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Statement on the occasion of the panel discussion:

"Artists and Cultural Producers as Political Subjects. Opposition, Intervention, Participation, Emancipation in Times of Neo-liberal Globalisation"

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What is meant by the assertion that art has become increasingly political during the last few years? In my view, it means that art has been increasingly eager to intervene in the social world. Now what does this desire mean itself? To what extent can we call it political? I will select three cases; three kinds of relations between art and the social world that can help us formulate the problem.

I borrow my first case from the sphere of public art. For some years, there has been a claim for a new kind of public art, intervening in places marked by unemployment, by bad housing, or ethnic conflict. Two years ago, a Belgian foundation dedicated to that particular kind of art awarded a project entitled "I and Us" presented by a French group of artists called "Urban Campment." The idea was to create a place within a poor and stigmatized suburb of Paris that would be "extremely useless, fragile and non-productive"; it would be a place at a remove, available to everybody but that could only be used by one person at a time.

My second case belongs to the world of museums and exhibitions. During the same period, various curators set out to resume the tradition of modern avant-garde art. Among the various means chosen for that purpose, one of them appeared to be 'de rigueur': a room dedicated to the photographs of water towers, blast furnaces, or other industrial buildings or landscapes made by Bernd and Hilla Becher.

My third case is halfway between museum exhibition and social action. Even in the "proper" places of art, we feel an obsessive desire to do "real" things, as realized in propositions for new housing, demonstrations of mobile ecological refineries, reports of actions made outside, etc. At the last São Paulo Biennale, I came upon a video installation made by the Cuban artist René Francisco, who had used a grant awarded by an artistic foundation to make an inquiry into the poor suburbs of Havana. Then he had selected an elderly couple and decided, with some fellow artists, to refurbish their home. The final work shown in the museum presented the viewer with a cloth screen printed with the image of the elderly couple, hung so that they appeared to be looking at the "real" screen of the monitor, where a video showed the artists working as masons, plumbers, or painters.

My three cases have at least one thing in common. All three deal with matters of place, building, or dwelling. All three remind us of this: art is not political because it deals with political

matters or represents social and political conflicts. It is first political because it reframes the distribution of space, its visibility and—let us say—its habitability. This reframing itself implies a duplicity of space, a travelling, or a negotiation between a proper space where art shows as such, as the object of a specific experience, and an outward space where art is not only confronted with non-art but appears to be destined as *art* to its self-suppression.

All three remind us of a bicentennial dialectic inherent in the politics of art. Art is political because it shapes a specific sensorium, suspending the ordinary coordinates of space and time that structure the forms of social domination. But from this premise two antagonistic conclusions could be drawn and have been drawn ceaselessly, sometimes in an alternative manner, most often in some sort of tangle. First, art is political to the extent that it remains faithful to the autonomy of its sphere; second, it is political insofar as it gets out of itself and weaves the fabric of a new common life. Briefly speaking: on the one hand, art is political to the extent that it is merely art; on the other, it is political to the extent that it is art no longer.

My three cases are still in keeping with that dialectic. But they change it into a kind of parody. The “extremely fragile, useless and non-productive place,” which is aimed at prompting new forms of sociability in the suburbs by only allowing one person at a time to get in, is obviously a remnant of the very space of the museum, a place at a remove from social life and hierarchy. It is the museum emptied of any work and brought back to its minimal form: the abstract schema of the Kantian universality of the individual judgement of taste or the Schillerian aesthetic education of mankind.

The favouring of the “objective” photography of the Bechers is another interesting case in point since it shows us the paradoxical role often played by photography nowadays. It is the form in which the outward, the “real” world is supposed to get into the museum. Yet it is also, at the same time, the quadrangular form on a white wall, which guarantees that the art place remains faithful to its essence. In the case of the Bechers’ blast furnaces, the demonstration seems optimized. Those blast furnaces bring the heterogeneity of the industrial world to the walls of the museum. But they bring it as the bygone universe of industrial work and social movement, which seems to survive only through the fidelity of the artists, with a set of formal rules that is the series’ principle: the neutrality of the frame, the absence of any empathy on the part of the artist and the aestheticization of the object. It looks as though the former revolutionary discipline still survives in those formal principles. But, at the same time, the photograph of the blast furnace ironically appears as the supreme form of the Modernist paradigm of the autonomous work of art, self-contained within its own materiality and politically significant from its very lack of political commitment.

In my third example, the beneficence of the ambivalence is clearly lost. Despite the artistic invention of the cloth screen with the figures printed on it, the work seems confined to the reporting of something that the artist *did* in the social world to help poor people. At the same time this work reminds us of the great revolutionary dream: the dream of an art that, as Malevich said, would no longer be just painting or sculpture but would shape the forms and buildings of a new life. Yet it is no longer a matter of shaping a new world, just of refitting the home of a badly housed couple. Sadly ironic, of course, is the fact that this occurs in one of the last countries to claim the Communist faith in a new community. Just as the great paradigm of the autonomous work seems to be enclosed in the

photograph of the blast furnace, the great dream of art becoming life is brought back to the propositions of relational aesthetics, the proposition of an art mending the gaps of the social fabric and creating microscopic examples of new forms of social interaction.

