

Spheres of action

Art and politics

In the anglophone context of the last thirty years, the phrase ‘critical theory’ has been used in two quite different ways. On the one hand it refers to the project of the Frankfurt School, in its various formulations, over a fifty-year period from the early 1930s (from early Horkheimer through to ‘middle period’ Habermas). On the other hand it has come to denote a far broader but nonetheless discrete tradition, with its roots in Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Saussure, and its primary manifestations in France in the period from the late 1950s to the end of the 1990s, with Barthes, Lacan, Althusser, Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard as its main representatives. In the first case, the phrase is both self-designating and the object of explicit theoretical reflection. In the latter case, however, it was the result of the reception of a theoretically heterogeneous tradition into the literary departments of the Anglo-American academy, where ‘criticism’ was an established professional activity. Consequently, while the conceptual emphasis in the reception of the Frankfurt School has been on criticism or critique (*Kritik*) – the main opposition being between ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’ (Horkheimer, 1937) – the emphasis in the reception of the French tradition was placed heavily on ‘theory’, the main opposition being between theoretical and a- or anti-theoretical (historically, aesthetic) interpretative practices. Yet ‘theory’, here, is not a name for an alien philosophy (in the way in which ‘critical theory’ was initially an alias for a certain philosophical reception of Marxism) but a purportedly post-philosophical pursuit, occupying the place, but not the mode, of a Heideggerian ‘thinking’.

What these two bodies of thought share is a suspicion of the self-sufficiency of philosophy, an orientation towards inter- and trans-disciplinarity, an openness to the general text of writing, and a critical attitude towards the institutions of Western capitalist societies. Where they differ is in their relations to the philosophies of Hegel and Heidegger. The former is self-consciously post-Hegelian and anti-Heideggerian, while the latter is insistently anti-Hegelian and generi-

cally post-Heideggerian. As Jean-Luc Nancy put it at the end of the 1980s: “‘French’ thought today proceeds in part from a “German” rupture with a certain philosophical “France” (which is also a rupture with a certain “Germanity”).’ It was this displaced Germanicism of French thought that was the object of attack in Habermas’s polemic *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985) – a book that appeared in the wake of the extraordinary success in Germany of Sloterdijk’s *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983).

The philosophically ‘Germanic’ character of much French critical theory is thus well established. Less attention has been paid to the influence of French thought – including that which proceeds from ‘a German rupture with a certain philosophical France’ – on the German critical tradition. Yet some of the most productive developments within the orbit of Frankfurt critical theory have been driven by a reflective intensity in the relationship to intellectual and artistic events in France. (This is true not only of Benjamin, but also of aspects of early Horkheimer and Adorno’s mature thought too.) More recently, there is a ‘post-Frankfurtian’ German thought of the 1980s and 1990s that has been profoundly influenced by currents of French theory of the 1960s and 1970s: French Nietzscheanism, structuralism, Barthes, Foucault, situationism, Deleuze/Guattari and Baudrillard. This problematizes the nationalism of German philosophy in a quite different way from Habermas’s identification with American pragmatism and his concern to reformulate normative issues within the terms of post-analytical philosophy. It is notable that these currents have all been concerned in some way with aesthetic aspects of political action and the political meaning of art; and that they have been able to flow more freely, in Germany, in the art school than the philosophy department.

The papers that follow* are by a trio of thinkers from Karlsruhe, whose writings are marked by different aspects of the French thought of the 1960s: *vitalism*, *structuralism* and *deconstruction*, in Sloterdijk, Weibel and Groys, respectively.

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*These papers were presented at ‘Spheres of Action – Art and Politics’, Tate Britain, London, 12 December 2005, organized by the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy, Middlesex University. List of Weibel’s images appears on p. 56.

