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# The Aporia of Praxis: Materialist Aesthetics, the Avant-Garde, and Socially Engaged Art

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**Abstract:** Rather than discuss *why* the avant-garde remains a central point of reference for discussing the politics of art, this article addresses the philosophical and methodological problems involved in making the very conceptual construction of the "avant-garde." Departing from a reconstruction of two prominent attempts to develop a "materialist aesthetics" in the 1970s, based on the historical experiences of the avant-gardes—Peter Gorsen and Peter Bürger—it turns to recent writings on "art activism" and "socially engaged art." Examining how exemplary texts of the "social turn" are conditioned by a return to the avant-gardes, the aim here is to retrieve certain materialist coordinates whose necessity for critical thought has become apparent in recent writings. What is striking in many recent attempts to interpret new socially engaged and activist trends as manifestations of a new radical art praxis—or even as embodiments of a new "avant-garde"—is an avoidance of the problem of social mediation and an insufficient attention to historical periodization. This often leads to a hyperbolic and misconstrued notion of artistic agency and praxis, or, even worse, an aestheticized grammar of political struggle and insurrection. Against this backdrop, the article demonstrates that a materialist aesthetics must continue to engage with art's *aporetic* relationship to praxis under capitalism. In this context, there is no reason to await a new avant-garde but every reason to look for attempts to actualize its self-negation—a self-negation that now falls to *others* to fulfill.

**Keywords:** *Materialist Aesthetics; The Avant-Gardes; Peter Gorsen; Peter Bürger; Socially Engaged Art*

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> *The idea that the artistic and aesthetic appropriation of praxis should be regarded as an inalienable part of culture and its memory—a viewpoint that, when viewed in the context of the plight of other peoples, is moreover narrow-minded and conservative—is anything but settled for the future.*[1]
>
> —*Peter Gorsen,* "Thesen zur künstlerischen Verarbeitung alltagsästhetischer Äußerungen."

The emergence of new forms of political art practice in the last couple of decades has led to the surprising revival of a seemingly outmoded historical phenomenon: the avant-garde. From Claire Bishop's historical genealogy of so-called "participatory art" and John Roberts's and Grant Kester's theorization of recent "socially engaged art" to Gregory Sholette's prehistory of "artistic activism" and Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen's identification of an avant-garde afterlife in the post-2011 protest movements, the avant-garde appears to be, if not outright resurrected, then a central model to comprehend the recent wave of political art practices.[2] The ban—the "prohibition of avant-garde radicality," as Marc James Léger put it[3]—has seemingly been lifted. At least in theory.

Notwithstanding the relative success of discourses on decolonization and curatorial, artistic, and institutional attempts to pursue different historical coordinates and genealogies for political art practices—a relative success, although we should recognize this has obviously always been mediated by reactionary hysteria, market adaptation, anti- and para-institutional struggles, and liberal recuperation—this has not eradicated the persistent *objection* of the largely Euro-Modernist avant-gardes. Such objection obviously takes various forms, identifying the avant-garde as either dead or alive, as fascist outcasts, or metamorphosed as something entirely different that has little to do with art.[4] And of course, scholarship and writing in this context are beginning to expand and provincialize the avant-garde, not only criticizing its gendered and

racial underpinnings but also looking for global, decolonial, and indigenous entanglements.[5] Yet, the avant-garde aporias concerning the relation of art and life, aesthetics and politics persist, arguably in resurrected form, as a biproduct of the new protest cycles and supposed "rebirth of history" from 2011 onwards, a contestation of two decades of post-political hegemony and poststructuralist micropolitics that for theorists and practitioners has made it necessary to reconsider art's imbrication with emancipatory and revolutionary horizons.[6] The "long life" of the avant-garde apparently lives on.[7]

But time has left its marks. As Peter Bürger remarked in his 2014 *After the Avant-Garde* (*Nach der Avantgarde*), the collective singular of the avant-garde has been replaced with plural forms.[8] For Bürger, this linguistic displacement not only testifies a different view of the avant-garde, but even a changed conception of history that struggles to evoke its own futurity. The return of history as a collective singular simultaneously appears to contest the semantics on which it depended since its conceptual emergence in the late eighteenth century. It is thus arguably less a return than a transmogrified and spectral reappearance.

To this we should add another semantic feature. Today, rather than something progressive, the very notion of the avant-garde mostly induces embarrassment. To suggest that someone belongs to the avant-garde—even in its plural form—is more insult than praise, more the lingo of a boomer art director than that of "real" revolutionaries. However, notwithstanding the "encumbrances the term can't help dragging with it," as Marina Vishmidt aptly put it,[9] the historical phenomenon it delineates, however contested and dynamic we might consider it—the Dadaists, constructivists, productivists, surrealists, and the "last avant-garde," the Situationists[10]—seemingly remains essential for thinking the contradictory relation between art and politics, aesthetics and social emancipation.

The question I want to discuss in this article is less why the avant-garde remains a central point of reference for discussing the politics of art, than what philosophical and methodological problems might be involved in making this very conceptual construction. That is to say, what does it mean to make this construction in the first place and, not least, to keep insisting on the value of the contradictions it provokes? What does the avant-garde demand of us? These questions are relevant here since, historically, the very theoretical construction of a Marxist or materialist aesthetics is inextricably linked to the recognition and perception of what has now come to be known as the "historical avant-gardes." Marxist aesthetics, as first theorized during the 1920s and 1930s and again in the late 1960s and 1970s, is simply unthinkable without an in-depth reflection on the avant-garde.[11] And in many respects, this is still the case. One of the central reasons for this, I will argue, has to do with what I will call the aporia of praxis.

This aporia, broadly speaking, has two features. First, the "historical avant-gardes" embody, in heterogenous and contradictory ways, an imbrication between art and revolution, a praxis of art invested in a notion and horizon of revolution that is simultaneously a "self-critique of the revolution" and thus both an obstruction and a radicalization of emancipatory process.[12] Second, the avant-gardes confront us with an expanded form of praxis of art that not only sought to subvert the distinction between art and life and art and politics, but also frequently crossed or transcended various disciplines and techniques and thus problematized the very historicity and theoretical apparatus of a materialist aesthetics.

Starting from a discussion of how this aporia of praxis was discussed in the 1970s in the writings of Peter Bürger and Peter Gorsen as an occasion for developing a new materialist aesthetics, I wish to elaborate a series of critical notes on the recent return of the avant-garde in relation to socially engaged art and activism and the aporia of praxis that this theoretical strand is entangled within.[13] This admittedly unusual, even slightly awkward, constellation is constructed with the aim of retrieving certain materialist coordinates whose necessity to critical thought has become apparent in recent writings.

## Beyond the Inner-Aesthetic, or, the Aporia of Praxis after the Avant-Garde

Against the backdrop of the "cultural revolution" of the late 1960s and the remarkable number of monographs, anthologies, translations, exhibitions, journal issues, and magazines published in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was still the *Geistesgenie* of Theodor W. Adorno that, according to Bürger, provided the critical model to think with and against the avant-gardes of the interwar years.[14] As Bürger stressed toward the end of his 1974 *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (*Theorie der Avantgarde*), "the standard for any contemporary theory of aesthetics is Adorno's, whose historicalness has become recognizable."[15] Eight years later, in his 1983 *On the Critique of Idealistic Aesthetics* (*Zur Kritik der idealistischen Ästhetik*), Bürger further elaborated on this claim, arguing that Adorno's aesthetics reached its "epochal limit" precisely in its inability to fully develop the implications of the project of the avant-garde.[16] Adorno's problem, Bürger argued, was that he merely transferred the critique of the avant-garde to an "inner-aesthetic" (*innerästhetisches*) problem.[17] He thus essentially covered up or obscured the rupture that should call into question any "modern" aesthetic theory. For Bürger, a "contemporary" aesthetic theory should start from this rupture, from this non-aesthetic break constituted by the avant-garde critique of the "institution of art," an institution that the avant-gardes, against

the backdrop of the historical emergence of what Bürger calls "aestheticism," had made recognizable. In this way, Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (*Ästhetische Theorie*)—notwithstanding, or perhaps rather precisely because of his theorization of the nominalism of modern art—obfuscated the very historicity of aesthetic categories.

Paradoxically, however, such critique was for Bürger no longer contemporary but rather precisely "historical"—obsolete or "recuperated," as the Situationists would put it. It is as if the very proposition of a *historico-practical* opening of a materialist aesthetics forced Bürger to neutralize or erase such a possibility in the very moment of being thought; that is, to transfer it to a distant historical object, a historically impossible theoretical potential. As Bürger admitted much later, *Theory of the Avant-garde* should be read not least as a response to the hope and ultimate failure of the revolutionary promises of '68. As he put it: "In this situation, I transferred without being conscious of it, utopian aspirations from a society in which they could not be realized to theory."[18] This should not be read merely as a surprisingly late retrospective confession, but rather as a statement that brings to the fore the historico-philosophical kernel of critical aesthetic theory and the porous relationship between theory and praxis that according to Bürger became apparent with the avant-garde.

