheavals of the early twentieth century were quickly sutured onto new and complete subject positions that could be regulated and managed, whether through Five-Year Plans or New Deals.

Malevich was known to speak of the Black Square as establishing something of a “zero” in art: a strong but empty position from which it is possible to begin again. NSK’s work can be seen to create similar conditions, where the political is emptied out through a continual unmasking and recapitulation of the contradictory elements involved. This is not done so that the emptiness at the core of the political, its negative ontology, can be revealed and then filled again with new positive content. Rather, this functions very much as a negativistic critique, where new forms of rearticulation are possible around the empty center of the political, the emptiness of artistic practice, but not in a way that seeks to give it a new positive essence. The center remains indefinite, even as it is constantly reexamined. As IRWIN suggested, “a single painter’s canvas is never more persuasive then five. A collective is in a position to express the difference by repeating the same motif” (1991: 131). NSK’s usage of repeated motifs to the point of becoming-icon opens up an empty center through which it becomes possible to rearticulate a form of collectivity whose bounds are not already given within current conceptual frameworks.

We dissolve ourselves, demolish eternally your structures and leave this hollowness to re-form under new circumstances at the very moment of our creation. Your time is dated. Ours will never come. (“Atomic Declaration of Dependence” from the First NSK Citizen’s Congress, Berlin, 2010)

NOTES

1. It is difficult to confirm whether a fistfight occurred or was merely alleged. For more information on this, see Johnson (2010), Walsh (2010), and Finch (1998). For the purposes here, it is not essential to know whether it did occur, as repeating the story illustrates something important even if the events described are not true.
2. Perhaps Malevich and Tatlin should be pleased that they only had a fistfight rather than being chased by someone “playing the dog,” as occurred at the 1996 “Interpol” exhibition in Stockholm. For more on this, see Čufer and Misiano (2001).

3. For an extended discussion of this production, see Ėda Čufer (2002).

4. Further treatment of the relationship between icon painting and IRWIN can be found in two essays in the IRWIN: Retroprincip catalog from 2003, edited by Inke Arns.

5. For more on esoteric currents shaping the Russian context, see Young (2012). Perhaps icons retain a special status because they are not, in Russian Orthodox traditions, art as such. For more on icons as threshold as devotion, see Rowan Williams’s Ponder These Things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin (2006).

6. Giorgio Agamben places the identification of the artist with his materials at the center of art production, suggesting that once the artist begins to place himself above the materials, “this shared concrete space of the work of art dissolves” (1999: 37). This argument has been taken up and expanded more recently by Benjamin (2015).

7. An interesting possible point of comparison would be between how IRWIN engage with icons in their work and how Nagel and Wood theorize their concept of an “anachronic renaissance,” in particular how artistic works congeal together multiple forms of time with their assumed temporal coherence. The work of the NSK generally, and IRWIN in particular, seems to show a good illustration of deliberate playing with these kinds of dynamics.

8. A good selection of these images can be found in IRWIN: Retroprincip (2003 Arns).


11. For more information on the Micro-nations Summit, see http://www.muu.fi/amorph03. A book also was published after the summit, edited by Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen (2005), one of the summit organizers.

12. Perhaps this is why Laibach, as of 2014, has started its own political party called ‘Spectre.’ For more information, see http://spectre-party.org.


14. For more on recent uses of overidentification and strategies similar to that employed by the NSK, see Cultural Activism Today: The Art of Over-Identification (2007) collection edited by the Dutch art group BAVO, although it is debatable whether some of the examples contained (such as the Yes Men) are based on a principle of over-identification. It is clear in their performances, for instance, that they are not advocating the hyperbolic position that appears to be advocated under assumed roles. This was not the case for the NSK and Laibach, whose work was all the more unsettling precisely because one could never be sure whether they meant it, and thus it resisted easy interpretation.


