

Prefigurative Politics and Social Practice: A Critique

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Birmingham City University
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2023

Faculty of Arts, Design and Media
Birmingham City University

Acknowledgements

I would not have begun this journey were it not for the encouragement, patience, love, and support of my wife, Helen Mebrate. I owe thanks to Renzo Martens for teaching me about art and for mentorship along the way. I want to thank my supervisors Anthony Downey and Jonathan Harris for their patience and for giving me free rein to explore my interests, even if it left them baffled at times. I am grateful to my contacts at the Platypus Affiliated Society for challenging the pieties and thought taboos of the dead Left, in particular Sophia Freeman, Padraig Maguire, Efraim Carlebach, and Wentai Xiao. My friends around the world are a constant presence even in their absence. A special thank you to Josh Widera for giving feedback on an early research proposal. Finally I would like to thank the university (Sian Vaughan in particular) for being flexible when my circumstances changed and for the generous financial support.

Abstract

This thesis offers a critical account of activist art and prefigurative politics. It pursues a double trajectory. On the one hand, it considers art's transformation into activism or what is known as social practice. On the other hand, it examines the growing popularity of prefigurative politics. The thesis connects these phenomena, arguing that they illuminate and supplement each other. If art has become a form of goal-oriented social action, it is equally true that recent forms of socio-political contestation define themselves in self-consciously aesthetic terms. The thesis suggests that by looking at social practice through the lens of prefigurative politics and by looking at prefigurative politics through the lens of art, we gain a fuller understanding of each and in fact are able to perceive their essential commonality. *Each is a form of social action with an aesthetic rationale.* In social practice, as in prefigurative politics, the object of social action is no longer to bring about social change but to demonstrate the *possibility* of change by performing a utopian alternative. Thus the thesis draws on the concept of prefiguration to articulate a new account of social practice and to clarify the aesthetic dimension of prefigurative politics. In doing so, it employs a critical-dialectical method and embraces a broadly Marxist perspective.

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Introduction. The Aestheticization of Social Action

Brazilian artist Vik Muniz partners with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to develop a school for cultural literacy in the slums of Rio de Janeiro (*Escola Vidigal*, 2014–ongoing). In Hamburg artists help residents of a deprived neighbourhood to transform an area earmarked for regeneration into a public park (*Park Fiction*, 1995–2005). In Istanbul a group of artists rent a three-bedroom apartment in the private sector and put it to public use, inviting their neighbours to dinner, organizing play dates for children, and hosting theatre workshops (*Oda Projesi*, 2000–2005). The Austrian collective WochenKlausur set up meetings between city councillors, public prosecutors, newspaper editors, and politicians to discuss drug-addiction and homelessness among sex workers, resulting in the creation of a daytime shelter (*Shelter for Drug-Addicted Women*, 1994). Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk transforms a strip of empty shops into a community hub, boasting a bookshop, café, and a quarterly cultural programme focusing on issues of local concern (*De Strip*, 2002–2004). The German Center for Political Beauty offer a €25,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of the owners of arms manufacturer KMW, wheatpasting ‘wanted’ posters across the country and thereby preventing the sale of 270 Leopard II tanks to Saudi-Arabia (*25,000 Euro Reward*, 2012). The Cuban artist Tania Bruguera backed by the Queens Museum of Art opens a community space for immigrants, offering art classes, English lessons, legal advice, and health services free of charge (*Immigrant Movement International*, 2011–2013). Dutch artist Renzo Martens runs an art colony on an abandoned palm oil plantation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, marketing locally made sculptures to an international audience, thereby generating a new income stream for Congolese artists (*Institute for Human Activities*, 2012–ongoing).

These are just a few examples of artist-led social projects. They are part of a growing field of site-specific, post-studio practices variously known as participatory art, activist art, socially engaged art, and social practice (my preference is for ‘social practice’ for reasons I explain below). Social practice is distinguished from more traditional, object-based practices by its emphasis on shared authorship and collective experience. The emphasis on collective action can be seen on the level of the artist (formerly an individual, now working collectively as a

collaborator, facilitator, or organizer), the artwork (formerly a discrete object, now a social project or durational intervention), and the audience (formerly the recipient of an aesthetic experience, now a participant or co-creator) (see e.g. Kester 2011, 7-8; Bishop 2012, 2). Social practice often takes the form of a social intervention whereby artists engage with non-art constituencies (often marginalized communities) to achieve specific ends. This – social practice’s ostensibly instrumental rationale, its utilitarianism – is what distinguishes it most clearly from the engaged practices of an earlier period. Whereas the latter sought to have an impact *mediately* through the aesthetic properties of the artwork, social practice seeks to impact a situation *directly* or *practically* through an activist intervention in social life. Consequently, it is often described in political rather than aesthetic terms.

If social practice is not just an artistic but a quasi-political practice, it is imperative to examine what kind of political practice it is. The literature, however, has little to say about this. This might surprise since the ‘politics of art’ is frequently discussed. But the ‘politics of art’ pertains to aesthetic form, not political practice per se. Given that social practice aspires to political efficacy, we cannot limit ourselves to an assessment of its art historical precursors; we must also examine the concrete political practices it models itself after. In other words, it is not just politics in the attenuated, aesthetic sense that is relevant to the study of social practice (i.e. the politics of form), but politics as a distinct social practice with its own history and concepts. Once this is established, the one-sidedness of the social practice literature becomes apparent. The literature is focused exclusively on the transformation of art into social practice, while it is silent on concomitant changes in political practice. If, as is frequently observed, contemporary art is increasingly political, this might be a function of changes in politics as much as art. Thus the fundamental premise of this thesis is that to understand social practice, we must take account of concomitant changes in political practice. – And vice versa: to understand recent forms of protest politics, we must take stock of developments in art. – The present emphasis on art history as opposed to political history, on aesthetic theory as opposed to political theory, is one-sided at best. This is especially true if one considers the relative social importance of the two practices. Despite artists’ claims to the contrary, art is peripheral to social life, whereas changes in politics have far-reaching consequences. To put it slightly differently, while art may have an influence on politics, the influence is more likely to run in the opposite direction. To lend my ‘fundamental premise’ some initial plausibility,

note that the rallying cry of the New Left was ‘participatory democracy’ (Farber and Bailey 2001, 91; Horn 2007, 190). If, as Claire Bishop argues, social practice is driven by an interest in ‘participation’, then this must be connected to *political* ideas formulated in an earlier period, which, it appears, have not yet lost their potency (Bishop 2006a; Bishop 2012).

The project undertaken in this thesis makes up for a lacuna in the literature: its near total neglect of a particular kind of protest politics, which, in both form and content, bears more than a passing resemblance to social practice. The thesis thus places social practice in a wider aesthetico-political context than existing accounts. The aim is to get the political affordances of social practice more clearly in view. As will become clear, this will simultaneously point us to a new understanding of the aesthetic dimension of social practice. Thus, on the descriptive side, the thesis offers an account of social practice that seeks to capture the peculiar blend of political and artistic, instrumental and aesthetic, concerns that animate it. But this account is not neutral. Throughout the thesis the impetus is to draw attention to the lowered political horizons that social practice is both an expression of and naturalizes. Against the view that the prevalence of ‘activism’ in contemporary art is a sign of political renewal, I hold that it represents a further concession to the status quo.

My critique hinges on an understanding of the changing relation between art and politics. If art has become a kind of social action, it is equally correct to say that certain kinds of political contestation have become a kind of art – that is, they are increasingly concerned with questions of *form*. The shorthand for the kind of political contestation I have in mind is ‘prefigurative politics’. The object of prefigurative politics, I argue, is not to bring about social change but to demonstrate the *possibility* of change by performing a utopian alternative. In a sense, then, changes in art are offset by changes in politics. The activist turn in art is counterpoised by developments in the political practice of the extra-parliamentary Left, the most vital parts of which are committed to prefigurative politics. If art seems on some level to have acquired an instrumental rationale, this apparent instrumentality must be measured against the properly *aesthetic* character of prefigurative politics. This does not give rise to an emancipatory ‘aesthetics of politics’, as Jacques Rancière argues, but is detrimental to both art and politics (see e.g. Rancière 2010). Thus the argument unfolded in the course of this thesis can be summarized in a single – though at this point admittedly cryptic – sentence:

social practice is a form of prefigurative politics, and prefigurative politics is constitutively aesthetic. I will use the Introduction to introduce the argument and present its structure. The Introduction also includes chapter summaries, a discussion of my methodology and contribution to knowledge, and a brief glossary.

Social Practice: From Art to Instrumental Action, and Back Again

The social practice literature has grown rapidly since the mid-2000s, when social practice entered the museum. One of the hallmarks of this literature is its fragmentary state. Despite resonances across practices, there is no unified theoretical field to speak of. The best indication of this is the bewildering variety of names used to designate social practice. Social practice is variously known as relational art, participatory art, collaborative art, activist art, socially engaged art, interventionist art, dialogical art, community-based art, littoral art, contextual art, research-based art, Arte Útil, and social practice. While the proliferation of categories may serve an empirical purpose, allowing for fine-grained distinctions, it also prevents us from taking note of broader transformations in art. The term ‘social practice’ is, I think, best suited to throw these transformations into critical relief. Note that all but one of the available alternatives I highlighted above emphasize art (they modify the noun in various ways). And yet, according to Pablo Helguera, it is ‘social practice’ – the only term that does *not* make reference to art – that is the most popular (2012, 3). This is a fairly striking observation. It highlights social practice’s self-understanding as being somehow beyond art. It clearly considers itself a practical means of change rather than a form of aesthetic reflection. And yet, despite de-emphasizing art, I want to insist ‘social practice’ functions *as a definition of art*. ‘Social practice’ defines art in terms of its opposite – instrumental social action – and as such opens up a quasi-dialectical perspective. The dialectical point is simple: the amalgam of art and politics is not the sum total of their characteristics but results in an altogether different identity. To define this new practice is one of the objects of this thesis.

The literature emphasizes the instrumental dimension of social practice. This is what the unreflective use of ‘social practice’ is meant to communicate. ‘Social practice’ resonates with

‘social action’, a term originating in Weberian sociology. Max Weber distinguished between value rationality and instrumental (or purposive) rationality (2019, 101). A value-rational action serves a goal that is considered to be valuable in itself. Conversely, the goal of an instrumentally rational action is valued for its effects; it is a means to something else.¹ Whereas Weber considered art to be value rational, the social practice literature reconceptualizes art as a form of instrumental action, a means to bring about social change.² Thus, according to Marc Léger, the ‘basic operative principle’ of social practice ‘is that art can be used to bring about progressive social change and social justice’ (2015). Similarly, for Charles Esche the goal of social practice is ‘to propose real changes in social and economic relations’ (2012, 36). For Nato Thompson it is to ply ‘effective methods for change’ (2012, 18). Mary Jane Jacob casts the artist in the role of a ‘catalyst or activist for change’ (1995, 51). For Leigh Claire La Berge social practice’s aspiration to political efficacy is ‘definitional’ (2019, 104). François Matarasso argues that social practice is ‘a valuable tool for building a better future’ (2019, 29). According to Gail Day, it is ‘extra-aesthetic effectivity which provides (...) the strong animating force for [social practice]’ (2010, 240). The rhetoric of social practice often veers towards the revolutionary. Yates McKee imagines social practice as ‘liberated from the enclosures of the art system and instead embedded in the living fabric of collective political struggle’ (2016b, 204). Dutch artist Jonas Staal argues that social practice can help us ‘gain control over the means of production through which our realities are constructed in order to make new ones’ (2019, 189). Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette similarly imply that artists have taken the place of the proletariat, arguing that social practice can achieve what Marx called the ‘self-realization of human nature’ (2007, 13).

The social practice literature presents art as an agent of change, but in a way that is radically different from its modernist precursor. For social practice it is not enough to have an effect on consciousness through the aesthetic properties of the work of art. ‘Art’s function is no longer to be a space for “signaling” problems’, Tania Bruguera writes, ‘but the place from

¹ For Weber, these two forms of rationality are not mutually exclusive. But he notes that ‘from the perspective of purposive rationality (...) value rationality must always be *irrational*, the more so when action is governed by absolute values’ (2019, 103).

² A recent book on social practice bears the title *Art as Social Action* (Sholette and Bass 2018). Another publication investigates ‘the shift in artistic practice from representation to direct social action’ (van den Berg, Jordan, and Kleinmichel 2019). Boris Groys equally speaks of the attempt to ‘combine art and social action’ (2014).

which to create the proposal and implementation of possible solutions' (2011). What Bruguera is articulating is the insufficiency of 'mere' critique. Advocates of social practice reject aesthetic negativity for its limited practical utility. Trevor Paglen, for instance, argues that it is time to 'move beyond critical reflection, critique alone, and political "attitudes", into the realm of practice' (2008, 32). The Austrian collective WochenKlausur contend that 'it makes more sense to have a modest influence on existing circumstances than to only talk about them and criticize them' (WochenKlausur 2022). One of the recurrent tropes in the social practice literature is that 'critique' (meaning aesthetic experience as a form of critical consciousness) is insufficient because it falls short of practically ameliorating a situation. As Ekaterina Degot writes, artists are 'increasingly ashamed of "just" being critical and reflexive, as these qualities now signify weakness and inability of action' (2015, 21). In abandoning what Susan Buck-Morss calls 'the critical moment of aesthetic experience' (1996, 29), social practice rejects the legacy of the (neo-)avant-garde, whose negativity is recognized by many as its most enduring characteristic (see e.g. Clark 1982; Bürger 1984; Călinescu 1987; R. Williams 1996; Adorno 1997; Roberts 2000).³ Social practice seeks to go 'beyond critique' (P. Fraser and Rothman 2017). It wants, as Dave Beech puts it, to 'stretch the scale of art's political ambition beyond the narrow concept of critique' (2019, 4). Social practice, then, is a self-consciously *postcritical* practice: it disavows art's criticality, reconceptualizing itself as a tool for the practical resolution of social problems.

This view of art has been gaining ground. For a long time, social practice was confined to the periphery of the art world. Almost as soon as it emerged in the late 1960s it was driven underground, continuing, as Nato Thompson writes, 'off the art world screen' (2004). This began to change in the late 1990s with the success of relational art. Reviewing *Traffic*, Nicolas Bourriaud's seminal 1996 exhibition at the CAPC in Bordeaux, Carl Freedman notes the 'increasing prevalence of some kind of "interactivity" in contemporary art' (1996). 'The art work is seen as a vehicle for engendering and mediating relationships between the artist and others, and the viewer is increasingly involved as an active participant or collaborator' (ibid.).

³ The obvious exception is constructivism. But, as Groys points out, constructivism was a post-revolutionary phenomenon and therefore had the state on its side (2014). He therefore suggests that 'only the pre-revolutionary Russian avant-garde can be regarded today as being relevant to our contemporary situation' (2013).

Ten years later, Bishop captured the zeitgeist by speaking of a 'social turn' in art, noting how even commercially successful artists had turned to social practice (Bishop 2006b, 179). Now, fifteen years on, social practice is an established genre of art. The field is actively theorized and historicized,⁴ boasts three international prizes,⁵ and has its own dedicated academic journal.⁶ As of 2005, it is possible to study for a social practice degree⁷ using one of the college-level textbooks.⁸ Social practice is more visible than ever and has been the subject of several high-profile exhibitions. Examples include *The Interventionists* curated by Nato Thompson (MASS MoCA, 2004); *Dissent* co-curated by the Russian collective Chto delat? (ICA, 2010); and the Barbican's 2018 season-long programme *The Art of Change*. While laying their stresses differently, each sought to explore 'art's relationship to activism and social change'.⁹ The mainstreaming of social practice is perhaps best illustrated by documenta, which is poised to have its first-ever social-practice-only edition. Curated by the Indonesian collective

⁴ See for instance Larsen (2000), Bourriaud (2002), Kwon (2002), Bishop (2004; 2006a; 2012), Kester (2004; 2011), Reed (2005), Stimson and Sholette (2007), Bryan-Wilson (2009), Helguera (2011), Jackson (2011), Thompson (2012), Finkelpearl (2013), Lampert (2013), Raunig (2013), Wright (2013), McKee (2016), Sholette (2017), Jacob (2018), La Berge (2019), and Staal (2019).

⁵ The Leonore Annenberg Prize for Art and Social Change (awarded annually by Creative Time between 2009 and 2014), the International Award for Participatory Art awarded by the Legislative Assembly of Emilia-Romagna in Italy (awarded in 2011 and 2013), and the Visible Award (awarded biennially from 2011 and ongoing). Note that activist and relational artists are increasingly being considered for mainstream art prizes. The Hugo Boss Prize has gone to Marjetica Potrč (2000), an artist known for her water filtration systems and wind turbines, as well as relational artists Pierre Huyghe (2002) and Rirkrit Tiravanija (2004). The Artes Mundi Prize has been awarded to Theaster Gates (2015), and the Turner Prize to Assemble (2015). The 2021 Turner Prize will go to one of five collectives committed to various social causes. What captured the jury's attention is their 'work (...) with communities across the breadth of the UK to inspire social change through art' (Tate 2021).

⁶ *FIELD* was founded in 2014 by Grant Kester in response to "the remarkable proliferation of new artistic practices devoted to forms of political, social and cultural transformation" (Kester 2014).

⁷ In 2005 the California College of the Arts in San Francisco introduced the first Social Practice MFA. Since then, at least ten American universities have followed suit, including Portland State University, Otis College of Art and Design, Queens College, and Carnegie Mellon University (Grant 2016). European examples include Sciences Po's School for Political Art (SPEAP) in Paris, Olafur Eliasson's Institut für Raumexperimente (affiliated with the Berlin University of the Arts), and the Art and Politics programme at Goldsmiths University in London. All of these programmes charge upwards of \$10,000 in tuition, topping out at \$109,545 for the three-year programme at Carnegie Mellon (ibid.).

⁸ See e.g. Helguera (2011), Dewhurst (2014), Sholette and Bass (2018), Matarasso (2019), and Duncombe and Lambert (2021).

⁹ See (ICA 2010c). *The Interventionists* focused primarily on tactical media while Chto delat?'s intervention at the ICA was an attempt to 'articulate the potential for constituting new forms of living and learning' (ICA 2010b). With this in mind, they organized a '48 Hour Communal Life Seminar' in which participants lived together for two days to 'create an intensity of relations (...) through sleeping, eating, entertaining, performing and discussing together' (ICA 2010a). The Barbican similarly sought to explore 'how the arts respond to, reflect and potentially effect change in the social and political landscape' but gave this a more identitarian twist by 'providing a platform for voices currently underrepresented in the arts' (Barbican 2018). The curators invited young immigrant poets to reflect on their lived experience and commissioned a 'Youth Manifesto for the Arts' exploring 'how young people can effect change at different levels, from the individual to the global across society through the arts' (ibid.).

Ruangrupa, documenta 15 (2022) will use its platform as a redistributive model to finance social projects around the world.

Documenta 15 represents the high point of a particular vision of art: art as social project. This vision was first articulated by the community arts movements in the late 1960s. A 1974 Arts Council report identifies its distinguishing marks. The 'primary concern [of community artists] is their impact on a community'. They see their work 'as a means of change, whether psychological, social or political' (quoted in Kelly 2016, 33). As to the nature of their work, community artists 'are chiefly concerned with a process rather than with a finished product' (ibid.). Owen Kelly adds to this a third characteristic: an investment in collective as opposed to individual creativity (ibid., 35, 96). Strikingly, these features – a focus on social impact, an emphasis on the artistic process at the expense of the finished product, and an embrace of collective modes of production and experience – add up to a working definition of contemporary social practice. Yet, despite their similarities, community art and social practice have been received very differently. Whereas community art was banished to the margins of the art world, today's social practice artists are exhibiting in prestigious venues and winning accolades. The 2021 Turner Prize will go to one of five collectives committed to various social causes. What captured the jury's attention is their 'work (...) with communities across the breadth of the UK to inspire social change through art' (Tate 2021). Social practice is not just popular; it has become institutionalized. If community art's prioritization of social impact over aesthetic quality disqualified it from serious art world consideration, today the situation is reversed. For artists to be taken seriously, it is imperative that they embrace a social vision. The assumption that art is an agent of social change is shared by artists and administrators alike. Institutions as powerful as the Tate and Guggenheim now boast in-house social practice programmes. Since 2016, Tate Exchange explores how art 'can be the catalyst for change and exchange' (2022) while Guggenheim Social Practice, founded in 2014, seeks to 'foster new forms of public engagement through community participation' (2022).

The institutionalization of a practice that defines itself by its oppositionality should give us pause. Not only does it cast doubt on social practice's ability to transform institutions in the manner it envisages, it also opens up an historical perspective. Social practice is not new but newly popular. Not surprisingly, veterans of social practice are baffled by this development.

In a lecture given at the Birmingham School of Art, Loraine Leeson explained that she is currently receiving more speaking invitations than in the last twenty years combined (2017).¹⁰ Gregory Sholette similarly wonders at the ‘international explosion’ of social practices (2016). If ‘by the early 2000s we find previously widespread art world resistance to socially engaged art practices eroding (...) in 2015 the social turn is spinning full-throttle’ (Sholette 2017, 218). If this is true, then the obvious question is: why now? As Sholette puts it, why has art ‘taken a so-called “social turn” (...) at this particular historical juncture?’ (ibid., 212). Sholette’s explanation is that social practice satisfies an ‘unfulfilled social need’, namely the preservation of society in the face of predatory capitalism (ibid., 220). While this is certainly true, it fails to explain why the social response takes the particular form it does. It might have taken a different form, but what we are faced with is an ‘international explosion’ of social practice. My suggestion – and it is no more than that – is that the popularity of social practice is not just a matter of *its* rise but also of the rejection of negativity in art and social action. It is social practice’s postcritical character that, in my view, gives us a clue as to why it is ascendant today. Ultimately, however, this explanation merely raises a deeper question: what explains the rejection of negativity? This is not a question that will be treated at any length in this thesis, but I want to flag it here as a concern that haunts much of the analysis that follows. The absence of negativity and its relation to our historical self-understanding is raised most pointedly in Chapter 4, but there too in the form of a question.

So far I have shown that the literature places extraordinary emphasis on the instrumental dimension of social practice. Social practice aims not for an effect on consciousness but for practical utility; it claims to be an art of *practice* or *intervention*. But a critical examination of the literature reveals a number of contradictions. First, there is a contradiction between social practice’s supposedly interventionist character and its emphasis on creating ‘models’ and ‘alternatives’. Critics often describe social practice as ‘anti-representational’ (see e.g. Thompson 2012, 21; McKee 2016a) or ‘post-representational’ (see e.g. Finkelpearl 2013, 49; Sholette 2017, 216) to highlight its interventionist character. Social practice, it is said, ‘treats

¹⁰ Leeson was involved in a series of community art projects in east London in the 1970s and 80s, including the campaign to save Bethnal Green Hospital (1978) and the campaign against the gentrification of the London Docklands (early 1980s).

the social itself as a medium and material of expression' (Sholette 2017, 216).¹¹ This is a tall order for it suggests that social practice is capable of transforming the *kind* of society we live in. From this perspective, social practice is a quasi-revolutionary practice. However, the same literature (and often the same authors) commonly invoke the language of 'models', 'alternatives', and 'experiments' to describe social practice, which now appears as a much more traditional, representational practice. Art is a 'test site for economic and social alternatives', Esche writes (2012, 37). The goal of social practice is to 'develop a sustained alternative to commodified social life', according to Stimson and Sholette (2007, 4). Bourriaud famously describes the products of social practice as 'models of sociability' (2002, 70). From this perspective, social practice is not 'anti-' or 'post-representational' but rather *represents* or *figures* possible responses to social problems – without necessarily solving them.

Another contradiction concerns the form of rationality social practice espouses: is it a means to an end or an end in itself? While social practice is described as a form of instrumental social action, this takes the form of open-ended social sculptures or living processes. 'Socially engaged art practice', Mary Jane Jacob notes, 'often delivers a creative process instead of a traditional art product' (2018, 72). This creative process appears like life itself, but differs from it in the values it upholds. Whereas social life is characterized by individualism, the pursuit of profit, social injustice, and various other antagonisms, the 'process' is inclusive, participatory, consensual, and harmonious. Sometimes the artistic process is said to constitute 'new forms of living' (Thompson 2012, 32) or 'alternative ways of life' (Coelewij 2018; see also Matarasso 2019, 29). What is at issue, according to Gerald Raunig, is 'transforming [existing] forms of living into a beautiful and good life' (2013, 152). Note how the literature vacillates between describing social practice as a means to an end – a goal-oriented practice which is justified by the concrete benefits it produces – and an end in itself – a practice that enacts the good and the beautiful, and is therefore self-justifying.

Social practice's processual and open-ended nature are well-established. Artists 'express an activist desire to be (...) accomplishing concrete goals', Bishop writes, and yet 'they do this through an embrace of open-endedness' (2012, 205). If activism has traditionally defined

¹¹ This is one of the most common ways of defining social practice. See Chapter 2 for a discussion and critique.

itself programmatically, social practice often has no more than a set of values to go by: participation, inclusion, dialogue, consensus, and so on.¹² That is to say, social practice is a form of activism that lacks concrete goals. While it can be based around specific issues, more often than not the aim is to ascertain what the issues are and to collaboratively determine a way forward. In a sense, the goal is to define the goal, to have participants decide for themselves what is important and what must be done to achieve their aims. Hence social practice's emphasis on *process*. For instance, Park Fiction in Hamburg helped residents to reclaim an area of their neighbourhood slated for urban renewal, not by proposing a course of action but by creating a process that allowed residents to clarify and concretize their own ideas. There are, in addition, a growing number of artist-run community centres which assist marginalized communities in various ways. Examples include Tania Bruguera's *Immigrant Movement International* (New York), a space that aims to be a community hub for migrants, or her more recent Institute of Artivism Hannah Arendt (INSTAR, Havana), a horizontal community space offering workshops, financial support, and scholarships for artists, activists, and intellectuals. While such initiatives aim to be useful, they do not pursue specific goals. Rather, their mission consists in *creating the conditions for* autonomous action. In each case it is not the goal that is foregrounded so much as the process by which a solution *may* come about. Even if a solution is not forthcoming, this does not invalidate the project from the standpoint of the artist.¹³ What matters is that the audience and participants catch a glimpse of what a solution might look like. Here we begin to see how a distinctively aesthetic dimension is at work within social practice's ostensibly instrumental rationale.

Every claim to the effect that social practice is an incipient political practice is undermined by an aesthetic counter-claim. Social practice is presented as a goal-oriented practice aiming to realize concrete social benefits. Yet this takes the form of an open-ended process in which nothing is decided in advance, so that any outcome is a good outcome. Social practice is presented as a means to an end. Yet the values it enacts are considered ends in themselves,

¹² Boris Groys makes a similar point. While social practice seems to pursue specific ends, the goals are always defined in such a way as to make it impossible for the audience to find out whether they have been achieved or not, or whether they were attainable in the first place (2018, 68).

¹³ Most social practice initiatives come to an end within a few years for lack of funding or time. *Oda Projesi* ended when the artists could no longer afford the rent. Bruguera's *Immigrant Movement International* simply dropped off the radar when activities ceased in 2013. *WochenKlausur's* shelter for rough-sleeping sex workers closed after six years when the city of Zurich discontinued its funding.

so that a project succeeds by merely existing. Social practice wants to be of use to specific communities. Yet the persistence of injustice and exploitation does not invalidate it, since each intervention counts as a symbol of the possibility of another world. If this is politics, it is politics of a decidedly aesthetic kind. Instead of viewing social practice as the activist practice it claims to be, I suggest we understand it in aesthetic terms. The interventions of social practice serve as utopian reminders of the *possibility* of alternative social arrangements. Such projects do not change objective social relations – how could they? – but figure, represent, or demonstrate the availability of an ‘alternative’ in the form of a makeshift social model. These ‘models’ can be described in different ways, but what seems essential is that they restore, within a circumscribed space, a sense of autonomy to a disenfranchised community. From the perspective of the participants, these models appear concrete, practical, and functional (i.e. ‘non-representational’). But from the standpoint of society (i.e. those not involved), they appear quite different, namely as modest exceptions to the status quo. In short, they *represent* attempts at collective self-determination. What is striking, then, is that social practice can be described in fairly traditional aesthetic terms, namely as *figurations of autonomy*.

As I mentioned above, the politicization of art is widely debated in the literature, but there has been little reflection on the aestheticization of politics. To put it slightly differently, what has been insufficiently noted is that social practice politicizes art in a new way: not by politicizing or critiquing its own values – in the manner of the modernist and neo-avant-garde – but by exporting its values into other domains, notably that of politics. The dominant strategy among those invested in social practice is no longer to *critique* art’s values but to attempt to *realize* them.¹⁴ This takes the form of myriad social projects foregrounding collective modes of production and experience, virtually always with a view to demonstrating the possibility of social change. We might hesitate to describe this as the ‘aestheticization of politics’, and for good reason, for it immediately calls to mind Walter Benjamin’s definition of fascism. However, we no longer live in the era of mass politics. It is precisely in the wake of the disintegration of mass political parties that the current form of aesthetic politics emerges.

¹⁴ Stewart Martin refers to this as the ‘realised utopianism’ of social practice: ‘art as a direct form of non-reified life and community’ (2007, 371).

What we are seeing is not the aestheticization of politics per se – if by politics we mean the conquest of state power – but the aestheticization of *social action*. Moreover, this strategy is adopted not by the Right but by the self-identified Left. In other words, Benjamin’s counsel to politicize art and leave the aestheticization of politics to the Right is rejected and reversed. Thus we have gone from Benjamin arguing that ‘Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life’ (1969, 241) to Jacques Rancière claiming that ‘there never has been any “aestheticization” of politics in the modern age because politics is aesthetic in principle’ (1999, 58). According to Rancière, a man of the Left, politics becomes political only when it appeals to aesthetic values (see Chapter 4).

Rancière’s claim is an index of the ongoing transformation of the political practice of the Left. The anti-capitalist Left has migrated from the former social-democratic parties to the extra-parliamentary arena. This has resulted in the development of a ‘prefigurative’ political practice which bears a striking resemblance to social practice. This is a politics that encourages people to ‘be the change’. It seeks to transform society by creating small-scale alternatives *within* the capitalist status quo. Like social practice, prefigurative politics places great emphasis on ‘process’ and tries to devise alternative ‘forms of living’. It attempts to create ‘autonomous zones’ within which dominant social relations are temporarily suspended. The convergence of artistic and political practice sheds new light on each. If to many it appears as though art has become goal-oriented political practice, my argument is that the kind of politics it models itself on is governed by an aesthetic principle. The object of this form of politics is not to bring about social change but to demonstrate the *possibility* of change by performing a utopian alternative. To put this in more political terms, the myriad social projects initiated by artists and activists are not inscribed in a collective political project, and so are no more than the sum of their parts. They are valued *despite* their questionable political worth because they momentarily prefigure another world. This yields a radically different conclusion. Bishop worries that social practice sacrifices art ‘at the altar of social change’ (2006b, 183). But what is being sacrificed is not art or aesthetic experience, but politics.

Prefigurative Politics: Figuring Alternatives

Social practice takes a new approach to art, importing into the aesthetic realm what seems to be most antagonistic to it: instrumental social action. At the same time, it takes a novel, aesthetic approach to social action, which is no longer in the service of a political project to transform society but is pursued for its own sake. Through punctual interventions, social practice demonstrates how communities might go about creatively addressing the problems facing them, regardless of the results. The outcome is less important than the process by which a solution *may* come about. Most projects come to an end within a few years for lack of funding or time. But what they lack in political efficacy, they make up for in aesthetic appeal: they figure a social alternative on a limited scale. In this way, they hint at the possibility of a different society, one that is less hierarchical, more participatory, and resolves its problems independently of the state.

This novel approach to social action is referred to as prefigurative practice, prefigurative politics, prefigurativism, or simply prefiguration.¹⁵ At its most basic, prefigurative politics is to ‘be the change’. It is a form of direct action whereby people implement the changes they want to see in the world immediately, without having recourse to the state. Prefiguration can be individual (e.g. the act of recycling) but it can also take a collective form (the subject of this thesis). Here the goal is to body forth the elements of a more just, free, and egalitarian society. Hence *prefigurative* politics: the alternative social and organizational forms it enacts are supposed to offer a glimpse of the free society of the future. According to Luke Yates, it is the ‘dominant orientation’ in today’s social movements (2021, 1040). Some of the largest protests of the last decade have been prefigurative: the Spanish *Indignados* movement (also known as M-15, 2011), the global Occupy movement (2011), the French *zones à défendre* (ZAD, 2011–18), the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul (2013), the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement (2014), the French assembly movement *Nuit debout* (2016), the Dakota Access Pipeline protests at Standing Rock (2016), and the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone in Seattle (CHAZ, 2020) (cf. Snow et al. 2013, xxxix).

¹⁵ I will use ‘prefigurative politics’ when highlighting its political aspects, reserving ‘prefigurative practice’ as a more general term to designate the *unity* of social practice and prefigurative politics. See terminology section.

These protests followed a similar pattern. While they arose in response to specific issues, they became the occasion to discuss broader social problems. Each took the form of a semi-permanent occupation of public space in the form of a protest camp. These camps served a practical purpose, namely to sustain the protest, but they also functioned as a prefigurative example. While some were located in rural areas (e.g. ZAD, Standing Rock), most occupations were sited in city squares, highly mediated spaces generating an enormous amount of visibility. Within each protest camp a series of makeshift institutions arose. Virtually each camp had a first-aid post, a kitchen, internet points, a library, and a rubbish collection service. The larger camps had additional amenities. The protest camp in Puerta del Sol, Madrid, for instance, boasted a kitchen serving hot food three times a day, a study and conversation area, a library with thousands of catalogued books, Wi-Fi hotspots, a press centre, kindergarten, first-aid post, recycling points, and a vegetable garden (Grueso 2012; Blanco 2018, 127). In addition, most camps had a number of rudimentary political institutions. These were often referred to as 'General Assemblies' (GAs) and governed the day-to-day running of the camp. The GAs enacted a form of horizontal, participatory democracy, giving everyone in the camp a stake in its governance. It is these institutions of social reproduction and self-governance that gave the camps their prefigurative character. As Nikos Sotirakopoulos writes, 'besides its practical function, a camp is also the creation of an alternative community, with its own codes and values. In the camp, the activists attempt to directly materialize their ideals' (2016, 99).

At its most ambitious, prefigurative politics understands itself as 'revolutionary practice' (Raekstad and Gradin 2020, 73). It is a theory and practice of social change motivated by the desire to align means and ends, 'so that there is no distinction between how we fight and what we fight for' (Maeckelbergh 2009, 66). Traumatized by the failures of past socialist revolutions, prefigurative politics embraces a rigorously ethical vision. The only means it allows are those which align with its vision of a free society. Since such a society would exclude a hierarchical state structure, the only kind of action available to 'prefigurativists' is direct social action.¹⁶ To use the state to change society or even to abolish the state itself carries too

¹⁶ 'Prefigurativist' is Raekstad and Gradin's word (2020). It is unwieldy but useful as a shorthand for 'advocate of prefigurative politics'.

great a risk on this view. The seizure of state power will inevitably corrupt the movement's leaders and may even lead to dictatorship (Raekstad and Gradin 2020, chap. 6). Prefiguration's anti-statism is not only intended to prevent abuses of state power; it is also supposed to be more effective than statist strategies.

The seizure of state power is not rejected solely on ethical grounds, *despite* being deemed an effective revolutionary means. Rather, it is rejected as *ineffective*, since it does not result in a classless society but in dictatorship (Gordon 2018, 529).

According to Uri Gordon, if the goal is to create a classless society, prefiguration must be considered more not less effective than statist strategies. However, prefigurative interventions rarely achieve their goal. Most are short-lived, lasting no more than a few months on average, after which they are crushed by the state. At most, their victories are negative; their positive proposals hardly ever make it beyond the prefigurative zone. Among the examples cited above, only the French ZAD was partially successful, helping to prevent the construction of a new airport. But none of the ZAD's prefigurative elements (e.g. its cooperative economic model) travelled beyond the zone.¹⁷ In each of the examples above, the attempt to institute alternative social arrangements remained limited to the 'autonomous zone' of the protest community; as soon as the camp was cleared by the police, the alternative vanished with it. Most prefigurative experiments are just that: symbolic reminders of the possibility of another world.

Prefigurative politics is inherently aesthetic or representational since to embody a desired future state in the present is, by the same token, to present an image of it. In many ways, the aesthetic dimension of prefigurative politics is clearer than that of social practice because it plainly involves an interaction between actors and audience. Whereas social practice is often performed solely for the benefit of the participants, prefigurative politics can produce genuine spectacle, attracting large crowds and global TV audiences, as was the case with Occupy. Bishop has argued that social practice is almost 'impossible to represent visually' and

¹⁷ The ZAD at Notre-Dame-des-Landes cooperatively produced fruit, vegetables, dairy, bread, honey, and medicinal herbs for a 'non-market' where goods were distributed for free (alter JT 2015 2:20).

that it neglects the ‘secondary audience’ (anyone who is not a participant) by failing to create a compelling object that might resonate beyond its immediate context (2012, 205, 217). When we look at prefigurative politics – and when we look at social practice through the lens of prefigurative politics – this picture changes radically. What is striking is that prefigurative politics is based on a fairly traditional aesthetic template, according to which an artist creates an object that is then presented to an audience. The prefigurative protests mentioned above reinstate each of the aesthetic elements that social practice was thought to have abandoned or overcome: a bounded object, a clear distinction between author and spectator, and a compelling spectacle for a secondary audience to reflect on.

Prefigurative actions tend to take place within a clearly demarcated space. This can be a protest camp, but also a community centre or a squat, and is often referred to as an ‘autonomous zone’ (cf. Bey 2002). The autonomous zone allows protesters to temporarily suspend or renegotiate the status quo. For instance, CHAZ and the ZAD at Notre-Dame-des-Landes ejected the police from the area they controlled, temporarily suspending the authority of the state.¹⁸ The autonomous zone functions as a ‘frame’ or ‘stage’ on which protesters act out their alternative. This gives rise to a representational structure. Prefigurative politics postulates an *object* that embodies the desired changes, and this object forces a distinction between actor and spectator, artist and audience. While the goal is always to get more people to join the ‘movement’, prefigurative protests cater to a non-participating audience by hosting various activities and events. CHAZ, for example, attracted visitors who came to enjoy the concerts, street art, and film screenings (see e.g. Dwilson 2020; Hu 2020; Guardian News 2020). Heather Gautney notes that for a short while Occupy Wall Street (OWS) was one of New York’s prime attractions: ‘tourist buses added Zuccotti to their regular routes, and large media conglomerates maintained a constant presence around the perimeter of the park’ (Gautney 2013).¹⁹

¹⁸ Hakim Bey’s influential text ‘TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone’, which popularized the concept, notes that it does not have to be a physical space but can be an occupation ‘of time, of imagination’ (2002, 117). At one extreme the autonomous zone suspends state power, at another it is no more than a virtual community. See Chapter 1 for a more detailed discussion.

¹⁹ Zuccotti Park in downtown Manhattan is where Occupy Wall Street was located (see Chapter 1).

Within the autonomous zone, protesters seek to demonstrate their alternative. This can take many forms. CHAZ tried to enact a self-policing community free from racism and police brutality. Occupy experimented with alternative institutions of governance, enabling a more participatory form of democracy. The key stipulation is that the prefigurative community define its own goals, that it legislate its own content. Unlike other forms of emancipatory politics, prefigurative politics is not defined (or partially defined) by its goal but rather by the attempt to align means and ends. The goal can be anything, as long as it is visible or foreshadowed within the means deployed to realize it. Prefigurative politics, in other words, places great emphasis on 'the process, the means, the participation and the dialogue' over and above the realization of concrete goals (Breines 1980, 422). To put it slightly differently, prefigurative politics is not a substantive politics but a 'politics of process' (Maeckelbergh 2011a, 6). The reason is clear: for prefigurativists to determine the what and the how of an action, they require a deliberative process. In collective prefiguration it is the process of self-governance that takes centre stage. Since a free collectivity is defined by its autonomy, prefigurative politics, like social practice, attempts to enact an autonomous social process, and does so within an aptly named 'autonomous zone'. This 'frame' or 'stage' is temporally and spatially discontinuous with everyday life, and thereby establishes an explicitly representational structure. The result is a living work of art, a performance of autonomy as living process.

Chapter Summaries

This thesis takes as its point of departure the idea that social practice and prefigurative politics mutually illumine each other. Prefigurative politics provides insight into the *kind* of politics that so-called 'politicized art' subscribes to, while social practice clarifies the aesthetic underpinnings of prefigurative politics. The thesis drives at a recognition of their ultimate identity, culminating in a theory of the aesthetic logic common to them both. The aim, however, is not just to disclose their commonalities, but to demonstrate how each draws out the disavowed character of the other. In social practice, art endeavours to outgrow the symbolic, the 'merely' aesthetic dimension of art. But it recovers its aesthetic character in the

very politics it embraces. Prefigurative politics, on the other hand, tries to guard against failure by representing its ideal in real time, but it does so at the expense of making its efficacy an aesthetic matter: it becomes a *symbol* of a better future, often staged for media consumption. The thesis initially treats social practice and prefigurative politics as distinct practices. Chapter 1 is concerned with prefigurative politics, Chapter 2 with social practice. But in Chapter 3 I treat them as one; I combine the insights of the two previous chapters to establish the aesthetic logic of what I call 'prefigurative practice' – the term I use to designate social practice and prefigurative politics in their unity. Chapter 4 explores the historical significance of the prefigurative turn in art and politics. I will say a bit more about each.

Chapter 1 analyses prefigurative politics qua politics. It opens with a detailed description of the salient features of the Occupy movement, giving the reader a sense of how prefigurative politics manifests in practice. Occupy is an important reference point because it catalysed academic and popular interest in prefigurative politics and consolidated it as a field of study. My analysis of the theory of prefigurative politics distils its three principal features. These features are important because, I will argue, they are shared by social practice and they will form the basis of my account of the aesthetic logic of prefigurative practice in Chapter 3. I show that prefigurative politics has a negative component – the suspension of the status quo within the autonomous zone – and a positive component – the performance of an alternative within it. The third feature is the action's exemplarity with respect to the free society it supposedly prefigures. Since a free social subject is defined by its autonomy, the criterion of prefigurative politics is autonomy or self-legislation. I move on to a practical analysis of the politics of Occupy and note that prefiguration's formalism – its emphasis on autonomous process – prevented it from clarifying its ideology. Prefigurative politics is in that sense post-ideological. This finding is an important corrective to the tendency in the literature to assimilate prefigurative politics to the anarchist – and therefore the socialist – tradition. I argue instead that contemporary prefigurative politics originates in the New Left's *break* with the socialist tradition and is incompatible with it. I unearth an alternative, socialist concept of prefiguration through a reading of two papers by Carl Boggs, who was the first to theorize prefigurative politics. The chapter concludes with a critique of the political efficacy of prefiguration. I demonstrate that the occupiers abandoned their prefigurative principles

because they proved ineffective in practice. This chapter amounts to a *political critique* of prefigurative politics, which, however, points to its aesthetic character.

Chapter 2 focuses on social practice. It opens by taking a bird's eye view of the cultural milieu of the mid-2000s in which social practice emerges. This milieu is characterized by debates rehearsing in different ways the ineffectiveness of critique. What is needed, according to some, is an art of 'practice' or 'intervention'. But the attempt to formulate an activist, postcritical art runs into contradictions. What does it mean to say that society is the 'medium' of social practice or that social practice intervenes in social form? Is there such a thing as 'political plastic' that artists can manipulate at will? Does the claim that social practice is 'anti-representational' or 'post-representational' bear scrutiny? I argue that most of these claims are rhetorical. The meaning and significance of social practice, as of all modern art, are a function of its form. This leads to a discussion of the criteria of social practice. The criteria that have been proposed – participation, cooperation, social impact – fail to distinguish social practice from other practices. I argue that social practice is continuous with more traditional forms of art in aspiring to the unity of form and content – autonomy. Recent forms of activist art interpret this criterion in a social (one might say literalist) vein: aesthetic form becomes living process, or what Schiller called 'living form'. Social practice's attempt to create a microcosm of an autonomous social process is a key point of contact with prefigurative politics. In fact – and this is important for my argument – the social practice literature and the literature on prefigurative politics describe their object in roughly the same way. The 'autonomous zone' of prefigurative politics reappears as a 'social interstice' (Bourriaud 2002, 45) and 'cultural enclosure' (Esche 2012, 37). According to the proponents of social practice, art designates a social or institutional space where people are 'able to act according to different rules' (ibid.). In the latter part of the chapter, I challenge the coherence of this notion. The only way to achieve autonomy in aesthetic form – the only way to disengage from dominant social relations – is by thematizing its impossibility, that is, through immanent critique. Thus the avowed anti-capitalism of social practice is incompatible with its postcritical, prefigurative politics. I demonstrate this through a number of case studies. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the history of social practice, which points back to the 1960s but also to the moment in which the principle of aesthetic autonomy was first articulated. This thought is further elaborated in Chapter 4.

Chapter 3 makes explicit what has been implied all along: that social practice and prefigurative politics can be understood as a *single* practice, what I refer to as ‘prefigurative practice’. I begin by noting an aspect of Occupy that is ignored in the political science literature: the fact that the Occupy encampments were widely perceived as works of art. After the work undertaken in Chapters 1 and 2, we are in a position to explain it: prefigurative practice functions according to an aesthetic logic. To describe this logic, I cash out the claim I made above: that social practice and prefigurative politics mutually illumine each other. When social practice is viewed through a prefigurative lens, we find a fairly traditional aesthetic *structure*. Conversely, when prefigurative politics is viewed through the lens of art, we notice its aesthetic *form*. I add to this a third characteristic. Since prefigurative practice has neither social nor political power at its disposal, it must try to realize its ambitions by way of an ‘aesthetic education’. I provide numerous examples, which demonstrate that prefigurative practice is not the solutions-oriented practice it claims to be. Its modus operandi is to create an exemplary community on the very site that symbolizes the problem. This community at once frames the problem and performs its resolution, creating a symbolic contrast which suggests that things *could* be otherwise. In short, the purpose of prefigurative practice is not to produce a solution but the *image* of a solution, it is not to acquire power but to produce powerful feelings. Prefigurative practice endeavours to change the world by the sheer power of an image or experience. Its ‘aesthetic education’ is aimed at an external audience (who are offered an image of freedom) but equally at the prefigurativists themselves (who are given the opportunity to experience it in practice). The autonomous zone creates an interval in which the norms and conventions of everyday life are suspended. Within this space of exception participants can experience a deep sense of purpose and community. First-hand accounts confirm that prefigurative protests allow for an intensity of experience that is simply not available in everyday life. But in this respect they are no different from holiday camps or music festivals – temporary escapes from reality that are of questionable political value.

Across the first three chapters, I allude to Schiller’s aesthetic theory and occasionally use Schillerian terminology (for instance, beauty as ‘living form’, ‘aesthetic state’, and ‘aesthetic education’). In Chapter 4 these references are finally made explicit. I explain why Schiller’s

theory of beauty must be considered the *urtext* of prefigurative practice and why this is problematic. Schiller argued that beauty was ‘a symbol of [humanity’s] *accomplished destiny*’ (1993, 126). The beautiful work of art anticipated an autonomous social form in which the opposition between sense and reason, real and ideal, was reconciled. A free society, Schiller thought, was not an ‘ethical state’ based on the rule of law, since it relied on the threat of force (*ibid.*, 176). Freedom would only be realized, Schiller argued, in the ‘aesthetic state’, where the need to *compel* ethical behaviour would cease to exist (*ibid.*). ‘The state will be merely the interpreter of [man’s] own finest instinct, a clearer formulation of his own sense of what is right’ (*ibid.*, 95). Beauty, in other words, had a *prefigurative* quality. It could transcend the realm of art; it was potentially ‘living form’ (*ibid.*, 128). Beauty does not appear to be a concern for today’s engaged artists, yet they are motivated by its social promise. Instead of creating beautiful objects, they produce ‘micro-utopias’ (Bourriaud 2002, 70) – that is, miniature aesthetic states, or what we might call ‘social beauty’. The principle, articulated by Schiller, remains the same: the manifold social projects initiated by artists are supposed to demonstrate the feasibility of a better society, a society which they, qua expressions of beauty, prefigure.

I argue that the attempt to recover Schiller’s prefigurative paradigm of beauty runs into contradictions, which I show in two different ways. First, I examine the work of Grant Kester and Jacques Rancière – two contemporary critics who engage with Schiller’s aesthetics. One is vehemently opposed to Schiller’s theory and claims it must be overcome, the other argues for its continued relevance. And yet, as I show, Schiller’s critic reproduces most of his insights, whereas his self-proclaimed heir arrives at radically different conclusions. Not only do Kester and Rancière have a hard time making sense of what Schiller’s theory is, the theory itself appears both relevant and outdated, to confirm and foreclose the possibility of another world. This, I argue, is a function of its *self-contradiction* in capitalism. The second way in which I demonstrate this self-contradiction is by tracing the aesthetic antinomies that emerge with modernism. In the 1840s we begin to see the outlines of a period in art history ‘after the beautiful’ (Pippin 2014). What this means, concretely, is that the polarities that according to Kant and Schiller were held together in aesthetic experience become disarticulated. This must be understood in light of the self-undermining social dynamic that emerges with capitalism, which throws the utopian future that beauty prefigured into question. For Schiller, beauty

was a symbol of the *actuality* of freedom. The plausibility of his prefigurative outlook was premised on the perfectibility of bourgeois social relations. This perfectibility has been in doubt since the advent of industrial capitalism. Consequently, the art of modernism – and that of the avant-garde in particular – begins self-consciously to politicize its principal value. In a strange way, then, the blind spot of what is presently the most popular form of political contestation is modernist art.