For Bürger, the historical avant-gardes were the first form of art that came close to what Marx in the Feuerbach theses dubbed "revolutionary praxis."[19] Only by placing the avant-garde into this conjunction does its failure become intelligible. At stake was nothing less than an attack on the art institution, a "revolutionizing of the praxis of life [*Lebenspraxis*]."[20] Bürger's notion of praxis here played an ambiguous role. On the one hand, the avant-garde refrained from developing a style and even "the possibility of a period style."[21] As manifested in the use of "obsolete materials," their praxis took place "outside those sanctioned by the institution," as he later stressed.[22] The attack on the art institution "set off from the praxis of life"; that is, beyond and against the totality of artistic style. On the other hand, it was this *Lebenspraxis* itself that they strived to revolutionize. Such a claim would have been guilty of an undialectical contradiction had it not implied the *mediation* of an art that it sought to "reintegrate […] in the praxis of life."[23] From this desired reintegration emerged a politics by other means, a politics that used art to revolutionize the praxis of life—indeed a contradictory form of politics that, if successful, would sublate art itself. As Bürger put it: "Paradoxically, the avant-gardiste intention to destroy art as an institution is thus realized in the work of art itself. The intention to revolutionize life by returning art to its praxis turns into a revolutionizing of art."[24]

For Bürger, Adorno's worst and most fatal failure was his failure to recognize the failure of the avant-garde. Art remained an "unconscious historiography

of what is norm and what is monstrous in history,"[25] and the avant-garde attack on the "antithesis between art and the praxis of life" a mere "work" [*Werke*].[26] In this way, Adorno's thought could even be characterized as an "anti-avant-gardism."[27] He was simply unable to free himself from the trap of the inner-aesthetic province, or even to recognize that he was caught in such a trap—a critique that, somewhat paradoxically, one could easily direct toward Bürger himself.[28] Notwithstanding Adorno's elaboration of the double character of art and its complex social mediation, for Bürger, it was Adorno's refusal to analyze art's effect as a positivistic and functionalist exercise, and the unmediated grasp between work and effect this implied, that indicated an insufficient understanding of art's "social function," which, with the emergence of the avant-garde, gained a new critical consciousness.[29]

Ironically, Bürger's antidote to Adorno was found in the early writings of Herbert Marcuse; specifically, his 1937 essay "On the Affirmative Character of Culture." It is ironic because Bürger was hereby subtly ignoring Marcuse's largely Adornian critical reconsideration of this essay in *Counter-Revolution and Revolt*, published two years before *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. As Marcuse put it in his later text:

> The cultural revolution remains a radically progressive force. However, in its efforts to free the political potential of art, it is blocked by an unsolved contradiction. A subversive potential is in the very nature of art—but how can it be translated into reality today, that is to say, how can it be expressed so that it can become a guide and element—in the praxis of change without ceasing to be art, without losing its internal subversive force? […] Art can express its radical potential only as art, in its own language and image, which invalidate the ordinary language, the "prose du monde." […] The tension between affirmation and negation precludes any identification of art with revolutionary praxis. Art cannot represent the revolution, it can only invoke it in another medium, in an aesthetic form in which the political content becomes metapolitical, governed by the internal necessity of art.[30]

Articulated in the wake of '68, Marcuse's message was clear: Art's metamorphosis into revolutionary praxis will happen neither before nor after the revolution. The aesthetic form or *Schein* was a transhistorical and impenetrable veil. By implication, the very project of the historical avant-garde's reintegration of art into "social praxis" could only be considered a contradiction in adjecto, indeed a historical impossibility. In an inverted form of Hegel's "end of art" thesis, art could, in fact, never end. The historical and social critique of art in capitalist societies was hereby replaced with a socialist metaphysics of "permanent aesthetic subversion," since, as Marcuse noted, "this is the way of art."[31]

It was Marcuse's 1972 book, together with Jürgen Habermas's reflection on art in *Legitimation Crisis* (*Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus*) published the same year, that served as the backdrop for Gorsen's essay "Transformed Everyday Life or the Transcendence of Art" (Transformierte Alltäglichkeit oder Transzendenz der Kunst?) published in the anthology *Das Unvermögen der Realität: Beiträge zu einer anderen materialistischen Ästhetik* (The incapacity of reality: Contributions to an alternative materialist aesthetics). While Gorsen, contrary to Bürger, refrained from suggesting any overarching historical model, and was thus less interested in the rupture of the avant-garde than the possibilities it opened, he not only shares Bürger's recognition of the avant-garde as the central *event* that necessitated a new materialist aesthetics; on the basis of his scholarly work on the Proletkult movement, he also unearthed a different theoretical terrain of "art praxis" or "aesthetic praxis."[32] As he put it: "From the tradition of both anti-bourgeois (e.g. Surrealist) and revolutionary-proletarian art practice, the historical approaches to a different materialist aesthetics, one that does not slavishly adhere to the postulate of aesthetic immanence, can be extrapolated."[33]

Like Bürger, Gorsen was occupied with subverting the "inner-aesthetic" or "aesthetic immanence" maintained by figures such as Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas, whose recent books he thought manifested a problematic blurring between bourgeois and Marxist aesthetics. Rather than a field of contradictions expressing unresolved social relations, this blurred field was, according to Gorsen, characterized by an obsession with a separation between artwork and life praxis, an a priori separation reproduced in the conventional omnipresent question that came to the foreground every time bourgeois art theory was confronted with avant-garde art: "Is this art?"[34] In the attempt to free himself from this blurred space, without failing to consider its contradictory nature, Gorsen proposed an "operative aesthetics" [*operative Ästhetik*] or "aesthetics of production" [*Produktionsästhetik*]. Evoking figures like Boris Arvatov, Sergei Tretyakov, Bertolt Brecht, and Walter Benjamin—all in divergent ways "operative artists" [*operierenden Künstler*]—Gorsen was interested in the bourgeois angst for the "artist without an artwork" that their practices made apparent.[35] At play here, Gorsen suggested, was a strategic and conscious "misunderstanding" of art on the part of the operative artist:[36]

> If critical theory (Marcuse, Habermas) still understands art in a bourgeois-immanent way as the singular transfiguration of the inner-aesthetic work, then operative production aesthetics consciously 'misunderstands' art as a lever for organizing knowledge and imagination in the life context of collectives. It is a means of organizing the aesthetic qualification of everyday life.[37]

Gorsen acknowledged the persuasiveness of the conforming position of the critical theorists, their maintenance of the "aesthetic difference between art and

life," as a "*Politikum*" in a post-68 world where the revolting "actionist and psychedelic forms of living art," as argued by Marcuse, were less critiquing than extending the commodified "aesthetics of the everyday" [*Alltagsästhetik*].[38] With the emergence of an omnipresent "commodity aesthetics," as analyzed by Wolfgang Fritz Haug, in the form of phenomena such as design and public relations, capitalism indeed appeared as the "true avant-garde" in the history of art, Gorsen argued.[39] Holding on to an aesthetic difference in a landscape of aesthetic indistinguishability was understandable since it maintained a clear grasp on art's criticality.[40] However, as Gorsen underlined in another text from 1974 titled "Against media optimism" ("Gegen den Medienoptimismus"), he was far from convinced about the assumption, so prevalent among Frankfurt School theorists, that it was possible to retrieve the elements for an anti-capitalist counterculture in the bourgeois tradition.[41] It is against this backdrop that his scholarly and editorial work on Proletkult should ultimately be considered. Just as importantly, the very belief in the emancipatory potential of the aesthetic *Schein*—bourgeois or not—that secured a mediated relationship between art and revolution as "a unity of opposites, an antagonistic unity,"[42] as Marcuse put it, appeared increasingly difficult to reiterate, if not outright historically obsolete.

As Gorsen notes in the article "Theses on the artistic processing of everyday aesthetic expressions" ("Thesen zür künstlerischen Verarbeitung alltagsästhetischer Äusserungen"), first published in 1978 but based on a talk given in 1976, the turn toward operative aesthetics, and its misunderstood notion of art, could be seen as a response to the question of how "artworks can retain their claimed critical power" in a time of diminished "public character" due to the culture industry's reduction of art and culture to private consumption and the broader aestheticized forces of capital.[43] As a critical but astute reader of Adorno, Gorsen was committed to a reconsideration of art's critical role in a present where art's "de-artification" (*Entkunstung*) was more extensive and complicated than Adorno was able to grasp. Gorsen theorized such complication as a dialectical process of a "de-aestheticization of art" and an "aestheticization of reality," a double movement underpinned by a more general "industrially produced experiential mode."[44] In this new historical terrain, the commodity had not only become the "competitor" to art but an essential *framework* for artistic and curatorial production itself, as exemplified in the case of the works of Andy Warhol and the art institution's new "motives for mass visits."[45] With this loss of art's "public character," which Adorno in a more or less repressed form always presupposed, a reconsideration of art's critical potential could not be detached from its organizational form. And as Gorsen argued, the negative force of the artwork, the sedimented and immanent carrier of utopia,

> is a poor organizer of everyday life and its communicative processes. It conveys social change exclusively in categories of aesthetic immanence, of conformity to form, of the logic immanent in the work, but not in the categories and expressions of practical relationships in the collective context of life.[46]

Rather than positing an a priori "aesthetic difference" by reference to art's fundamental separation from everyday life, Gorsen therefore tried to identify an aesthetic "quality of difference" (*Differenzqualitäten*) in various practices that appropriated or operationalized the artistic "organization of knowledge [Erkenntnis] and phantasy," through or beyond art, but in close proximity to "practical relationships in the collective context of life."[47] Whereas the negative force in the inner aesthetic realm—and its "non-operational concept of the artwork"—as espoused by Habermas, Marcuse, and Adorno, maintained art as the fixed, more or less hermetic point of departure for a "learning process" (*Lernprozess*) as the object and goal for such a process, Gorsen argued that "operative aesthetics inverts the learning process. Now it is the art producer who has difficulties with the masses."[48] By this, Gorsen alluded to the fact that for the operative artist, it was not a question of "inventing" new artforms, but rather to "find" them *in* life.[49] This inversion of the "learning process" by the operative artist prompted an inversion or displacement of the relation between art and life. In Gorsen's words: "Aesthetic difference from the bad that exists is no longer determined by the individual work of art, but by life, which has given itself a new style, a new form, a different aesthetic."[50]

