

# Looking Away: Participations in Visual Culture

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**Figure 6** Thomas Struth, *Pergamon Museum I*, Berlin, 2001; C-print, face mounted on plexiglas. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

What comes after the critical analysis of culture? What goes beyond the endless cataloging of the hidden structures, the invisible powers, and the numerous offenses we have been preoccupied with for so long? Beyond the processes of marking and making visible those who have been included and those who have been excluded? Beyond being able to point our finger at the master narratives and at the dominant cartographies of the inherited cultural order? Beyond the celebration of emergent minority group identities as an achievement in and of itself?

Many of these issues and questions are being rehearsed in the arenas of displayed culture and in the shift of focus from the objects on display to the strategies of their staging and the responses of the viewing audiences. Over the past generation we have seen an extensive critique of the museum as everything from the staging ground of national histories to the performative sites of private obsessions. Artists such as Hans Haacke, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Spoerri, the Guerrilla Girls, Fred Wilson, and Barbara Bloom have launched complex stagings of the disavowed dimensions, both public and private, of cultural display.<sup>1</sup> We have even seen institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York put themselves on supposedly reflexive display by looking at their own practices through the artworks that unravel them as "The Museum as Muse."<sup>2</sup> Spurred on by the work of Michel Foucault, we have looked at issues of categorization and classification; by the work of Haacke, at "Museums as Managers of Consciousness" through the machinations of sponsorship; and by that of Daniel Buren at the way museums turn "History into Nature."<sup>3</sup> From James Clifford we have taken an understanding of the relation between collecting and colonizing, and from Hal Foster of the relation between establishing something called "Primitivism" and maintaining the hegemony of the West.<sup>4</sup> From Carol Duncan we have understood how deeply notions of gender are embedded in the museum as a mode of display and a public notion of edifying space, while the Guerrilla Girls have documented the continuing absence of women artists from both permanent collections and temporary exhibitions within mainstream American Museum culture.<sup>5</sup> The Canadian artist Vera Frenkel offers another mode of troubling the realms of museological display in her documentary project accompanied by videos and performance activity entitled "The Cornelia Lumsden Archive."<sup>6</sup> In it Frenkel traces, through her veritable absence, the shadowy presence of a fictive twentieth-century woman writer; she does this by scrupulously emulating the archival modes that would have represented her had she ever existed, which takes us back full circle to Foucault. From all of these theoretical

and art practice sources we have mobilized an extensive critical arsenal which we can deploy for a critical analysis of the ways in which institutions have functioned, and of what they have hidden, elided, or simply disavowed. It seems to me that within the space of a relatively short period we have been able to move from criticism to critique to criticality – from finding fault, to examining the underlying assumptions that might allow something to appear as a convincing logic (as in the case of all the aforementioned work on and in museums), to operating from an uncertain ground which, while building on critique, wants nevertheless to inhabit culture in a relation other than one of critical analysis; other than one of illuminating flaws, locating elisions, allocating blames.

In Visual Culture some partial responses to the question of what comes after critique can be teased out through a shift of the traditional relations between all that goes into making (practice) and all that goes into viewing (audience) the objects of visual cultural attention. This, of course, builds on that mighty critical apparatus which was evolved throughout the 1970s and 1980s and in which an unraveling of the relations between subjects and objects took place through radical critiques of authorial authorities, of epistemological conceits, and, perhaps more than anything else, through the ever-growing perception of knowledge as an extended wander through fields of intertextual subjectivities. That project is well underway and in its wake come the permissions to approach the study of culture from the most oblique of angles, to occupy ourselves with the constitution of new objects of study that may not have been previously articulated for us by existing fields. In fact, it may well be in the act of looking away from the objects of our supposed study, in the shifting modalities of the attention we pay them, that we have a potential for a rearticulation of the relations between makers, objects, and audiences. Can looking away be understood not necessarily as an act of resistance to, but rather as an alternative form of, taking part in culture?

The diverting of attention from that which is meant to compel it, i.e. the actual work on display, can at times free up a recognition that other manifestations are taking place that are often difficult to read, and which may be as significant as the designated objects on display.

