BEYOND THE SOVEREIGN SELF

AESTHETIC AUTONOMY FROM THE AVANT-GARDE TO SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART

GRANT H. KESTER

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To Samira and Elliott, always and forever . . .

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INTRODUCTION

It is one thing to be active in relation to a dead thing, to voiceless material that can be molded and formed as one wishes, and another thing to be active *in relation to someone else's living, autonomous consciousness*.

—Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*

Beyond the Sovereign Self explores the concept of aesthetic autonomy as it relates to contemporary activist art practices and to the broader processes of social transformation with which they are engaged. This linkage may seem counterintuitive, given the conventional association of aesthetic autonomy with a radical separation between art and political action. As I will argue here, however, the modern concept of aesthetic autonomy is inherently political. It is predicated on a set of interdependent claims regarding the privileged capacity of artistic production to reflect critically on the operations of the capitalist system and to empower us to imagine a future alternative to this system. The concept of aesthetic autonomy covers over a highly differentiated

field of meanings and values. First, we have the notion of aesthetic autonomy as marking the artist's freedom from what is seen as an intrinsically coercive social order (a meaning that first emerges in the work of figures such as Friedrich Schiller). As a result of this freedom, the artist is able to reflect back critically on a broader system of repression from which they themselves have escaped. In this manner, autonomy is collapsed into a notion of critical distance that is specific to the artistic personality and, as we will see, to art in general. Here, the concept of aesthetic autonomy as enjoining a freedom *from* external control is paired with a corresponding power *over* others. (The artist's exemplary freedom allows them to claim an adjudicatory relationship to the consciousness of those who are not yet free.) If the first meaning of the term "autonomy" understands the individual as existing apart from an external world that constantly threatens to erode the integrity of their core self, the second meaning understands the production of truth as necessitating a withdrawal from material entanglement with the world about which that truth is sought. In each case, what is naturalized is a version of personal sovereignty that will be a central concern in the following study.

This is a paradigm of aesthetic autonomy that continues to inform our understanding of art, and the personality of the artist, to the present day. And it is this same paradigm that is being challenged by new forms of engaged art practice that have emerged over the past thirty years. These can be defined as artistic practices that operate largely outside the institutionalized art world of galleries, museums, auction houses, and biennials and that are often produced in conjunction with forms of social or political activism. Representative examples include the escrache actions of the early 2000s, which addressed the violence perpetrated by Argentina's military junta during the 1970s and 1980s; the *Tamms Year Ten* project, which led to the closure of a notorious supermax prison in Illinois; Bishan Commune, a quasi-anarchist community-based project developed in rural China; the "Washing the Flag" performances in Peru, which contributed to the overthrow of Alberto Fujimori's regime in 2000; staged interventions on the streets of Iran in which women sing and dance openly in public; the Rhodes Must Fall protests in Cape Town, South Africa; the Rojava Film Commune, a collective operating in the autonomous region of northern Syria; Renata Carvalho's work with the National Movement of Trans Artists in Brazil; and art practices associated with the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States.[1] These examples give some sense of the remarkable variety of political and social concerns evident in this diverse body of work. My goal in this book is to examine the ways in which these practices have transformed

the notion of aesthetic autonomy outlined above, and to offer an alternative aesthetic paradigm that can account for their unique capacity to enrich our understanding of both art and political transformation.

In some cases, these projects were linked with broader social movements that produced concrete changes in particular institutional structures (contributing to the overthrow of a dictatorship or the closure of a prison), while in others they simply served to bind together, for a brief moment in time, a body of individuals who sought to register their opposition to seemingly intractable forms of social and political domination. Across this broader continuum, we can identify a set of key mediations: between localized action and more systematic forms of change, between the pragmatic demands of resistance and its creative and prefigurative potential, between transformations in individual subjectivity and a broader social or collective consciousness, and between artistic production and praxis. These are forms of mediation, as I will argue here, that have significant implications for our understanding of the relationship between political and aesthetic knowledge. We are witnessing, in this diverse body of work, a paradigm shift that has profound implications for our understanding of the longer trajectory of modernist art. In particular, it marks the transition from a residual aesthetic paradigm, associated with the traditions of the historical avant-garde (and dependent on the conventional notion of aesthetic autonomy sketched out above) to an emergent paradigm predicated on a dialogical understanding of aesthetic experience. Most crucially, these projects are concerned with how we come to resist. What forms of consciousness, sociality, and imagination lead us into action? And how does the experience of resistance itself encourage the emergence of new forms of creativity and critical insight?

The innovations evident in contemporary socially engaged art can be traced to a number of precedents, including "dematerialized" art practices during the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the subsequent emergence of new forms of activist and "new genre" public art during the 1980s and early 1990s.[2] It is important to bear in mind, however, that socially engaged art did not simply emerge sui generis over the past few decades. Rather, it marks only the most recent manifestation of a desire to engage creatively with the norms of aesthetic autonomy that extends back to the nineteenth century. It is evident in Honoré Daumier's lithographs following the July Revolution and in the Arts and Crafts movement during the 1860s and 1870s; in the prefigurative cultural politics of the Paris Commune and the anarchist illustrations of the Neo-Impressionists; in the revival of khadi cloth in the Indian Independence movement and in the prints of El Taller

de Gráfica Popular in Mexico in the 1930s; in Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed and in Emory Douglas's images for the Black Panther Party; and in the performances of El Teatro Campesino in the 1960s and the theatrical productions of the Minjung Movement in South Korea during the 1980s.[3] Here art is understood to possess an important capacity to mobilize forms of critical and prefigurative insight in conjunction with processes of political and social transformation. For artists working in this tradition, the official "art world," composed of galleries, auction houses, dealers, and collectors, is seen as a key ideological component of the capitalist system, allowing for the symbolic staging of expressive freedom and critique only so long as they are restricted to cultural institutions dominated by the bourgeoisie and subordinate to the demands of the market. If art hopes to retain its critical and emancipatory power, it must operate outside these boundaries, establishing alliances with ongoing processes of social and political transformation that seek to challenge the underlying forms of economic domination on which the art world itself depends.

Even as artistic practice has been transformed over the past three decades, the theoretical discourse associated with contemporary art remains, by and large, invested in a more conventional understanding of the relationship between art, the institutional art world, and mechanisms of political transformation. In this view, art can preserve its unique "dissensual" power only by remaining sequestered within the institutional and discursive confines of the museum and the gallery. "To be a work of art," as literary theorist Nicholas Brown argues, "means to intervene in the institution of art, which is in turn the social basis of the artwork: what makes it count."[4] Rather than marking a shift in the underlying ontology of artistic production, socially engaged practices are understood as a misguided aberration that squanders art's critical potential by operating outside the protective enclosure of the bourgeois art world. Here we can identify a second tradition in which the utopic power of art rests precisely on its capacity to incarnate a pure, or ideal, form of consciousness that cannot be sullied by exposure to the fractious world of political and social struggle. In this tradition, famously articulated by Schiller in *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, art must confine itself to "the realm of semblance alone," where it will function to transform the consciousness of individual viewers or readers, making them less prone to instrumentalizing violence.[5] As Schiller will contend, humanity cannot be trusted to engage in substantive political change until *after* this process of "aesthetic education" has been completed. It is a process that unfolds in the protective enclosure of a bourgeois cultural sphere composed of galleries,

theaters, and concert halls, which emerged in conjunction with the modern art market during the late eighteenth century.

This belief system will be both challenged and renewed by figures such as Theodor Adorno, who will argue during the 1960s that meaningful political transformation is entirely foreclosed and that the only effect of an activist art practice is to foster the naive belief that "decisive change" is possible under a system of "total administration." The very conventions of autonomy (and the institutional art world that houses them) that the first tendency views as a disabling constraint reappear in this tradition as the only thing that prevents art's fragile emancipatory potential from being extinguished in a sea of kitsch and propaganda. While the art world is not understood as an entirely protected space in this paradigm (its complicity with capitalism has to be partially acknowledged in order for the artist to act out a symbolic resistance against it), this complicity is assumed to be relatively superficial and fundamentally different from the forms of complicity that operate in virtually every other sphere of bourgeois society. It is precisely this belief that many socially engaged artists have sought to challenge, not because they believe that art world–based practices cannot be critical but because they reject the assumption that *only* art world–based practices possess this capacity.