Methodology

The method employed in this thesis is dialectical. However, dialectic is more than a method; it is also a view of social reality, an ontology. As Hegel writes, ‘the only true method [is] identical with the content’ (2010, 5). Dialectic grasps a reality which is itself dialectical. The dialectician conceives of reality as a system or totality in which the constituent element mutually affect and determine each other. One of the key assumptions of dialectic is the unity-in-difference of opposites. Theory and practice, concept and object, interpenetrate. Consequently, social reality is not conceived as brute materiality but as itself conceptually structured. This does not mean that it is a product of the mind but that it has a *form*, and this form is inscribed in the practices that make society what it is. Practice, therefore, is not distinct from theory but is itself theoretical. This allows the dialectician to reconstruct the logic of a given practice and criticize it. Marx’s reconstruction of the logic of commodity exchange is the most famous example of an immanent dialectical critique. In a letter to Ferdinand Lassalle, Marx explains that the manuscript he is working on (what would eventually become *Capital*) ‘is at once an exposé and, *by the same token*, a critique of the system [of bourgeois economy]’ (1983, 270 my emphasis). Since commodity exchange has become self-contradictory in industrial capitalism, merely to describe it is, by the same token, to criticize it. The practice critiques *itself*. In this thesis I adopt a similar argumentative strategy. By reconstructing the logic of prefigurative practice, I intend to demonstrate its self-contradictory nature. I contrast this logic with the practice’s *self-understanding*, which fails to recognize – indeed tends to suppress – the self-contradictory and therefore self-undermining nature of the practice. I refer to this as a lack of *critical self-consciousness* (see terminology

section for a definition of critique). In the Conclusion I will return to the question of critique and postcritique.

In this thesis I consider both the theory and practice of prefiguration. In choosing my case studies, I have paid attention to the – political and aesthetic – importance of the intervention. As regards prefigurative politics, there is one that towers above all others, and that is the Occupy movement. Occupy introduced prefigurative politics to a large (non-specialist) audience. In mid-October 2011, Occupy encampments could be found in 950 cities spread across six continents (Feigenbaum, Frenzel, and McCurdy 2013, 38). Following Occupy, academic references to prefigurative politics increased eightfold (Yates 2021, 1052). Given the importance of Occupy to the theory and practice of prefiguration, it was clear to me that this had to be one of my case studies. Moreover, as I began reading up on Occupy, I discovered that the protest camps were frequently compared to works of art. This led to an investigation into the relation between activist art and the kind of protest politics that Occupy seemed to exemplify.

One of the salient facts about the literature on prefigurative practice is its celebratory tone. Much of the literature exists to affirm rather than critically engage with these practices. There seem to be two reasons for this. First, the division of labour between critic and practitioner is eroding. Many accounts are produced either by the activists themselves (see e.g. Maeckelbergh 2009; Graeber 2013; McKee 2016b; Staal 2019) or people with a professional stake in promoting their work, for instance curators (see e.g. Bourriaud 2002; Thompson 2012; Finkelppearl 2013). Another reason is the shallow Leftism that characterizes the field, according to which the collective must always be preferred to the individual, the active to the passive, the relational to the object-based, simply because these values are understood to be the opposite of those favoured by capitalism. This undialectical approach leads critics to find signs of oppositionality or resistance where really there are none. My dissatisfaction with the literature determined my decision not to undertake primary research but to focus on a critical engagement with primary and secondary literature. It seemed to me that more was to be gained from a critical intervention in the literature – of which there are few – than from adding additional source material, which is abundant as it is. There is a wealth of primary literature in the form of first-hand accounts, interviews, and audiovisual resources that have

helped me gain a firm grasp of the events leading up to and during the occupations. Thus the thesis takes the form of a clarification and critique of the self-understanding of prefigurative practice, as reflected in the literature. Finally, while the Occupy movement was global, the largest camps were in Europe and North America, and these are the camps that are discussed most extensively in the literature. As they make for richer case studies, I have followed this trend, resulting in an unfortunate but unavoidable Western bias.

Contribution to Knowledge

This thesis contributes to our understanding of prefigurative practice. It offers an *account* and a *critique* of prefigurative practice in terms of its double – aesthetic and political – character. To put it slightly differently, the thesis demonstrates and critiques the way in which art and politics are transformed in prefigurative practice. The latter is constitutively interdisciplinary, I argue. To understand prefigurative practice, we must take account of changes in politics as much as art. In claiming that the object of study is interdisciplinary, I am also claiming that the thesis addresses a shortcoming specific to each of the two bodies of literature it draws on. In the social practice literature there is a lack of attention to politics. What is at issue in social practice is not just the ‘politics of aesthetics’ but politics as a social practice that aims to make a practical contribution to the transformation of society. If it is claimed that art has outgrown the symbolic dimension and is now a vehicle for *political practice*, it is imperative to meet this claim by analysing what *kind* of political practice it is. An examination of prefigurative politics as pioneered by the New Left is crucial to this task. The literature on prefigurative politics, on the other hand, suffers from a lack of attention to aesthetic questions. It has so far gone unnoticed that prefigurative politics relies on an essentially aesthetic conception of practice, one in which *figuring* alternative social relations is more important than realizing them. The performativity of prefigurative politics is not subservient to a political project but constitutes the core of the practice.

Given the interdisciplinary nature of the thesis, its contribution can be understood as two distinct contributions. From the standpoint of such disciplines as art history, philosophical

aesthetics, and visual culture, the thesis contributes to the ongoing attempt to *define* recent forms of activist practice. The thesis is the first to offer a general account of social practice as a form of prefigurative practice. It does so not just by comparing recent forms of activist art to recent iterations of prefigurative politics but by noting that art (qua expression of beauty) was itself originally understood as a prefigurative symbol. The thesis demonstrates that prefiguration is *internal* to the continental aesthetic tradition. Social practice, it argues, marks a regression to the paradigm of beauty that was superseded in modernism.

From the standpoint of such disciplines as political philosophy, critical theory, and social movement studies, the thesis contributes to an understanding of the *aesthetic* dimension of prefigurative politics. Prefigurative politics is generally understood as a form of politics which contests power in and through the democratic ideal it embodies. While there are critiques of the efficacy of prefigurative politics, there are as yet none that derive this ineffectiveness from prefiguration's aesthetic character. This thesis demonstrates that the aim of prefigurative politics is to enact an autonomous social process within a circumscribed space or protest community, thereby creating a sensible impression of a reconciled social form, that is, 'social beauty'. Such interventions are inevitably hamstrung by the social contradictions they fail to recognize. On this basis, the thesis contests many of the political claims made on behalf of prefigurative politics. The thesis also addresses a lacuna in the literature by distinguishing between self-critical prefiguration, as practised in the socialist tradition, and positive prefiguration, which was popularized by the New Left and is ascendant today.

Terminology and Punctilios

On the view espoused in this thesis, 'social practice', 'prefigurative politics', and 'prefigurative practice' essentially mean the same thing. It would be possible, therefore, to discard all but one of these terms. However, there is a practical need to retain the existing variety of designations – first, because it tells the reader when questions of aesthetic concern are addressed and when questions of political concern; second, because each term is embedded in a distinct body of scholarship. To speak of social practice while referring to a text on

prefigurative politics would be confusing. Accordingly, I will use ‘social practice’ when discussing prefigurative practice under its *aesthetic* aspect and ‘prefigurative politics’ when discussing prefigurative practice under its *political* aspect. I will reserve ‘prefigurative practice’ for general discussions emphasizing the double – aesthetic and political – character of prefigurative practice.

It must be borne in mind that prefigurative politics is not a *sui generis* politics but rather a form of *social action*. This leads me to a second terminological point. What is the difference between social action and prefigurative practice (i.e. social practice and prefigurative politics)? And how does social action differ from activism, direct action, direct social action, instrumental action, and so on? ‘Social action’, as I use it, is a hypernym of prefigurative practice. In other words, prefigurative practice is a *particular kind* of social action. There is a vast sociological literature on social action, going back to Max Weber who defined social action as the object of sociology (2019, 78). In this literature a distinction is made between ‘social action’, referring to the *individualist* theory of action developed by Weber and Parsons, and ‘social practice’, referring to the *collectivist* vision of Marxism (Therborn 1973).²⁰ Incidentally, when artists refer to their activities as ‘social practice’ they do so in order to place themselves, implicitly or explicitly, within a tradition of revolutionary politics.²¹ My use of ‘social action’ derives from (but is nonidentical with) the Marxist conception of social practice. I will briefly outline how Marx conceived of social practice in order to distinguish it from social action as it is understood in this thesis.

In the Marxist tradition social practice is understood in an expanded and a more restricted sense. In the expanded sense it is social activity as such, understood as social *self-production* – an expression of humanity’s self-determined and open-ended species being. In the more restricted sense – which concerns us here – it is understood as ‘revolutionary’ or ‘practical-critical’ activity (Marx and Engels 1978, 143). It has three features. First, it implies the ‘coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity’ (ibid., 144). Its goal is

²⁰ ‘Individualist’ and ‘collectivist’ here merely indicate a methodological orientation: the methodological individualism of Weber and the early Parsons versus Marx’s dialectical materialism with its emphasis on social classes.

²¹ ‘Art-as-practice emerges out of the movements which demanded that social life be transformed through what Karl Marx called “revolutionary praxis”’ (Boon and Levine 2018, 14).

the transformation of objective social conditions, which necessitates a theory and practice of revolution. Second, it is the activity of a specific class, which is why Marx also refers to it as the 'self-activity' of the working class (ibid., 191-92). Third, and most importantly, revolutionary practice combines social and political activity. On the one hand, it is the independent self-organization of the working class in voluntary associations (e.g. in trade unions, neighbourhood assemblies, clubs, etc.); on the other hand, it is the effort to contest the political power of the ruling class and to replace it with the rule of the working class – in order to abolish class rule altogether (ibid., 520, 542ff.).

My use of 'social action' has most in common with the first of these features; ignores the second; and breaks the third into its constituent elements. So I define social action as a collective effort to change society by social means. Thus, in contrast to the sociological tradition, I do not understand social action as individual but as collective action. In contrast to the Marxist tradition, I do not understand the collective in class terms.²² Finally, 'social action' contrasts with 'political action'. If social action is based on voluntary association, politics implies an element of coercion. If social action is the self-organization of interest-based groups in society – in this case groups manifesting an interest in *changing* society; that is, the Left broadly conceived – politics is their attempt to impose their will on society using political means, i.e. the state.

Generally speaking, prefigurative practice has a political *intent* but disfavours political *means*. Like all radical traditions, it rejects the legitimacy of the state in its present liberal-democratic form, aiming to replace it with a system of free association. However, it argues that the conquest of state power is not conducive to this aim. In this sense, it is similar to anarchism. One of the questions raised by prefigurative politics is whether social action can achieve a political aim (the transformation or abolition of the state) while renouncing political means (the means of coercion embodied in the state).

²² This point is terminological not normative: while I think social action *ought* to be class-based, the term, as I employ it, does not refer to the activity of any class in particular. (In Chapter 1 I will argue that prefigurative practice's constitutive inability to address class makes it incompatible with a socialist project.)

In this thesis, activism, direct action, direct social action, instrumental action, etc., are understood to be synonymous with social action.

This thesis defines 'the Left' by its anti-capitalism. This means that presently the Left is by and large an extra-parliamentary phenomenon. It is limited to various political groupuscules, pressure groups, student and non-governmental organizations, and miscellaneous social initiatives seeking to contest capitalist ways of life and to create alternatives to them.

'Critique' is a notoriously difficult concept to define, given its conflicting Kantian, Hegelian, Marxist, as well as ancient, lineages. By 'critique' I do not mean fault-finding or the practice of writing about art (cf. R. Williams 1985, 84-86), nor do I mean just any 'critical theory'. In this thesis 'critique' is understood as a practice that produces *critical consciousness*, by which I mean consciousness of a reality that is itself negative, riven with contradictions. Thus critique is understood dialectically insofar as dialectic aspires to a consciousness that is adequate to reality. If reality is structured by social contradictions, i.e. is negative through and through, then critical consciousness is the kind of consciousness that is adequate to its object, allowing the subject to transform it.

Some final points of form: when a quotation or parts of it are italicized, the emphasis is the author's, unless stated otherwise. When the words 'introduction' and 'conclusion' are capitalized, they refer to the first or last section of the thesis, not that of an individual chapter.

Chapter 1. Occupy and the Politics of Prefiguration

Introduction

This chapter lays the groundwork for the following chapters by establishing what prefigurative politics is. It does so through an analysis of the theory, practice, and history of prefiguration. The main case study is Occupy, with a particular focus on its New York manifestation – Occupy Wall Street (OWS). Occupy represents one of the largest upsurges of popular discontent of the last ten years. It was international in scope and a defining moment for the Millennial Left. The politics of Occupy is widely understood as prefigurative, and the movement has been credited with introducing this concept to a large audience (Graeber 2013, 29). Since Occupy, scholarly references to prefigurative politics have increased eightfold relative to the previous decade (Yates 2021, 1052). It is therefore an ideal candidate for an analysis – and critique – of prefigurative politics.

Prefiguration has proved to be an extremely fertile concept. On the one hand, a theoretical constellation has emerged drawing in such concepts as the ‘common’ and ‘autonomous zone’, ‘free spaces’ and ‘alternative spaces’, ‘being the change’, ‘worlding’ and ‘world-making’, and ‘heterotopias’ and ‘concrete utopias’. On the other hand, we find an ecology of practices grounded in social movements but extending far beyond them (see below for details). The promiscuity of the concept has made it hard to grasp its substance. What does prefiguration mean in a political context? What are its aims? How does it function? Where does it come from and can its history tell us something about its political horizon? Are scholars of prefigurative politics correct to assimilate it to the socialist tradition? How effective is it? These are some of the questions that this chapter will try to answer. I am primarily concerned here with the *politics* of prefigurative politics. However, as will become clear, the characteristics of prefigurative politics imply an aesthetic logic.

Occupy and the Movement of the Squares

In 2011, following the fallout of the 2008 financial crash, a wave of protests swept the globe. Beginning in Tunisia in late 2010, the protests would spread to most of the Arab world, Europe, the United States, and Asia. One of the peculiarities of the demonstrations, reproduced around the world, was the use of sit-ins. For instance, after the Tunisian autocrat Ben Ali had been ousted, protesters organized several sit-ins in Kasbah Square, Tunis, to maintain pressure on the transitional government. Egyptian protesters staged a similar sit-in in Tahrir Square, Cairo, but in this case the occupation itself played a part in overthrowing the government. While it took protesters only eighteen days to oust Mubarak, the sedentary nature of the protest was such that it required an extensive infrastructure. The protesters installed a water point and siphoned off electricity from the square's mains. They collected and recycled rubbish. They set up a field hospital and a kindergarten. Wi-Fi was available from two separate hubs (except during internet blackouts). There was an exhibition space showing revolutionary art and a 'wall of martyrs' commemorating fallen comrades. At night, movies were screened drive-in style on bed sheets while street vendors sold popcorn (BBC 2011; Shokr 2011; Gunning and Baron 2014, 264).

Tahrir's self-sustaining community became the focus of global media attention. Much of this was orchestrated by the protesters themselves. The Egyptian revolution (what would become known as the 25 January Revolution) was one of the first to make extensive use of social media. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were used to schedule protests, report directly from the occupied square, and signal-boost the protesters' demands. The use of social media allowed protesters to circumvent censorship and reach out to a global audience. It also facilitated coverage by the international press. Knowing that local outlets would not carry their message, protesters actively courted the international news media. At the centre of the square was the 'Tourist Company', a press centre where reporters could meet with key opposition figures and conduct interviews (Gunning and Baron 2014, 180). As a result of this

media density, people around the world were able to follow the revolution as it unfolded in real time. Dramatic events, such as the ‘Battle of the Camel’, were broadcast live on TV.¹

The sit-in at Tahrir Square provided the template for similar actions around the world. In Spain, mass demonstrations took place on 15 May. Activists had put out a call on social media to protest against austerity and unemployment. In Madrid 50,000 people showed up, chanting ‘*Democracia Real Ya!*’ (‘Real Democracy Now!’). After the march, some of them gathered in Puerta del Sol – a square in the city centre of Madrid – and decided to remain there. As in Tahrir Square, a tent city arose. It was called Sun City.² This was the beginning of the *acampadas* (camps) that would spread to fifty cities across Spain (Martín 2011). The protesters, who came to be known as the *indignados*, put systems in place to take care of their basic needs: food, water, sanitation. Within days Sun City boasted a kitchen serving hot food three times a day, a study and conversation area, a library with thousands of catalogued books, Wi-Fi hotspots, a press centre, kindergarten, first-aid post, recycling points, and a vegetable garden (Grueso 2012; Blanco 2018, 127). The movement would eventually produce its own choir and orchestra. A General Assembly was established to facilitate collective decision making. This organ of direct democracy voted into being a large number of working groups and committees, most of which were concerned with the day-to-day running of the camp. Many served a clear practical purpose. For instance, the Audiovisual Committee (‘AudioviSol’) created short videos of life in the camp and disseminated them online. The Respect Committee functioned as the camp’s conflict resolution team (a kind of nonviolent police force). The Infrastructure Committee helped protesters to build and conceive new structures. There was also a Documentation and Archive Committee to keep a record of the activities taking place at the camp. Other committees had a wider scope and seem to have been modelled after government ministries: health, education, culture, economy, diversity. There were also working groups which resembled think tanks with names such as the Long-term Policy Working Group, the Short-term Policy Working Group, and the Ethical Journalism

¹ On 2 February, mounted hirelings charged the square in an attempt to disperse protesters. The event was broadcast live by Al Jazeera.

² *Acampada Sol* (or *Acampadasol*) is a reference both to the square that hosted the encampment (Puerta del Sol) and Campanella’s classic utopian tract *City of the Sun*. The movement would be named 15–M after the day of the first protest (15 May 2011).

Working Group (15M 2022). The Sun City website lists a total of 37 committees and 32 working groups.

The whole experiment lasted 28 days. As the movement lost momentum and participation waned, the protesters voted to dissolve the camp and 'make it itinerant' (Martín 2011). Had they achieved their goal?

On the one hand, the 15 May protests had been aimed specifically at austerity, with banners reading 'we will not pay for this crisis'. But they had also expressed more radical discontents, calling into question the political system as a whole. Protesters had chanted 'PSOE-PP it's the same shit', referring to the main Left- and Right-wing parties. Thus *El País* qualified the demonstrators as 'anti-system' (2011). It is this 'anti-system' tendency that surfaced when the occupants of Sun City refused to enter into dialogue with, or make demands of, the state. A manifesto published by the occupiers declared that 'we are here because we want a new society' (15M 2022). In some sense, this society was acted out in miniature in Sun City. As Julia Blanco puts it, the protesters' 'demands were expressed through the dynamics of the [camp] itself' (2018, 130). In other words, in demanding 'real democracy', they had tried to enact it themselves.



Acampada Sol, Madrid, 2011

The 'movement of the squares' spread to Greece and Israel and from there to the United States (Gerbaudo 2014). By mid-October, the movement had taken hold in 800 cities worldwide (Castells 2015, 116). Some put the figure as high as 950 (Feigenbaum, Frenzel, and McCurdy 2013, 38). One of its most visible manifestations was Occupy Wall Street (OWS) located in Zuccotti Park, downtown Manhattan, not far from the street it was named after. As in Madrid, the New York camp developed its own organizational ecosystem. It began with a soup kitchen, a first-aid post, a library, and a media centre – the basic institutions replicated in almost every camp. At first, people slept al fresco on beds made of cardboard, but when the city failed to follow through on a sanitation order, occupiers pitched their tents (Chafkin 2012, 81). By late October, the park was choked with people, tents, and generators, making it difficult to move around. At one corner, there was a welcome centre for new arrivals; on the other side, a Legal Team to assist arrestees (Gould-Wartofsky 2015, 69-70). As the occupation wore on, a space developed along the northern perimeter of the park reserved specially for making and displaying signs: the camp's own gallery. There was no shortage of Occupy media. In addition to the massive amount of online content (the Media Working Group was live-streaming much of what was happening at Zuccotti Park), the occupiers produced their own print media. They put out papers such as the *Occupied Wall Street Journal* and the Spanish-language *IndigNación*. There was also a quasi-academic journal called *Tidal* and an unaffiliated *Occupy Gazette* published by *N+1* (Gitlin 2012, 67). There was the daily spectacle of the General Assembly itself, with its abstruse (for outsiders) gestures and codes, and its 'people's mic'.³ The day-to-day management of it all was in the hands of the semi-autonomous working groups. Some of these were structural: Media, Facilitation (the people responsible for running the General Assembly), Accounting (the people looking after the \$650,000 that had been donated to the movement), Sanitation, and so on. Other were theme-based, which could be anything from alternative currencies to herbal medicine (ibid., 68). According to David Graeber, there were over thirty working groups in all (2013, 171). The Spanish scholar Mayo Fuster Morell puts the number closer to one hundred (2012). One

³ Early on, protesters were told by police that the use of megaphones was illegal. Out of this situation evolved the 'people's mic', a means of amplifying the speaker's voice by repeating what they said to the people sitting further away. It could take up to eight rallies for the speaker's voice to reach the edge of the park (Chafkin 2012, 80). The people's mic made communication impractical but poetic.

reporter described the camp as a ‘city within the city, a small, working democracy’ (Matthews 2011). According to Gregory Sholette, it was a ‘functioning commonwealth’ (2017, 121).

Like Tahrir Square and Sun City before it, OWS became a ‘media obsession’ (Schneider 2013, 94). By the second week of October, Occupy represented the single biggest news story in the United States (Gould-Wartofsky 2015, 82). On the one hand, this was the result of the occupiers’ own efforts. Protesters ran dozens of social media accounts, websites, and livestreams. On the other hand, it was only when the mainstream media decided to carry the story that the movement began to see rapid growth.⁴ Once it was in the spotlights, occupiers tried their best to keep it there. The Media Working Group, consisting of hundreds of volunteers, sought to ‘control the narrative’ by shaping the news coverage and producing their own (Chafkin 2012, 79). Before long, all the major networks maintained a permanent presence along the perimeter of the park (Gautney 2013).

Occupy was a compelling spectacle for at least two reasons. First, there was a lot to see at Zuccotti Park – and much of it was produced for media consumption. As Nathan Schneider puts it, the park became ‘a society of spectacle – a place to be seen, and to be recorded, and to be famous’ (2013, 95). That is to say, the more attention was lavished on it, the more performative it became. Yates McKee recounts how occupiers would stand ‘at the edges of the park holding their signs outwardly facing pedestrians, passing vehicles, and journalists’, presenting themselves ‘to be photographed as a kind of sculptural object’ (2016b, 98). Tourist buses added Zuccotti Park to their routes (Gautney 2013). Celebrities visited the park⁵ while high-profile intellectuals delivered speeches.⁶ One of the placards at the camp wryly read: ‘This revolution for display purposes only’ (Taussig 2012, 82). Second, it was not clear what the occupiers wanted. As many have noted, Occupy did not espouse a political programme or recognizable ideology, nor did it make demands of the state – at least not formally. Consequently, as Manuel Castells (2015, 124) points out regarding the Spanish occupations

⁴ On 24 September, a peaceful march triggered a violent police response. Three young women were corralled using plastic netting and then pepper sprayed in the face at point-blank range, supposedly for blocking traffic. A video of the event was posted online, exposing the NYPD’s gratuitous use of force. The story went viral and Occupy became a national sensation, with all the major networks running the story. The size of the camp doubled overnight (Gerbaudo 2012, 113; Gitlin 2012, 29).

⁵ Mark Ruffalo, Russell Simmons, David Crosby, Michael Moore, Billy Brag, and Russell Brand, among others.

⁶ Judith Butler, Slavoj Žižek, Noam Chomsky, Cornel West, Joseph Stiglitz, Naomi Klein, and Chris Hedges.

and Schneider (2013, 93) regarding the American, Occupy called for a style of reporting that the mainstream media were not accustomed to. There were no leaders or spokespeople because it was a horizontal movement. Accordingly, every participant could speak on behalf of the movement with the authority of a leader. This gave rise to a confusing cacophony of voices. On the one hand, Occupy delivered sound bites that could be reported verbatim; on the other hand, the meaning of the whole required interpretation. One of the signs read, 'this is a process not a protest' (Feigenbaum, Frenzel, and McCurdy 2013, 40). Like the residents of Sun City, OWS expressed its discontents through the dynamics of the camp itself. In a way, this was nothing short of revolutionary. The occupiers implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) demanded a radical overhaul of the system.⁷ At the same time, this demand did not take political form. OWS wielded no power and it seemed only a matter of time until the protesters would be evicted from the park. This happened on 15 November, two months into the occupation.

The mode of organizing employed by Occupy was 'prefigurative' in the sense that the means it employed anticipated the goal it hoped to achieve. Before looking more closely at what prefiguration is in the sections that follow, it is useful to look at what it *isn't* by reference to the occupation of Tahrir square. In the literature there is a tendency to lump OWS, Sun City, and Tahrir together (see e.g. van de Sande 2015, 189-90; Raunig 2013, 150). But their outward resemblance conceals important differences. Tahrir became an object of emulation for Occupy because of its apparent success. Thus OWS initially sought to formulate 'one simple demand' because this, they thought, was why Tahrir had succeeded (Adbusters 2011). But unlike the Egyptians, the Spanish and American protesters did not have an autocratic leader that embodied all that was wrong with the system. In Egypt, most of civil society rallied behind the demand that Mubarak must go, creating alliances across political, religious, and generational lines. The grievances of the protesters in Spain and the United States were more diffuse. If their demands were more radical – 'a new society' as the Spanish put it – they were also less clearly defined. One of the largest banners in Tahrir Square read, 'The People Demand the Removal of the Regime' (Shokr 2011). By contrast, OWS saw a multiplicity of

⁷ Schneider notes that the Right-wing media were most attuned to this, registering that Occupy 'denounced capitalism and the American way of life' (2013, 101).

hyper-specific demands – ‘End the Fed’, ‘Bring Back Glass-Steagall’, ‘Abolish Corporate Personhood’ – paired with a demand for ‘true democracy’ (NYC General Assembly 2011a). As one journalist put it, ‘their demand is simply for a better world, which, as far as they’re concerned, they’ve already started building’ (cited in Gitlin 2012, 85).

Whereas Tahrir was goal-oriented, Occupy was process-oriented.⁸ Castells quotes an occupier as saying that ‘the process is the message’ (2015, 187). Gitlin – and many others – also note Occupy’s ‘obsession with process’ (2012, 72).

What matters is the process, more than the product. In fact, the process is the product. Not that the ultimate product (a new society) is irrelevant. But this new society will result from the process, not from a pre-conceived blueprint of what the product should be (Castells 2015, 147).

In other words, the process had to produce its own goals from within itself. It had to be autonomous (self-legislating). On the one hand, we have a protest with a clearly defined goal – to remove Mubarak from power. This allowed for the emergence of a cross-ideological coalition. In Tahrir Square, football fans (Ultras), orthodox Muslims (Salafis), former political prisoners, the Old Left, the New Left, and the Muslim Brotherhood fought alongside each other (Gunning and Baron 2014, 178-9). Moreover, the protest involved all sections of the population. While it was initiated by young, university-educated activists, it was the mass mobilization of workers in the final days of the occupation that led to Mubarak’s downfall (Gunning and Baron 2014, 181; Chomsky 2012, 58-59; Warkotsch 2012, 40-45).⁹ Occupy took a radically different approach. Instead of having one clear goal, it accommodated all grievances and all demands, as evidenced by the striking variety of issues debated within the movement.¹⁰ One occupier put it as follows: ‘whatever your issue was, you could come there

⁸ A note on terminology: I will use ‘movement of the squares’ to refer to the occupations of public space across the Arab world, Europe, and North America. ‘Occupy’ refers only to the protest camps in Europe and the United States (including 15-M).

⁹ In Tunisia it was the other way around: the rising began in the southern mining towns as a protest against high prices and unemployment and was then taken up by middle-class constituencies in the urbanized north (Ayeb 2011).

¹⁰ Castells lists the twenty-eight most frequently heard demands, which include things as diverse as the regulation of high-frequency trading, improving medical care for veterans, internet privacy, and bolstering animal rights (2015, 188-89).

and be in community with folks who want to see change' (quoted in Gould-Wartofsky 2015, 8). The refusal to specify what the movement was about, another occupier says, 'allowed everybody to come and become part of this, everybody who wanted to, everybody who's frustrated, angry or had any kind of issues that they wanted to address felt like this could be their movement' (quoted in Bray 2013, 92). This was one of the factors behind Occupy's incredible uptake. But it also meant that Occupy was all things to all people.

Occupy and Tahrir were categorically different struggles. In Tahrir, the ideological nature of the struggle was momentarily suppressed. The key actors set aside their political differences to pursue a common goal. These differences surfaced, however, as soon as Mubarak had been forced out. Occupy, on the other hand, wanted to build an altogether different society, which required at least some ideological agreement as to how this should be achieved. The 'process' was supposed to produce this agreement, but it never did. In fact, ideological debate as to the goals of the movement proved so contentious that it was suspended almost immediately (Gould-Wartofsky 2015, 50-51). So whereas the occupation of Tahrir Square was subordinated to a predetermined goal, Occupy enacted a process that was supposed to produce its own goals. In this lay its prefigurative character: anyone interested in building a new society could come and join the process. The institutions of governance and social reproduction established in the occupied squares of Madrid and New York were supposed to offer a glimpse of what this new society would be like. Some have claimed that Tahrir was similarly 'a model for an alternative society' (Shokr 2011) or 'a social laboratory in which a new political community was shaped' (van de Sande 2015, 190). But this is to disregard political reality. The coalition that formed within the square was ad hoc. The illusoriness of the 'new political community' became clear in the post-revolutionary period. To claim that the occupation of Tahrir Square was leaderless or horizontal is equally incorrect. First, each faction represented in the square had its leaders and spokespersons.¹¹ More importantly, the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest and most organized political force operating in the square, decided to work with other groups on an equal footing, thus cultivating the illusion of equality as a means to their ultimate (but short-lived) victory (Gunning and Baron 2015, 180). The

¹¹ In contrast to OWS, which declared that 'Occupy Wall Street is (...) party-less, leaderless, by the people and for the people' (NYC General Assembly 2011b).

irony is that a protest which was neither prefigurative nor horizontal gave rise to an unprecedented interest in precisely those methods of organizing.

The Theory of Prefigurative Politics

Occupy has led to an unprecedented interest in the theory and practice of prefiguration. As David Graeber notes, it was Occupy that broke prefigurative politics out of the ‘activist ghetto’ and introduced it to a large audience (2013, 29). Luke Yates estimates that prefiguration is now the ‘dominant orientation’ in social movement practice (2021, 1040). Since 2011, many protests have followed the Occupy template, occupying symbolically charged sites to create alternative social models (see Introduction). But prefiguration is not limited to this style of protest, nor is it limited to social movement practice. In this section I want to explore the general characteristics of prefigurative politics, so as to be better placed to examine the *politics* of prefigurative politics in the sections that follow.

At its most basic, prefigurative politics is to ‘be the change you want to see in the world’. It is to bring into existence the desired social changes by embodying them in the present. Here are three definitions.

By ‘prefigurative’, I mean the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal (Boggs 1977a, 100).

Prefiguration (...) is an enactment of the ultimate values of an ideal society within the very means of struggle for that society (Maeckelbergh 2011b, 302).

We define prefigurative politics as the deliberate experimental implementation of desired future social relations and practices in the here-and-now (Raekstad and Gradin 2020, 19).

While these definitions lay their stresses differently (e.g. Boggs emphasizes politics, Maeckelbergh values, Raekstad and Gradin the experimental dimension), each defines prefigurative politics in terms of the alignment of means and ends. Importantly, they do not define what the ends are. Maeckelbergh writes that ‘prefiguration (...) is primarily concerned with questions of *how*’ (2009, 94). Similarly, Raekstad and Gradin write that prefiguration ‘is not an alternative to struggle against our society’s oppression, exploitation, and injustice; it’s a way of carrying that struggle out’ (2020, 20).

Prefigurative politics is concerned with the *how*, not the *what*; with *form* rather than content. This accounts for the concept’s extraordinary flexibility. Practices and spaces that are said to incorporate prefigurative principles include ‘non-profit and cooperative cafes, student organisations, (...) social centres, communal living spaces, and art collectives’ (Raekstad and Gradin 2020, 22), lifestyle choices such as polyamory and anti-consumerism (Portwood-Stacer 2013), squats (Yates 2015), teaching (Zavala and Golden 2016), the transition towns movement (Allen 2017), and software development (Törnberg 2021, 100). In academic discourse, the concept of prefiguration leads a similarly itinerant existence. Extending far beyond social movement studies, the concept comes up in disciplines as varied as ‘the politics of art, theatrical practice, community work, alternative libraries, consumption, philosophy, critical theory, translation, community psychology and computer games studies’ (Yates 2021, 1040). Since prefiguration is essentially concerned with form, it can in principle accommodate any content; it has the status of *method*.

Prefigurative politics is the practice of changing (aspects of) society by creating a positive alternative immediately. Since it does not specify what needs to change, only how to change it, it is compatible with a large number of causes. One can think of any number of social issues that can be addressed through prefigurative action, e.g. pollution (through recycling), animal welfare (through veganism), global warming (by driving an electric car) racism and sexism (by being sensitive to informal hierarchies of race and gender), patriarchy (by practising polyamory), and so on. We might refer to this as *individual* prefigurative action. By itself, this kind of action is unlikely to change society since it leaves its structure untouched. *Collective* prefigurative action therefore experiments with alternative institutions and forms of governance. This is what Occupy became known for. Through its General Assembly, it tried to

enact a form of direct democracy, enabling large numbers of people to participate in collective decision-making. Individual and collective prefigurative action appear to be at odds: one focuses on lifestyle and identity, the other on representation and organization (cf. Raekstad 2018, 362-3). What connects the two, however, is a concern with *form*. Each is motivated by the desire to bring actions in line with principles, to reconcile means and ends, theory and practice. What lifestyle changes achieve on a personal level, alternative structures of governance are expected to bring about on a collective level: a social body that acts in accordance with its own principles. Note, again, that the goal itself is not defined. The point is not to achieve anything in particular, but to achieve whatever end individuals and collectives decide on. This is particularly evident in the case of collective prefigurative action. To the extent that it prefigures a free society, it must leave the content of that society radically open. It must, in other words, prefigure freedom itself.¹²

When we look at a more formal definition of prefigurative politics, it becomes evident that its criterion is *autonomy*. Prefigurative politics is most commonly explained in terms of the unity of a number of polarities.

Practising prefigurative politics means removing the temporal distinction between the struggle in the *present* towards a goal in the *future*; instead, the struggle and the goal, the real and the ideal, become one in the present (Maeckelbergh 2009, 66-7).

Maeckelbergh mentions three oppositions that are supposedly reconciled in prefigurative politics: present and future, means and ends, and real and ideal (or theory and practice). The same polarities are mentioned by other authors, indicating a large degree of consensus in the literature. Thus van de Sande argues that in prefigurative practice 'there is no (...) qualitative difference between means and ends' (2013). Yates speak of 'means-ends equivalence' (2015, 4), Gordon of 'means-ends unity' (2018, 523). Graeber argues that 'you will never achieve the ends at all unless the means are themselves a model for the world you wish to create' (2013, 144). Raekstad and Gradin argue that 'we cannot use hierarchical organisations to achieve a non-hierarchical society' (2020, 30). As to the foreshortening of the future, van de Sande calls

¹² In this thesis 'prefigurative politics' refers specifically to collective prefiguration.

it the 'contemporaneity of the future and of the present' (2017, 41); Yates refers to it as 'prolepsis' (2015, 4); Raekstad and Gradin call it 'building tomorrow today' (2020). Regarding the unity of theory and practice, Graeber argues that the movement's ideology is expressed through its organizational forms (2002, 70). Van de Sande argues that the goal is not to 'practice what you preach'. Rather, in prefigurative action such a distinction between 'practising' and 'preaching' cannot be made' (2013, 233). For Sitrin and Azzellini it is about making 'our principles (...) consistent with our actions' (2014, 153). W.J.T. Mitchell simply says that the occupiers 'were saying something by doing something' (2012, 5).

The abstraction of this definition – based on the unity of means and ends, theory and practice, present and future – conceals the fact that it is simply a description of autonomous action (or self-transformation). At the risk of slightly misrepresenting the point, I will illustrate it with an example. If I want to become a doctor, I must employ means that are consistent with my goal (e.g. study medicine). I must apply the principles I glean from textbooks in my medical practice (and perhaps even contribute to better textbooks as my practice develops). And I must, insofar as possible, exhibit the values, knowledge, and behaviour of a qualified doctor, thus prefiguring what I am to become. Of course the analogy has its limitations. First, in the case of prefigurative politics the goal is to change (rather than reproduce) social relations. Second, the analogy poorly describes collective autonomous action, which would depend on an effective set of institutions for defining (and redefining) collective goals. Third, the example describes a series of actions guided by a future goal, but prefigurative politics tends to collapse the difference between an action in the present and a goal in the future, so that the aim is simply to enact the desired changes immediately (Swain 2019, 55). Nonetheless, the example illustrates an important point, namely that prefigurative politics aspires to self-governance – that is, autonomy – on an individual and collective level.

One of the paradoxes of prefigurative politics is that it emphasizes 'concrete alternatives' and 'direct intervention', but as an orientation to action it is completely formal, empty. On the prefigurative view, the aim of politics is not to pursue any goal in particular but to allow people 'to decide for themselves what their goals are' (Maeckelbergh 2011b, 325). Insofar as a collective aims to prefigure a free society – organizing itself, as Graeber says, as if it was already free (2013, 173) – it cannot take its content (its collective aims) for granted. It needs

a set of institutions to determine itself. Hence the emphasis on *process* – a shorthand for the rudimentary institutions allowing people to collectively chart a way forward. We saw this with Occupy, whose emphasis on process was arguably its defining characteristic. In one of the few official statements it put out it called on ‘the people of the world’ to ‘create a process to address the problems we face, and generate solutions accessible to everyone’ (NYC General Assembly 2011a). Note that the emphasis was on the process, not the problems, for the process would decide *which* problems to address. The process became a model for a new political order. As Graeber writes,

was it our job to come up with a vision for a new political order, or to help create a way for everyone to do so? (...) If we were all attracted to the idea of creating General Assemblies, it’s because we saw them as a forum for the overwhelming majority of Americans locked out of the political debate to develop their own ideas and visions (2013, 39).

It is this focus on self-determination that, as Chris Haddix puts it, makes prefigurative politics a ‘practice of freedom’ (2011). He adds that such a practice has ‘no terminal point or end other than the practice itself’ (ibid.). It is, in other words, an end in itself. As a description of a free collectivity this is certainly correct. Politics, however, is traditionally understood as a means to an end. We begin to see, then, how prefigurative politics’ emphasis on *figuring* autonomy might stand in the way of its ability to *realize* it.

The redescription of prefigurative politics in terms of its criterion (autonomy) allows us to draw out a number of additional characteristics. I want to highlight three: the need to establish the conditions for autonomous action (by way of an autonomous zone), the emphasis on construction rather than critique, and the implicit claim that the form of the prefigurative gesture is exemplary of a free society.

First, given that autonomy is ruled out (to a greater or lesser degree) by existing social conditions, prefigurative politics must establish a space of exception in which a different set of conditions can obtain. This is the ‘autonomous zone’. Most often this is a clearly demarcated physical site (a square, a building, a plot of land, or a body), but, as Hakim Bey

points out, it can also be a virtual space (2002, 117). At one extreme, it suspends the authority of the state, as did CHAZ and ZAD (discussed in the Introduction), and, to a lesser extent, Occupy; at another, it is no more than a virtual community. Most often the 'autonomous zone' brackets dominant norms, habits, codes, etc. without challenging the legal order (think, for example, of intentional communities or lifestyle choices). The key feature of the autonomous zone is that it operates according to its own logic. Bey, who popularized the notion, writes that the autonomous zone 'liberates an area' in order to establish 'a microcosm of (...) a free culture', allowing us to 'work toward that goal while at the same time experiencing some of its benefits here and now' (ibid.). The autonomous zone establishes the conditions for autonomous action by suspending dominant social relations. But the experience of past autonomous zones casts doubt on the cogency of this notion. As a rule, the boundary established by the autonomous zone is no more than symbolic. Both CHAZ and Occupy were overwhelmed by social contradictions originating beyond their respective enclaves. Moreover, as Bey himself emphasizes, the free spaces of prefigurative politics are often temporary, thus calling into question their efficacy as a means to establish a free society.¹³

Second, within the circumscribed space of the autonomous zone, prefigurative politics constructs an alternative set of social relations (a different way of relating to the world, oneself, and others). This can take the form of a squat, a commune, a social project, an act of consumption, a way of being (i.e. an identity), etc. Think for example of intentional communities attempting to resist 'the logic of capital accumulation [by] creating new forms of working, living and being in common' (Ruivenkamp and Hilton 2017, 4). One can also think of self-managing cooperatives and social centres, or art projects in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, allowing people to 'gain, or regain, some degree of control over some aspects of their lives' (Kelly 2016, 54). The point I want to stress is that prefigurative politics deals with perceived social problems by affirming an *alternative*; it rejects critique in favour of *construction*. More precisely, it rejects critical social action in favour of constructive social action. If the goal of the former is to abolish itself, the latter seeks to lead by example, building out from the autonomous zone. In this sense, it is a 'practice of freedom' rather than a

¹³ For a critique of the TAZ, see Bookchin (1995, 20ff.).

practice trying to overcome *unfreedom*. What is often forgotten is that the alternative is at the same time supposed to be the means of its realization on a larger scale. As Maeckelbergh writes, prefigurative politics adopts

a strategy that transforms existing power relations not by pointing out what is wrong with the existing structures and demanding that these be changed, nor by verbally convincing others that alternatives are possible, but by actively setting up alternative structures so that people can *experience* for themselves what is possible and get actively involved (2011a, 16-17).

While the alternative is supposed to bring some practical benefits, it is always at the same time an advertisement: an attempt to expand the community of actors by encouraging others to get involved.¹⁴ In this sense, the strategy of prefigurative politics is not so different from the anarchist propaganda by the deed. The aim is to show that the system can be changed through conspicuous and highly symbolic acts of resistance. This is no longer done through the killing of monarchs and generals but by acts that are exemplary in their social content. There are precedents for this within the anarchist tradition. George Woodcock describes the libertarian communities of pacifist anarchists as ‘a kind of peaceful version of the propaganda by deed’ (1962, 21). Similarly, Uri Gordon writes that ‘the most effective anarchist propaganda will always be the actual implementation and display of anarchist social relations (...) It is much easier for people to engage with the idea that life without bosses or leaders is possible when such a life is displayed, if on a limited scale, in actual practice’ (2008, 38-9).¹⁵

Third, prefigurative politics takes the form of the social alternative it establishes to be *exemplary* – not just in the self-evident sense but in the emphatic sense. On the one hand, prefigurative politics is exemplary by definition (i.e. relative to the goal) since the aim of the action is to prefigure the goal it strives towards. But it also presumes that the action is exemplary *of a free society* since the aim is always (implicitly or explicitly) to increase autonomy. At its most ambitious, prefigurative politics creates a *model* of an autonomous

¹⁴ Abbie Hoffman describes the activities of the Yippies as ‘an advertisement for revolution’ (1970, 138). Graeber, in his post-mortem of Occupy, writes that ‘the camps were always primarily an advertisement, a defiant experiment in libertarian communism that was never going to be allowed to last for very long’ (2012, 427).

¹⁵ I return to the propagandistic nature of the exemplary deed in Chapter 3.

collectivity. The frequent allusions to freedom in the Occupy literature must be understood in this light (see e.g. Haddix 2011; Mansoor, Marcus, and Spaulding 2012; Feigenbaum, Frenzel, and McCurdy 2013, 219; Graeber 2013, 172-3). The same is true of assertions, now commonplace, that artworks (in the form of social interventions or ameliorative projects) can be ‘models of sociability’ (Bourriaud 2002, 70). Put in the most general way: according to the logic of prefigurative politics, the ‘alternative’ exemplifies the *form* of autonomy, i.e. of (individual and collective) self-governance.¹⁶

Prefiguration as Political Practice

In a way, ‘prefigurative politics’ is a contradiction in terms, if by politics we mean a set of ideas not just about how to govern an area or state, but to what end. Since prefigurative politics does not specify the goal – since it is concerned with the *how*, not the *what* – there are no ‘restrictions on the substantive ideological content’ of prefigurative politics (Raekstad and Gradin 2020, 44). It is in principle compatible with any ideology. The emphasis many place on its origins in the socialist – specifically the anarchist – tradition is therefore somewhat mystifying (see e.g. Graeber 2002, 2013; Bray 2013; van de Sande 2015; Gordon 2018; Raekstad 2018; Raekstad and Gradin 2020). It is not my intention to dispute the historical parallels, which are undeniable. Present-day activists borrow the *idea* of prefiguration from historical anarchism.¹⁷ Moreover, contemporary activists, like historical anarchists, interpret the concept in such a way as to require abstention from the political struggle for state power. However, the politics of anarchism is not prefigurative but *anarchist*.¹⁸ The difference is that

¹⁶ Whether this is in fact attainable will be discussed in the next chapter.

¹⁷ The idea of prefiguration is often traced back to the Sonvilier Circular, a pamphlet published in 1871 by the anarchist Jura Federation. It concludes that

The society of the future should be nothing other than the universalization of the organization with which the International will have endowed itself. We must, therefore, have a care to ensure that that organization comes as close as we may to our ideal. How can we expect an egalitarian and free society to emerge from an authoritarian organization? Impossible. The International, as the embryo of the human society of the future, is required in the here and now to faithfully mirror our principles of freedom and federation and shun any principle leaning towards authority and dictatorship (quoted in Graham 2005, 97-98).

¹⁸ Historical anarchism employed a diversity of tactics, which included terrorism. The idea that it was strictly or even predominantly prefigurative is false. The ‘new anarchism’ (Graeber 2002) has done much to popularize the concept within anarchist studies (Yates 2021, 1039-40). The notion that prefigurative social action is the *only* legitimate means to bring about social change is closely associated with horizontalism (see below).

anarchism is a *politics* which is partly defined by its *goal* whereas prefigurative politics is not really a politics at all but rather an orientation to action (cf. Yates 2021, 1040). Prefiguration is ideologically agnostic and therefore can be paired with any ideology, as demonstrated by fascist initiatives with a prefigurative intent.¹⁹ To think of prefiguration as a politics is to conceive of politics in non-ideological terms. While most adherents of prefigurative politics are on the Left and many call themselves socialists, the practical manifestation of this politics demonstrates its post-ideological character. It is a politics of *form* concerned primarily with questions of policy, process, and organization. In this section, I want to highlight, first, the post-ideological character of prefigurative politics, taking Occupy as my example. I then want to home in on the origins of prefigurative politics. As I have said, the emphasis on anarchism as the source of prefigurative contestation today obscures more than it clarifies. I will argue that we will gain a much clearer understanding of prefigurative politics if we see it as contingent on the New Left's *break* with the socialist tradition. My claim is not just that prefigurative politics and socialist prefiguration are different, but that prefigurative politics is incompatible with a socialist project in principle.

Occupy wanted to be political without being ideological. That is, it avoided ideology by focusing on questions of process and organization. Occupy's 'horizontalism' became its most widely publicized feature. This is noteworthy because the term specifically denotes an organizational form; it says nothing about what the occupiers stood for. Unlike previous social movements (e.g. the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, the anti-nuclear movement), Occupy's concerns were not immediately obvious. Instead, it became known as a movement without leaders – or rather one in which everyone was a leader; it was not leaderless but 'leaderful' (Hammond 2013, 505). Occupy rejected all hierarchy and representation as inherently undemocratic (see e.g. Sitrin and Azzellini 2014). It refused to organize itself into a political party (a 'vertical' form of organization) and in that sense resembled anarchism. But in its anti-authoritarianism it went much further than historical anarchism did. It stipulated that decisions be made by consensus. In fact, OWS used a system

¹⁹ Bastion Social in France (founded in 2017; dissolved in 2019 by state decree) and CasaPound in Italy (founded in 2003) run neo-fascist community centres, which organise various recreational activities. CasaPound has its own band and theatre company, radio station, online TV channel, and a monthly magazine. Both organizations occupy abandoned buildings to establish communal living spaces and organize community projects for the poor (e.g. housing campaigns and food banks), though they exclude migrants from their programmes.

of ‘modified consensus’, which meant that proposals could pass provided that at least 90% of participants were in favour (Gould-Wartofsky 2015, 48).²⁰ However, this concession to majority voting did not prevent the system from grinding to a halt. It was hard to agree on anything, let alone to produce ideological consensus. As many report, the mood at Occupy’s general assemblies was often fractious (see e.g. Grueso 2012; Bray 2013, 88-90; Schneider 2013, 106-9; Castells 2015, 133; Gould-Wartofsky 2015, 50-51; McKee 2016b, 102). To avoid contentious ideological questions, the occupiers tried focusing on specific issues.²¹ The NYC General Assembly called on people around the world to ‘create a process to address the problems we face, and generate solutions accessible to everyone’ (2011a). However, there was always the question of *which* issues to address and *how*. Thus the occupiers produced a long list of grievances – which included illegal foreclosures, student debt, race- and gender-based discrimination, a lack of privacy on the internet, limitations on collective bargaining, cruelty to animals, and more – but did not introduce priorities (ibid.). To do so would have required a measure of ideological agreement.