16. One easy but ultimately not very interesting critique that is sometimes made of NSK’s work is how deeply it is entrenched in European history, in ways that have long ceased to be intellectually fashionable. In other words: It is Eurocentric. This is certainly true, but only to the extent that it is through a deep excavation of such histories that it becomes possible, to use Dipesh Chakrabarty’s phrasing (2000), to “provincialize...”
Europe.” One could argue that by developing intellectual tools for the excavation and interrogation of historical trauma, the NSK turns from an assumed backdrop and measurement to a tool that can be used elsewhere. However, identifying such a potential use of the NSK does not necessarily result in it being used in this way. To give a small example, at the same time as the congress, an exhibition was at the same institution called *The Potosí Principle*, which was about the Spanish colonization and the continuation of primitive accumulation in dynamics of globalization and labor exploitation (http://www.hkw.de/en/programm/2010/potosi/veranstaltungen_40707/Veranstaltungsdetail_49023.php).

In many ways, this was the ideal complement to the NSK event in that it also excavated a suppressed history and its continuing effects in the world. But it did not seem to interest many of the delegates, although that easily could have been because they were too busy with other things to take the time to check it out. This is only to note that it is through better exploring these related forms of historical and political practice that the work of the NSK and projects such as the State in Time become all the more useful.

17. For more about this project, see http://times.nskstate.com/towards-a-double-consciousness-nsk-pass-port-project. The CCA Lagos website is http://www.ccalagos.org.

18. For more on institutional critique, see Alberro and Stimson (2009), Raunig and Ray (2009), and Buchloh (1999).


21. For more on the monstrosities of the Soviet imagination and Lenin as the Mummi-fied Embodiment of Communism, see Todorov (1995).

22. For more on the relationship between avant-gardes and marketing, see Brown and Patterson (2000). On the creation of the corporate soul, see Marchand (1998).

23. Nina Gurianova, in her recent work on the relationship between anarchism and the early Russian avant-garde (2012), points out that it contained a much different conception of creativity than embodied in the “socialist objects” of Constructivism and Productivism, and was even further from the fetishized workerism of Stalinism. This can be seen perhaps clearest in Malevich’s essay “Sloth—The Real Truth of Humanity.”

24. Malevich declared, in relationship to how the Black Square transformed both his practice and himself personally, “I have transfigured myself in the zero of forms” (quoted in Néret 2003: 50). For more in-depth discussion, see also the catalog from the recent exhibition at the Tate Modern (Borchardt-Hume 2014).

25. For such a negativistic reading of Adorno’s ethics, see Freyenhagen (2013).

26. For more on contemporary forms of self-organization within the arts, see Herbert and Karlson (2013) and Shukaitis (2009).
The Composition of Movements to Come

Coda

As we now come toward the end of this book, let us turn back to the beginning for a moment, perhaps to the very first thing anyone is likely to notice about it: namely, its title. The Composition of Movements to Come, as a title, is borrowing from and riffing on several pieces of art, a whole genealogy that informs it. Most directly, it takes a cue from the excellent 1998 album The Shape of Punk to Come by the Swedish punk band Refused. This album helped to redefined punk in a number of ways, by expanding its sound palette to draw from jazz and electronics, while honing an ardently articulated radical political message that draws from post-1968 autonomous politics, radical labor currents, and broader countercultural influences. And a careful read through the liner notes will lead one to the realization that this incorporation of new sounds and aesthetics, which is quite different from the earlier more straight ahead (and still excellent) take on hard-core punk, is that it is precisely based on how their conception of politics and aesthetics comes together. At a time when the sounds of punk had increasingly become accepted and watered down into easily accessible forms of suburban mall music, Refused wanted to bring back jarring changes and elements to go along with their antagonistic politics.

In doing this it is not any surprise that the very title of the album is a reference to Ornette Coleman’s 1959 album The Shape of Jazz to Come, which has radically redefined the nature of jazz. Coleman was key in the development of free and improvised jazz, with this particular element being one of the first that did not include a more chordal instrument to structure the songs around (such as a piano or guitar). Coleman’s work, which departed significantly from other jazz at the time, likewise introduced a range of
harsher than usual tones and was later developed into a more fully elaborated theory of “harmolodics,” through which Coleman worked out his notions of the relationship between harmony, melody, movement, and improvisation. For both Coleman and Refused, the connection is close between aesthetics and politics, in terms of both form and content. And it is the link between the form and content that is all the more important, rather than the precedence of one over the other. Both of these albums were met at the time of their release with varying degrees of shock and incredulity, even if they both have been accepted as classics that served to introduce a new era of development in music. In different ways they could both be thought of as untimely; only long after their release could they be appreciated for these innovations, as is often the case for avant-garde creation.

