

A woman with dark hair, wearing a light pink short-sleeved top and a dark skirt, is seen from behind. She is carrying a large, teardrop-shaped sculpture on her head. The sculpture is made of a fine, silver-colored wire mesh and is filled with crumpled white paper. It has a long, thin, tapering neck. The woman is standing on a dirt path in a park-like setting with trees and a fence in the background. The text of the book cover is overlaid on the right side of the image.

# THE ONE

CONTEMPORARY COLLABORATIVE ART

# and THE MANY

IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

GRANT H. KESTER

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THE ONE AND THE MANY

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# THE ONE AND THE MANY

Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context

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Grant H. Kester

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To Samira Kester, my collaborator in life

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# INTRODUCTION

## THE SEMANTICS OF COLLABORATION — 1

If oneness in art works inevitably implies the use of force against the many—phrases like “mastery over materials” in aesthetical criticism betray this state of affairs—then it follows that the many must also fear oneness.

T. W. ADORNO, *AESTHETIC THEORY*

This book began with a question. Why have so many artists over the past decade and a half been drawn to collaborative or collective modes of production? This is a global phenomenon, extending from the fashionable biennales of Europe to the villages of central India, from the Hamburg waterfront to the arctic circle of Finland, and from generously subsidized new media centers to struggling community art programs. While each practitioner comes to collaborative work with a unique perspective, these individual creative choices, taken in the aggregate, reveal much about both the current political moment and the broader history of modern art. We must begin, of course, by coming to terms with collaboration itself. Its primary meaning is straightforward enough: “to work together” or “in conjunction with” another, to

engage in a “united labor.” It is shadowed, however, by a second meaning: collaboration as betrayal, to “cooperate treasonably, as with an enemy occupation force.”<sup>1</sup> This ambivalence, the semantic slippage between positive and negative connotations, is, I think, fitting. There are other terms that one might employ to describe this work: “cooperative,” “collective,” and so on. Where collaboration is redolent of Vichy France, collectivity evokes associations of forced labor camps, even as cooperation leads us through a chain of associations to “cooperative” witnesses and a complicitous submission to authority.

It is telling that within the continuum of terms we use for working together, each carries with it a counter-meaning: a warning, so to speak, of its ethical undecidability. I’m reminded of a lecture I once gave on collaborative art to an audience of distinguished academics. Over the course of an otherwise unremarkable presentation, I noticed one audience member becoming increasingly agitated. Eventually, he could contain himself no longer and burst out with an impassioned jeremiad about the dangers that inevitably follow when trying to work creatively in groups. We are well acquainted with the conformist demands that collective social formations make on individual participants, but the threat, as Adorno reminds us, runs in both directions.<sup>2</sup> The many have equally to fear the power of the one, for whom the world in all its concrete particularity is a mere resource to be joyfully manipulated and transformed. Is the identity of the many based on coercive consensus or radical plurality? Is the one defined by narcissistic projection or an opening out to alterity? These are some of the most pressing political and ethical questions of our day, and they are also central to the collaborative art projects I’ll be exploring here.

There are, of course, no unequivocal signifiers, just as there is no art practice that avoids all forms of co-option, compromise, or complicity. It seems wiser to openly acknowledge this impurity than to assume that it can somehow be defeated at the level of terminology. We can identify many modes of collaborative practice, many ways of being together, in contemporary art. Perhaps most visible are what we might term “artist-to-artist” collaborations of the kind Charles Green describes in *The Third Hand: Collaboration in Art from Conceptualism to Postmodernism*. Green discusses such collaborative “teams” as Marina and Ulay Abromovic, Christo and Jeanne Claude, and Gilbert and George, focusing primarily on the dynamics of collaborators who are also linked through personal re-

lationshps (“publicly-bonded couples,” as Green has it).<sup>3</sup> His key theoretical innovation, the concept of the “third artist,” marks a form of creative praxis that emerges at the intersection of these complex, overlapping relations. If art is understood as an expression of autonomy and unity (the unity of authorial intention and of the work itself as a semantic construct), then any concession to contingency and multiplicity will be perceived as a transgression. At the same time, most of the examples outlined in Green’s book simply expand a capacity for conventional artistic expression and production to multiple participants (e.g., two “performance artists” working collaboratively rather than one in isolation). In many of the projects I’ll be examining here, the artistic personality itself (defined by its commitment to mastery and self-projection) is understood as a locus of creative transformation. Further, they often challenge the traditional perception of the work of art as an event or object authored beforehand and subsequently presented to an audience.