Just as Tretyakov, whose writings had been translated into German just a few years before, had transformed himself into an "interviewer" or "literary secretary" in collective life contexts,[51] Gorsen attempted to trace the afterlife or reinvention of such operative aesthetics in cases such as the women's and feminist movements of the 1970s and practices of obscene "sexual aesthetics."[52] Though imbued with social compromises and ambivalences, Gorsen thought it was possible to consider some of these practices not simply as new art forms, but rather, as he stated in relation to feminist practices, "an aesthetic and 'art' that bases the transformability of alienated everyday life on the assumption that capitalism will not completely subjugate the female sphere of individual reproduction, need-oriented imagination, and spontaneity to the aggressive reality principle of production."[53] Whereas Bürger had attempted to trace avant-garde strategies and practices before and beyond the "history" and ism's that reduced them to manifestations of artistic styles, Gorsen considered the possibility of an avant-garde afterlife in the name of an operative aesthetics understood as a "critical context of use between aesthetics and everyday life" that was able to include "the emancipation of female needs" and other "anomalies" and as such manifest an aesthetic "appropriation of praxis."[54]

## After Socially Engaged Art

The so-called "social turn" that continues to influence and even constitute the discursive conditions of contemporary art could be said to replay central problems and claims articulated by Bürger and Gorsen regarding the antimonies of art as praxis.[55] In this respect, it is indeed more accurate to designate it as a *re*-turn. As Roberts has argued, the emergence of socially engaged art from the 1990s onwards has led to an "an explicit identification of art praxis *with* political praxis, producing, in effect, a new, generic conjunction of the cultural and political: art-political praxis."[56] In a similar vein, Léger argued in the wake of the 2011 uprisings that "beyond the deadlock of the postmodern critique of meta-narratives, artists, theorists, and activists have begun to revisit questions of radical practice that were prematurely consigned to the dustbin of history."[57]

The obvious contradictions of this revival of the question of radical or political praxis *as* art is only bolstered by its extraordinary success *in* the art world in the last fifteen years or so—a success that, obviously, could just as well be considered a failure if we measure it by the desired extra-artistic social effects that the practices aim to achieve.[58] It would be wrong to simply consider this successful failure through the logic of recuperation. As discussed by writers like Vishmidt, the prevalence of activist and socially engaged art practices at the heart and periphery of institutions first and foremost find their intelligibility in their functional adaptability to "neoliberal social management" and a creative entrepreneurialism in a waning regime of capitalist accumulation.[59] This does not completely occlude the political potential of socially engaged or activist art practices, but rather constitutes the ground on which they find themselves.

It is on this ground that the "radical" aura—certainly the result of an ideological recuperation—saturating discourses on art activism and socially engaged art has failed in a successful way. And it is this auratic "politics," endowing curators and artists with an agency that even 1920s avant-gardists would consider hyperbolic, that has justified and compelled socially engaged and activist shows at the most prestigious art institutions and biennials and has, overall, left an enduring mark on institutional profiles and curatorial programs, with special issues and even a whole new journal devoted to the "field" appearing together with MFAs, university courses, summer schools, curatorial programs, and professorships in "social practice." To this we could add prestigious art awards, such as the Turner Prize going to prominent socially engaged artists and collectives, not to mention the notorious "lists," such as that of ArtReview, who in 2020 ranked "Black Lives Matter" (BLM) as the most influential actor in the art world—"MeToo" was ranked in fourth place.[60] In certain respects, this social and "activist" trend in the art institutional mainstream culminated with *documenta fifteen* in 2022, which consisted entirely of art collectives that formed their very own ecosystem

anchored within what was considered a solidarity-based alternative economy—made possible, of course, through partnership with big "stakeholders" such as Volkswagen, who, during the exhibition, propagated sustainability and a zero-emission politics.

In this respect, it is difficult not to consider socially engaged art and activism as a huge success that has been keeping everyone happy: artists and curators, academics and activists—and business. As summarized by Sholette: "Once omitted from standard art historical accounts and museum collections, artistic activism and collectivism is now visible virtually everywhere in the art world and beyond."[61] Socially engaged art is now inextricably linked, even functional, to the art world as such. Vishmidt's remark from 2012 still holds true: critique of autonomy on behalf of "radical dependency" constitutes one of the orthodoxies of the art world.[62] This popularity and functional adaptability comprises an important part of socially engaged art's "opacity."[63] Designations such as social practice, socially engaged art, and art activism have become as opaque as the neo-positivist notion of the "social" itself undergirding them. As Louis Hartnoll has argued:

> today's "post-social" moment, where engagement, dialogue, and participation determine institutional self-understanding, where dependency is an orthodoxy made morally comfortable, the view that art is thoroughly and unquestionably social, and that this is empirically demonstrable, is unavoidable.[64]

Clear indications of the crises and vulnerabilities that such a post-social moment entails and sparks became publicly apparent with the backlash against *documenta fifteen* and the instrumentalization of accusations of antisemitism, that, together with widespread censoring and self-censoring, and a ubiquitous genocidal ignorance, have only intensified in Germany and elsewhere since Israel's genocidal war in Gaza, not to mention the effects of Trump 2.0 and the mainstreaming of neo-fascist anti-woke cultural politics on a global scale. While these more recent occurrences invite us to recall that artistic calls for social engagement and collective organizing were, in fact, always—arguably since the "historical avant-gardes" in the Euro-Modernist tradition—virtually surrounded by reactionary panic and liberal and conservative defenses of the "autonomy" of art and aesthetic "transgression," it would also be wrong to neglect to register new mutations.[65] Since the most realistic scenario is that this contradictory terrain will endure and intensify, at least in the immediate future, this necessitates continuing reflection on the potentialities and constraints of a phenomenon that is now impossible to detach from the institutional apparatus of the art world and its opportunist friends and enemies.[66]

In the following, I will therefore inspect a series of central claims and strategies by some of the most influential theorists and critics of activist and socially

engaged art, in particular the work of Kester and Sholette. While Kim Charnley is correct in pointing out that the "aporias of Marxist aesthetics have returned to hold a prominent position in debates about the social turn,"[67] I wish to elaborate on the claim that such Marxist aporias are themselves imbricated with the aporias of the avant-garde as its historical condition of possibility and that only by acknowledging these imbrications can we begin to grasp the contemporary aporia of praxis, which must be considered essential to the possibility of a materialist aesthetics today.

## Genealogies without History

It has become somewhat of a habit in art theory and criticism to engage in constructing alternative genealogies. As already noted, this has led to a somewhat surprising return of the avant-garde. This return, however, is less surprising if we inspect the historical conjunction in which it appears. After all, the avant-garde is a child of revolutionary periods. It moves in spirals, in the latent and spectral spaces of crises that prove manifest in the "now of recognizability." As Bürger notes, the avant-garde is not recognizable in every historical moment. If May '68 served as a Benjaminian "tiger leap" for critics like Gorsen and Bürger, then the financial crisis and the social unrest it sparked—in particular, since 2011—could be seen as the historical condition of possibility for recent socially engaged art and the re-consideration of the avant-garde that has often accompanied it.

Tellingly, this allusion to 2011 was present in the very title of the publication, edited by Nato Thompson, that grew out of the exhibition *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991–2011*, held at Creative Time in New York in 2011 and in various iterative and "nomadic" forms at other places in the subsequent years. According to the critic Yates McKee, this reference to 2011 as the periodizing end point could even be understood literally. By noting the direct crossing of paths between the exhibition at Creative Time and the early formation of Occupy Wall Street (OWS), he thus suggested the "historiographical provocation"—admittedly bordering on New York centrism[68]—that OWS marked the "end of socially engaged art" as a progressive institutional phenomenon and thus also the beginning of an extra-institutional form of art activism.[69]

According to influential theorists such as Bishop, Sholette, and Kester, the phenomena of socially engaged art and art activism should be analyzed in a far broader historical perspective. For all these writers, the avant-garde plays a central role in terms of providing a historical reference for a contemporary theorization of new radical practices. In contrast to Gorsen and Bürger, who

in distinct ways identified the historical rupture of the avant-garde and tried to follow its aporetic structure in the postwar years, the avant-garde in more recent art theoretical writings is most often included in the history on the premise that it poses no demands on its own.[70] The role of the avant-garde is here not to interfere in the present with a historical problematization of the relation between art and emancipation but to mark its *pre*history. Whereas Thompson thus describes the avant-gardes as "predecessors," Bishop smoothly constructs the "historical avant-gardes" as an "anticipation" of and "origin" for more recent participatory and socially engaged art that "arguably forms what avant-garde we have today: artists devising social situations as a dematerialized anti-market, politically engaged project to carry on the avant-garde call to make art a more vital part of life."[71] Sholette is seemingly more skeptical of the temporal order imposed by chronological genealogies. He thus argues that his book *The Art of Activism and the Activism of Art*—a "particle accelerator" that is also a "surplus or phantom archive"—merely provides a "selection of this wildly branching genealogy."[72] However, he nevertheless places the "last avant-garde," the Situationist International, as the starting point for his brief genealogy of "art activism," a historical arché that is not only justified because it is the most "succinct and influential interpretation," but clearly also because it allows him to hint at the revolutionary prospects of contemporary art activism.[73] Kester, on the contrary, sees the avant-garde as the primary historical obstacle to comprehending recent socially engaged art. In a way, his "dialogical aesthetics," as developed from 2004 to the recent two-volume study of "aesthetic autonomy," is one long endeavor to elaborate a non-avant-gardist but distinct "historical" (though highly selective and idiosyncratic) tradition of aesthetic-political social emancipation, a gesture which, of course, appears strikingly avant-gardist.