Recently an exhibition opened at the Courtauld Institute in London, an exhibition of contemporary art selected and hung in the actual spaces of the Institute by some postgraduate students.<sup>7</sup> The opening was jam-packed with the young men and women of the art world – pushing and shoving on the narrow stairs, sloshing beer over everyone, and grinding cigarettes

on the hallowed eighteenth-century staircase. This invasion of a stiff and formal, traditional academic space by the floating population of art world openings was surprising enough to someone like myself, having studied at the Institute at an earlier phase. Instead of being hung in the more conventional spaces of the adjacent Courtauld Galleries, the works here were distributed among the offices and seminar rooms of the Institute itself and the viewers were asked to explore the spaces that are usually occupied by the business of teaching and of academic work, spaces cordoned off by the work being done in them and barred from the view of the general public. More surprising than this invited invasion, however, was the comment I overheard again and again as I trudged up and down the stairs “Well,” said various visitors that evening, “it’s not so posh, I expected it to be a lot more posh, didn’t you?” “What’s all the fuss about this place?” said another, “It’s just an old building, isn’t it?” ending his statement on a slightly puzzled questioning tone, as if wondering if there was some level of the experience that had been hidden to him. I, who, as a student, had for years been intimidated by this place and by its snobberies and exclusivities, was endlessly amused – it was as if the Queen had opened her bedrooms to the public and everyone had come around to share in the exposure of something that had so far been hidden. But beyond the voyeurism and beyond my own amusement, at a more interesting level, a form of participation was taking place in which some façade of privilege, of class and cultural exclusion, of supposedly rarefied learning, had been breached and the viewers were trying to figure out what exactly had kept them outside, had kept them at bay – since after all “it wasn’t all that posh, was it?”

The exhibition project on display itself probably had in mind some notion of “democratization” and “accessibility” through undoing the boundaries of elevated separation and inserting itself in the realm of the “contemporary.” Its final effects, however, were almost the opposite: rather than making people feel comfortable within its spaces, it produced – in my reading of it at least – an embodied manifestation of the mythical and fantasmatic which kept them at a distance. It did so, not through curatorial intention, but through a proliferation of performative acts generated by the audience and, of course, by our ever-growing ability to read these performative acts. There is a popular assumption that the performance of exclusion is an actual form of remaining outside, of not daring to enter spaces perceived as exclusive or intimidating or barred. Perhaps, though, the performance of exclusion is the process of realization that exclusion

has nothing to do with entrance or access and far more to do with perceptions of the possible. In the tortuous operations of trying to produce a fit between specific identities and their legible representations, the joyous possibilities of Giorgio Agamben's "whatever," which I shall return to in greater detail later, are lost to us.<sup>8</sup> The "whatever" in question here, says Agamben, relates to singularity not in its indifference with respect to a common property (to a concept, for example: being red, being French, being Muslim) but only in its being such as it is.<sup>9</sup> In the experience of the actual space, in being positioned as an actual audience, the crowd at the Courtauld exited the work of framed identities, in relation to which they are positioned, and judged themselves and moved into the performative workings of the "whatever." Thus it is experiential, not in the sense of having an actual embodied and shared experience in the space, but rather in the sense that entering a space inscribed with so many caveats and qualifications, in a state of what I call "unbelonging," leads to the active production of questions concerning the very rights of entry and belonging. It is in this sense that I would perceive it as an embodied manifestation of the mythical and fantasmatic that kept the audience entering the Courtauld that evening at a cultural distance in the first place. It is in this moment, in the preliminary production of these questions, that I wish to recognize the shift from entering to taking part, from following the roles allotted to us as viewers and listeners, to engaging in the performative and becoming the subject of the work itself.

In expanding the parameters of what constitutes engagement with art, we might in fact be entertaining an expanded notion of the very nature of participation, of taking part in and of itself. We all believe in the principle of participation. From the institutions of parliamentary democracy we sustain to the practices of listening to, rather than silencing or ignoring, the voices of children, women, minorities, or the handicapped that we take part in, we all uphold and approve the rhetorics of expanded participation as they circulate in political culture. What we rarely question is what constitutes the listening, hearing, or seeing in and of itself – the good intentions of recognition become a substitute for the kind of detailed analysis which might serve to expand the notions of what constitutes a mode of speaking in public, of being heard by a public, of having a public *manifestation*.