The politics of equal aesthetic rights

Boris Groys

Art and politics are connected in one fundamental respect: both are realms in which a struggle for recognition is being waged. As defined by Alexandre Kojève in his commentary on Hegel, this struggle for recognition surpasses the usual struggle for the distribution of material goods, which in modernity is generally regulated by market forces. What is at stake here is not merely that a certain desire be satisfied but that it is also recognized as socially legitimate. Whereas politics is an arena in which various group interests have, both in the past and the present, fought for recognition, artists of the historical avant-garde have contended for the recognition of all individual forms and artistic procedures that were not previously considered legitimate. Indeed, the historical avant-garde has opened up the potentially infinite horizontal field of all possible real and virtual forms endowed with equal aesthetic rights. One after another, so-called primitive imagery, abstract images and simple objects from everyday life have all acquired the kind of recognition that once used to be granted only to certain privileged images and objects.

Both forms of struggle for equality – political and aesthetic – are intrinsically bound up with each other, and both have the goal of achieving a situation in which all people with their various interests, as indeed also all forms and artistic practices, will finally be granted equal rights. But, clearly, such a condition of total equality has de facto never been attained, either in the political or in the artistic realm. Contemporary art, like contemporary politics, still operates in the gap between formal equality and factual inequality. So the question arises, what are the mechanisms of this inequality – how we can define them and deal with them if we want to keep the promise of equality given by the historical avant-garde?

When the avant-garde started its struggle against aesthetic inequality, it was the museum that was considered the main enemy, as a place of inequality par excellence. The museums were perceived as guardians of the old privileges, as the places of the Romantic

iconophilia admiring the masterpieces of the past and preventing the emergence of the new, as the churches of the new religion of art with its strange rituals and esoteric conventions – closed spaces where the initiated few decided the fate of art beyond any democratic discussion and control. Accordingly, the avant-garde understood itself as an iconoclastic movement, as an attempt to secularize and democratize art in the name of equal aesthetic rights. Such appeals and demands have meanwhile become quite commonplace, even to the extent of now being regarded as a cardinal feature of contemporary art – they remain, of course, in many ways still legitimate. But the question arises, is the museum today still the central place of contemporary iconophilia and the origin of contemporary aesthetic inequality? Is the struggle that is directed against the museum – and the art institutions connected with the museum – truly iconoclastic under the contemporary aesthetic regime? Personally, I doubt it.

In the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth, the socially dominating tastes were defined and embodied by the museum, indeed. The criteria on which the museum based its choice of ‘good’ art were generally accepted as the aesthetic norm. But today it is simply not the case any more. Under the dominating aesthetic regime the museum has indisputably been stripped of its normative role. In our time it is the globalized mass media that dictate aesthetic norms, having long since dethroned the museum from its position of aesthetic dominance. The general public now draws its notion of art from advertising, MTV, video games and Hollywood blockbusters. The contemporary mass media have emerged as by far the largest and most powerful machine for producing and distributing images – vastly more extensive and effective than the contemporary art system. We are constantly fed with images of war, terror and catastrophes of all kinds, at a level of production with which the individual artist with his or her artisan skills cannot compete. Nowadays, every major politician, rock star, television entertainer or sporting hero generates thousands of

images through their public appearances – much more than any living artist can even imagine. The dominating aesthetics of our time is the aesthetics of the commercialized mass media – not of the museum.

Museum or media?

In the context of contemporary, media-generated tastes the call to abandon and dismantle the museum has taken on an entirely different meaning from when it was voiced during the avant-garde era. Nowadays this protest is no longer part of the struggle waged against prevailing normative tastes in the name of aesthetic equality but is, inversely, aimed at stabilizing and entrenching currently prevailing tastes. Characteristically, it is the gurus of the contemporary neoliberal media markets who wonder today – in the style of the early avant-garde – why anyone at all is needed to decide what art is and what it is not. Why can't we just choose for ourselves on the open markets what we wish to acknowledge or appreciate as art without patronizing advice from curators and art critics? Why does art refuse to seek legitimation on the open media market just like any other product? From the perspective of the media market the traditional aspirations of the museum seem historically obsolete, out-of-touch, insincere and even somewhat bizarre.