Modernism is identified with the emergence of the solitary genius out of the lumpen collectivity of the medieval guild or lodge—a transition symbolized by the apocryphal tale of Charles V kneeling to retrieve Titian’s brush during a visit to the master’s studio. The modern artist would soon make his triumphant debut on the stage of European culture, blinking in the glare of his newfound fame like Plato’s slave freed from the dark cavern of communal illusion. The future of (European) art from this point on was preordained as the titanic struggle of progressive individualism against the stultifying conformity and consensus imposed, variously, by the salon, bourgeois consumerism, political propaganda, and, eventually, the history of modernism itself. More recent art historical research has done much to discredit this simplistic account (works produced in guilds and lodges were often neither collectively authored nor anonymous).<sup>4</sup> However, the figure of the singular, auratic artist, reinforced by notions of artistic genius first formalized by Kant, remains the bulwark of the long history of modernism, and the epistemological template for much contemporary criticism and curatorial practice. We can also identify intellectual and creative tendencies that challenge, or at least complicate, conventional notions of authorship during the modern period. In fact, one of the primary trajectories of modernist art involves the gradual erosion of the authoring conscious via techniques such as automatic drawing, frottage, montage, the splatter and dripping of paint, and so on.

The history of modernism can be viewed from this perspective as enacting a relentless disavowal of agency (and the rational, calculating mind it was seen to represent): a surrendering of authorial power to the unconscious, chance, or desire. There is, as well, a more formal tradition of distributed or collective authorship that looks back, to the artisanal guilds of an idealized Middle Ages (William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement, Jugendstil, Der Blaue Reiter), or forward, to a utopian fraternity of artists and technicians (Constructivism, David Alfaro Siquiero's "polygraphic team"). Emerging at differing historical moments and in varying geopolitical contexts, these new collective formations also performed a defensive function, serving as a protective enclave against an indifferent mass culture and an openly hostile art establishment. The collaborative and collective traditions of the interwar years (dadaism, surrealism, etc.) were revitalized during the 1960s and '70s by Situationist, activist, and feminist groups, ranging from Womanhouse in the United States and Tucuman Arde in Argentina, to Welfare State in England and Hi Red Center in Japan.<sup>5</sup>

During the 1980s and '90s a new generation of collectives emerged (Border Arts Workshop, Group Material, REPO History, Guerilla Girls, Gran Fury, Platform, Wochenklausur, and Grupo Etcetera, among many others) that experimented with multiple authorship and novel reconfigurations of the artist's relationship to audience, with a particular focus on public space and activist intervention. Typical projects include Gran Fury's *Silence = Death* campaign in the late '80s; Group Material's *Democracy* project at the Dia Art Foundation in New York, which featured an extended series of dialogues and exhibitions on participatory democracy; and Platform's *Delta* installation, which used a micro-hydro turbine to mark the tidal movements of one of London's hidden rivers. Feminist collaborative practices by figures such as Judy Baca, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Leslie Labowitz, Suzanne Lacy (whose concept of "New Genre" public art played a key role in debates during the 1990s), and Jo Spence, Loraine Lee-son, and the Hackney Flashers group in London, provided a particularly important point of contact at that time between the traditions of conceptual art, public art, and activism.<sup>6</sup> As curator Okwui Enwezor has argued, those moments at which the constitution of the artistic personality is most radically in question often coincide with periods of more general political and social crisis. "Such crises," Enwezor writes, "force reappraisals of

conditions of production, reevaluation of the nature of artistic work, and reconfiguration of the position of the artist in relation to economic, social and political institutions.”<sup>7</sup> We might consider here the link between William Morris’s involvement in syndicalist politics in nineteenth-century England and the founding of the Arts and Crafts movement, the obvious influence of the Russian and Mexican Revolutions on early twentieth-century avant-gardes, and the dramatic expansion of experimental tendencies in the arts during the political upheavals of the 1960s and ’70s.

The current moment is defined by a complex and contradictory mixture of cultural and geopolitical forces. The last two decades have witnessed the rise of a powerful neoliberal economic order dedicated to eliminating all forms of collective or public resistance (institutional, ideological, and organizational) to the primacy of capital. Within this movement, the state and civil society have taken on a central role as zones of contestation and targets of conquest by corporate power. Thus, during the economic crisis that followed the demise of the subprime mortgage system in the United States, the primary response involved a return to market-complementing Keynesian economic policies rather than a more substantial challenge to the imperatives of capitalism. And even these relatively modest gestures were greeted with vehement opposition and warnings that the United States was in danger of devolving into “socialism.” Of course, the neoliberal juggernaut is asynchronous. Some European countries still manage to retain remnants of the postwar social compact, subsidizing higher education, the arts, healthcare, and so on, while other countries (Venezuela, e.g.) have managed to resuscitate the otherwise vilified discourse of state socialism as a tool for the (ambivalent) promotion of economic and social justice. But their ability to maintain the standard of living of their middle classes is tenuous at best. Even now, the nations of the European Union find themselves increasingly reliant on the cheap labor of foreign immigrants, leading to the demoralizing spectacle of anti-immigrant racism in historically tolerant cultures like those of Holland, Denmark, and Ireland.