I will here suggest that we read Kester as the exception that proves the rule. Kester's denigrating and highly strategic account of the avant-garde is symptomatic of a suspension of the aporetic structure of the "historical avant-gardes," a kind of included exclusion that neutralizes the very historical and social contradictions of art's claim to praxis and, with this, a materialist grasp of its emancipatory horizons in the present. The avant-garde, for Kester, does not refer to any material reality or specific historical conjunction, even less to specific forms of art practices. The avant-garde rather constitutes an "aesthetic paradigm" or "schema" or "dispositive"—that is, a "discursive system" and "performative matrix"—whose claims to autonomy and "performative historical effects" Kester takes "very seriously," at "face value," as the art historian Steyn Bergs has phrased it.[74]

Strikingly, Kester's aesthetic autonomy double volume has managed to avoid any reference whatsoever to the arguably most influential theoretical elaboration on the critique of aesthetic autonomy: Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.[75]

In contrast to Bürger, and the discussions it sparked in the 1970s concerning whether the avant-garde in fact negated or reclaimed autonomy,[76] for Kester, the avant-garde, first and foremost, epitomizes "a form of autonomous subjectivity, rooted in a paradigm of bourgeois possessive individualism."[77] Such an analysis is not only the consequence of Kester's highly critical attitude toward (some crudely construed version of) Marxism, but also the methodological outcome of his focus on the ontology of the artist's (rather than art's) discursive horizon and claims.[78] Hence, whereas Lenin becomes a representative of the possessive individualism inherent to political vanguardism, Adorno is turned into a representative of the avant-garde's "cognitive domination" and the idea that "the prefigurative potential of aesthetic experience can only be sustained so long as it remains "undamaged by praxis" and its "dreaded moment of premature desublimation."[79]

While I have shown elsewhere that Adorno in fact elaborated a far more dialectical and "generative" notion of praxis,[80] I would here simply like to note the sheer awkwardness of such claims when read in light of Bürger and Gorsen. What is entirely ignored in Kester's critique of the avant-garde is not only the historical constitution of the critique of what Bürger and Gorsen called Adorno's "inner-aesthetic" horizon—and thus an elaboration of the historicity of aesthetic categories more broadly—but also precisely art's contradictory imbrication with praxis. This ignorance is all the more striking given Kester's implicit reliance on exactly such critiques. It matters less here that the function of Kester's notion of the avant-garde is mostly heuristic, since it allows him to delineate a series of practices that are supposedly *more* political, praxis-oriented, and therefore closer to emancipatory struggles than the avant-garde supposedly ever was (in other words: more avant-gardist). His repeated critique of the "conventionality" of the avant-garde, or what he also calls the "'normal science' of the avant-garde,"[81] is therefore first and foremost to be understood as a boomerang: it replicates the worst conventional caricatures in a general dehistoricization of art's relation to praxis.[82]

My point here is obviously not that the avant-garde tradition should not be treated critically—it certainly should, and a great amount of work has done so for at least fifty years. Rather, I will argue, Kester's straw man construction of the avant-garde indicates a more general and prevalent political and historical leveling of the contradictions of artistic *praxis*. While Sholette is dubiously ambivalent as to whether it is in fact possible to reiterate the Situationists' desire for "total subversion of the system" in the present,[83] Kester is more explicitly trying to free himself from the burdens of Marxist and communist thought. One of his recurrent critiques of the avant-garde is symptomatically its naïve belief in "full Communism" (hereby bypassing the central role played by anarchism, among other political strands). Kester wrongly ascribes this notion to Marx.[84]

In general, he reduces communism to a foolish belief in historical teleology and naïve utopianism as epitomized in Paul Signac's pointillist painting *Au temps d'harmonie* (1895), precisely the "ideal" that Marx and Engels denounced on behalf of "the real movement which abolished the present state of things."[85] It is against this backdrop that the avant-garde is to be considered the aesthetic equivalent to Lenin's "iron discipline, military hierarchy, and merciless violence" legitimized by the "mythos of total revolution."[86] As a problematic "privileged carrier of revolutionary consciousness" throughout the twentieth century, the avant-garde reproduced cognitive hierarchies and a bourgeois utopianism that supposedly blocked any relationality between art and praxis. This is the reason why the avant-garde as a hegemonic discourse of art's claim to social emancipation constitutes an enemy to socially engaged art and thus also an enemy to a present that for Kester is supposedly in no need of its bombastic revolutionary impulses and desires.

Rather than historical rupture and development, as in Bürger, or even the Freudian-poststructuralist *Nachträgligkeit*, as in Hal Foster, Kester's overall historical model appears strikingly flat and "empty," characterized, mostly, by genealogical points of continuities across continents. There is no attention to the question of periodization in Kester's work. While the avant-garde artist here shows up to be always already virtually "segregated in the museum and circulating within the rarefied precincts of the international art market"[87] and not a product of historical specific mutations, this is apparently not a fate shared with socially engaged art, for whom the appropriation of praxis, as theorized by Bürger and Gorsen, seems to always already have taken place. While there are good reasons to be sympathetic to Kester's attempt to expand the historical gaze beyond a Western context, it is also telling that the historical nodes he traces (Honoré Daumier, Arts and Crafts, the Paris Commune, Neo-Impressionism, Proletkult, Gandhi, El Taller de Gráfica Popular, Augusto Boal, etc.) are not in any way framed or contextualized with broader historical, global, and social conjunctions. Instead, they are only analytically connected by virtue of Kester's transhistorical patchwork of an abstract aesthetic-political struggle or "resistance" against various forms of "power." This general lack of historical elaboration and a crypto-Foucauldian (or "poststructuralist") notion of "resistance" and "power"—"that shadowy and mythical Foucault entity," as Frederic Jameson aptly dubbed it[88]—can help explain the awkward arbitrariness of his examples illustrating his own "more sophisticated" discursive paradigm, which alone accommodate the supposed "complexity" of recent socially engaged art.[89] Rather than an expression of "sovereign authorship," to use one of Kester's own expressions, it would be more precise to see this as a symptom of a particular form of historical narcissism and a privatization of historical knowledge that Kester paradoxically shares with certain institutional tendencies in the art world and elsewhere.[90]

## Beyond and Within the Inner-Aesthetic

In an interview published on *YouTube*, Kester has argued that part of the reason he wrote the two volumes on aesthetic autonomy was to address the question "what does it mean to call this work art?"[91] At no point in the books, however, does he actually develop the category of art. Admittedly, at certain points he does suggest that activist gestures began to be used as "creative intentionality rather than simple tactical necessity" and thus opened up "a field of potential experimentation,"[92] but his account of this historical process is extremely brief, and more importantly, more or less univocally tied to the intention of the artist-subject or Kester's own theoretical interpellation of subjects and forms of practices that few would recognize as art. As an elastic term (rather than *concept*/*Begriff*) devoid of historicity and philosophical speculation, art for Kester is thus subject to an ahistorical nominalist subjectivism of either the artist in question or himself as the theorist.

This problem is often found in critical writing on socially engaged art and art activism. Haunting this writing, we can detach the nominalist problem as posed by Adorno. This can be roughly condensed into one question: How can we grasp and philosophically comprehend artistic practices that radically supersede inherited aesthetic categories and thus confront the critic with the very historicity of their theoretical apparatus? Rather than delving into the contradictions and historical-theoretical problems of this question, such as the tendencies to take refuge in inner-aesthetic realms, as discussed by Bürger and Gorsen, it has become common sense to simply claim and thus presuppose that socially engaged art has expanded art, at best by referring to general historical schemes such as the "dematerialization" of art and its post-object character. This often creates an ambiguous tension between subversion and expansion, transcendence and integration.

A good example of this, which in many respects tries to give a historical account of this tension, can be found in Sholette's *The Art of Activism and the Activism of Art.* As Sholette argues toward the end of this book, in an allusion to the work of Giorgio Agamben, and some of his own previous writings, art has become "bare art."[93] It is this historical process—"the missing determinant for the recent explosion of art activism"[94]—that has rendered it possible for art to engage in everyday life in a 1:1 format without completely eradicating its critical potential.[95] Rather than justifying itself by going against the "exceptional privileges" of art, what makes art activism both possible and necessary today is "art's earthbound plummet into an everyday reality, wholly saturated with capital from megadevelopers and petroleum industry oligarchs, and capable of serving as a tax shelter, or mutual fund investment, or a cloak no longer even concealing real estate, debt and war profiteering."[96]

As life has become fully aestheticized and "capitalist hegemony [is] turned into a consummate design project," art, Sholette suggests with a reference to the theorist Stephen Wright, comes to equal life.[97] This serves a discrete path for art to simply "escape into the everyday without a trace."[98] The historically complex problem of art's social mediation is here replaced with circular reasoning and political-aesthetic *immediacy*. As Sholette's collaborator and theorist of "social-aesthetics," Kim Charnley, has phrased it, "bare art is art on the brink of tipping over into politics, forming a space in which to assemble resistance against the neoliberal capitalist order."[99] It appears as if, for Sholette, we are placed in a unique historical situation where art has finally merged into life, but not by its own force. As Sholette notes by referring to a quote from the Argentine artist León Ferrari which inspired the iconic Tucumán Arde:

> Today the "environment where the artist moves" is everywhere. It is the same for the activist. And even if we could apply some type of Turing test to determine whether this or that phenomenon is activist or is art, given contemporary circumstances, its outcome would always wind up as a paradox.[100]

Categorial differentiation has apparently become obsolete, even paradoxical when trying to come to terms with social reality, since art no longer presents itself as distant from this reality. Finally, it seems, art has escaped from its own monadological form. It is no longer necessary for art to find ways to overcome the distinction between itself and life. This is Sholette's historico-philosophical *solution*.