Occupy’s lack of ideological substance – as well as many other problems it faced – are often traced back to its adoption of a system of consensus decision-making (see e.g. Cornell 2012). However, to think that the consensus system was Occupy’s chief problem is to assume the post-ideological attitude one is criticizing; it is to say that Occupy’s shortcomings were a matter of *form*. The problem is not consensus but prefiguration. Occupy attempted what I have called ‘collective prefiguration’. Its focus was not on the lifestyle choices of individuals but on bringing people together to prefigure a free society. As I pointed out in the previous section, collective prefiguration is necessarily concerned with questions of process (i.e. political form) because it cannot take the content of a free society for granted. It needs a set of institutions to determine itself. Collective prefiguration therefore turns on the question of *institutional design*. What is at issue is not *how* this microcosm of a free society determines itself – whether through a system of consensus or some other form of democratic decision-

²⁰ For more information on how Zuccotti Park’s General Assembly functioned, see NYC General Assembly (2022).

²¹ Ideological struggle took the form of a debate on demands – what to demand or whether to demand anything at all. This is generally framed as a debate between ‘horizontal’ anarchists and ‘vertical’ socialists, i.e. between anti-statist and statist tendencies (see e.g. Graeber 2013, 31ff.; Gould-Wartofsky 2015, 47ff.). What has been insufficiently noted is that this debate refracts uncertainty about the ends of the movement itself (cf. Bray 2013, 90-95).

making – but that collective prefiguration *necessarily* elevates process to politics. Prefigurative politics is, by its own admission, a ‘politics of process’ (Maeckelbergh 2011a, 6).²²

Prefigurative politics does not have any ideological content of its own. Its content is determined by the beliefs of those who come together to practise prefiguration. What makes prefigurative politics post-political is that it assumes a world in which ideological differences are so shallow that they can be reconciled through correct – fair, inclusive, democratic, etc. – procedure. In the prefigurative imaginary, people are stripped of all ideological attributes. In Madrid, protesters chanted, ‘We are not a collective. We are not an association. We don’t answer to any union. We are *people*’ (Grueso 2012, 18:57). When an anarchist union joined one of their marches, they were asked to remove their flags and insignia because the *indignados* desired to remain ‘non-sectarian’ (Bray 2018). But to suppress sectarianism is not to overcome it. The Occupy movement did not find a way to address the ideological obstacles standing in the way of cooperation, as is clear from the movement’s disintegration along sectarian lines.²³ According to some of its proponents, prefigurative politics accommodates ‘multiple visions of the future society’ (Maeckelbergh 2011b, 302) and a ‘multiplicity’ of goals (Sitrin and Azzellini 2014, 42). But this is not borne out in practice, as Occupy’s General Assemblies vividly demonstrate. Occupy’s ‘multiple visions’ became a de facto lack of vision as debate about the means and ends of the movement ground to a halt. In short, prefigurative politics’ ability to accommodate multiple goals actually assumes a baseline of understanding, an agreement on fundamentals, which it itself cannot produce.

While understanding itself as a movement for radical change, Occupy reproduced the political deadlock of the existing system.

²² Graeber inadvertently makes the same point. In response to the charge that prefigurative politics lacks a ‘coherent ideology’, he argues that the ‘new forms of organization *are* its ideology’ (2002, 70).

²³ In broad terms, Occupy was split between ‘social democrats’ who wanted to participate in electoral politics, giving rise to Podemos in Spain and attempts to ‘capture’ the Labour Party in the UK and the Democratic Party in the USA, and ‘anarchists’ who desired to remain autonomous. However, few occupiers assumed a fixed ideological position; most oscillated between statist and anti-statist poles (see below).

[Occupy] adopted the procedure-oriented approach of the very establishment it claims to be protesting against. Paradoxically, it has embraced one of the least attractive features of contemporary Western public life, which is the tendency to look for organisational solutions to what are in fact political and moral problems (Furedi 2011).

Occupy's emphasis on process tended to stifle political debate. The result was to drive ideological differences underground, locking parties into an uncomfortable *modus vivendi* that foreclosed effective action. As Mark Bray points out, the inability to pass a proposal or resolution results in 'an inherent bias toward the status quo' (2018). There were other ways in which Occupy favoured the status quo. First, while aiming to be radically inclusive, it effectively excluded large segments of the population. Taking part in Occupy's horizontal organizations required an abundance of time and a measure of personal autonomy. Therefore 'full participation' was effectively reserved for 'full-time activists, part-time students, and freelance professionals' (Gould-Wartofsky 2015, 218). Second, while claiming to be leaderless, Occupy produced an *informal* leadership composed of the better educated, well-connected, middle-class participants.²⁴ Of course it was only natural that Occupy should produce its own cadre. But since leadership positions were not acknowledged, it was not clear who the leaders were nor could they be held accountable. Third, while prefigurative politics understands itself in rigorously anti-statist terms, the proliferation of committees and working groups in the Occupy camps soon resembled a mushrooming bureaucracy. Occupy did not do away with the state but reproduced it. Many of the working groups represented attempts to think through the problems of society (e.g. the working group on alternative currencies in New York or the 'Long-term Policy Working Group' and 'Short-term Policy Working Group' in Madrid). They did so by coming up with *policy* – to be implemented by the state – not by empowering people to solve their own problems.

Occupy wanted to prefigure a free society, but in many ways it replicated the existing order. Ideologically it failed to stake out an independent course. Indeed, insofar as prefigurative

²⁴ Rafal Soborski makes the same point regarding the World Social Forum and alter-globalization movement (Soborski 2018 chap. 4).

politics is ideologically agnostic, it conceals a predilection for existing social relations. In its de facto exclusion of workers, in the individualism of its 'leaderless' structure, and in its focus on autonomy, Occupy hewed to the liberal progressivism that is so popular among the educated middle classes.²⁵ It is strange, then, that the literature should insist on prefiguration's origins in anarchism. Prefigurative politics, a term that does not come into circulation until the 1960s, is a historically specific practice that emerges well after the heyday of anarchism. Despite certain analytic resemblances, anarchism and prefigurative politics are qualitatively different practices. One is socialist, the other post-socialist.

Prefigurative Politics and the New Left

Prefigurative politics in its present form originated in the milieu of the 1960s New Left. The 'New Left' is a broad and contested category, often used to designate the 'spirit of '68' (Horn 2007). Demographically, it was the rebellion of the baby boomers, their coming of age in a society that had achieved unprecedented levels of wealth, was conformist and patriarchal, and in which the Left, under Stalin's influence, had become conservative and authoritarian. The New Left thus rejected the 'Old Left' and changed in crucial ways what political dissent looked like (*ibid.*, 152-55). The changes that must be mentioned here are fourfold. First, the New Left abandoned the notion that the masses of working people are the agents of change, emphasizing the agency of students, intellectuals, and other elements of the radicalized middle classes, as well as ethnic minorities, immigrants, and homosexuals (Keucheyan 2014, 48). Thus in his 1960 'Letter to the New Left' C. Wright Mills argued that the 'labor metaphysic' was an obsolete notion inherited from 'Victorian Marxism'; not workers but students and intellectuals were the 'historical agency of change' (2008, 263, 261). Second, the New Left substituted activism around a multitude of issues – civil rights, gay rights, women's rights, abortion rights, the Vietnam war, free speech, the environment, gender roles, and so – for a critique of society as a whole. The critique of capitalist class relations gave way to a moral and

²⁵ Eli Schmitt, himself an occupier, underscores the occupiers' 'anxiety about exclusion (...) and concomitant intense desire for inclusion', which, he says, are products of a 'liberal education' (2011, 19, 18). He distinguishes the values espoused by Occupy from those of 'middle America', who believe in meritocracy, and 'professional leftists', who seek to address class (*ibid.*, 18).

cultural critique of the consequences of capitalist affluence (Sotirakopoulos 2016, 27). Thus the imperative was to counter consumerism, individualism, and materialism by embracing alternative values. Third, in contrast to its predecessor, the New Left laid a heavy emphasis on culture, conceiving of lifestyle as a possible form of dissent. This would come to be known as the counterculture. Accordingly, the 1960s gave rise to numerous politicized cultural movements: the Situationists in France, the Provos in the Netherlands, the Hippies, Yippies, and Diggers in the United States, Gruppe 47 in Germany, and the *capelloni* in Italy, among others. The fourth difference I want to highlight is that the New Left abandoned the organizational forms of the Old Left such as political parties and trade unions, criticizing them for being overly rigid and hierarchical.

Not unlike social practice's attempt to go 'beyond critique', the New Left attempted to go beyond the negative conception of social action it had inherited from the Old Left. If socialists had organized on the basis of that which must be overcome (i.e. labour as value), the practices of the 1960s gradually lose this self-critical aspect. Social action comes to be about figuring a positive content (i.e. affirming an alternative); it becomes 'prefigurative' in the present sense of the word. Accordingly, on each of the four points highlighted above, the New Left substituted a positive for a negative content. First, the New Left rallied round a multitude of issues that could be addressed through prefigurative action. For instance, racism, sexism, and pollution could be addressed by 'being the change' (as well as by legislation enforcing the desired behaviour). Objective social contradictions like class cannot be addressed in this manner. Second, the New Left replaced an agency that strives towards its own self-abolition (the working class) with a positive agency – various middle-class constituencies that *already* embody the desired changes. Third, the New Left traded a critique of the self-contradiction of Enlightenment values (become 'bourgeois ideology') for an emphasis on *alternative* values. Hence the experiments with alternative lifestyles and counterinstitutions, which were held in some sense to be superior to the society that produced them.²⁶ Fourth and last, for mass parties with a clear organizational structure, the New Left substituted fluid, non-hierarchical

²⁶ Paul Starr gives the following examples of counterinstitutions: 'communes, cooperatives, free clinics, free schools, free universities, counseling centers, day-care centers, encounter groups and other forms of collective therapy and 'consciousness-raising', 'underground' newspapers, grass-roots community organizations, public-interest law firms, and peace, environmental, women's, civil-rights, and consumer groups' (1979, 245).

organizations, or ‘networks’, which emphasized participation in decision-making and direct action, thereby ‘prefiguring’ a more democratic social system. Whereas the organizations of the Old Left enjoyed a certain permanence, the New Left’s organizations had a more cyclical character – not only because they lacked a permanent infrastructure, but because they served a limited purpose, springing up periodically around specific issues (Epstein 2002, 345-46).

Thus organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and the Youth International Party, known as the Yippies, tried to ‘be the change’ in a way that is incommensurable with the socialist movement preceding them. The reason is simple: socialists strove towards a qualitatively different future, the kind that cannot be prefigured, whereas the prefigurative politics of the New Left was oriented towards the present; it sought to ‘build tomorrow today’.²⁷ Socialism – a classless society – can only be ‘prefigured’ by facing up to the class character of society, that is, *negatively*. As I wrote in a previous section, prefigurative politics is constructive. It is a politics that addresses any number of issues by performatively resolving them within a circumscribed space, thus creating an ‘alternative’. It leads by example: it wants to see its ‘alternatives’ generalized. But the goal of socialism is to *abolish* labour as value, and thereby the class character of society. Mass working-class organizations do not embody an alternative but strive towards their own dissolution. What they prefigure is the working class’s assumption to power – the revolution, not socialism. At this point new social forms will emerge that cannot be prefigured. To put it more formally, prefigurative politics is positive. It functions by creating a microcosm of the situation it wants to see generalized. It seeks to overcome a specific social problem by instantiating the counterfactual. Socialist prefiguration, on the other hand, is negative or self-critical. It does not prefigure socialism but organizes on the basis of that which must be overcome. The reason is clear: while we have a conception of what it is like to live in a society without racism, sexism, and pollution, we have no idea of the social forms that will emerge in a classless society. Prefiguration in the positive sense is incompatible with the idea of qualitative change.²⁸

²⁷ ‘Building tomorrow today’ is the subtitle of Raekstad and Gradin’s book – the first dedicated to prefigurative politics (Raekstad and Gradin 2020).

²⁸ Socialism can be defined negatively by what it is not (class society) or positively as greater freedom. The problem with the positive definition is that it yields only the most abstract goal: the free self-transformation of society, individual and collective autonomy. It is completely open-ended. Consequently, it introduces the

Prefigurative politics as it is practised today is a product of the New Left's *break* with socialism.²⁹ We see this in the shift from a negative to a positive conception of social action, but also in the New Left's rejection of the theoretico-ontological assumptions made by socialists. Raekstad and Gradin usefully summarize the key differences:

Many of the core advocates of prefigurative politics (...) adopt what today is called a poststructuralist conception of human beings and society (Raekstad and Gradin 2020, 60).

A commitment to prefiguration is (...) based on a capillary view of power (Raekstad and Gradin 2020, 131; see also Graziano 2017, 183-84).

Conversely, in the socialist tradition power is understood to be concentrated in centralized institutions (the state, army, press, etc.) while human beings and society are viewed through the prism of class.³⁰ The 1960s saw the transformation of these assumptions. As Razmig Keucheyan writes, one of the 'main characteristics of the critical thinking of the 1960s and 70s' was the 'gradual abandonment of the "statocentric" conception of power in favour of a "decentralized" approach' (2014, 48). The pre-eminent theorist of this new conception of power is Michel Foucault. The modern state, he argues, should be understood not as an apparatus of 'exploitation and domination' but as a 'matrix of individualization':

problem of self-definition that Occupy struggled with. Traditionally, therefore, socialism has been defined negatively. This is the reason for Marx's reluctance to specify the content of the free society: it cannot be prefigured; it is up to future generations to decide. Therefore socialists do not pursue autonomy *in general* but seek to remove a restriction on autonomy specific to existing society, the shorthand for which is class. The absence of class cannot be prefigured since it is premised on the negation of objective social conditions. To create an 'autonomous zone' – an egalitarian commune, say, where the means of production are held in common – does not solve the problem. Practically, such communities are reliant on the commodities produced in class society. Theoretically, they are no more than the abstract negation of the society they reject. In other words, they have no positive content of their own but are defined by their opposite. Historically, they do not go beyond but fall below existing society, reproducing earlier (agrarian, communal) social forms that are unable to provide the surplus required to maintain existing standards of living, let alone radically to improve them.

²⁹ One of the few commentators who has this clearly in view is Maeckelbergh (see esp. her 2011b; see also Bray 2018; Soborski 2018, chap. 4).

³⁰ For Marxists, this class-based conception of people and society is grounded in a dialectical social ontology.

a very sophisticated structure, in which individuals can be integrated, under one condition: that this individuality would be shaped in a new form and submitted to a set of very specific patterns (1982, 783).

To 'liberate the individual from the state', therefore, is to liberate the individual 'from the type of individualization which is linked to the state':

We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries (ibid., 785).

Power is no longer held to be concentrated in the state but said to express itself through forms of 'individualization'.³¹ It assumes a 'capillary' form, pervading society at all levels. This results in a double transformation. First, the field of political struggle comes to be located beyond state institutions. Second, the object of politics changes. It no longer addresses structural, state-sanctioned forms of domination such as class exploitation but issues revolving around identity. On the one hand, we have the emergence of micro-politics; on the other, a new concept of domination which we might call 'oppression'. Foucault defines oppression as that which 'ties [the individual] to his own identity in a constraining way' (ibid., 781). If exploitation can be understood as the domination of labour, oppression is the domination of identity or individuality. Consequently, we witness a change in emphasis from objective (historical) conditions to subjective experience. While class is pegged to one's place in an objective, economic hierarchy, oppression is indexed to one's experiences and feelings.

This shift in the focus of politics – from the macro to the micro and from the objective to the subjective – produces a compelling argument to 'be the change'. Oppression (as opposed to exploitation) plays out in the informal interactions between people. As such, it can be addressed as a function of one's behaviour. The desired changes can in most cases be *embodied*. Hence why 'the personal-is-political argument for prefigurative politics (...) is one of our main justifications for the necessity of prefigurativism' (Raekstad and Gradin 2020, 35).

³¹ It is noteworthy that state power ceases to be a theoretical problem for the Left when it is no longer practically available (see e.g. Foucault 1977).

Class, on the other hand, is a ‘real abstraction’ (Sohn-Rethel 1973, 31). It does not play out in face-to-face interactions but is the result of an *impersonal* process. It ‘goes on behind the backs of the producers’ (Marx 1996, 54). The absence of this process cannot be prefigured. The absence of oppression, on the other hand, *can* be prefigured.³²

Grounding prefigurative politics in the workers’ struggles of the nineteenth century gives it a revolutionary imprimatur but does little to clarify the debate. Socialists (and this includes anarchists) do not prefigure socialism positively but negatively – by facing up to the objective contradictions that stand in the way of realizing their goal. Prefigurative politics, on the other hand, is positive. It creates a (democratic, inclusive, fair, just, etc.) alternative, which it hopes to generalize. As I noted in the introduction to this section, certain tendencies within the socialist tradition (anarchism, left communism) share with contemporary activism the notion that prefiguration requires abstention from politics (i.e. the struggle for state power). In the next section I will reconstruct the Marxist concept of prefiguration to show that prefiguration can (and ought to be) integrated with politics. If the literature lacks a clear account of the difference between socialist (negative) and contemporary (positive) prefiguration, it is equally silent on historical (orthodox) Marxism. It is generally assumed that Marxism, because of its ‘statism’, is not prefigurative or against prefiguration on principle. But as Chris Cutrone points out, Marxism was once understood as the ‘effective union of social and political action’ – of prefigurative action and instrumental political action (2019). I will then contrast the Marxist concept of prefiguration with that of the New Left, which is both exclusively social and affirmative, giving us the practice we have today.

³² This does not mean that it can be *resolved* through prefigurative action. On the socialist view, oppression will not disappear short of addressing the underlying social cause that objectively divides people.

The Concept of Prefiguration in Marxism and the New Left

The final goal of socialism constitutes the only decisive factor distinguishing the social democratic movement from bourgeois democracy and from bourgeois radicalism.

—Rosa Luxemburg (1908)

The new left (...) attempt[ed] to found a new politics of participation and process.

—Wini Breines (1980)

Prefiguration renders the process and the goal inseparable; the process becomes the goal.

—Marianne Maeckelbergh (2009)

Prefigurative politics was first discussed at length by the Marxist author Carl Boggs in two papers published in 1977.³³ He was the first not only to offer a systematic account of prefiguration but to critique it. Boggs's definition of prefiguration is one of the most cited.

By 'prefigurative', I mean the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal (1977a, 100).

There are several ironies here. First, this definition does not specify the essential *content* of prefigurative practice in the socialist tradition, though it is present in the title of one of Boggs's papers: 'workers' control'.³⁴ Second, Boggs's definition is praised by contemporary authors for being 'broad', i.e. for including 'culture' and 'human experience' (Raekstad and Gradin

³³ While Boggs introduced the term into academic debate, he did not coin it. André Gorz had used the term to somewhat similar effect almost ten years before (see Gorz 1968). Lucio Magri employs the term in the post-socialist sense (see Magri 1970). Regarding the origin of the term, see also Gordon (2018).

³⁴ Gordon (2018, 527-8) points out that in one paper Boggs gives a formal definition (cited above) while in the other paper he gives a substantive definition, which specifies the goal: 'popular self-emancipation, collective social and authority relations, socialist democracy' (1977b, 359). The difference is material since it defines (or begins to define) a politics. On the other hand, Boggs's 'substantive' definition remains formal since it defines the end positively (see footnote 79 above).

2020, 19). However, elsewhere in the same paper Boggs specifies that this is a *new* content introduced by the New Left and was not present in the socialist tradition (1977a, 119). Third, and most importantly, the crux of Boggs's intervention has got lost: his papers amount to a sympathetic *critique* of prefigurative practice, not, as some argue, an endorsement (Raekstad and Gradin 2020, 17-9, 28, 97). That is, a sympathetic critique of *socialist* prefiguration; he reserves his most virulent criticism for the post-political tendencies introduced by the New Left – the substance of contemporary prefigurative politics. In this section I want to recover Boggs's original critique – a critique that encompasses both 'statist' Marxism and 'prefigurative' anarchism and left communism. Boggs shows that prefigurative (social) action and instrumental (political) action are dialectical complements that must be integrated – as Marx had originally emphasized (see e.g. Marx 1978, 520). Having recovered the dialectical Marxist concept of prefiguration, I will then contrast it with the New Left's understanding of prefiguration, which is both positive and one-sidedly social, giving us the template for prefigurative politics today.

Boggs's main focus is on the failed workers' uprising of the early twentieth century, but he also discusses the upheavals of the late 1960s associated with the New Left.³⁵ His articles are key precisely for their historical content: they allow us to get at the changing character of prefiguration. The problem that Boggs grapples with is 'workers' control', the ultimate goal of the socialist revolution, though not of socialism itself (1977a). Boggs notes that the dominant strategies of social transformation – Leninism, structural reformism (i.e. social democracy), and anarcho-communism – have all failed to deliver on this revolutionary aspiration. Instead, 'they have led to bureaucratic party-states (classical Leninism, the Soviet model) or assimilation into existing bourgeois institutions (Social Democratic and Communist parties in advanced capitalist societies), or retreat from politics altogether (Council Communism, the new left)' (Boggs 1977b, 359). Thus the existing strategies have led to opposite results: on the one hand, the reproduction of state bureaucratic capitalism; on the other hand, marginalization and political irrelevance. Simplifying, we might say that Leninism

³⁵ His examples of prefigurative organizations and actions include 'the peasant collectives in Russia, China, and Spain, the shop-stewards organization in Britain, the trade union grievance committees in Italy and France (...) The Paris Commune, the Russian and Chinese Revolutions, the Hungarian Revolutions of 1919 and 1956, the Spanish upheaval of 1936-39, the Vietnamese Revolution, and the 1968 Revolt in France' (Boggs 1977a, 104).

was successful politically but failed to empower workers while anarcho-communism successfully prefigured workers' control but was politically ineffective. Wherever it emerged, it was swept away by more organized forces. Boggs stresses that an adequate theory of transition must pay attention to both the instrumental (political) and the prefigurative (social) dimension. What is required – and what has so far failed to materialize – is a 'synthesis' of the two (Boggs 1977b, 387).³⁶

On Boggs's account, structures of popular self-organization such as factory committees, neighbourhood assemblies, and affinity groups 'prefigure' a socialist society but also provide 'a new source of *political* legitimacy' (1977a, 104, my emphasis). On the one hand, organs of popular self-management are directly accountable to the communities and workplaces in which they are grounded, and in that sense 'prefigure' socialism. They anticipate the *end* of the struggle. On the other hand, the political legitimacy of a socialist party would depend precisely on such existing forms of popular self-governance. In that sense, they are the *means* enabling the self-transformation of social relations. More emphatically: the means of their self-abolition through political struggle. The self-activity of the working class thus serves a double function. On the one hand, it 'prefigures' socialism by establishing sources of what Boggs calls 'democratic counter-power' (ibid., 115). On the other hand, it establishes the political legitimacy of a socialist party whose goal it is to seize state power, making the problem of capital practically tractable for the first time. In the Marxist tradition, then, social action has a double character. It is *political* in the sense that it enables the political struggle for power. And it is *prefigurative* in the sense that it increases workers' control in the present and anticipates the non-instrumental relations of socialism following the workers' rise to power. To summarize, prefigurative structures – in the form of organs of popular self-governance – are means as much as ends. They are best thought of as sources of *social power* which both prefigure a free society and provide the *political* legitimacy required to realize it.

Note, however, that these collective agencies are non-identical with the society they 'prefigure'. While workers' control is the ultimate goal of the revolution, it is only a passing

³⁶ An argument can be made that such a synthesis was attempted in the Marxism of the Second International, especially in the social and political organizations of the SPD. On the SPD's failure to achieve the union of social and political action in practice, see Nettl (1965).

phase of socialism. Once workers have successfully seized political control and democratized production, there no longer is a working class to speak of, and the social forms that will emerge then are unknowable. In this transitional phase, the social organizations of the working class will assume responsibility for production and take over certain functions of the state, as anarchists and syndicalists like to stress. But the key point is this: their goal is to render themselves obsolete, to dissolve the need for the *kind* of organs of self-management that were required to eliminate the obstacle to workers' emancipation, not to prefigure a free society. This is why the concept of prefiguration must be approached *critically*. Marx insisted on the non-identity of the workers' movement and socialism. 'We do not attempt dogmatically to prefigure the future, but want to find the new world only through criticism of the old' (1978, 13). 'Communism', therefore, 'is a dogmatic abstraction', i.e. no more than the abstract negation of existing social relations (ibid.). The workers' assumption to power – the *realization* of their social power – will allow for new social forms that *cannot* be prefigured.

Boggs argues that prefiguration – social action – is not a coherent alternative to, but rather a one-sided critique of, political action (1977b, 383). Nonetheless, this is a critique that political action cannot do without, in the same way that social action must submit to the critique that it lacks political efficacy. To put it more starkly, for Boggs the whole problem is that there is such a thing as a 'prefigurative tradition' disjoined from a 'statist tradition', and vice versa.³⁷ What is required is a synthesis, 'incorporating into a single strategy both spontaneism and the "external element" [i.e. organization and leadership], consciousness and structural transformation, prefigurative and state power struggles' (Boggs 1977b, 387). However, Boggs notes that a synthesis seems less likely than ever. In his own time, the New Left looked mainly to the prefigurative tradition for inspiration. But this assumed ever more degraded forms: 'mysticism, terrorism, therapy' and other forms of 'primitive rebellion' (ibid.). The New Left's overt 'hostility to "politics"' meant that it was even less effective than the spontaneous risings of an earlier period (1977a, 119).

³⁷ Within Marxism, this split is a consequence of the failed revolutions of 1917-23, after which Marxism as the 'effective union of social and political action' fractured into 'statist' Marxism (varieties of Stalinism) and 'anti-statist' left communism.

This was the fate of the new left everywhere: in its fear of centralism, in its retreat into extreme subjectivism, and in its uncompromising abstentionism, it gave little strategic expression to its vision of liberation. It effectively attacked the ideological underpinnings of bourgeois society, but the means it employed – mass direct action politics on the one hand, small isolated groups on the other – were politically primitive (ibid., 120).

Boggs's critique centres on the schism between social and political action. In the New Left, these come to be represented by opposing tendencies – mass spontaneous action versus ultra-vanguardist sects – condemning each to the margins of politics. Barbara Epstein refers to this as the 'counter-culture/politico split of the sixties' (2002, 343). While the politics went into decline, the countercultural movement flourished. It had a decisive influence on the direct action movement in the decades that followed, and ultimately on Occupy. Social action – the prefigurative dimension – became the dominant element in the protest politics of the subsequent period, *but not in the sense outlined above*. The New Left transformed prefigurative practice, giving it the sense we are accustomed to today. It no longer designated a form of social power seeking to abolish itself, but acquired a positive content. This is foreign to the socialist tradition – anarchism as much as Marxism – and has led to a qualitative shift in the understanding of prefiguration.

If socialists organized on the basis of that which must be overcome (i.e. class), the practices of the 1960s gradually lose this self-critical aspect. Prefiguration comes to be about figuring a positive content. Boggs hints at this by noting that the New Left 'brought a new political content to the prefigurative tradition', attempting to 'integrate personal and "lifestyle" issues into politics' as well as a 'range of issues that confronted the social system as a whole: health care, culture, ecology, etc'. (1977a, 119). This, in fact, would lead to a different politics altogether (cf. Frey 2004, 106-7; see also Melucci 1989, 58ff.; Bray 2013, 191-92). Writing about the New Left, Wini Breines is the first to use 'prefiguration' in this new, positive sense, severing it from the socialist tradition.

Prefigurative politics attempted to develop the seeds of liberation and the new society (prior to and in the process of revolution) through notions of participatory democracy grounded in counter-institutions; this meant building community (Breines 1980, 421).

Breines retains the language of 'revolution' and 'counter-institutions', but replaces 'socialism' with 'community'. The difference is material because socialism designates a future state whereas community can be realized 'within the live practice of the movement' (ibid.). By 'community' Breines means the unalienated social relations that are being undermined by 'capitalism and (...) the instrumental needs of large-scale corporations' (ibid.). But for Breines this does not mean that capitalism and community are mutually exclusive. Community is an effect of democratic *process*, she argues. A non-hierarchical, participatory movement will be able to cultivate community within its own organizational network. Thus the protest movement gives rise to a prefigurative community, modelling itself on a vision of the liberated society by 'eliminating leaders, office functions, the division of labor, centralized decision making and formal democracy [replacing it with direct democracy]' (ibid., 423). The struggle *for* socialism turns into its immediate *enactment* in the community of the protest movement. The content of prefigurative practice changes accordingly: from 'workers' control' to 'community, equality, participatory democracy' – from a negative to a positive content (ibid., 422). In this way, the prefigurative practice of the New Left collapses the future into the present. The coherence of a prefigurative strategy, however, depends precisely on maintaining a productive tension between the two. It is only by maintaining their non-identity that a political trajectory emerges and a rational analysis of means and ends is possible. Put another way, only a negative content – a self-critical relation – can 'prefigure' a future that is different from the present.

Interestingly, Breines sets up her argument in the same way as Boggs did his: a 'synthesis' is needed, she says, between prefigurative social action and instrumental political action (ibid., 420). But whereas Boggs contends that the politics of the New Left amounts to the further disintegration of social and political action, Breines argues that the New Left accomplished precisely this synthesis. Her argument, simply, is that social action *is* political.

The search for and/or the struggle to defend community (...) become political in the context of the changes capitalism has brought in the everyday life of the individual – changes characterized by lack of control at work, school and play, impersonality and competition in all areas of life (ibid., 421).

What makes social action political, according to Breines, is that it counteracts individuals' 'lack of control' by restoring their sense of agency. A 'community' in Breines's sense is the kind of social formation that enables autonomous decision-making and action. This is true both *within* the protest community – which is built around values of participation, inclusiveness, and direct democracy – and of its attitude towards the state, which, insofar as possible, it ignores. It pursues a strategy of 'direct action', implementing the changes it wants to see while disregarding the state (which could reverse them at any moment) (ibid., 425-26). Breines agrees with Boggs, therefore, that social action is about building 'democratic counter-power': it seeks to extend the autonomy of individuals and their communities through instruments of popular self-governance. But for Breines this amounts to a *political* strategy. Prefigurative social action becomes prefigurative *politics*. What in the Marxist tradition was *half* of a political strategy now stands by itself. Breines recognizes this and argues that the New Left redefined political success. 'The process, the means, the participation and the dialogue were as important as the goal' (ibid., 422). Note the ambivalence in Breines's formulation. She establishes parity between means and ends, leaving the actual criterion of success open to interpretation. In short, the extent to which achieving political goals matters to prefigurative politics is not clear. This ambivalence is evident throughout her text. On the one hand, she argues that the New Left opposed the 'instrumental bias' of traditional politics (ibid., 420), saying that it '*chose not to be strategic; it chose to fail according to traditional political standards and definitions*' (ibid., 422). This would suggest that the New Left was content to limit itself to building 'community'. On the other hand, she argues that the New Left made a *strategic* decision to operate 'outside the system' as 'a way to achieve goals and to avoid co-optation' (ibid., 425, 426). From this angle, the New Left sought to influence politics without participating in it – from the 'outside'. Social action here acquires a strategic or 'political' dimension while abandoning politics – the struggle for state power – per se. Social power becomes a substitute for political power, which may or may not be able to influence the political process.

The New Left's 'politics of participation and process' (ibid., 419) is the same 'politics of process' that Occupy became known for (Maeckelbergh 2011a, 6). Occupy is its repetition under changed circumstances (the occupiers notably had networked social media at their disposal). We see this not only in the politics itself – which is characterized by its positivity and one-sided emphasis on social action – but in its retrospective evaluation. Both the New Left and Occupy have been criticized for lacking political effectiveness. Breines rejects this negative assessment, arguing that it is premised on an instrumentalist conception of politics, which prevents critics from 'looking at the new left through *its* eyes, eyes that did not accept certain conceptions of politics' (ibid., 420). Forty years later, the same is said of Occupy. According to Mathijs van de Sande, the widely shared sentiment that the movement of the squares and its successors were politically ineffectual is a consequence of analysing them 'in terms of their demonstrable outcomes' rather than 'what they themselves regard as a success' (2013, 226). For van de Sande, 'outcomes', 'achievements', and 'successes' are 'problematic abstractions' that are incompatible with a prefigurative understanding of politics (ibid., 233). Just as Breines admits that the New Left failed by 'established political standards' (1980, 419), so Occupy's champions agree that it failed by 'conventional political metrics' (McKee 2016b, 205). But in both cases it is argued that this failure was *deliberate* because the operative measure of success was prefigurative. By prefigurative standards, Occupy was an 'undeniable success' (ibid.; see also Holmes 2021).

This raises an obvious question: how does prefigurative politics define success? On the face of it, the goal of prefigurative politics is to achieve social change, but to do so in a certain *way*, namely by prefiguring the end it strives towards. Simply put, it implements the desired changes on a small scale and then hopes to roll them out to the rest of society. In theory, the instrumental and the prefigurative dimension are therefore integrated. To fail to achieve political outcomes counts as a failure by prefigurative standards too. The rejection of instrumental criteria by the likes of Breines, van de Sande, McKee, and others complicates this picture. They claim that prefigurative interventions can be successful despite failing to achieve concrete goals. This might seem like an aberration – and many proponents of prefigurative politics will dismiss it as such. However, as I argued in a previous section, prefigurative politics *necessarily* conceives of politics as process. The epigraphs at the top of

this section show the transition from the goal-oriented Marxist understanding of politics to the process-oriented vision that emerges with the New Left. With prefigurative politics, ‘the *process* becomes the goal’ (Maeckelbergh 2009, 75). This process must be autonomous, and for it to be autonomous it must be an end in itself. To reconceptualize politics as the enactment of an autonomous process within a clearly defined community or space is, ipso facto, to conceive of politics in aesthetic terms. The operative measure of success is the *figuration* of autonomy as living process within a spatially and temporally disjunctive frame. OWS was instructive in this regard. It was regarded by many as a work of art. In Chapter 3 I will try to explain this perception by reference to the three characteristics of prefigurative politics discussed above. Note, however, that while Occupy was considered an artistic and prefigurative success, the traditional instrumentalist conception of politics continued to hold sway. If we look at what the occupiers *did*, as opposed to what they *say*, it becomes clear that many abandoned their prefigurative principles in search for a more effective practice.

Means and Ends: Conflation or Mediation?

Prefigurative politics is most commonly defined as the attempt to implement the desired end within the means employed to realize it. Thus the mediation of opposites gives way to their immediate resolution in the process or protest camp (cf. Swain 2019, 55). This resolution is what entitles it to its exemplary status, i.e. its autonomy. But it is doubtful that such mediation actually takes place. The contradiction between means and ends, etc., seems rather to be *aestheticized* – that is, performatively resolved within a circumscribed space for the benefit of an audience (see also Chapter 3). Clearly, to perform an alternative social model is not to mediate between means and ends in actuality but to demonstrate how it *might* be done. Insofar as the model is at the same time supposed to serve as the means of its realization, it is in fact radically to *neglect* the means. The irony is that a ‘politics’ primarily concerned with the *how* should neglect how its social models are to be realized in practice – that is, should neglect the instrumental dimension per se: politics itself (understood as the struggle to obtain control of the ‘means’, i.e. the apparatus of state). It is not surprising that the key debate in the literature is about how ‘strategic’ prefiguration is (see e.g. Maeckelbergh 2011a; Yates

2015; Swain 2019). But to talk of ‘strategy’ is simply a way of talking about politics in an obscure and unself-conscious manner. Politics, insofar as it represents the instrumental dimension, haunts prefiguration.

The insistence on mediating the contradiction between means and ends *now* prevents a rational analysis of what is required for such mediation actually to take place. This opposition is not just a theoretical abstraction but represents a *real* social contradiction. In most liberal democracies it is enshrined in the constitutional order, specifically in the separation between the legislative and executive branches of government. The division between means and ends *within* government corresponds to the more general division between society and the state (see e.g. Buber 1957). The mediating principle is representation, embodied by political parties. Prefigurative politics rejects this form of mediation – at its most extreme, it rejects mediation as such.³⁸ The title of Sitrin and Azzellini’s book on horizontalism is not ‘They don’t represent us!’ but ‘They *can’t* represent us!’ (2014). ‘Parties carry an almost pathological tendency to transform into bureaucratic and oligarchic organizations’, they write (*ibid.*, 49). Prefigurative politics thus critiques the *form* that politics assumes in capitalism: its pseudo-representationalism; the hierarchical, top-down structure of parties; the centralization of power in a small number of institutions and individuals, and so on.³⁹ Over against this it places an alternative model: horizontal, bottom-up, participatory, and decentralized.⁴⁰ The crux of the prefigurative critique is that politics suppresses broad participation in collective decision-making. If it is correct to say that politics is in this sense one-sided (i.e. in elevating the state over society), it is equally correct to say that it is *less* one-sided than prefigurative politics. It is the *party* that mediates between society and the state, means and ends, theory and practice, etc. Even in capitalism this mediation takes place, however defectively. Prefigurative politics, on the other hand, remains one-sidedly social – or, more precisely, aesthetic, since it

³⁸ Srnicek and Williams also note prefigurative politics’ aversion to mediation: ‘against the abstraction and inhumanity of capitalism’, it ‘aims to bring politics down to the ‘human scale’ by emphasising temporal, spatial and conceptual immediacy’ (2015, 10).

³⁹ The prefigurative critique of the centralization of power in the state or in political parties is at odds with the Foucauldian claim, pursued by the same authors, that power is inherently diffuse and all-pervasive (see e.g. Raekstad and Gradin 2020).

⁴⁰ Occupy’s preoccupation with political form was exemplified by its concern with democracy, a concept that dominated the movement’s political imagination. When the *indignados* marched in the street, they cried ‘real democracy now!’ while in New York the General Assembly put out a statement demanding ‘true democracy’ (NYC General Assembly 2011a).

does not have the power to enforce the interests of its base ‘in a general form, in a form possessing general, socially coercive force’.⁴¹

One of prefigurative politics’ central claims is that, in a society in which the institutionalized separation of means and ends is mediated by political parties, it can do without. The rejection of the need for a political party corresponds to the rejection of an instrumental conception of politics, highlighted above. However, when we look at the political trajectory of Occupy, it becomes evident that activists abandoned their prefigurative principles because they did not work in practice. Put more formally, it turned out that their prefigurative strategy was unable to mediate between means and ends, and was therefore ineffective.

From Anti-Statism to Statism, and Back Again

Prefigurative politics offers an anti-statist alternative to politics but, to the extent that it aims to *realize* its vision of a free society, its horizon remains statist. We see this, for instance, in the retrospective assessments of Occupy. After the occupations, it was widely reported that Occupy had ‘changed the conversation’ (see e.g. Dreier 2011; Mitchell 2012, 6; Schneider 2013, 181; Lennard 2016; Myerson 2016). That is to say, politicians had begun to take note of the issues it raised. As one participant put it, ‘Obama is running [his 2012 re-election campaign] on inequality’ (quoted in Gould-Wartofsky 2015, 205).⁴² Even Mitt Romney adopted the language of the ‘99%’ (ibid., 121). Occupy’s legacy, in other words, had been to place issues such as inequality, corporate greed, and student debt on the political agenda. But Occupy went beyond trying to influence politics through protest. Following its demise, many of its key organizers threw themselves headlong into electoral politics.

Just as Occupy was an international phenomenon, so was the turn to electoral politics that came in its wake. In Spain, 15–M gave rise to Podemos, becoming the third-largest party in

⁴¹ The phrase is Marx’s (1978, 520). He points out that a social struggle becomes political when it attempts to enforce the interests of the class ‘in a general form, in a form possessing general, socially coercive force’, that is, when it tries to *universalize* the social interests of the class by political means.

⁴² The mainstream media ran articles with titles such as ‘Why Obama Will Embrace the 99 Percent’ (*The New York Times*, 19 February 2012) and ‘For Obama 2012, it’s all about the 99 percent’ (Reuters, 26 January 2012).

the 2015 elections; in Greece, Syriza swept to victory in European and national elections in 2014 and 2015; in the UK, Jeremy Corbyn's bid for the Labour leadership was brought off by millennials flooding the party, many of them freshly politicized by Occupy London (MacAskill 2016; Gerbaudo 2019, 52); in the US, the Occupy network was put at the service of the People for Bernie campaign, supporting the Senator whose policy proposals 'put the interests of the 99% front and center'.⁴³ The turn to electoral politics – statism – stands as a rejection of prefigurative principles. After the occupiers were defeated, they did everything they had in theory opposed. They went from seeking independence from a corrupt political system to avoid 'co-optation', to working within massive, centralized organizations – the Labour and Democratic Parties – that virtually guaranteed their co-optation; they went from being pioneers of direct democracy to being servants of representative democracy; they went from setting up small, local, neighbourhood assemblies to participating in nationwide caucuses; they went from engaging in autonomous action to working with (and within) federal and state institutions. Prefigurative politics, then, gives way to the very thing it rejects. It is, in other words, its own immanent self-critique – the result of its failure to live up to its own political aspirations.

'The Occupy Movement's most significant and enduring effect', Samir Gandesha writes, 'was to be felt five years later in the dramatic grassroots support for Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders' bid for the Democratic Party's Presidential nomination' (2018, 49). After the occupiers were evicted from Zuccotti Park, they turned their attention to 'occupying electoral politics' (Myerson 2016). Some occupiers 'resisted the electoral process' (Stewart 2019). As Gould-Wartofsky points out, the Occupy coalition between 'horizontalists' (the anarchists who ran the camps) and 'verticalists' (the socialists and trade unionists who supplied the bodies in the street for marches) would eventually come apart (2015, 220). Gould-Wartofsky attributes the split to a disagreement over whether to support Obama in the 2012 presidential election, an idea rejected by the 'horizontalists'. But when a more suitable candidate came along, someone perceived to be more Left-wing, even the most committed 'horizontalists' softened to the idea of working with, or even within, a political party. Graeber, now teaching at the London School of Economics, had written that 'the entire political system' is 'absolutely

⁴³ The People for Bernie Sanders Facebook page, 16 February, 2022.

corrupt, idiotic, and irrelevant to people's actual lives' (2013, 195) and that activists should avoid politics as it would legitimate 'existing political institutions' (ibid., 80). 'Progressive change', he concluded, is 'not possible through electoral means' (ibid., 79). But when Corbyn was elected to the Labour leadership, he unequivocally endorsed him. Corbyn was not just the least bad option but heralded the dawn of a new era.

Should the left be pursuing accelerationism, pushing the contradictions of capitalism forward with rapid growth and development, or should it aim toward a total shift of values and radical de-growth? (...) Should the central bank enact 'quantitative easing for the people', or a universal citizen's income policy, or should we go the way of Modern Money Theory and universal jobs guarantees? (...) Might the United Kingdom become a pioneer for such a new economic dispensation? The new Labour leadership is making the initial moves (Graeber 2016).

This is a theoretical volte-face. The very advances that a few years earlier Graeber had argued could only be achieved by prefigurative means are now brought within reach by party politics. In the wake of Occupy's failure to achieve anything but symbolic concessions (lip service to the '99%' from Obama), Graeber embraces electoralism: the state as a means of implementing progressive policies. Occupy's desiderata would now be met by a victorious Labour Party.

In the wake of Occupy's failure, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri similarly saw fit to temper their enthusiasm for prefigurative politics. Their book *Declaration*, published within months of the Occupy groundswell, praises many of the movement's most questionable features. For instance, it argues that horizontal movements 'are powerful not despite their lack of leaders but because of it. (...) What a tragic lack of political imagination to think that leaders and centralized structures are the only way to organize effective political projects!' (2012, 90-91). In a later work, they strike a radically different note. 'We are not among those who claim that today's horizontal movements in themselves are sufficient, that there is no problem, and that the issue of leadership has been superseded' (2017, 7). If in 2012 they had argued for an 'exodus from the existing political structures' (2012, 45), they now claim that 'we cannot avoid the need to take power' (2017, 288). Like Graeber, Hardt and Negri swing from anti-

statism to statism, from a prefigurative rejection of politics to an embrace of ‘democratic centralism’ (ibid., 18).

Note that the beneficiaries of the electoral turn were invariably existing capitalist parties. Instead of organizing society’s discontents *against* the state, as Occupy had promised to do, it fed them into the very bureaucratic structures that Occupy had rebelled against. The Sanders campaign in the United States is a case in point.

Former occupiers who turned their energies to the so-called Sanders revolution stress that more than just talking points have carried through. Modes of horizontal, rhizomatic organizing, and the deployment of a network of over 50 Twitter and Facebook accounts by the People for Bernie activist coalition, all began in the context of Occupy. The @OccupyWallSt-NYC Twitter account (with its 205K followers) was taken over by former occupiers using the platform to support Sanders (Lennard 2016).

Thus Occupy turned over its network, experience, skills, knowledge, and resources to the Democratic Party. The movement that had declared that ‘no true democracy is attainable when the process is determined by economic power’ now places its resources at the service of that very process (NYC General Assembly 2011a). Occupy changed from a movement that studiously avoided contact with the governing class to one that found its *raison d’être* in getting their candidate elected, from a movement that called the legitimacy of the entire system into question to one that sought to preserve it. Of course the occupiers were under the impression that they were using the Democratic Party as a vehicle for progressive change. As they put it, since Sanders was an independent, he would not ‘subject himself to organizational discipline’ (The People for Bernie 2016). But arguably the Democratic Party was using Occupy – and Sanders – for *its* purposes. As Pamela Nogales puts it, ‘OWS (...) provided the Democrats a rebranding opportunity’ (2021). Aligning itself with grassroots movements and independents, it created the impression of being further to the Left than it actually was. The result was to draw into the Democratic fold a new generation of politicized millennials, where many would remain to fight Trump. Occupy, which began, as Graeber says, as a ‘revolutionary movement’ that refused to ‘recognize the legitimacy of the existing political institutions’, ends up funnelling fresh blood into those very institutions (2013, 80).

These institutions were not only *representative* (and therefore at odds with Occupy's support for direct democracy) but avowedly capitalist (and therefore at odds with Occupy's ends).

When examining Occupy's political trajectory, it becomes clear that the contradictions it sought to mediate are more salient than ever. Most obviously, the theory and practice of prefiguration diverge radically. When tracking what the occupiers *do* as opposed to what they *say*, it turns out that principles have less purchase than election cycles. Prefiguration's anti-statism is little more than a pose. The emphasis on the movement (as opposed to the party) conceals that 'the "movement" is always understood as a pressure-tactic on elected officials' (Cutrone 2019). The prefigurativists need the officials to get things done, and the officials are grateful to the prefigurativists for providing a veneer of accountability. The contradiction between ends and means, between a social body that advertises its concerns, either directly or through elected representatives, and an executive branch that acts on them or not, remains firmly in place. The electoral turn simply confirms this disjunction. To mediate these contradictions in practice would require an *independent* political platform, which is precisely what prefigurative dogma prevent activists from seeing. Instead, they oscillate between movementism and electoralism, from pursuing a form of social action that naively rejects politics to electioneering within established capitalist parties, *and back again*.

After the occupiers fail to achieve tangible results within the capitalist parties they had opportunistically flooded, they return to the streets. According to Winnie Wong, the ex-occupier in charge of the Sanders campaign, 'it was never about electing Bernie Sanders (...) It was about creating a movement' (quoted in Myerson 2016). That is to say, when electoralism fails, the prefigurative notion that the movement is an end in itself resurfaces – the very principle that had been betrayed by the electoral turn. In Britain, it was similarly argued that the Left ought to resume its extra-parliamentary activism. After the defeat of Corbynism, James Meadway, Corbyn's economic advisor, argued that 'it is critically important that the self-identified Left (...) shakes off its attachment to the state':

The political strategy for the Left, faced with the monumental prospect that its brief period of coexistence with the state might be unwinding, takes us back to (...)

prefiguration, in the sense of seeking to create immediate alternatives that themselves act as synecdoche for the future society (2021).

Meadway, who had attempted to steer the Left to victory using the parliamentary Labour Party, now pins his hopes on an extra-parliamentary movement.