Predictions of a newly decentralized “Empire” notwithstanding, the reality is that the command and control of global capital has never been more centralized. Class divisions and the monopolization of major industries (energy, finance, pharmaceuticals, media) are reaching levels not seen in the United States since the late nineteenth century. At the same time, we have witnessed the recent emergence in India and China of powerful capi-



talist managerial blocs with significant nationalist ambitions of their own. Combined with mounting U.S. dependence on China's central banks, the most likely future scenario is a series of low-intensity skirmishes among competing nation-states over tariffs, energy resources, immigration, debt, and labor markets. As the U.S. loses its economic dominance, especially in domains where it can no longer rely on sheer military aggression to impose its will, the risk of destabilizing nationalist conflict is likely to increase. This hyper-rationalized economic order is accompanied, and complicated, by the rise of right wing, theocratic fundamentalism in the United States, the Middle East, and regions of Southeast Asia, along with the dramatic penetration of Protestant evangelical Christianity into the faith "markets" of South America and Asia. Thus, we have a convergence across the developed and developing world of patriarchal, absolutist, faith-based cadres, operating in many cases at the highest level of political power, and exercising considerable influence over large segments of the public.<sup>8</sup>

Despite this bleak picture, there is also a growing sense of political renewal around the world. From the worker-run factories of Argentina to Tahrir Square, and from university-based protest movements in Europe and the United States to campaigns for tribal rights in India, we encounter new forms of social organization, resistance, and identity. This is a time of both peril and opportunity, as the dominant political narratives used to explain and justify social and economic inequality, the distribution of resources and opportunities within society, and the relative responsibility of the state to the public at large, are being contested and destabilized. As these narratives lose their legitimacy, space is opened for new stories and new visions for the future. In the past history of the United States, to use one example, these moments of transition produced rapid transformations in the political self-understanding of the country, as decades of incremental struggle were, in a matter of a few years, realized in quite dramatic changes. This was evident during those moments of systemic crisis and incipient disorder (the Progressive era, the Great Depression, the Sixties) when previously unimaginable rearticulations of the political (the right to collective bargaining, public education, state regulation of corporate conduct, the expansion of voting rights, etc.) were given enduring form through legislation, legal enfranchisement, changes in public discourse, and so on. Of course, these periods are brief, and the pressure toward reversal and renormalization almost immediate, but they led to

substantial improvements in the quality of daily life for millions of Americans. No doubt, similar examples could be provided for other countries and political cultures.<sup>9</sup>

So what can we predict for the future? The continuing revival of religious theocracy marching in lockstep with corporate capital, or the triumph of immaterial labor as computer programmers and artists harness the “swarm intelligence” of the multitudes? Incipient fascism, as the United States reenacts the interpenetration of state and capital of Weimar-era Germany, or the spread of Bolivarian socialism through the southern hemisphere? Any and all scenarios seem equally possible and equally improbable. It is a sign of the uncertainty of the moment—the unresolved play of cultural, economic, and political forces currently unfolding before us. It is this sense of possibility, and imminent threat, that animates the remarkable profusion of contemporary art practices concerned with collective action and civic engagement. The cycle of contestation and reconsolidation in the political sphere is paralleled in the history of modernism itself, as formerly transgressive modes of artistic practice achieve canonical status, only to be unsettled in their turn by a subsequent transgression for which they function as the necessarily reified counterpoint. As a result, the “work” of modern art can be understood less in terms of formal or stylistic change per se, than as an ongoing struggle to identify, and then displace, normative conventions (whether these are discovered in the surrounding sociocultural environment or within the history of art practice itself). It is this procedure of distancing and critique that constitutes the essential content of the contemporary aesthetic (or at least one of its most characteristic functions). Thus, we might view the recent proliferation of collaborative practices as part of a cyclical paradigm shift *within* the field of art, even as the nature of this shift involves an increasing permeability *between* “art” and other zones of symbolic production (urbanism, environmental activism, social work, etc.). As the history of modernism has repeatedly demonstrated, the greatest potential for transforming and re-energizing artistic practice is often realized precisely at those points where its established identity is most seriously at risk.

As I will suggest subsequently, there are really two decisive shifts at work. First, there is growing interest in collaborative or collective approaches in contemporary art. And second, as I’ve already noted, there is a movement toward participatory, process-based experience and away

from a “textual” mode of production in which the artist fashions an object or event that is subsequently presented to the viewer. This shift is evident across a wide range of practices, from neoconceptual, biennial-based works by figures like Rirkrit Tiravanija and Thomas Hirschhorn, to more recognizably activist projects by groups like Park Fiction and Ala Plastica. The breadth of this shift is somewhat unusual. During the 1980s, the last time that collaborative work was on the radar screen of the mainstream art world, there were obvious methodological differences between the projects of groups like ACT UP, Colab, the Social and Public Art Resources Center, and Group Material, and the recognized avant-garde represented by Neo-Expressionist painting and postmodern appropriation, which both remained mono-authorial and fairly traditional in terms of media. Today the boundaries between socially engaged art practice and the avant-garde are harder to determine, with mainstream artists like Hirschhorn, Francis Alÿs, and Liam Gillick working in public space, engaging social networks, and so on. The interrelationship among and between these various modes of collaborative practice will be an important subtheme of this book.