Obviously, artists do other things than art, and not everything they engage with becomes artistic. It would be incredibly patronizing and methodologically unjustifiable—a manifestation of a disciplinary and "territorial" attitude—to presuppose or claim that any political engagement by artists maintains an artistic or "aesthetic" dimension, thus implying that artists cannot have a political practice in a non- or even anti-artistic/aesthetic way. Though Sholette seems to be aware of the intrinsic problems of such a vulgar voluntarism, he nonetheless appears to be caught in its antinomic web. It is not sufficient to simply state that artists engage in protest, he needs a positive definition. Hence, he argues that the activist artist is not "representing politics or social injustice" but is rather characterized by "an unyielding focus on agitation and protest as an artistic medium."[101] However, how this new artistic medium is mediating social struggles, and how, precisely, artists can contribute with their skills in social movements in a world already characterized by "the full-on aestheticization of the social itself," not to mention the pivotal question why "artists" or "activists" remain or become artists when they engage in social struggles, is left largely unaddressed.[102] For Sholette, activist artists move in a pendulum of "indivisible contingency."[103] It embodies the political negation of the artist and the aesthetic affirmation of the activist: at one end of the spectrum, the activist

Emery Mwazulu Diyabanza is removing an African artifact from an exhibition in Paris, at the other end the artist Oliver Ressler follows and films "performative demonstrators" with Extinction Rebellion. Admittedly, if art activism here poses itself as a "far stranger phenomenon than it might at first appear,"[104] it only does so because Sholette has constructed it as such. The "tenuous line"—"if a line still exists at all"[105]—between art and activism has more or less dissolved and even scholars are supposedly now analyzing the new protest movements and their use of aesthetics and art "without reservation of the need to explain some elusive difference between art and activism."[106] As Sholette rhetorically asks: "and honestly, isn't that the least of our concerns now?"

The problem here, as I see it, has nothing do with acknowledging the open and porous categorical nature of art. Rather, Sholette symptomatizes an ignorance of the categorical contradictions and problems that characterizes material and social relations, a seemingly "progressive" ignorance that can easily lead to a hyperbolic and ultimately reactionary notion of artistic agency and praxis, or, even worse, an aestheticized grammar of social struggle and insurrection. This could also be phrased as an avoidance or bypassing of the intricate problem of social mediation.[107]

For McKee, OWS should be considered an artwork in its own right, while for Sholette, museum workers trying to unionize, demonstrators protesting against the so-called gag-law in Spain in 2014, and Black Lives Matter are put in the same "archival" box as that of the Situationist International and other canonical (art) figures, such as Martha Rosler and Hans Haacke. Kester constructs a similar historical space of artists and activists, which includes the *escraches* in Argentina in the early 2000s, the Tamms Year Ten project in Illinois, the Bishan Commune in China, the "Washing the Flag" performances in Peru, and the Rojava Film Commune in Rojava in northern Syria.[108] On the one hand, activist or socially engaged art acquires its politics by taking place "outside" art institutions, by transcending it or conducting a strike. On the other hand, this politics harvests its distinct criticality and radicality precisely by remaining art, just at another level or by other means. This contradictory movement—a kind of immanent transcendence that floats in an "indivisible contingency"—obviously implies its own risks, as also discussed by Charnley: if the first movement tends to idealize and reinforce the ideology of the autonomy of artists and the art institution as some kind of purist apparatus or sovereign machine that has nothing to with a materialist analysis, the other movement often leads to a "reification" of social struggles as the object of an "artistic reading" or a focus on the aesthetic features of the political that is nearly always done on behalf of wider social, historical, and political analysis.[109]

## Art as Political Effect

Whereas Kester's work is deeply invested in the endeavor to invent a new aesthetic-political grammar of resistance beyond the "conventional" paradigm of the avant-garde and its revolutionary inclinations, Sholette on the contrary argues that Saint Simon's early nineteenth-century call for the avant-garde is "fulfilled" in our "unpresent."[110] Despite this apparent divergence, their recent writings nonetheless intersect at the attempt to formulate a new form of emancipatory aesthetic subjectivity on the basis of the latest activist and socially engaged art practices. At stake here is nothing less than a rearticulation of the relation between aesthetics and politics, and with this also art's claim to achieve a direct political *effect*.

As Sholette has remarked in a 2022 talk, reminiscent of Suzanne Lacy, activist art could be defined as "engaged useful art that gets things done."[111] But what, precisely, do activist artists get done? A prevalent strand in 2000s and 2010s socially engaged art revolved around the notion of *usefulness*. What often undergirded this discussion was the realization at another level of the avant-garde sublation between art and life. Whether in WochenKlausur's various manifestations, such as the project of a Women-led Workers' Cooperative in Drumchapel Glasgow, or Tania Bruguera's *Immigration Movement International* (IMI), originally centered in Corona, Queens, art was frequently said to subvert the aesthetic domain of *Schein* for the sake of an immediate and communal effect, such as empowering vulnerable groups. In such instances, art has a direct *impact*, not by confronting the viewer with "the uselessness of those works as objects for contemplative immersion," as Benjamin described the Dadaists, but by actually helping people.[112] Viewers were here turned into participants and art itself an *arte útil*.

Together with artists such as Bruguera, Kester's "dialogical aesthetics" has been essential for theoretically validating such a view, not by a historico-philosophical solution, as in Sholette, but a pragmaticist and neo-Habermasian conviction in the political powers of dialogue and communal and institutional reform. Socially engaged art, according to Kester, carries a "concept of art that gains its power precisely through its active engagement with the impure actuality of the world as it is."[113] That is to say, socially engaged artists are political because they always already find themselves in this "world as it is," a world or life that is itself always already considered a "lifeworld of resistance."[114]

Kester repeatedly contrasts socially engaged art's "specific, embodied conditions" and its "dialogical interconnection with the lifeworld of resistance" with the supposedly "pure," "possessive," and "self-contained" desires of the

"avant-garde."[115] I here want to suggest that Kester's evocation of the mysterious "lifeworld," this impure "world as it is" *beyond* the art world, could be seen as the mirror effect of its purported antipode.[116] In Kester's readings, the politics of socially engaged art is always self-referential, "concrete." There is neither an outside to the events or practices analyzed by Kester, nor do they relate to each other through historical reasoning, contradictions, and mediations. Methodologically speaking, this means that Kester's analysis, due to its ethnographic and quasi-positivist mode, is condemned *to describe*. Life and its aesthetic encounters are here abstracted from everything that is *not* concrete; *as if* it were an artwork incapable of historical sedimentation and reflection on the social totality, even materially unrelated to such a totality. If the life that artists are absorbed in is hereby subject to an abstraction from which it earns its politics, we could, in its most rudimentary form, define this abstracted life as that which is "beyond" the art institution but nevertheless self-referential. Absorption and abstraction are here to be considered complementary logics undergirding Kester's "lifeworld of resistance." In other words, having supposedly escaped the self-contained nature of the "avant-garde," socially engaged art is granted political efficacy by participating directly and immediately in a life whose paradoxical self-referentiality—beyond but always within—ironically mimics not only his "own" avant-garde, but also the "inner-aesthetic" that the "historical avant-gardes," according to early theorists like Bürger and Gorsen, tried to wrest themselves from.

As argued by Stewart Martin, implicit or explicit evocations of the avant-garde strategy to dissolve art into life in an age of "expanded capitalism subsumption" should be considered with caution, since such dissolution not only easily risks appropriating "new content of commodification," but could also simply provide a "new form" of capitalist life.[117] Drawing on the work of Martin and others, Larne Abse Gogarty expanded and further elaborated on this critique by showing how this attention to "life" and its social reproduction often privileges the "forces of production" rather than its "relations."[118] By compensating and mimicking the failures of the welfare state and austerity policies—a central point of departure for its emergence—socially engaged art practices and their theoretical validations often tended to obscure "property relations" and the various forms of "wageless life" that structurally underpin a stagnant capitalism economy, which in the art world often manifest as "decommodified labor."[119] It hereby often ends up *cohering* with rather than *confronting* "the paternalism of the state and capitalism."[120]

While in previous work, Sholette and Kester in particular have spent much time elaborating on such "useful" practices that are now central to the ideological legitimation of the art field, their recent work seems to have partly shifted emphasis toward a more direct political vocabulary and gestures of "protesting"

and "resisting." This shift should not just be seen in light of the institutional recuperation and adaptation of activism and social engagement, but also, more broadly, as a response to the "mass protest decade" of the 2010s that arguably culminated with the George Floyd uprising, an event which, according to Sholette, led him to rewrite the whole book on art activism.[121] Importantly, this shift toward protest and resistance itself displaces the very usefulness or political effect of socially engaged or activist art into a terrain where, somehow paradoxically, it is far less clear precisely what "things" artists get done.

To a higher degree than in his previous work, Kester's two-volume book on aesthetic autonomy attempts to theorize art and aesthetic practices in social movements, such as the early formation of BLM at the National Convening of the Movement for Black Lives at Cleveland State University in 2015 or the Shackville protest at the University of Cape Town in 2016 led by activists from the Rhodes Must Fall movement. These events emblematize the central features of his dialogical aesthetics, which Kester outlines as (1) "the porous boundaries between engaged art and popular or prosaic culture," (2) an "epistemologically generative potential of performative and embodied action," and (3) a "dialogical linkage of both tactical and prefigurative experience."[122] Kester thus, for instance, brilliantly analyzes the unfolding of events surrounding the Shackville protest's construction of an iron shack at the UCT campus as a protest against the lack of student housing, in particular for working-class students, and their subsequent removal and defacing of artworks of past UCT leaders. As Kester describes, this also led to the installation of a counter-exhibition at a university gallery and other aesthetic gestures of "embodied recollection and reclamation" as well as internal disagreement and dissensus followed by a critique of a group called the Trans Collective.[123] There is certainly something to be learned from Kester's case studies. But what do they tell us about art's relation to praxis on a broader level?