The strategies that are operating behind museum collections and exhibitions are treated in the mass media mostly as the workings of a shadowy conspiracy, as an intrigue masterminded by insiders, as a display of the hidden power of curators and museum directors far removed from any form of democratic legitimation – in other words, as an impenetrable swindle. Instead, artists are invited to follow the enticements of the mass media age, in the quest to be disseminated through media channels. This allows them to address and to seduce a much larger audience; it is also a decent way of earning money – for which the artist previously had to beg from the state or private sponsors. The mass media give the artist a new sense of power, social relevance and public presence within his or her own time. But that means precisely: the critique of the museum has lost today its avant-garde edge. Instead, the call to break loose from the museum amounts de facto to a call to medialize and commercialize art by accommodating it to the aesthetic norms generated by today's media.

At the same time – and at first glance strangely enough – the mass media also appear as a new space for the true art that was in a certain sense betrayed by contemporary art as a result of its quest for equal aesthetic rights. Certain images circulating in the

media become the icons of contemporary aesthetic and political imagination, not only because they are easily accessible, almost omnipresent and conform to the prevailing aesthetic taste, but in the first place because they are regarded as being true, being real – and as being true precisely in the very old romantic, iconophilic sense. Kojève pointed out that the moment when the overall logic of equality underlying individual struggles for recognition becomes apparent creates the impression that these struggles have to some extent surrendered their true seriousness and explosiveness. This was why, even before World War II, Kojève was able to speak of the end of history – in the sense of the political history of struggles for recognition. Since then, the discourse about the end of history has made its mark, particularly on the art scene. People are constantly referring to the end of art history, by which they mean that these days all forms and things have 'in principle' already obtained the right to be considered works of art. Accordingly, the aesthetic equality of all images that modern art has fought to establish is now frequently considered a sign of their arbitrariness and irrelevance. For if, as is argued, all images are already acknowledged as being of equal value, this would deprive the artist of the possibility of creating the images that could break taboos, provoke, shock or extend boundaries of art. Instead, by the time history has come to an end each artist will be suspected of producing just one further arbitrary image among many. Were this indeed the case, the regime of equal rights for all images would have to be regarded not only as the *telos* of the logic followed by the history of art in modernity but also as its terminal negation. Accordingly, we now witness repeated waves of nostalgia for a time when individual works of art were once still revered as eminently precious, unique and singular because of being in some emphatic sense true.

Under these new conditions, in which musealized art has seemingly lost its seriousness and its claim to be true, it is the media that become the space where the quest for the true art takes place. In today's world, the images of terror and of war against terror function primarily as such true images – as authentic icons of the contemporary political sublime. Especially video art became the medium of choice for the contemporary warriors – and because of that the medium of truth. As we know, bin Laden is communicating with the outer world primarily by the means of this medium: we all know him as a video artist, in the first place. The same can be said about the videos representing beheadings, confessions of the terrorists, and the rest.

In all these cases we have consciously and artistically staged events that have their own easily recognizable aesthetics. Here we have the people who do not wait for an artist to represent their acts of war and terror. They do not wait for a new Goya, or a new Picasso. Instead, the act of war itself coincides here with its documentation, with its representation. The traditional function of art as a medium of representation and the role of the artist as a mediator between reality and memory are here completely eliminated. The same can be said about the famous photographs and videos from the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad. These videos and photographs demonstrate an uncanny aesthetic similarity with alternative, subversive European and American art and film-making of the 1960s and 1970s. The iconographic and stylistic similarity is, in fact, striking (for example, Viennese Actionism and Pasolini movies). In both cases the goal is to reveal a naked, vulnerable, desiring body that is habitually covered by the system of social conventions. But, of course, the strategy of the subversive art of the 1960s and 1970s had the goal of undermining the traditional set of beliefs and conventions dominating the artist's own culture. In the Abu Ghraib art production this goal was, we can safely say, completely perverted. The same subversive aesthetics was used to attack and to undermine a different, other culture in an act of violence, in an act of humiliation of the other (instead of self-questioning including self-humiliation) – leaving the conservative values of artist's own culture unquestioned. In any case, it is worth mentioning that on both sides of the war on terror the image production and distribution are effectuated without any intervention of an artist. The political action becomes here identical with the artistic, aesthetic action – without any need for an additional artistic practice of aestheticization.