## 2 — ART PRACTICE AND THE INTELLECTUAL BAROQUE

*The One and the Many* builds on research that I began in *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (2004). Where that book concentrated on what I described as “dialogical” art practices (projects organized around conversational exchange and interaction), *The One and the Many* casts a wider net, examining the broader methodological field constituted by recent collaborative and participatory art. I will, however, continue to elaborate on the concept of dialogical production in the current study, especially as it relates to questions of creative labor. Since the publication of *Conversation Pieces*, interest in “relational” aesthetics and art practices concerned with social networks has increased dramatically within the art world. This is due in part to the growing importance of biennial exhibitions as both gatekeepers and commissioning agents for contemporary art projects that must, by their nature, be ephemeral or temporary. This institutional framework is paralleled by the emergence of entrepreneurial curators, like Nicholas Bourriaud, Catherine David, Okwui Enwezor, Uta Meta Bauer, and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, who

have done much to encourage art world interest in such work. Further, the range of collaborative art has continued to expand over the past decade, extending into work in new media (online collectives, concepts of distributed creativity, etc.) and protest-based practices catalyzed by the anti-war and anti-globalization movements in the United States and Europe, as well as an active tradition of demonstration-based collective work in South America (Grupo Etcetera and Taller Popular Serigrafia in Argentina, e.g.). There is, in addition, a long history of collaborative work in activist theater (much of it inspired by the writings of Augusto Boal) and community-based art.<sup>10</sup>

A substantive account of this entire field would require several volumes. It has been my preference to provide a more sustained analysis of a smaller number of projects rather than a synoptic overview. As noted above, I'll focus here on site-specific collaborative projects that unfold through extended interaction and shared labor, and in which the process of participatory interaction itself is treated as a form of creative praxis. In many cases these projects have been developed outside of traditional art venues such as biennials, galleries, and museums, and were produced instead in conjunction with local communities, neighborhoods, or sites of political resistance (Park Fiction's work challenging gentrification in Hamburg, e.g., or Dialogue's creation of water pump enclosures in central India). At the same time, as I've already noted, collaborative work has gained increasing legitimacy in the mainstream art world, as evidenced by the visibility of figures such as Alÿs, Gillick, Hirschhorn, and Tiravanija, who employ methodologies (video collectives, workshops, public meetings, etc.) that would have been identified, and possibly dismissed, as "community art" only a generation ago.<sup>11</sup> I'm interested in the differential articulation of participation and collaboration across a range of practices and sites, and what it can reveal about the more general condition of contemporary art. Thus, this book will also feature extended readings of projects by more recognized figures and groups (Alÿs, Superflex, and Santiago Sierra in particular).<sup>12</sup>

The proliferation of collaborative and participatory work suggests certain transformations in the nature of contemporary art practice that have broader implications for art historiography and theory. There are three areas in which these transformations have been particularly significant. First, contemporary collaborative art practices complicate conventional

notions of aesthetic autonomy. These practices mark a (cyclical) renegotiation of aesthetic autonomy via the permeability that exists between art production and other, adjacent, forms of cultural production and activism. This raises an important set of ontological questions. What constitutes “art” at this historical moment, and what are its constituent or defining conditions? A second set of questions concern the epistemological status of this work. What forms of knowledge do collaborative, participatory, and socially engaged practices generate? These questions have come to the fore in recent debates over the differentiation of “aesthetic” and “ethical” criteria in the evaluation of artistic production. The issue of evaluative criteria is further complicated by the contrasting modes of transgression at work in the aesthetic and political fields, which I outlined above. How do we determine which transgressions *matter* in the arts? In the political sphere the act of transgression is typically framed through an appeal to some ethical criteria (respect for difference, the cultivation of the full range of human capacities, equal opportunity for participation in decision making, etc.). There is some reluctance, however, to explicitly acknowledge the kinds of ethical claims that art practices advance. Instead, the procedures of distanciation and destabilization are presented in much current criticism as intrinsically valuable. Finally, collaborative practices have important hermeneutic implications. While many projects that I examine include a physical component, the artists involved also identify various dialogical *processes* as integral to the content of the work. This suggests a model of reception, and a set of research methodologies, that are potentially quite different from those employed to analyze object-based art practices. The extemporaneous and participatory nature of these projects requires the historian or critic to employ techniques (field research, participant-observation, interviews, etc.) more typically associated with the social sciences.<sup>13</sup>

Taken in the aggregate, collaborative practices suggest a paradigm shift in contemporary art production. As I’ve already suggested, they deviate in certain key ways from textual forms of production in which the work of art is presented to an audience or viewer fully-formed. In using this designation I’m not suggesting that collaborative or participatory practices are somehow more rooted in the political or social “real.” The concept of textual production refers here to the status of authorship and reception in the work, rather than proximity to conventional notions of the political. Moreover, as I’ll outline in subsequent case studies, these are not hard

and fast distinctions. Rather, “collaborative” and “textual” approaches can more accurately be described as predispositions within contemporary art practice that vary from artist to artist and project to project, depending on the artist’s relationship to the materiality of a given work and to the viewer. Thus, collaborative practices don’t supersede this textual approach. They simply offer a different articulation of a capacity that I take to be central to the constitution of modern art more generally: the ability of aesthetic experience to transform our perceptions of difference and to open space for forms of knowledge that challenge cognitive, social, or political conventions. This is, of course, a fairly vague definition, but I hope to make its meaning clearer through the case studies and project descriptions that follow.