As Kester himself states, a dialogical aesthetics can help us gain a sense of not only how "artistic production is imbricated with praxis," but also how the "ontologically transformative effects [are] precipitated by an aesthetic encounter and political transformation here and now."[124] For this reason, a dialogical aesthetics can even contribute to a reconceptualization of "praxis today and the unique role that forms of engaged art might play in this reconceptualization."[125] Two things should be noted here. First, Kester has entirely eroded the differential and negative aspects of the aesthetic as still maintained by Gorsen, even when he tried to situate art and aesthetic practice *in* life. As already mentioned, he glimpsed and pursued an aesthetic "quality of difference" (*Differenzqualitäten*), an operative quality, beyond the *Schein* of the autonomous artwork in material operations and aesthetic practices of "transformed realities," such as that of feminist organizational practices, or in his work on "sexual aesthetics," where

he, as Kerstin Stakemeier aptly put it, traced "the fantasies of dispossessed desires subsisting in art, as art, through art."[126] Despite the ambiguous and contradictory nature of such practices and fantasies, Gorsen was persistently interested in their immanent aesthetic antagonism to capitalist life forms. Second, Kester's detachment from a historically sensitive analysis of the global class composition and the constraints, contradictions, and potentialities of emancipatory struggles in a wider context often leads to a fetishization of the "here and now," local and brief instances of resistant embodied collectives and aesthetic encounters. This overemphasis of the "here and now" methodologically safeguards an avoidance of the problem of social and historical mediation and a sensitivity to the wider temporal and spatial sedimentations this implies. From this perspective, Kester's "here and now" operates as an ethnographic abstraction that might be able to provide empirical insights but is generally incapable of grasping art's claim to praxis. As one more mirror effect of the bourgeois inner-aestheticism, we could call this Kester's repressed formalism, an aesthetic autonomy that has always already overcome the distinction between art and life but is nevertheless discernable—that is, autonomous—as an empirical object waiting to be described and analyzed. A practice of dialogical aesthetics solicits itself for reflection out of the contingencies of space and time. It can never fail, since it has always won; it is ontologically ungraspable for the art institution, is always already reaching toward "future practical action."[127]

Like Kester, Sholette is for good reasons drawn by the sheer intensity of "desire by artists to transform their practices into a form of highly focused protests"[128] and thus sublate the dialectical tensions and contradictions inherent to art as praxis. As already noted, the reason for this, according to Sholette, is itself historical. Activism has become one of the last ways for art to withdraw or escape from itself, he argues.[129] On the one hand, he glimpses a kind of artistic self-negation, somehow resembling a model of "de-artification," as in Stakemeier's critical elaboration of Adorno's term.[130] On the other hand, this activist "glitch," as he calls it in reference to Charnley, also involves a new form of artistic subjectivity (the activist artists), medium (protest and agitation), and reinvented genres (such as institutional critique).[131] Reminiscent of the structure of immanent transcendence and Kester's mirroring of the inner-aesthetic traced above, art activism is simultaneously escaping and reinventing the history of art, just as Kester's "institutional critique" of the avant-garde gives rise to its own kind of ethnographic art criticism. This is the ambiguous background to the attempt to think beyond the dialectics of art and life, aesthetics and politics. The social contradictions and antagonisms that this ambiguity might be said to express are apparently not a problem worthy of consideration. Even Marxist critics like Charnley argue that it is time to move away from the critical analysis of institutional "co-option" and more directly "situate art in the political currents of the present."[132] What is hereby evaded, however, is the problem, or aporia,

which, according to Bürger and Gorsen, was constituted by the "historical avant-gardes" and their operative aesthetics; namely, the conflict between art and politics that throughout the twentieth century sometimes led to hyperbolic dreams on behalf of art's historical agency, while arguably most of the time occasioning frustrating, unsatisfying, and, occasionally, productive experiences of the lacuna dividing art and revolutionary struggle, a lacuna that more frequently than not in fact ended up encouraging art to remain, experiment with, and problematize the aporia of praxis as a problem whose solution—that is, whose end—required *more* than art.[133]

## After the End

> *There will be a revolution or there will not.*[134]
> —Joshua Clover

If, for Peter Osborne, the "historical avant-gardes" are not least historical in the sense of an "investment in history, as a whole, in the collective singular," contemporary art, as he sees it, manifests "a disavowal—a disavowal of its own futural, anticipatory or speculative basis"; in other words, "a disavowal of politics."[135] As Bürger noted in 2014 in a similar register, art is no longer "necessary" in the sense of being implicated in emancipatory or revolutionary struggles.[136] Writers of socially engaged art and activism like Kester and Sholette completely disagree. Politics, even in its emancipatory forms, has indeed returned, but not just in the form Osborne or Bürger are looking for. Whether as BLM or as "artists working nonstop in northern Kyiv to create anti-tank barricades,"[137] Sholette glimpses the contours of a new avant-garde that has paved the way for a mutated form of revolutionary politics whose power and distinctness is to be found in the way it protests "aesthetically," or in Kester's words, entails "an important form of creativity."[138] For Sholette, "the contemporary art of activism and the activism of art" thus constitutes a "spacetime haunted by the elusive dream of historical agency and its unceasing hunger for total emancipation,"[139] a dream, however, that is simultaneously "a dream of historical agency's aesthetic incarnation."[140] While for Osborne and Bürger, the avant-garde comes to figure as a historico-philosophical placeholder whose absence they lament, a theory without praxis, Kester and Sholette consider it possible to glimpse a new kind of avant-garde, but they are unable or unwilling to situate this new subject and praxis within a broader materialist conjunction. The result is a commitment to a praxis detached from its historical and social space of intelligibility.

What is needed is not a diplomatic third way or a "nuanced" middle-ground. If, namely, a materialist aesthetic theory *after* the avant-garde demands a reflection

on the relationship between art and revolution, we should not only remind ourselves of the historicity of these two very notions and the practices they delineate, but also their aporetic imbrication. A commitment to a materialist aesthetics, in particular one that evades the temptation to identify or disavow a contemporary avant-garde,[141] should insist on criticizing and problematizing this imbrication as long as capitalism exists. Today, such a commitment is only allowed to recall the avant-garde insofar as it acknowledges the (self-)negation that the concept entails—a (self-)negation that now falls to *others* to fulfill.

# NOTES

1 Peter Gorsen, “Thesen zur künstlerischen Verarbeitung alltagsästhetischer Äußerungen,” in *Transformierte Alltäglichkeit oder Transzendenz der Kunst* (Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1981), 287.

2 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Verso, 2012); John Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (Verso, 2015); Gregory Sholette, *The Art of Activism and the Activism of Art* (Lund Humphries, 2022); Grant Kester, *The Sovereign Self: Aesthetic Autonomy from the Enlightenment to the Avant-Garde* (Duke University Press, 2023); Grant Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self: Aesthetic Autonomy; From the Avant-Garde to Socially Engaged Art* (Duke University Press, 2024); Mikkel Bolt, ed., *Aesthetic Protest Cultures: After the Avant-Garde* (Minor Compositions, 2024). To this list, we could add the work of Marc James Léger (see, e.g., note 3), Boris Groys, Alain Badiou, Kerstin Stakemeier, Stevphen Shukaitis, and many others.

3 Marc James Léger, *Brave New Avant Garde* (Zer0 Books, 2012), 76. Léger has undoubtedly been one of the most consistent and stubborn critics searching for an answer to the question of what the avant-garde means today.

4 For an analysis of the fascist appropriation of avant-garde strategies, see Organ of the Autonomous Sciences, “The Resurrection of Nashism: Report on the Emergent Forms of Spectacular Fascism in Scandinavia,” *e-flux* 129 (2022), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/129/486513/the-resurrection-of-nashism-report-on-the-emergent-forms-of-spectacular-fascism-in-scandinavia/.

5 See, e.g., Christina Kiaer, “African Americans in Soviet Socialist Realism: The Case of Aleksandr Deineka,” *The Russian Review* 75 (July 2016): 402–33; Steven S. Lee, *The Ethnic Avant-Garde: Minority Cultures and World Revolution* (Columbia University Press, 2017); *bauhaus imaginista: A School in the World*, ed. Marion von Osten and Grant Watson (Thames & Hudson, 2019); David Ayers, Joana Cunha Leal, Benedikt Hjartarson, and Margarida Brito Alves, eds., *Globalizing the Avant-Garde* (de Gruyter, 2024). The global entanglement of the avant-garde is of course also intrinsic to the very notion. A good example of this is the Brazilian art theorist Ferreira Gullar’s 1969 essay “Vanguarda e Subdesenvolvimento” in which he discusses the very applicability of the term in Brazil. For a brilliant account of this, see Irene V. Small, “Exit and Impasse: Ferreira Gullar and the ‘New History’ of the Last Avant-Garde,” *Third Text* 26, no. 1 (2012): 91–101.

6 The notion “rebirth of history” was suggested by Alain Badiou, see *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, trans. Gregory Elliot (Verso, 2012).

7 In 2024, Wolfgang Asholt published what should now be considered the most ambitious and comprehensive attempt to write the history of avant-garde theory. See Wolfgang Asholt, *Das lange Leben der Avantgarde: Eine Theorie-Geschichte* (Wallstein, 2024). Although I disagree with many of his points and readings, the chapter “AvantgardeAktivismus: Praxis als Theorie oder eine Zweite Avantgarde?” has been particularly helpful in writing this article. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

8 Peter Bürger, *Nach der Avantgarde* (Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2014), 14–15.

9 Marina Vishmidt, “A Future Everyone Can Get Behind,” in *Aesthetic Protest Cultures: After the Avant-Garde*, ed. Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen (Minor Compositions, 2024), 106.