It is important to state that we are speaking here about the images that became the icons of the contemporary collective imagination. The terrorist videos and the videos from Abu Ghraib prison are impregnated in our consciousness or even subconsciousness much more deeply than any work of any contemporary artist. This elimination of the artist from the practice of image production is especially painful for the art system because at least since the beginning of modernity artists wanted to be radical, daring, taboo-breaking, going beyond all limitations and borders. The avant-garde art discourse makes use of many concepts from the military sphere, including the notion of the avant-garde itself. There is talk of exploding norms, destroying traditions, violating taboos, practising certain artistic strategies, attacking existing institu-

tions. The artists of the classical avant-garde saw themselves as agents of negation, destruction, eradication of all traditional institutions of art. In accordance with the famous dictum 'negation is creation', which was inspired by the Hegelian dialectic and propagated by authors such as Bakunin and Nietzsche under the title of 'active nihilism', avant-garde artists felt themselves empowered to create new icons by destruction of the old ones. A modern work of art was measured by how radical it was, how far the artist had gone in destroying artistic tradition. Although in the meantime modernity itself has often enough been declared passé, to this very day this criterion of radicalness has lost nothing of its relevance to our evaluation of art. The worst thing that can be said of an artist continues to be that his or her art is 'harmless'.

Along these lines, Don DeLillo writes in his novel *Mao II* that terrorists and writers are engaged in a zero-sum game: by radically negating that which exists, both wish to create a narrative which would be capable of capturing society's imagination – and thereby altering society. In this sense, terrorists and writers are rivals – and, as DeLillo notes, nowadays the writer is beaten hands down because today's media use the terrorists' acts to create a powerful narrative with which no writer can contend. But this kind of rivalry is even more obvious in the case of the artist. The contemporary artist uses the same media as the terrorist or the warrior: photography, video, film. At the same time it is clear that the artist cannot compete with the terrorist in the field of radical gesture. In terms of the symbolic exchange operating by way of potlatch, as it was described by Marcel Mauss or Georges Bataille, this means that in terms of the iconoclastic rivalry understood as rivalry in destruction and self-destruction, art is obviously on the losing side.

Yet this increasingly popular way of comparing art and terrorism, or art and war, is fundamentally flawed. I will try to show where I see the fallacy. In fact, terrorism is not iconoclastic. Terrorism and war are extremely iconophilic practices. Indeed, the terrorist's or the warrior's image production has the goal of producing strong images – the images that we would tend to accept as being 'real', as being 'true', as being the 'iconic revelations' of the hidden, terrible reality that is for us the global political reality of our time. These images are the icons of the contemporary political theology that dominates our collective imagination. These images answer the postmodern iconophilic nostalgia for a true image and at the same time they draw their power, their persuasiveness, from a very effective form of moral blackmail.

Presentation that presents itself

After so many decades of modern and postmodern criticism of the image, of mimesis, of representation, we feel ourselves somewhat ashamed to say that the images of terror or torture are not true, not real. We cannot say that these images are not true, because we know that they are paid for by a real loss of life – a loss of life that is documented by the images. Magritte could easily say that a painted apple is not a real apple or that a painted pipe is not a real pipe. But how can we say that a videotaped beheading is not a real beheading? Or that a videotaped ritual of humiliation in the Abu Ghraib prison is not a real ritual? After so many decades of the critique of representation directed against the naive belief in photographic and cinematic truth, we are now ready to accept certain photographed and videotaped images as unquestionably true, again.