If the first orientation can underestimate the extent to which political action imposes its own forms of instrumentalization on the artistic projects produced in its orbit, the second orientation is characterized by an unrealistic faith in the ability of art world–based practices to transcend the often-ritualized forms of dissent that are tolerated in the space of the gallery, museum, or biennial. This outline suggests a bifurcation, however, that is often belied by the experience of individual artists who can work across both of these tendencies. These two positions should be understood as discursive horizons that orient the larger worldviews of artists and theorists rather than indicators of the actual freedom or autonomy enjoyed by a specific form of art practice. As I will argue here, the concept of artistic autonomy does not refer to an empirically verifiable quality of existing artworks. There is no art form that manages to abstract itself entirely from entanglement with complex political forces both within and beyond the art world. Thus, gallery- or museum-based artworks also engage with the social or political sphere in a myriad of ways (as financial instruments for the wealthy, as a form of symbolic capital that legitimates the larger art market, etc.). By the same token, activist artworks always bear a mediated and quasi-autonomous relationship to praxis. Even the most militant street action is caught up in a chain of signifiers, forms of affect, gestural politics, and spatial choreographies

that structure its political significance at any given moment. The discourse of aesthetic autonomy, performed through the self-understanding of artists and the embodied effects of specific art practices and institutional systems, is better understood as marking a set of a priori judgments regarding the potential for, or the impossibility of, substantive political change in a given historical moment. These judgments are, in turn, linked to a set of practice-based protocols and ideological formations that correspond to their respective claims (that meaningful political transformation is possible here and now or that it is premature or misguided). This accounts for the central tension within the history of modernism between a concept of art that must remain inviolable and pure and a concept of art that gains its power precisely through its active engagement with the impure actuality of the world as it is.

It is this second tendency that has reemerged in socially engaged art practices since the 1990s. My goal in this book is to examine the ways in which these practices have transformed our understanding of the aesthetic and aesthetic autonomy. This investigation will, by necessity, entail a closer examination of the normative forms of autonomy that evolved out of the earlier avant-garde tradition and that continue to be operative in the mainstream art world. In developing this analysis, I will be exploring theoretical sources (the concept of social labor in the Marxist tradition, anticolonial theories, Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of "dialogical" experience) that can help us make sense of this transformation and that can contribute to the formation of an alternative paradigm of the aesthetic appropriate for this work. Thus, this book is also concerned with the complex interrelationship between Marxism and the aesthetic. I want to begin by offering the reader some provisos. First, this book is not intended to provide a single unified "theory" for socially engaged art practice. That seems both unrealistic (given the diversity of the field) and antithetical to the situational nature of the practice itself. Rather, it takes contemporary socially engaged art as the occasion for a broader set of reflections on the nature of aesthetic autonomy that can also help illuminate aspects of historical art practice that have remained less visible to us. I will contend that contemporary socially engaged art encourages us to think differently about the relationship between art, the aesthetic, and the political. At the same time, the term "socially engaged art" simply serves to identity the most recent iteration of a tendency that is threaded throughout the history of modernism and that has important antecedents and parallels both within and beyond the art world itself. For this reason, this study will examine earlier examples of artistic production in order to decipher deeper points of affinity across this broader historical continuum.

Second, while this book will range widely across critical theory as well as art history, it is not my intention to subordinate artistic practice to some overarching theoretical narrative. But neither do I wish to reduce theory to a set of simple prescriptive guidelines whose only function is to provide an analytic framework for socially engaged art. I view both theory and artistic practice as affiliated forms of creative production with their own unique qualities, points of convergence, and moments of disjunction. Rather than subsuming one into the other, I am concerned with the forms of insight that emerge at the intersection of each of these distinct modes of production. Thus, this book will explore the complex internal dynamics of individual theories at various points, not because they illustrate some specific feature of socially engaged art, but because they help to reveal a larger constellation of ideas around the aesthetic and the political. These ideas, associated with the ways in which subjectivity is produced at the "threshold" between self and other, as Bakhtin writes, mark a significant transformation in the discursive structure of contemporary culture more generally.[6] This shift is evident in new paradigms of participatory or collaborative creation that have emerged in a range of areas, from socially engaged art to political activism to theories of participatory democracy and beyond.

Here I should note a final proviso. While this book will offer some descriptions of specific projects, it is not intended to provide a survey of recent socially engaged art. There are a number of excellent books that fulfill that role, within an increasingly global context. I will address some newer projects, as well as some older projects, but not in a comprehensive or synoptic manner. I do so not because there is not any more recent work to discuss but because these projects exemplify specific theoretical or analytic themes developed in the book as a whole. My concern, in short, is not with the most current expression of socially engaged art but with identifying certain continuities in its broader evolution over the preceding decades. Additionally, my primary focus will be on projects that evolved out of specific sites of social or political resistance (the struggle against the Fujimori dictatorship in Peru, for example, or activism related to incarceration) rather than projects that have been commissioned by art institutions or foundations. These sorts of commissioned projects are especially common in the US and Europe due to the rapid institutionalization of "social" art practices in these regions.[7] This distinction is significant for my analysis because I believe that the emergence of resistance itself, from a specific matrix of political forces and in response to specific modes of repression, entails an important form of creativity. The same is true of the processes that are necessary for an artist

or collective to gain entry to and build a rapport with a given community engaged in organized forms of resistance or social change.

There is a growing critical literature devoted to the analysis of socially engaged art, with books by Jennifer González, Shannon Jackson, Gregory Sholette, Pablo Helguera, Nato Thompson, Izabel Galliera, Marc Léger, Meiqin Wang, Justin Jesty, Carlos Garrido Castellano, Jennifer Ponce de León, Kim Charnley, and many others.[8] It is notable that much of this research is by either curators and artist-critics, like Helguera, Sholette, and Thompson, or by figures who work in fields adjacent to art history, such as Jackson, who is a performance studies scholar, or Jesty, who is a Japanese studies specialist. Until fairly recently, conventionally trained art historians have exhibited less interest in socially engaged art, and when they did write about it, they often expressed skepticism about the artistic merits of this work or its capacity to generate a meaningful "aesthetic" experience.[9] This skepticism has taken varying forms over the years, but it is defined by two common assertions. First, it hinges on the argument that socially engaged or activist art practices necessarily subordinate any generative aesthetic qualities to mercenary calculations of political efficacy. Or, put differently, it assumes that it is impossible for a project that is concerned with the practical transformation of existing social or political reality to also incorporate a creative aesthetic dimension. And second, this skepticism is based on the contention that any emancipatory effects produced by these projects will be immediately recuperated by the mechanisms of capitalist hegemony and used to provide ideological validation for ongoing, structural forms of repression. The second argument, which I will discuss below as an "exculpatory" critique, has only an indirect link to the question of aesthetic or artistic value. The first critique, however, appeals directly to a set of theoretical claims about the nature of the artwork and the forms of knowledge generated by both aesthetic and politically transformative experience. This question, the question of the aesthetic significance of socially engaged art, is a central concern of this book. While I have discussed the aesthetic dimension of socially engaged art in my past books, my primary focus has been on developing a critical language and a set of research methodologies that are appropriate to this work. In this book, however, I will address the aesthetics of socially engaged art in a more sustained manner. In particular, I will explore the ways in which this work both contests and reinvents a principle of aesthetic autonomy and criticality that is associated with the traditions of avant-garde art. In conjunction with that endeavor, I will also

be exploring the complex imbrication of aesthetic and political meaning in the theoretical discourse of the avant-garde more generally.

After beginning this research several years ago, I concluded that the task of developing an aesthetic account of socially engaged art was impossible without first interrogating the normative paradigm of aesthetic meaning that is typically encountered in mainstream criticism and theory, and against which socially engaged art is measured and found wanting. What precisely do we mean when we say a given work of contemporary art possesses "aesthetic" value and another one does not? And how is that specifically aesthetic significance related to more generic forms of critical insight or creativity? My analysis of the contemporary articulation of aesthetic meaning required, in turn, an engagement with the political history of the aesthetic itself. This historical inquiry was necessary in order to comprehend what is distinct about contemporary socially engaged art while also recognizing its less visible continuities with earlier artistic and aesthetic traditions. Thus, *Beyond the Sovereign Self* began life as part of a longer manuscript, the first half of which analyzed the historical evolution of the aesthetic as it relates to questions of political transformation and subjectivity. In this analysis, the concept of aesthetic autonomy emerged as a central locus, allowing me to identify certain symptomatic tensions in the modern construction of both artistic meaning and artistic subjectivity. The task of addressing this complex history in a substantive manner, however, took on its own life. As a result, I made the decision to divide the original manuscript into two separate studies, each of which constitutes a unique, but interdependent, research project. The first volume, *The Sovereign Self: Aesthetic Autonomy from the Enlightenment to the Avant-Garde*, provides a new interpretation of the evolution of aesthetic autonomy, describing key continuities over the long trajectory from Enlightenment philosophy to the discourse of the avant-garde to contemporary art theory. The second volume, presented here, builds on this foundation to account for fundamental shifts that have occurred in the aesthetics of contemporary art with the expansion of socially engaged practices while also extending the analysis of the avant-garde introduced in *The Sovereign Self*. These two tasks are related, as the changes associated with the development of socially engaged art involve a transformation in the structure of aesthetic autonomy itself (at the level of the identity of the artist and the relationship of the work of art to the broader social and political world). Or rather, we might say that this work reflects the coming into visibility of an aesthetic paradigm within

modern art that has often been obscured. For this reason, it is impossible to develop a substantive theoretical account of engaged art without at the same time addressing the ways in which its contemporary production has been informed by deeper historical currents within the modernist tradition.