Of course one of the main issues within this structure is that the question posed in the name of expanded participation – whatever that question might be – is inevitably articulated at the centers of power, and it is

only the response elicited *by* it, that is paid attention. What interests me is the possibility of reading a response as a form of rearticulating the question of what it might be to take part in public sphere culture. These thoughts chart the beginning of an inquiry into the possibilities that exhibition spaces might provide to accommodate the proliferation of performative acts by which audiences shift themselves from being viewers to being participants. Furthermore the participation I have in mind goes beyond an aesthetic identification within the confines of spaces reserved for artistic practices and towards a model in which these spaces re-engage with political culture in unexpected ways. The argument is predicated on a belief that art does not have to be overtly political in its subject matter in order to produce a political effect, thus constituting a politics rather than reflecting one. It is this differentiation between the subject matter of works or exhibition thematics and the *subject of the exhibition* that is the main issue I should like to get to, albeit via a slightly circuitous route. In trying to recount a series of scenes in which audiences produce themselves as the subject of whatever may have been put on view for their edification, I am arguing that exhibition spaces might indicate possibilities – rather than provide opportunities – for self-representation.

Of late I have become interested in trying to understand participation differently than as dictated by the commonly agreed principles of democratic participation and representation through institutions; some of these thoughts have been spurred by the opportunity to hold public dialogs with curators on the theme of “the curatorial”;<sup>10</sup> others were developed through a process of integrating some of my thoughts into a book of artist’s writings by Yve Lomax, and all have resulted from the struggle to reconfigure my relations to the spaces and activities of art beyond the position of critical viewer.<sup>11</sup>

By claiming an interest in participation I would like to put into question what it means to take part in culture beyond the audience functions of viewer or spectator allotted to us by most cultural arenas. Obviously the active/passive division of that old model of taking part in culture cannot be sustained in the wake of the immense rethinking of positionality that the last 25 years of theoretical analysis have launched on the world. We all come from somewhere, we all represent something, we are all burdened by histories, we all make and re-make ourselves daily through the acts of speech and appearance, but none of these are the stable identities which we can rely on to be constant through the barrage of encounters of difference we face. Being so active and volatile an entity we, as viewing audience, can

no longer be positioned as the observers of work from the outside, and having understood how we remake work in relation to the subjectivity we project upon it, we cannot unlearn this when confronted with the work of “art.” The question that is raised therefore is what forms of response replace that old model of lost identification, and do these emergent modes of response afford some mutuality that links viewers and participants beyond their named location of identity? Consequently I have been reading various philosophers and social theorists who themselves have been thinking possibilities of the common and its articulation without resorting to the stability of “identity” whether essential or constructed.<sup>12</sup>

At some level it has been possible to locate in these readings potential opportunities for the disruption of that rapt gaze of culture which has kept us for so long in the position of edified viewers: finding alternative models of both looking away and coming together in Giorgio Agamben’s unhinging of “singularity” into the “whatever,” in Jean-Luc Nancy’s<sup>13</sup> insistence on the disruption of myth – of myth designating the absence of what it names – as the grounds for political possibility, and in Hannah Arendt’s constant flow of made and remade “spaces of appearance.”<sup>14</sup> In their thought there is a preoccupation with concepts of community that is not founded in the politics of identity, and there is equally a play with flows and ebbs of mutuality that has helped me link preoccupations with “the performative” to a theory of “the political.”

For some time now I have been getting into trouble with my use of “we” and “us” in my texts. Frequently after the publication of some piece I would be asked, often with great hostility, “Who is we, who are us, in your writing?” – “We,” they would say, “who don’t share your identity; be it national, sexual, political, theoretical, class- or language-based, refuse our inclusion into your argument.” Well, the “we” I have in mind is not identity-based – it cannot be found in the named categories by which an identity is currently recognized in the world. Rather, it comes into being fleetingly as we negotiate a problem, a mood, a textual or cultural encounter, a moment of recognition – these momentary shared mutualities do not form a collective heritage, but they do provide the short-lived access to power described by Arendt, not to the power of the state but to the power of speech. In the context of this particular writing the “we” I have in mind is designated through recognition of shifts taking place in the project of “theory.” A shared transition, albeit expressed in different ways, that the project of theory has moved on from being a mode of analysis by which you understand what lies behind and beneath the workings of

knowing and representing. Instead “theory” can become the space of making, or re-making, of culture, of envisaging further possibilities rather than of explicating existing circumstances. Those who agree to a suspension of the purely critical, to momentarily shared imaginaries, to a bit of groundlessness, lost and regained – that’s us, that’s who I mean.