We are confronted here with a strategy that is historically quite new. The traditional warrior was interested in the images that would be able to glorify him, to present him in a favourable, positive, attractive way. And we, of course, have accumulated a long tradition of criticizing, deconstructing, such strategies of pictorial idealization. But the pictorial strategy of the contemporary warrior is a strategy of shock and awe. And it is, of course, only possible after the long history of modern art producing images of angst, cruelty, disfiguration. The traditional critique of representation was driven by a suspicion that there must be something ugly and terrifying hidden behind the surface of the conventional idealized image. But the contemporary warrior shows us precisely that – this hidden ugliness, the image of our own suspicion, of our own angst. And precisely because of that, we feel ourselves immediately compelled to recognize these images as being true. We see things that are as bad as we expected them to be – maybe even worse. Our worst suspicions are confirmed. The hidden reality behind the image that is shown to us is as ugly as we expected it to be. So we have a feeling that our critical journey has come to its end, that our mission as critical intellectuals is accomplished. Now, the truth of the political has revealed itself – and we can contemplate the new icons of the contemporary political theology without a need to go further, because these icons are terrible enough by themselves. And so it is sufficient to comment on these icons. It makes no sense any more to criticize them in aesthetic terms. That explains the macabre fascination that finds its expression in many recent publications dedicated to the images of the war on terror emerging on both sides of the invisible front.

The source of contemporary iconophilia is not the museum but the mass media. The struggle of the avant-garde against the museum can be properly understood only by keeping that in mind. In fact, art became art originally through iconoclastic practice – of curators rather than artists. The first art museums came into existence at the turn of the nineteenth century, and became established in the course of that century as a consequence of revolutions, wars, imperial conquest and pillage of non-European cultures. All kinds of ‘beautiful’ functional objects, which had previously been employed for various religious rituals, dressing the rooms of power, or manifesting private wealth, were collected and put on display as works of art – that is, as defunctionalized, autonomous objects of pure contemplation. The curators administering these museums ‘created’ art through iconoclastic acts directed against traditional icons of religion or power, by reducing these icons to mere artworks. Art was originally conceived as ‘simply’ art. This perception as such is situated within the tradition of the European Enlightenment, which conceived of all religious icons as ‘simple things’ – as mere artworks. But the same should be said also about the icons of contemporary mass consciousness. They are simply certain images among other images – nothing more. The art of today can keep its promise of equality of all images only by secularizing the icons of today’s neoliberal and pseudo-democratic, populist media in the same way as it reacted towards the old icons of religion and power. And by doing so one should not be afraid to be accused of being elitist and undemocratic. The requirement of aesthetic equality of all images is much more radical than the requirement of the democratic, popular legitimization of certain images by the will of the majority. An allegedly democratically legitimized image is just an image – even if it is functioning as an icon of the mass media. Given our current cultural climate, the art museum is practically the only place where we can actually step back from our own present and compare it with other historical eras. The museum is a place where we are reminded of the tradition of secularization and of radical egalitarian art projects of the past – so that we can measure our own time against them.

Of course, museums cannot be the places where all possible images are exhibited on a basis of perfect equality. The space of a museum is always limited. That leads to a selection of exhibited images by a curator – a selection that is always questionable and must be questioned. But the work of a curator is primarily not an act of selection. As I have suggested,

in our time the work of selection is effectuated by the mass media, not by the museum curators. The work of a curator is an act of presentation – the act of presentation that presents itself. And that is the central difference between the museum, on the one side, and the globalized media and art market, on the other. The curator cannot but place, contextualize and narrativize works of art – which necessarily leads to their iconoclastic relativization. The museum makes the act of showing, exhibiting, curating images visible; the art market and the media market conceal it, creating the illusion of the autonomy of the image. The museum is a place where the act of curating becomes obvious – even if many curators try to reduce their curating to non-curating, to zero-curating in a tradition of Romantic iconophilia.