Chapter Summaries

The following study is divided into seven chapters. In the introduction, I will synopsize the underlying historical analysis that is developed more fully in *The Sovereign Self*. This will entail the description of a schema or discursive structure that informs the Enlightenment paradigm of aesthetic autonomy and that is carried forward in revised form in the traditions of the European avant-garde. This analysis will allow me to identify certain constituent features of aesthetic autonomy over its longer historical arc. These core features constitute a kind of preconscious horizon that continues to inform and constrain our understanding of the critical potential of contemporary art to the present day. One of the central characteristics of this structure is an apophatic orientation in which the identity of an avant-garde practice is predicated on its differentiation from an adjacent form of cultural production that can be accused of sacrificing art's unique critical potential. In chapter 1, I will examine this process as it unfolds in the work of French theorist Jacques Rancière. Rancière's effort to revive the analytic paradigm outlined in Schiller's work demonstrates the remarkable durability of Enlightenment-era concepts of the aesthetic. As I will argue, while Rancière's appropriation of Schiller is selective (he focuses on the principle of playful nonidentity embodied in Schiller's analysis of the *Juno Ludovisi*), he retains the underlying social architecture on which Schiller's analysis depends (the subject positions and forms of competence assigned to the artist and viewer in relationship to the work of art). Here I will explore the complex shifts that occur as Rancière's earlier commitment to the cognitive acuity of the working class is translated into his analysis of the avant-garde traditions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With Rancière, we can also observe the symptomatic differentiation between avant-garde artistic practice and a degraded other, represented for him by the escrache tradition, a form of activist art first developed in Argentina during the 1990s.

I will examine this conjunction more closely in chapter 2. For Rancière, the escraches violate the necessary separation of the artist from the exigencies of social or political change, thereby abandoning art's unique critical

potential. In this chapter, I will challenge this interpretation, drawing out aesthetic qualities associated with engaged art that are not apparent within the hermeneutic frame employed by Rancière. Through detailed readings of several projects (including an analysis of the escraches themselves), I will identify the ways in which aesthetic and critical experience is mobilized in these works through forms of sociality and resistance that operate outside the institutional art world. I will also link these contemporaneous practices with a longer tradition of collaborative and activist production within the avant-garde. Here I will argue that the new forms of insight catalyzed by the escraches are simply the most recent manifestation of a mode of creative production that has many precedents in the broader modernist tradition. While it has been periodically exiled from the canonical body of avant-garde art, it remains nonetheless an essential, if often spectral, presence on the margins of art historical discourse. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of the "melting down" of existing forms of aesthetic autonomy in the European avant-garde during the 1920s and 1930s, focusing on Walter Benjamin's analysis of Sergei Tretyakov's "operative writer."

This historical analysis will be carried forward in chapter 3, where I will explore the "dematerialization" of artistic practice through new, collaborative methodologies during the 1960s and 1970s. This period marked the shift from an object to an event-based aesthetic paradigm with significant implications for contemporary art. Both melting down and dematerialization imply a process by which a fixed or static form of identity—of cultural genres, of the artwork's physical embodiment—undergoes a process of creative dissolution and reassembly. In each historical moment, a window of transformative potential is opened through which the conventions of artistic autonomy become visible, and susceptible to reconfiguration, against the ground of a more general climate of political change. Here I will contrast two modalities of dematerialization that occur in artistic production during this period. On the one hand, we encounter a process of "de-transcendentalization" in the work of figures such as Adrian Piper, whose performance-based practice is concerned with forms of critical insight generated in the interstices between self and other. And on the other hand, we can identify a corresponding form of "re-transcendentalization," as the locus of critical insight is transposed to the speculative consciousness of the artist, exemplified by figures such as Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner. I will explore the tensions between these positions as they unfold in the contrasting methodologies of two experimental film collectives working in France during the late 1960s (the Dziga Vertov Group and the Medvedkin Group).

In chapter 4, I will build on the empirical analysis of specific projects presented in the previous two chapters to identify a set of generic characteristics associated with socially engaged art more broadly. If the avant-garde schema is predicated on the assumption that decisive political change is foreclosed in the current moment, engaged art assumes that its potential here and now is not yet exhausted. This entails, of course, a very different political imaginary and a mode of critical thought that is waged against the ongoing forms of repression or domination encountered in the social world beyond the gallery and museum space. This fundamentally alters the aesthetic claims of engaged art, requiring an analysis that is sensitive to the scalar specificity of this resistance, as it moves from the reshaping of the individual consciousness to collective action to social or political transformation. I will introduce specific examples to illustrate this scalar range, from the subversive interventions of Iranian women dancing and singing in public space to the *Tamms Year Ten* project in the United States to the *Lava la Bandera* actions in Peru. In each case, we can identify a unique mode of praxial insight that combines tactical knowledge, critical analysis, and prefigurative forms of social experience. Here the key features of the discourse of avant-garde aesthetic autonomy become points of heuristic inquiry rather than axiomatic truths.

This taxonomic outline will provide the foundation for chapter 5, in which I turn to the Marxist concept of "social labor" to delineate an alternate theoretical paradigm that can account for the creative and quasi-aesthetic qualities of collective resistance. In this view, the act of resistance is not simply pragmatic but also has the capacity to transform the consciousness of the agents of resistance themselves, laying the groundwork for the development of alternative social forms that can transcend the limitations of the capitalist lifeworld. While often derided in contemporary critical theory as a vestige of Karl Marx's early "humanist" writing, I argue that social labor provides a valuable resource for rethinking the self-transformative potential of political action. It will also inform a second and third generation of Frankfurt School thinkers (Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, Hans Joas) as they seek to move beyond the melancholic resignation of Adorno and Max Horkheimer's later work through theories of "communicative action" and "recognition." We also encounter a significant parallel to the concept of social labor in the cultural modalities of "new social movements" during the 1960s and 1970s, which expanded to address forms of oppression based on gender, sexuality, and race as well as class.

While the concept of social labor is a valuable tool in helping us disclose the aesthetic potential of engaged art, it also carries its own liabilities. As

I will discuss in chapter 6, social labor relies on a conventional model of autonomous subjectivity, in which selfhood is defined by the appropriative mastery of the external world. As a result, it can effectively bifurcate an instrumental form of subjectivity, necessary for political change, from a prefigurative transformation of the self, necessary to envision and sustain an emancipatory society. Socially engaged art practices seek to combine these two modalities. In order to preserve this multivalent aspect of engaged art practice, it is necessary to supplement the concept of social labor with an alternative model of intersubjective experience found, among other places, in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. With Bakhtin we can identify an aesthetic paradigm that accounts for the creative processes involved in the reciprocal transformation of self and other in "dialogical" artistic exchange. Bakhtin's critique of "monological" forms of identity allows us to think both within, and against, the Marxist tradition in order to advance a more fully materialist account of social interaction and political transformation. We find a parallel resource in anticolonial theory, which embraces elements of a Marxist analysis while at the same time drawing our attention to the liabilities of its often-Eurocentric outlook. This is evident in the work of figures such as Édouard Glissant, whose concept of cultural "creolization" parallels Bakhtin's notion of dialogical cultural exchange.