## Refusals

What are the demands that are made on us by “art” but the demands for totality and singularity, for completeness and for satiety, that infuse “art” as they infuse any other grand cultural scheme in the traditional order? I want to take some elements of Yve Lomax’s dialog with these demands, with their claims and with the refutation of those claims, and situate them in what Hannah Arendt has called “The Space of Appearance.”<sup>15</sup> As much of Yve Lomax’s reflection is put forward through a play with narrative voices, and as I am a fellow participant in her work’s overall charge of decentering cultural trajectories, it seems appropriate for me to inflect these with additional analyses that are both spatialized and founded in ethnographic observation of a fairly mundane nature. In so doing I am attempting an argument that would wish to both unframe the realm of art from all of those deeply isolating grand privileges, from all those impossible demands, while at the same time allowing it to be the space of collective engagements. Not collective engagements planned in the headquarters of ideological persuasions, but rather those that Arendt characterized as “speech and action,” loosely coming together for a momentary expression and then coming apart again. This “space of appearance” articulated by Arendt is neither concretely inhabited nor is it temporally constant; it comes into being “whenever men are together in the manner of speech and action and therefore precedes and predates all formal constitution of the public realm and its various forms of government.”<sup>16</sup>

Why have I gone back to old Hannah Arendt? Why to someone so often allied with “liberalism” and who seemingly predates the intricacies of “difference” in trying to think of some of the little steps that might follow in the wake of the slippery sliding “line in the middle” Yve Lomax speaks of?

Why then?

Having abdicated the collective investment in totalizations and singularities which had long claimed the task of our collective cementing, can

we begin to think alternative collectivities and can we do so without lapsing into some lamenting grief about the clear-cut guidelines and navigational principles we once shared in those long-gone days of certainties and the unequivocal actions that these legitimated? This state of having first fragmented those certainties and of currently trying to go beyond both these and the endlessly fragmented lines they have dissolved into is not an act of refutation – “No,” says Yve Lomax, “not a question of a lost or unlocatable reality, no, not a question of total mystification.” It is not a refutation of those old demands seemingly made on us by “art” but a refusal – a refusal of both them and the very terms by which they come into conceptualization and operation – which is my preoccupation. It is for this reason that I have dragged in old Hannah, because of the exceptionally fresh and arbitrary nature of the “space of appearance” that she proposes to us.

In its fleeting and ephemeral constitution, the “space of appearance” shares much common ground with Henri Lefebvre’s concept of “spatialization” as the constant social production of space.<sup>17</sup> Not a space named by its concrete constituents – such as buildings or environments or tasks – but one which comes into being through a related reading of actions and of the fantasmatic subjectivities projected through these actions. The peculiarity of this space of appearance, says Arendt, “is that unlike the spaces which are the work of our hands, it does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears not only with the dispersal of men . . . but with the disappearance or the arrest of the activities themselves. Wherever people gather together, it is potentially there but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever.”<sup>18</sup>

The knowledgeable reader, immersed in structuralist and post-structuralist theory as such readers are, will inevitably ask: why invoke Arendt when we have available to us theories of spatialization by Lefebvre, theories of discourse by Foucault, and the strategies of performativity suggested by Judith Butler? In partial, only very partial, reply I might say that it is because Arendt’s thought links speech and action to the very constitution of power, but not power as a mode of representation, nor power as the concrete articulations of ideological belief and their consequent translation into various structures of speech and of government. “What keeps people together after the fleeting moment of actions has passed (what we today call ‘organisation’), and what at the same time they keep alive through remaining together, is power.” Neither force, strength, nor violence, nor the apparatuses of the state or the law, this power

conceptualized by Arendt is the fleeting coming together in momentary gestures of speech and action by communities whose only mutuality lies in their ability both to stage these actions and to read them for what they are. The spaces of appearance in which these momentary actions take place are the staging grounds of protests, refusals, affirmations or celebrations, and like Lefebvre's "space in the process of production" they do not bear the markings of traditional political spaces but rather galvanize the spaces of everyday life and temporarily transform them by throwing flitting mantles of power over them: "Action and speech create a space between the participants, which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere. It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as they appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly."<sup>19</sup>