After the failure of the electoral turn, it became clear that in many ways Occupy had been right all along. The Left was able to change very little by working within the 'system'. Syriza sold out, Podemos lost its electoral clout, Sanders was defeated by Clinton, who then lost to Trump, and Corbyn's Labour Party was routed in the 2019 election. Occupy's distrust of capitalist politics had been vindicated. Moreover, it is likely that this – Occupy's wholesale rejection of politics *as it exists today* – was the key to its success. Graeber may have been right that 'OWS's most revolutionary aspects – its refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the existing political institutions, its willingness to challenge the fundamental premises of our economic system – [were] at the heart of its appeal' (2013, 80). Importantly, OWS's message appealed to self-identified Republicans as much as Democrats (Gould-Wartofsky 2015, 121; Jacobs 2021; Nogales 2021). Initially, Occupy was often compared to the Tea Party (see e.g. Reilly 2011). The grievances of the two movements overlapped. Each attacked the influence of the financial sector on politics, the failure of the governing class to represent the interests of working people, the bailouts, foreclosures, corruption, and so on. In other words, many of the issues raised by Occupy were bipartisan. Thus OWS missed an opportunity 'to break with the stranglehold of the political continuum set by the Democrats and Republicans' (Jacobs 2021). That is, instead of building their *own* political platforms, occupiers chose opportunistically to support 'Left' candidates within the Democratic Party. This move not only lost them their outsider appeal (they were now part of the establishment) and the support of sympathetic Republicans; it underestimated the extent to which the Democrats were part of the 'system' – indeed *are* the system.

The tragedy of the Millennial Left is that it followed the historical template laid out by Boggs. Boggs had critiqued the New Left for repeating the mistakes of the past. The prefigurative uprisings of the 1920s, he pointed out, fell victim to either 'spontaneism' (the absence of organization and leadership) or 'corporativism' (the co-option of a dominant stratum of

workers into existing bourgeois institutions) (1977a). The New Left, Boggs argued, reproduced the same pattern 'in even more exaggerated form' (ibid., 120). If the New Left repeated the mistakes of the 1920s, then Occupy repeated in 'exaggerated form' the mistakes of the New Left. Indeed, Boggs anticipates Occupy's exact trajectory: on the one hand, endless protests, community projects, and 'autonomous zones' (spontaneism); on the other, absorption into established capitalist parties (corporativism). Like its precursors, OWS failed to create 'a sustained movement that is both prefigurative and *politically effective*', that combined social and political action (ibid., 120). Boggs critiqued prefigurative politics for being one-sided – a point my analysis has confirmed. The irony is that Occupy attempted to overcome what it perceived to be the one-sidedness of politics. Breines's deep insight was that a supposedly 'instrumental' capitalist politics was really an end in itself. The problem with capitalist politics, she saw, is that it is self-serving and self-referential, an empty proceduralism posing as change but which really seeks to preserve everything as it is. As such, however, it is not so different from the kind of politics embraced by Occupy. Far from challenging the self-referential nature of politics, Occupy reproduced it. It, too, became an end in itself. And when this became apparent, it abandoned its principles and reverted to the very electoralism it had wanted to challenge. Instead of integrating social and political action, it oscillated between them.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have been concerned with the *politics* of prefigurative politics. I have established its three principal features – its reliance on an autonomous zone; its affirmative or constructive character; and its supposed exemplarity. I have also established its criterion – autonomy – which manifests, necessarily, as an investment in *process*. In prefigurative politics it is the process of self-governance that takes centre stage. It is not a substantive politics but a 'politics of process', that is, a formalism. Prefigurative politics presupposes a world in which ideological differences are so shallow that they can be reconciled through correct – fair, inclusive, democratic, etc. – procedure (indeed, it sometimes seems to assume that the only reason there is conflict in society is because of an outdated system of representational

government, i.e. liberal democracy). Prefigurative politics is incompatible with socialism not just for its formalism but because of its positive (affirmative or constructive) character. Socialism – a classless society – can only be ‘prefigured’ by facing up to the class character of society, that is, *negatively*. In its negativity, socialist prefiguration is not strictly speaking prefigurative. But, as Boggs points out, in its emphasis on self-organization it nonetheless seems to anticipate some of the features of a free society. The key point, however, is that the aim of proletarian self-organization is to render itself obsolete. The formalistic and processual character of prefigurative politics also has implications for its effectiveness. As I intimated, for an intervention to succeed by strictly prefigurative standards, it must be an end in itself, for only a process that legislates its own content is truly autonomous. This tension between the desire to figure freedom and the need to achieve concrete political goals – the difference between art and politics – is one of the key contradictions of prefigurative politics and a recurring theme in this thesis.

With prefigurative politics, the figuration of an alternative takes precedence over its realization. We see this, for instance, in the fact that the Occupy encampments were widely perceived as works of art. In Chapter 3 I will establish the basis for their artistic resonances, but first, in Chapter 2, I want to home in on the artistic practices with which prefigurative politics has so much in common. McKee suggests that ‘much of Occupy was anticipated, consciously and unconsciously, in a lot of the most interesting contemporary art of the past ten years’ (2013). McKee is referring to the field of social and relational practice. Indeed, the salient features of this kind of artistic practice – an emphasis on the process at the expense of the finished work, an embrace of collective modes of production and experience, and a desire to address social problems through direct action – were taken up by Occupy, albeit on a more ambitious scale. We can turn this around: the fact that Occupy was recognized as art at all is a function of changes in artistic practice. On a critical view of art,

a successful work (...) is not one which resolves objective contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure (Adorno 1981, 32).

On this view, the camps, understood as living works of art, could only give rise to an experience of 'spurious harmony'. But this conception of art, which demands of it a critical awareness of its own contradictions, has been challenged precisely by the rise of social practice, or the developments underpinning it. Roger Rothman speaks of a 'constructive turn' in art, in which 'critique is set aside in favor of acts of constructive affirmation' (2017, 31). Social practice rejects the 'interwar conception of art-as-critique [which] has been the most enduring dimension of avant-garde practice' (ibid., 30). It is precisely the attempt to go beyond critique that establishes the affinity between social practice and the 'prefigurative politics at the heart of the Occupy Movement' (ibid., 31). Just as prefigurative politics can be traced back to the abandonment of negativity in social action, so activist art is contingent on a rejection of aesthetic negativity. In the following chapter, I will examine the effects of the 'constructive turn' on art.

Chapter 2. Social Practice as Prefigurative Practice

Surprisingly, then, from the East Coast to the West, from museums to public spaces, there was a movement toward mainstream interest in cooperative art.

—Tom Finkelpearl

What is a critique? In what ways can it be posed? How is it most effective? Does it need to be effective? Do we really want our art to be ‘critical’? Why do we want this? Can ‘critique’ and ‘art’ coexist in the same moment or are the two terms antithetical? Or, conversely, is all art worthy of the name inherently critical, a mode (one of the last) of envisioning and constructing things otherwise?

—George Baker

Introduction

This chapter offers an analysis of the theory, practice, genealogy, and institutional context of social practice with a view to drawing out its prefigurative character. As I indicated in the Introduction, social practice tends to understand itself in decidedly non-artistic ways. More often than not, aesthetic considerations are subordinated to explicitly political objectives. Through a critical examination of the literature, history, and a number of case studies, I will sketch a ‘global’ picture of what can be a confusing subfield of artistic endeavour. Since the mid-2000s the literature on social practice has grown exponentially, making it in some ways *more* difficult to grasp the coherence of the field. Because of the confusion of competing accounts as well as social practice’s innate indeterminacy, I have found it necessary to engage in some conceptual clarification. For instance, I challenge the coherence of certain notions frequently used to describe social practice, for example the idea that it employs ‘the social as medium and material’. I also question the loose use of ‘social form’ and the language of intervention in which social practice’s political claims are often couched. Once some of the rhetoric surrounding social practice has been deflated, what is left is a much more ‘traditional’

practice than ordinarily assumed. What remains are the abiding questions of aesthetic autonomy and form.

My central argument will be that the question of aesthetic autonomy has not been superseded in social practice. Rather, it is re-articulated along positive lines. Schematically, the negative self-differentiation of the avant-garde gives way to the positive self-differentiation of social practice. We thus go from the (self-)critique of autonomy to its affirmation. It is this positive model of autonomy that makes social practice *prefigurative*. The features of prefigurative action distilled in the previous chapter are reproduced in the social practice literature. Like prefigurative politics, then, social practice leads by example. It recovers art's exemplarity as it was conceived by the aesthetic paradigm of beauty. The critical question I will raise is whether this exemplarity is tenable under existing social conditions.

'Beyond Critique': Three Recent Episodes

Social practice understands itself as an art that goes 'beyond critique'. 'Art's function is no longer to be a space for "signaling" problems', Tania Bruguera says, 'but the place from which to create the proposal and implementation of possible solutions' (2011). As such, social practice distinguishes itself from what was the dominant orientation of the neo-avant-garde since conceptualism: institutional critique. This impatience with critique is not limited to the art world. If we take a bird's eye view of the cultural milieu of the mid-2000s in which social practice comes to prominence, we find that it is characterized by a series of controversies about the effectiveness of critique. In the art world, this debate was sparked by Andrea Fraser's 2005 text 'From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique', in which she argued that artistic critique was necessarily caught in an institutional frame, limiting its effectiveness (reprinted in Léger 2014). Fraser's text was widely read as defeatist. Gerald Raunig, for instance, glossed its main point as 'we are trapped in our field', thus dashing hopes of extra-artistic effectivity (Raunig 2006). However, Fraser's argument is better understood

as pointing the way to a more practical form of engagement. In the last section of her essay, she calls on artists to take responsibility for the transformation of the institution.

Every time we speak of the ‘institution’ as other than ‘us’, we disavow our role in the creation and perpetuation of its conditions. We avoid responsibility for, or action against, the everyday complicities, compromises, and censorship – above all, self-censorship – which are driven by our own interests in the field and the benefits we derive from it (2014, 16).

Fraser was not arguing that ‘we are trapped in our field’, as Raunig suggests, but that we must take responsibility for changing it.¹ On this view, critique may be more of an obstacle than an aid. Fraser develops this point in two subsequent texts. She observes that there is a disjunction between what artworks *are* from an objective economic standpoint (commodities, luxury goods) and what they *mean* or claim to be doing (criticize society or the institution of art) (2012b, 190). ‘We have seen artworks identified with social and even economic critique sell for hundreds of thousands and even millions of dollars’ (ibid., 189). Critique, on this view, masks a professional and affective investment in the institution of art. It allows artists to participate in it, thereby gaining ‘access to its considerable rewards’, while at the same time asserting their distance from it (2012a, 200). Artistic critique thus functions as ‘negation in a Freudian rather than a Marxian sense’, i.e. as psychological disavowal rather than objective transcendence (ibid.).

It is in this light that one of Fraser’s most controversial works is perhaps best seen. *Untitled* (2003) records the artist having sex with a collector, who paid an undisclosed sum for the creation of the work. Peggy Phelan describes *Untitled* as the literal enactment of Baudelaire’s provocation that art is prostitution, resulting in the ‘utter loss of metaphor’ (2004, 571). From this perspective, *Untitled* simply performs the commodification of art. Its literalism lies in its reduction of art’s symbolic content to its material conditions. The critical artistic gesture is no more than a lurid commodity, rendered impotent through its embeddedness in capitalist

¹ Fraser’s position recalls the ‘politics of responsibility’ advocated by C Wright Mills. Mills called on ‘the intellectual community’ to take responsibility in the face of an irresponsible elite (Mills 1969, 24-25).

relations of (re)production. But, as Andrea Ferber points out, '*Untitled* makes the distinction between intimacy and exploitation difficult' (2009, 100). In other words, the work does not just draw attention to the commodity status of critique, but makes explicit what is repressed in the act of criticizing: the artist's *voluntary submission* to the process of commodification – if the price is right. *Untitled* anticipates the recommendation Fraser would make years later: 'we must begin to evaluate whether artworks fulfill, or fail to fulfill, political or critical claims on the level of their social and economic conditions' (2012a, 201). In other words, critique is insufficient if it does not, at the same time, change 'social and economic conditions'.

Thus Fraser, perhaps the most visible exponent of the 'second wave' of institutional critique, formulates a 'critique of critique'. This critique is subsequently picked up by activist art collective MTL who note that Fraser's 'argument [concerning the institutionalization of critique] actually pointed in two directions': an 'insular concern with art-world dynamics' (Fraser's own work) or an engagement with art's 'entanglements' (2018, 211). This latter idea 'would prove to be prescient for the evolution of arts activism in the coming decade' (ibid.). Social practice, on this view, is the attempt to go beyond – or realize the promise of – institutional critique: 'we are at a moment when the principles of institutional critique are being pushed to a breaking point and opening onto something radically new and radically old at the same time' (ibid., 227).

Another episode that must be mentioned is the polemic between Claire Bishop and Grant Kester in the pages of *Artforum*, which, in a more rarefied way, is also about the value of artistic critique. This polemic, which roughly coincides with Fraser's interventions, becomes the occasion for clarifying art's criterion of success. In both her attack on relational art (Bishop 2004) and social practice (Bishop 2006b), Bishop accuses artists of inviting, and critics of employing, non-aesthetic criteria of evaluation. 'Political, moral, and ethical judgments have come to fill the vacuum of aesthetic judgment in a way that was unthinkable forty years ago' (2004, 77). Bishop rejects social and relational practice insofar as it commands moral rather than aesthetic assent. However, she notes that a new kind of art criticism specifically encourages this trend: 'the social turn in contemporary art has prompted an ethical turn in art criticism' (2006b, 180). Hence what is at issue is not just the development of a new genre of art but the renegotiation of art's criterion. In countering this tendency, Bishop appeals to

the notion of aesthetic 'quality' (ibid.; 2004, 65, 78-79). Elsewhere she specifies what she means by this: art can be 'a space of antagonism or negation vis-à-vis society' (Bishop 2012, 16). Thus Bishop conceives of aesthetic merit not in terms of a positive standard but as the *critique* of standards, as negativity towards established (aesthetic, economic, social, moral) norms in sensible form.

While this essentially modernist conception of art and aesthetic experience is shared by many, though with important differences (see e.g. Clark 1982; Bürger 1984; Călinescu 1987; R. Williams 1996; Adorno 1997; Roberts 2000), Bishop's polemic is a sign of its growing marginality. In his response, Kester contests the idea that aesthetic practice should be defined by its criticality (2006).² For Kester, critique implies 'detachment' and 'distance', which he contrasts with a conception of art based on direct involvement in 'political struggles' (ibid., 22). In rejecting an art of 'exposure' and 'revelation' in favour of an art of practical amelioration, Kester draws on a nascent body of postcritical scholarship (ibid.). He cites Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's influential essay on the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (1997; 2003). Sedgwick's argument is based on a kind of *reductio*. She points out that academics invested in critique appear to believe that 'to make something visible as a problem' is but a 'jump away from getting it solved' (Sedgwick 2003, 139).³ Sedgwick thus plays on the fact that to criticize something is to want to change it. But critique, of late, hardly ever succeeds in doing so.

I daily encounter graduate students who are dab hands at unveiling the hidden historical violences that underlie a secular, universalist liberal humanism [and yet have grown up] in a xenophobic Reagan-Bush-Clinton-Bush America where 'liberal' is, if anything, a taboo category and where 'secular humanism' is routinely treated as a marginal religious sect (ibid., 139-40).

Thus Sedgwick takes critique to task for its *ineffectiveness*. The question 'is a particular piece of knowledge true' is less important than 'what does knowledge *do*' (ibid., 124). Sedgwick's

² Kester's entire project is defined by the attempt to deconstruct the notion that 'criticality' should function as the 'criterion for the evaluation of artistic or aesthetic merit in contemporary art' (2017, 97; see also his 2004, 2011, 2015). In Chapter 4 I show where this leads him.

³ In this (postmodern and post-postmodern) discourse, critique is equated with the exposure of normative commitments or underlying regimes of violence.

alternative to a suspicious hermeneutic is a reparative one. Implied in this transition is the greater efficacy of the latter. Reparative enquiry is directly 'ameliorative' (ibid., 144). Kester invokes this reparative alternative and identifies it with social practice.

Thus in the exchange between Kester and Bishop a picture emerges of two distinct kinds of artistic practice. On the one hand, there is critical practice, which, as Kester puts it, is only 'indirectly' political, i.e. through an aesthetic form that refracts the contradictions and antagonisms of social form (2006, 22). This is contrasted with a 'directly' political art which takes part in social and political struggles, i.e. an art seeking to intervene in social form itself (ibid.). Whereas one maintains 'a skeptical distance that parallels the insight provided by critical theory', the other draws on postcritical or 'reparative' theory to practically ameliorate a situation (ibid.).

The last event I want to highlight is a 2003 symposium organized by *Critical Inquiry*, the American arts and humanities journal. The symposium, entitled 'The Future of Criticism', is important for a number of reasons. First, it was attended by a who's who of the American academy (Fredric Jameson, J Hillis Miller, Stanley Fish, Lauren Berlant, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Homi Bhabha, Robert Pippin, etc.). Each participant contributed a short statement, which was then published in the journal, offering a useful snapshot of the thinking of key academic figures in relation to the following questions.

How will the very notions of criticism and critique change in the epoch and in the current state of perpetual crisis and emergency? What will be the relation of the coming criticism to politics and public life? (...) What, in your view, would be the desirable future of critical inquiry in the coming century? (...) above all, what steps do you think need to be taken in the present moment to move toward this desirable future? What, in short, is to be done? (Mitchell 2004, 330).

Second, the symposium allows us to place the shifting attitude towards critique manifested by its participants in a political and historical context. The symposium took place less than a month after the invasion of Iraq. More shocking than the invasion itself was the defeat of the global anti-war movement, which, the journal's editor notes, 'was much larger than at any

point during the Vietnam War, with a greater international reach and a much more diverse economic and ethnic profile' (ibid., 327). The re-election of George W Bush the following year would add to the sense of defeat on the Left.

It is in this context that we should place the call for a more responsive and politically engaged form of critical enquiry raised by many of the symposium's respondents. While a few participants sought to deflate the political claims of critical theory (Stanley Fish notably), there was some consensus as to the obstacle standing in the way of effective engagement. This was the professionalization of critique and the consequent loss of contact with an audience beyond the academy. Bill Brown notes that, though 'it's a fact that feminism, queer theory, critical race theory, and cultural studies continue to transform the way teachers and students view themselves and the world', this is also where its impact ends. Critique's utility is confined to 'the classroom' (2004, 454). Mary Poovey notes that critics routinely mistake 'pedagogical comments' for 'social effects' (2004, 429). James Chandler notes that even a journal like *Critical Inquiry*, 'intended to be intelligible, even useful' across disciplines, does not 'speak beyond the academy' (2004, 358-9). Harry Harootunian argues that the 'collapse of theory' is the result of its 'professionalization', the fact that it has 'no relationship to the world outside of the academy' (2004, 399; see also Hallberg 2004, 443). 'Theory, thus, as it has played out in cultural studies and served to further professional proficiency in interpreting the world within the borders of the academy, has been removed from any possibility of changing it' (ibid., 400). Critical theory has become 'a functional requisite empowered to endow its holders with cultural capital and even stardom, so long as its discourse remains safely within the academic compound' (ibid.). If Andrea Fraser called attention to artistic critique's neutralization within the institution of art, the *Critical Inquiry* symposium calls attention to the neutralizing function of the academy.

The goal, then, is to close the 'gap between the professoriate and the "masses"' and abolish the 'disjuncture between theory and the world' (Chakrabarty 2004, 461-2). Critique, the respondents argued, had to recover its 'true vocation', which was to be an effective tool for change (Harootunian 2004, 401; see also Miller 2004, 419; Meltzer 2004, 468). Richard Neer summed up the mood: 'I would like to see a move *beyond* critique and toward active, collaborative inquiry' (2004, 474, my emphasis). The manifesto for a more involved, practical,

and constructive critique would be published by *Critical Inquiry* the following year. Bruno Latour's 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern' argues that 'the critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles' (2004, 246).⁴ According to Latour, the task 'is to associate the word *criticism* with a whole set of new positive metaphors, gestures, [and] attitudes' (ibid., 247). Emphasizing the constructive dimension of critical enquiry, Latour would later replace 'criticism' with 'composition', writing a 'Compositionist Manifesto' to compete with Marx's Communist Manifesto (Latour 2010). Latour's work has had an impact on numerous disciplines, including anthropology, ecology, and philosophy. In literary studies it has given rise to 'postcritique', which seeks to unsettle what it perceives as the methodological dominance of critique in the humanities – the work begun by Eve Sedgwick.⁵ Questioning the 'political payoff of critique', Rita Felski argues for a method of 'addition rather than subtraction, translation rather than separation, connection rather than isolation, composition rather than critique' (2015, 143, 182). Critique, on this view, must be replaced with 'a form of making rather than unmaking' (ibid., 12).

Social Practice and the Autonomy of Art

In this wider context, social practice can be seen as the artistic manifestation of a larger social phenomenon. The impatience with critique or, per contra, the desire to actualize its political claims, must be ascribed to the Left's periodic awareness of its own weakness. What results is an art of 'practice' that attempts to address the perceived shortcomings – the passivity – of previous forms of engagement. Thus aesthetic criteria, which from a modernist standpoint are virtually identical with (self-)criticality, are abandoned in favour of more positive measures. If critique is retained as a concept, it is reinterpreted along more constructive lines. Thus Irit Rogoff, who helped transform the field of art history into visual culture, differentiates between 'critique' and 'criticality', where the former is negative and the latter positive. We

⁴ Latour's article remains one of *Critical Inquiry*'s most-cited. Its popularity must be explained by the historical circumstances cited above since Latour had made the same point ten years prior, writing that 'the critical mechanism has outlived its usefulness' (1993, 46).

⁵ I take the term 'postcritique' from Rita Felski and Elizabeth Anker (2017). See also Felski (2015). I use the term to capture the tendency across the arts and humanities to replace critical negativity with constructive – practical, ameliorative, creative, etc. – forms of theory and practice.

thus go 'from the investigative and the analytical to the performative and the participatory' (2008, 101). With 'criticality', what is important is 'what effects it has in the world rather than (...) what existing meanings it uncovers' (ibid., 104). The curator Maria Lind has a very similar concept of 'criticality', which she defines as 'context-sensitive' and 'constructive' (2010, 96). In a way, then, Rogoff and Lind simply heed Latour's advice 'to associate the word *criticism* with a whole set of new positive metaphors'.

Most often, such semantic contortions are not required and the positivity of the criteria in question is more obvious. As social practice's multiple names indicate, these criteria often centre on collaboration, participation, community engagement, and so on, all of which social practice is supposed to produce or enhance. So, for instance, Grant Kester proposes that the goal of social practice is to facilitate dialogue and produce 'consensual knowledge' (2004, 112). For Tom Finkelpearl it is to foster 'social cooperation' (Finkelpearl 2013, 50). For Nina Möntmann it is to 'empower the socially disadvantaged' (2006). Frequently the goal is not specified beyond some notion of 'social change'. So for Charles Esche the goal of social practice is 'to propose real changes in social and economic relations' (2012, 36). For Nato Thompson it is to ply 'effective methods for change' (2012, 18). Mary Jane Jacob simply casts the artist in the role of a 'catalyst or activist for change' (1995, 51).

When art goes 'from criticism to activism' there appear to be two consequences, and much of the social practice literature is concerned with substantiating one or both of these claims (Coumans and Straatman 2015). First, it gives rise to the claim that art can intervene in social relations, not mediately, through an effect on consciousness, but immediately. And this, second, results in the deprioritization of aesthetic concerns. In this section I want to contest these claims and their implications on a theoretical level; in the following section I will consider some practical examples. What I will try to show is that, first, the question of art's autonomy has not been superseded by social practice's emphasis on intervention and/or its rejection of critical distance. Second, that the question of art's autonomy – specifically *how* it is conceived – is key for an understanding of its politics.

The attempt to go 'beyond critique' gives rise to an art of practice or intervention. Art's capacity for direct social intervention is claimed on the basis of an expansive understanding

of medium and form. Social practice is defined as an art that ‘treats the social itself as a medium and material of expression’ (Sholette 2017, 216; see also Stimson and Sholette 2007, 13; Bishop 2012, 2; Jacob 2018, 72). Stephen Wright casts the same idea in terms of scale: if traditional art practices produce ‘scaled-down models’ or ‘representations’, social practice operates on a ‘1:1 scale’ with society (2013, 3). Aesthetic form, too, is reconceptualized to encompass social form. So, according to Paul Ramírez Jonas, ‘the public has a form and any form can be art’ (quoted in Thompson 2012, 22). The slogan that adorns Rick Lowe’s *Project Row Houses* is ‘Community is Our Artform’ (quoted in Davis 2013). According to Raivo Puusemp, the artist whose artwork was to become mayor of a small American town, ‘form can be applied equally well to social and political systems as physical ones’ (2018, 49). Eyal Weizman argues that since the ‘world (...) undergoes a constant process of formation’, architecture can be used to shape it (2018, 177). Nato Thompson’s exhibition surveying twenty years of social practice was entitled *Living as Form*. In the catalogue he argues that ‘just as video, painting, and clay are types of forms, people coming together possess forms as well’ (2012, 22). The mistake is to equate people having a conversation or doing a project as having a ‘social form’. But social form has to be defined objectively if it is to mean anything at all. Social form is what endures *despite* the individual’s subjective disinvestment. Once social form is defined objectively in terms of the exchange of labour (i.e. the commodity form), all the problems of mediation, representation, and art’s relation to society come flooding back.

Given that the notion that artists have unmediated access to something like a ‘social medium’ or what Weizman calls ‘the political plastic’ is an illusion, the ‘interventions’ of social practice must be understood as *alternatives* – or, better, *representations* of alternatives (Weizman 2018, 177). Thus the idea that social practice is ‘anti-representational’ (see e.g. Thompson 2012, 21; McKee 2016a) or ‘post-representational’ (see e.g. Finkelppearl 2013, 49; Sholette 2017, 216) must be rejected. This is because the problem of mediation between social form and aesthetic form (i.e. between society and the alternative created by the artist) persists. In this sense, social practice is no different from other art. As I indicated in the Introduction, the ‘enactment’ of a practical alternative must be seen as a *representation* of one from the standpoint of society (social objectivity). Thus Kester’s insistence that social practice is ‘directly’ political (2006) or Sholette’s idea of ‘art as political action’ (2016) is not going to help us. The question is not *whether* art is political but what *kind* of politics it embraces. And this

is determined not by some rhetorical flourish but by the aesthetic form itself and its relation to the dominant social form.

When art is defined as practice or direct intervention, aesthetic (i.e. formal) concerns are seemingly deprioritized. We see this in the adoption of criteria that could be (and indeed *are*) achieved by non-aesthetic means. Social practices enact ‘a function already fulfilled by something else’, Wright points out, and are in that sense ‘redundant’ (2013, 4). But this equally renders art redundant. According to Marcus Boon and Gabriel Levine, the category of art is obsolete since it ‘no longer seems to describe adequately the vocation of artists’ (Boon and Levine 2018, 12). They propose replacing it with ‘practice’, arguing that it ‘offers a way out of the (end) game of art, and a proposal for other frameworks in which thinking, making and doing can be valued’ (ibid., 13). Thompson similarly argues that the distinction between art and non-art is ‘dated’ (2012, 26). ‘As opposed to assuming there is an inherent difference between artist-initiated projects and non-artist-initiated projects, I have opted to simply include them all’ (ibid., 27). For Thompson what matters is having a positive social impact. The result is a list of ‘projects’ that includes WikiLeaks, the occupation of Tahrir Square, and a floating abortion clinic.

There is a certain amount of bad faith in this apparent indifference to art. We see this, for instance, in artists’ readiness to ‘invoke the art status of their work for funding purposes’ (Kester 2004, 188; see also Sholette 2016). More importantly, the question of social practice’s specificity – what distinguishes it from other practices and other forms of art – is precisely what has given rise to a burgeoning literature. This literature has produced myriad novel criteria (participation, cooperation, community empowerment, etc.), criteria that social practice shares with other practices, and yet sees the need to retain the concept of art. Put another way, even if art is reconceptualized along non-artistic lines, the concept itself is always implicitly retained. This is most obvious in the notion of ‘social practice’ itself, which functions *as a definition of art*.⁶ What the language of immediacy – art as politics, intervention, etc. – obscures is that the question of art’s autonomy continues to structure this

⁶ Thus Boon and Levine speak of ‘art-as-practice’ (2018, 14). According to Wright, social practice has a ‘double ontology’, i.e. it is art and not-art at once (2013, 4). In other words, art might duplicate the ontology of another practice yet it persists as art.

debate. In fact, given social practice's self-described oppositionality, this question is more, not less, pertinent. The idea of 'social change' is not compatible with an art that self-liquidates into society. To put it slightly differently, even as art becomes 'life' it must differentiate itself from it if 'life' is to be changed. 'Art' is often the cipher that allows for this minimal self-differentiation. But it is tacked on as an afterthought, without explanation as to what it means.

Implicitly, the social practice literature seeks to distinguish activist art (a) from other practices and (b) from dominant social relations. This is clear from the proposed criteria (participation, cooperation, etc.), which always articulate a perceived lack in the social order. But participation and cooperation are widespread phenomena that occur in the context of any number of practices. They fail not only to distinguish activist art from other practices but indeed from the dominant social relations it opposes. Often a different criterion is operative but which fails to be articulated as such. Consider Thompson again. He argues that the distinction between art and non-art is 'dated'. What matter is that a practice has a positive social impact. But, as he acknowledges, corporations can have a positive impact too. Through its CSR programme fast-food chain McDonald's offers 'essential medical, dental, and educational services to more than 150,000 children annually', generating an impact most artists can only dream of (Thompson 2012, 31). But McDonald's is not included on Thompson's list. Thompson thus fails to consistently apply his own criterion (he said he was not going to distinguish between art and non-art). 'Social impact' is subordinated to another principle. The same is true of such criteria as participation and cooperation. The exchange of commodities is the dominant form of social cooperation in modern society, but this does not qualify as social practice. Toyota encourages employee participation through *kaizen*, but this does not qualify as social practice. What social practice aims for, then, is not participation, cooperation, social impact, etc., but *autonomy* as living process. As Stimson and Sholette put it, its goal is to 'develop a sustained alternative to commodified social life' (2007, 4). Thompson implicitly acknowledges this. He defines social impact not in terms of measurable outcomes but as the creation of 'new forms of living' (2012, 29, 32). The same is true of Boon and Levine. When art turns into 'practice', they argue, it becomes 'a site for practical experimentation' with new 'forms of life' (2018, 21). Note how the language of immediacy yields to an idiom of mediation. We go from the language of 'practice' and 'social impact'

back to the language of 'form', therefore from the language of politics back to the language of aesthetics, and from the language of intervention back to the language of representation and 'alternatives'. These alternative forms are not defined by their emphasis on participation, cooperation, etc., per se, but rather by their aspiration to the unity of form and content, that is, their attempt at *self-legislation*.

Thus the criteria that are ordinarily proposed to evaluate social practice must be understood in light of a more general principle: autonomy. To do so is to inflate and deflate the claims of social practice at the same time. On the one hand, to describe social practice in terms of participation, cooperation, etc., fails to capture its true ambition, which is not to foster participation but to figure an autonomous social form. On the other hand, to say that its aim is to figure autonomy is to draw attention to its continuity with more traditional artistic practices. It is to deflate its political ambition by highlighting its representational, figurative, or symbolic – that is, its properly aesthetic – character. The implication is that the politics of activist art, like the politics of all art, is a function of its *form*. The question, specifically, is whether it achieves autonomy in its form. This is why the distinction between art and non-art continues to be relevant: 'art' functions as a cipher of autonomy, and therefore of the non-alienated social relations that social practice is after. The difference between social practice and its avant-garde precursors is that it seeks to figure these relations positively whereas in the avant-garde model art achieves autonomy negatively through self-critique. Social practice abandons critique, but this is merely to say that it appeals to autonomy in its positivity, the aesthetic expression of which is beauty. As such, a longer trajectory comes into view. Social practice recovers – or, more precisely, *literalizes* – a pre-modernist view of art, namely the prefigurative paradigm of beauty (see Chapter 4).

The question of art's autonomy persists, then, but in changed form. Schematically, the negative self-differentiation of the avant-garde gives way to the positive self-differentiation of social practice. We thus go from the (self-)critique of autonomy to its affirmation. We might rephrase this and say that social practice politicizes art in a new way: not by critiquing art's values but by enacting them, momentarily instantiating 'social beauty'.

One of the most important inflection points in the ongoing effort to re-articulate art's autonomy is Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*. In this text Bourriaud attempts to restore to art its original social mission. He argues that relational artworks can be understood as 'models of sociability' (2002, 70). Bourriaud's key claim is precisely that successful aesthetic forms are 'models' – that the sociality of art is, at its best, *exemplary*. Art stands in a positive relation to society. It does not criticize it but creates 'models' or 'micro-utopias' to make it better (ibid.).⁷ In attributing a model-like quality to art, *Relational Aesthetics* recovers the Schillerian notion that aesthetic form constitutes the ultimate horizon of social form. Note that Bourriaud does not fall into the trap of immediacy. He does not claim that art changes social relations directly but rather that it offers models (representations) of autonomous social relations and thereby enables change mediately. Moreover, he does not reduce autonomy to its particular manifestations (participation, cooperation, etc.). Bourriaud thus articulates the prefigurative model in its generality, highlighting its three main features. First, art is different from life: it creates a '*social interstice* within which (...) new "life possibilities" appear to be possible' (ibid., 45). This is the equivalent of the autonomous zone of prefigurative politics. Second, it is constructive, countering 'the alienation reigning everywhere else' (ibid., 82). This is the alternative constructed within the 'interstice'. Third, it has an exemplary form: art creates *models* of sociability. Later writings on activist art lose the clarity of Bourriaud's account. They elide the difference between aesthetic and social form and obscure its aspiration to autonomy (i.e. its model-like sociality), burying it beneath myriad criteria that fail to differentiate art from capitalist heteronomy. Conversely, Bourriaud articulates the general contours of a postcritical/prefigurative art, and is in that sense its pre-eminent theorist.

Relational Aesthetics is a canonical text but also a highly disputed one. On the one hand, it captures a shift in the zeitgeist, speaking to the desire for a form of engagement that is more

⁷ 'The role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real' (Bourriaud 2002, 13). 'Art was intended to prepare and announce a future world: today it is modelling possible universes' (ibid.). 'Art (...) is no longer seeking to represent utopias; rather, it is attempting to construct concrete spaces' (ibid., 46). 'It is not a matter of representing angelic worlds, but of producing the conditions thereof' (ibid., 83). 'The [relational] work proposes a functional model and not a maquette' (ibid., 112).

concrete than the critical gestures of the (neo-)avant-garde.⁸ On the other hand, *Relational Aesthetics* has been subjected to vigorous criticism, often in the name of a more political art. Relational art's popularity was at least partly responsible for this. The artists associated with *Relational Aesthetics* – Rirkrit Tiravanija, Pierre Huyghe, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Carsten Höller, Liam Gillick, Félix González-Torres, and others – are some of the most rewarded and widely exhibited of the last two decades. The familiarity of these names on the exhibition circuit as well as their visibility within commercial spaces seemed to undermine the political claims made on behalf of relational art by Bourriaud. While *Relational Aesthetics* should indeed be criticized, the problem with many of the existing critiques is that they obscure the importance of Bourriaud's framework for explaining social practice, which is often more recognizable in the pages of *Relational Aesthetics* than the relational practices it is ostensibly concerned with (a point I will return to below). The irony is that, despite trenchant critiques of Bourriaud's text, the ideas laid out in it have become a kind of common sense, especially among advocates of social practice.

Even as social practice assert its distance from its immediate precursor, relational art, and, through it, *Relational Aesthetics*, it reproduces the prefigurative logic laid out in this text. We see this perhaps most clearly in its attitude towards art and the institution of art. One of relational art's innovations (with respect to institutional critique) is that it takes a more positive view of the institution. The same is true of social practice. This, however, is concealed under an anti-institutional rhetoric. Whereas relational art was 'incorporated in the art industry', social practice maintains its distance from it (Davis 2013). Whereas the gallery-based interventions of relational art resembled 'a VIP cocktail party', social practice empowers marginalized communities (Thompson 2012, 31). What this rhetoric conceals is that social practice simply endeavours to use the institution for more 'political' ends. A vocabulary has emerged to describe this kind of para-institutional activity. It is most often referred to as 'leveraging', which can be defined as the attempt to channel institutional resources into a particular social cause or community (see e.g. Kolbowski, Joselit, and Friday

⁸ Instructive in this regard is George Baker's account of Rirkrit Tiravanija's first solo show in New York, during which he presented his now-famous *Untitled (Free)*. Baker contrasts this with a work by Christian Philipp Müller, which was in many ways the opposite of Tiravanija's (Baker refers to it as 'counter-relational') and which received a much more muted reception. *Untitled (Free)* became 'the model for much contemporary "avant-garde" practice' while Müller's critical approach became increasingly marginal (Baker 2002).

2012, 79; Sholette 2017, 35-38). It is, in other words, a form of ‘material redistribution’ (La Berge 2019, 67). It is also referred to as ‘institutional activism’ (Degot 2015, 22), the ‘infrastructural turn’ (MTL Collective 2018, 193-94), ‘instituent practices’ (Raunig 2006), and ‘critical complicity’ (Anagnost 2018). There are differences of emphasis. While ‘leveraging’ and ‘critical complicity’ refer to the use of existing institutions, the others terms describe the effort to create counterinstitutions and alternative spaces. The key point is that social practice regards the institution as a potential ally.⁹ This is not just a question of funding but signals the idea that art constitutes a (social or institutional) space where alternatives might take shape. This is Bourriaud’s idea of art as a ‘social interstice’. As Charles Esche puts it, ‘through their association with the tolerated cultural enclosure called “art”, [artists are] able to act according to different rules’ (2012, 37). Art becomes ‘a test site for economic and social alternatives’ (ibid.). The German activist collective Center for Political Beauty capture the same idea by saying that art provides ‘a free space for action’ (Center for Political Beauty 2022).

Social practice’s emphasis on *process* should also be seen in light of its prefigurative character. The ‘process’ takes on singular importance in prefigurative politics and social practice because it is believed that certain procedural checks and balances can lay the groundwork for an exemplary, self-regulating community.

In art activism the processes behind an art piece or action are important as political practice (...) embodied, dialogical, and performative art forms clearly dominate the field, as these allow prefigurative forms of building community (Serafini 2018, 183).

In fact one would have to go further as the process does not stand ‘behind’ the work but *is* the work, just as autonomous community is not a means to an end but is means and end at once. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, ‘process’ is virtually identical with ‘autonomy’. It is produced by a set of rudimentary institutions that aim to guarantee the full and equal participation of all concerned in collective decision-making. Thus ‘horizontal structures,

⁹ The irony is that the discourse on ‘leveraging’ emerges in the wake of the institutionalization of social practice (described in the Introduction). The notion that artists are using the institution for progressive ends takes the place of self-reflection on how their practices might align with, or be mobilized by, elite interests.

collaboration, and democratic processes in [social practice] can be understood as prefigurative forms of art making', as Serafini writes (*ibid.*, 80). But it is important to highlight why: these structures and processes enact on a limited scale the ideal of collective self-legislation, autonomy as living process. What is important to note here is that the process is *not* equivalent to the life process but, in theory at least, marks off a space of autonomy.¹⁰

Social practice follows the prefigurative logic laid out in *Relational Aesthetics*. If Bourriaud's text has given rise to an unprecedented ferment of theorization, the resulting literature has not altered its fundamental insights. Social practice is constructive; it believes in the interstitial or exceptional nature of art and the institution of art; and it insists on the exemplarity (i.e. autonomy) of the social alternative it proposes. It is this last point in particular that secures activist art's prefigurative character and allies it with a pre-modernist understanding of art. In social practice aesthetic form recovers its socially exemplary character, albeit in quasi-literalized form since the artwork enacts the utopian vision that beauty once symbolized (see Chapter 4).

The problem with social practice is that the ostensible model-like status of its alternatives is contingent on the idea that art can be an 'interstice' or 'cultural enclosure'. But, as Stewart Martin points out, what is lacking anywhere in the literature is an account of *how* social practice disengages from capitalist social relations (2007, 379). Art's interstitial nature is never argued, merely posited. And yet prefiguration's success – its ability to figure autonomy as opposed to capitalist heteronomy – is contingent on its disarticulation from dominant social relations. The need to disengage from capitalism is implicitly recognized, first, through the claim that art is an 'interstice', 'cultural enclosure', or 'autonomous zone'. Here the claim to autonomy is shifted from formal (aesthetic) onto institutional or social ground; it becomes a physical space insulated from capitalist heteronomy. But the problem is also approached from the opposite side, by insisting on the possibility of embodying unalienated social

¹⁰ Deweyan pragmatists such as Finkelpearl and Jacob tend to dissolve the artistic process into the life process. Jacob, for instance, argues that both art and life can be understood as a 'creative process' and that therefore life itself 'is an ever-evolving work of art' (2018, 59). But Jacob implicitly recognizes that the process defines an ideal type, which she characterizes in terms of a 'means-ends continuum', i.e. a desideratum strictly speaking off limits in capitalism (*ibid.*, 71).

relations directly. This is the claim that artworks or social interventions can be 'models' and thereby 'prefigure' a free society.

What must be explained is how social practice and prefigurative politics elude the contradictions of the commodity form. It would be wrong to think that they can do so by refusing to make objects (saleable commodities). The commodity form is an *objective social form*. It arises in the exchange of labour, the dominant social practice and material basis of society. It can be understood, therefore, as the form of society at a particular stage of its historical development. As such, it characterizes even non-commodified practices such as art. As Jensen Suther writes:

Art is, in Marx's terms, 'unproductive' intellectual labor, whose relative autonomy is determined by the alienated wage labor that makes it possible: artworks are, in other words, defined by that which they oppose (2017, 105).

Artworks are not strictly speaking commodities since they do not create value. They are, from the standpoint of the capitalist, 'unproductive'. And yet they are subjected to the commodity form. Suther calls it '*the form of the intelligibility of objects under capitalism*' (ibid.). Every object has an equivalent and is 'defined' by it. The same goes for individuals when they sell their labour on the market, even if not strictly speaking as wage labourers, and therefore not strictly speaking their 'labour'. An object's value (the amount of abstract labour it internalizes) makes it commensurable with all other objects, even if it is not a mass-produced commodity. Value, therefore, is a cipher of heteronomy: it is that which is imposed on an object from without. Artworks produced under capitalism necessarily internalize this heteronomy, which is also the condition from which they assert their distance qua expressions of self-legislating form. The question is how to do this. Let's first consider how *not* to do it. One can make as if heteronomy is an external condition that can be ignored or shut out by operating within an 'autonomous zone'. This is the strategy adopted by prefigurative practice. It claims that its alternative is autonomous because it collectively produces its own content. But this ignores that the process of self-legislation is subordinated to the process of value creation, which it cannot legislate out of existence. Thus, in order to preserve its 'autonomy', the process ignores its dependence on value. In Occupy, this resulted in the literal exclusion of wage

workers from the occupations. This annihilates any pretension to ‘prefigurative’ community since it simply reproduces existing class relations. The only way for art to attain a measure of autonomy is negatively, by thematizing its dependence, i.e. through self-critique. As Martin writes, reconstructing Adorno, ‘art’s resistance to commodification is obliged to take the form of an immanent critique or self-criticism’ (2007, 373; see also Clark 1982; Roberts 2000). The attempt to go ‘beyond critique’ is incompatible with resistance to objective social relations. It is precisely the immanent critique of the commodity form that holds open the possibility of a *different* form, not practicable, nor even legible, within existing social relations.¹¹

Social practice’s (implicit or explicit) anti-capitalism – a function of its (implicit or explicit) investment in autonomy – is incompatible with its prefigurative politics. That said, the politics of any artwork is a function of its form. It is determined in the encounter with it, not in advance. As a regulative principle, I have assumed the unity of the theory and practice of activist art, but this has to be borne out in individual judgements. Whether an artwork resists or reproduces the logic of the commodity depends on its ability to thematize the objective contradictions that structure it. I will give some examples below. While necessarily selective, my examples are supposed to make vivid that a strategy of direct or immediate opposition, as envisaged by the prefigurative approach to form, tends to reproduce the very contradictions it must exclude to secure its ‘model-like’ status.

Relational Art and Social Practice: Case Studies

The locus classicus of relational art is Rirkrit Tiravanija’s *Untitled (Free)*, first performed at 303 Gallery in New York in 1992.¹² The work is routinely read through the lens of *Relational*

¹¹ ‘Harold Rosenberg challenged me to explain what one of my paintings could possibly mean to the world’, Barnett Newman once told an interviewer. ‘My answer was that if he and others could read it properly, it would mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism’ (quoted in Wood et al. 1993, 65). Newman was suggesting that the condition of intelligibility of his paintings is the negation of existing social relations. They figure reconciliation negatively.

¹² George Baker points out that ‘Tiravanija had an earlier 1990 exhibition at the Paula Allen Gallery entitled *Pad Thai* that received much less attention than the 1992 exhibit at 303 Gallery’ (2002, 134, fn1). The work has been performed many times since, including at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, in 1995 and at David Zwirner Gallery in New York in 2007. The MoMA acquired the work in 2011.

Aesthetics and has been attacked for being uncritical (see e.g. Baker 2002) or no more than a form of 'entertainment' (see e.g. Bishop 2004, 69). But a close reading reveals that *Untitled (Free)* subtly critiques its own outwardly convivial appearance. Tiravanija's performance was based on an inversion. He emptied the gallery's office and transferred its contents – binders, frames, furnishings, water dispensers, etc. – to the gallery space. The office, now empty, was the site of Tiravanija's performance. He cooked up a simple dish of pad thai using rudimentary cooking equipment. The food was given away for free to anyone who happened to drop in. The work had the outward appearance of a gathering among friends. Laura Hoptman writes that Tiravanija's work makes us 'conscious of the beauty and pleasure of those activities that make up our lives – eating, drinking, playing, resting, conversing with a friend or stranger' (1997). But *Untitled (Free)* did not take place in a gallery – a space traditionally reserved for the contemplation of beauty – but in a place of work. The performance deprived the gallerist of his office, who was now 'obliged to work in public, among cooking smells and diners' (Bishop 2004, 56). As such, the work drew attention to the inseparability of social and economic relations of exchange. From this standpoint, *Untitled (Free)* called to mind Michael Asher's 1974 intervention at the Claire Copley Gallery in Los Angeles. Asher removed the wall separating the office from the exhibition space, thereby exposing the director and turning him into the gallery's main attraction. This obvious reference to institutional critique is often elided in the work's reception history.

Far from approaching the audience as 'equals' or 'collaborators', Tiravanija's works tend to exhibit them in quasi-self-compromising poses – enjoying a commodity concealed as a gift, for instance, or looking for transcendence but finding only the banal and the everyday. Take *Untitled 1996 (Tomorrow is Another Day)*, a plywood replica of Tiravanija's New York apartment. Executed at one-to-one scale, the replica contained a functioning kitchen, shower, and toilet. The installation, first installed at the Cologne Kunstverein in 1996, was open to the public around the clock. According to lore, some used Tiravanija's apartment as a wedding venue, others camped out overnight, while art-world insiders used the kitchen to cook pad thai in an attempted *mise en abyme*. Like most of Tiravanija's works, *Untitled 1996* consists of an environment that must be activated by an audience (Tiravanija always includes 'lots of people' in his list of materials). What constitutes the work is the resulting socio-aesthetic form. The focus, however, is on the event, the relations that are formed with and within

Tiravanija's environments. This explains why so many apparently identical iterations exist as separate works. The artist exhibited a replica of his apartment at the Cologne Kunstverein as *Untitled 1996 (Tomorrow is Another Day)*, at his New York gallerist Gavin Brown as *Untitled 1999 (Tomorrow Can Shut Up and Go Away)*, at the 2002 Liverpool Biennial as *Apartment 21 (Tomorrow Can Shut Up and Go Away)*, and at the Serpentine in London as *Untitled 2005*. The reasoning is clear: while the concept is the same, the work is not, because in each case the social material is different. The apparent originality of each iteration throws into relief the utterly prosaic nature of the interactions. As Dan Fox puts it, 'what can I gain from a conversation at a Tiravanija installation that I can't get from meeting my friends in the pub?' (2005). According to Hoptman, this would be the wrong way to look at it: 'These works (...) do not offer refuge from the day-to-day, but rather give us a setting in which to recognize its beauty' (1997). But what Tiravanija's environments exhibit is not beauty but an aspiration to beauty that never comes to fruition. They are not, in that sense, 'models of sociability' but exposés of failed attempts at transcendence. Here the aestheticization of life, the effort to merge art and society, seems to have reached a dead end. In its affirmation of the banal and the everyday, *Untitled 1996* seems to question rather than assert its exemplary status as a beautiful form. What Hoptman suggests is a celebration of the quotidian could equally pass for a critique of art's reduction to it.

Such formal resistance by way of self-critique is certainly not guaranteed, and may even come off as a kind of fluke (Tiravanija himself always insists that his works are 'models'; see e.g. Tiravanija and Kramer 2020, 73). For an example of a work which straightforwardly asserts its model-like nature, consider Carsten Höller's *Ball House* (1999), a large donut-shaped tent containing seventy balls. Its lycra surface is punctured with irregular holes. It has one larger opening that serves as an entrance. Visitors are invited to enter the tent, using it as a formal structure to design their own game. Balls can be passed to fellow participants, thrown out of the tent or into it, depending on the rules that participants come up with. In 2000, Höller created a similar work, a quatrefoil tent made of lycra, but this time containing thirty frisbees (*Frisbee House*). Again, participants are invited to throw frisbees in and out of the tent, threading them through one of the elliptical holes, or come up with any number of other games. According to Tim Stott, *Ball House* and *Frisbee House* 'thematise social organisation' (2015, 39). In other words, the ball or frisbee games are metaphors for social normativity.