In chapter 7, I will draw these threads together to reflect on the broader political implications of a dialogical aesthetic paradigm. As the example of Glissant suggests, Bakhtin's work has important resonances in the realm of anticolonial theory, playing a significant role in Homi Bhabha's influential concept of cultural hybridity. At the same time, as critics such as E. San Juan Jr. note, there is a commensurate tendency in this approach to detach the experience of individual self-transformation that occurs in dialogical exchange from the processes by which these same individuals might come together to engage in meaningful social and political resistance. I will explore this tension here, sketching out a set of parallel discursive structures that impose a binary division between forms of localized social change and structural or global revolution and between forms of identity based on racial, ethnic, or sexual difference and class-based identities. As I will argue here, there is a danger in contemporary left theory of abandoning a close understanding of the material conditions that lead people to demand change and the specific, embodied conditions of both repression and resistance. We find valuable insights for understanding this embodied condition in the realm of anticolonial and Black theory, among other sources. Here I will reference Boaentura de Sousa Santo's notion of a "rearguard" theory that seeks to establish a dialogical,

rather than a regulatory, relationship with praxis. I will also outline a set of examples, including the Shackville protests at the University of Cape Town in 2016 and recent work by indigenous artists and activists in Canada, to suggest the ways in which embodied experience, political change, and self-transformation can be brought together within a single practice.

This research marks the culmination of a set of concerns that have gradually evolved since I first began writing about socially engaged art in the 1980s. As I will argue here, I believe this work reflects a new configuration of the aesthetic, with implications that extend beyond the realm of socially engaged art alone. Precisely in challenging existing paradigms of artistic production, this work can illuminate important aspects of past art history and theory that have remained inaccessible to us. At the same time, in its conscious engagement with processes of social and political transformation, this work also expands our understanding of the complex interaction between aesthetic and political experience today. My goal, in both this book and *The Sovereign Self*, is to understand more fully the nature of this interaction. Taken as a whole, these books do not simply outline a new aesthetic paradigm; they also constitute an attempt to reconsider the nature of the aesthetic within modernity more generally. As a result, they are in dialogue with scholarly traditions and readerships outside those associated with socially engaged art, including aesthetic philosophy, political theory, and the history of the avant-garde. Given the interconnected nature of these two books, it will be helpful to provide the reader with an outline of the historical and theoretical argument that is developed more fully in *The Sovereign Self*. This outline can, by necessity, only be schematic, but I hope to indicate some of the key tensions in existing paradigms of aesthetic autonomy that will be renegotiated in the evolution of socially engaged art practice.

Aesthetic Autonomy in the Enlightenment

> Only the capacity to act as a moral being gives human beings a claim to freedom; but a mind that is capable of acting only according to sensuous motives deserves freedom as little as it is receptive for it.
>
> —Friedrich Schiller, letter to Duke Friedrich Wilhelm Augustenberg, 1793

The concept of autonomy, which plays a central role in *The Sovereign Self*, originates in the Enlightenment political theory of figures such as Locke, Grotius, and Hobbes and only subsequently migrates into aesthetic philosophy. Autonomy in the context of liberal political theory refers to the

capacity of the individual to generate their own norms. It emerged in the seventeenth century as part of an effort to challenge absolutist and sacral forms of political authority.[10] Autonomy was thus concerned with defining a new mode of subjectivity that would be capable of generating its own social values and governmental forms instead of having them imposed by an external and arbitrary power. It appealed in turn to the complex process by which these values and forms might be generated through the creative negotiation of human differences and societal tensions. At the same time, autonomy, understood as a liberatory demand for absolute personal freedom, always carries within itself the justification for a process of intersubjective violence necessary to secure this freedom. It also carries the implication that the natal condition of the human self is a radical individuality, poised against the intrusion of coercive external forces (the "conception of myself as an absolutely free being" who emerges "out of nothingness," as Hegel wrote).[11] This facet of autonomous selfhood was dramatically enhanced by the linkage of political liberalism with the ethos of possessive individualism promulgated by capitalism. Here the "self" implied by the experience of autonomy is given a more specific ontological orientation, associated with an acquisitive model of subjectivity, in which one seeks to exercise a transcendent mastery over the world and other selves. As a result, a form of autonomous subjectivity that is defined by a dialogical openness to other selves, necessary to ground the process of consensual will formation, coexists with a form of autonomous subjectivity defined by the instrumentalization of other selves.

Norms are shared constructs that gain their significance from their ability to regulate social interactions beyond the individual conscience. How, then, do we ensure that individual selves, newly liberated from absolutist rule, do not simply impose their own self-generated norms on other, equally autonomous, selves? Or, to pose the question differently, how do we understand our capacity for freedom in the absence of the coercive external force that had previously regulated human conduct? There is an underlying fear in the early modern period that the natural human condition was one of primitive barbarism (now exacerbated by the rise of capitalism) that could only be held in check by the transcendent authority of a god or king. This fear of the innate violence of the human self was further heightened in the period following the French Revolution. Both Immanuel Kant and Schiller viewed the Reign of Terror as evidence that humanity was not yet ready for true liberation. Schiller's *Aesthetic Education* was, in fact, written in its shadow. As he famously observed, "The fabric of the natural State is tottering, its rotting foundations giving way, and there seems to be a physical possibility

of . . . making true freedom the basis of political associations. Vain hope! The moral possibility is lacking, and a moment so prodigal of opportunity finds a generation unprepared to receive it."[12] As a result, the moment that is promised in the concept of political (and aesthetic) autonomy, the moment at which human selves gather together to creatively and collectively generate their own consensual values, must be deferred. As Schiller wrote, "we must continue to regard every attempt at political reform as untimely . . . as long as the split within man is not healed."[13] It was the work of aesthetic experience, according to Schiller, to repair this division through the individual's privatized encounter with a work of art.

The new forms of democratic will formation made available by the decline of absolutist rule implied a social order predicated on a fundamental political equality. Here the fixed hierarchies of the ancien régime will be replaced by a radically egalitarian system that is prefigured in aesthetic experience itself. "No privilege, no autocracy of any kind," as Schiller writes, "is tolerated where taste rules and the realm of aesthetic semblance extends its sway."[14] But this utopian society was compromised in its earliest stages by the parallel emergence of new forms of bourgeois subjectivity that introduced their own hierarchical division, between those who deserve political freedom (the bourgeois subject, able to actualize his will in the transformation of the natural world) and the poor and working class, whose lack of entrepreneurial spirit condemns them to a life of dependence and penury. As Sylvia Wynter has argued, this division, structured around incipient forms of class division, was, in fact, dependent on a priori forms of racial difference that emerged in the wake of the European colonial enterprise. Here the non-European self was consigned to the status of barbaric other, incapable of accessing the core of natural human reason and driven instead by their animalistic bodily passions. "It was to be the peoples of the militarily expropriated New World territories, as well as the enslaved peoples of Black Africa," as Wynter writes, "that were made to reoccupy the matrix slot of Otherness—to be made into the physical referent of the idea of the irrational/subrational Human Other."[15] We encounter here the origin of a fundamental discursive division between mind and body, reason and emotion, that will be applied indiscriminately to women, colonized subjects, and the European working class, all of whom are deemed unworthy of the freedom made available by political autonomy.

Before we experiment with freedom, then, we must first undergo a process of "aesthetic education" by which our consciousness, damaged by the dehumanizing effects of modernity, will be rehabilitated. Through art we will learn to adopt an attitude of empathic openness to others rather

than seeking to dominate and instrumentalize them. In fact, the political imaginary of the aesthetic evoked by Kant, Schiller, and later G. W. F. Hegel is, precisely, the image of a society in which each individual is able to enjoy absolute personal freedom without any fear that their actions might impinge on the equally unconstrained actions of others. This is the mythos of the aesthetic state, pervaded by a natural social harmony in which intersubjective violence is entirely banished and all tensions between self and other are effortlessly reconciled because the very nature of the human self has been transformed. This will occur through the inculcation of a capacity for aesthetic "disinterest" facilitated by works of art or literature rather than the self-interest that is reinforced by the market. But for this ameliorative self-transformation to occur, the experience of art, of the aesthetic, must be restricted to "the realm of semblance alone," as Schiller writes (acting out, virtually, the reconciliation of self and other through our encounters with artworks rather than other human agents).[16] Any pragmatic effort to produce social or political transformation here and now, to mobilize actual processes of consensual norm generation, remains "premature," according to Schiller, due to the limitations of existing public consciousness, which is torn between the "crude, lawless instincts" of the lower orders and the "lethargy and depravity" of the civilized classes.[17]

The aesthetic emerges, then, as the solution to a key point of uncertainty within political modernity: Do we have the capacity to enjoy freedom without lapsing into violence?[18] The answer is yes, but that capacity is as yet only latent in the human personality and must be cultivated slowly over time. Only after the aggregation of countless moments of individual enlightenment, through the consumption of art, will a critical mass of transformed individuals emerge who are capable of exercising true political freedom in a civil manner. In this dynamic, the artist plays an absolutely central role, as the single agent able to prefigure the transformed paradigm of the self toward which society as a whole should aspire. And art, precisely because it unfolds at the level of the symbolic or virtual, entirely independent from the world of practical experience, is the only path along which this process can safely unfold (due to the otherwise corrupt nature of existing society). While this prefigurative experience of self–other harmony can only occur at the level of the individual consciousness, it holds out the promise that it will one day be universalized in practice. In *The Sovereign Self,* I outline a schema to more clearly describe the specific features of the Enlightenment aesthetic, which I will synopsize here. This schema is predicated on a set of implicit assumptions about the nature of modernity, the potential for—or

the impossibility of—substantive political change, and the role of art that will be carried over and reformulated in the discourse of the avant-garde.