The reason I would wish to think of "art" in relation to such a "space of appearance" is a recognition that, when something called "art" becomes an open interconnective field, then the potential to engage with it as a form of cultural participation – rather than as a form of either reification, representation, or contemplative edification – comes into being. The engagement with "art" can provide a similar space of appearance to that described by Arendt, not by following the required set of interpellated, pensive gestures but rather by seeking out, staging, and perceiving an alternative set of responses.

## Looking Away

What is it that we do when we look away from art? When we avert our gaze in the very spaces and contexts in which we are meant to focus our attention? When we exploit the cultural attention and the spatial focus provided by, and insisted on, by museums, galleries, exhibition sites, and studios to cajole some other presence, some other dynamic in the space, into being? Are we producing the "affirmation through negation" which Yve Lomax speaks of in her discussion of the Alpha (its very refutation serving to actually ground its importance), or are we opening up a space of participation whose terms we are to invent? Is this averted gaze a refusal of the work on display, of the contexts which frame it, of the claims made for it, of the gravitas required in its contemplation, of the gratitude it demands for our supposed edification? Perhaps it is a refusal of the

singularity of attention that the work traditionally demands (a friend tells of never being able to get into a museum's exhibits because he always seems to get waylaid by the bookstore; another friend spends longer talking about the different coffees in the museum's cafeteria than about the exhibit that generated the visit in the first instance).

Beyond Benjamin's notion of the "aura" with its combined understanding of how uniqueness and value mutually constitute one another through the production of a third entity – the work of art imbued with a halo of splendour – we have to think of what actively separates the work from everything else that takes place around it. In this context I would have to briefly and tediously insist on the difference between the project of contextualizing art, of embedding it in social and other histories as appropriate frameworks for the production of meaning (a largely academic and scholarly project which galvanizes both archival materials and methodological analyses to provide frames for reading works) and that of attending to the performative gestures which I have in mind and which work to undo those very frames. I am referring to those moments in which people come together to unconsciously perform an alternative relation to culture, through their dress, or speech, or conduct. These performative gestures offer both a disruption and the possibility of an alternative and less obvious set of links with its surroundings, links which may be quite arbitrary or coincidental to the trajectories of immanent meanings. Of these, the most insistent separations between bodies of work and their surroundings come about through two sets of beliefs. Firstly, an overriding belief in the singularity of the work of art and, secondly, a belief in the cultural habits of affording it, that singular work, our unfragmented attention. Therefore we have to unravel both concepts of "singularity" and those of "undivided attention" in order to rework the relations between art and its audiences through strategies of concentration.

To unpack "singularity" I am using Giorgio Agamben's argument in *The Coming Community*, a series of linked essays that asks how we can conceive of a human community that lays no claims to identity, and that can be formed of singularities that refuse any criteria of belonging. How can we think a community whose collective basis is neither the shared ideological principles nor the empathies of affinity and similarity? The coming community, Agamben writes,

is whatever being . . . The Whatever in question here relates to singularity not in its indifference with respect to a common property (to a concept, for

example: being red, being French, being Muslim), but only in it's being *such as it is*. Singularity is thus freed from the false dilemma that obliges knowledge to choose between the ineffability of the individual and the intelligibility of the universal. The intelligible, according to a beautiful expression of Levi ben Gershon (Gersonides), is neither a universal nor an individual included in a series but rather "singularity insofar as it is whatever singularity." In this conception, such-and-such being is reclaimed from having this or that property, which identifies it as belonging to this or that set, to this or that class (the reds, the French, the Muslims) – and it is reclaimed not for another class nor for the simple generic absence of any belonging, but for its being-*such*, for belonging itself. Thus being-*such*, which remains constantly hidden in the condition of belonging . . . and which is in no way a real predicate, comes to light itself: The singularity exposed as such is whatever you *want*, that is, lovable.<sup>20</sup>

Yve Lomax, in unshackling photography from being either the representation of a single reality or the manifestation of a singular practice, says,