10 For an analysis—with and against Bürger—of the Situationists as “the last avant-garde,” see Mikkel Bolt, *Den sidste avantgarde: Situationistisk kunst og politik* (forlaget politisk revy, 2004); Mikkel Bolt, *Avantgardens selvmord* (Forlaget 28/6, 2009).

11 For an account of these two “waves”—and a potential “third” one—see the introduction to this special issue.

12 The notion of art as “the self-critique of the revolution” is here borrowed from historian and theorist Carsten Juhl’s “Bevidsthedsudvidelse Og Verdensomlægning: Kunsten som revolutionens selvkritik - En indledning til 17/2-seminaret på Billedkunstskolerne, København, 2012,” in *Bevidsthedsudvidelse og verdensomlægning: Kunsten som revolutionens selvkritik* (Forlaget Nebula, 2012).

13 For a brilliant discussion of the aporia of a materialist aesthetics in Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* that has helped me reflect on these issues, see W. Martin Lüdke, “Die Aporien der materialistischen Ästhetik—Kein Ausweg? Zur kategorialen Begründung von P. Bürgers ‘Theorie der Avantgarde’,” in *‘Theorie der Avantgarde’: Antworten auf Peter Bürgers Bestimmung von Kunst und bürgerlicher Gesellschaft*, ed. W. Martin Lüdke (Suhrkamp, 1976), 27–71.

14 For a useful (though somewhat problematically selective) overview of this period, see the chapter “The Politicization of Aesthetic Theory: The Debate in Aesthetics since 1965” in Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Reappraisals: Shifting Alignments in Postwar Critical Theory* (Cornell University Press, 1991), 156–97. To name only a few important materialist aesthetic books that in various ways engaged with the avant-garde in this context (besides Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*): Peter Bürger, *Der französische Surrealismus: Studium zum Problem der avant-gardistischen Literatur* [(Suhrkamp, 1971); Hildegaard Brenner, ed., *Asja Lacis—Revolutionär im Beruf* (Rogner & Bernhard, 1971); Elisabeth Lenk, *Der Springende Narziss: André Bretons poetischer Materialismus* (Rogner & Bernhard, 1971); Michael Müller, *Autonomie der Kunst: Zur Genese und Kritik einer bürgerlichen Kategorie* (Suhrkamp, 1972); Friederich Tomberg, *Politische Ästhetik: Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Luchterhand, 1973); Peter Gorsen and Eberhard Knödler-Bunte, *Proletkult 1: System einer proletarischen Kultur; Dokumentation* (Freiderich Frommann Verlag, 1974); Gisela Dischner et al., *Das Unvermögen der Realität* (Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 1974); Peter Gorsen and Eberhard Knödler-Bunte, *Proletkult 2: Zur Praxis und Theorie einer proletarischen*

*Kulturrevolution in Sowjetrussland 1917-1925; Dokumentation* (Freiderich Frommann Verlag, 1975). These studies were accompanied by extensive work translating important texts by figures such as Boris Arvatov (1972), Sergej Tretjakov (1972), Vsevolod Meyerhold (1974), Proletkult (1974), and Sergei Eisenstein (1974–75).

15 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (University of Minnesota Press, 1984 [1974]), 94.

16 Peter Bürger, *Zur Kritik der idealistischen Ästhetik* (Suhrkamp, 1983), 12.

17 Bürger, *Zur Kritik*, 13.

18 Peter Bürger, "Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*," *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 698.

19 Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach (original version)," in *Marx & Engels: Collected Works* [MECW], Volume 5, 1845–47 (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 4.

20 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 92.

21 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 18.

22 Bürger, "Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde," 707.

23 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 22.

24 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 72.

25 Adorno quoted in Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 87.

26 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 87.

27 Bürger, *Zur Kritik*, 13.

28 Bürger's own analysis of the "historical avant-garde" is notoriously narrow and "art immanent." A part of this can of course be explained by its theoretical ambition and scope: a historicization of Adorno's aesthetic that simultaneously transformed it to ideology critique, as Lüdke registered ("Die Aporien," 49). The agenda is clearly not to provide an economic, socio-political, and historical contextualization but rather a theoretical framework that makes the avant-garde critique historically intelligible. Acknowledging "the fact that the unfolding of object and the elaboration of categories are connected," Bürger wants to do with the avant-garde what Marx did with labor: theorize (that is, historicize) "objectifications in the arts." As he argues: "It is only with aestheticism that the full unfolding of the phenomenon of art became a fact, and it is to aestheticism that the historical avant-garde movements respond." Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 16–17. This is also the reason why Bürger, somewhat paradoxically given his rejection of the neo-avant-garde, denounces "end of art"-hypotheses like that of Friedrich Tomberg. As Tomberg argues in an essay in *Politische Ästhetik*, the "worldwide rebellion against the intellectually limited bourgeois master" that became manifest in the Cultural Revolution and anti-imperialist struggle of the Vietnamese people manifested a farewell to modern art. For Bürger, however, this was to be considered as a mere "moral postulate" empty of historical explanation and thus guilty of a casual "tie-in between the development of art and that of society" (Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 110). In other words: an analysis that was unable to provide a historical explanation of the objective development of the object that is art.

29 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 10–11.

30 Herbert Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution and Revolt* (Beacon Press, 1972), 103–4.

31 Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution and Revolt*, 107.

32 Gorsen, "Transformierte Alltäglichkeit," in *Das Unvermögen der Realität* (Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 1974), 141.

33 Gorsen, "Transformierte Alltäglichkeit," 141.

34 Gorsen, "Transformierte Alltäglichkeit," 140.

35 Gorsen, "Transformierte Alltäglichkeit," 140–41.

36 Gorsen, "Transformierte Alltäglichkeit," 140.

37 Gorsen, "Transformierte Alltäglichkeit," 145.

38 Gorsen, "Transformierte Alltäglichkeit," 130–31, 133.

39 Gorsen, "Transformierte Alltäglichkeit," 134–35.

40 Gorsen, "Transformierte Alltäglichkeit," 135.

41 Peter Gorsen, "Gegen den Medienoptimusmus," in *Texte zur Ästhetischen Erziehung*, ed. Gunter Otto (Georg Westermann Verlag, 1975), 108. In the anthology, Gorsen's essay is ascribed to 1974.

42 Gorsen, "Transformierte Alltäglichkeit," 137.

43 Gorsen, "Thesen zur künstlerischen Verarbeitung," 276.

44 Gorsen, "Thesen zur künstlerischen Verarbeitung," 275.

45 Gorsen, "Thesen zur künstlerischen Verarbeitung," 274.

46 Gorsen, "Transformierte Alltäglichkeit,"149.

47 Gorsen, "Transformierte Alltäglichkeit," 145; "Thesen zur künstlerischen Verarbeitung," 285

48 Gorsen, "Transformierte Alltäglichkeit," 144–45.

49 Gorsen, "Transformierte Alltäglichkeit," 145.

50 Gorsen, "Transformierte Alltäglichkeit," 145.

51 Gorsen, "Transformierte Alltäglichkeit," 145.

52 See Peter Gorsen, *Sexualästhetik: Grenzformen der Sinnlichkeit im 20. Jahrhundert* (Rowohlt 1987); Gislind Nabakowski, Helke Sander, and Peter Gorsen, eds., *Frauen in der Kunst*, 2 volumes (Suhrkamp 1985).

53 Gorsen, "Thesen zur künstlerischen Verarbeitung," 285.

54 Gorsen, "Thesen zur künstlerischen Verarbeitung," 287.

55 The notion of the "social turn" was coined and popularized by Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents," *Artforum* 44, no. 6 (February 2006): 178–83.

56 John Roberts, *Art and Emancipation* (Brill, 2024), 241, emphasis in the original.

57 Léger, *Brave New Avant Garde*, 7.

58 This point is made by Carlos Garrido Castellano. As he argues, "what constitutes the grounds on which socially engaged art distinguishes itself from other creative practices is precisely having an impact outside the art world, beyond discourse." This failure marked by the institutionalization of socially engaged art does not, however, imply that it has entirely lost its relevance. On the contrary,

as he notes, “to survive, or at least remain meaningful, socially engaged art has to be aware of its own success [and thus also its failure] if it still wants to be identified as a more valid tool for social transformation.” See Carlos Garrido Castellano, *Art Activism for an Anticolonial Future* (State University of New York Press, 2021), 61, 64.

59 Marina Vishmidt, “‘Mimesis of the Hardened and Alienated’: Social Practice as Business Model,” *e-flux* 43 (March 2013), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/43/60197/mimesis-of-the-hardened-and-alienated-social-practice-as-business-model; Marina Vishmidt, “What do we Mean by ‘Autonomy’ and ‘Reproduction’?,” in Kerstin Stakemeier and Marina Vishmidt, *Reproducing Autonomy: Work, Money, Crisis and Contemporary Art* (Mute, 2016), 33–53.

60 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 17.

61 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 11.

62 Marina Vishmidt, “The Value of Autonomy—A Conversation between Marina Vishmidt and Kerstin Stakemeier about the Reproduction of Art,” *Texte zur Kunst* 88 (2012): 102.

63 John Roberts, socially engaged art’s most prudent and critical defender, has recently elaborated on its peculiar form of “opacity.” See John Roberts, “Opacity, Transparency and the Crisis of Form,” in *Socially Engaged Art and the Crisis of Democracy*, ed. John Roberts and Karen van den Berg (Manchester University Press, forthcoming 2026).

64 Louis Hartnoll, “The Road to Artificial Hells: Revisiting the Theory of Socially Engaged Art,” *kritische berichte* 40, no. 2 (2022): 13.