This schema is organized on two related levels. The first level concerns the particular model of social reality implicit in the concept of aesthetic autonomy and against which an aesthetic experience is presumed to unfold. This would include a paradigm of social transformation as well as the ideal political system toward which this transformation aspires. It also includes a concept of human psychological development necessary to facilitate this transformation (a model of the kind of self that is produced by current social conditions as well as a model of the transformed version of that self that will result from an aesthetic encounter). Two features of this level are particularly important for my analysis here. The first concerns the perceived incapacity of the masses. The discourse of aesthetic autonomy that emerges out of the Enlightenment assumes that the experience of modernity (specifically, the materialistic self-interest promulgated by the capitalist system) has been deeply corrosive to the human personality, leading to the atrophy of our ability to treat others with respect and compassion. As a result of this quasi-pathological condition, the general population is incapable of higher forms of reasoning and marked by a level of cognitive immaturity that renders them unfit for forms of social or political action intended to challenge the existing distribution of social and political power (a proscription that is imposed even more forcefully on colonized subjects). As a result of the incapacity of the masses, any form of practical, collective action guided by the consciousness of the general public and drawing on their own experience of political action will fail. For Schiller, we must first undergo a process of aesthetic education, while for Hegel we still require the tutelage of the philosopher to resolve conceptual impasses.[19] I will refer to this second feature as the "prematurity of practice" thesis.

If the first level of the schema is concerned with general assumptions about the nature of the self and political transformation, the second level concerns the specific epistemological claims made on behalf of the work of art, and aesthetic experience more generally, in advancing this emancipatory vision. These claims are also organized around two central features. First, they are predicated on the belief that art and the personality of the artist serve as vessels for the new forms of consciousness necessary to launch a successful emancipatory project. Because the aesthetic operates at the level of individual somatic experience, it is uniquely equipped to transform the consciousness of the broader public, which is defined by its dependence on bodily sensation rather than intellect. The idea that art alone is capable of

this ontological reprogramming of the self stems from the growing bifurcation between "fine art" and various forms of popular culture identified by figures such as Schiller and Karl Philipp Moritz as early as the 1780s.[20] This entails a form of apophatic differentiation that will be carried forward in subsequent divisions between advanced art and kitsch in the avant-garde tradition. Here art defines its unique critical power as the negation of principles of semantic accessibility that are exemplified by more popular cultural forms. I will refer to these interrelated assumptions as the "singularity of art" and the "surrogacy of the artist" theses.

The second epistemological claim associated with the discourse of aesthetic autonomy involves the belief that emancipatory insight can only be generated through forms of monadic contemplation, removed from the exigencies of social interaction. While the aesthetic may reach us initially through our senses, its ultimate goal is a form of cognitive reprogramming that can only occur though a strategic transformation of the core self, as it exists prior to any external determination. To facilitate this ontological regression, it was necessary that aesthetic experience be produced through the individual viewer's self-reflective awareness of the operations of their own consciousness. In this sequestered space, social interaction is acted out in our apperceptive recognition of the harmony of the faculties (Kant) or the "free play" of the form giving and sensuous drives (Schiller). Rather than one drive, or cognitive modality, dominating the other, they work effortlessly together. The goal is a form of self-transcendence that occurs through the virtual reconciliation of self and other, or individual and collective, the very process that is meant to unfold in the practical, realized exchanges necessary to achieve consensual norm generation under a condition of true political freedom. In this manner, the experience of beauty lays the groundwork for our eventual participation in actual forms of political transformation. A key corollary assumption here is that all subsequent forms of intersubjective experience and critical insight are dependent on a more profound self-transformation that can only occur in isolation from the social.

Aesthetic Autonomy in the Avant-Garde

> The unconscious aesthetic standards of the masses are precisely those that society needs in order to perpetuate itself and its hold on the masses. The pressures of a heteronomous life force them to accept diversion instead of making them reach for the concentration required by a strong ego.
> —Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

Conventional wisdom suggests that the emergence of a discourse of avant-garde transgression in the mid-nineteenth century marked a decisive break with the principle of aesthetic transcendence that we associate with the traditions of the Enlightenment. Certainly, at the thematic level this would seem to be the case, as the belief that art must present idealized forms of beauty is replaced by the contention that the artist's role is to "lay bare with a brutal brush . . . all the filth at the base of our society," as Gabriel-Désiré Laverdant argued in 1845.[21] And clearly, models of reception change as well. A key source for this shift is the growing rapprochement between avant-garde artistic discourse and Marxist theory and political activism. It is a convergence that expresses itself in the transposition of the figure of the avant-garde artist and the vanguard revolutionary. In this exchange, artists would directly participate in revolutionary action (evident in Gustave Courbet's involvement in the Paris Commune), but equally importantly, they sought to craft an aesthetic paradigm in which their works would enact a form of revolutionary violence at the cognitive level. Here the relationship between the artist (capable of prefigurative and critical insight into the constitution of a just society) and the public in need of enlightenment is reframed in two variant modes. On the one hand, it is reproduced in the perception of the viewer as a prototypical bourgeois subject whom the avant-garde artist will assail through a punitive perceptual attack (evident in the rhetoric of the Dada and Surrealist movements). And on the other, it is carried forward in Marx's account of the relationship between the "theoretical" communist (typically a bourgeois intellectual who possesses a mastery of abstract revolutionary theory) and the "practical communist" (the worker, whose knowledge is limited primarily to forms of bodily affect and conative agency rather than theoretical insight). Here the Enlightenment hierarchy of mind over body and reason over emotion is reproduced in a revolutionary vernacular. This tendency comes to fruition in Leninism during the early twentieth century, and is evident later in the century in the work of figures such as Mao Tse-tung, who famously described China's masses as a sublimely "clean sheet of paper," upon which the vanguard leader could "paint the newest and most beautiful pictures."[22] This custodial relationship is replicated in avant-garde artistic discourse through the concept of an emancipatory, rather than a punitive, form of assault intended to rouse the somnolent proletariat to a consciousness of its revolutionary mission, evident in the Constructivist tradition of Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Vladimir Tatlin, and others.

The transition to an avant-garde aesthetic paradigm during the late nineteenth century was driven by the recognition that the cumulative model

of social transformation promised by the Enlightenment aesthetic had decisively failed. Notwithstanding several decades during which countless bourgeois viewers had enjoyed the experience of aesthetic transcendence provided by works of art, bourgeois society as a whole had failed to realize the utopian social order that was, ostensibly, anticipated by these individual viewing acts. Here the bourgeoisie hold out the ideal of social harmony as an object of aesthetic delectation even as they deny its practical realization in the realm of political life. In this manner the exculpatory function of the aesthetic allows the bourgeoisie to imaginatively equate its own class-bound experience of beauty with a universal paradigm of taste (and, by extension, to legitimate its own class privilege through cultural means). The avant-garde aesthetic paradigm will seek to reverse this dynamic. Now, the ideal of a disinterested aesthetic experience in which the individual transcends his or her social specificity (and class identity) is replaced by an aesthetic paradigm in which the role of art is precisely to deny the viewer this false transcendence, forcing them instead to confront their own class specificity and guilt. In this manner, an aesthetic discourse of shock and disruption replaces a discourse of contemplative beauty and pleasure.