Iconoclastic visibility

Giorgio Agamben writes that ‘the image is a being, that in its essence is appearance, visibility, or semblance.’ But this definition of an artwork’s essence does not suffice to guarantee the visibility of a concrete artwork. A work of art cannot in fact present itself by virtue of its own definition and force the viewer into contemplation – artworks lack vitality, energy and health. They are, rather, genuinely sick and helpless; in the museum a spectator has to be led to the artwork, as hospital workers might take a visitor to see a bedridden patient. It is no coincidence that the word ‘curator’ is etymologically related to ‘cure’. Curating is curing. The process of curating cures the image’s powerlessness, its incapacity to present itself. The artwork needs external help; it needs an exhibition and a curator to become visible.

Certainly, the hidden curatorial practices of contemporary media create the illusion that the images are per se strong and powerful – because they are able to invade our visual space beyond or even against our explicit consent. These images are presented in the media as, so to say, super-images endowed by supernatural strength and dynamics – and precisely the same super-images are treated by the media as true images, as icons of our time. But the museum curatorial practice undermines this kind of iconophilia, for its medical artifice cannot remain entirely concealed from the viewer. In this respect, museum curating remains unintentionally iconoclastic even as it is programmatically iconophile. Indeed, curating acts as a supplement or a pharmakon (in Derrida’s usage), in that it cures the image even as it makes it unwell. Yet this statement opens the question: which is the right kind of curatorial practice? Since curatorial practice taking place in the

museum can never totally conceal itself successfully, the main objective of museal curating must be to visualize itself, by making its practice explicitly visible. Only then can the museum take a stand against the new icons of the popular imagination – in the name of the equal aesthetic rights of all the images. The museum can do so effectively by using – we can say also misusing – the artworks as mere illustrations of art history, by recontextualizing images, by making problematic their autonomous status.

Orhan Pamuk’s novel *My Name is Red* features a group of artists searching for a place for art within an iconoclastic culture, namely that of sixteenth-century Islamic Turkey. The group are illustrators commissioned by the powerful to ornament their books with exquisite miniatures; subsequently these books are placed in governmental or private collections. Not only are these artists increasingly persecuted by radical Islamic (iconoclastic) adversaries who want to ban all images; they are also in competition with the Occidental painters of the Renaissance, primarily Venetians, who openly affirm their own iconophilia. Yet the novel’s heroes cannot share this iconophilia, because they do not believe in the autonomy of images. And so they try to find a way to take a consistently honest iconoclastic stance, without abandoning the terrain of art. A Turkish sultan, whose theory of art would actually serve as good advice for contemporary curatorial practice, shows them the way. The sultan says the following:

an illustration that does not complement a story, in the end, will become but a false idol. Since we cannot possibly believe in the absent story, we will naturally begin to believe in the picture itself. This would be no different than the worship of the idols in the Kaaba that went on before Our Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, had destroyed them.... If I believed, heaven forbid, the way these infidels do, that the Prophet Jesus was also the Lord God himself,... only then might I accept the depiction of mankind in full detail and exhibit such images. You do understand that, eventually, we would then unthinkingly begin worshipping any picture that is hung on the wall, don’t you?

This subtle iconoclastic strategy proposed by the sultan – turning the image back into an illustration – is actually much more effective than the avant-gardist one. We have known at least since Magritte that when we look at an image of a pipe, we are not regarding a real pipe but one that has been painted. The pipe as such is not there, is not present; instead, it is being depicted as absent. In spite of this knowledge we are still inclined to believe that when we look at an artwork, we directly

and instantaneously confront 'art'. We see artworks as incarnating art. The famous distinction between art and non-art is generally understood as a distinction between objects inhabited and animated by art, and those from which art is absent. This is how works of art become art's idols – that is, as analogous to religious images, which are also believed to be inhabited or animated by gods.