The connections between these two albums go beyond that. The penultimate track, “Dérive/Tannhauser,” borrows a melodic line from the “Augurs of Spring” section of Igor Stravinsky’s 1913 ballet and orchestra piece, The Rite of Spring.1 Ornette Coleman uses the same melody. Although nothing is particularly unusual about musical borrowing, sampling, and repurposing (which is done in various ways by almost all of the movements discussed in this book), it is quite interesting here. At first glance, it seems strange to borrow a melodic line from a ballet, but The Rite of Spring is no ordinary ballet in that it too announced and marked a new stage in artistic production, and something of a break in forms of musical and theatrical production. At its opening in 1913, the audience exhibited great consternation with what was being presented, and if some versions of the event can be believed, much like the Dadaist cabaret events several years after that, it grew to a near riot. And it is precisely during the dance sequence in the “Augurs of Spring” section that this alleged near riot started.

What Ornette Coleman and Refused share is not just a borrowed melody, but something more profound, what one might be tempted to call the very sound of rupture, the sound of the avant-garde announcing itself . . . you could almost say this melody line contains something like The Sound of Modernism to Come, which constantly announced itself by breaking with what came before it in a new grand and defiant gesture. The melody line functions in much the way that Barbara Ehrenreich has pointed can be seen in the two meanings of the Greek word nomos: law and melody (2007: 24). The nomos of the aesthetic-political rupture, then, is both a striving for autonomy as giving a law unto oneself, but importantly giving that law through the form of melody. This is the function of the avant-garde, attempting to break through forms of traditions, patterns of governance and convention, and to declare in a new aesthetic form that which can be elaborated into new forms of sociality, cooperation, autonomy, and freedom. And it is true that such
movements of aesthetics revolt often end up being brought back into the museum, in the same way that labor revolts could easily end up being fed into the creation of a few spirit of capitalism. Despite all concerns about the questions of recuperation or co-optation, of which there could be many, something always remains . . . for such a process can never be total or complete.

Recalling the initial discussions of Harry Cleaver that began this book, we can say that this is the task of a strategic-compositional reading of the avant-garde: to find these moments of the nomos that have not been recuperated, or perhaps cannot be recuperated, and to tease out their potentials. What does the passing down and movement of such affective interactions, whether as a melody or as a creative practice, make possible for those who are affected by them? Does it set off a riot in the audience, or maybe allow a different perspective, raptor-like, to perceive the topography of the territory in which the political is constantly shaped and reshaped? As Raoul Vaneigem would put it, past revolts “take on a new dimension in my present, the dimension of an immanent reality crying to be brought into being without delay” (2012: 207). The same could be said for moments of aesthetic revolt, which develop a wealth of knowledges, ideas, and capacities that feed through into larger processes of social recomposition. But these lines of influences are not always obvious, clear, or apparent—they often occur into wandering paths, and through distorted forms. They exist, as Gerald Raunig (2007) gestures, in a realm outside of flat or linear progress that we might be accustomed to in approaching such histories:

This is certainly a history of currents and bridges, outside the realm of flat notions of linear progress or a movement from one point to another. (19)

Rather, they inhabit a lineage of discontinuous continuities, where the ineliminable remainder, a fragment of ruptures past found in a melody-law declared, can be recovered . . . reworked, and perhaps become active again as an instrument of provoking social and political transformation. Thus, what may seem to be a spontaneity of multitude, which arises miraculously from nowhere, is neither spontaneous nor miraculous, but rather continued and an often unrecognized organization of micropolitical processes, as Maurizio Lazzarato (2009) points out, which often takes the form of artistic political practices that sustain and transform them:

Micropolitics is far from being a call to spontaneity, a simple call to movement, a simple affirmation of forms of life. . . . Micropolitics requires a very high level of organization, a precise differentiation of the actions and the functions of the political, a multiplicity of initiatives, an intellectual and organizational discipline. . . .
Micropolitics requires an organizational rigor, and perhaps demands even more organization. (14)

As the NSK would remind us (through the title of a series of events organized by IRWIN)—Mind the Map! History is not given! And this not givenness of history does not solely characterize art history (although this is primarily what IRWIN have been revisiting and reworking), but history more generally. For history is truly not given: It is constructed, and ideally collectively constructed. In different ways the Situationists, histories of art and labor, and the NSK develop approaches to drifting through history and appropriating it as ready-made materials for constructing the past, as well as for developing artistic-political strategies in the present.

STRATEGIC REALITY AND THE ART OF THE UNDERCOMMONS

Walking through Vienna one night several years ago, I asked Konrad Becker what he meant when he used the word “strategy.” What indeed, for cultural politics, media arts, and interventions, is strategy? To ask the question so bluntly is to walk into “elephant in the room” territory. Although the question of what is to be done, how to do it, and its effectiveness (or lack of it) is a constant obsession for those involved in arts and media politics, openly discussing them is generally taboo. Strategy: Using that word perhaps carries with it too many connotations of a moribund Leninism, of an enforced separation between conceptualization and the body of social antagonism in motion. To speak of strategy carries the risk of falling back into an older style of hierarchical politics, although it is debatable whether this guilt by association is sensible. Perhaps this removal of strategic questions from open discussion does more harm than good to movement building and the prevention of ossified hierarchies. Yet, this has been exactly the task of this book, for better or worse, as we now near its end.

But I digress, for this is not Konrad’s style or his conceptualization of the political. If it were, we would have no need to discuss or rethink it, just to implement the pre-given strategic project. But if a fresh perspective on what strategy is were available, then surely it would be found by asking Konrad. Having spent the earlier section of the evening in discussion around the power and limitations of the radical imagination, it was now time to cut through to the kernel of the meta-question: What is to be done with what is to be done?

Konrad paused. Then he answered that by strategy he means something closer to wisdom. This was unexpected, to say the least. Discussions of wisdom within artistic-political milieus are encountered even less than of strategy. What could it mean that strategy was a question of wisdom? The more
I thought about this since that night, the more sensible it seems, but why? Perhaps wisdom as strategy is a way to reapproach matters of understanding and discernment, distinguishing appearances from underlying situations and how these relate to the ongoing shaping of the political. Thinking back on that conversation several years later, this also is a fitting way for bringing together the considerations on strategy, avant-gardes, cultural labor, and social recomposition that have been explored here. Recasting these simple but important questions has the potential for intervening in the broader questions of the relation between art and knowledge production: the wisdom to make worlds from within an art of the undercommons.

THE AVANT-GARDE THAT IS NOT ONE

Gazing back on the history of the avant-garde, as angels on mounting wreckage, what we find is the refuse of ruptures and manifestos—from bravado-filled declarations on the detached and depotentialized status of the arts that call for merging art with everyday life, to equally irate denunciations when this merging takes less than ideal forms (advertising techniques, culture-led gentrification, museum-based legitimation for dodgy petro producers, etc.). From the first Futurist manifestos, the avant-garde style of provocation has centered on brazen interventions into the politics conjoining art and knowledge production. To use Rancière’s wording, the avant-garde manifesto takes the form of announcing a new distribution of the sensible, the task of which the practices of the announced movement will embody (even if this is assumed already to have occurred):

The history of the relations between political parties and aesthetic movements is first of all a history of a confusion . . . between these two ideas of the avant-garde, which are in fact two different ideas of political subjectivity. . . . [T]he very idea of a political avant-garde is divided between the strategic conception and the aesthetic conception of the avant-garde. (2004: 30)