An analysis of this paradigm shift requires, in turn, a reevaluation of existing art theory and the ways in which art theory and criticism are used to legitimate specific forms of art production. Therefore, my investigation of collaborative practice will also entail an extended engagement with the normative conventions of art theory itself. I’ll be using the concept of an avant-garde “discourse,” or “tradition” to describe a set of features common to a range of otherwise diverse contemporary practices. While the notion of an avant-garde tradition may seem oxymoronic, it is my contention that certain historically specific modes of artistic production have achieved a canonical status in contemporary theory and criticism. The constituent elements of this avant-garde tradition include a particular model of reception (based on shock or disruption), the *a priori* assumption of the viewer’s perceptual or cognitive naïveté, and a belief in the intrinsically transgressive or liberatory power of desire or a-rational somatic experience. This mode of production remains quite vital and pervasive in contemporary art. My description of it as a “tradition” is not meant as a judgment of its efficacy or value, but is simply intended to denaturalize it as a particular system of art production rather than the necessary condition of all advanced art.

This model of artistic production emerged in conjunction with the assimilation of Continental (and primarily French) philosophy in the United States and European art worlds during the 1990s. Of course, various forms of theory began to play an increasingly central role in artistic production and criticism during the 1970s and early ’80s. One could produce a revealing portrait of the art world based solely on changing intellectual fashions

over the past four decades—from *Zen in the Art of Archery* to *The Poetics of Space*; from von Bertalanffy and systems theory to Wittgenstein and the *Tractatus*; from Lacan and psychoanalytic theory to Saussure and semiotics; from the cultural studies of Raymond Williams to the cultural anthropology of Clifford Geertz; from the feminism of *Screen* to the queer theory of *GLQ*; and from the Western Marxism of Gramsci, Lefebvre, and Benjamin to postcolonial theory via Fanon, Bhabha, and Spivak. By the early 1990s, this relatively inchoate mélange had been gradually winnowed down to the familiar patrimony of Deleuze, Derrida, and Foucault, and more recently, the quartet of Agamben, Badiou, Nancy, and Rancière.<sup>14</sup> While other sources and theoretical paradigms continued to be referenced, the poststructuralist tradition gained a quasi-hegemonic prominence in art critical discourse and was widely reproduced through the expansion and professionalization of graduate education in art history, studio art, and curatorial practice. The academic regularization of “theory” inevitably led to pressures to produce a uniform and consistent narrative based around a relatively limited number of canonical authors. As a result, theoretical paradigms that emerged out of the distinctive political conditions of Fifth Republic France were, in many cases, unproblematically imported into dramatically different contexts and settings. The result has been a complex and often contradictory dialogue between the art world and the academy. François Cusset describes this exchange in *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Company Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*:

When revolution is reinterpreted as stylized rebellion, when social forces are turned into identity politics, when writing is replaced by reading, when texts published by Gallimard or Éditions de Minuit wind up translated by specialized university presses, when mottos coined during Left Bank marches are being re-used in New York art galleries, then indeed one can speak of a “structural misunderstanding,” not in the sense of a misreading, an error, a betrayal of some original, but in the sense of a highly productive transfer of words and concepts from one specific market of symbolic goods to another.<sup>15</sup>

While Cusset is concerned to deny any connotation of “betrayal” in the broader assimilation of French theory, the transition he describes (from revolution to “stylized” rebellion, from Gallimard to “specialized univer-

sity presses,” from Left Bank marches to “New York art galleries”) inevitably implies a process of deracination or compromise; a movement from populist political engagement to more marginal forms of cultural production. I will return to this contrast in greater detail subsequently. For now, I simply want to note the growing interdependence between art practice and the academy, and the institutionalization of “theory” itself. Within this system the artist or the intellectual is simultaneously dependent on the dominant social order (through its subsidy of academic or cultural production) and external to it (through his or her capacity to achieve a critical distance from normative conventions), both alibi and critic. This development was anticipated almost twenty years ago by Pierre Bourdieu, who writes of the “reproduction of the corps” necessary to sustain institutional power in the academic system (an analysis that could be applied, in modified form, to the art world itself) and of the central role played by the “consecrated heretic” and “ritual sacrilege” within this system.<sup>16</sup>