Photography is mixed up with all sorts of things – law and order, the family, the medical professions, the art market. Photography is involved in a diversity of practices, stories and theories. There is painting in photography. There are words in photography. There is sexuality in photography. There is money in photography. There are a host of different "photographies." When we start with photography we are already in the middle of quite a few things. Indeed, we may argue that there is no such thing (in itself) as Photography, only photographs.<sup>21</sup>

Between Yve Lomax's pluralities and Agamben's notion of the "whatever" (which, for the sake of clarity, is not the "whatever" of California teenagers in which anything can be substituted by anything else, more a distrust of speech) we have a joint project of decentering – not the repeated movement of return to a narrowing enclosure, but the introduction of a logic of movement at whose core is a non-epistemic, or, perhaps better, a counter-epistemic, arbitrariness. By this I mean an epistemological equivalent of Agamben's "whatever" in which both the *what* we know and the *how* we know it are fluid entities that settle in different areas according to the dictates of the moment but receive equal amounts of attention and concentration regardless of their recognition or status in the world of knowledge.

Agamben continues:

Whatever is the figure of pure singularity. Whatever singularity has no identity, it is not determinate with respect to a concept, but neither is it simply indeterminate; rather it is determined only through its relation to an idea, that is, to the totality of its possibilities. Through this relation, as Kant said, singularity borders all possibility and thus receives its *omnimoda determinatio* not from its participation in a determinate concept or some actual property (being red, Italian, Communist) but only by means of this bordering.<sup>22</sup>

Thus the singularity of “art” is disrupted by a decentring dynamic, broken up by the plurality of its possibilities and by the arbitrariness of the principle of “whatever.”

## Disrupted

Theoretical analyses are also lived realities. Thus the disruption of art’s singularity, of its hold on our attention and focus, is everywhere in the speech and action we produce in the seemingly unimportant registers we engage in relation to it.

G.B. and I have gone to see the Jackson Pollock exhibition at the Tate Gallery, London. I am wary of the hyperbolic claims made for the grand master of abstract expressionism, wary of the investment in the muscular and visceral hero of modernism, wary of the equation of action, physicality, and scale with some notion of liberation and of a strike for cultural autonomy. In short I am critically on guard and approach the whole visit with weariness and a sense of cultural obligation. I have dragged G.B. along in the hope that his superior knowledge of the period and of the work, the fact that he has already visited the exhibition on several occasions, will provide me with insight and animate the encounter, chip away at my weariness. Shortly after entering the exhibition and beginning to look, through the compulsions of chronology, at the early work, we spot the actress who plays the beautiful nurse Carol Hathaway on the fabled TV series *ER*. We are mesmerized, we follow her around the exhibition, she is even more beautiful in real life than on the screen and we speculate on the color of her hair and on her relationship to her companion at the exhibition. Our attention has been well and truly diverted and one mythic structure – the heroic modernist figure of Pollock and the art history that instates him and claims that singularity of our attention for him and for his art – has

been interrupted by another mythic structure, that of Hollywood celebrity and the odd slippages between distance and proximity, reality and filmic fiction, that occur when it is delivered directly into our living rooms with weekly regularity.

It is entirely true that both G.B. and I are fans of the series; at the same time it is also true that we occupy ourselves with the critical interrogation of the meanings and status of art within broad visual culture. Were we simply swept along, interpellated by fandom and struck by glamor? Or had we staged a disruption that was entirely necessary for our own viewing processes, allowing us to exit the application demanded from us and to unframe the exhibition from the isolating claims made for it, from its mythic structures?

Mythic structures clearly play a substantial role in the interpellation of our attention. Much thought has been given to the mythic in terms of heroic artists and of valiant, groundbreaking avant-garde movements, of figures and actions which oppose some set of perceived conventions of the day. But they are equally the primal scene of Arendt's "space of appearance" and evolved out of the joint operations of narrative and conversation. Certainly in the case of the disrupted viewing of the Jackson Pollock exhibition, G.B. and I regaled one another with tales of our watching experiences and reactions to *ER*: our perceptions of the characters portrayed, of the actors portraying them, of the evolving story line, of the mesmerizing effects of the fast cutting technique which is the series' cinematic hallmark. Not only was one mythic structure mobilized in relation to another one, that of the exhibition, but a viewing position, an alternate of imbricated fan as opposed to reverential spectator, was put into play in this disruption. Myth, states Jean-Luc Nancy, begins when a group is gathered listening to a story, and the telling of that story is the entire point of their assembly – the scene of the myth is their space of appearance. "We know this scene well. More than one storyteller has told it to us, having gathered us together in learned fraternities intent on knowing what our origins were. Our societies, they have told us, derive from these assemblies themselves, and our beliefs, our knowledge, our discourses and our poems derive from these narratives."<sup>23</sup> The relation of the narrative and of its structuring properties within the mythic is to do with the fact that what it communicates is *itself*, its process of communicating:

It does not communicate a knowledge that can be verified from elsewhere: it is self-communicating . . . In other words, along with knowledge, about

whatever knowledge about whatever object it might be, it communicates also the communication of this knowledge . . . Myth communicates the common, the being-common of what it reveals or what it recites. Consequently, at the same time as each one of its revelations, it also reveals the community to itself and founds it.<sup>24</sup>

One of the most interesting of Nancy's insights is the degree to which critical or analytical initiatives (his examples are romanticism, communism, structuralism) are secret communities and constitute the very last possibility of myth to both invent itself and transmit itself. Another is his insistence on its fictional nature: "Mythic thought – operating in a certain way through the dialectical sublation of the two meanings of myth – is in effect nothing other than the thought of a founding fiction or a foundation by fiction."<sup>25</sup>

Both of these insights I believe to be the source of much comfort, yet another acknowledgment of Derrida's faith in there being no "outside of the text," an endorsement of the fact that as we converse and exchange critical perspectives we do not situate ourselves beyond their contexts and interpellations but rather shift the ground of these and recognize the degree to which we ourselves are its mythic objects. We are the arena and the site of both of these combined activities. As Nancy says, myth operates simultaneously as both "foundation" and "fiction," and its truest form of thinking is philosophy which wants to both tell the truth (1) *of* myth, and (2) *in relation to* myth (as its opposite).<sup>26</sup>

But having agreed on the space of appearance and on the inherently split nature of the mythic, now we also have to face not simply the fictional but also the fragmented nature of the critical models around which a gathering could take place. Beyond romanticism, communism, structuralism, we locate ourselves within atomized trajectories in which direction or subject, one direction or one subject, are not at all inevitable. On the contrary, says Yve Lomax,

Think of making the art gallery a most untimely place. Think of making the lines break through and not settling for well-established points. Think of all the lines, which are involved. Rigid lines – sexual lines – institutional lines – supple lines – saddening lines – electric lines. Lines of prejudice but also vibrant lines. The lines involved within the formation of the gallery space can never be contained in just one local place.

Everything that we had previously counted on in order to focus our attention – the fixed and designated identity of named spaces, the perceived

clarity of division between subject and object, the gripping and compelling nature of myth – have come undone within the dialectics of subjectivity. In Jean-Luc Nancy's terms:

Myth realizes itself dialectically: it exceeds all its mythic figures to announce the pure mythology of an absolute, foundational, symbolizing or distributive speech. It is here that things are interrupted. The tradition is suspended at the very moment it fulfils itself. It is interrupted at that precise and familiar point where we know that it is all a myth . . . and the word "myth" itself designates the absence of what it names.<sup>27</sup>

The disruption I recounted is partly an intervention in a mythic structure and the compulsion to point to the absence that it names through the deployment of a high/low dichotomy. But it is also performative and makes a claim for what Hannah Arendt calls "the space of appearance." For Arendt, this space of appearance is what makes possible "action" and the inevitable reversal it has wrought in the hierarchical order between, in Arendt's terms, contemplation and action. Having become aware of the very mythic nature of our own critical interventions, it is the minute gatherings of refusal and disruption that are left to us to somehow live out the combined entities of participation and criticism. To make such a statement is to somehow be seemingly gripped by a *situationist* ethos, by the echoes of stealthy street actions, remade topographies and inscriptions left behind on walls. How do we occupy the space of commanding attention in ways that are not the take-over of street marches nor the romantic covert operations of the agents of *détournement*? Perhaps we could say that we simply do not, that we refuse that very notion of a spatial occupation in which our identity is subjugated to a named commonality. To my mind the great difference between subversive action and what I am calling "disruption" is precisely Agamben's "whatever" in all its arbitrariness and ephemerality. No form of subversive action can be that without some attempt to create a fit between itself as a manifestation and a set of values and ideals it is operating in the name of. In other words, subversivity is always ideological and always consciously mobilized, even if it takes the form of an unplotted nocturnal roaming and even if its outcomes are not foreseen, as in the workings of *détournement*. Equally critical practice works to unveil the hidden and to enter the battlefield of signification, in order to intervene and subvert those meanings. Instead I am hankering after the unconscious processes of actually becoming the subject, which I identify as "the performative." Claiming that we live out Agamben's "whatever" in