Thus, through a history of practices, from social sculpture to the crafting of unitary ambiances, these declarations about the reshaping of art-knowledge-politics proliferated. Such a strong connection developed between the avant-garde and these public declarations that it becomes difficult to conceive of it without them. What would that mean? An artistic movement dedicated to the reshaping of art, life, and politics that did not announce this to as many as would listen, but went about affecting its method of transformation on a minor scale? 
The problem is that by declaring openly intents and methods to reshape art, life, and the relations of production, the avant-garde has tended to give away too much, to let its hand be shown too early—in other words, to leave it open to processes of decomposition and recuperation, where radical ideas are put to service within forms of social control and domination. If the tradition of autonomist politics and analysis shows us that working-class insubordination and resistance to capital are the driving factors shaping economic and social development, then an autonomist understanding of the history of the avant-garde would show us something else. An autonomist conceptualization of these histories would uncover, rather than a disconnected series of movements and formal relations, how the avant-garde opens up new possibilities for reshaping social relations that are then seized upon by mechanisms of control and capital accumulation. As Jacques Attali (1985) argues, music, rather than being a superstructural reflection of underlying conditions, precedes and prophesizes these broader changes in social and economic relations. Thus the avant-garde is the canary in the mineshaft of history: Its death signals coming transformations, when submerged veins of creativity are brought to the surface.

It is history filled with the techniques of reality engineering, libidinal bonding, consensus construction, and infopolitical subterfuge. This is a history that is perhaps the psychogeographic equivalent of the Tyburn gallows, where drifts of history are marked by the bodies of dead ideas. Indeed, it was the moment before execution at Tyburn when the condemned was granted the freedom to speak whatever was on his mind, for what was there to lose? But this would not be the question of strategy, for there is always something to lose. The moment of freedom that appears before the condemned is only possible because of the structure of unfreedom, a literal thanatocracy, which underpins it, whether in the form of the gallows or the integration of mechanisms of death, desire, and manipulation within practices of statecraft.

The Situationist International was quite fond of arguing that in looking back on this appropriation of the avant-garde, its rendering into corpses and fodder for the spectacular mechanisms of domination, you could detect two different methods of execution: Dada tried to negate the status of art without realizing it, whereas Surrealism wanted to realize art without negating it. Therefore the task of the Situationists, in a supremely Hegelian manner, would be to create tactical means for the simultaneous realization and negation of art, expressed as the “communication of incommunicable” and crafting situations for the realization of the insurgent desires and ideas they alleged were already in everyone’s heads. One might suspect that behind such paradoxical sounding and typically cavalier phrasing, this is more of a
triumphalist declaration (all the failures of previous avant-gardes will be solved by our intervention!) than anything.

However, this pairing of the necessity of everyone knowing and not knowing at the same time, of communication (of the incommunicable) as the key dynamic, runs through all of the work of the SI. It brings together all of the strands constituting their politics of communication, of the spectacle as condition one is immersed in and struggles through. And it is at this juncture that the framing of strategy as wisdom comes to make the most sense. For if it is true, as Debord comments on the gypsies, that they “rightly contend that one is never compelled to speak the truth except in one’s language; in the enemy’s language, the lie must reign” (1991: 10), what is this other than a very direct question of strategy-as-wisdom? And, in that sense, it is also a fundamental question about the relation between art and knowledge production for subversive currents. When language and media politics become sites of informational warfare, having the wisdom to know whether one should be expressing one’s goals openly, in a language of lies, or an encoded and partially concealed manner... this becomes a central, if not the central question of strategy.

This is what thinking about strategy as a question of wisdom opens up. Take, for instance, the way Konrad describes the process of rendering dead movements and subversion into material for renewed capital accumulation:

The process of cooptation, typical of art-market logic, exploits the visual alphabet and cultural codes of autonomous positions and infiltrates its agents into the parallel worlds of hidden cultural practice. Debates on strategies regarding this takeover and the mirroring of symbolic language of opposition movements have continued for generations, but concepts of authenticity do not seem to offer valid options of cultural self-defense. (2009: 64)

This reframes recuperation through a materialist politics of communication. It is recuperation through exploiting the visual codes of autonomous practices, and through that to work into the underground, submerged realm of communication and relations: too much given away too openly. The accelerating co-optation of cultural expression creates both a market around it and “strategies dealing with this phenomenon of ever-faster appropriation of artistic expression by corporate business involve tactical invisibility and an immersion in the age of biocybernetic self-reproduction” (Becker 2002: 115). This is precisely why returning to a notion of authenticity, of the collapse between the said and what is meant, is not a valid strategy for working through, in, or against this dynamic. What is needed instead is a discerning sense of the strategic, the wisdom of someone such as Debord, of the gypsies,
of infrapolitical communication and subterfuge: the tools to develop an art of the undercommons.