Notwithstanding these transformations, there remains a subterranean continuity between the two aesthetic traditions. First, the utopian mythos of both traditions remains remarkably consistent. Thus, the telos of the Enlightenment aesthetic state, in which conflicts between self and other are entirely effaced due to a fundamental transformation of human subjectivity, is strikingly similar to the mythos of life under "full Communism" in the Marxist tradition, which is defined by the emergence of a "New Man" who has been entirely purged of self-interest through the crucible of revolutionary struggle. Schiller will argue that any practical political transformation must be deferred until humanity's "aesthetic education" has been completed. "All reform that is to have any permanence," as he writes, "must begin from our whole manner of thinking."[23] Here the prematurity of practice thesis is based on his belief that existing human consciousness was unprepared for the freedom entailed by such a transformation without devolving into violence. Vladimir Lenin will also seek to exercise a pedagogical authority over the masses, who are unprepared for freedom, or at least for truly revolutionary struggle, without the guidance of a vanguard party. However, the utopian reconstruction of human consciousness that he seeks will only fully express itself after the violence of revolution, carried out through the terrorism of the dictatorship of the proletariat, has subsided. In this view, there is no need to "practice" democratic forms of decision-making or experiment with new

social or political structures here and now because, in the aftermath of the dictatorship of the proletariat, human consciousness will be so profoundly altered that politics as we currently understand it will cease to exist and the state itself will gradually "wither away."[24]

As this outline suggests, each of these aesthetic paradigms, the Enlightenment and the avant-garde, is defined by a deliberate depreciation of the creative and prefigurative power of political practice itself. As a result, Lenin remained highly resistant to ongoing calls to introduce more democratic forms of political decision-making both before and after the revolution. It was only after a violent interregnum of "revolutionary terror" that the hardened, appropriative sovereignty of the vanguard leader will give way to a society in which there are no significant differences to negotiate or transcend. Rather than viewing the transition from the Enlightenment to the avant-garde aesthetic as a simple overturning of one tradition by another, it is more accurate to understand it as marking the reorientation of the paradigm of political transformation on which the aesthetic itself is based. The telos of this process remains consistent: a utopia in which the actual, creative processes necessary to produce normative political values have been rendered obsolete by mankind's evolutionary integration into a single, harmonious, universal class (contained embryonically, in the Marxist tradition, in the proletariat). The means to achieving this goal, however, are quite different. Instead of practicing virtualized forms of intersubjective harmony in the aesthetic encounter, we find a new aesthetic paradigm based on disruption, as art takes on a projective (and allegorical) relationship to the direct political violence necessary to produce an all-encompassing transformation of the existing (capitalist) political system. At the same time, the social architecture within which each of these forms of reception is staged (which identifies the artist as a privileged vessel of advanced consciousness) remains unchanged.

It is important to note here that the relationship between the symbolic violence enacted against the implicitly bourgeois viewer by the avant-garde artist and the actual violence of revolution is increasingly framed in the late twentieth century in terms of the perceived impossibility of real political change (due in part to the descent of the Soviet Union into authoritarianism). This marks a decisive shift in the discourse of the avant-garde. Here the "prematurity of practice" thesis of the Enlightenment period reemerges in the belief, central to the work of a figure like Adorno, that revolutionary change is foreclosed due to the implacable forward movement of capitalist instrumental reason. As a result, the utopic promise of the aesthetic is

deferred, once again, to an indefinite future, while the (now revolutionary) consciousness necessary to bring it into practical existence is displaced from the benumbed public to the artist or theorist who serve as their "plenipotentiary." Adorno reproduces an underlying pessimism regarding the revolutionary capacity of the proletariat that is already evident in Lenin, for whom the failure of the Paris Commune seemed to illustrate the inability of the masses, in their quasi-instinctual and spontaneous forms of resistance, to think strategically about their relationship to class domination.[25] For Lenin, this failure demonstrated the absolute necessity that the cognitive leadership of revolution be transferred to a special cadre of vanguard political leaders who would devote themselves entirely to the science of political change. This gesture entailed, in turn, the displacement of revolutionary consciousness from the field of praxis to the domain of theory, where it would be sustained and cultivated on behalf of a working class as yet unprepared to realize its historical mission.[26]

Here we can identify the symptomatic linkage between Marxist theory, which imagines the vanguard intelligentsia as a vessel for the "imputed consciousness" of the proletariat, and the avant-garde artist.[27] In each case, a form of autonomous subjectivity, rooted in a paradigm of bourgeois possessive individualism, is endowed with a revolutionary imprimatur due to its capacity to sustain an otherwise endangered form of proletarian class consciousness. In this manner, the avant-garde artwork, segregated in the museum and circulating within the rarefied precincts of the international art market, can nonetheless claim to represent a more acute and meaningful form of political engagement than projects developed by artists working in direct conjunction with existing social movements. It can do so precisely because it has access to an otherwise hidden revolutionary truth that only the avant-garde artists and theorist can grasp. Notwithstanding Adorno's command of revolutionary truth, the masses were unable to subordinate their unreflective bodily appetites to a disciplined, rational assessment of objective political reality (evident in their self-indulgent desire for immediate gratification in pursuit of political transformation). This view is clear in Adorno's critique of the German student movement during the 1960s, which he accused of a naive "actionism" in its belief that its protests could actually precipitate any meaningful political change.[28] As a result, the only remaining space within which a revolutionary intelligence can be safely preserved is the internal compositional sphere of the avant-garde artwork (as it acts out a symbolic resistance to normative values through its rejection of existing stylistic or formal conventions). In this manner, the avant-garde movement

appropriates the (now devalued) social form of the vanguard political party, without a parallel critique of its evident limitations. Here the artist becomes a "deputy," on behalf of the universal class of the proletariat and the utopian future society whose potential it unwittingly carries.[29]

Now the Enlightenment artwork, as the prefigurative anticipation of a future aesthetic state that can't yet be realized in practice, is superseded by the avant-garde artwork as a vessel for a form of revolutionary consciousness that can't yet be fulfilled through direct action. This is necessary precisely because the masses are now entirely subordinate to the ideological mechanisms of the capitalist system. It is the pervasive and monolithic nature of this cognitive domination that is distinctive in Adorno's analysis, the perception that it is entirely seamless in its effects and that literally the only form of consciousness that remains immune to its effects is that of the artist or theorist. In this new paradigm, the act of evoking intersubjective harmony through concrete forms of political resistance that incorporate a creative, prefigurative dimension (as evidenced by the student activism of the 1960s) is proscribed. It is proscribed because this resistance can never hope to be successful or to expand or multiply its effects in a way that allows for real, structural change to occur. This form of prefigurative knowledge always carries a fatal residue of the original exculpatory function of aesthetic pleasure and transcendence enjoyed by the bourgeoisie in its experience of beauty. For the same reason, Adorno was virulently opposed to new forms of performance-based or activist artistic practice during the 1960s, which would in his view surrender the necessary critical mediation between self and other provided by the physical art object and effectively collapse the only remaining refuge of truly critical thought into the maw of a profane capitalist culture. "It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives," as Adorno writes, "but to resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men's heads."[30] In this manner, aesthetic autonomy reemerges and claims a second life, as the necessary bulwark that protects authentic revolutionary consciousness from co-optation by the engine of capitalist appropriation.

The singular privilege assigned to negation in avant-garde discourse is exemplified by Alain Badiou in his essay "Avant-gardes," a meditation on Andre Breton's poem *Arcanum 17*. Badiou's analysis provides a key example of the intellectual imaginary of the avant-garde as it has been constructed in contemporary theoretical discourse. For Badiou, the essence of the avant-garde lies in its "negative excess" as a gesture of sheer refusal and assault. The principle of "rebellion" that is carried by the avant-garde expresses itself as a "vital spark," purified of all teleological aspirations.[31] Breton, who wrote

Arcanum 17 while proselytizing for Surrealism in New York City during World War II, dismisses any concern with the actual repercussions of revolutionary political change as the passive "resignation" of the "miserable priest," who "entreats us to weigh up the worth of rebellion against its results."[32] Like a callous Gradgrind obsessed with utilitarian calculations of profit and loss (of lives rather than money), the priest of resignation churlishly ignores the sublime "presentness" of rebellion as it forges violently ahead, heedless of the form it might eventually take or the damage it might inflict in acquiring this form. The appeal of this position for Badiou, who continues to celebrate Mao's Cultural Revolution as one of the most significant political events of the twentieth century and who remained a staunch defender of the Khmer Rouge until 2012, is self-evident.[33] It serves as an implicit riposte to those who would question the ease with which intellectuals embrace the extreme suffering and repression that can result when the "violent aesthetic militancy" of the artistic avant-garde is translated into practical action. Badiou, of course, has no patience for this squeamishness, arguing that "The theme of total emancipation, practiced in the present, in the enthusiasm of the absolute present, is always situated beyond Good and Evil. . . . The passion for the Real is devoid of morality."[34]