the vagaries of trivial conversations that ebb and flow, making and remaking the “space of appearance” as we speak of different things. Inside, distracted, acknowledging that our utterances come back to us in inverted form, conceding the common while refusing its identity – that’s us. “Us” in the process of becoming the subjects of culture.

The ethnographies of visits to the Tate Gallery and to the Courtauld Institute, and to all the other exhibitions and institutions that I am attempting to describe in the course of this work on participation, are encounters with mythic spaces in Nancy’s terms. They allow me to make concrete and manifest, to stage as it were, the unauthorized consequences of what I have called “looking away,” of diverting attention from all that culture demands we pay attention to. It is precisely because we are knowledgeable about the “auratic” value invested in art through teleology and filiation (to use the Marxist and the semiotic terms of analysis), precisely because we have been through such a long and protracted phase of institutional critique of the spaces and strategies of display, that we can affect such a bold step of “looking away” from inside those discourses and those spaces. In the process we produce for ourselves an alternative mode of taking part in culture in which we affect a creative *bricolage* of art works and spaces, and modalities of attention and subjectivities, that break down the dichotomies of objects and viewers and allow for a dynamic manifestation of the *lived* cultural moment.

## Notes

- 1 See Hans Haacke, *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986); Marcel Broodthaers, *Marcel Broodthaers* (New York: Walker Arts Center, 1989); Daniel Spoerri, *An Anecdotal Topography of Chance* (London: Atlas Press, 1995); The Guerrilla Girls, *Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls* (London: Pandora Press, 1995); Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum* (Baltimore: Baltimore Society of Contemporary Art, 1989); and Barbara Bloom, *The Reign of Narcissism* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1990).
- 2 Kynaston McShine, *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999).
- 3 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1972); Daniel Buren, “The Function of the Museum,” *Artforum*, 12 (1) (1973).
- 4 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); and Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Washington: Bay Press, 1985).

- 5 Carol Duncan, *Civilising Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995); and Steven Dubin, *Of Power: Memory and Amnesia in the American Museum* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).
- 6 Vera Frenkel, "The Cornelia Lumsden Archive," in *Museums by Artists* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983).
- 7 Exhibition titled *Shadows and Silhouettes*, November 2001, Courtauld Institute, London.
- 8 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.
- 10 Part of this text has been published as "How to Dress for an Exhibition," in M. Jaukuuri and M. Hannula (eds), *Stopping the Process* (Helsinki: NIFCA, 1998). This is the proceedings of an international meeting of curators and theorists which attempted to broaden the understanding of the curatorial.
- 11 Part of this text appears in Yve Lomax, *Writing the Image: An Adventure with Art and Theory* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000). My thanks to Yve Lomax both for involving me in her project and for permitting me to reprint part of that writing in the present context. The mutuality of that writing project between the critical/analytical, the theoretical, and the creative made it possible to locate corollaries between these ideas and some of the main concepts.
- 12 Much of my thinking on this subject has been developed in conversations with the philosopher Eva Meyer whose own texts also embody the contiguity of the analytical and the creative mentioned in the previous footnote.
- 13 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
- 14 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 198.
- 15 Lomax, *Writing the Image*, p. 78.
- 16 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 198.
- 17 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).
- 18 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 199.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 198.
- 20 Agamben, *The Coming Community*, pp. 1–2.
- 21 Lomax, *Writing the Image*, p. 78.
- 22 Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p. 67.
- 23 Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 44.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- 26 *Ibid.*, pp. 53 n. 23, 161.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

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New Responses to Art  
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Edited by Gavin Butt



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