To the degree that autonomous artistic-political milieus have had sustained strategic discussion, it generally has taken a large degree of inspiration from the work of Michel de Certeau (as has been explored through several chapters already). De Certeau takes up a line of inquiry coming out of post-1968 French political thinkers. His distinction between strategy and tactics in everyday life has become particularly influential, attaining an almost ubiquitous status. It is the sort of insight that informs and enriches research done within cultural studies and beyond: to take seriously these everyday interactions as sites of political contestation and tactical maneuvering.8 Ironically enough, it is de Certeau’s distinction that makes it difficult to discuss strategy, precisely because of how he identifies strategy with mechanisms of power and tactics with resistance. For de Certeau, “a tactic is determined by the absence of power just as a strategy is organized by the postulation of power” (1984: 38).

The problem is that in this framework, social movement politics are precluded from the formation of strategies and spaces of their own, precisely because this does not fit the model. Oppositional politics, insofar as they are tactical, could not be understood to create spaces of their own or to operate on a strategic level. Strategies of resistance do not exist, only domination. This overstates the operations of strategic fields of power and underestimates the ability of oppositional politics and tactics to congeal a level of strategic interaction, precisely because they do create strategic spaces and orientations, even if not within the sense understood by de Certeau. This framing leads to an uncritical valorization of micropolitical subversion, but one that is without any means to articulate connections between antagonisms without that articulation being viewed as an act of domination. And that is why strategy is little discussed. But this does not seem at all like an orientation to strategic questions founded upon wisdom. How could we get there, if indeed, we wanted to?

To return to the autonomist tradition, if resistance comes first, and is a prior and determining factor of social development, then it operates precisely on a strategic field. In the “Copernican turn” of understanding resistance as the prior and primary factor, the autonomist tradition recasts the strategy and tactics distinction.9 This is an insight that we have pursued through this book, as the movements and practices explored would typically have been understood as forms of tactics art and/or politics: as weapons of the weak. The gambit made here is that within such apparently tactical practices, forms of strategic knowledge can be teased out. They occur prior to the apparent shifting of strategic fields, at least as seen from above. On the one hand, it is
ridiculous to work from a notion of strategy, where resistance is only tactical, operating from a shifting no-place never of its own, from somewhere that cannot formulate a tactical theater of operations without coalescing into a transcendent-hierarchical form of strategy as domination, but the alternative of seeing all forms of social resistance as strategic likewise neglects the specificity of how these strategic operations are composed. To grasp these specificities, what is needed is not reified conceptions of statecraft or assumptions of the inherently strategic nature of autonomous political-artistic activity. This moves us back toward a more classically oriented approach to strategy, but with a number of critical differences, perhaps akin to the way that Debord revisits the history of military strategy and thinking precisely in order to learn from it and apply it differently.

Strategy becomes not the planning of operations and tactical maneuvers based on rational, abstract calculation, elaborated from a disembodied transcendent perspective. Rather, it is contextual and process-based, formed around how particular strategic plans fit with and respond to their environment. Translated politically, this is a process of constantly adapting and transforming strategic planning and tactical operations in relation to changing compositions of forces, antagonisms, and subjectivities in motion at a given time, according to the shifting grounds of the situation. This adaption to and from the environment is traditionally a question of intelligence, of the military variety, an intelligence that is necessarily incomplete. Strategic models leave out some elements, as all models do, but the question is which elements and what effects their absence has. Or to reframe that, what are the benefits of basing an analysis on what is included? Take, for instance, the notion of psychogeography, which omits many aspects integral to most understandings of territory and strategic operations. What it does include, however, is closely attuned analysis of emotional and affective dynamics, which is precisely the terrain of cultural politics and infowar in cognitive capitalism. Psychogeography, then, in one sense, is nothing more than adapting the methods and approaches of military strategy and cartography to the changing situation of spectral commodity production and state power. It is the wisdom to formulate this readaption, or how strategy applies situational intelligence with the available tactics and resources.