I said that the forms of politicized art today replayed and remixed the great strategies of political art, but that they did it as a parody. Let me elucidate what I mean. We have become accustomed, during the last ten years, to the ideas of parody and joke. We saw the paradigm of “critical” art shift to a paradigm of “parodical” art, blurring the difference between the reduplication of commodity culture and its critique. What confronts us today is different. Freshly re-politicized art dismisses parody. It wants the real: doing something, making real objects instead of producing or recycling images, doing real actions in the real world rather than merely “artistic” installations. It equates political commitment with this search for the real. But the political is not the “outside,” the “real” that art would have to reach. The “outward” is always the other side of an “inward.” What makes the difference is the topography in the frame of which the relation of *in* and *out* is negotiated. The real as such simply does not exist. What does exist is a framing or a fiction of reality. Now, when you search for the real world and real action, you are at risk of first meeting a certain framing of reality, this framing of the “reality of the real” is epitomized in the word *consensus*.

Consensus is the keyword of our present. But this word means much more than the agreement of right and left parties on a certain form of common interest. It means a certain framing of the common, a non-controversial framing of the “reality of the real.” It means that we are all living in one and the same world, configured by global necessities that nobody can deny. The logic of consensus draws a clear-cut dividing line between what is given and what is not, what is in and what is out, what is real and what is “ideological” or “fictional.” In such a way, it frames the scenery of a global community where, unfortunately, some groups or individuals still stay behind or accidentally fall astray, as traditional forms of social bonding tend to loosen or vanish. That’s why consensus calls art to mend the social bond, empower threatened identities, or reframe a sense of community.

Such a “politicization” of art actually means the contrary of politics. Politics begins when there is a disagreement on the “reality of the real,” a dispute on the “given” itself, a controversial fictionalization of the relationship between the inside and the outside. Politics too has a fictional dimension. It shapes fictional subjects, subjects that do not exist as social groups or real parts of the social body but impose their existence as they bring new objects into the picture, frame new forms of visibility of the common and put other worlds in the same world. In that sense, politics is an aesthetic activity, which reframes the sensory configuration of the common.

If this makes sense, we have to restage the relationship between art and politics. Art does not enact politics by reaching the real. It enacts it by inventing fictions that challenge the existing distribution of the real and the fictional. Making fictions does not mean telling stories. It means undoing and rearticulating the connections between signs and images, images and times, or signs and space that frame the existing sense of reality. Fiction invents new trajectories between what can be seen, what can be said, and what can be done. It blurs over the distribution of places and competences, which also means that it blurs over the very borders defining its own activity: enacting art means

displacing the borders of art, just as enacting politics means displacing the borders of what is recognized as the sphere of the political.

The relation between art and politics thus might be seen as a relation between two fictional activities: between the artistic invention of new trajectories between words and things or times and spaces and the political invention of new subjects that rearticulate the sense of the common. Now this double self-displacement does not mean, in my view, that artistic performance and political subjectivization get merged into one and the same process. I think that the political power of fiction is forgotten when you assert a direct identification of the performances of art with a new kind of collective agency. This identification of artistic performance with new political agency was strongly claimed by Brian Holmes in his presentation. It was further supported by many other presentations and discussions during the conference. What sustains this line of argument is the idea that we are in a new age of Capitalism when material and immaterial production, knowledge, communication and artistic performance would fuse together in one and the same process of implementation of collective intelligence.

In my view, this is a too easy way of erasing the specificities of both artistic and political dissensuality by resuming the avant-garde figure of the producer, who is simultaneously a worker, an artist, and the builder of a new world. There are many forms of collective intelligence just as there are many ways of performing and many stages of performance. Let us remember what The Yes Men told us this afternoon about their performance as Bush campaigners. They said that it was a total failure precisely because it was a total success. They wanted to fool the pro-Bush audience and they succeeded too well. Now, what is the consequence of fooling a pro-Bush audience into doing something against Bush's re-election? More importantly, what is the consequence of fooling a pro-Bush audience into framing forms of political action that would not be a matter of voting for or against Bush?

A "success" can be a "failure." This means that there are different performances in a performance and different individuals in the political artist, just as there are many "peoples" in the people addressed by the artist or by the political subject. Political art always produces local and provisional effects at some crossroad in that multiplicity of scenes and trajectories. Those local effects add up to the construction of other worlds in the consensual world. Art and politics become one and the same thing only when they vanish together into ethical indistinction.