Participants have to negotiate a set of rules and hold themselves to it, keeping in mind the available materials and challenges of the terrain. This, however, does not prevent them from renegotiating the rules or devising an altogether different game at a later stage. 'What is not selected in play remains accessible and attractive to participants as a medium for further observations and further play', Stott observes (ibid., 40). *Frisbee House* thus demonstrates that 'there are more possibilities than otherwise imagined for observing and organising sociability' (ibid.). In this way *Frisbee House* demonstrates the plasticity of the social, thus affirming the possibility of social change. This possibility has a formal correlate in the work itself, which changes depending on the relations it engenders. *Frisbee House* 'models' society as a freely self-organizing entity. Moreover, in giving this social model the form of a game, Höller evokes society in its reconciled state. It is almost impossible to miss the reference to Schiller, according to whom 'man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays' (1993, 131, emphasis removed). For Schiller, play is one of the clearest examples of 'living form' or 'what in the widest sense of the term we call *beauty*' (ibid., 128). What is specifically *aesthetic* about play, according to Schiller, is that it designates a state in which form (in this case the rules of the game) is no longer opposed to sense (here the embodied actions of the players) but merge, and in such a way as to elicit an experience of pleasure which is valued for its own sake. On the face of it, then, Höller has created a prefigurative work in which aesthetic form functions as a model for – the ultimate horizon of – social form. Like Tiravanija's convivial encounters, it seems to create a 'model of sociability': a form that society could and should imitate. But what the analogy with Schiller is meant to draw out is that this 'model' articulates the ideal of modern society, an ideal *already* embodied in liberal institutions (including art), which, however, are *also* the institutions inhibiting its realization. *Frisbee House* does not suggest an alternative but affirms what is – failing, however, to recognize the self-contradiction of the 'model' it embraces. Put another way, it expresses the self-understanding of liberal society, an understanding that by now has become ideological. The outwardly ludic, optimistic, and forward-looking vision of *Frisbee House* conceals an unconscious, backward-looking melancholy for a failed social model. It does not create an exemplary social form but expresses the forgetting of the self-contradiction of social form. What is lacking in Höller's works is a self-critical element that somehow brings to consciousness the self-undermining quality of social self-legislation in capitalism.



Carsten Höller, *Frisbee House*, 2000

According to Bourriaud's prefigurative account of relational art, the works of Tiravanija and Höller offer social models for a future that modernism could only figure negatively (2002, 45-46). In this sense, they 'realize' the social promise of modernism. But often it is precisely a reference to modernism that allows relational art to function self-critically. For instance, Tiravanija has created a series of pavilions replicating icons of modernist architecture (including works by Sigurd Lewerentz, Philip Johnson, and Rudolf Schindler), which he transformed into playgrounds and day-care centres.¹³ On the one hand, it is clear how such gestures resonate with the theory of relational aesthetics. The sight of playing children immediately throws the austerity and functionalism of modernist architecture into relief. For the pavilion based on Johnson's Glass House, Tiravanija had children decorate the walls with drawings, disrupting the clean lines and transparency of the original design. Moreover, the replicas were scaled-down versions of the originals, making 'the houses appear more human' (Lind 1995). Thus Tiravanija seems to achieve the micro-utopian vision – a modernism of

¹³ Tiravanija's works are, in the order of the architects mentioned, *Untitled 1995 (Half-scale single-family home No. 47 with interior decorations by children of the Storken day care center ages 5-7)*, *Untitled 1997 (Glass House)*, and *Untitled 2002 (he promised)*. The latter, a scaled-down version of Schindler's Kings Road House, was used as 'an arena for a variety of programs, including DJ sessions, film screenings, panels, and children's workshops' (Guggenheim 2004).

modest gestures – advocated by Bourriaud, Esche, and others.¹⁴ If modernist architecture *implies* a utopian vision, Tiravanija’s work seems to explore what it would take to make that vision a reality. But if Tiravanija’s pavilions can be understood as micro-utopias, so they can be read as an indictment of utopian thinking today. ‘This is what is left of the utopian imagination’, the works seem to say. The pavilions offer a vision not of the playfulness of maturity but the playfulness of infancy. Utopian play is presented not as the most serious business but as something that one indulges in as a child – and must then outgrow.¹⁵ Does the work affirm the ‘utopian’ doodles of a child or criticize contemporary utopian experimentation for being no more than a kind of doodling, ultimately as worthless as the drawings pinned to the walls of Tiravanija’s pavilions? Tiravanija’s glass house precludes an easy answer – precisely because it allows Johnson’s original implicitly to criticize Tiravanija’s appropriation, and vice versa. Tiravanija’s pavilions can be read as critiques of the austerity and impracticability of modernist utopianism, but they can also be taken as comments on the incoherence, impotence, and childishness of the utopian imagination today. Since this tension plays out within the work, it can be understood as a self-critique. This self-critical element prevents Tiravanija’s work from collapsing into capitalist life but it also undermines its status as a ‘model’.

Often (but not always) Tiravanija’s ‘models’ achieve critical autonomy by initiating an art-historical dialogue with the avant-garde, allowing the past to stand in judgement on the present. But this strategy can also fail. Consider Höller’s most famous works: his slides. Höller’s first slides were installed at the inaugural Berlin Biennale (*Valerio I* and *Valerio II*, 1998). They were modest in size, no larger than the slides installed in public playgrounds. In an interview with *Artforum*, Höller criticized capitalism for its ‘competitive utilitarianism’ and argued that his work could be understood as a model for a less alienated form of living (Höller and Birnbaum 1999). Over the next two decades, Höller would install slides in fourteen locations. Formally they would remain the same, but they would grow in size, resulting in

¹⁴ Esche wants to see ‘small-scale, local, engaged, independent initiatives (...) [that] question current conditions not through critique and metaphor but through tangible ‘play’ with the mechanisms of capitalist production and social exchange’ (2012, 36). He conceives of such gestures as ‘antidotes to the utopian tendency of art. Utopias are dangerous in many ways, not only if they are made real but even their proposal seems too often to lead to a kind of lazy disinvestments in the existing situation’ (ibid., 37).

¹⁵ ‘Really free labour’, Marx notes, ‘the composing of music for example, is at the same time damned serious and demands the greatest effort’ (2000, 403).

iconic sculptural forms. The turning point was *Test Site* (2006), Höller's commission for Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. The work comprised five tubular slides, the largest of which spiralled down from the fifth floor and was 58 metres long. The title of the work – *Test Site* – evokes the prefigurative language of *Relational Aesthetics*. The work, Höller claims, was conceived as a functional model for an intervention in urban space.

We conceived the Turbine Hall installation as a large-scale experiment to see how slides can be used in public spaces (...) The slides here are large (...) but in fact I'm using the Turbine Hall as a small model for the whole city, for every city (Höller and Honoré 2006).

Höller commissioned two architectural studies to prove the feasibility of his model, which proposed installing slides across London to enliven public interaction with the city's buildings (General Public Agency 2007). According to critic Mark Windsor, the work's viability

as a model for buildings outside of the art gallery (...) as proven by the independent feasibility study commissioned to accompany the work, affirms the political value of *Test Site*, not as a fictional utopia but a concrete space that presents a better, more life-affirming way of interacting with the world (2011).

Both artist and critic adopt Bourriaud's language of 'models' to highlight the work's social relevance. But the slides' viability as a 'model' clearly derived from their compatibility with a different set of interests. *Test Site* was a huge commercial success, drawing three million visitors (DW News 2010). In the Turbine Hall, Höller demonstrated what his slides were capable of. Over the next decade and a half Höller's slides saw a sharp increase in demand. Cultural institutions around the world wanted a version of *Test Site* on their premises. Höller installed slides at the São Paulo biennial (2008), the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb (2009), the Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane (2010), the New Museum in New York (2011), the Hayward Gallery in London (2015), the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence (2018), the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn (2018), the Danish Architecture Center in Copenhagen (2020), and Luma in Arles (2021) – nearly half of which were permanent or semi-permanent installations. Multinationals such as Vitra (2014) and Prada (2000) commissioned slides to cheer up their

headquarters. In 2016 Höller was called in to save the legacy of Anish Kapoor's *ArcelorMittal Orbit*, the gigantic sculpture-cum-observation tower commissioned for the 2012 summer Olympics. Instead of reaping a projected £1.2m a year, Kapoor's sculpture cost the taxpayer £10,000 a week to maintain (Wainwright 2016). It was decided that one of Höller's slides might turn things around. To wrap the world's longest slide around the UK's largest sculpture seemed like a winning idea. The slide arguably functions as an extension of the nearby Westfield shopping centre. For £17 exhausted shoppers can re-energize themselves with a ride down Höller's helter skelter. American project developers soon took note. Two years later, the same 'model' was rolled out to the Aventura Mall – America's second-largest shopping centre – which commissioned two of Höller's slides. Wedged between the Apple store and a sushi bar, Höller's installation functions as an ad hoc nursery, allowing parents to get on with their shopping without having to worry about the kids.

What to make, then, of the claim that Höller is 'an outspoken and articulate critic of today's society' (Höller and Birnbaum 1999)? As I have argued, this claim would have to be substantiated on the level of form. Höller explains that his slides are inspired by Brancusi's *Endless Column* (1938). There is another obvious precursor: Tatlin's (idea for a) *Monument to the Third International* (1919), which, on reviewing Höller's slides, suddenly appears to be modelled on a helter skelter. This juxtaposition creates an obvious and dramatic contrast. While Brancusi's Column and Tatlin's Tower lead up, Höller's sculpture spirals down. Tatlin's Tower evokes a movement of dialectical self-overcoming, hinting at the possibility of a mature social subject. Brancusi's Column likewise produces a vision of progress: the top rhomboidal module is a half-unit, suggesting an infinite upward motion. *Test Site* reverses this movement, suggesting a trajectory not of maturation but infantilization, leading away from responsibility and into the arms of external authority. This tension – between a collective utopian vision and hedonic individualism, between the difficulty of living up to one's ideals and the ease with which they are abandoned – formally structures *Test Site*. The work can and has been criticized for demonstrating the museum's continuity with the 'mall' (Baker 2002, 135) or 'fairground' (Harris 2013, 322), but this critique may be internal to the work itself. *Test Site* exhibits commodity culture to itself within the 'interstice' that was supposed to provide a refuge from it, measuring it against past ideals. But as Höller's slides begin to adorn corporate

headquarters and shopping centres, this self-critical moment becomes increasingly elusive. The slides are reduced to their commodity status. Their form ceases to function critically.

Höller's work exhibits a tension that can be found in much relational art. To the extent that it straightforwardly asserts its exemplarity, it becomes obfuscatory, ideological, or simply affirmative of existing conditions. Insofar as it creates a functional 'model', its success will depend on its compatibility with existing social relations, i.e. its commercial viability. For the most part, however, the models of relational art do not take themselves seriously as models. They consist of ironic gestures: ludic, contradictory, slyly subversive, and in most cases impracticable. This irony reflects the necessary ambiguity of *all* ameliorative gestures under capitalism (I will return to this point below). Judged against the prefigurative standard proposed by Bourriaud, then, relational art will often fall short. Conversely, social practice will often try to live up to the prefigurative standard proposed by *Relational Aesthetics*. Social practice is an art of 'concrete spaces' (Bourriaud 2002, 46) and 'modest proposals' (Esche 2012, 37). It rejects irony and ambiguity. Like Bourriaud himself, it is earnest about art's social mission. If relational art at its best mimics the commodity in its socially responsible garb, social practice seeks to go beyond this appearance and propose an actual fix.

To illustrate this, I will highlight two projects that are indebted to Tiravanija's *Untitled (Free)* but intend to go beyond it, realizing the social promise it appears to contain. The first is *Conflict Kitchen* (Pittsburgh 2010–2017), a project that took the form of an eatery serving food from countries the United States is in conflict with (on a broad understanding of 'conflict'). Founded by artists Jon Rubin and Dawn Weleski, the restaurant successively showcased the cuisines of Iran, Afghanistan, Cuba, Palestine, Venezuela, North Korea, and the Haudenosaunee (a confederacy of Native American peoples). The food wrappers contained interviews with local residents or members of the diaspora about aspects of their country's culture and politics. In this way it was hoped that patrons would gain a more nuanced understanding of people habitually demonized in the mainstream media. Food was used as a way to get people to communicate across cultural differences. In some cases this was facilitated by the presence of members of the relevant diaspora who would sit down at someone's table, allowing them to 'meet a local'. The culinary programme was augmented

with a cultural programme, consisting of talks, performances, panel discussions, and so on, raising awareness about the plight of people suffering under US (foreign) policy.



Jon Rubin & Dawn Weleski, Conflict Kitchen, July 2014

A similar project was mounted by American-Iraqi artist Michael Rakowitz. The seed for *Enemy Kitchen* (2003–ongoing) was planted during the First Gulf War. The artists, who was living in New York at the time, was told by his mother that there wasn't a single Iraqi restaurant in the city. In the American cultural imaginary Iraq was a country of war and oil, creating a climate that was hardly conducive for Iraqi restaurateurs (Rakowitz 2018). Then, shortly after 9/11, Rakowitz saw New Yorkers queuing to get into Khyber Pass, one of the city's Afghan restaurants. Rakowitz recalls:

It was such a beautiful way for people to say that their grief was not a call to war, and it was a strange communion, taking in the food of the enemy. I thought about what my mother said. As the US was heading toward war with Afghanistan and Iraq (...) I started teaching her recipes in New York, where I was living then (Rakowitz and Boucher 2018).

The idea for *Enemy Kitchen* was born. To make intercultural relations discussable, Rakowitz began giving cooking lessons, including at the Hudson Guild Children’s Center, on a council estate in Chelsea, New York. Some of these working-class children were of Iraqi descent; others had relatives serving in the US Army occupying the country. As they prepared Iraqi food, the children discussed the ‘war on terror’, a taboo subject at school. The project later moved to Chicago, assuming a different form but embracing the same animating idea. Rakowitz brought together Iraqi chefs and American veterans who had served in the Iraq war. The artist had them share kitchen duties as they sold Iraqi food out of a converted ice cream truck. He also inverted the power dynamic: the Americans were to serve as sous-chefs to the Iraqis. The project drew attention to the plight of Iraqi-Americans in Chicago, many of whom run Greek or Lebanese restaurants, fearing that any association with Iraq would harm their business. Thus Rakowitz addressed their fear of being considered enemies by drawing the ‘enemy kitchen’ behind various Chicago food establishments out into the open.



Michael Rakowitz, *Enemy Kitchen*, 2003–ongoing

Untitled (Free), *Conflict Kitchen*, and *Enemy Kitchen* lend themselves to easy comparison because of their thematic similarities. In each case the artist uses food ‘as a way of coaxing conversation out’, as Jon Rubin puts it (Al Jazeera 2014). Food is instrumentalized in the

service of examining or altering social relations. The conversations among participants are as important as, if not more important than, the dishes that occasioned it. Despite these formal similarities, there are striking differences between *Untitled (Free)*, on the one hand, and *Conflict Kitchen* and *Enemy Kitchen*, on the other. First, while the latter are more collaborative, they are also more didactic. They are less open-ended in their setup and the exchanges they are bound to prompt. If none of these works are *about* food, *Untitled (Free)* makes least use of its formal properties. That is to say, the meaning of the work owes little to the qualities of the dish. The other projects, conversely, use food as a symbolic marker of origin, ideology, and cultural attachment. The cultural valences of specific cuisines are used to interpellate participants.¹⁶ The resultant assemblages are therefore thematically tighter but also less polysemous than that constructed by *Untitled (Free)*. While in *Untitled (Free)* the food can be understood in any number of ways – as a comment on the relation between spiritual and physical nourishment, say, or the status of the gift in a commodity society – everything in *Conflict Kitchen* and *Enemy Kitchen* – from the choice of food to the constituencies they target – drives at a specific meaning and a specific effect: the possibility of reconciliation between conflicting communities.

The key difference between the two sets of projects consists in how they render or elide social contradiction. The central contradiction in *Untitled (Free)* concerns the commodity status of the object. The work is structured around the sharing of a free meal, but the status of this gift is questioned in various ways (see above).¹⁷ *Untitled (Free)* draws attention to the contradiction between paid and unpaid labour, the antagonism underlying the outwardly convivial encounter, without resolving it. *Conflict Kitchen* and *Enemy Kitchen* take a different approach. In each case, food is sold at normal rates, making the projects indistinguishable from an ordinary takeout or deli. Rubin explains that 95% of *Conflict Kitchen*'s annual revenue derives from food sales (Rubin and Haines 2015). The strategy is not to draw out the contradictions inherent in the commodity form but to mobilize its symbolic valences to

¹⁶ In her book on site-specificity, Miwon Kwon tracks the changing understanding of site: from site as the 'actuality of a location' or the 'social conditions of the institutional frame' to site as a discursive construct (2002, 26). This maps onto the transition from site-specific to 'issue-specific' work (ibid., 110).

¹⁷ In her much-cited critique of relational art, Bishop unfavourably compares Tiravanija's work to that of Santiago Sierra. 'While Tiravanija celebrates the gift, Sierra knows that there's no such thing as a free meal' (Bishop 2004, 70). She thus fails to pick up on the central contradiction around which *Untitled (Free)* is structured.

ameliorative effect. In each case the broad aim is identical: to reconcile conflicting communities. The cultural meaning of a particular dish or cuisine serves as a springboard for conversation, ultimately in the interest of challenging stereotypes and prejudices. Food is thus a means of transcending cultural difference. In the case of *Enemy Kitchen*, this acquires religious overtones. Rakowitz likens the act of 'taking in the food of the enemy' to the sacrament of the Holy Communion. Just as the consumption of bread and wine reconciles the Christian to the community of believers embodied in the Lord, so consuming a plate of kubba is a way of asserting one's proximity to the people of Iraq. Much can be said about Rakowitz's inversion of the power dynamic between Iraqi chefs and American veterans, but one interpretation is that he casts the Iraqis in a quasi-hieratic role. Rakowitz's truck is a bit like a public confession booth. It is where the liberal public go to ask forgiveness for their government's sins. The Iraqis take confession and hand them the means of their absolution on a paper plate. The result is a miraculous reconciliation. Indeed, in church doctrine the Eucharist can be understood as the *completion* of the sacrament of Reconciliation (penance). There is, as Rakowitz says, something poetic about this gesture. But it is also simplistic – in the precise sense that it reduces a political conflict to a cultural one, or, more insidiously, assumes that political conflict must be based on cultural misunderstanding. *Conflict Kitchen* and *Enemy Kitchen* seem to suggest that if the American public had known more about their 'enemies', conflict would not have transpired. Or, more charitably, the projects simply bracket politics, demonstrating how well people get along *if it wasn't for politics*. This, then, is the key difference between *Untitled (Free)* and the two social practice initiatives. Whereas the former subtly hints at the contradictions underlying the outward display of amicability, the latter resolve what is at bottom a political contradiction culturally.

Conflict Kitchen and *Enemy Kitchen* seek to challenge how certain peoples and cultures are represented. According to Grant Kester, this is one of the functions that conversation-based works can fulfil. By facilitating a process of intercultural dialogue, they 'can challenge dominant representations of a given community and create a more complex understanding of, and empathy for, that community among a broader public' (2004, 115; see also Kwon 2002, 114-15). From this perspective, *Conflict Kitchen* and *Enemy Kitchen* create a kind of counter-narrative challenging the biases of the corporate media. But in doing so they fulfil the same depoliticizing function as their opponents. Both frame political conflict in cultural

terms, that is, as being justified or not based on the characteristics of a given 'community'. This community is as fictitious as the solution on offer. *Conflict Kitchen* and *Enemy Kitchen* sell an idea, namely that participants can help contain conflict by exposing themselves to cultural difference. This is the kind of gestural politics that underpins ethical consumerism. The symbolic realm, which includes art as much as marketing, becomes the ideological carrier of a false narrative of reconciliation, instead of the medium where material contradictions are reflected truthfully. The irony is that *Conflict Kitchen* was pulled up short by the contradictions it failed to articulate in its form. In 2015, staff decided to unionize, citing low pay and poor working conditions (Sholette 2017, 144-45). Thus the self-contradiction of the commodity form supervened on the project from without. Importantly, *Conflict Kitchen* had no choice but to ignore these contradictions if it was to fulfil its ameliorative objective. Put another way, for the project to be *prefigurative* – for it to anticipate a reconciled community – it had to ignore the objective contradictions that stand in the way of reconciliation. In this precise sense, it veiled rather than disclosed reality.

Relational art at its best can be understood as a mimetic critique of the commodity form. It attempts to resist it (not always successfully) by rendering its latest manifestations intelligible, doing so with the friendly, corporate face we have come to expect of it. Advocates of social practice criticize this art for being insufficiently political. As Rubin suggests, relational art will likely end up as 'part of some tidy movement that's eventually put to bed in a set of books and catalogues'. What we need, he argues, is 'an actual movement in which art and artists truly play more significant roles in questioning and structuring society' (Rubin and Reiman 2016). But in attempting to go beyond critique, social practice merely reproduces the dominant social logic. Today the commodity no longer manifests as need and satisfaction of need but, with increasing regularity, as the solution to a social problem (witness the rise of ethical consumerism, 'social businesses', etc.). Corporations are now problem-solvers, subordinating the profit-motive to a social principle, at least in marketing brochures and advertisements. To satisfy a need is not enough; the commodity must also address the social problems attendant upon it (deforestation, pollution, inadequate wages, etc.). *Enemy Kitchen* and *Conflict Kitchen* follow the same logic, selling commodities that are 'exemplary' in their reconciliatory powers.

Historical Precedents

The first attempts to historicize relational practice in the mid-2000s are motivated by a contradictory impulse: relational art's enormous popularity, on the one hand, and its perceived inadequacy, on the other. The period from 1993 to roughly 2004 can be characterized as the decade of relational art (cf. Bishop 2012, 195). By the early 2000s, the cohort of relational artists championed by Bourriaud are ubiquitous presences on the art world circuit on both sides of the Atlantic. As relational art reaches its zenith, critical questions begin to be asked, first of all by its own protagonists. In their curatorial statement for Utopia Station, Molly Nesbit, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Rirkrit Tiravanija reflect on the failure of the global anti-war movement to stop the invasion of Iraq. The marches and protests, and then the invasion itself, coincide with their preparations for the Venice Biennale, which opens in the summer of 2003. In their statement the curators quote President Bush.

In the speech to the graduating West Point cadets in June 2002, President George Bush announced his policy of pre-emptive strikes and wars with the reassurance that 'America has no empire to extend or utopia to establish' (Nesbit, Obrist, and Tiravanija 2003).

The authors criticize 'the refusal of utopia' on the part of political leaders, which they liken to an absence of 'forward social vision' (ibid.). But of course this must be read as a self-criticism too. According to Bourriaud, relational art had abandoned utopia in favour of modest gestures (2002, 31). Obrist, Nesbit, and Tiravanija reinstate it, conceiving of Utopia Station as a meeting place to 'revive the question of utopia' (ibid.). The following year, Bishop publishes her acclaimed critique of relational art, arguing that it 'gives up on the idea of transformation in public culture' (2004, 69).¹⁸ At the same time a more politicized alternative is emerging into the mainstream. An early example of an exhibition of activist art in a mainstream institution is Thompson's 2004 *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere* at MASS MoCA, showcasing projects that embrace tactical media and direct action (see e.g. Demos 2004).

¹⁸ Bishop equally takes Bourriaud to task for rejecting utopia (2004, 54).

Relational art's commercial success, a growing dissatisfaction with its political efficacy, and the appearance of more activist alternatives trigger a re-evaluation. On the one hand, this gives rise to a search for new evaluative frameworks, alternatives to Bourriaud's 'models of sociability'. As I have argued, the key feature of these new frameworks is that they abandon mediacy (representation) in favour of immediacy (intervention). On the other hand, there is an attempt to clarify the history of social practice. Here, too, the imperative seems to be to construct a more 'political' genealogy. The originary moment of social practice begins to shift from the embarrassing dot-com nineties to the countercultural sixties. In fact, we often find the history of social practice referencing both moments at once. This is illustrated by two exhibitions, each seeking to historicize relational art at the peak of its popularity. The first is Nancy Spector's *theanyspacewhatever*, held at the Guggenheim in New York in 2008. This exhibition looks back to the 'relational moment' of the early 1990s for answers. It features the same artists as were included in Bourriaud's *Traffic* (CAPC Bordeaux, 1996), though each contributed new work. Bourriaud's essay 'The Relational Moment' from the original *Traffic* catalogue was reprinted in the Guggenheim publication. Consequently, as Smolinski notes, 'Spector struggles to present an alternative theoretical lens' (2011, 47). However, it should be noted that Spector, unlike Bourriaud, emphasizes relational art's 'post-representational' character, distinguishing it from art's antecedent investment in 'representational' critique (ibid., 46). Thus Spector channels the demand for a more interventionist practice, even as her exhibition fails to construct a genealogy allowing participatory practice to escape from the dominant relational narrative. This challenge is taken up by an exhibition happening concurrently at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Rudolf Frieling's *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now* traces relational practice back to early happenings and Fluxus, reserving a prominent place for Joseph Beuys. Here relational art is presented as continuing a participatory impulse under changed socio-technological possibilities, specifically the rise of the internet.

In the years following, more specific reference points emerge. A 2010 publication refocuses attention on two historic exhibitions, both held in 1969: Harold Szeemann's *When Attitudes Become Form* at the Bern Kunsthalle and Wim Beeren's *Op Losse Schroeven* at the Stedelijk

Museum in Amsterdam (Rattemeyer 2010a).¹⁹ Each exhibition will be re-enacted in the years that follow, highlighting their perceived relevance to the contemporary moment. These restagings offer a valuable perspective on how the 1960s are taken up and appropriated. Szeemann's show is valued for its groundbreaking curatorial approach. It is with *When Attitudes Become Form* that the exhibition is elevated to a creative medium in its own right, that the curator becomes the artist's equal, and that the museum is transformed into a site of production (Gleadowe 2010). Szeemann thus anticipates many of the developments that are sometimes credited to Bourriaud or the new institutionalism (see Farquharson 2006). *When Attitudes Become Form* is 'increasingly regarded as the cornerstone for an understanding of contemporary exhibition making', Teresa Gleadowe writes (2010). This would seem to justify its 2013 re-enactment, which saw the Bern Kunsthalle of 1969 grafted in its entirety – walls, floors, artworks, radiators, even electrical sockets – onto the Venetian palazzo housing the Fondazione Prada (Leonardi 2021, 177).

In addition to Szeemann's curatorial ethos it is his expansive notion of form that resonates today. In 2011 Nato Thompson curated an exhibition surveying twenty years of social practice, the largest of its kind. It was called *Living as Form*, a nod to Szeemann's *When Attitudes Become Form*. Like the two 2008 exhibitions, Thompson's show faced in two directions at once. Taking 1991 as its starting point, it implicitly grounded social practice in the 'relational moment' of the 1990s.²⁰ But the title harks back to the late 1960s and Szeemann's concept of form. According to Szeemann, attitudes and gestures can be understood as aesthetic forms (2007, 226). He writes that form does not derive from 'pre-formed pictorial opinions, but from the experience of the artistic process itself' (ibid.). Thompson takes this to its logical conclusion, arguing that 'living itself exists in forms that must be questioned, rearranged, mobilized, and undone' (2012, 29). Despite this formal similarity, the contents of the two shows could not be more different. Szeemann's show was a messy assemblage of various kinds of post-minimalist work (e.g. conceptual art, land art, arte povera). 'This exhibition includes some of the most extreme art ever produced', Scott

¹⁹ The full title of Szeemann's exhibition is *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form (Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information)*, that of Beeren's *Op Losse Schroeven (Situations and Cryptostructures)*. 'Op Losse Schroeven' literally means 'on loose screws'. 'It is a Dutch idiomatic expression indicating a state of uncertainty or instability' (Rattemeyer 2010b).

²⁰ Thompson wrongly identifies 1991 as the year in which Tiravanija's *Untitled (Free)* first took place.

Burton writes in the catalogue (1969, 8). For his *Splash Piece*, Richard Serra dripped molten lead on the skirting of one of the exhibition rooms. Lawrence Weiner created a negative painting by removing a piece of wall. And for his *Berne Depression* Michael Heizer took a wrecking ball to the tarred forecourt of the museum, leaving visitors to contemplate the traces of an unknown disaster. The gestures in *When Attitudes Become Form* were invariably opaque, destructive, and aleatory. They seemed to demand the impossible of the viewer: to appreciate something that was barely there. Thompson's *Living as Form*, on the other hand, was a beacon of clarity. According to one reviewer, the large amount of documentation on display gave 'the audience the impression of being in a library rather than an exhibition space' (Hoffmann 2012). While Thompson's exhibition was marked by its own ambiguities, the artistic intention was in each case crystal clear.²¹ There are other contrasts. Szeemann writes that the works on display in Bern manifest 'an opposition to form' (2007, 225).²² Conversely, the projects in Thompson's show are eager to create new forms, specifically new 'forms of living' (Thompson 2011, 29). Szeemann's artists are interested in 'anti-social ideas' (2007, 225). Thompson's artists, on the other hand, make work that is 'deeply rooted in community relations' (2011, 32). In short, the artists in Szeemann's show mount a frontal attack on art and the wider culture while the artists in Thompson's show explore ways to make it better. On the one hand, we have a critique of aesthetic form; on the other, the aestheticization of social form. And yet it is not hard to see how the work included in Szeemann's show might clear the way for that in Thompson's. 'The only large esthetic distinction remaining is that between art and life', Burton writes; 'this exhibition reveals how that distinction is fading' (1969, 9). But according to one newspaper the difference between art and life had already been obliterated: 'the human beings, the visitors to the Kunsthalle Bern are the only works of art to be seen at this exhibition' (quoted in Szeemann 2007, 226).

From a contemporary perspective, then, the work included in the Amsterdam and Bern shows (which was virtually identical) seems less relevant. Neither exhibition included the proto-relational work that was just then beginning to emerge. This is confirmed by the restaging of the Amsterdam exhibition in 2018, which does not quite re-enact the 1969 show but places

²¹ Jens Hoffmann notes that *Living as Form* was a missed opportunity 'to once and for all clarify what "social practice" really is' (2012).

²² The words 'form' and 'work' are invariably in scare quotes in Szeemann's curatorial statement (2007, 226).

it in the wider historical context of the late 1960s. *Amsterdam Magisch Centrum: Kunst en Tegencultuur 1967–1970* (*Amsterdam Magical Centre: Art and Counterculture 1967-1970*; also at the Stedelijk Museum) decentres the work exhibited in 1969 and looks at the socio-cultural changes wrought by the counterculture. There were rooms dedicated to the feminist movement, the Cuban Revolution, and grassroots activism in which artists took an active part, though at the time they did not consider this part of their artistic practice.²³ By bringing the artists' activism into the museum, the Stedelijk reproduces the gesture of contemporary social practice. While the exhibition included many of the artists that were included in the 1969 show (e.g. Marinus Boezem, Jan Dibbets, Ger van Elk, Robert Morris, Dennis Oppenheim, and Lawrence Weiner), it also showcased contemporaneous work that was not included because it was considered of lesser art historical importance at the time. Some of this post-Fluxus work bears a striking resemblance to the social and relational practices of the last twenty years.

²³ For instance, in 1969 artists including Donald Judd 'liberated' the Rijksmuseum and the Stedelijk by occupying it. This anticipates the language of 'institutional liberation' recently adopted by Not An Alternative (see Not An Alternative 2016).



Maria van Elk, Soft Living Room, 1968

Consider Maria van Elk's *Soft Living Room* (1968), a closed-off interactive environment with carpeted floors and small, fur-lined sculptures. The environment is 4 metres in diameter, 2 metres high, made of wood panelling, and has a silken white roof. One enters through a small,

oval opening. The walls are velvety to the touch and the plush, movable sculptures can be used to sit or lie on. In a way, the work recalls Claes Oldenburg's soft sculptures. But unlike Oldenburg's work, *Soft Living Room* is interactive, inviting audience members to enter it and thereby creating a delimited space for social interaction. Van Elk describes *Soft Living Room* as a 'social sculpture' intended 'to make art more accessible [and] to improve the interrelations between people' (2022). The sculpture was exhibited at the 1969 Lausanne Tapestry Biennial where it occasioned lively interactions. Interestingly, there is a tension between van Elk's desire to create a quiet space, motivated by her interest in yoga and meditation, and the public's lively and at times disorderly interaction with the work. What was considered groundbreaking at Lausanne was that the work could be entered and used for social interaction (Jansen 2018, 35). The artist seems often to have been present at the work, engaging audience members in conversation. (There is no record of these conversations, only that van Elk would ask people to take off their shoes.) It is this interactive dimension, as well as the use of 'inferior' or 'low-brow' materials such as textiles, that gave it the appearance of 'applied art', reducing its value in the eyes of curators (ibid., 36). For a time, museum staff at the Stedelijk Museum in Schiedam used the work as a breakout area. It was subsequently lost, only to be rediscovered in 2013, when van Elk was asked to restore it. In 2018, it was included in the Stedelijk exhibition and became the subject of a book (see Huizing, Jansen, and Apol 2018). *Soft Living Room* anticipates the institutional environments of artists like Gillick and Tiravanija by thirty years.

Another work included in the 2008 but not the 1969 exhibition was a social experiment by Ben d'Armagnac, Gerrit Dekker, and Louwrien Wijers. In 1967 these artists left Amsterdam for the countryside to found a commune. Their intention: to be closer to nature and explore their inner lives. They adopted an ascetic lifestyle, wearing clogs and traditional garb, living off the land, and working only with found objects (C. Thompson 2004, 56). Within their small community, there was no separation between art and life. Most of the art they made was functional. Using scrap wood, they constructed makeshift houses to live in. Wijers engaged in a kind of meditative practice, concentrating for prolonged periods on a single word, thereby seeking to master it completely. As Leontine Coelewijn suggests, instead of making art, the artists were interested in creating 'alternative forms of life' (2018). In a letter to a friend, Dekker described himself as 'a man who tries as an individual to adopt an attitude towards

“life” in as objective a fashion as possible’ (quoted in Thompson 2004, 56). The artists’ claim that their work ‘had nothing to do with art’ speaks to the desire to abolish the distance between art and life (ibid.). Echoing the title of Szeemann’s exhibition, art becomes the objectification of an attitude towards life, prefiguring a more integrated social form. This work must be seen in relation to the 1960s communes movement, which also staged an exodus from urban reality to pursue a more wholesome way of life in the country. By the same token, this work anticipates projects such as Tiravanija’s The Land Foundation (1998–ongoing), a space for experiments in communal living near Chang Mai in rural Thailand.

Amsterdam Magical Centre also spotlighted a little-known collective by the name of Eventstructure Research Group (ERG). The collective consisted of Jeffrey Shaw, Theo Botschuijver, and Sean Wellesley-Miller and specialized in creating inflatable structures using PVC sheeting, which they termed ‘eventstructures’ (1967-1972). These were soft, interactive sculptures, sometimes serving a quasi-functional purpose but always allowing pleasurable interaction. The sculptures would take the form of air cushions, walkways, and even multi-storey buildings. They were invariably located in the public sphere, becoming a site of convivial encounter and ludic interaction. Shaw notes that

An important characteristic of the *Airground* was that each person’s movements would affect the behavior of the structure as a whole, and thereby the dynamics of other participants’ experience. It was the invention of a sculptural medium that could physically stimulate, embody and express human interactions and interrelations (Shaw 2022).

The 1968 *Airground*’s form dynamically articulates the movements and interactions of the participants. In this way, it prefigures an alternative social form grounded in cooperation and play. ERG describe their eventstructures as an art which ‘makes operational an expanded arena of will and action (...) to everyone’ (Eventstructure Research Group 1969, 49). It is worth quoting the collective at length.

Art as that area of working with matter that is not in the pay of the system in the sense that a ‘job’ is. Rather, the work is self-regulating, demonstrating the capacity to make

uselessly, i.e. to give form to an alternative and individuated system of usefulness and value. This does not mean art for art's sake. That formula has become abortive, embraced by the establishment (...) to rob the art project of its essential revolutionary function as a popular incitement to self-action and environmental transformation. With exceptions, the predominant overcultured esotericism of today's art forms and language is a shrinking away from this function (Eventstructure Research Group 1969, 47).

ERG think of their work as 'operationalizing' autonomy, thereby creating an 'expanded arena of will and action'. Note how they mobilize one understanding of autonomy against another. They reject the inward-looking autonomy of art for art's sake, which, critical of society's purpose, seeks to negate it. This has led art into 'esotericism'. It shies away from its 'revolutionary function' to make the good life a reality. Against this, ERG mobilize a positive understanding of autonomy: a form of 'self-action' which gives form to an 'alternative system of usefulness and value'. The prefigurative character of this model is clear. 'We seek to catalyse excitement and broadened feeling of what's possible (...) We are not interested in mere formal considerations, but in new operative relations between an audience and the art work' (Eventstructure Research Group 1970).

Today, ERG's eventstructures appear to us as the utopian precursor of the commercial bouncy castle. Looking back, Shaw notes that '*Airgrounds* lost their artistic functionality when they became commercialized as purely recreative devices' (1997, 75). The *Airground* is a potent symbol of a future that never was – or, more precisely, of what happens when a utopian future is inserted into the commodity form. Strikingly, in 1970 ERG perceived a liberating potential in the alliance between art and industry (perhaps as a result of their collaboration with the Artist Placement Group). The collective were sponsored by various companies, noting that their 'research and development' could be 'extremely valuable' to them (1970). ERG write that 'in the process of mutual involvement between this firm and our art projects, a productive informational exchange has occurred valued by both parties' (ibid.). While there is no evidence that the firm in question subsequently turned to the commercial exploitation of bouncy castles or air mattresses, it is ironic that the *Airground* lost its aesthetic value precisely because of the kind of R&D conducted by the artists, which allowed for its

commodification. To put it slightly differently, ERG's attempt to 'leverage' their commercial contacts was liable to have unintended consequences. It stands as a warning to critical innovators today.



ERG, Airground, 1968, Brighton Festival

What is striking about all three interventions is that in their affirmative character they were easily integrated into everyday life. This lack of resistance may explain art history's indifference to them. On the other hand, it is the present interest in social and relational practice that is, as I have argued, driving the re-appraisal of what was artistically significant about the 1960s. It is less the cutting-edge art displayed at the two 1969 exhibitions that serves as a reference point for social practice than certain high-level ideas about form and curation ('living as form' and the exhibition as an artwork in its own right) and, more importantly, what was happening *outside* the museum. Social practice is anticipated by the relational practices that developed on the fringes of the art world and took the idea of 'living

as form' in a more collective direction. Moreover, it is the social and cultural struggles of the 1960s that social practice identifies with and in many ways tries to renew.

When the historical frame of reference is shifted from the 1990s to the 1960s, social practice appears in a more 'political' light; it acquires a lineage aligning more closely with its self-understanding. This lineage is both confirmed and complicated by the figure who is arguably the most important influence on contemporary social practice: Joseph Beuys. Beuys's work was present in both 1969 exhibitions. Yet Beuys rejected the negative conception of art that many of his peers adopted. In rejecting aesthetic negativity, he drew on intellectual resources that suggest that we should add to the 1990s and 1960s a third – and much older – reference point.

Beuys's concept of 'social sculpture' is a constant presence in discussions of social practice. It offers an intuitive gloss on social practice's concern with social form and is, in a sense, the precursor of Bourriaud's 'models of sociability'. But Beuys's phrase actually articulates the post-representational aspiration of social practice better. 'Social sculpture' translates the German *Soziale Plastik* (social plastic), which thus emphasizes the plasticity of the social. More than the English, the German phrase lays claim to the idea that art is able to intervene in social form directly. 'The artist whose name came up most often in discussing influences', Finkelpearl writes in his book on social practice, 'is Joseph Beuys, with his notion of "social sculpture"' (2013, 28). 'Very little attention has been paid in Anglophone art history to Beuys's activities of the 1970s', Bishop writes, 'despite the fact that they form the most central precursor of contemporary socially engaged art' (2012, 244). This may be partly to do with Benjamin Buchloh's polemic, which has overdetermined Beuys's reception among anglophone scholars (Buchloh 1980). Buchloh accused Beuys of fascism for aestheticizing politics. But his argument is anachronistic. If Beuys was guilty of aestheticizing social relations, this had little to do with the mass political phenomenon called fascism.²⁴ In fact, Beuys looked to the eighteenth century for a renewal of art's creative and political powers, rejecting the critique of Enlightenment values by his Marxisant colleagues.

²⁴ As I noted in the Introduction, prefigurative practice, of which Beuys is an exponent, arises in the period following the disintegration of mass politics and is better understood as a form of social action.

In a 1969 interview he explained his project as follows: 'In the simplest terms, I am trying to reaffirm the concept of art and creativity in the face of Marxist doctrine' (Beuys quoted in Lippard 1997, 121-2). That is to say, Beuys contests art's negativity, seeking to recover a positive notion of art, which he associates with freedom.

The Socialist movements (...) define man exclusively as a social being (...) which led to the confused political conditions not only in Germany but also in America. Man really is not free in many respects. He is dependent on his social circumstances, but he is free in his thinking, and here is the point of origin of sculpture (Beuys in Lippard 1997, 122).

Beuys specifies that 'sculpture supplies a definition of man' and that 'every human being is an artist' (ibid.). Sculpture (i.e. art) and humanity are defined by a common property: freedom. The problem with both the movement for socialism and aesthetic modernism, according to Beuys, is that they elide freedom, placing too much stress on humanity's *socially* determined unfreedom.²⁵ Thus Beuys rejects the modernist investigation into the determinacy of aesthetic form, which invariably leads to a consideration of extra-artistic (heteronomous) conditions. Beuys equally rejects the socialist remedy against heteronomy: the transformation of man's objective social conditions. For Beuys, such a view depends on the vulgar materialism that robbed people of their agency to begin with. His alternative is to assert the reality of freedom, understood as the creative realization of ideas.²⁶ This is the task of the 'most modern art discipline', what he calls 'social sculpture' or 'social architecture' (Beuys 2003, 929). Of course we must ask whether Beuys's assertion of freedom against social determination is not equally one-sided.

In anticipation of Chapter 4, I want to examine not Beuys's art but the ideas that inspired it. It is well known that Beuys was a student of Steiner's anthroposophy. But Steiner's work, much like Marx's, is an attempt to inherit the Enlightenment under changed circumstances.

²⁵ 'If man is determined by his environment, then there is no such thing as freedom' (Beuys quoted in Taylor 2012, 39).

²⁶ 'The origin of matter [is] the thought behind it' (Beuys in Lippard 1997, 121).

Unlike Marx, however, Steiner did not ground his theory in an analysis of social relations.²⁷ Against the materialism and acquisitiveness of the age, Steiner asserted the importance of the spiritual realm – freedom – and the need to actualize it through education and creativity. Mark Taylor notes that when Beuys was asked about his influences, he would often cite philosophers:

Another good point to begin would be the age of German Idealism, which is where the conception that I have come into being. You find it in the Romantics, in Novalis, you find it in the whole circle around Goethe, you find it in the works of Lorenz Ocken, for instance, or in Carl Gustav Carus, or Caspar David Friedrich, you find it in Schelling, Hegel, etc. (Beuys quoted in Taylor 2012, 28).

Beuys reads these sources through the lens of Steiner's anthroposophy, finding in them the remedy against a one-sided, materialist attitude keeping people from actualizing their potential as free, creative beings. As Taylor notes, 'Beuys rejects the materialism of his age because he thinks it is insufficiently dialectical' (2012, 40). What is needed, on Beuys's view, is a new kind of practice to 'reconcile the opposites rending personal and social life' (ibid., 41). Beuys finds the model for this practice in the Enlightenment conception of art. This is not surprising for, as Martin Jay notes, the Enlightenment philosophers conceived of art as an 'organon of reconciliation' (1984, 273). Beuys thus develops his famous notion of 'social sculpture' on the basis of an engagement with Enlightenment aesthetics.

Like the philosophers before him, Beuys aims for a dialectical understanding of art and society. Each is conceived as a totality of interlocking parts. Society is a 'social organism', Beuys writes, and this organism can potentially be transformed into a 'total art work' (2003, 929).²⁸ This task 'will only reach fruition when every living person becomes a creator, a sculptor, or architect of the social organism' (ibid.). This is not a matter of literally turning people into artists but of having them realize that they are part of a social organism whose shape and direction they co-determine. 'Man is only truly alive when he realizes he is a

²⁷ Both Marx and Steiner (and through him Beuys) are Hegelians, but they take his dialectical philosophy in radically different directions.

²⁸ I have taken the liberty of removing Beuys's capitalizations.

creative, artistic being (...) in all realms of life' (Beuys in Lippard 1997, 121). Social sculpture is first and foremost about promoting a change in consciousness.²⁹ The aim is to 'reach the threshold where the human being experiences himself primarily as a spiritual being', i.e. as free (Beuys 2003, 929). Perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively, to be an artist is to be fully conscious of one's agency and to recognize society as the product of one's agency.³⁰ What Beuys is after, in other words, is a more virtuous dialectic, in which the individual is no longer alienated from social reality but takes an active part in shaping it.

Of course this is precisely the positive dialectic expressed by the philosophy of freedom of the Enlightenment. It is expressed in, for instance, Schiller's hope that society will one day resemble a work of art. 'Of all his philosophical precursors', Taylor writes, 'Schiller comes the closest to anticipating Beuys's artistic program' (2012, 37). Since Beuys accords to art an active, shaping role, it is claimed that he 'finishes what Schiller began' (ibid.). But Taylor and Beuys overlook one crucial difference. For Schiller, beauty expresses a potential *in* social relations. Beuys, on the other hand, sees the need to dismantle 'a senile social system' (Beuys 2003, 929). But this is the same social system that Schiller thought could develop into an aesthetic state. What Beuys fails to acknowledge in his recuperation of positive dialectics is that society is already a 'total art work' and that every human being is already an artist – in the precise sense that they collectively produce it through their labour. Society is already a 'social organism' – but a self-alienated one. Beuys merely restates (in his own peculiar idiom) the ABC of the philosophy of freedom become self-contradictory in capitalism.

Conclusion

In one sense, social practice is highly innovative. It radicalizes the relational impulse of certain practices first seen in the 1960s. In another sense, however, it is backward-looking. By insisting on its ability to figure autonomy positively, it recuperates a very traditional

²⁹ This is why Beuys seems to have thought of his vocation in pedagogical terms: 'To be a teacher is my greatest work of art' (Beuys in Lippard 1997, 121).

³⁰ It is, in other words, to reach that state of consciousness which Hegel promises to 'those who have received the inner call to *comprehend*', namely 'the *reconciliation* with actuality' (Hegel 1991, 22).

understanding of art, one that takes art to be the activity of creating beautiful objects. Of course beauty is understood as a social process, but this in itself is a kind of literalism: aesthetic form becomes living process, or what Schiller called 'living form'. The attempt to figure an autonomous social process is what establishes the connection between social practice and prefigurative politics. Strikingly, the two literatures theorize their object in very similar terms, despite their disciplinary separation. In each case, there is a positive and a negative component. The positive alternative or 'model' must be insulated from dominant social relations by what in one case is called an 'autonomous zone', in the other a 'social interstice' or 'cultural enclosure' – notions whose coherence I have challenged. In addition, each places extraordinary emphasis on 'the process' – a shorthand for a self-legislating social process.

The logic of social practice has taken us from the mid-2000s to the mid-1990s to the late 1960s, and from there to the late 18th century. Possibly this cascading timeline is just a coincidence. Perhaps each period simply looked back to the previous one for answers. But in fact there is an obvious affinity between Bourriaud's models of sociability, Beuys's social sculpture, and Schiller's aesthetic state. Each is a living artwork, a reconciled totality, whether conceived as an actual social order where 'conduct is governed by beauty', as in Schiller (1993, 176), or a more modest 'micro-utopia', as in Bourriaud (2002, 82). In each case, the living artwork is understood as a beautiful, integrated whole, potentially encompassing all of society. As we will see in Chapter 4, in the aesthetic paradigm developed by Kant and Schiller, beauty is an exemplary expression of autonomy and therefore has an exemplary social relevance. This is what constitutes its prefigurative dimension. Beuys and Bourriaud recover it. Some of the artworks discussed above did too, asserting their exemplarity as social models. But as I have tried to show, this recovery is fraught with contradictions.