Strategic frameworks and tactical maneuvers, connected through logistical webs, find themselves bound up in infinite spirals of reciprocal anticipation. Or to put it in autonomist terms, capital and the state work to anticipate new forms of subversion so that their energies may be rendered into new mechanisms for capital accumulation and governance. Those who would sabotage that very process must likewise anticipate the coming process of decomposition and recuperation to divert and prevent it. This shielding and
obfuscating of deductive decision making, the layering and encoding of strategic operations and appearances, is the development of an art of the undercommons. It is an art that does not give away all of the subversive knowledge it holds through public declaration, or declare a new regime of the sensible, as in the history of avant-garde declarations. Thus, when Brian Holmes (2007) says that when someone is talking about politics in an artistic frame, they’re lying, that is in some sense not a critique, but also an admission to the potential of an artistic politics formed around those dynamics of deception.

**UNDER THE COMMONS**

It is this strategic necessity to obfuscate and encode the intentions, knowledges, and understanding of subversive activity that approaching strategy as wisdom gestures toward. It is a necessity particularly for artistic-political-media interventions, which as we have learned all too well and paradoxically not well enough, are prime arenas for the decomposition of subversive energies. This would be not an art of the public, of an assumed or pre-given audience, but an art of the undercommons as described by Stefano Harney: a strategic reframing of artistic-political interventions around taking very seriously the question of with whom and why one is communicating. It is an art where

The first act of self-organization in the undercommons is a refusal of subjectivation through, and only through, self-organization. This disidentification through self-organization is also, for us, not a prerequisite to what Toni Negri calls the common management (*gestione*) of the commons, but the potential of that organization. (2008)

One might think of it as a relational aesthetics that, rather being confined to the gallery space, operates through an infrapolitical and everyday realm, forming immanent points of strategic convergence through the shaping of relations in that space. Or better yet, it is the formation of the space itself.

The notion of the undercommons comes out of the writing of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, who take up the theorizing of figures such as Robin D. G. Kelley and James Scott on the layers of encoding, deception, and evasion embedded within forms of resistance employed by peasants, escaped slaves, and other populations who cannot afford the risks associated with saying openly their intents or ideas.10 Although this is quite a different position from where many political artists and media producers work (although not all), something still can be learned from this approach. If the problem of autonomous cultural and artistic production is that it gives away too much,
inadvertently opening itself up to the process of recuperation-decomposition, then perhaps a strategic orientation to address this dynamic would learn from the encoding and obfuscating dynamics of infrapolitical intervention and the shaping of the undercommons. And although the undercommons are from capital’s perspective the unacknowledged self-organization of the despised, discounted, and antisocial, from an autonomous perspective they are something else entirely: the self-organization of the incommensurate. They embody a process of self-organized dis-identification where the knowledge of subversion is kept within the parallel-submerged terrain, rather than becoming part of enforced state hallucinatory patterns.

Through this book we have approached questions of strategy and social recomposition in working through, in, and against this direction, offering a few dead saints crisscrossing the paths of the present European wasteland. This analysis itself is dispersed across the unfolding stream of prose, but clearly marked at moments of double articulation, for instance, when he quotes the Prussian soldier and military strategist Dietrich Heinrich von Bülow when he says “a strategy is the science of military movements outside of the enemy’s field of vision; tactics is within it.” Indeed.

This makes the question of strategy reappear, literally, not as one where tactics are component parts of the formation of overarching strategy (which they in some ways are), or component parts inherently linked to dynamics of domination or resistance (whichever direction is the dominant characteristic), but a distinction based on fields of visibility and apprehension. A strategic approach defined through a logic of (in)visibility, of becoming imperceptible, is the condition of wisdom when power, bound by its very visibility, provides tactical advantages to the conditions of the capacity to remain unseen. It is, as Roger Farr (2007) has explored through its manifestations in anarchist poetics, a strategy of concealment.