Of course many of the insights on which this study depends (intersubjective models of identity, the aesthetics of collective or collaborative production, the micro-politics of various cultural practices) are themselves informed by the traditions of post-structuralism. It is, nonetheless, necessary to subject these same theoretical models to critical scrutiny, precisely because they have increasingly taken on the form of received wisdom within the art world. There are also certain assumptions about the nature of political resistance and cultural production specific to critical theory produced in the wake of May 1968 that require reconsideration. While this tradition is hardly monolithic, it nonetheless exhibits certain generic characteristics, especially around the question of the individual’s relationship to the collective and the relative efficacy of organized forms of political action. As I will discuss in chapter 1, the concept of a textual politics (centered on a process of critical reading, or decoding) is symptomatic of an underlying tension within post-structuralist thought in which the act of critique must be insulated from the exigencies of practice or direct action. We find a telling example of this tension in an incident recounted by the philosopher Alain Renaut in François Dosse’s *History of Structuralism*:

I remember [Jacques] Derrida, at the ENS [Ecole Normale Supérieure] on the rue d’Ulm, after having been stopped in Czechoslovakia. During his seminar, he said that he had been quite distressed because after



having spent his life as a philosopher deconstructing humanism and saying that the idea of the author and of responsibility did not exist, he had one day been stripped naked in Czechoslovakia at a police station. He had to admit that this was a serious infringement of human rights. On that day, Derrida demonstrated his great lucidity by saying that he was in a very bizarre intellectual situation. So he proposed a category of the intellectual baroque, because, according to him, the two levels did not intersect. But we cannot remain eternally in the baroque.<sup>17</sup>

We might view the intellectual baroque as an essentially aesthetic category in which a given critical or creative protocol takes on a life of its own, operating independently of the mechanisms of social and political change necessary to realize the ideals on which it is founded. The artists discussed in this book have each, in their own way, struggled with the dilemma of Derrida's "bizarre" situation. How does one reconcile the utopian or transformative insight disclosed by creative practice with the actuality of lived experience? Is it possible for these two levels to "intersect"? The nature of this intersection, between theory and practice, withdrawal and engagement, text and materiality, will be a central theme in the following study.

The book is divided into three chapters. The first, "Autonomy, Antagonism, and the Aesthetic," will include summary descriptions of three collaborative projects that will be examined more fully in subsequent sections (Park Fiction in Germany, Ala Plastica in Argentina, and Dialogue in India). The chapter's main focus involves an extended meditation on the significance of autonomy in the development of modern art and art theory. As I've suggested, one of the most decisive features of recent collaborative art practice is a rearticulation of aesthetic autonomy as art practices parallel, overlap with, and challenge the organizational and ideological protocols of urban planning, political activism, and other fields of cultural production. It is necessary then to determine more precisely how the concept of autonomy originated, what function it has played through the evolution of modern art, and what is at stake in its maintenance or transformation today. This investigation will begin with an analysis of aesthetic autonomy as it emerged during the early modern period in reaction to growing anxieties about the vulgar taste of an incipient middle class. I'll relate this defensive notion of autonomy to recent discussions of relational aesthetics by the curator Nicholas Bourriaud and the critic Claire Bishop, one of his

primary interlocutors. These writers can help us more clearly identify an underlying set of assumptions regarding the autonomy of the work of art and the sovereignty of the artistic personality, which have exerted a strong normative influence on contemporary art production and criticism, with particular implications for the analysis of collaborative art. Finally, I will trace the rapprochement that occurs between this discourse and the traditions of post-structuralist theory during the 1980s and '90s, focusing in particular on the impact of the events of May '68.

The second chapter, "The Genius of the Place," builds on the theoretical framework established in chapter 1, providing a more detailed analysis of the specific material conditions and epistemological effects of collaborative experience. What forms of knowledge are catalyzed in collaborative interaction? How do they differ from the insights generated through the specular experience provided by object-based practices? The chapter begins with an extended reading of Francis Alÿs's *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002), a large-scale performance staged near a shantytown outside Lima, Peru. Alÿs's work allows for a discussion of the status of labor in contemporary art. I identify a series of elisions in recent critical theory that led to a privileging of the un-worked and simultaneous over the labored and durational, and which have blocked a more substantive engagement with collaborative experience and interaction. I outline a new framework for the analysis of collaborative art practice, rooted in a reinterpretation of labor. It's first necessary to free the concept of labor from the productivist paradigm that has governed both historical and contemporary accounts. This analysis opens out into a broader examination of the history of artistic identity, pointing to certain fault lines in the constitution of modern subjectivity around notions of property and possessive individualism.

The chapter then turns to an investigation of the rhetoric of "development" in contemporary social policy and political theory. The relationship between developed and developing nations is paralleled at the regional level by a discourse that constructs the "rural" as the degraded antipode of the "urban." In each case, we encounter a set of oppositions that define the rural, or developing, culture as the parochial counterpart of an implicitly superior metropolitan culture. Insight and emulation can flow in only one direction: from the enlightened core to the blighted periphery. I'll investigate a series of projects that challenge or destabilize the rural/urban dichotomy, and which produce strategic inversions in the field of

developmental rhetoric sketched above, focusing in particular on the work of Dialogue, an art collective working in central India. I also address the complex and often contradictory interrelationship between collaborative art practices in the developing world and the operations of non-governmental organizations, using the work of the Danish group Superflex as an example. The chapter concludes with a discussion of two extended collaborative projects, in Argentina's Rio de la Plata basin and in Myanmar.