The recuperation of the Enlightenment paradigm of aesthetics seems to result from the rejection of negativity, or what I have called postcritique. This is another thread connecting the authors and artists considered in this and previous chapters. As I pointed out in the Introduction, the artists invested in social practice want to go 'beyond critique'; similarly, the critics discussed above are disenchanted with critique's limited 'political payoff' (Felski 2015, 143). Bourriaud refers to critical theory as an 'ineffectual toy' (2002, 31); Beuys defines his

project as the reassertion of 'art and creativity in the face of Marxist doctrine'. Indeed, social practice's postcriticality may be the best predictor of the atavisms that accompany it. Categories whose self-contradiction was widely recognized a century ago re-emerge in their positivity. Autonomy (as attempts at collective self-legislation), beauty (as living form), and society (as exemplary community) are affirmed as positive values that must be defended rather than overcome. In a sense, 'critique' is another such category. The growing sense that critique is unable to bring about positive social change is in large part responsible for its disenchantment. Boltanski and Chiapello refer to this as the 'crisis of critique' (2005, 324). But if, as Adorno points out, critique is the 'cornerstone of reason and bourgeois thinking *tout court*', its crisis is at least as old as capitalism (2005, 282). What is rarely perceived is that the return to a 'positive' notion of critique – that is, a view of critique in terms of its speculative product, progress – approximates to the original Enlightenment conception of critique. Inasmuch as critique designates 'the principle of all movement, all life, and all actual activity', it is the engine of the bourgeois dialectic of progress (Hegel 2010, 129). Today's insistence on practical amelioration may be an attempt, albeit unconscious, to recover this 'positive' view of critique.

Chapter 3. The Aesthetic Logic of Prefigurative Practice

Much of Occupy was anticipated, consciously and unconsciously, in a lot of the most interesting contemporary art of the past ten years.

—Yates McKee (2013)

Introduction

As I suggested in the Introduction, the only way to get social practice fully in view is by considering a parallel movement in politics. And vice versa: to understand the prefigurative politics of the extra-parliamentary Left it is necessary to confront it with a parallel movement in the arts. In this chapter, I will substantiate this claims by showing that social practice and prefigurative politics share an underlying aesthetic logic. This logic is based on the properties distilled in the two previous chapters. Depending on our perspective, different aspects of prefiguration can be discerned. When social practice is viewed through a prefigurative lens, we find a fairly traditional aesthetic *structure*. This is a result of the autonomous zone, a discrete object which not only *represents* the desired changes but forces a distinction between actor and spectator. Conversely, when prefigurative politics is viewed through the lens of art, we notice its aesthetic *form*. That is, we realize that the ‘the process’ is distinguished by its autonomy, and that the figuration of autonomy was a task originally reserved for art. In the prefigurative conception of politics, figuring an alternative is more important than realizing it in practice. This point is underscored by the fact that prefigurativists have neither social nor political power, and do not seek to acquire it. Instead, they try to change the world by the sheer power of an image or experience, substituting an ‘aesthetic education’ for politics. I will illustrate each point with examples below. Note that ‘prefigurative practice’ is the term I use to refer to social practice and prefigurative politics in their unity – that is, in their reliance on the aesthetic logic laid out in this chapter.

The Aesthetic Logic of Prefigurative Practice

In previous chapters we encountered artists who identify as political or even revolutionary actors, and indeed present *art* as their means of revolution.¹ This conflation of terms is less common in the literature on prefigurative politics. Indeed, the aesthetic resonances of prefigurative politics are mostly ignored by political scientists. And yet, Occupy – the very movement that spurred the academic interest in prefiguration – was described in artistic as much as political terms. Some drew attention to the art that was produced *within* the movement. In his wrap-up for 2011, art critic Ben Davis counted the work associated with Occupy Wall Street (OWS) among that year's best. The 'most emblematic work' of 2011, he argued, was the so-called 'Occupy Bat Signal', a giant light projection illuminating Manhattan's skyscrapers with Occupy slogans: 'We Are the 99%', 'We Are Unstoppable', 'Do Not Be Afraid', and 'Occupy Earth'. According to Davis, it perfectly summed up a year marked by 'outburst of creative activism' (2011). The BBC's Paul Mason similarly registered the reciprocal relation between Occupy and contemporary art, wondering whether we weren't 'seeing the emergence of an Occupy "style"' (2012). But some critics went further, arguing that the occupation itself was a work of art. In October 2011, one month after protestors had entered Zuccotti Park, Martha Schwendener, art critic for *The New York Times*, wrote that Occupy Wall Street was itself 'a kind of art object: a living installation or social sculpture' (2011). In the months and years that followed many would come round to the same view. Nathan Schneider, a journalist and occupier who wrote a first-person account of the occupation of Zuccotti Park, writes that OWS was 'above all best understood as a gigantic art project' (2013, 159). According to Yates McKee, an occupier and art historian, 'Occupy as a totality – rather than just this or that phenomena within it – can itself arguably be considered an artistic project' (2016b, 34). Martha Rosler sees 'the occupations (...) as grand public works of process art with a cast of several thousand' (2012). This sentiment is not restricted to artists and art critics; it is shared by political philosophers and critical theorists. 'An occupation is a kind of happening', Hardt and Negri claim, 'a performance piece' (2012, 21). W.J.T. Mitchell suggests that 'the occupation of public spaces by mass assemblies is itself an artistic practice'

¹ According to Jonas Staal, art is 'the means of production through which we construct reality' or 'the means of reality production' for short (2019, 189).

(2013, 114). Occupy's 'molecular revolution', Gerald Raunig contends, was about 'transforming forms of living into a beautiful and good life' (2013, 152).

The aesthetic resonances that many discovered in Occupy can be explained in different ways. First, many of OWS's key organizers were artists or creative professionals (see e.g. Schwendener 2011; McKee 2016b). Further, the occupation relied on a network of galleries for material and infrastructural support (Schneider 2013, 159). The 16 Beaver art centre was particularly important in this respect. In the months leading up to OWS, it was in close contact with Spanish and Egyptian organizers and hosted a lecture series on the commons with Silvia Federici, David Graeber, and others (McKee 2016b, 85-86). Many of those in 16 Beaver's orbit would go on to be lead organizers in OWS. One can also take a more cynical view. The substitution of one criterion for another allows scholars and activists to claim what appeared to be a political failure as an artistic success. On this view, the claim that OWS was a work of art is no more than an ex post facto rationalization. While I am sympathetic to both views, the argument pursued here is different. My argument is that Occupy's artistic resonances must be explained by the logic of prefigurative practice itself. The point is not that activists rationalize the political shortcomings of their practice by appealing to an aesthetic criterion retrospectively, but that the very logic of prefigurative practice is aesthetic.

The basis for the aesthetic character of prefigurative practice are the properties outlined in Chapters 1 and 2. There I noted three characteristics that social practice and prefigurative politics have in common. First, each attempts to establish the conditions for autonomous action by marking off a space of exception. In prefigurative politics, this is referred to as the 'autonomous zone'. In social practice, it is called the 'interstice'. Sometimes art itself is held to constitute this space of exception. Art is described as a 'cultural enclosure' (Esche 2012, 37) or 'a free space for action' (Center for Political Beauty 2022), that is, a social space where 'new "life possibilities" appear to be possible' (Bourriaud 2002, 45).² The key feature of the autonomous zone is that it is *spatially delimited*, creating an object for contemplation and interaction, and *temporally bounded*, giving rise to punctual interventions valued not for their

² Another correlate in art discourse is the 'site' of site-specific practice. While this is most often a physical site, it can also be a discursive construct or 'issue' (Kwon 2002), in the same way that the autonomous zone is sometimes conceived as a virtual space (Bey 2002).

material effects but for the experiences they enable. The second feature that social practice and prefigurative politics have in common is that they are both positive or what I have called postcritical. Prefigurative practice deals with perceived social problems by affirming an alternative; it rejects critique in favour of construction. More precisely, it rejects critical social action in favour of constructive social action. If the goal of the former is to abolish itself, the latter seeks to lead by example, building out from the autonomous zone. Third, both social practice and prefigurative politics insist on their exemplary form. This is what it means to say that a practice 'prefigures' a free society or enacts a 'model of sociability': it is to say that it legislates its own content. It is this third characteristic that determines prefigurative practice's preoccupation with autonomy as living process, a feature widely recognized in both the literature on prefigurative politics and social practice. We might add to this a fourth characteristic: the only means social practice and prefigurative politics have at their disposal are aesthetic. Possessing neither social power (labour power that could be withdrawn) nor political power (representation at the level of the state), prefigurative practice must try to realize its ambitions by way of an 'aesthetic education'.

Combined, these characteristics give rise to an aesthetic logic. In a way, the aesthetic dimension of prefigurative practice is obvious, since to embody a desired future state in the present is, by the same token, to present an image of it. But the features listed above make this specific, explaining in detail why aesthetic matters – questions of form and representation – assume such significance. By its very logic, prefigurative practice has a representational *structure*, aspires to exemplary *form*, and employs aesthetic *means*.

The Autonomous Zone as Autonomous Artwork

CHAZ

Consider the recent Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone in Seattle. During the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, clashes erupted between protesters and police in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighbourhood. When police abandoned their station on 8 June, the protesters declared the

neighbourhood an 'autonomous zone'. The Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ) was born.³ The area comprised six blocks and a large park. Protesters put up barricades with signs saying 'YOU ARE NOW LEAVING THE USA' and 'WELCOME TO FREE CAPITOL HILL'. In a statement published online, protesters demanded not only an end to police violence but its defunding or abolition (FreeCapitolHill 2020). Shrines sprang up commemorating George Floyd and other victims of police brutality. There was an effort to educate the public about racism, with talks and film screenings at the 'Decolonization Conversation Café'. But, as several eyewitnesses report, the overall impression was one of a space for like-minded people to congregate (see e.g. Dwilson 2020; Hu 2020; Guardian News 2020). There was live music, street art, and games on a nearby sports field. Protesters pitched their tents in the park and grew vegetables. This, a protester explained, would allow activists to build 'their own self-sustaining communities [and] economic systems' (Guardian News 2020, 2:48). There were countless mutual aid booths, giving away coffee, food, and clothes. Enterprising vendors put up food stalls. The 'No Cop Co-op' functioned as an ad hoc supermarket, distributing its wares on the basis of need. Out of this ferment of social activity emerged, as Arun Gupta writes, a 'miniature society' (2020). 'What this is about', a protester explained, 'is community and taking care of one another as a whole. We don't *need* capitalism!' (quoted in Hu 2020).⁴

One of CHAZ's main demands was to 'defund and abolish the Seattle Police Department' (FreeCapitolHill 2020). The point of having a specifically *prefigurative* protest – and not, say, an ordinary rally – was to demonstrate that the city could do without an active police force. Protesters attempted to demonstrate in practice that they were able to maintain order and protect each other from harm. Banners read 'no cops, no problem'. The night the police abandoned the East Precinct building, ceding control of the area to protesters, someone addressed the crowd as follows:

They've given us the precinct, and we've got to be smart, and we have to work together. And we have to remain peaceful, and we have to remain strong. This is the

³ CHAZ later changed its name to Capitol Hill Organized Protest (CHOP) to avoid the 'notion that the protesters are part of a separatist movement' (Smith 2020b).

⁴ Some went so far as to argue that the autonomous zone exemplified the 'revolutionary ideals of the Paris Commune' (Mould 2020).

message that we are trying to deliver. That if they give us the precinct, we're not going to try to destroy it. We're not going to do what they want us to do. We're going to take care of it, because this is our street (quoted in Jimenez and Raftery 2020).

Desiree DeLoach, a CHAZ organizer, explains that by spending money on policing

you're creating a world where you need police. If you were to take that funding from the police and put it into communities that really need it – for de-escalation, for medical services, hospitals, education – there really is no need for a police. We can police ourselves. And that's one of the biggest concepts of this autonomous zone: letting people know that we can peacefully work together. We don't need a police force. We can do it all on our own (quoted in Maupin 2020 7.24).

The peaceful cooperation among CHAZ's members was *demonstrative*. What the organizers envisioned – an autonomous community policing itself – was 'pre-enacted' within the autonomous zone. This was supposed to prove to the city that it was possible to channel money spent on policing into education, health care, and so on. In this sense, CHAZ had an aesthetic rationale: it was a *performance* of solidarity, cooperation, and self-management for a specific audience: Seattle's mayor Jenny Durkan and her staff. CHAZ failed to persuade her (for reasons I explain below), but it should be noted that even if it had succeeded, the organizers left the decision to abolish the police or not entirely up to the authorities. Regardless of the outcome of CHAZ's experiment, it lacked the political clout to affect the mayor's decision. In this sense, the aesthetic and social (as opposed to the political) element preponderated. Organizers seem to have valued the process of creating an autonomous zone for its own sake, regardless of the outcome.

Prefigurative politics seeks to resolve social contradictions in and through the creation of an exemplary community. CHAZ primarily addressed racism and police brutality. It confronted violence towards ethnic minorities by declaring itself a police-free zone. It tried to educate the majority white population on issues affecting the black community such as mass incarceration. It held talks and screened films at the 'Decolonization Conversation Café'. But the reconciliation of social contradiction played out on a more abstract level too. For instance,

within CHAZ it was impossible to distinguish between means and ends. What the protesters sought to achieve – a city without police, friendly relations between ethnic minorities and the majority white population – had already crystallized within the zone, and the zone itself was the means by which they hoped to achieve it. By the same token, theory had lost its abstract, one-sided character. If theory explains how things ought to be, this ideal was realized in the living practice of the protest community. Finally, in creating a prefigurative example, the protesters collapsed the future into the present. If CHAZ was meant to foreshadow a future in which police are redundant, it was by the same token meant to prove the *actuality* of that future. In short, it staged an exemplary community in which the contradictions between means and ends, theory and practice, present and future were resolved. In performing the act of self-legislation within a well-defined space, CHAZ can be understood as a living work of art. As Hegel puts it, in the experience of beauty we discover the ‘inseparability of what in all other cases is presupposed in our consciousness as distinct (...) universal and particular, end and means, concept and object’ (1975, 60). From this perspective, prefigurative politics is not just aesthetic in its structure (i.e. in its performative dimension) but in *what* it figures, namely the unity of form and content – beauty as living form.

Occupy

We see a similar dynamic at work in Occupy. Like CHAZ, Occupy began by marking off a space within which protesters could act in relative autonomy. These were the protest camps, located in parks and city squares around the world. To demarcate this space, protesters relied on visual cues in the urban landscape (green spaces, landmarks, etc.), but also introduced their own. The camps disrupted spatial norms by inserting alien objects (tents, signs, art installations, etc.). Some of these (e.g. the General Assemblies) were exotic, throwing into relief the exceptional nature of the camp. Protesters often found themselves encircled by police, further emphasizing the limits of the free space (cf. Feigenbaum, Frenzel, and McCurdy 2013, 182). The result, as Lois Melina points out, is that the camp had the quality of a ‘bounded stage’ (2016, emphasis removed). The occupiers used this stage to engage various audiences: onlookers and passers-by – potential recruits – as well as tourists, journalists, the authorities, and an unspecified global audience. In New York, one of the authority figures was

mayor Bloomberg. When he issued a sanitation order, the occupiers responded by performatively sweeping and mopping the park (Chafkin 2012, 80).

The stage-like quality of the autonomous zone cast the unwitting passer-by in the role of a spectator, but it equally *generated* an audience who came specifically to view or experience it in person. CHAZ, for example, attracted day trippers who came to enjoy the concerts, street art, and film screenings (see e.g. Dwilson 2020; Hu 2020; Guardian News 2020). Occupy Wall Street became one of New York's prime tourist attractions (Gautney 2013). Journalists and film crews flocked to the park to interview participants, who would present themselves 'to be photographed as a kind of sculptural object' (McKee 2016b, 98). Certain aspects of the camp were designed specifically to engage an external audience. Zuccotti Park had its own library where visitors could learn more about the movement as well as a 'sign garden' (on the model of a sculpture garden). The signs were later collected by the MoMA (Holpuch 2013). OWS's fame attracted pranksters, politicians, and celebrities who used the camp to access its audiences, further underscoring the stage-like quality of the camp (Schneider 2013, 95-97). Occupy encouraged and cultivated this non-participating audience because they – together with the activists themselves – created the spectacle that put the movement in touch with further, more distant audiences (I will return to this below).



Occupy Wall Street, 'Sign Garden', 2011

Within the autonomous zone, the occupiers enacted what they believed was a model of a free society. They did so on two levels. First, on the level of social reproduction, they established various systems of mutual aid. The camps in London, Madrid, New York, Portland, and elsewhere, boasted an impressive range of services: childcare, healthcare, mental health services, legal aid, soup kitchens, libraries, Wi-Fi hotspots, and so on. These services could be accessed regardless of one's ability to pay or even contribute. At some camps (London, New York, Portland) efforts were made to feed and shelter the homeless. Thus the occupiers tried to enact the principle 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his need'. Put another way, the camps saw the performance of conscious cooperation as opposed to the alienated form of cooperation embodied in commodity exchange. This process was not without guidance or oversight. The occupiers sought to establish rules, provisions, and committees to give the camps the form its inhabitants desired. This was the second level on which the occupiers sought to model a free society. It was this aspect in particular – the camps' formally self-legislating character through the General Assemblies – that made them appear as 'a small, working democracy' (Matthews 2011) and a 'functioning commonwealth' (Sholette 2017, 121). These epithets refer not just to the GAs but to the camps as a whole as

living processes. This process figured – or attempted to figure – a reconciled society. Politically, we might say that the camp reconciled the contradiction between ends and means, society and the state, in the General Assembly, an institution of pure self-governance. But to *figure* this reconciliation is not to *effect* it. Even if we assumed that this living process functioned successfully – that is, if we discounted the problems outlined in Chapter 1 – the political question of how to generalize this model remains. To perform an alternative social model is not to mediate between means and ends in actuality but to demonstrate how it *might* be done. The contradiction between means and ends seems rather to be *aestheticized* – that is, performatively resolved within a circumscribed space for the benefit of an audience. Occupy’s numerous protest camps should be understood in aesthetic rather than political terms. The autonomous zone is not so different from the autonomous artwork. It establishes a frame within which protesters perform the reconciliation of means and ends, theory and practice, form and content. In doing so, they hope to create a sensible impression of autonomy, of beauty as living form.

Youth International Party (YIP)

My last example is a historical example to underscore the origins of prefiguration in the counterculture of the New Left. An early example of prefigurative practice is the Youth International Party, known as the Yippies, who played a major part in the anti-war protests of the 1960s. Their goal, according to co-founder Abbie Hoffman, was ‘the development of a model for an alternative society’ (1970, 106). They did this not through political organizing but street theatre and direct action, often with a satirical twist (in 1967 they tried to make the Pentagon levitate). They organized ‘be-ins’ which mixed spirituality with political consciousness and communal living, but often resembled rock festivals. A be-in at New York’s Grand Central Station is described by Hoffman as ‘thousands, maybe ten thousand people, dancing, singing, throwing balloons in the air’ (ibid., 73).⁵ The Yippies, as co-founder Jerry Rubin declared, were involved in a ‘cultural revolution’ (quoted in Farber 1988, 22). This did not mean that they had given up on political revolution. Rather they thought that politics, as

⁵ This is before the crowd was brutally dispersed by the police, leaving over 100 people hospitalized (Gitlin 1993, 229).

traditionally conceived, was unable to bring about change. 'Politics is how you live', Rubin said (quoted in Farber 1988, 21). Thus in a 1968 manifesto the Yippies laid out 'the way we should live' (1968). The goal was to establish an alternative community based on principles of cooperation and mutual aid. They dubbed this community the 'new nation' (ibid.). They imagined it would be held together by a series of counterinstitutions – people's clinics, food co-ops, free universities, and so on – run on a voluntary basis.⁶ It was hoped that through the gradual expansion of this community the existing system would eventually collapse.

The Yippies provide an early example of prefigurative practice. Through their interventions they performed the practical feasibility of the desired changes, often with a specific audience in mind. To protest against the Vietnam War, the Yippies organized a 'Festival of Life'. They insisted that their festival be within view of the Democratic National Convention, so they applied for permits to use the park opposite the venue (Farber 1988, 36).⁷ The festival created an autonomous zone, laying the template for interventions like CHAZ and Occupy decades later. There was a 'free store' which gave away clothes, a first-aid post, a theatre, and a music area. The trees were decorated with balloons and food was given away for free (ibid., 177). At one end of the park there was a drum circle, at the other a performance by rock band MC5. In short, the Yippies demonstrated the needlessness of war through performative peacefulness. In the Yippies' 'Festival of Life' as in the autonomous zones of CHAZ and Occupy – in the 'new nation' each established – the problem was solved. If only the authorities would take notice.

Symbolic contrast

Prefigurative practice relies on the power of contrast to make its case. This points us to its principal contradiction. The literature describes prefiguration as a solutions-oriented practice. Prefigurative practice, it is argued, is a form of direct social action generating practical solutions to real social problems. But what the examples above demonstrate is that the

⁶ These principles were first expressed in Hoffman's pamphlet 'Fuck the System' (1967) and further elaborated in his *Steal This Book* (1971).

⁷ The permit for Grant Park was rejected and the Yippies ended up having to organize their festival in Lincoln Park instead, ten miles from the Democratic National Convention.

purpose of prefiguration is not to produce a solution but the *image* of a solution, and to contrast it with the response (or lack thereof) of the state.⁸ The modus operandi of prefigurative practice is to create an exemplary community on the very site that symbolizes the problem. Recall that CHAZ created a police-free zone around an abandoned police building. The Yippies sought to organize their 'Festival of Life' within view of the Democratic Party's 'Convention of Death'. Protesters at Standing Rock halted the building of a pipeline by declaring the land sacred, thus opposing an extractive view of nature with an indigenous one. The largest *zone à défendre* (ZAD) established a rural commune on land earmarked for the construction of a new airport, thus opposing a 'natural' way of life to a modern, resource-intensive one. Finally, Occupy erected its camps near the institutions it held responsible for the 2008 financial crisis – in London near the Bank of England, in New York near Wall Street – confronting 'corporate democracy' with 'real democracy' (Sitrin and Azzellini 2014, 145). In each case, the protest community addressed the problem – whether it was police brutality, environmental degradation, or a lack of democratic participation – by performing a solution within a circumscribed space. But this does not address the problem but shows how the problem *could* be addressed. The strength of prefigurative practice lies not in offering practical solutions but in creating mediagenic contrasts. The protest crystallizes an image of good and bad which protesters hope the media will pass along to the public. When the protest community disbands or is cleared away by the police, the 'solution' vanishes with it. This is not to say that prefigurative practice is ineffective but rather that its efficacy is of an aesthetic nature. What is remembered is the exuberance of the Yippies' be-ins, the solidarity among campers in Zuccotti Park, and so on. They become symbols of the possibility of a different social order. What is forgotten is their political failure to bring that order any nearer. Politics is subordinated to an aesthetic principle: the figuration of an alternative takes precedence over its realization.

⁸ This of course is nothing other than the contradiction between art and politics, which prefigurative practice presumes to abolish.

Representational structure and exemplary form

What is striking is that the examples above each have the structure of a traditional performance. This is the result of the autonomous zone: a discrete object designed, at least in part, for aesthetic contemplation. This object introduces a distinction between artist and audience, actor and spectator.⁹ As I showed above, the actors were aware that the autonomous zone functioned like a stage since they used it to reach out to specific audiences. Interestingly, it is precisely the liquidation of these distinctions – between artist and audience, art and life – that is said to constitute the specificity of social practice (see Introduction and Chapter 2). According to the literature, social practice challenges the traditional aesthetic template according to which an artist creates an object that is then presented to an audience. Instead of an artwork it delivers a process, and this process is not exhibited in a gallery but embedded in social life. In Chapter 2 I challenged this way of looking at social practice. The process is distinguished by its attempt to restore a sense of autonomy to a given constituency. The result, therefore, is not the merging of art and life but the creation of an autonomous zone – an intervention that functions through its *separation* from life. The irony is that activist artists leave the gallery because they believe it to be compromised, only to create similarly exceptional spaces elsewhere. Their projects, then, are more accurately viewed as *multiplying* galleries and stages. Social practice does not shatter the frame but frames a social issue, performatively resolving it so as to create the *appearance* of a solution for a given audience.¹⁰

The point is illustrated by Renzo Martens's Institute for Human Activities (IHA) – an art project that takes up the cause of those working on historically Western-owned plantations in the

⁹ I am using 'object' in the philosophical sense of an object of consciousness in the external world, not a material thing that endures. Qua material thing, the objects under discussion resemble performances, since they are limited not just in space but in time.

¹⁰ The same is true of prefigurative politics. In Portland, Oregon, occupiers chose a park located near city hall, the federal building, and the police station to address the problems that city officials ignored. 'As a dramatic performance', Lois Melina writes, 'the encampment made visible the presence of populations like the homeless, the mentally ill, the unemployed, and hungry, and those without access to medical care' (2016). As it framed these problems, it simultaneously performed their resolution – by feeding people through its soup kitchen (1,500 meals a day), offering free medical care in its field hospital, and offering comfort to the mentally ill in its 'calm tent'. In the words of one occupier: 'Look at us, we're providing health care where your big city, urban planning renewal, whatever, couldn't do it. You couldn't do it. We're doing it, and we're doing it with no money' (quoted in Melina 2016). Thus the camp performatively resolved a number of social issues by creating an exemplary though short-lived community.

Democratic Republic of Congo. These workers, earning on average less than twenty dollars a month, have contributed to Western economies in various ways but have received little in return. Instead of leaving the gallery to address the issue, however, Martens has transplanted the gallery to the plantation. In a village on a former palm oil plantation he has installed a white cube. It is the kind of building one would expect to find in Berlin-Mitte or Manhattan. Designed by Rem Koolhaas's architectural firm, it is utterly at odds with the surrounding landscape and architecture. The gallery quite literally focuses the gaze of a Western audience on a number of issues (economic inequality, environmental degradation, colonial legacies, etc.), generating the kind of media attention that most social practice initiatives lack.¹¹ As of 2020, Martens claims to have raised €100,000 through the project. This money is funnelled back into what he calls the 'post-plantation' in Congo – a kind of autonomous zone. In sum, the IHA has created a highly visible exception to the status quo. The virtue of Martens's project is that it makes this exceptionality visible. The white cube cuts an ostentatious contrast with the surrounding villages. This contrast is not an effect of the white cube, however. The white cube merely makes explicit what is true of social practice – and indeed prefiguration – in general: it does not reject the gallery system but reproduces its logic, creating highly visible yet clearly circumscribed spaces of exception.



Institute for Human Activities, Lusanga, DRC, 2012–ongoing

¹¹ The project figured on the front page of *The New York Times* (int. ed.) on 22 April 2021.

When social practice is viewed through a prefigurative lens, what we find is a fairly traditional aesthetic *structure*. This is because prefiguration presupposes an object that embodies the desired changes, and this object forces a distinction between artist and audience, actor and spectator. This representational structure is concealed under an interventionist rhetoric, according to which social practice is ‘post-representational’ and mobilizes ‘the social itself as a medium and material of expression’ (see Chapter 2). But if I am correct that such notions are untenable, then what we are left with is a much more traditional structure, based on what we might call the ‘author-spectator nexus’ (Coombs 2021, 112). The fact that the authors and spectators are often the same people does not affect this.

When we turn things around and view prefigurative politics through the lens of art, the aesthetic *form* of the prefigurative performance comes into view. At its most ambitious, prefigurative politics seeks to generate an impression of a liberated social form. That is, it tries to enact the idea of autonomy – of self-legislation – as living process. CHAZ enacted a self-policing community free from racism and police brutality. Occupy experimented with alternative forms of governance and social reproduction. Each endeavoured to create a self-regulating community. This took the form of a zone of immediacy in which the rigidity of various ‘binaries’ broke down. This, indeed, is how prefigurative practice is theorized:

Practising prefigurative politics means removing the temporal distinction between the struggle in the *present* towards a goal in the *future*; instead, the struggle and the goal, the real and the ideal, become one in the present (Maeckelbergh 2009, 66-7).

The contradiction between present and future, means and ends, real and ideal is reconciled in the living practice of the prefigurative community.¹² This can only be understood as a dynamic *process* in which means and ends are mutually constitutive, and in which the future emerges organically from the present without any interruptions, breaks, or events. The emphasis on ‘process’, central to social practice and prefigurative politics alike, must be understood in this light. Most projects do not have a priori goals because the goals must be

¹² As I pointed out in Chapter 1, other authors mention the same polarities, indicating a large degree of consensus on this point in the literature.

produced from within the process itself, deliberately and consensually.¹³ In that sense, ‘the *process* becomes the goal’ because only a process that produces and realizes its own goals is truly autonomous (ibid., 75).

In short, if we look at prefigurative politics through the lens of art, we find that it takes on a task originally reserved for art: the *figuration* of freedom. For it to do this successfully, it must be an end in itself. The result is a politics that is elevated from a mere means – as politics was traditionally understood – to an exemplar of this or that desirable outcome. But this implies that politics carries its justification within itself; it becomes something to be pursued for its own sake. As an exemplar of social autonomy, it is supposed to be an instructive if not beautiful illustration of what humanity is capable of, and therefore something to be celebrated *despite* failing to achieve its goals. Prefigurative politics neglects the properly political task of acquiring social and political power. This, however, is not to say that it is ineffective; it is merely to point out that the means it employs are themselves aesthetic. Prefigurative politics tries to change the world by means of an aesthetic education.¹⁴

Politics as Aesthetic Education

External audience

In hundreds of cities around the world, occupiers erected a stage on which they performed an autonomous social process. This was the camp, which was described by some as ‘a small, working democracy’ and a ‘functioning commonwealth’. What made this commonwealth prefigurative was its self-legislating character: it attempted to figure, within a delimited space, the form of a free society. The aesthetic nature of this exercise is perhaps best

¹³ As David Graeber writes regarding Occupy Wall Street, ‘was it our job to come up with a vision for a new political order, or to help create a way for everyone to do so?’ (2013, 39). Similarly, François Matarasso defines social practice (what he calls community art) as the creation of art ‘by professional and non-professional artists, co-operating as equals, for purposes and to standards they set together, and whose processes, products and outcomes cannot be known in advance’ (2019, 51). In other words, it is defined by collective self-legislation as open-ended process.

¹⁴ The crux of Schiller’s idea of an ‘aesthetic education’ is that beauty puts us in a state conducive to self-determination. Beauty confers ‘freedom by means of freedom’ (Schiller 1993, 176). See also Chapter 4. Here I am using the phrase to designate a ‘politics’ that tries to change the world through the sheer power of an image or experience.

illustrated by the recurrent claim that the occupations were ‘ends in themselves’. So, for instance, Sanford Schram notes that for many ‘Occupy’s value lay in no small part with it being an end in itself’, that is, in allowing people to come together to ‘build community’ (2014). Chris Haddix describes Occupy as a ‘practice of freedom’, serving ‘no terminal point or end other than the practice itself’ (2011). Hito Steyerl writes that ‘occupation is not a means to an end (...) Occupation is in many cases an end in itself’ (2011). Andrew Ross argues that, for the occupiers,

group assembly and direct action are not means to some end that is then adopted as policy and legislated. Meetings and actions – where people practice the art of being autonomous and mutually supportive at one and the same time – *are* the product (2012, 63).

Mark Bray, striking a self-critical note, observes that Occupy’s ‘actions were often oriented to be ends in themselves without a larger picture of what we were working toward’ (2013, 158). Graeber, on the other hand, fully endorses this position, arguing that the ‘process’ is an ‘end in itself’ (Graeber and Wolfe 2012).

We begin to note the contradiction between Occupy’s prefigurative or aesthetic side and its instrumental or political side. For it to successfully figure freedom, it *must* be an end in itself. However, for it to be politically effective, it must *also* be a means. This tension can be witnessed in the Occupy camps. On the one hand, the camp is a quasi-self-sufficient social system. Occupiers spent a lot of time building, maintaining, and improving the camp’s infrastructure, participating in its governance, creating committees and subcommittees to investigate various problems, mediating conflicts, and so on. It was, in this sense, self-enclosed and inward looking. On the other hand, the camp was a performance staged for an audience. Occupiers spent much of their time talking to the press, engaging passers-by, and mediating their activities to influence public opinion. In this sense, the camp was outward looking: a vehicle for its own replication. The important point, however, is that the means employed to realize Occupy’s vision were themselves of an aesthetic nature. The occupiers possessed neither social power (labour power that could be withdrawn) nor political power (representation at the level of the state). Instead, the occupiers endeavoured to bring about

change by the sheer force of an image or experience. Graeber calls this ‘contaminationism’: the idea that the experience of the camp – whether through an image or direct contact – is so transformative as to replicate itself (Graeber 2013, 29). Occupy was thus ‘based on a kind of faith that democracy was contagious’ (ibid.). Another occupier put it thus: the camp was ‘something that would grow into a model that remained there until it spread outwards to more and more sectors of the world’ (quoted in Melina 2016). In other words, it was assumed that the performance of direct democracy within the autonomous zone – the impression of freedom produced by the camp – was so compelling as to generate its own offspring.

Prefigurative politics aims to *demonstrate* that another world is possible, to *figure* the shape it might assume, but also to *realize* this vision on a larger scale. Packaging a project for media and art-world consumption is an integral part of this process. It allows protesters to cultivate an audience to whom they can showcase their alternative. This is done, on the one hand, by creating a spectacle worthy of (media) attention and, on the other hand, by encouraging the mediation (and self-mediation) of their activities. People did not just visit CHAZ and Occupy but blogged, tweeted, and vlogged about it. Among the most active ‘content creators’ were the organizers themselves. Occupy in particular was one of the first movements (after the 2009 Iranian Green Movement and the 2011 Arab Spring) to mobilize social media, which has since become the default strategy of prefigurative politics. M-15, Occupy, CHAZ, and the Umbrella Movement gained followers by disseminating content through traditional and social media. Each was set up as a PR campaign as much as a social intervention. The protest camps in New York (OWS) and Madrid (M-15) had their own press centres, PR people, and media working groups (Blanco 2018, 128). The Media Working Group at Zuccotti Park was considered so important that it was nicknamed the ‘central nervous system’ of the occupation (Gould-Wartofsky 2015, 80). Through the savvy use of social media, it managed to ‘control the narrative’, at least for a time, resulting in the viral growth of the movement (Chafkin 2012, 79). It is through various forms of (self-) representation, then, that prefigurative protests connect with audiences beyond their immediate vicinity, allowing them to grow while also offering a measure of protection from state repression.

Prefigurative politics aims for a process of cumulative change. It envisions the indefinite expansion of the protest community until it replaces capitalism (Raekstad and Gradin 2020

chap. 3d). If the individual autonomous zone is no more than an exception, a tiny victory, this changes when the movement grows and more people get involved. Social practice follows a similar strategy. The aim is always to expand the community of actors, that is, to encourage people to act for themselves and create their own initiatives. This may explain why so many activists insist on the art status of their activism: galleries and museums function not just as display boxes but as platforms for agitation (cf. Groys 2014; Sholette 2016). A prefigurative perspective helps to explain why it is misleading to brand social practice as ‘anti-visual’ or ‘anti-aesthetic’. Activist artists *need* an audience, precisely because this interface is the only ‘political’ means available to them. In a sense, this is the key problem of social practice (as of prefigurative politics), since if it fails to reach an audience, it will likely remain isolated, a mere symbol of resistance, as does indeed happen most of the time. Artists will thus attempt to reach out to audiences in various ways, for instance by ‘leveraging’ the resources of an institution (see Chapter 2), organizing direct exchanges between themselves and others,¹⁵ or by creating a more traditional artwork.¹⁶ The point is that activists are greatly helped by a compelling object, image, or story. But interventions generating scandal or spectacle appear to be the most effective. For instance, the German Center for Political Beauty ran an elaborate media campaign exposing an arms deal between Germany and Saudi Arabia (*25,000 Euro Reward*, 2012). They put up large-format posters across the country promising a reward for any information incriminating the owners of arms manufacturer KMW. This triggered a media storm. The campaign generated over 2,500 articles within three months, scuppering the politically sensitive deal (Center for Political Beauty 2012). A comparable action took place during the 2019 Whitney Biennial. When it became known that the vice chair of the Whitney’s board, Warren Kanders, owned an arms company, some artists withdrew their work, others made work about it, while still others occupied the museum. This created a scandal, forcing Kanders to resign.

In prefigurative practice, spectacle – or, less emphatically, exposure – becomes the measure of political success. As such, it vitally depends on aesthetic experience. Admittedly, aesthetic

¹⁵ For instance, Forensic Architecture have hosted workshops on the use of ‘counter forensics’ at Tate Britain and the ICA, allowing others to replicate their media activism. It is also possible to study for a degree with them via the MA in Research Architecture at Goldsmiths College.

¹⁶ Park Fiction and Renzo Martens have both made feature-length films documenting their activist interventions, see Park Fiction’s *Unlikely Encounters in Urban Space* (2003) and Martens’s *White Cube* (2020).

experience is reconceptualized. Less a form of self-interrogation, it becomes a clamorous call to action or 'proof' of the existence of 'real' social alternatives. The obvious danger is that spectacle is confused with political power. We saw this most clearly with Occupy. For a while, the movement grew rapidly. 'Contaminationism' seemed to work. Why? In Graeber's words, because of 'the media's eventual decision to take the protests seriously' (2013, 54). At its height in October 2011, OWS generated 12,000 newspaper citations a month (Gould-Wartofsky 2015, 199). As Occupy's novelty wore off and the number dwindled, it became vulnerable to state repression. The only weapon it had at its disposal, both to defend itself and to coerce politicians, was public opinion – mediated by the corporate media. Thus Occupy 'lived and died by corporate media' (Arun Gupta quoted in Gould-Wartofsky 2015, 199). By May 2012 the movement generated less than 1,000 citations a month. By this time, Occupy had lost all of its encampments, most of its core organizers, and the General Assemblies were out of commission. There was little left of the movement but its signs and symbols, which by now had lost their power to move an audience. The same is true of the Center for Political Beauty and the Whitney action. Each created a compelling image of people challenging power – so compelling as to conceal the material insignificance of the victory (the Saudis bought their tanks elsewhere; Kanders was replaced by a more respectable capitalist).

As I argued in Chapter 1, we might think of the strategy of prefigurative practice as a peaceful version of the propaganda by the deed. This, indeed, is how the Center for Political Beauty seem to think about their actions.

The great defenders of human rights – exemplified by historical figures such as Varian Fry, Beate Klarsfeld, Soghomon Tehlirian, Peter Bergson, or Simon Wiesenthal – seem to have died out. The Center for Political Beauty seeks to recover and exhibit their deeds in the free space for action that art can provide (Center for Political Beauty 2022).

The Center seek to *exhibit* the exemplary deeds of political activists. In this way they invoke the anarchist strategy of propagandistic action (cf. Staal 2019). The aim is not to challenge power so much as to create an *image* of people challenging power. This, it is hoped, will inspire broader action, which may achieve more structural change. In describing such actions

as 'beautiful' and 'exemplary', the Center mark a shift in the original understanding of propagandistic action. Prefigurative politics does not commit acts of terrorism but creates enclaves of social beauty.

Internal audience

Prefigurative practice tries to jolt people into action by creating small but highly publicized exceptions. Such interventions advertise the possibility of a different social system. It is noteworthy that in describing the function of the Occupy encampments, Graeber appeals to the language of advertising. 'The camps were always primarily an advertisement, a defiant experiment in libertarian communism that was never going to be allowed to last for very long' (Graeber 2012, 427). Who were these 'advertisements' for? The aesthetic education of prefigurative practice is aimed not just at an external audience (who are offered an image of freedom) but the prefigurativists themselves (who are given the opportunity to experience it in practice). One of the main ideas behind prefigurative practice is that experiencing alternative social arrangements (as opposed to reflecting on them in the abstract) is a crucial step in convincing people that another world is desirable and feasible (see e.g. Gordon 2008, 38-39; Maeckelbergh 2011a, 16-17; Melina 2016; Raekstad and Gradin 2020, chap. 4b). 'Doing is believing', Maeckelbergh writes (2011a). What matters is not the result of the action, not even the act itself, but *acting*. The fact that propagandistic action is almost always short-lived matters little.¹⁷ The *process* of collective action generates a powerful experience that survives the end of the protest as memory and symbol. In short, the result of an action is less important than the feelings it generates. Prefigurative action is action for experience's sake.¹⁸

Prefigurative practice enables experiences that are hard to come by in everyday life. As many first-hand accounts make clear, engaging in prefigurative action – spending time in a protest camp, for instance – is a life-changing experience. It forges a powerful sense of community

¹⁷ By saying that Occupy 'was never going to be allowed to last for very long', Graeber implies that the authorities were to blame for Occupy's short-lived nature. Yet he favours decentralized 'horizontal networks' over permanent organizations such as parties, and played an important role in organizing Occupy in this way (Graeber 2002, 70). See also the discussion on the difference between the Old and New Left in Chapter 1.

¹⁸ Compare with the activists mentioned above who conceive of prefiguration as an end in itself. See also Chapter 1, where I pointed out that a lack of tangible results can also lead activists to abandon prefigurative practice.

and solidarity, and creates lifelong friendships (see e.g. Schneider 2013; Powell 2021). These experiences stand out for their rarity or unavailability in everyday life. This highlights an important but underdiscussed feature of prefigurative practice: its discontinuity with everyday reality.¹⁹ Just as there is a break between the autonomous zone and the area surrounding it, so it interrupts the regular flow of time. The autonomous zone, in other words, is not only *spatially* but *temporally* disjunctive. In a sense, prefigurative action stands outside of time. It suspends ordinary time in order to lift the veil on a different – future – temporality. This alternative time can only be experienced temporarily and must inevitably be suspended in turn, marking a return to ordinary time. What this means, concretely, is that the protest camp offers a powerful experience of exception, of contrast with ordinary reality.²⁰

In the interval created by the autonomous zone, life is experienced differently. The norms and conventions of everyday life are suspended. Occupy, for instance, suspended political hierarchy. The General Assemblies (GAs) allowed everyone to experience first-hand what it is like to take part in collective decision-making. Very few decisions were made, however. Most occupiers admitted that the GAs were ‘dysfunctional’, but everyone equally agreed that participating in a GA was an unforgettable experience (McKee 2016b, 102; see also Graeber 2013, 105, 200). The camp also released people from their everyday routines, and motivated them to engage in new activities and take on new responsibilities. At the ZAD in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, protesters set up a non-monetary subsistence economy, growing their own food and building their own houses. Stephen Squibb writes that the Occupy encampments resembled

local communes where one really could meditate in the morning, rally at noon, work the food tent in the evening, and study criticism after supper (Squibb 2011, 27).

Schneider writes in a similar vein about OWS.

¹⁹ Compare the debate in the social practice literature on the importance of ‘projects’, which, though durational, always come to an end, in contrast to the traditional art object, which endures (see e.g. Groys 2018).

²⁰ The autonomous zone is not only disjoined from reality but from other protests. Individual actions are not inscribed in an overarching political project to change society and therefore fail to add up to something greater than the sum of their parts.

A scientist did a lot of social media and logistics and coordinating of artists. Artists did everything. The more wholly you gave yourself over to what was taking place, the less likely it was that you would be doing what was normally considered to be your job before the movement. On planet Occupy, a person is a person and a community member before being any particular kind of worker (Schneider 2013, 85).

Squibb and Schneider reference Marx's description of communism, which would release workers from the monotony of a single occupation. Thus prefigurative practice allows one to *experience* a situation which, to achieve it in reality, would require a political revolution.

The autonomous zone enables an intensity of experience that is not available in everyday life. First-hand accounts convey a sense that life in the camp is lived to the full, and emphasize the communal bonds as particularly transformative (see e.g. Breines 1982, 58-59; Epstein 1988; Polletta 2002 chap. 6; Schwendener 2012; Schneider 2013; Powell 2021). This feeling of community is an effect of the unalienated social relations protesters seek to enact. Through self-directed action protesters attempt to materialize their ideals, closing the gap between theory and practice. Moreover, they do so collectively, as members of a social body that transcends them yet over which they can exercise control, thereby relieving the antagonism between the individual and the group. The deep sense of purpose and community experienced by protesters is the affective side of the practical attempt to actualize autonomy. This experience contrasts radically with quotidian life – and it is precisely this contrast that is of interest to prefigurative practice, for it throws dominant norms and values into relief. However, in this respect it is no different from other experiences on offer in the experience economy. It is no surprise that autonomous zones have been compared to music festivals and holiday camps (Feigenbaum, Frenzel, and McCurdy 2013, 190), university campuses (Schmitt 2011), and carnival (Holmes 2009, chap. 2). Indeed, the carnivalesque is often self-consciously invoked by protesters, as evidenced by their use of masks, costumes, puppets, banners, and floats.²¹ During carnival revellers wear masks allowing them to disengage from their ordinary social roles. A similar dynamic is at work in prefigurative practice. Like carnival, the

²¹ For instance, in 1999 protesters sought to disrupt the G8 summit in Cologne with a 'Carnival against Capital'. According to Brian Holmes, this 'subversive carnival' created a 'temporary autonomous zone' celebrating 'a prefigured social transformation in the here-and-now of the occupied streets' (2009 chap. 2).

autonomous zone offers a temporary escape from reality. It enables a series of experiences – of solidarity, community, and purposive collective action – that are hard to come by in everyday life. These experiences are considered valuable in and of themselves, even if concrete results are lacking. What results is an *aestheticism* – action for action’s sake. In short, prefigurative practice does not actualize autonomy so much as produce an *image* of it for an external audience, while allowing participants momentarily to *experience* it within a circumscribed space. This is the aesthetic education that prefigurative practice substitutes for politics.

The Critique of Prefigurative Practice

What connects social practice and prefigurative politics is that each attempts to integrate art and politics. In this way, their self-understanding coincides. If one is to believe key voices in the literature, art can be a vehicle for radical social change while politics can be beautiful.²² Abbie Hoffman, co-founder of the Yippies, thought of himself as a ‘revolutionary artist’, by which he meant a mix between Fidel Castro and Andy Warhol (1970, 95, 63). But the amalgam of Castro and Warhol is not the sum total of their characteristics; it results in an altogether different identity. In their merger, both art and politics are transformed. Politics becomes prefigurative politics and art becomes social practice – two practices which can be thought of as a *single* practice, namely what I have called ‘prefigurative practice’. Prefigurative practice is aesthetic insofar as it attempts to *figure* a free society; it is political insofar as it tries to *realize* it. As such, it can be critiqued from two angles: for its lack of political efficacy (see Chapter 1) and for its failure to represent or enact autonomy (see Chapter 2). I briefly want to revisit these critiques in light of the case studies discussed above.

Prefigurative practice is driven by aesthetic concerns and neglects the properly political question – that of power, of who rules whom. It stages punctual interventions that symbolize the possibility of another world but do not bring that world any nearer. Within three weeks of its creation, Seattle’s autonomous zone was cleared by police. Occupy Wall Street lasted

²² The aptly named Center for Political Beauty make this explicit.

for two months. Its precursors in the squares of Athens and Madrid self-dissolved within a month. The more modest projects of activist artists similarly fail to deliver the changes they seem to prefigure (see Introduction). This is not to say that prefigurative practice is ineffective but that its efficacy must be understood along aesthetic lines. Prefigurative symbols may exert a powerful influence, including on politicians. The energy released by a prefigurative protest can be channelled into political action, as was the case with the social democratic turn in the wake of Occupy, when Millennials tried to seize power by ‘capturing’ capitalist parties (see Chapter 1). My analysis demonstrated that this statist turn was motivated by a sense of the political ineffectiveness of prefigurative practice. Because it lacks the social and political means to realize its goals, prefigurative practice quickly devolves into protest politics – that is, ‘statism by proxy’ – or outright capitalist statism – that is, support for centre-Left parties.²³ This betrays the radical impetus behind prefigurative practice, which is not to implement mere reforms but to create a radically different world. Prefigurative practice envisions a world in which people’s control over their lives is radically deepened and extended. But we must ask whether it succeeds in offering us ‘a glimpse of how free people might organize themselves, and therefore what a free society could be like’ (Graeber 2013, 172). There is reason to believe that aesthetically, too, prefigurative practice falls short of its own ambition.

Take CHAZ’s attempt to establish a self-policing community. Despite the protesters’ best intentions, it was violence within the zone that led to its demise. Between 20 and 29 June there were five shootings, killing two and leaving a fourteen-year-old boy in critical condition. This led the authorities to reclaim the area. Instead of demonstrating that the protesters could do without the police, CHAZ effectively proved them wrong: they were unable to ensure the safety of the Capitol Hill community. It should be noted that the city acted exactly as the protesters had demanded: it de-escalated the situation by removing police from the Capitol Hill neighbourhood. It was only after two murders were committed – when the tactic of de-escalation failed – that police returned. CHAZ failed to create the self-managing community it envisioned *despite* mayoral support, not because of the city’s antagonism towards it.²⁴

²³ G. M. Tamás identifies ‘statism by proxy’ with the new social movements: ‘we won’t vote for you, we won’t smash your power through revolution, but we want you to draft bills and pass acts of parliament and UN and EU resolutions that we deem useful and edifying’ (2006, 241).