Here we have two related themes that will be important for my subsequent analysis. First is the Manichean opposition between revolution (immediate, all encompassing, and sublimely violent) and resignation (the only other possible attitude toward political transformation), which is small-minded, timidly moralistic, and incapable of the majestic sacrifices necessary to produce real change. The second theme is a messianic concept of revolutionary time in which any possible form of temporal continuity (involving, for example, some recognition of the specific human costs of political violence) is dismissed as simply another expression of the ubiquitous conceptual reification imposed by the capitalist system, extending now to the principle of causality itself. Badiou describes this perpetual withdrawal from answerability or relationality by the avant-garde as a matter of "always . . . going further in the eradication of resemblance, representation, narrative or the natural."[35] As Badiou's description demonstrates, the avant-garde rejection of temporal or historical continuity is joined with a series of spatial or semantic conjunctions (the linkage between signifier and referent, for example) that will be subjected to a similar destabilizing assault. This disjunction is consistent with Badiou's own intellectual trajectory. For Badiou, a philosophy capable of revealing the "truth" must first purge itself of any troubling contamination by current forms of political resistance, which are irrevocably compromised

by the bankrupt pseudo-democracy of neoliberalism or the equally suspect traditions of existing political philosophy.[36] Drawing on the axiomatic truths revealed by mathematical set theory, Badiou's philosophy will occupy an autonomous realm of pure thought, allowing him to devise an entirely new and more perfect theory of the revolutionary "event." Here we encounter the symptomatic correlation between avant-garde art and theory itself, as twin expressions of a radical autonomy which bear a privileged relationship to revolutionary change.

During the 1980s and 1990s, we can identify a further evolution of the avant-garde ethos of autonomy. In this process, the locus of repressive normativity against which the avant-garde work will act out its symbolic resistance begins to shift from the reified compositional protocols of specific art media to the institutional enclosure of the art world itself. This is evident in the concept of a "neo" avant-garde popularized by historian Hal Foster and associated with emergent "Institutional Critique" practices during the same period.[37] In this view, art can retain its unique emancipatory power only by restricting its symbolic gestures of negation to the co-optative mechanisms of the museum and the gallery. What is critiqued, then, is precisely the art world's tendency to renormalize the proto-revolutionary disruptions introduced by the avant-garde artwork itself (in particular, the revolutionary art practices of the 1920s). The neo-avant-garde retains its critical power in two related ways. First, it does so by advancing a critique of the naive efforts of artists during the 1960s and 1970s (associated with Happenings, activist practices, and so on) to prematurely actualize certain utopic values associated with the aesthetic by operating outside the institutional art world and seeking to engage viewers as collaborators or participants (effectively treating artistic subjectivity as potentially mobile). In this manner, neo-avant-garde art defines its resistance through the negation of previous artistic practices that are seen as insufficiently critical of their own institutionalized status. Second, the neo-avant-garde seeks to critique the appropriative mechanisms of the art world itself, which function as surrogate expressions of the more overt forms of economic and political domination that exist in the world beyond the gallery and museum and with which the artist cannot risk direct engagement.

In this view, the only space within which a legitimate or meaningful form of critique can be generated is the institutional art world itself.[38] We encounter a more recent expression of this position in Philipp Kleinmichel's 2019 essay "The Symbolic Excess of Art Activism." For Kleinmichel, it is self-evident that "the political activism of radical, direct democracy," which

he associates improbably enough with the Bolshevik Revolution, "belongs to a bygone world."[39] As a result, "artistic political activism" can no longer play a meaningful role in the broader process of political transformation. The only function left for this work is to serve as a prophylactic reminder of the current impossibility of praxis itself. This will occur through what Kleinmichel terms the "museal" absorption of activist art into exhibitions in galleries, biennials, and museums. The very assimilation of this work into the institutional art world, where it will take its place alongside other once vital but now moribund art forms such as "Land Art," "readymades," and "abstract painting," will serve to foreground its anachronistic nature and, by extension, the more general absence of any truly revolutionary politics today. The viewer, confronted with this spectacle of de-actualized transgression, will be "forced" to recognize that the possibility of any reciprocal engagement between art and political transformation (in the form of "radical democratic activism") "ceased to exist . . . with the dissolution of the Soviet Union." "The political value of activist art resides," as he writes, "in the fact that it signifies the aesthetic and symbolic procedures of political activism . . . as forms of a lost world of the past."[40] All that is left, then, is for the artist or curator to preserve the "memory trace" of this failed utopic possibility, registered in the consciousness of individual gallery goers.[41] Thus, contemporary activist art, which naively imagines it can play some meaningful role in political transformation, comes to function as a kind of taxidermied object lesson, consigned to the museum as a warning to other artists. We encounter here the frankly Eurocentric belief that the Bolshevik Revolution represented the last legitimate expression of a viable form of revolutionary political transformation, coupled with the conviction that the only possible relationship that one can take to its failure is a kind of melancholic contemplation. Here the claim that the art world is the only site at which meaningful critique can be produced is justified precisely by insisting on its utter impossibility elsewhere and, by extension, minimizing those constraints that do operate in an art world context.

The avant-garde aesthetic is based on the imperative to preserve inviolate a vestigial trace of authentic revolutionary consciousness. But preservation implies a degree of fixity; the "thing" to be preserved must exist as a discrete and self-contained entity that can be uncoupled from any dialogical interconnection with the lifeworld of resistance while losing nothing of its essential character. In this manner, neo-avant-garde discourse surrenders the generative nature of resistance itself, effectively reproducing the conventional aesthetic paradigm of autonomous mind over dependent body,

abstract thought over material practice. This discursive system is predicated on a false equivalence in which virtualized gestures of art-world dissensus (waged against existing artistic conventions, art-world ideologies, etc.) are meant to sustain or prefigure the forms of consciousness that would result from political struggle against the structures of capitalist domination. However, the modes of propositional criticality engendered by conventional artistic practice are of an entirely different order than those mobilized in actual resistance, in which the normative system against which one resists is reciprocally responsive, requiring a continual retuning of the resistant gesture in real time. Avant-garde transgression also "retunes" itself as the art-world apparatus imposes its own normalizing powers, but that modulation is a constituent feature of the institutional art world itself rather than a threat to its fundamental existence. The evolution of artistic criticality ensures the ongoing supply of new material necessary to feed the larger system of validation on which the marketability of contemporary art as something both novel and "transgressive" depends. The art world as such is structured with the specific purpose of nurturing and monetizing these same critical energies. The significance of actual transgression is that it poses at least a potential challenge to the underlying stability of the social order against which it contends. But that potential, even as a distant horizon, has been abandoned in the neo-avant-garde paradigm. In this manner, the "preservative" impulse of the avant-garde aesthetic ends by destroying the very thing it claims to sustain.

Notwithstanding the tensions evident in Adorno's paradigm of the avant-garde, the fact remains that his critique of the "actionist" naïveté of the 1960s was, at one level, correct. It did not lead to the global communist revolution that he envisioned as the telos of aesthetic freedom. There are, of course, very good reasons for the pessimism that we encounter in figures like Adorno, Kleinmichel, and many others and for the ongoing salience of Adorno's critique of capitalist culture. One need only survey the current political landscape to find endless validation for Adorno's bleak assessment of the potential for real political change and the cognitive limitations of the general public. However, we must also consider the broader implications of Adorno's proposed response to this reality, delivered from the comforts of what Georg Lukács sardonically termed the "Grand Hotel Abyss."[42] Here the artist and theorist sit back and contemplate the disaster of the current moment from the relative privilege of the academy and the art world, dispatching encrypted messages to an imaginary revolutionary future, like so many bottles cast into an indifferent sea.[43] At the center of this paradigm

is the radically autonomous self-consciousness, impervious to external determination, first valorized in Enlightenment aesthetic philosophy. This autonomous self becomes the ur-form of a whole series of institutional and cognitive enclosures in subsequent art theory. These include, of course, the concept of a quasi-protected art world outlined by Foster, as well as the principle of defensive sequestration that is evident in the belief that art can preserve its redemptive power only by focusing its critical energies on its own institutional status. In this paradigm, as noted above, the institutional art world of galleries and collectors, auction houses and curators, a world that is heavily indentured to the multibillion-dollar market for contemporary art, constitutes the only meaningful locus of aesthetic and critical meaning. By the same token, artistic practices that choose to operate outside or only peripherally to this world have effectively abandoned the only available epistemological fulcrum necessary to generate real criticality. In the following chapter, I will examine the ways in which the conventions of avant-garde aesthetic autonomy I have outlined above are deployed in Jacques Rancière's analysis of the escrache actions in Argentina. Rancière's critique allows us to more clearly identify the unique features of socially engaged art, as it both transgresses and transforms these conventions.