If "development" provides a primary frame of reference for the projects discussed in chapter 2, "regeneration" is a central theme in chapter 3 ("Eminent Domain"), which examines collaborative groups working in urban settings. The discourse of development implies a primal, or pastoral, culture awaiting the civilizing effects of modernization. Regeneration, on the other hand, suggests a formerly healthy or advanced organism that has undergone a process of atavistic decline. In the history of the modern city this decline has often expressed a moral dimension: not simply the deterioration of a city's physical infrastructure, but the demoralization or spiritual degeneration of its (typically working-class) inhabitants. The signs of this demoralization include labor unrest, rising crime rates, the growth of poverty, the spread of disease, and so on. From Manchester in the 1860s to Detroit in the 1960s to modern-day Bangalore, the image of the city as a "natural" organism entails a strategic disavowal of its function as a system for the efficient spatial organization of industrial (or post-industrial) production. The pathological city, diseased and chaotic, effectively recodes the systemic effects of the capitalist economy (brought about by the division of labor, downward pressure on wages, cyclical crises of overproduction, and corporate disregard for public welfare) as the consequence of the moral depravity of the urban poor and working classes. As a result, contemporary urban regeneration schemes remain a site of significant political conflict.

In chapter 3, I'll discuss a range of projects that employ modes of collaborative and collective interaction to address the regeneration process and the imaginary construction of urban space. These projects explore the ways in which the image of the city is deployed to justify the authority of dominant economic and political interests, as well as struggles over the narratives used to advance or challenge specific public policies and projects. I begin chapter 3 with an extended analysis of work produced by Santiago Sierra in conjunction with beggars and the homeless. I discuss

Sierra's attempt to mobilize images of urban poverty in relationship to the visual culture of urban reform in the late nineteenth century (specifically, the work of the Danish-American journalist Jacob Riis), examining the ways in which both Riis and Sierra deploy images of the suffering body. Following this analysis I survey the cultural history of urban renewal (or urban regeneration as it is often known in Europe), focusing primarily on the relationship between urban renewal, public art, and gentrification in the United States during the 1960s and '70s, but with some reference to debates over regeneration in London during the 1980s as well. The second half of the chapter will concentrate on collaborative projects that involve the reclamation of urban space against the grain of gentrification and displacement, or that seek to activate urban space as a site of public, political discourse. The projects include Park Fiction's work in Hamburg's Hafenstraße neighborhood and Rick Lowe's Project Row Houses in Houston, Texas. Each of these projects asserts a claim of spatial sovereignty, while at the same time seeking to preserve a reflective relationship to the modes of collective solidarity necessary to sustain this claim, returning us to the questions of agency, identity, and labor introduced in chapter 2.



# 1

## AUTONOMY, ANTAGONISM, AND THE AESTHETIC

FROM TEXT TO ACTION — 1

Augustine writes in the *Confessions*, “What is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is: if someone asks me, I no longer know.”<sup>1</sup> Here Augustine suggests that the moment that passes between posing a question and receiving a reply is marked by both risk and possibility: the risk of doubt and uncertainty, and the possibility of an opening out to the other. Paul Ricoeur, in *From Text to Action*, uses Augustine’s quote to illustrate a familiar post-structuralist parable, as our “confused, formless . . . [and] mute temporal experience” inevitably succumbs to the instrumentalizing grasp of narrative discourse.<sup>2</sup> However, this passage carries another, equally subversive, message. Knowledge is reliable, safe, and certain as long as it is held in mono-logical isolation and synchronic arrest. As soon as it becomes mobilized and communicable, this certainty slips away and truth is negotiated in the gap between self and other, through an unfolding, dialogical exchange.

The Russian Constructivist El Lissitzky reiterated Augustine’s famous query in the early twentieth century: “When someone would ask me what ‘Art’ is, then in that moment I do not know

what it is. But when I'm not being asked, then I know what it is."<sup>3</sup> Lissitzky's paraphrase neatly conflates two of the central tenets of the modern avant-garde. First, avant-garde art constitutes a form of critical insight; its task is to transgress existing categories of thought, action, and creativity (beginning with the definition of art itself), to constantly challenge fixed boundaries and identities. And second, the formation of an artistic subjectivity capable of such insight requires a process of withdrawal and defensive interiorization. The uncertainty that the artist experiences in responding to an interlocutor is presented as a barrier and a constraint, while the certitude of his own, internal, definition of art is a necessary precondition for creative practice. It is precisely in *not* attempting to define or fix the meaning of art for the Other that the artist is freed to act with the greatest creativity, even as his own self-understanding provides an infallible compass. It's symptomatic that even in the midst of a Constructivist movement notoriously hostile to traditional notions of self-expression, we encounter this conflation of the task of modern art (the generation of counter-normative insight) and the experience of subjective individuation (the isolation of the artistic personality in a sequestered zone of autonomous self-reflection). For Lissitzky, the artist requires mono-logical clarity, needs to "know" what art is, precisely because he is challenging bourgeois tradition, popular opinion, or other forms of collective or cumulative knowledge, which are understood as intrinsically compromised. Armed with this wisdom, incubated within the far recesses of the self, the artist creates physical manifestations, works of art, designed to variously provoke, reveal, expose, and transgress.<sup>4</sup>