²⁴ The city provided vital infrastructure to sustain the protest. Having learned from the 1999 anti-WTO protests, which turned Seattle into a battleground, the city adopted a radically different approach and was generous in

Occupy Wall Street similarly failed to prefigure a more democratic social form. Even the occupiers themselves admitted that the General Assembly was ‘dysfunctional’ (McKee 2016b, 102). The movement’s deliberate ideological agnosticism, its ambition to represent ‘the people’ as such, made it impossible to agree on shared political values (Gitlin 2012, chap. 7 and 8; Gould- Wartofsky 2015, 215). Prior differences in outlook irrupted. Instead of demonstrating unity, the occupation splintered into a multitude of ad hoc project groups where decisions were made far from the ‘legitimate deliberative bodies’ (Schneider 2013, 108). As the political momentum of the movement waned, most of the Occupy encampments turned into care centres sheltering the homeless and feeding the poor. Occupy’s *raison d’être* was no longer to change society but to assuage its ills. As one occupier put it, ‘we turned into a social services organization’ (quoted in Gould-Wartofsky 2015, 135; see also Sotirakopoulos 2016, 135). In each case, what was supposed to be a performance of a better, more autonomous alternative became an exhibit of social contradictions that supervened on the protest community from without. The direction of influence was reversed: what was on display was not a positive alternative that radiated out from the autonomous zone, but rather the negativity of society that fell in on it from the outside. The projects of activist artists are subject to the same critique: they refract the contradictions they seek to ameliorate or shut out (see Chapter 2). In short, the attempt to recover art’s exemplary autonomy, to figure a beautiful social form, founders on pre-existing social contradictions. When these contradictions are resolved aesthetically, they give rise not to an experience of beauty but of ‘spurious harmony’ (Adorno 1981, 32).

Conclusion

One of the placards at Zuccotti Park read: ‘This revolution for display purposes only’ (Taussig 2012, 82). This witticism drawing attention to the heavy media presence at the park can also be read as a comment on Occupy’s frustrated political ambitions: it was made to be seen, more so than to achieve political victories. Graeber writes that ‘the camps were always

its support. It installed portable toilets, erected traffic barriers, going so far as to clad them with plywood to enable street art, and continued to respond to emergency calls within the zone (see e.g. Derrick 2020; Smith 2020a; Smith 2020b).

primarily an advertisement' (2012, 427), thus invoking the language of Abbie Hoffman, who said that the activities of the Yippies were 'an advertisement for revolution' (1970, 138). Politics, in other words, was subordinated to an aesthetic principle: the figuration of an alternative took precedence over its realization. Within the circumscribed space of the camp, the creation of a self-regulating social body was the chief concern. To the extent that it tried to enact 'a beautiful and good life', the camp was – and indeed had to be – an end in itself (Raunig 2013, 152). As such, the camp stood in an ambiguous, if not antagonistic, relation to the political aspirations of the 'movement'. The only 'political' means available to the occupiers was the image and experience of the camp. They hoped these would become 'contagious', and even if for a moment they did, their symbolic power never translated into social and political power. In the prefigurative conception of politics, the emphasis is on creating rousing symbols of solidarity, ingenuity, and grassroots resistance – symbols that crystallize the possibility of a different social order. While often presented as functional and solutions-driven, such interventions have a limited scope and lifespan.

By using terms like 'living form' and 'aesthetic education', I have hinted at prefiguration's affinity with Schiller's concept of beauty. It is the supposed exemplarity of the process in particular – its self-legislating character – that invites comparisons with beauty as living form. In the previous chapter I suggested that the 'micro-utopias' of activist art are best understood as attempts to create 'social beauty' or miniature 'aesthetic states' (Schiller's term for the state in which living form is generalized). The same applies to the autonomous zone of prefigurative politics. Occupy was not 'where art acquire[d] new meaning', as Michael Taussig suggests, but where it recovered its original *prefigurative* significance (2012, 81). In a way, then, it is only fitting that such projects should be exhibited in museums. After all, they are meant to be symbols of a brighter future, as beauty itself was traditionally understood to be.²⁵ On the other hand, the recuperation of an aesthetic paradigm that is over two hundred years old raises deep and troubling questions about our historical self-understanding. This will be subject of the next chapter.

²⁵ Not only did the MoMA collect the signs displayed at Zuccotti Park (Holpuch 2013), the occupation itself was exhibited at documenta 13 and the seventh Berlin Biennale (both held in 2012) (see Loewe 2015).

Chapter 4. Prefiguration and Beautiful Form

Introduction

In the preceding chapters, I traced the connection between art and prefiguration, culminating in the claim that prefigurative practice is a form of social action with an aesthetic rationale: it *performs* autonomy as living process within a circumscribed frame, often for the benefit of a specific audience. In claiming to be the living embodiment of autonomy, prefigurative practice should remind us of Schiller's famous claim that beauty is 'freedom in appearance, autonomy in appearance' (2003, 151). Schiller developed this thought into a fully-fledged aesthetic theory which construed the *telos* of beauty as 'living form'. Thus Schiller's theory of beauty picks out two important features of prefigurative practice. First, its exemplary relation to autonomy and, second, its prefigurative dynamic. On Schiller's view, aesthetic form is the ultimate horizon of social form. In short, if we want to understand the significance of the prefigurative turn in art and politics today, we have to explore its relation to Schiller's paradigm of beauty. This is the task I take on in this chapter.

I spotlight two contemporary thinkers who have engaged extensively with Schiller's aesthetic theory. Jacques Rancière's influential account of the 'politics of aesthetics' is based on a reading of Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. This text, Rancière argues, is the founding document of modern art. It inaugurates an 'aesthetic regime' in which art and life share the same criterion, autonomy, making it impossible to distinguish between them on a priori grounds. If Rancière argues for the continued relevance of Schiller's aesthetic theory, Grant Kester takes the opposite view. A staunch defender of social practice, Kester thinks we must reject Schiller's principle of aesthetic autonomy because it mirrors the ideological self-image of the bourgeois subject. Autonomous art maintains a critical distance from life, and is therefore incapable of practically ameliorating a situation. Kester thus goes in search of a 'new paradigm', which he finds in social practice (2011, 37).

Kester and Rancière represent diametrically opposed positions. Rancière claims to inherit Schiller's aesthetic theory, whereas Kester rejects it. But, as I show, Schiller's critic ends up reproducing his insights, whereas his self-proclaimed heir disputes most of his conclusions. There seems to be an inherent difficulty in claiming Schiller's relevance for the present *and* in dismissing him as obsolete. I argue that taken together as distinct yet related symptoms Kester and Rancière perfectly illustrate the *self-contradiction* of the Enlightenment paradigm of beauty in capitalism. To substantiate this point I trace the emergence of a period in art history 'after the beautiful' (Pippin 2014). The polarities that Kant and Schiller thought were held together in the experience of beauty are pulled apart in the polemics pitting artist against critic in the mid-nineteenth century. Beauty loses its social expressivity as a result of the self-undermining social dynamic that emerges with capitalism. This, I argue, has implications for the plausibility of a prefigurative perspective. Schiller could only understand 'living form' as 'a symbol of [humanity's] *accomplished destiny*' because the contours of an emancipated society had *already* come into view (1993, 126). The eclipse of beauty in modernism suggests that this emancipated future now lies beyond bourgeois society, throwing the prefigurative paradigm into crisis. In this way, the self-contradiction of beauty in modernism has something to teach us about contemporary prefigurative practice.

Grant Kester

Schiller's book is in large measure a meditation on the impossibility of progressive political change.

—Grant Kester

Since in the enjoyment of beauty, or aesthetic unity, an actual union and interchange between matter and form, passivity and activity, momentarily takes place, the compatibility of our two natures, the practicability of the infinite being realized in the finite, hence the possibility of sublimest humanity, is thereby actually proven.

—Friedrich Schiller

Grant Kester is one of the most articulate proponents of social practice. His most recent book *The One and the Many* (2011) is of great interest because it offers a defence of social practice not just in political but in aesthetic terms. As I showed in Chapter 2, there is a tendency in the social practice literature to downplay aesthetic concerns. Kester is the exception. 'One of the most decisive features of recent collaborative art practice', he writes, is its 'rearticulation of aesthetic autonomy' (14).¹ Social practice, on his view, is 'engaged in a more or less conscious effort to renegotiate the condition of art's autonomy, and to shape a new paradigm' (37). The aim of Kester's text is to explain what this 'new paradigm' is and to distinguish it from the old paradigm, which he associates with Kant and Schiller.

The old paradigm of aesthetic autonomy must be rejected, Kester argues, because it is modelled on the myth of the sovereign subject. Autonomy is primarily a category of bourgeois subjectivity, he argues. Thus Kester understands autonomy as 'pure self-transcendence', 'absolute self-sufficiency', and 'freedom from external determination' (40). Drawing on the work of Martha Woodmansee and C. B. Macpherson, he argues that such notions are not only central to bourgeois self-understanding but highly ideological. They equally define autonomous art, which, he argues, asserts its absolute distance from everyday concerns. Thus Kester historicizes the principle of aesthetic autonomy to expose the ideological interests it served. First, it allowed eighteenth-century critics to distinguish works of aesthetic merit from popular entertainment, the market for which was growing as a result of rising literacy rates. In this way, aesthetic autonomy established a criterion of taste separating a rising bourgeois class from the masses. Second, it reinforced bourgeois self-understanding by reflecting the idea of autonomy back to them in aesthetic experience. Aesthetic autonomy thereby perpetuated the myth of the sovereign subject.

Thus, according to Kester, the idea of aesthetic autonomy can be traced to the ideological self-understanding (or 'false consciousness') of the bourgeois subject. Bourgeois subjectivity is actually 'relational', Kester notes, given its dependence on others in an economy based on the exchange of labour, but this knowledge is suppressed (111). Not only is autonomy

¹ In this section page numbers without attribution refer to Kester (2011).

'illusory', it actually provides a cover for exploitative behaviour (111). Kester variously describes the activity of the bourgeoisie as 'the violent extraction of value or the suppression of difference' (112); as 'the violent projection of self' (113); and as 'committed to the infinite expansion of self and the endless accumulation of power' (180). Kester is susceptible to a certain hyperbole. 'Within the pedagogy of capital, as described by thinkers such as Adam Smith and Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, the sole priority is to enrich and aggrandize oneself, often at the expense of others' (176).

The problem, as Kester sees it, is that the idea of autonomy suppresses recognition of the bourgeois subject's dependence on others. 'The myth of its absolute autonomy can only be sustained by an active suppression or denial of this underlying dependence on the labor of the Other' (109). The autonomous artwork perpetuates this myth because it reflects 'a form of monadic selfhood', i.e. it mirrors bourgeois self-understanding (177). The challenge, then, is to conceptualize a different model of autonomy in which the 'binary oppositions' between self and other, individual and society, are placed in a more dialectical relationship (89). Kester finds this model in the modes of collective experience and production fostered by social practice.

The important point is not to simply acknowledge the (suppressed) 'truth' of our divided selfhood in some singular epiphany, but rather, to develop the skills necessary to mitigate violence and objectification in our ongoing encounters with difference (111).

Developing these skills requires 'a temporally extensive form of social interaction in which modes of expression, enunciation, and reception are continuously modified and reciprocally responsive. (...) This is the experiential knowledge that is catalyzed [by social practice]' (111-12). In short, whereas the autonomous artwork does 'the "work" of possessive individualism', social practice is based on a form of 'co-labor' that makes explicit our dependence on others and helps us better respond to the ethical demands this places upon us (112). Social practice therefore performs 'a prefigurative function' (152). It fosters 'experimentation with new modes of self-organization and collective action', and thereby anticipates the reconciliation between the individual and society, the one and the many (152).

Before turning to the real issue, I want to make a few observations about the *structure* of Kester's narrative, which duplicates Schiller's own. The bourgeois subject is the modern subject. The individual who, according to Kester, is engaged in 'the violent extraction of value' and who is 'committed to the infinite expansion of self and the endless accumulation of power' is not a rapacious capitalist; it is us. Kester implicitly acknowledges this, which is why he wants us to 'develop the skills necessary to mitigate violence and objectification in our ongoing encounters with difference'. We need, in other words, an aesthetic education. Kester criticizes Schiller and the concept of aesthetic autonomy for 'the assumption that more direct forms of political engagement are either futile or premature' (59). He laments that 'we must endlessly prepare our subjectivities for political action through a deferred aesthetic reeducation' (59). But in fact Kester shares 'Schiller's skepticism regarding the fate of political action unguided by aesthetic sensibility' (60). It is as though he sometimes forgets that his is a book on art, not politics. Kester is hesitant about our ability to engage in successful political action, conceiving of art as a testing ground for alternative forms of sociality (one of the central ideas behind social practice).

How do we determine which forms of new insight, and which efforts to destabilize existing systems of meaning, are liberating or empowering, and which are harmful or destructive? (...) this determination can only be made a posteriori, through an evaluation of practice, and through the knowledge produced by practice itself (113).

Time and again, Kester insists that a social model must prove itself in practice. He wants artists to deliver testable models that can be experienced and evaluated *before* they are implemented.² Kester supposes that this is different from a Schillerian aesthetic education because it is more practical. After all, social practice does not deliver an artwork in the traditional sense but an experience allowing participants to develop practical skills and ethical awareness. But in fact the principle is the same. What we end up with is not 'direct political

² 'The artist's a priori assumptions' must be 'tested against the exigencies of site and situation' (89). What is needed is 'the pragmatic testing of ethical claims through a process of mediated exchange' (179). 'The ethical valence of a given social interaction (...) can only be determined through a pragmatic assessment of the modes and effects of social interaction at a given site' (185). Social change 'becomes sustainable and extensive only through a *cumulative* process of reciprocal testing' (212).

engagement', as Kester envisions, but testable models, prototypes of another world (48). Contemplating or experiencing such models allows us to become more responsive to 'the Other' – very much on the model of an aesthetic education.

The real question is: why art? Why should art be singled out as a site for social intervention? This is because Kester, like Kant and Schiller before him, attributes to art an exemplary status. According to Kester, art offers an education in exemplary subjectivity – an idea he takes from Schiller. Kester conceives of the artwork as a dialectical model of independence within interdependence – like Kant and Schiller before him. Kester cannot see this because he reads them through the lens of a Macpherson or a Woodmansee. The paradoxical result is a text that sets itself in violent opposition to the Enlightenment paradigm of aesthetics yet reproduces its main insights. Kester's indebtedness to the paradigm he rejects is revealed by the title of his book, which is drawn from a section of Hegel's *Logic* (Hegel 2010, 154). This not only confirms the dialectical impetus behind his project but highlights its fundamental contradiction. Kester criticizes Kant and Schiller for being insufficiently dialectical. Hegel, on the other hand, credits them with inaugurating a truly dialectical conception of art (Hegel 1975, 60-61) and even modern dialectics as such (Hegel 2010, 103-4). What gives?

Kester critiques Kant and Schiller for failing to see that independence (autonomy) is a function of interdependence (cooperation or what Kester calls 'co-labor'). He attributes to them the idea of 'absolute autonomy', but there is no such concept to be found in their work (109). This is Kester's subterfuge: he absolutizes something that was understood dialectically. The model-like relationality of the work of art can be understood in different ways, for instance in terms of the disinterestedness that Kant ascribes to aesthetic experience (for such a reading see e.g. Jay 1984, 48). But it may be better to think of aesthetic autonomy, and beauty in particular, as an instance of *exemplary mediation* (I will elaborate on this below). Whether it is understood as the free play of the faculties, the mediation between the sense and form drives, or, as in Kester's case, a productive interchange between the one and the many, the exemplarity of aesthetic experience inheres in the reconciliation of opposites. This is an idea that comes into being with the modern aesthetic tradition that Kester outwardly rejects but unwittingly reproduces.

What to make, then, of Kester's critical exposé of the Enlightenment *philosophes*? It would be tempting to take Kester to task for engaging in the kind of unenlightening 'orgy of unmasking and exposure' that he condemns in others (223). But the lesson is more complicated than that. There are two points to be made. First, it is true that, from the standpoint of capitalism, bourgeois philosophy (Enlightenment thought) can appear as but a hypocritical justification for the acquisitive drives of the bourgeois subject. But that it is more than just 'bourgeois ideology' is proved by Kester himself who unwittingly reproduces the ideas he tried to historicize away. The ideals of the Enlightenment continue to hold a contradictory validity, but, lacking a critical perspective, Kester does not know what to make of this. Second, Kester's critique of the Enlightenment applies to social practice as well. He levels a materialist critique at Schiller et al., grounding their ideas in an emerging capitalist system. But social practice, he argues, is able to 'uncouple the process by which identity is constituted within modernity (...) from the conative drive of possessive individualism' (113). Art, in other words, is an 'interstice' or 'autonomous zone'. But this is mistaken. The process of identity formation cannot be 'uncoupled' from the social system underpinning it. Social practice could, at most, offer a counter-tendency. It is important to insist that the problem of bourgeois subjectivity is objectively grounded. Recall that bourgeois activity – 'the violent extraction of value' – does not refer to extractive industries or other forms of corporate spoliation. The extraction of value and the attendant violence is inherent in the commodity form, which means that we are subjects and objects of this violence as producers and consumers of value. Ultimately, this totalizing social system is what undermines the plausibility of a prefigurative perspective. But this system appeared to Schiller in a different light than it does to us today. To Kant and Schiller it seemed reformable, even perfectible, hence their Enlightenment optimism. It is the historically new situation that emerges with the onset of rapid industrialization, giving rise to a self-undermining social dynamic, that gives the lie to this optimism. To recover, as Kester does, their prefigurative understanding of art – to claim that art is a 'model' capable of the formation of exemplary subjectivity – is to fail to register the significance of this shift.

In conclusion, Kester's account of aesthetic autonomy does not yield a 'new paradigm' but reproduces the old one. Like other theorists of prefiguration discussed in this thesis, Kester implicitly thinks of social practice as the actualization of beauty as living form. However, given

the critique of prefigurative practice elaborated in previous chapters, we should take issue with the word ‘actualization’. Social practice does not actualize so much as *enact* or *perform* it in the shape of ‘micro-utopias’ or testable ‘models’. It is worth noting that Kester’s prefigurative conception of art is a function of his postcriticality, which I briefly discussed in Chapter 2. Kester identifies critique with the ‘intellectual baroque’ – a state in which a ‘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’ (14). Art must therefore go beyond critique, Kester argues, by submitting itself to ‘the exigencies of practice’ (13). Kester thus exemplifies a trend I have been tracing across previous chapters: the desire to abandon aesthetic negativity leads to the inadvertent recovery of the Enlightenment paradigm that precedes it. As we now turn to Jacques Rancière, we encounter the opposite problem. Rancière claims to inherit Schiller’s theory of art, underscoring its relevance for our contemporary moment. But Rancière’s Schiller is very different from the author of the *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*.

Jacques Rancière

The [art]work upholds the aesthetic promise of a reconciled life. But the price it pays for doing so is to defer it indefinitely, to refuse all reconciliation.

—Jacques Rancière

Beauty provides us with triumphant proof that passivity by no means excludes activity, nor matter form, nor limitation infinity.

—Friedrich Schiller

Jacques Rancière is one of the most influential voices in philosophical aesthetics of the last two decades. He is also a prominent political philosopher. Across a number of books he has tried to clarify the relation between art and politics. One of the peculiarities of Rancière’s

work is that, in both his aesthetic and political theory, he draws heavily on Enlightenment thought. In the previous section I showed that Kester's call to abandon 'the long tradition of aesthetic autonomy' is really an attempt to recover it (2011, 59). Rancière advocates a return to Schiller; but his return, like Kester's recovery, miscarries, if for different reasons. Kester, like other proponents of prefigurative practice, lays claim to the perfectibility of bourgeois social relations. He thinks that social practice plays an important role in reforming subjectivity and proposing adjustments to society, and in this sense inherits the tradition of bourgeois radicalism (progressive liberalism). Rancière, on the other hand, displays a contemporary (post-1960s) pessimism about the possibility of social change and projects this pessimism back onto key Enlightenment figures such as Kant and Schiller, distorting their ideas in the process. The strategy Rancière pursues is one of *re-periodization*. His 'aesthetic regime' of art, supposedly based on Schiller's *Letters*, claims to describe the condition of intelligibility of art since the Enlightenment. I will argue that Rancière's re-periodization not only fails to capture important historical discontinuities but is expressly designed to suppress consciousness of their existence. I will begin by briefly outlining Rancière's theory of art and politics, after which I will demonstrate the profound difference between his theory of art and that of the Enlightenment figures on which it is ostensibly based.

Rancière's Theory of Art and Politics

According to Rancière, art and politics share an underlying politico-aesthetic logic. There can be no question of the aestheticization of politics, therefore, because 'politics is aesthetic in principle' (Rancière 1999, 58), just as art is a form of 'sensible politics' (Rancière 2004, 14). Politics is (or ought to be) governed by an 'aesthetics of politics', just as art is (or ought to be) governed by a 'politics of aesthetics'. Rancière thus inverts the problem that Benjamin detected in the 1930s. If for Benjamin politics is rendered conservative and reactionary by its reliance on aesthetic values, Rancière argues that a certain aesthetic operation is what makes politics political. Conversely, when politics relinquishes its relation to aesthetics, it degenerates into mere 'policing'. As the name indicates, to 'police' is to maintain the status quo, or what Rancière calls the 'police order' (1999, 30). This is the state in which everyone and everything occupies their assigned place. But this order is inherently unstable. Rancière singles out art and politics as the practices that are liable to upset the status quo, each in its

own way. This, then, is what art and politics have in common: they redraw the map of the common world, what Rancière refers to as the 'distribution of the sensible':

a set of relations between the perceptible, the thinkable and the doable that defines a common world, defining thereby the way in which and the extent to which this or that class of human beings takes part in that common world (2012, 11).

The 'distribution of the sensible' is a set of coordinates that present themselves to experience as self-evident (Rancière 2004, 13). They define the distribution of roles and resources: who is ruled and by whom, who is a legitimate political actor, whose words make sense and whose words are perceived as mere noise. Politics, as much as art, is about upsetting the self-evidence of these coordinates. In doing to, it allows marginalized groups to stake a claim to the common from which they had hitherto been excluded.

We might ask what it is about the police order that makes it inherently unstable. What is it that allows politics to emerge? According to Rancière, this is the principle of equality formulated during the Enlightenment. 'Politics', he says, 'is that activity which turns on equality as its principle' (1999, ix).

From the moment that the word *equality* is inscribed in the texts of laws and on the pediments of buildings; from the moment that a state institutes procedures of equality under a common law or an equal counting of votes, there is an effectiveness of politics, even if that effectiveness is subordinated to a police principle of distribution of identities, places and functions (Rancière 2010, 207).

As soon as equality emerges as a universal principle, there can no longer be any a priori justification for the existing distribution of roles and resources. There emerges what Rancière calls a 'virtual or due community' which exists 'beyond the distribution of commands and jobs' (1999, 58). This is the 'common world' that exists by virtue of the principle of equality.³

³ Note that the 'common world' has two meanings. On the one hand, it defines a particular 'distribution of the sensible', i.e. a status quo. On the other hand, it denotes a utopian community in which the distribution of roles

But equality is ‘a mere assumption’ (ibid., 33); it is always subordinated to a police principle that assigns people to their designated places. The question, then, is how to operationalize the assumption of equality. This, Rancière argues, involves an aesthetic procedure: the setting up of a ‘sensory space’ in which the logic of equality meets the logic that resists it (ibid., 25). ‘We need to think of this encounter as a meeting of the heterogenous’ (ibid., 32). Just as an artwork brings together disparate elements in a common frame,⁴ so politics is a ‘meeting of incommensurables’ – a meeting between the assumption that the world should be reordered and the assumption that things should remain as they are (ibid., 73).

The problem is precisely this incommensurability. Rancière thinks of it in linguistic terms: as a conflict between those who speak the same language yet fail to understand each other (ibid., x). Politics, then, is not just about the meeting of two incompatible logics but about constructing a frame within which the opposing parties can understand each other. As he puts it, it is necessary to ‘produce both the argument and the situation in which it is to be understood’ (ibid., 57). It is the construction of this situation that constitutes the aesthetic element in politics. Rancière uses various terms to highlight the aesthetic nature of this argumentative space: a ‘scene of revelation’, a ‘sensory space’ (ibid., 25), a ‘political stage’ (ibid., 26), a ‘sphere of visibility’ (ibid., 42), and a ‘collage’ that ‘forges the common by putting in common what is not common’ (2017, 141-42). It is within this space that the conditions for mutual understanding are forged. Politics, then, is a reaching across divides; *it is the framing of a disagreement in such a way that agreement becomes possible*.⁵ This brings a common world into view. It should be noted, however, that Rancière does not think that this world can be brought nearer in any fundamental sense. For Rancière, the common world remains a ‘mere assumption’, an ‘as if’ (1999, 33, 58). Politics overturns the established order, but every act of politics gives rise to a new order that must be challenged in turn. The ‘police order’ is a quasi-permanent state periodically disrupted by politics.

is *not* defined. It is the ‘common world’ in this second sense that political actors use to challenge the status quo. Most references to the ‘common world’ refer to this utopian or ‘virtual’ community.

⁴ Art is the ‘clash of heterogeneous situations and heterogeneous languages’ (Rancière 2010, 142).

⁵ Rancière’s emphasis on art and politics as forms of ‘dissensus’ must be qualified accordingly. Dissensus succeeds only when the argument ‘staged’ by the dissenters is intelligible to their opponents and results in a form of consensus.

For Rancière, politics becomes political only when it adheres to an aesthetic logic. It amounts to the polemical use of the principle of equality by an excluded party, which uses it in such a way as to make its claim to equality intelligible to its interlocutors. This is what Rancière refers to as the 'aesthetics of politics'. With its twin concept, the 'politics of aesthetics', Rancière applies the same analysis to art. Just as he did with his theory of politics, Rancière grounds his theory of art in the Enlightenment, specifically in a reading of Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795/1993). The Enlightenment, Rancière points out, produced not only the concept of equality but also that of art (in the singular). This concept frees art from the rules and hierarchies (e.g. of genre and subject matter) which had previously constrained it. As art is freed from external legislation and begins to legislate its own laws, it becomes impossible to distinguish between it and life on a priori grounds (Rancière 2004, 23). Just as the principle of equality has the potential to disrupt established forms of political intelligibility, so the modern concept of art is liable to overturn established patterns of aesthetic experience. This has two consequences. First, anything can in principle be art and, second, this implies the possibility of a state in which *everything* is art (or indeed nothing is), i.e. in which there is no difference between art and life because life itself has become an artistic expression, and vice versa. This is Schiller's 'aesthetic state' in which 'mere life' and 'mere form' form a union to create 'living form' (Schiller 1993, 129). The 'aesthetic state' prefigured by the work of art is the functional equivalent of the 'common world' prefigured by politics. Just as modern politics emerges with the recognition of a state *beyond* politics, so modern art emerges with the idea of art's dissolution into life. Art and politics share the same horizon: each strives towards self-abolition. The question is how to interpret this. Is the aesthetic state a regulative principle or an actuality? The answer to this question determines one's proximity to the Enlightenment.

Rancière appears to ground his theory in the Enlightenment but in reality diverges from it in important respects. In fact, he *must* diverge from it because of his periodization. Rancière places us in the 'aesthetic regime' of art and politics, which begins with the emergence of the modern concepts of art and politics in the years leading up to the French Revolution. But the continuity implied by the 'aesthetic regime' conceals important discontinuities. The revolutionaries of 1789 could not have foreseen the full extent of the Industrial Revolution, nor could Schiller have anticipated the art of modernism. Rancière's periodization seems

designed to suppress recognition of the events *after* the Enlightenment that threatened its legacy. To conceive of the post-1789 period as a homogenous block of time is to ignore that the Enlightenment was, in important respects, superseded by events. This is why Marx and Engels are sometimes referred to as ‘the *philosophes* of a second Enlightenment’ (Menand 2003, xvi). For Marx and Engels, the only way to sustain the Enlightenment was to have a *second* Enlightenment, which was to be its continuation under changed circumstances. Their clarification and critique of socialism was an attempt to preserve the legacy of 1789 precisely by making good on the circumstances that had betrayed it. Rancière does not address this history, which casts doubt on his use and understanding of the Enlightenment. Since the continuity Rancière posits between pre-industrial times and the present is untenable, he has to bias his account of the Enlightenment in favour of contemporary sensibilities. This is most obvious in his recovery of the principles of equality and aesthetic unity. Indeed, both are products of the Enlightenment and prefigure a ‘common world’ in which humanity has reached moral and intellectual maturity. But whereas the thinkers of the Enlightenment considered such a state to be a genuine possibility, indeed an actuality, Rancière thinks of it as no more than a regulative principle – a mere ‘as if’.

Rancière and the Enlightenment Concept of Art

Schiller and Rancière conceptualize the work of art in more or less the same way – as framing an ‘identity of opposites’ (Rancière 2010, 138). And yet they give this ‘identity’ a radically different *meaning*. As I suggested above, it is one’s view regarding the possibility of the moral self-grounding of the social process – symbolized by the aesthetic state – that determines one’s proximity to the Enlightenment. And in this regard, Schiller and Rancière could not be further apart. For Rancière, art ‘promises a future destined to remain unaccomplished’ (2010, 183). For Schiller, on the other hand, the experience of beauty *proves* the realizability of the aesthetic state.

Since in the enjoyment of beauty, or *aesthetic unity*, an actual *union* and interchange between matter and form, passivity and activity, momentarily takes place, the *compatibility* of our two natures, the practicability of the infinite being realized in the

finite, hence the possibility of sublimest humanity, is thereby actually proven (Schiller 1993, 164-65).

Schiller finds in the experience of beauty proof of the possibility of 'sublimest humanity'; Rancière, on the other hand, thinks that those who believe in art's social promise 'are condemned to a certain melancholy' (2010, 133). The distance between the Enlightenment attitude articulated by Schiller and its ostensible recovery by Rancière could not be greater. Rancière, who claims to derive his theory from Schiller's *Letters*, actually occupies a position that is diametrically opposed. For Rancière,

the [art]work upholds the aesthetic promise of a reconciled life. But the price it pays for doing so is to defer it indefinitely, to refuse all reconciliation (2010, 179).

For Schiller, on the other hand,

beauty provides us with triumphant proof that passivity by no means excludes activity, nor matter form, nor limitation infinity (1993, 164).

If for Schiller the artwork is proof of the possibility of reconciliation, for Rancière it demonstrates that reconciliation must be deferred ad infinitum. If for Schiller the artwork is a symbol of society's potential, for Rancière it reveals society's structural deficiency. If for Schiller the artwork gives rise to an experience of beauty, for Rancière it produces an experience of 'dissensus'.⁶

We see the same pattern in Rancière's treatment of Kant. Rancière attempts to read Kant's third *Critique* against the grain by turning the oppositions it seeks to overcome into irresolvable antinomies. For instance, Rancière argues that

⁶ It should be noted that, on the Enlightenment view, the experience of beauty does not exclude antagonism or disharmony. Already in Leibniz, whose view of beauty as a form of perfection is explicitly rejected by Kant, we find the notion that dissonance can add to the overall beauty of a work of art (Leibniz 2000, 237).

the beautiful and art stand in a disjunctive relation to one another. The ends that art sets itself stand in contradiction to the finality without end that characterizes the experience of the beautiful (Rancière 2010, 174).

It is true that the artwork, qua finite object, stands in a disjunctive relation to the beautiful, qua 'finality without end'. The artwork is the product of finite ends (the design of the artist) while beauty affords an experience of the infinite. But the point is to mediate the two, and Kant, like Schiller, thinks that aesthetic experience is the site of their reconciliation.⁷ If the artwork is suspended between finitude and infinity, so is man. The goal that the third *Critique* sets itself is to bridge this gap. In his introduction, Kant claims to have found a principle – the purposiveness of nature presupposed a priori by the faculty of judgement – which is able to 'throw a bridge' from the realm of freedom to that of nature (Kant 2000, 81). It is specifically in and through aesthetic experience that we become conscious of this principle. In the experience of beauty, Kant argues, we find that the *form* of an object meshes with the *form* of judgement. This seems to indicate the possibility of mediating the 'disjunction' between subject and object. On Kant's view, beauty does not give rise to an experience of 'dissensus' but is best understood as an instance of exemplary mediation 'in which the theoretical faculty is combined with the practical, in a mutual and unknown way, to form a unity' (Kant 2000, 227). This is the experience occasioned by a beautiful object: it reconciles us to the world and ourselves. To claim, as Rancière does, that aesthetic experience is disjunctive or dissensual is radically unKantian.⁸

Rancière rejects the Enlightenment while claiming to recover it. His theory annihilates the positive side of freedom, which, in its ineffability, was symbolized by beauty, according to Schiller. We see this for instance in his reading of the *Juno Ludovisi*. Rancière takes his case study directly from Schiller, who describes it as exhibiting an 'intimate union' of opposites (1993, 132). The countenance of the statue displays 'not grace, nor is it yet dignity (...) because it is both at once' (ibid.). The result is a figure that 'reposes and dwells in itself, a creation completely self-contained' (ibid.). Rancière glosses this as follows:

⁷ See Schiller above, according to whom the experience of beauty proves 'the practicability of the infinite (...) in the finite'.

⁸ I give a brief summary of Kant's third *Critique* in the next section.

The goddess is such because she wears no trace of will or aim. Obviously, the qualities of the goddess are those of the statue as well. The statue thus comes paradoxically to figure what has not been made, what was never an object of will. In other words: it embodies the qualities of what is not a work of art. (...) The 'free appearance' stands in front of us, unapproachable, unavailable to our knowledge, our aims and desires. The subject is promised the possession of a new world by this figure that he cannot possess in any way (2010, 117).

Rancière seems to make two separate arguments. First, the statue's autonomy is the result of its embodying 'the qualities of the goddess'. Second, this implies that the world it prefigures is condemned to remain out of reach. But Schiller has the exact opposite in mind. Insofar as the statue embodies 'the qualities of the goddess', it embodies man's own infinity, i.e. his freedom. And the world promised by the autonomous work of art is *within* reach precisely because the experience of it makes us conscious of our freedom.

Rancière's reading fails to make sense even within the terms set by his own theory. 'Obviously', Rancière says, 'the qualities of the goddess are those of the statue as well'. But what is so obvious about this religious assumption? Does a picture of a chair embody the qualities of a chair? This is true only of idols, fetishes, and the like. Rancière conflates the terms of his own 'regimes'. The *Juno Ludovisi* might have embodied the qualities of a goddess for the Greeks (in the 'ethical regime' of art determined by art's use value) but not for Schiller or for us (in the 'aesthetic regime'). The first rule of art – which Schiller captures with the notion of 'semblance' – is that it does not depict anything outside itself. So if, as Rancière puts it, the statue 'embodies the qualities of what is not a work of art', these qualities must yet be immanent to the work itself. If the *Juno Ludovisi* is a fetish, it is a peculiarly *modern* one, embodying man's own qualities. Rancière ignores these basic points because he fails to take note of Schiller's aim, which is to clarify the relation between beauty and freedom. According to Schiller, 'it is only through beauty that man makes his way to freedom' (1993, 90). Clearly, for Schiller the relation between beauty and freedom is *positive* (see next section). For Rancière, on the other hand, aesthetic experience is an experience of *lack*; it makes us conscious of what we do *not* have and will never have.

Schiller concludes his reading of the *Juno Ludovisi* as follows.

The whole figure reposes and dwells in itself, a creation completely self-contained, and, as if existing beyond space, neither yielding nor resisting; here is no force to contend with force, no frailty where temporality might break in. Irresistibly moved and drawn by those former qualities, kept at a distance by these latter, we find ourselves at one and the same time in a state of utter repose and supreme agitation, and there results that wondrous stirring of the heart for which mind has no concept nor speech any name (1993, 132).

Schiller describes how seemingly contradictory phenomena – activity and passivity, proximity and distance, the finite and the infinite – come together to form a whole, both in a figure ‘completely self-contained’ and in the subject experiencing it. The experience of this beautiful object, he says, puts us in a state ‘for which mind has no concept nor speech any name’. This is a reference to Kant, who argues that the ‘inscrutability of the idea of freedom entirely precludes any positive presentation’ (2000, 156). If in the exercise of freedom the practical and theoretical faculty combine ‘in a mutual and unknown way’, so beauty unites contradictory elements in a pleasing whole without yielding up its secret. In short, beauty is as good a representation of freedom as we can get, and Schiller offers the *Juno Ludovisi* as an example of it. Rancière obfuscates this point by emphasizing only the disjunction between subject and object, neglecting their reconciliation in the experience of beauty.⁹ For Rancière, unlike Schiller, the meaning of the ‘identity of opposites’ is negative – simply because this identity is undermined by an underlying non-identity which ultimately prevents mediation from happening. This is not about Rancière’s preferences so much as the difference between two distinct historical moments. Before I explore this difference in more detail, I want to revisit Schiller’s theory of aesthetic autonomy in order to highlight what I take to be its original meaning and significance.

⁹ If for Kant and Schiller beauty provides an exemplary instance of mediation, Hegel holds that ‘the reconciliation and mediation’ of opposites ‘is absolutely accomplished and is ever self-accomplishing’ in all manner of practical activity (Hegel 1975, 55). Nonetheless, he holds that it is only in one of three forms of ‘absolute spirit’ – philosophy, religion, and art – that this reconciliation is brought to consciousness.

Schiller and the Social Significance of Beauty

Kester rejects Schiller on behalf of a more 'political' art; Rancière claims to recover him on account of the same. But Schiller's ostensible critic ends up reproducing his insights, while his self-professed advocate rejects most of them. To understand what is going on, we need to get a better sense of the object of their criticism-disguised-as-praise and praise-disguised-as-criticism – Schiller and his notion of aesthetic autonomy. Today aesthetic autonomy is often understood as a species of 'art for art's sake' (see e.g. Harrison, Wood, and Gaiger 1998, 14; Buchloh 2007, 35). But, as I will argue in the next section, the idea of *l'art pour l'art* and the corresponding art historical movement, aestheticism, emerge after the core principle of aesthetic autonomy is first articulated by Schiller, and are an indication of its crisis. Generally speaking, discussions of aesthetic autonomy tend to focus on the 'autonomy' part at the expense of the 'aesthetic' part. That is, they tend to highlight how the artwork has its purpose in itself, appears self-contained, is created and contemplated for its own sake, etc. For the likes of Kester this implies art's distance from everyday concerns, and must be overcome. But 'beauty', Schiller wrote, is 'nothing less than freedom in appearance' (2003, 152). Note that Schiller's dictum combines both terms – 'aesthetic' (beauty) and 'autonomy' (freedom) – and places them in a particular relation. Beauty is understood as the *aesthetic expression* of autonomy. As such, art is not separate from but an expression of life, and, moreover, an expression of life in its *reconciled* state.

What makes beauty exemplary, according to Kant and Schiller, is that it does something that (on a strictly Kantian view) is impossible: it makes freedom appear in objective reality, reconciling us to it. Beauty goes one step beyond freedom by showing its *actuality* as a functioning dialectic between nature and spirit, freedom and necessity, sense and reason, and so on – hence 'exemplary mediation' is what best describes (in philosophical terms) the experience of beauty. In Schiller's words, 'beauty provides us with triumphant proof that passivity by no means excludes activity, nor matter form, nor limitation infinity' (1993, 164). Beauty reconciles, Hegel writes, 'what in all other cases is presupposed in our consciousness

as distinct (...) universal and particular, end and means, concept and object' (1975, 60). Martin Jay, summarizing the Enlightenment conception of art, offers a pithy formula: art functioned as an 'organon of reconciliation' – that is, the means by which life, broken up into contradictory fragments by the division of labour, is re-integrated and attains its full potential (1984, 273). Surely, this can only appear to us as a form of false consciousness.

The citizen who, in everyday life has been reduced to a partial function (means-ends activity) can be discovered in art as 'human being'. Here, one can unfold the abundance of one's talents, though with the proviso that this sphere remain strictly separate from the praxis of life (Bürger 1984, 48-49).

From our historical vantage, art's autonomy seems based on its separation from life, and thus appears as an ideological cover for a society that fails to deliver on the promise of autonomy. The contradiction is that the Enlightenment philosophers at the end of the eighteenth century – Kant, Schiller, Hegel, and others – understood art's autonomy in diametrically opposed terms. To them beauty indicated (Kant) or even proved (Schiller) autonomy's *actuality* as living process. Our task is not to denounce or expose such a lofty view of art as mere 'bourgeois ideology' but, first, to explain it in light of its social immanence – what does this tell us about modern society and the dialectic of labour in particular? – and, second, to capture and try to understand its *self-contradiction* in the succeeding period, for it is this that explains its contradictory validity, its status as both true and untrue, exemplified by Kester and Rancière's opposing attitudes towards it.

In what follows, I want to briefly reconstruct Schiller's account of aesthetic education, as it will illustrate some of the points I made above. Schiller is very clear that autonomy is a function of a specifically modern social dynamic. As such, he conceives of its realization (or externalization) as an ongoing process and *task*. His main idea is that beauty places us in a state that is conducive to self-determination, and thereby contributes to the project of freedom.

As Schiller notes in the first Letter, his text is an elaboration on 'Kantian principles' (87).¹⁰ Kant had radically upset the field of aesthetics by rejecting both the objectivism of (neo)classicism (e.g. Winckelmann) and the subjectivism of empiricism (e.g. Hutcheson, Hume). Instead he elaborated a proto-dialectical conception of beauty and aesthetic experience foregrounding the *relation* between subject and object (characterized by a correspondence between the form of an object and the form of judgement) and between the faculties (characterized by their free play). Aesthetic experience, on Kant's view, was a reflective experience, an experience about experience, in which the subject (a) senses herself sensing and (b) experiences herself experiencing an object. Kant argued that this double correspondence (between the faculties and between subject and object) had a cognitive and a moral significance. In aesthetic experience the subject experiences the mediation between the faculties – the ground of her capacity for cognition as such – as their 'free play', which is the basis of her pleasure. But, Kant argued, this is simultaneously a pleasure in the form of an object, or, more precisely, in the way this form is taken up by the mind. In aesthetic judgement, nature exhibits a purposiveness *for* our faculty of judgement (Kant's famous 'purposiveness without a purpose'). That is, a beautiful object seems particularly suited to our mental apparatus. This 'fit' between mind and world seemed to indicate not only that the world can be known, but that aesthetic experience penetrates aspects of reality that are lost or hidden in everyday experience. It allows us to see what cannot be seen. Specifically, beauty takes us beyond the given in the same way that the exercise of our moral freedom does. Thus 'the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good' (Kant 2000, 227). The experience of beauty seemed to indicate that nature is amenable to moral purposes – ultimately the establishment of a free moral order. On Kant's account, aesthetic experience had distinctively utopian implications.¹¹

Schiller takes Kant's account of aesthetic judgement in a new direction and, in a sense, radicalizes it. If the mediation between the practical and theoretical faculties (now reconceptualized as drives) is the ground of our freedom, and such mediation takes place in exemplary fashion in aesthetic experience, then art offers an education in freedom. As Schiller

¹⁰ In this section page numbers without attribution refer to Schiller (1993).

¹¹ In my reading of Kant's third *Critique* (Kant 2000) I was greatly helped by Fiona Hughes's reading guide (see esp. Hughes 2010, 150-51).

writes, it is 'through beauty that man makes his way to freedom' (90). Conversely, if mediation fails to take place and either one of the drives is dominant, we are not truly free. The concept of a 'drive' is important in this respect because it indicates compulsion. As Schiller puts it, 'the sense drive exerts a physical, the form drive a moral constraint' (127; cf. 145). Man is split between these two drives – he is an 'amphibious animal', as Hegel would say (1975, 54) – and there is a risk of either one becoming dominant, thereby limiting the individual (124, 128-29, 135). If we are to be free from such one-sided determination – if we are to be *self*-determining – we have to find a way to mediate between our opposing drives. 'As long as he satisfies only one of these two drives to the exclusion of the other, or only satisfies them one after the other', man is not, 'in the fullest sense of the word, a human being', i.e. he is not free (126).

Schiller finds an exemplary instance of such mediation in the experience of beauty. When someone experiences a beautiful object, a third drive is activated, the play drive, 'in which both the others act in concert' (127). In the play drive, the constraint exerted by the other drives dissolves. It 'deprives feelings and passions of their dynamic power' and 'the laws of reason of their moral compulsion' (127). Schiller follows Kant in conceiving of beauty as throwing a 'bridge' from the realm of freedom to that of nature, but he goes further than Kant in assigning to beauty an active, shaping role. He replaces the idea of aesthetic experience (or aesthetic judgement) with the 'play drive', thereby imputing to beauty a motive force.¹² Similarly, beauty becomes 'living form' (128). Thus beauty acquires a 'live' character as the object of the play drive in the experiencing subject. Aesthetic experience is not a matter of passive contemplation (as later authors have often accused it of being) but of the living embodiment of freedom. Thus Schiller argues that the beautiful work of art is 'a manifestation of the infinite' and 'a symbol of [humanity's] *accomplished destiny*' (126). In other words, beauty is an *exemplary* expression of freedom. It *prefigures* a state to which we can attain only 'in the totality of time' (126). Freedom, on Schiller's view, is an open-ended project; it is the 'unending task' of the realization of potential (117).

¹² Schiller writes that 'if truth is to be victorious in her conflict with forces, she must herself first become a *force* and appoint some *drive* to be her champion in the realm of phenomena' (106).

Schiller, more so than Kant, insists on beauty's practical import. This of course is his idea of an 'aesthetic education'. Since, as I have said, this is essentially an education in freedom, there is something paradoxical about it. 'The notion of a fine art that teaches (didactic) or improves (moral) is 'self-contradictory', Schiller notes, 'for nothing is more at variance with the concept of beauty than the notion of giving the psyche any definite bias' (151). Thus beauty does not impart any knowledge in particular but rather suspends the one-sided determination of the drives. The result is a feeling of emptiness which is at the same time a kind of fullness. In the experience of beauty, 'man is *naught* (...) considering the absence in him of any specific determination' (147). But at the same time he is 'the totality of his powers' (147).

Beauty produces no particular result whatsoever, neither for the understanding nor for the will. It accomplishes no particular purpose, neither intellectual nor moral; it discovers no individual truth, helps us to perform no individual duty and is, in short, as unfitted to provide a firm basis for character as to enlighten the understanding. By means of aesthetic culture, therefore, the personal worth of a man, or his dignity, inasmuch as this can depend solely upon himself, remains completely indeterminate; and nothing more is achieved by it than that he is henceforth enabled *by the grace of nature* to make of himself what he will (147).

Beauty puts us in a state that is conducive to *self*-determination. Man is offered a glimpse of his own infinity in the momentary suspension of his determination by nature and reason. This prepares him for the task of freedom: the actualization of potential. That this is indeed a *task* is indicated by Schiller's insistence that, insofar as it is in our nature to be free, we are only every fully human '*in potentia*' (147). Beauty 'offers us the possibility of becoming human beings, and for the rest leaves it to our own free will to decide how far we wish to make this a reality' (148).

As to the task of freedom, Schiller envisions the gradual externalization of man's freedom in what he calls the 'aesthetic state'. When he first introduces the concept, it refers to 'a disposition of the psyche that removes all limitations from the totality of human nature' (148). But by the end of his text, he conceives of it as a fully reconciled social order. Schiller proposes a teleological schema in which society (or conduct) is successively ruled by force, law, and

beauty. Schiller conceives of the state dialectically (in proto-Hegelian fashion) as the objective essence of man (moral law become legal). Insofar as 'subjective man sets his face against objective man', the state will have to *enforce* the law, given that man fails to constrain himself (95). This is what Kant calls a '*pathologically* compelled agreement' (2009, 14) and what Schiller himself refers to as the 'ethical state' (176). In the 'aesthetic state', however, there is no need for compulsion: 'the state will be merely the interpreter of his own finest instinct, a clearer formulation of his own sense of what is right' (95). Here the state has been subordinated to civil society and ceases to exist as such. It is important to note that for Schiller the aesthetic state is continuous with bourgeois society. It does not require a revolution; it is rather the *completion* of the bourgeois revolution, which, however, as a process of ongoing self-transformation, is infinite. This – a dynamic process rather than a static state – is what beauty as living form symbolizes.

To conclude this section, I will briefly consider why Schiller saw the need for an aesthetic education. In the most general terms, it has to do with the problem posed by modernity – and it is Schiller's view of modernity that distinguishes him most clearly from contemporary authors. Schiller's negative view of pre-modernity is sometimes concealed under his obvious admiration for the art and culture of ancient Greece. Moreover, in his Sixth Letter Schiller appears to critique modern society *from the standpoint of Greek civilization*. Schiller praises the Greeks for the simplicity of their nature and the naturalness of their manner. In Greek society, the individual was 'the representative of his age' (99). Conversely, in modern society 'one has to go the rounds from one individual to another in order to be able to piece together a complete image of the species' (98). Schiller highlights several factors that make modern society qualitatively different: the separation of state and church, the division of labour, the disarticulation of knowledge into the individual sciences, and the consequent fragmentation of the individual character. 'Enjoyment was divorced from labor, the means from the end, the effort from the reward' (100). In other words, we have the emergence of a dialectical social order, characterized by the separation of means and ends, real and ideal, theory and practice, and so on – in other words, a modern dialectic of freedom. This gives rise to the need for an aesthetic education that would restore the unity of nature – by creating a *second* nature. Schiller's project is emphatically not backward-looking. It is this that distinguishes him from contemporary commentators as well as artists and activists seeking to restore a lost unity

instead of facing up to the task of creating something new. Schiller's view of the unity of pre-modernity is essentially negative. In traditional society, 'in the great chain of being', man 'never sees others in himself, but only himself in others' (157). 'Communal life (...) confines him (...) within his own individuality' (157-8). His state is one of 'sullen limitation' (158). Modern society, on the other hand, allows human capacities to develop, 'by artificial means, far beyond the limits that nature seems to have assigned to [them]' (103). While Greek civilization had reached a 'maximum of excellence, which could neither be maintained at that level nor rise any higher', modern society opens the door to a potentially infinite development (102). Thus for Schiller the fragmentation of modern society comes with its own distinct possibilities, namely progress, the possibility of creating a different and better world.