NOTES

Introduction

Section epigraph: Friedrich Schiller, letter to Duke Friedrich Wilhelm Augustenberg, 1793, in Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism*, 97.

1 See Corlin Frederiksen, *Bishan Commune*; Kamanzi, "'Rhodes Must Fall'"; Gilbert, "Autonomous Determination"; Awde, "Renata Carvalho"; Jesty, "Japan's Social Turn"; Black Lives Matter, "The Provocateurs"; Hofman, "Disobedient."

2 See, for example, Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain*.

3 See Kester, "Activist and Socially Engaged Art."

4 Brown, *Autonomy*, 37.

5 Schiller, *Aesthetic Education*, 197.

6 Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 287.

7 This institutionalization is evident in the proliferation of foundations, conferences, graduate programs, and commissioning agencies dedicated to this work. On the one hand, this has provided important funding opportunities, along

with a set of online forums that publish interviews, project descriptions, and other coverage. While often affirmative in nature (a funding agency is unlikely to commission an essay critical of the work that it supports), these forums have contributed significantly to promoting dialogue among artists, administrators, and curators working in this area. At the same time, the process of institutionalization, like any other system of patronage, carries its own liabilities. This is evident in the often-superficial concept of social engagement evident in the "participatory" art practice encountered in museums, biennials, and art fairs. It can also make artists complicit in burnishing the reputations of wealth-driven institutions. This was evident in the May 2015 announcement of "Guggenheim Social Practice," an initiative that commissions "socially engaged art" projects that "engage community participants . . . and foster new forms of public engagement." "Guggenheim Social Practice" is funded by the Edmond de Rothschild Foundation, the philanthropic arm of Edmond de Rothschild Investment Partners, a private asset management firm in France. On its website, the Rothschild Foundation professes its dedication to "social entrepreneurship" (a neoliberal catchphrase that signals its support for projects that seek to imbue the poor with a properly bourgeois commitment to economic self-actualization and that implies, by extension, that their poverty is the result of a lack of entrepreneurial zeal). Not surprisingly, the same language is reproduced on the Rothschild Investment website, which praises the virtues of risk-taking "entrepreneurs and investors." The timing of the Guggenheim's announcement is particularly revealing. It came only a few weeks after the museum decided to break off negotiations with the Gulf Labor Coalition in April 2016. The Gulf Labor Coalition consists of artists, activists, and scholars who have been working since 2010 to encourage the museum to adopt fair labor practices in the construction of a new Guggenheim branch in Abu Dhabi.

8 See, for example, Jackson, *Social Works*; Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*; González, *Pepón Osorio*; Demos, *Decolonizing Nature*; Castellano, *Beyond Representation*; Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance*; Thompson, *Seeing Power*; Léger, *Vanguardia*; La Berge, *Wages against Artwork*; Ponce de León, *Another Aesthetics*; Charnley, *Sociopolitical Aesthetics*.

9 Bishop, "The Social Turn," 181.

10 Schneewind, *Invention of Autonomy*, 4–8.

11 This quote is from *The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism*, written in 1796–1797 by Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling. Ferrer, *Oldest Systematic Program,* 22.

12 Schiller, *Aesthetic Education*, 25.

13 Schiller, *Aesthetic Education*, 45.

14 Schiller, *Aesthetic Education*, 217.

15 Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being," 266.

16 Schiller, *Aesthetic Education*, 197.

17 Schiller, *Aesthetic Education*, 25–27.

18 For a useful account of the political implications of the aesthetic, see Schoolman, *A Democratic Enlightenment*.

19 Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics*, 54.

20 Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market*, 34.

21 Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 9.

22 Mao Tse-tung, "Introducing a Co-operative."

23 Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism*, 97.

24 Lenin, "The Economic Basis."

25 For a useful overview of the theoretical rationale for Bolshevik revolutionary tactics, see Lovell, *From Marx to Lenin*. Here is Maxim Gorky's assessment of Lenin in 1917: "He possesses all the qualities of a 'leader' and also the lack of morality necessary for this role, as well as an utterly pitiless attitude, worthy of a nobleman, towards the lives of the popular masses. Lenin is a 'leader' *and* a Russian nobleman, not without certain psychological traits of this extinct class, and therefore he considers himself justified in performing with the Russian people a cruel experiment." Gorky, *Untimely Thoughts*, 88.

26 In fact, even after surviving the violent upheaval of the Russian Revolution, Lenin would insist that the "de-classed" proletariat was still incapable of an autonomous revolutionary consciousness and required the ongoing oversight of the Communist Party.

27 Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 41.

28 Adorno and Marcuse, "Correspondence on the German Student Movement," 131. There is, of course, more than a grain of truth to Adorno's contention that 1960s activists deluded themselves when they imagined that their protests could precipitate real revolutionary change. However, the most symptomatic expression of this naive action-ism can be found not in the student movement he disdained but among those organizations that relied on the same vanguardist principles that are transposed into aesthetic form in his own critical theory. In groups such as the Weather Underground in the United States, the Red Army Faction in Germany, and the Red Brigades in Italy, we encounter the characteristic appeal to "exemplary violence," undertaken by a cadre of radically autonomous militants who have become the vessels for a form of pure revolutionary consciousness. We encounter, as well, the belief that this violence (bombings, kidnappings, assassinations) will provoke the otherwise indolent masses to rise up and seize power ("Strike one to educate one hundred," as the Red Brigades argued). Drawing on Guevara's notion of "foquismo," these groups believed they could bring the conditions necessary for true revolution into practical existence through the sheer force of their will and their privileged knowledge of the totality of capitalist oppression. As a result, these practices possessed neither an immediate efficacy (in producing meaningful forms of situational political change) nor any prefigurative potential that might have laid the foundation for a broad-based social movement to come. Rather, they served only to alienate large segments of the public in both the United States

and Europe from the form of political liberation that they claimed to champion. See Varon, *Bringing the War Home*; Beck et al., *Strike One to Educate One Hundred*.

29 Adorno, "The Artist as Deputy," 67.

30 Adorno, "Commitment," 180.

31 Badiou, "Avant-gardes," 142.

32 Badiou, "Avant-gardes," 141.

33 See Ono-Dit-Biot, "Regardez." Between 1975 and 1979, the Khmer Rouge (supported by the Chinese Communist Party) was responsible for the Cambodian genocide, in which 1.5 to 2 million Cambodians were systematically murdered. For a critique of Badiou's romanticization of the Cultural Revolution, see Chu, "Alain Badiou." Badiou assumes, of course, that he would be exempt from the violence that is inevitably visited upon independent thinkers in the wake of the kind of revolution he hopes to precipitate.

34 Wolin, *The Wind from the East*, 164.

35 Badiou, "Avant-gardes," 132.

36 See, for example, his critique of "popular democratic processes" in Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, 97.

37 Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?"

38 For a more contemporary version of this argument, see Roberts, *Revolutionary Time*. As Roberts argues, art's critical power is defined through the "restless, *ever vigilant positioning* of art's critical relationship to its own traditions of intellectual and cultural formation and administration" (p. 54).

39 Kleinmichel, "The Symbolic Excess of Art Activism," 236.

40 Kleinmichel, "The Symbolic Excess of Art Activism," 237.

41 Roberts, *Revolutionary Time*, 67.

42 Jeffries, *Grand Hotel Abyss*.

43 Adorno and Horkheimer, "Towards a New Manifesto?," 58.

1. The Incommensurability of Socially Engaged Art

1 Roberts, *Revolutionary Time*, 55.

2 Laclau and Mouffe address the concept of "antagonism" in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy,* and Mouffe introduces a further distinction between "antagonism" and "agonism" in *The Return of the Political*.

3 As Mouffe writes, "According to my conception of 'adversary,' and contrary to the liberal view, the presence of antagonism is not eliminated but 'tamed.'" Mouffe, "Agonistic Public Sphere," 91.

4 Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 19.

5 Mouffe, "Activism and Agonistic Spaces," 4.

6 Mouffe, "Activism and Agonistic Spaces," 4–5.

7 Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 164.