To practise the secularization of and by art would mean understanding artworks not as incarnations of art, but as mere documents, illustrations of art. While they may refer to it, these are nevertheless not art. To a greater or lesser extent this strategy has been pursued by many artists since the 1960s. Artistic projects, performances and actions have regularly been documented, and by means of this documentation represented in exhibition spaces and museums. However, such documentation simply refers to art without itself being art. This type of documentation is often presented in the framework of an art installation for the purpose of narrating a certain project or action. Traditionally executed paintings, art objects, photographs or videos can also be utilized in the framework of such installations. In this case, admittedly, artworks lose their usual status as art. Instead they become documents, illustrations of the story told by the installation. One could say that today's art audience increasingly encounters art *documentation*, which provides information about the artwork itself, be it art project or art action, but in doing so confirms the absence of art in the artwork.

The artist becomes here an independent curator – and an independent curator becomes an artist. The independent curator is a radically secularized artist. He is an artist because he does everything artists do. But the independent curator is an artist who has lost the artist's aura, one who no longer has magical powers at his disposal, who cannot endow objects with art's status. He doesn't use objects – art objects included – for art's sake, but rather abuses them, makes them profane. Yet it is precisely this which makes the figure of the independent curator so attractive and so essential to the art of today. The contemporary curator is heir apparent to the modern artist, although he doesn't suffer under his predecessor's magical abnormalities. He is an artist, but atheistic and 'normal' through and through. The curator is an agent of art's profanation, its secularization, its profane abuse.

'Utopia Station' is a good example: curated by Molly Nesbit, Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Rirkrit Tiravanija, this exhibition was presented at the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003. Critical and public discussion of this exhibition stressed the issues of whether the concept

of utopia is still relevant in this day and age; whether what was put forward as a utopian vision by the curators could really be regarded as such, and so on. Yet the fact that a curatorial project that was clearly iconoclastic could be presented at one of the oldest international art exhibitions seems to me to be far more important than the above considerations. It was iconoclastic because it employed artworks as illustrations, as documents of the search for a social utopia, without emphasizing their autonomous value. It subscribed to the radical iconoclastic approach of the Russian avant-garde, which considered art to be documentation of the search for the 'new man' and towards a 'new life'. Most importantly, though, 'Utopia Station' was a curatorial and not an artistic project (even if one of the curators, Rirkrit Tiravanija, is an artist). This meant that the iconoclastic gesture could not be accompanied – and thus invalidated – by the attribution of artistic value. Nevertheless, it can still be assumed that in this case the concept of utopia was abused, because it was aestheticized and situated in an elitist art context. And it can equally be said that art was abused as well: it served as an illustration for the curator's vision of utopia. But in both cases the spectator has to confront an abuse, be it an abuse of art or by art. Here, though, abuse is just another word for iconoclasm.

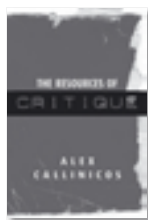
The space of a museum exhibition or of an artistic installation is often disliked in our day because it is a closed space – contrary to the open space of the contemporary media. But the closure that is effected by a museum should not be interpreted as an opposition to 'openness'. By closure the museum creates its outside and opens itself to this outside. The closure is here not an opposition to the openness but its precondition. The media space, on the contrary, is not open because it has no outside – media want to be not open but total, all-inclusive. The art practice that is conceived as a machine of infinite expansion and inclusion is also not an open artwork, but an artistic counterpart of the imperial hybrid of the contemporary media. The museum exhibition can be made into a place of openness, of disclosure, of unconcealment precisely because it situates inside its finite space, contextualizes, curates images and objects that also circulate in the outside space; and in this way it opens itself to its outside. Images don't emerge into the clearing of Being on their own accord, in order for their original visibility to be abused by the 'exhibition business', as Heidegger describes it in 'The Origin of the Work of Art'. It is far more that this very abuse makes them visible.

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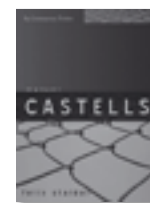


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