At the same moment, Lissitzky was acutely conscious of the new demands placed on artistic subjectivity by the Constructivist movement and the necessary contradiction between the imperative to subvert conventional knowledge, on the one hand, and the use of conventional forms of authorship to produce this subversion, on the other. "What is needed is a cooperative," he wrote in a letter to Jan Tschichold in 1925. "But there is still too much subjectivist leaven in us, since every attempt fails." Writing seven years later, Lissitzky reflected on the impact of the avant-garde assault on conventional artistic production: "We fought against 'art,' we spat on its 'altar'—and we got what we wanted. Now, of course, we need no new art monasteries and sacred groves, but, even flying through a storm as we are, we would like to be able to achieve a little more concentration

and to carry our offspring to term.”<sup>5</sup> This ambivalent relationship between individual and collectivity identity, between the work of art as experiential process and final product, is symptomatic. It isn’t a question of privileging one term over the other, the collective over authorial sovereignty, or self-expression over the constraints of popular culture, but rather of recognizing the interplay of these ostensibly divided terms as a key nexus of creative action.

The tension between artistic and normative models of subjectivity was central to the development of modernist art over the past century, and continues to inform contemporary art practice and criticism.<sup>6</sup> The persistence of this dynamic is understandable. It was set in place initially by the overt hostility that greeted modernism’s earliest outriders (the Romantic painters, the Realists, the Barbizon school, Der Blaue Reiter, etc.) as they did battle with the still resonant forces of the salon and the academy. Withdrawal into the fortified enclave of the group or movement, and doughty faith in the integrity of one’s personal vision against the grain of an art establishment mired in neoclassical repetition, were necessary for survival. The risk of significant ostracism and hostility has long ago subsided, but the *Weltbild* remains, a residue of modernism’s initial struggle for legitimacy, internalized now by young artists at the earliest stages of their careers.

There is, of course, much at stake in the effort to preserve a cultural space that allows for critical reflection. Despite its many positive contributions, the impact of modernity on human subjectivity has also been profoundly damaging: the violence of industrial production, the brutal means/end rationality of the market, divisive class structures, the displacement or outright destruction of indigenous cultures, and oppressive forms of political totalitarianism have all diminished our understanding of what it is to be human. The history of modern art can be viewed, in large measure, as an ongoing struggle to develop a compensatory cultural response to the destructive and dehumanizing effects of modernity, whether this is done through the agency of a well-crafted object, paintings of bucolic Polynesians, or the therapeutic disruption of the viewer’s perception. The artistic personality itself is perhaps the most symptomatic expression of this struggle. It exists as an explicit rebuke to the complacency, compartmentalization, and depersonalization imposed by the contemporary social order. Modern art has come to function as a privileged site of reflection



on the forces of modernism—a quasi-autonomous space of commentary and engagement, whose critical optic has been made possible precisely by art’s gradual displacement from its previously integral cultural role within premodern society. Now occupying the margins of society (in terms of broader cultural relevance if not its status as a signifier of class hierarchy), it exists at a critical remove, allowing the artist the distance necessary to recognize the flaws and limitations of modern life and consciousness, and to reveal those constraints to the viewer.

The modern artist’s attack on society and societal norms has most often been mobilized through a critique of representation (or, more recently, “signification”). It was the way in which society chose to image itself, the fawning idealization of wealth in Baroque painting, the sentimentalization of bourgeois privilege in the nineteenth-century salon, and later an entire mass cultural apparatus predicated on illusion and manipulation, that provided the axis of attack for the modern avant-garde. In response, artists deployed a range of counter-representational strategies (the disruption of academic conventions governing the use of color, facture, and composition; the turn toward abstraction; and eventually a full-scale attack on the very principle of mimesis in visual art), calling attention to the mythifying powers of the conventional image and holding open space for a more complex aesthetic experience, capable of catalyzing self-reflection rather than Pavlovian consumption. The result was a modernist discourse centered on the theatrical struggle between good and evil images, and defined by heroic acts of exposure and revelation against the nefarious forces of duplicity and reification. Artists would wage war on the instrumentalizing powers of representation on behalf of the chaotic integrity of lived experience. This remained, of course, a deeply and self-consciously ethical tendency: a battle for the heart and mind of the modern subject. It sought to produce viewers more sensitive to the singularity and difference of the world around them, and less reliant on simplistic or reductive systems of meaning in trying to comprehend that world.

These two characteristics—the inviolable autonomy of the individual practitioner and a mode of ethico-representational engagement—remain an article of faith in even the most ostensibly participatory or interactive works of contemporary art. Consider curator Lars Bang Larsen’s account of Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset’s *Cruising Pavilion* (1998), a cube-