Strategy, then, is not necessarily directly concerned with the use of force, but an understanding of the force dynamics in motion, the movement of becoming and unbecoming at play, and the application of these dynamics in the immanent composition of political possibility. The strategic operation of the infrapolitical is also at work in the heart of the state and within the logic of governance, in the continued attempts to shore up the infopolitical and media spectacular mechanisms holding together continued forms of domination. But these strategic forms of statecraft are themselves ephemeral and precarious, in need of constant maintenance and shoring up through cultural engineering. Statecraft and governance constantly need to re-create their own space (and, perhaps, in this sense de Certeau is correct about the relation between strategy and space). Thus governance is in constant need of a new
fix for this problem, whether through learning from Giordano Bruno’s techniques of libidinal bonding and information modulation, from antagonistic social movements and energies, or through the conjuring up around new conspiracy panics against those who abide within the undercommons.11

Now we can see that the class of reality engineers are caught between the powers of the measurable and physical and the techniques of modulating imagination, desire, and creativity that need to be continuously controlled for apparatures of governance to continue functioning. Today, in cognitive capitalism, the disease for which it pretends to be the cure, these mechanisms urgently desire us to give away all that we know, whether through having fun at work, through participatory work teams, in cultural quarters, through the former radicals who have become reasonable and given up the ghost of their former subversion, through the rendering of antagonism into imaginal capital. An art of the undercommons reorients strategies of media and cultural intervention around the wisdom to not give away too much or to open up these knowledges to harvest. The art of the undercommons is the wisdom to make worlds while obfuscating subversive knowledges from recuperation. As Brian Massumi reminds us, the “anarchist slogan that the mode of revolutionary activity must ‘prefigure’ the society to come is not infantile idealism. It is the affective cry of revolutionary realism” (2015: 53). For subversive movements to retain their potential, we can only hope that they do not fall into rituals of resistance and un-thought through gestures that transform the antagonism of the perennial avant-garde into fodder for the culture industries, but keep opening up the possibility of rupture and social recomposition. We can only hope to develop the wisdom to know the difference.

NOTES

1. Tannhäuser could also refer to Richard Wagner’s 1845 opera of that time, although if anything this would be more likely to have had an influence on the NSK rather than on either Coleman or Refused, as Wagner’s aesthetics, in particular the epic scale of his works, are a significant influence on them. Although the influence of Wagner on many of the movements discussed in this book would not be apparent at first, it is likely that they all have been marked in one way or another by his conception of the “gesamtkunstwerk,” or total work of art, that attempts to fuse all works of art via theater, in particular for a revolutionary political intent.

2. For more on this, see Eden (2005).

4. Perhaps the most well developed notion of an avant-garde not based on this desire for publicness is Hakim Bey’s conception of immediatism (1994).

5. Recently, the Dead Rat Orchestra and James Holcombe have produced an interesting project film and music, Tyburnia, exploring the history of the death penalty in the United Kingdom and its lingering effects. For more information on this, see http://deadratorchestra.co.uk/the-tyburnia-tour/4587507939.

6. For more on this, see Linebaugh (1992).

7. See also Alice Becker-Ho’s important study of gypsy argot and slang, which further develops these themes (2004).

8. For more on this history, see Gilbert (2008).

9. This reformulation is made within an essay by Mario Tronti, “The Strategy of Refusal” (1980), first published in 1964. Tronti’s approach is to understand wildcat strikes, refusal to work, and abandonment of recognized unions and political parties not as something that is distinct from questions of strategy and space formation, but precisely the basis of a different conception of strategy itself. For Tronti, the history of class struggle is not the reactions of workers to changing forms of domination, but these diffuse forms of resistance and escape from domination that precipitate crises capital must respond to in maintaining its domination.

10. See in particular Kelley (2002); and Scott (1990) and Harney and Moten (2013).

11. For more on conspiracy panics as technologies of governance, see Bratich (2008).
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