Should nature, for the sake of her own purposes, be able to rob us of a completeness that reason, for the sake of hers, enjoins upon us? (...) however much the law of nature tends in that direction, it must be open to us to restore by means of a higher art the totality of our nature that the arts themselves have destroyed (104).

Schiller opposes the art of nature leading to the development of the arts (trades) to a distinctively human art that would be able to fashion something new out of nature, that is, create a second nature. This, of course, is the art of beauty, 'our second creatress' (148). Thus, and this is the key point, an aesthetic education is not compensatory but affirmative and creative. It does not try to recapture a lost essence or recompose a fractured unity but enjoins us to live up to the task of freedom by fashioning our own nature. Schiller's project is future-oriented, informed by a utopian horizon that has all but vanished today.

For Schiller, beauty was a symbol of autonomy's *actuality*. This, I argue, is the original meaning of aesthetic autonomy. It expressed a potential in bourgeois social relations. In reconciling the sense and form drives – plenipotentiaries of nature and freedom – beauty betokened a functioning dialectic and therefore a self-regulating social process on the path to moral and intellectual maturity. In this way, beauty prefigured humanity's 'accomplished destiny'. Note that if we read Schiller in a particular way we find hints of Rancière's pessimism. Rancière writes that the artwork 'refuse[s] all reconciliation' and that those who believe in art's promise of happiness 'are condemned to a certain melancholy'. Schiller might be taken to

imply the same when he writes that freedom is an 'unending task': reconciliation is deferred indefinitely. But this reading, which in a way is true to the letter of Schiller's *Letters*, misses their spirit entirely. Beauty does not prefigure a particular state that will either be achieved one day or must remain forever out of reach, but a dynamic and ongoing social process, as Schiller makes clear by conceiving of beauty as living form. The aesthetic state *is* bourgeois society, but *in potentia*.

For Schiller, the possibility of 'sublimest humanity' was contained within bourgeois social relations. He could uphold a prefigurative vision of progress because, he thought, the fundamental outlines of an ideal society had already come into view. Rancière, for whom it is impossible to believe in the perfectibility of bourgeois social relations, is much more pessimistic. Thus, for Rancière, the work of art does not occasion an experience of beauty but dissensus. It does not prove the possibility of 'sublimest humanity' but 'promises a future destined to remain unaccomplished'. While Rancière and Schiller both conceive of the artwork as an 'identity of opposites', for Schiller there truly *is* a mediation of opposites, whereas for Rancière this 'identity' never quite comes off. The dialectic seems to have gone awry. For Rancière – and indeed for us – progress in bourgeois society seems an elusive prospect. It is hard not to be ambivalent about the direction of society – to the extent that progress itself has become a contested category. Schiller's vision of an infinite upward trajectory was falsified by the self-contradiction of the very dialectic that promised progress.

Historically, art registers this shift by seeking out the dissensual, disjunctive experience that Rancière describes, while abandoning the integrative experience of beauty. Not long after Kant and Schiller's death, we enter a period in art history 'after the beautiful' (Pippin 2014).¹³ In other words, art's criterion undergoes a transformation. As Arnold Hauser notes, 'classicism based the concept of beauty on that of truth, that is, on a universally human standard controlling the whole of life' (1999, 165). Romanticism turns this around and judges life by the criteria of art, finding it wanting. Art and life become disarticulated. Accordingly, beauty, as a symbol of reconciliation, begins to lose its social expressivity. Art no longer

¹³ What is clear from a 'retrospective position', Pippin writes, is a 'decline in the authority of the beautiful as an artistic ideal, and a corresponding alteration in (...) an artwork's address to the beholder' (2014, 132).

articulates the truth of society (its autonomy), as Kant and Schiller had argued, but expresses a social deficit. In short, art begins to be experienced as standing in a *critical* relation to society – by its beauty, its refusal of beauty, or by proclaiming ‘the charms of horror’ (Baudelaire 1993, 199). This is in large part an effect of the social upset caused by the Industrial Revolution. Paul Valéry writes that ‘by 1840, people were already indignant at the first effects of a transformation that had scarcely begun’ (2001, 45-46). This indignation is nowhere more obvious than in art.

The transformation of Aesthetic Autonomy in Modernism

The criticism of the mid-nineteenth century can be read as an index of the transformation of aesthetic autonomy in modernism. ‘Perhaps the least (but by no means un-) controversial characterization’ of modernist art, Robert Pippin writes, is that it is ‘art produced under the pressure of art having become a problem for itself’ (2014, 1). What Pippin is suggesting is that art has become a problem for itself *by its own criterion*. It is qua expression of the beautiful that art enters into self-contradiction in modernism. We have seen that for the Enlightenment *philosophes* art was an ‘organon of reconciliation’. For Kant and Schiller, the realizability of man’s highest aspiration – to be freely self-determining in a world governed by necessity – was discernible only from within the aesthetic dimension. As such, the beautiful work of art was the original prefigurative symbol of secular modernity.¹⁴ Hegel elevates philosophy over art but nonetheless makes exemplary the kind of experience that beauty was thought to instantiate – the reconciliation of opposites – which Hegel conceives as truth itself. The task of art is to ‘set forth the reconciled opposition’ and thus to ‘unveil the *truth* in the form of sensuous artistic configuration’ (Hegel 1975, 55). The problem is not, as Hegel supposes, that art is less suited to this task than philosophy, but that the very possibility of mediation is thrown into doubt by the reification of social relations in capitalism.¹⁵ To put it the other way

¹⁴ The legacy of the Kantian argument, Pippin explains, is that the problem of autonomy ‘could be addressed, rendered in some way intelligible, *only* aesthetically. (...) It was through beauty and art (...) that we could in some sense understand the reality of and the realizability of freedom in the natural world we inhabited’ (2014, 13).

¹⁵ Hegel thinks of romantic art as a post-aesthetic art, an art that is no longer concerned with beauty. Hegel is right but for the wrong reasons. Hegel’s claim is bound up with his end-of-art thesis: philosophy has overcome the need for spirit’s attempts at self-understanding in sensuous form, and romantic art, on Hegel’s view, acknowledges this truth. It is an art of ‘absolute inwardness’ (Hegel 1975, 519). What it expresses – what makes

around, the experience of reconciliation offered by fine art and dialectical philosophy loses its social expressivity: it is no longer experienced as truthful, or, to the extent that it is, becomes a form of false consciousness. We can see this new social situation unfold in the battle between artist and critic in the mid-nineteenth century.

In the aesthetic tradition inaugurated by Kant, aesthetic experience reveals aspects of the world concealed in everyday experience; it is understood as a nondiscursive way of making sense. This is a crucial assumption if the judgement of the critic is to amount to more than opinion or appreciation. But from the standpoint of the artist, the *ratio* of the critic soon comes to be associated with the irrationality of society. Already in 1831 (the year of Hegel's death) the poet Heinrich Heine writes that the 'understanding (...) only keeps order, and is, so to speak, the police in the realm of art' (1998a, 83). Heine anticipates by almost two centuries Rancière's suggestion that it is art's role to overturn the 'police order' of the understanding.

Heine's ire is aimed at the 'standing army' of critics who judge new works by old standards, failing to appreciate the originality of the artist and thus stifling creativity (ibid.). 'The poor, wretched rascal with his miserable intelligence or "understanding", he knows not how accurately he condemns himself' (ibid.). Launching polemics against 'pedants and philosophizers' was a favourite pastime among artists in mid-nineteenth-century Paris (Baudelaire 1998a, 488). But these were more than personal vendettas; they equated the 'intelligence' of the critic with the stupidity of society. Out of one such polemic comes what is sometimes falsely claimed to be the founding statement of art's autonomy. Poet and novelist Théophile Gautier popularized the notion of *l'art pour l'art* in a polemic that saw him face off with 'Saint-Simonian utilitarians' (1998, 98). These 'economists', Gautier complains,

it post-aesthetic – is that it rejects its own 'corporeality': 'it only becomes sure of its truth by withdrawing from the external into its own intimacy with itself and positing external reality as an existence inadequate to itself' (ibid., 518). Hegel thus reads romantic art as expressing its own inadequacy as a vehicle for truth, passing the baton to philosophy. According to Pippin, this represents a 'misstep' (2014, 23). The idea that truth does not require embodiment is 'nondialectical' and goes against Hegel's doctrine that essence must appear (ibid., 45). However, we must agree with Hegel that romantic art is post-aesthetic, not because beauty (qua sensuous appearance) is an inadequate vehicle for truth but because the rejection or impossibility of beauty truthfully expresses what society has become. Art's post-aesthetic condition is not a function of truth migrating from the sensuous realm of art to the abstract realm of philosophy but of a certain view of truth entering into self-contradiction.

‘wish to rebuild society from the foundations up’ using art as one of their means (ibid., 97). The idea that art should be valued for its social utility does not go down well with Gautier; he nearly chokes on it. Art’s purpose is to be beautiful and ‘the useless alone is truly beautiful; everything useful is ugly’ (ibid., 99). Gautier thus has a critique of the instrumentalization of art. But he couches this in a social critique of the utilitarian project as such: ‘I cannot see that life in a town organized on utilitarian principles would be more agreeable than residence at [the cemetery of] Père-la-Chaise’ (ibid., 99). What the utilitarians fail to understand is that ‘the superfluous is necessary’ (ibid.). Material prosperity loses its value when shorn of beauty. In other words, the good life cannot be expressed in utilitarian terms because it cannot be reduced to the provision of the useful. To Gautier, the utilitarians represent precisely what is making contemporary life increasingly disagreeable and ugly, and he presents art as its antithesis and critique. Art is no longer the union of sense and reason, universal and particular, but sides with individual feeling (the particular) against society and the understanding (universality).

Gautier’s text does not express what Harrison, Wood, and Gaiger call the ‘modernist principle’ of autonomy but its *crisis* (1998, 14). In modernism, art’s autonomy is its *uselessness* to society; this, clearly, is the self-contradiction of beauty’s ‘purposiveness without a purpose’ formulated during the Enlightenment. In other words, Gautier and the utilitarians occupy two poles that in the work of Kant and Schiller present an indivisible whole. If for the utilitarians art is valuable because it serves a social purpose, for Gautier art exists beyond the moral and material concerns of society, in the realm of the purposeless. The central idea in Kant and Schiller, however, is that art achieves a moral purpose by refusing any purpose whatsoever. As Schiller puts it, ‘nothing is more at variance with the concept of beauty than the notion of giving the psyche any definite bias’ (1993, 151). Because art teaches *freedom*, there is nothing more ‘self-contradictory’ than ‘the notion of a fine art that teaches (didactic) or improves (moral)’ (ibid.). Art achieves its moral purpose without any instruction at all. It does not teach or preach, and it is precisely because of this that the pleasure it elicits has a moral character: it teaches us that the power to act in accordance with reason is *our own*. In Gautier, aesthetic pleasure loses its moral aspect. He rhetorically asks, what’s the ‘use’ of being alive (1998, 99)? His answer: ‘pleasure seems to me the goal of life, and the only useful thing in the world’ (ibid., 100). The ‘use’ of pleasure is its refusal of the ‘suppositious perfectibility of the species

with which [the utilitarians] are forever dinning our ears' (ibid.). Aesthetic pleasure is no longer a symbol of man's power to improve his lot but of the refusal to be enrolled in just such a project. Between the Enlightenment and modernism, the idea of aesthetic pleasure and the idea of human perfectibility become degraded, resulting in their mutual opposition.

The point is best illustrated by the reception of Kant's aesthetics. In 1804 Benjamin Constant records a conversation he had with the Englishman Henry Robinson, a student of German philosophy:

Art for art's sake, with no purpose, for any purpose perverts art. But art achieves a purpose which is not its own (quoted in Burwick 1999, 121).¹⁶

This is the origin of the phrase art for art's sake, or *l'art pour l'art*. Constant is the link that connects Kant's aesthetics to the idea of art for art's sake.¹⁷ Constant clearly articulates art's 'purposiveness without a purpose' by stating that art achieves a purpose not its own. The phrase next occurs in a lecture delivered at the Sorbonne by Victor Cousin, fifteen years later:

We must have religion for religion's sake, morality for morality's sake, as we must art for art's sake (...) the beautiful cannot be the way to what is useful, or to what is good, or to what is holy; it leads only to itself (cited in Burwick 1999, 126 translation modified).¹⁸

Between Constant and Cousin, the meaning of 'art for art's sake' changes radically. Constant's all-important qualification is inked out. Art is now *confined* to the realm of beauty. In Gautier, art's separation from society receives a further polemical twist, resulting in what Benjamin scathingly calls a 'theology of art' (1969, 224). This is not the moment of art's 'autonomy' but

¹⁶ *'L'art pour l'art, sans but, car tous but dénature l'art. Mais l'art atteint au but qu'il n'a pas'* (cited in Burwick 1999, 125).

¹⁷ As I have indicated, this phrase is sometimes read as a definition art's 'autonomy' and is often mistakenly traced back to Kant. However, for Kant autonomy was not a category of art or beauty but of the will and the higher faculties (judgement, reason, and understanding). To the extent that 'autonomy' designates art's separation from or refusal of life, it can be understood (qua social phenomenon) as the self-contradiction of Kant's aesthetics.

¹⁸ *'Il faut de la religion pour la religion, de la morale pour la morale, comme de l'art pour l'art (...) le beau ne peut être la voie ni de l'utile, ni du bien, ni du saint; il ne conduit qu'à lui-même'* (cited in Burwick 1999, 126).

of its self-contradiction. In their encounter with 'the great army of bourgeois writers of the day' who defended the notion of '*l'art utile*', Heine, Baudelaire, and Gautier absolutize art's autonomy, which becomes *l'art pour l'art* (Schaffer 1928, 409). The 'autonomy' of art and the 'perfectibility' of man, which for Kant and Schiller had presupposed one another, are disarticulated, landing in two mutually antagonistic camps. If for the Enlightenment philosophers art had exemplified the truth of society (its autonomy), art now closes in on itself, rejecting society. In modernism, art's autonomy becomes a negative principle: the aristocratic refusal of the modern world or the negation of an emergent mass culture. Out of the encounter with the critics thus comes a new understanding of art which insists on the freedom of the artist. This is not a positive freedom but a freedom *from* the critic's judgement, their attempt to subject art to an external end, whether it be moral or social. Art's 'autonomy' comes at the price of its uselessness. But as T. J. Clark points out, if art is useless, so is life (1973, 20). Beauty once represented man's unrepresentable freedom: his autonomy. The implication of Gautier's polemic is that it can be preserved only by making it ineffective.

The same disarticulation of values can be witnessed in the concept of the artist. The idea of the absolute singularity of the artist sets the early modernists apart from the Enlightenment. This, Heine argues, is a result of the sway of 'Romanticism', which he understands as the concern with 'individuality' (1998a, 82). Baudelaire, for instance, would argue that 'every [artistic] efflorescence is spontaneous, individual':

The artists stems only from himself. His own works are the only promises that he makes to the coming centuries. He stands security only for himself. He dies childless. He has been his own king, his own priest, his own God (ibid., 488-89).

The true artist is without antecedent or successor; he is a universe unto himself. In some ways Baudelaire's words recall Kant's on genius yet they differ in their sheer insistence on the separation of the artist from his milieu. Art is now concerned with what stands out, what does *not* fit the mould, just as the artist himself becomes an anomaly: a dandy or bohemian. Of course the genius, as understood by Kant and Schiller, is also an agency defined by its originality. The genius is pre-eminently the producer of the new. But this is not a matter, as is sometimes argued today, of heroic individuality but of *exemplary mediation*. Kant theorizes

genius as a force of nature: it produces the new under the guise of what appears to have always been there. 'Genius is the exemplary originality of the natural endowment of a subject for the free use of his cognitive faculties' (Kant 2000, 195). The genius is exemplarily *free*, but only to the extent that this translates a *natural* endowment. The products of genius are self-grounding precisely because they were never 'created'. This, Kant argues, results in 'exemplary' artefacts or 'models' (ibid., 186). In sum, the exemplarity of the genius is a function of his ability to reconcile difference – to mediate between nature and freedom, sense and reason, object and subject – such that his creations have a self-grounding quality: they appear to have been there all along, everything about them is 'just right' (cf. Haskins 1989, 49).¹⁹ The exemplarity of the artist changes radically in later years. As Benjamin points out (referencing the Kant passage cited above), the artist continues to be exemplary but is no longer a model (1969, 201). Instead, the life of the artist expresses the 'growing discrepancy between [art] and life' (ibid., 202). Great modernist artworks are documents of the artist's alienation from society, their place at 'the heart of the impossible' (ibid., 201). If for Kant a great artwork produces 'a standard or a rule for judging' (2000, 187), Benjamin points out that the exemplary works of modernism are 'abnormal', which prevents them from providing any such rule (1969, 201). Art now stands in an antinomious relation to society. The exemplarity that produces new rules for judging degenerates into an 'exemplary' alienation: a freedom that somehow fails to fit in, that does not conform.

As Stephen Bronner points out, modernism places a 'new emphasis on subjectivity' (2012, 155). By this he means a subjectivity that is at odds with objectivity. The subject of modernism is preoccupied with individual feeling – the opposite of the *sensus communis* of the Enlightenment subject. Baudelaire writes that the artist must be 'content to *feel*' and ought to put their 'philosophic conscience' to rest (1998a, 487). The polemics cited above reiterate this point: the feeling of the artist stands opposed to the understanding of the critic. On one level, the argument is simply that the criteria employed by the critic 'always [lag] behind' the new forms invented by the artist (ibid., 487). But on a deeper level, the polemics reveal an

¹⁹ In *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Goethe has his protagonist articulate the exemplarity of the artist: 'Look at men, how they struggle after happiness and satisfaction! Their wishes, their toil, their gold, are ever hunting restlessly; and after what? After that which the poet has received from nature, – the right enjoyment of the world; the feeling of himself in others; the harmonious conjunction of many things that will seldom exist together' (1839, 80-81).

anxiety about art's place in society. Heine's Salon of 1831 is a case in point. The text was written shortly after the July Revolution of 1830. Heine describes how the paintings 'were generally looked at with only fleeting glances, for people's minds were busy with (...) perplexing politics' (1998a, 81). In the revolutionary tumult, people have no time for art, and so Heine compares the exhibition to 'an orphan asylum', with the 'infants, gathered here and there, left to themselves' (ibid.). At the end of his text, his metaphor comes alive. As he leaves the exhibition, he witnesses 'a deathly pale man fall to the ground on the Boulevards from hunger and wretchedness' (ibid., 84). It is not just the artworks that have been abandoned like orphans; there is actual 'bitter poverty' on display in the streets of Paris to which no one seems to pay attention (ibid.). Entire strata of French society have been 'orphaned', made redundant. How is one to enjoy art under such circumstances? Thus Heine raises the question of art's place in a rapidly changing society. What is its purpose and who is it for? Twelve years later, by the time he writes his Salon of 1843, he has found the answer: art is a *bourgeois* category – a term which no longer describes the revolutionary Third Estate but a particular *class*. 'All works of one and the same period have a trace or trait of [common] character', he declares, 'which we call the spirit of the age' (Heine 1998b, 166).

But what will manifest itself as the real character of the age to our descendants when they study the pictures of our present painters? By what common peculiarities will these pictures show themselves at a glance as the products of our present period? Has, perhaps, the spirit of the *bourgeoisie*, of industrialism, which penetrates all French life, shown itself so powerful in the arts of design that every picture of our time bears the stamp of its coat of arms (ibid, 167)?

Heine goes on to mock the sanctimoniousness of the bourgeoisie by comparing them to the suffering figures in religious paintings. A flagellated Christ is compared to 'the chairman or president of some company which has come to grief, and now appears before the stockholders and creditors to give an account of himself and his transactions' (ibid.). The Pharisees 'are terribly angry at the *Ecce Homo*, and seem to have lost a great deal of money by their investments' (ibid.). The portraits in the exhibition all have the same '*pecuniary* expression', and so on (ibid.). Three years later, in his Salon of 1846, Baudelaire would make the same point. He dedicates his text 'to the bourgeoisie', whom he sardonically praises for

their rationality and even-handedness (Baudelaire 1998b). The bourgeois order is a *reasonable* order, Baudelaire argues, where ‘equilibrium’ reigns (ibid.). Two years later there would be another working-class rising in which Baudelaire participated.²⁰

Heine, Baudelaire, and Gautier do not just reject the critic’s judgement but its very logic, which they identify with the unreason of society, and more particularly with the unreasonable reasonableness of a specific class: the bourgeoisie. The latter’s attempt to make art useful is but an epiphenomenon of a social process that reduces individuals to *means*. Everyone and everything is subordinated to the imperative of ‘progress’, the watchword of the bourgeoisie. But ‘progress’ produces poverty as much as wealth and ‘orphans’ – renders superfluous – an entire class of people. Art, as an expression of the free productivity of man, feels this contradiction acutely and turns against this order.²¹ ‘In the first half of the nineteenth century’, Valéry writes, ‘the artist discovered and defined his opposite – the *bourgeois*’ (2001, 46). If the bourgeois ‘believes in perfectibility’ – progress – ‘the artist reserves for himself the domain of the “Dream”’ (ibid.).²² If the bourgeois looks to the ‘chemist’, the artist looks to the ‘alchemist’ (ibid.). If the bourgeois believes in ‘the sciences’, the artist is a creature of ‘passion and the emotions’ (ibid.). In short, Valéry points out how the values adopted by the bourgeoisie are expelled from the aesthetic domain, resulting in opposed ‘bourgeois’ and ‘romantic’ worldviews. This opposition is more accurately grasped as a *self-contradiction*. Objectively, art (as ‘unproductive labour’) becomes dependent on the surplus generated by ‘productive labour’. But also subjectively: virtually all artists are themselves products of the bourgeois milieu, as are their patrons. This forces art – and artists – into a position of immanent contradiction. The artist *lives* the self-contradiction of bourgeois society in much the same way as the worker, revolting, as it were, against his own bourgeois consciousness. The best modernist artworks do not oppose romantic to bourgeois values – which would not be hypocritical so much as naïve – but draw out the self-contradiction of art’s own values.

²⁰ On Baudelaire’s political convictions, see Guan and Cristaudo (2020).

²¹ Trotsky notes that ‘art, which is the most complex part of culture, the most sensitive and at the same time the least protected, suffers most from the decline and decay of bourgeois society’ (Trotsky 1970, 105).

²² ‘There is yet another, and very fashionable, error which I am anxious to avoid like the very devil. I refer to the idea of “progress”’ (Baudelaire 1998a, 488).

This self-contradiction is masterfully expressed by the irony of Baudelaire's dedication in his Salon of 1846 – 'To the Bourgeoisie'. Showering an imaginary bourgeois reader with praise, he subtly shows how the universal values of art have become the preserve of a specific *class*, how, in effect, they have become particularized. Baudelaire describes the bourgeois, whether a 'king, law-giver, or business-man', as an agent of progress, '[realizing] the idea of the future in all its varied forms – political, industrial and artistic' (Baudelaire 1998b, 302).²³ The bourgeoisie envision a state of 'supreme harmony', laying the foundation for an 'international communion' of peoples (ibid., 301, 302). Not only is society described as a work of art, Baudelaire presents art as the means of achieving it. Art mediates between 'the stomach and the mind', between 'knowledge' and 'feeling', between 'reason and the imagination' (ibid.). It is art that 'is needed to establish the equilibrium of all parts of your being' and art that allows society to find 'its own general and absolute equilibrium' (ibid.). The reference to Schiller is unmistakable. The bourgeois order is an emergent aesthetic state, and Baudelaire finds in art the means of perfecting it. But it is only too obvious that Baudelaire is mocking the self-understanding of a specific class. The exemplary values of art – 'truth', 'harmony', 'equilibrium' – have become the ideological crutch of the bourgeoisie. There is a contradiction between the disharmony of society, which is at war with itself, and the self-understanding of the dominant class, which conceives of its rule as exemplarily just and balanced.

What I have tried to show is that the polarities which according to Kant and Schiller were reconciled in the experience of beauty become disarticulated in modernism. Insofar as the work of art continues to put heterogeneous elements into play, it no longer brings off their reconciliation. What becomes 'essential in a work of art' is 'the *tension* between its content and its form' (Adorno 1972, 101, my emphasis). In modernism it is not beauty as an experience of plenitude and potential but the alienation of and from beauty that forms the basis of aesthetic experience. Beauty gives way to what Rancière calls an experience of 'dissensus'. How should we interpret this transformation in the meaning of aesthetic autonomy? According to Adorno, art is 'the medium in which the unconscious historiography of society is recorded' (ibid.). At the end of the eighteenth century, it was argued that beauty

²³ The Orleanist King Louis Philippe I (reigned 1830-48) was known as the 'Citizen King' and the 'Bourgeois Monarch'.

expressed the truth of society. It was not just a symbol of freedom but demonstrated the actuality of a virtuous dialectic, and therefore of a self-regulating and self-correcting social process. When modernism calls into question art's criterion, this is more than a cry of protest; it represents the self-contradiction of the very notions that beauty symbolized. From a Marxist perspective, the negativity of modernist art registers the self-contradiction of autonomy's social basis – labour – in capital, which throws the Enlightenment project of emancipation into crisis. From now on it is impossible to speak of progress without at the same time speaking of regression. Industrial capitalism inaugurates a self-undermining social dynamic, but it also launches the workers' movement for socialism. For the first time, socialism is possible, necessary, and desirable. The self-contradiction of social relations means that society now points *beyond* itself, in the same way that art, in its negativity, drives at its own self-abolition.²⁴ In short, if beauty can be read as a symbol of the possibility of a mature social subject developing *within* bourgeois social relations, art's negativity (or self-critique) can be understood as pointing towards a qualitatively different future, in a manner analogous to socialist politics (see Chapter 1).²⁵ This is not to say that there is no longer any beauty, that it is impossible or inadmissible, but rather that it loses its social expressivity as a symbol of reconciliation, as evidenced by modernism's ever more extreme forms of self-negation. Art remains true to itself insofar as its self-negations offer a glimpse of the promise it once held.

Conclusion

Kester and Rancière's reception of Schiller illustrates the self-contradiction of the prefigurative paradigm of beauty. Rancière claims to base his aesthetic theory on Schiller's *Letters*, but, as I have tried to show, he inverts most of their conclusions. Kester rejects Schiller's idea of aesthetic autonomy in the strongest terms, yet in replacing the 'agonistic model' of critique in favour of a model foregrounding 'interaction and negotiation, conflict and reconciliation', he is closer to Schiller than he realizes (2011, 35, 104). Schiller's concept

²⁴ Gregg Horowitz expresses this thought as follows: 'modernist art (...) is the light that shines from the future onto the past, the light whose uselessness is what the present does not yet know how to make use of' (2011).

²⁵ T. J. Clark points out the 'co-dependency' between socialist politics and modernist art: 'there could and can be no modernism without the practical possibility of an end to capitalism existing' (1999, 8-9).

of beauty as living form seems at once outdated and relevant. Rancière wants it to be relevant but demonstrates its obsolescence. Kester thinks it must be overcome but inadvertently returns to it. The same contradiction manifests in their respective outlooks. Rancière, despite being an avowed Schillerian, shows none of his Enlightenment optimism. Kester, who wants nothing to do with the Enlightenment, nonetheless thinks there is reason to be optimistic.²⁶ To sum up, art seems to figure both the reconciliation of ‘the one and the many’ and their inevitable ‘dissensus’. This vividly demonstrates what it means to say that a particular set of ideas has become self-contradictory.

The problem of the self-contradiction of bourgeois thought has become incredibly obscure. This is evidenced in part by the fact that Kester and Schiller end up saying the opposite of what they intended. But while they misread Schiller in contrasting ways, the result is the same: each elides the difference between bourgeois society and capitalism, projecting the disappointed hopes of the present into the past. With Rancière this is explicit. His ‘aesthetic regime’ of art conceives of the period from the French Revolution to the present as a homogenous block of time. Rancière’s is a project of *re-periodization*. ‘The aesthetic regime of the arts’, he writes, ‘is the true name for what is designated by the incoherent label “modernity”’ (2004, 24). As such, it is designed to purge the historical memory of (a) the self-contradiction of the project of modernity in capitalism and (b) the *second* Enlightenment, which historically was the *consciousness* of this self-contradiction. This elision leads Rancière into all kinds of contradictions, some of which I have detailed above. Lacking a dialectical perspective, the only way he is able to reclaim Schiller is by having him ventriloquize contemporary prejudices. Kester, too, reads the modernist understanding of aesthetic autonomy into Schiller. Since this problem is so common as to appear invisible, I spent the latter part of this chapter tracing the various antinomies that emerge with modernism. In short my argument is that there is no modernist concept of aesthetic autonomy, that it is but the self-contradiction of the constellation of ideas associated with the Enlightenment concept of beauty.

²⁶ The significance of social practice, Kester says, ‘doesn’t lie in a simple calculation of political efficacy – a sudden and absolute revolution, or a single, seismic, shift in political consciousness – but in its contribution to an emerging mosaic of oppositional practices that is both local in effect and international in scope’ (2011, 212).

In my reconstruction of the Enlightenment paradigm of beauty, I have emphasized its prefigurative character. Strikingly, prefigurative practice *performs* the very social process that beauty as living form symbolized: self-legislating and self-regulating, producing its own ends from within itself, and free from the interference of the state. The prefigurative ‘micro-utopia’ is simply a microcosm of the self-conception of bourgeois society at the height of its power. It does not – and cannot – live up to this ideal, but this is its self-understanding: it frames a performance of autonomy as living process. The ‘autonomous zone’ literalizes what in Schiller was a metaphor for society as a whole. What is so jarring is that nearly two centuries ago this idea entered into crisis, inaugurating a moment in art history ‘after the beautiful’, and it was clear to most on the Left that bourgeois society could no longer fulfil its promise of autonomy. Thus what I have tried to show by an admittedly circuitous route is that the self-contradiction of beauty – as a symbol of the *actuality* of autonomy – in the 1840s can throw a critical light on contemporary prefigurative practice, and indeed can help us understand its misguidedness. One of the conceits of prefigurative practice is that it is a message from the future. But when we trace this notion back to Schiller (who, in a sense, is simply building on the concept of bourgeois revolution), we can see that its plausibility depends on a crucial circumstance: that the contours of the future are *already* in sight.²⁷ The bourgeois philosophers looked back and saw themselves at the head of a historical process that culminated in the self-recognition of freedom, equality, and solidarity as social realities. They projected this trajectory into the future, which seemed to foreshadow an infinite upward progression. But this process of ongoing self-transformation in freedom was premised on bourgeois social relations – that is, a virtuous dialectic of labour. In short, a prefigurative symbol is necessarily an expression *of* society and its potential for self-transformation, not the social order to come.

The self-undermining social dynamic inaugurated by industrial capitalism undermines the plausibility of a prefigurative perspective. We can see this in the way prefigurative practice is theorized. It requires an ‘autonomous zone’ or ‘interstice’ – that is, prefigurative practice

²⁷ The bourgeois revolution comes after the social revolution, that is, bourgeois society developed within the womb of feudal society. From a Marxist perspective, socialism cannot similarly mature within bourgeois social relations because of the latter’s self-contradiction, leading to the endless reconstitution of the bourgeois revolution, which seems structurally incomplete.

must insulate itself from society. The *tableaux vivants* of prefigurative practice are at once exemplars of autonomy and, by their own admission, exceptions to the rule. But this means they are neither. Indeed, insofar as prefigurative practice presents its interventions as exemplary, it is exceptionally ideological and moralistic. It naively places itself outside the social totality, an error that must be ascribed to a *postcritical* consciousness. In this way, prefigurative practice nevertheless clarifies our present moment, but in an obscure and negative fashion. It exemplifies not autonomy but the forgetting of its self-contradiction. As long as there is consciousness of this contradiction, art will not be able to stand fully behind its own values. It will, as Benjamin says, *politicize* them, adopting a *self-critical* attitude. However, as consciousness of this contradiction wanes, so art will begin by and by to rediscover its exemplarity – a process that is in an advanced stage today.

Conclusion. Critique and Postcritique

In this thesis I have established a close connection between two distinct practices. It is not just their considerable overlap that has propelled the analysis – culminating in an account of their shared ‘aesthetic logic’ – but their distinct histories and institutional identities. What is at issue in the encounter between social practice and prefigurative politics is the shifting relation between art and politics. One of the insights of this thesis is that the ‘politicization of art’ and the ‘aestheticization of politics’ have assumed altogether different forms in recent years. The dominant strategy of the artistic avant-garde is no longer to politicize the values of art but to affirm them, and indeed to export them into other domains. Life must be made more beautiful, but not through the creation of material objects, but by enacting practical examples of exemplary sociality, people coming together in entirely autonomous ways around shared, self-legislated goals. If we have to find an avant-garde precedent, it would not be dada or surrealism but Russian constructivism, simply because social practice presupposes a post-revolutionary situation.¹

If ‘politicized art’ is political in a new way, ‘aestheticized politics’ is aesthetic in a new way. The aestheticization of politics is no longer associated with fascism, as shown by Rancière’s claim that ‘there never has been any “aestheticization” of politics in the modern age because politics is aesthetic in principle’ (1999, 58). However, Rancière’s definition of politics is idiosyncratic. ‘Politics, when identified with the exercise of power and the struggle for its possession, is dispensed with from the outset’ (Rancière 2010, 27). So Rancière’s claim is not as antithetical to Benjamin’s as it at first appears. His argument for aesthetic politics is contingent on politics abandoning the struggle for state power. Indeed, in this topsy-turvy world politics ceases to be political when it takes power. The aestheticization of politics that

¹ The argument is Groys’s. Since constructivism was a post-revolutionary phenomenon, it had the state on its side. Therefore ‘only the pre-revolutionary Russian avant-garde can be regarded today as being relevant to our contemporary situation’ (Groys 2013). Lenin made a similar point shortly after the Russian Revolution. The idea that ‘capitalism could be “reformed” by the influence of models’, he said, was a ‘petty bourgeois illusion’. But ‘after the political power has passed into the hands of the proletariat (...) the situation is radically changed (...) the force of an example can for the first time exert a mass effect’ (Lenin 1918).

I have attributed to prefigurative politics must be seen in this light. It is not a veiled accusation of fascism but rather registers the novel way in which sections of the Left consider aestheticization a viable 'political' strategy. This sort of practice is not concerned with the acquisition of state power – indeed distances itself from it – but stipulates that the ultimate goal of an action must be *visible* within the means deployed to realize it. Politics must 'figure' or 'exhibit' its ends in the process of realizing them.

The attempt to align means and ends – prefiguration – is the main point of contact between social practice and prefigurative politics. This manifests in their shared emphasis on 'the process'. Nonetheless, it is the differences between them that have made their pairing so productive. Each practice highlights a different aspect of prefiguration. Social practice (qua art) helps us see the aesthetic character of 'the process', which, as the living embodiment of autonomy, is the point at which art and life converge. Prefigurative politics, with its (often highly publicized) 'autonomous zone', underscores the representational or performative structure of prefiguration. When the two practices are compared, we find that each draws out the disavowed character of the other. Social practice seeks to transcend the symbolic, the 'merely' aesthetic dimension of art. But when viewed through the lens of prefigurative politics it appears in a much more traditional light. Prefiguration presupposes an object that embodies the desired changes, and this object reintroduces the distinction between artist and audience that social practice had allegedly overcome. Social practice, like prefigurative politics, functions by establishing a frame – a space of exception – within which it then performs the ideal of autonomy. Although it leaves the gallery, rejecting it as compromised, it reproduces its logic. In short, social practice wants to be political but recovers its aesthetic character in the very politics it adopts. The impetus behind prefigurative politics is more negative. Here the aim is to elaborate a politics that will avoid the mistakes of the past. Traumatized by the failures of past revolutions, prefigurative politics stipulates that the free society must be foreshadowed by the means employed to realize it. But in trying to create a microcosm of a free society, prefigurative politics begins to take on a task originally reserved for art. The figuration of freedom takes precedence over its realization. Politics becomes aesthetic education.

One of the main innovations of this thesis is its interdisciplinary approach to prefigurative practice. I argue that this is necessitated by the practice itself, which combines elements of art and social action. Put another way, in order to get prefigurative practice fully in view, it is necessary to take stock of changes in art as much as politics. Before discussing some of the shortcomings of the narrative I have presented here, I want to quickly highlight how it intervenes in the two bodies of literature it draws on.² As I have noted, the social practice literature is largely affirmative in tenor. There are few critiques of social practice. Those that exist criticize it on the basis of its limited practical effectiveness (e.g. Davis 2013), its deprioritization of aesthetic criteria (Bishop 2004, 2006), or its disregard for the spectator (Bishop 2012). Bishop's critique is the most influential. While I agree with her on many points, I want to underline that my approach to social practice is fundamentally different. Bishop's main complaint is that social practice is insufficiently aesthetic. First, she accuses artists of inviting, and critics of employing, non-aesthetic criteria of evaluation. But what she considers 'aesthetic' – namely criticality or what she calls 'antagonism' – is historically specific. Second, she argues that social practice's processual nature makes 'spectatorship (...) an almost impossible position' (2012, 205).³ But a narrow definition of aesthetic experience in terms of visibility and spectatorship blinds us to the aesthetic character of beauty as 'living form'. Unlike Bishop, I have not contested social practice's aesthetic nature; rather, I have argued that it substitutes the critical (neo-)modernist paradigm with the paradigm of beauty that preceded it. In doing so, I have highlighted the latter's prefigurative dimension, thus establishing that prefiguration is internal to the continental aesthetic tradition. I have, moreover, challenged the perception that aesthetic autonomy is a modernist trope that is irrelevant to social practice, pointing out that what passes for aesthetic autonomy (art's separation from life) is actually its self-contradiction in modernism.

As for the literature on prefigurative politics, the main problem here is the lack of conceptual clarity. I address this in Chapter 1, pointing out that prefigurative politics – in taking itself to reconcile the contradiction between means and ends, real and ideal, present and future – implicitly understands itself as the living embodiment of autonomy, a reconciled social

² See also the 'Contribution to Knowledge' section in the Introduction.

³ See also Miwon Kwon who describes social practice as 'aggressively antivisual' (2002, 24).

state, which is a worthy aspiration, but an aesthetic one. Over and above my critique of prefigurative politics as an essentially aesthetic practice, I want to highlight my intervention in its historical self-understanding. The idea that prefigurative politics derives from anarchism is becoming increasingly common (see e.g. Graeber 2002, 2013; Bray 2013; van de Sande 2015; Gordon 2018; Raekstad 2018; Raekstad and Gradin 2020; for a useful corrective see Bray 2018). This idea depends on a sleight of hand. It spotlights an analytic resemblance (means-ends unity) while ignoring the substantive differences. The key difference is that contemporary (post-New Left) prefiguration is positive or affirmative, whereas socialist prefiguration was negative or self-critical. It organized on the basis of what must be overcome, and that included itself. Since a qualitatively different future cannot be prefigured, prefiguration in the positive sense is incompatible with a socialist politics. We gain a much clearer understanding of prefigurative politics if we see it as contingent on the New Left's *break* with the socialist tradition. Not only did socialists have a clear conception of the difference – and contradiction – between means and ends, they made radically different assumptions about power and social ontology than today's prefigurativists.

One of the salient facts about prefiguration is its popularity. It is said to be the 'dominant orientation' in today's social movements (Yates 2021, 1040). The concept, moreover, leads a promiscuous theoretical life, cropping up in disciplines as diverse as philosophy and computer games studies. But the best example of prefiguration's popularity is social practice, which has seen a spectacular rise since the mid-2000s. This returns us to a question I raised in the Introduction: what explains this popularity? Why has art 'taken a so-called "social turn" (...) at this particular historical juncture?' (Sholette 2017, 212). The standard explanation is that social practice is born of crisis. Gail Day, for instance, argues that the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the 2008 financial crisis, and concerns over global warming have led to 'a growing body of art taking critical and political orientations' (2010, 23). Dave Beech similarly writes that art has become 'more directly political' in response to various crises (2009). This is certainly true, but, as I pointed out in the Introduction, it fails to explain why the social response takes the particular form it does. It might have taken a different form, but what we are faced with is an 'international explosion' of social practice (Sholette 2016). My suggestion was that the popularity of social practice is not just a matter of *its* rise but also of the rejection of negativity in art and social action.

The rejection or abandonment of critique has been a running theme throughout the thesis. Both social practice and prefigurative politics are *postcritical* practices, and understand themselves as such. With social practice this is most obvious. The dissatisfaction with ‘mere’ critique seems to be one of the driving forces behind social practice; the need to go ‘beyond critique’ is a common trope in the literature. Prefigurative politics is driven by a similar imperative; it trades a negative conception of social action for a positive one. The rejection of critique in favour of construction connects many of the key figures discussed in the thesis: Kester and Bourriaud, the two principal theorists of social practice; Beuys, its founding figure; and all theorists of prefigurative politics bar none. I also highlighted the case of Andrea Fraser who took art to task for failing to fulfil ‘political or critical claims on the level of their social and economic conditions’ (2012a, 201). Thus Fraser, one of the most visible exponents of the ‘second wave’ of institutional critique, denounced her own practice for its limited practical utility. Fraser is a potent sign of what I had in mind: critical reflection makes way for positive social action.⁴

In the face of proliferating social crises, the turn to ‘practice’ – going ‘beyond critique’ – simply seems like the right thing to do. But this ignores that there are different kinds of practice – positive and negative, prefigurative and self-critical. Why should we prefer one over the other? The approbation with which the ‘social turn’ in art was met actually concealed a deep pessimism about the possibility of social change. Day, Beech, and others interpreted it as a sign of political renewal. According to Day, it signalled a ‘resurgence of radical energies’ (2010, 21), while Beech maintained that ‘radicalism is showing signs of recovery’ (2009). But the aim of social practice is not to transform society but to preserve its ‘remains’, as Sholette writes (2017, 220). Its objective thrust is conservative. As I have argued, prefigurative practice in all its forms does not anticipate a qualitatively different society but necessarily remains within the confines of the present one. The puzzle is that this is widely seen to be progressive.

To explain the rise of prefiguration by the decline of the critical tendency, as I did in the Introduction, merely raises a deeper problem, that of the conservatism of our time. This is

⁴ I am not suggesting that Fraser turned to prefigurative politics; I am merely describing a trajectory.

the profound historical problem that haunts this thesis: the progressive lowering of the emancipatory horizon. Seen from this angle, the question of negativity appears in a different light: it is not the absence of critique that explains the rise of prefiguration but the eclipse of the utopian horizon that explains the absence of critique. When change is blocked, the point of critique becomes obscure. I will not try to define critique beyond the comments made in the terminology section; the term is used differently in different traditions, but it has always had something to do with change (cf. Pippin 2004).⁵ Thus, when change is obstructed, critique seems out of place. Some reject it as harmful (Sedgwick 2003), others as an ‘ineffectual toy’ (Bourriaud 2002, 31; cf. Latour 2004). And yet we should insist, dialectically, that it is not just a certain historical dynamic that makes critique appear pointless, if not harmful, but equally that a lack of critical consciousness is standing in the way of change.

The problem seems twofold. First, the problem is not *just* that the dialectic of (critical) theory and (critical) practice has broken down, but that it persists. If bad theory leads to bad practice, bad practice equally leads to bad theory. So, on the one hand, prefigurative practice renounces theory. It is a form of ‘activism’, a term which is cognate with Adorno’s ‘actionism’: action that disavows theory as one of its constitutive moments and thereby falls below it.

The impatience with theory that manifests itself in [the return of the propaganda of the act] does not advance thought beyond itself. By forgetting thought, the impatience falls back below it (Adorno 2005, 292).

Practice ought to ‘advance thought beyond itself’, just as critical thinking ought to push practice beyond itself; each must be critical of the other. When, conversely, practice abandons the insights of thought, it ‘falls back below it’. It becomes ‘actionism’ or ‘pseudo-

⁵ What the contemporary debate about postcritique ignores is that today’s rejections of critique were preceded by Marxist polemics against critique. Thus in 1923 Karl Korsch noted that Marxism, understood as ‘a unified general theory of social revolution’, had disintegrated into a series of ‘criticisms of the bourgeois economic order, of the bourgeois State, of the bourgeois system of education, of bourgeois religion, art, science and culture’ (2008, 63). Georg Lukács, also writing in 1923, similarly took issue with ‘criticism’, which he conceived of as a method that produces and justifies a ‘reified world’ (1971, 110). Contemporary postcritics such as Rita Felski trace ‘critique’ back to Marxism, failing to understand that for Marxists an investment in ‘critique’ implied a rejection of *dialectic*. For Korsch and Lukács, then, ‘critique’ was emphatically not ‘synonymous with intellectual rigor, theoretical sophistication, and noncompliance with the status quo’, but rather the sign of a looming postcritical condition (Felski 2015, 117-18).

activity', activity for activity's sake, that is, the *aestheticization* of activity, which Adorno likens to the propaganda by the deed – a point I verified in Chapter 3 (ibid.). The issue, however, is not just an emphasis on action at the expense of theory. The deeper problem is that postcritical practice creates a theory in its own image: postcritical theory. The mutually *critical* relation between theory and practice advocated by Adorno gives rise to a *justificatory* relation. We see this in the literature, which does not criticize its object but vindicates it despite its obvious shortcomings.

Second, a deficit in critical consciousness leads to historical repetition. The object of critique is not just 'political economy' but the practices that try – and have tried – to confront its contradictions. When we lose the ability to learn from their efforts, we will repeat their mistakes. By now prefigurativists have gone through several cycles of repetition. From the New Left student movement of the 1960s, to the direct action movement of the 1980s, to the anti-globalization movement of the 1990s, to Occupy and related movements of the 2010s – each had to experience for itself the limitations of prefigurative practice, despite the fact that each movement had produced its own self-critique. Thus Breines (1982, 59-63), a participant in the student movement, critiques the New Left for the same reasons that Epstein (1988, 86-90), a participant in the direct action movement, critiques the anti-nuclear movement, and that Brooke Lehman (2012), a participant in the anti-globalization movement, critiques the 1999 anti-WTO protest in Seattle – namely, first, that prefigurative, leaderless structures are *not* more democratic than ordinary representative ones, and, second, that they do not work in large, ideologically diverse groups. This pattern of repetition applies not just to the prefigurativists but the Millennial Left as a whole. Its tragedy was that even in its failure it could not be original, but followed the exact template laid out for it by the New Left. Boggs had critiqued the New Left for repeating the mistakes of the 1920 'in even more exaggerated form' (1977a, 120). But so the Millennial Left repeated in 'exaggerated form' the mistakes of the New Left. As I showed in Chapter 1, Boggs's critique of the New Left anticipates the Millennial Left's exact trajectory.

In art, too, the abandonment of a self-critical perspective leads to a rejection of earlier critical positions, and ultimately to historical repetition. We see this, for instance, in how the self-evidence of institutional critique has, in a few short years, been challenged and dismissed. As

I showed above, Fraser thinks it is no longer good enough for an artwork to resist its heteronomous determination on the level of form; it must do so on the level of 'social and economic conditions'. This requires a new kind of institution, she argues, the model for which is the publicly funded European museum. 'European museums have the potential to be the birthplace of a new art field (...) where new forms of autonomy can develop' (Fraser 2012a, 201). Fraser's suggestion can be read as a template for both social practice and the 'new institution', each of which understands itself as enabling 'new forms of autonomy'. In the late 1990s a number of pioneering independent curators, some of whom had been instrumental in promoting relational art (Nicolas Bourriaud, Maria Lind, Charles Esche, Maria Hlavajova, Catherine David), took over medium-sized European institutions and radically transformed them (Farquharson 2006). What came to be known as the 'new institutionalism' deprioritized the exhibition format, placing it on a par with other activities such as lectures, workshops, conferences, and informal social activities. Charles Esche famously wrote that

the term 'art' might be starting to describe that space in society for experimentation, questioning and discovery that religion, science and philosophy have occupied sporadically in former times. It has become an active space rather than one of passive observation. Therefore the institutions to foster it have to be part community centre, part laboratory and part academy, with less need for the established showroom function. They must also be political in a direct way, thinking through the consequences of our extreme free market policies (Esche 2004).

New administrators such as Esche will be much more amenable to activist practice, allowing their institutions to serve as platforms for engagement within and without. The implication of the new institutionalism is that artists have a potential ally in the museum. Thus Fraser's vision for a new kind of institution which is 'able to produce, reproduce, and reward (...) more equitably derived and distributed forms of capital' was, in certain European countries at least, an accomplished fact (2012a, 201). Whether this has created a more equitable art world or a more autonomous art practice is something we might ponder. I just want to point out how certain ideas which had become a kind of common sense are casually abandoned. The idea, long associated with institutional critique, that the autonomy vouchsafed by the institution is contradictory and must be critically examined gives way to the affirmation of 'new forms of

autonomy'. Social practices naturalizes this new position, which can be seen in its prefigurative logic as I have described it. By multiplying the number of spaces where 'new forms of autonomy can develop', it reproduces the logic of the gallery, creating the very exceptions that institutional critique ruthlessly criticized.

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