65 An exemplary reactionary defense of autonomy is still Hanno Rauterberg, *Wie frei ist die Kunst? Der neue Kulturkamps und die Krise des Liberalismus* (Suhrkamp, 2018). In the English-speaking world, an analogous defense of artistic autonomy was articulated by Dean Kissick in a now widely discussed essay published in *Harper’s Magazine* in December 2024, where overt political and critical art is said to have “destroyed contemporary art,” as the subtitle has it, and with this also the “transgressive” and “experimental” spirit that Kissick longs for. See Dean Kissick, “The Painted Protest: How Politics Destroyed Contemporary Art,” *Harper’s Magazine*, December 2024, https://harpers.org/archive/2024/12/the-painted-protest-dean-kissick-contemporary-art/.

66 This contradiction is brilliantly epitomized by Hannah Black’s remark that “The whole matrix has reached some kind of apotheosis, with a majority of art institutions implicitly or explicitly revoking the radicalism of the woke era and choosing to side with the colonizer.” Hannah Black, “Like Knives in a Block,” *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 34, no. 70 (2025): pp. 295. A good, albeit very “German,” example of this tendency is “Let’s Talk About… Anti-Democratic, Anti-Queer, Misogynist, Antisemitic, Right-Wing Spaces and their Counter-Movements,” special issue, *OnCurating* 62 (September 2025).

67 Kim Charnley, *Sociopolitical Aesthetics: Art, Crisis, and Neoliberalism* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 29.

68 Castellano, *Art Activism*, 58.

69 Yates McKee, *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition* (Verso, 2016), 81.

70 Notable exceptions to this strategy are to be found in the writings of Roberts, Léger, Bolt, and Shukaitis.For references to the first three, see footnotes 2 and 3. Regarding the latter, see Stevphen Shukaitis, *The Composition of Movements to Come: Aesthetics and Cultural Labor After the Avant-Garde* (Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016).

71 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 13, 40–41.

72 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 18.

73 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 20.

74 Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, 21, 48; Kester, *Sovereign Self*, 7; Steyn Bergs, “Against Autonomy as Idea,” *Radical Philosophy* 2, vol. 17 (2024): 100.

75 This aversion to the avant-garde is not specific to the two-volume work on aesthetic autonomy, but is already present in *Conversation Pieces* (2004) and again in *The One and the Many* (2011).

76 The most sophisticated discussions of Bürger’s *Theory* are still to be found in the Lüdke’s 1976 *Theorie der Avantgarde*; in particular, regarding the autonomy problem, see Burkhardt Lindner’s chapter “Aufhebung die Aktualität der Auseinandersetzung mit den historischen Avantgardebewegungen,” 72–104.

77 Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, 23.

78 Kester, *Sovereign Self*, 11.

79 Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, 24, 41, 125.

80 Tobias Dias, “Praxis,” *CLCWeb*, special issue on “Keywords for Value and Culture” (forthcoming 2026).

81 Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, 74.

82 This conventionalization and leveling of the rich historical experiences of the avant-gardes can obviously be found in many writings on art activism and socially engaged art, especially those inspired by Kester’s work. Castellano’s *Art Activism* is a good example of this.

83 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 30.

84 Kester refers to an English translation of Marx’s 1844 manuscripts that appear in a footnote to Bertell Ollman’s 1979 *Social and Sexual Revolution: Essays on Marx and Reich*. Neither in this translation nor in the original German does Marx use the notion “full communism.” While it is correct—and completely uncontroversial—to say that some of Marx’s writings, in particular the early writings, elaborate and reproduce a problematic historical teleology, it is certainly equally uncontroversial to say that this is not true of all of Marx’s writing, particularly his later work. This claim becomes even more crude when Kester tries to make it representative of Marxist thought as such. The agenda is clearly to provide a “complex” theorization of social change that is not only *not* Marxist but *against* it.

85 Karl Marx and Frederich Engels, “The German Ideology,” in *MECW*, Volume 5, 1845–47 (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 49.

86 Kester, *Sovereign Self*, 65, 59; Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, 62.

87 Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, 23.

88 Frederic Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Macmillan Education, 1988), 349.

89 While the argument of the "complexity" of socially engaged art is a recurrent and seemingly self-evident feature of socially engaged art for Kester, the call for theoretical sophistication is articulated in the second volume in the following way: "To bring this discussion back to the question of socially engaged art, I would argue that in writing about this work we need a more sophisticated model of political change that can account for this capillary nature" (Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, 76). It is, however, striking to what extent Kester's supposedly more sophisticated models (presented in a preliminary list of seven points) are completely detached from a consideration of economic structures and social relations. As is also the case with certain strands in social movement studies, this leads to a hyperbolic and abstract notion of political agency and "social change." Paradoxically, Kester here comes to mimic a problematic political heroism so prevalent among the avant-gardes.

90 On the privatization of history and how it relates to certain curatorial strategies, see David Joselit, "Tyranny of the Present," *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 67 (2024): 150–56. Following the historian and theorist Carsten Juhl, narcissism could also be seen as a central feature of the "politics of engagement"—a politics that owes much to the writings of Sartre, but could also be said to encompass writers like Kester, though he would without doubt object to that—inasmuch as engagement can arguably be considered "more introverted and, in a literal sense, more self-sufficient than the inner turmoil [*anfægtelsen*], because conscience is appeased by the first effective response it encounters, i.e., that from an institution in the world"; see Carsten Juhl, *Globalæstetik: Verdensfølelsen og det kosmopolitiske perspektiv* (Billdkunstskolernes Forlag, 2007), 54.

91 Grant Kester, "Hosting Art with Diana Boros: A Dialogue with Grant Kester," posted by Lynch School of Education and Human Development, 7 December 2023, YouTube, 18:42, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFRyGTNxTgA.

92 Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, 86.

93 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 139. The title of one of Sholette's blogs was "Welcome to Our Bare Art World."

94 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 144.

95 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 145.

96 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 144.

97 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 145. Sholette here refers to the influential text by Stephen Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* (Van Abbemuseum, 2013).

98 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 145.

99 Kim Charnley, "Art on the Brink: Bare Art and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy," in Gregory Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Kim Charnley (Pluto Press, 2017), 21.

100 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 149.

101 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 12.

102 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 144.

103 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 151.

104 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 12.

105 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 13.

106 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 142.

107 Of course, theorists like Kester speak of mediation, but in a deeply un(or anti-)materialist way devoid of reflections on its constitutive relation to labor, value, and its racial and gendered underpinnings.

108 Whereas for Sholette, the justification for this is to be found in aesthetic repertoire, which so much activism involves today—a "protest aesthetics" that is itself a product of capitalism's "total aestheticization" but which it is able to outbid—McKee's "artistic reading" of OWS is partly legitimized by pointing to how star artists and theorists such as Martha Rosler, Judith Butler, and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri alluded to the proposal that OCW could be seen as an artwork, partly by pointing to the central role artists play in the occupation. Kester, on the other hand, elaborates a new aesthetic paradigm on the basis of Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the dialogical and second-generation Frankfurt School theorists, such as Habermas's and Axel Honneth's notion of "social labor," a theoretical elaboration whose relation to the categories of art and aesthetics remain obscure. In this way, Kester can be seen as a theoretical antipode to Claire Bishop's decision to read socially engaged art *as* art. Insisting on the transhistorical specificity of the aesthetics, she not only largely ends up privileging art world darlings (Hirschhorn, Bruguera, etc.), but also tends to analytically install an a priori separation of art from praxis, a separation seemingly legitimized by her disciplinary background as an art historian.

109 While Charnley discusses the first aspect in relation to the art collective Free, the second argument is developed in a cross-reading of McKee's work on post-OCW and Joshua Clover's theory of riot; see Charnley, *Sociopolitical Aesthetics*, 159–63.

110 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 143, 147.

111 Gregory Sholette, "The Art of Activism and the Activism of Art," talk at Sirius Summer School, posted 21 July 2022, by Sirius Arts Centre, YouTube, 9:51, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bMEEE2_Q0y8. As Suzanne Lacy remarked in her important 1995 *Mapping the Terrain*: "the underlying aversion to art that claims to 'do' something', that does not subordinate function to craft, presents resonant dilemma for new genre public artists"; Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Bay Press, 1995), 20–21.

112 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility: Second Version,” *Selected Writings: Volume 3, 1935–1938* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 119.

113 Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, 6.

114 Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, 27.

115 Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, 14, 27.

116 Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, 14.

117 Stewart Martin, “Artistic Communism—A Sketch,” *Third Text* 23, vol 4 (2009): 482.

118 Larne Abse Gogarty, “‘Usefulness’ in Contemporary Art and Politics,” *Third Text* 31, vol. 1 (2017): 118.

119 Gogarty, “Usefulness,” 122. On decommodified labor, see Leigh Claire La Berge, *Wages Against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art* (Duke University Press, 2019).

120 Gogarty, “Usefulness,” 125. Though he never engages with it himself in a systematic way, Kester admits the legitimacy of and even his sympathy for the critiques of the capitalist complicities of art and “the appropriative power of capitalism.” However, as he notes, we should nonetheless remain cautious “given how frequently these same critiques come from white, Euro-American academics who often have little direct experience of contemporary forms of political repression.” It would go without saying that this strategic avoidance of engagement with Marxist thought canalized as a suspiciousness of a “white, Euro-American” view replicates the most problematic aspects of “decolonial” thought and liberal identity politics; Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, 224.

121 Sholette, “Art of Activism,” 7:30.

122 Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, 212.

123 Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, 213–15.

124 Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, 104.

125 Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, 211.

126 Kerstin Stakeimer, “I’m with Fantasy,” *Mousse Magazine*, June 8, 2023, https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/im-with-fantasy-kerstin-stakemeier-2023/.

127 Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, 216.

128 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 12.

129 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 146.

130 See Kerstin Stakemeier, “Entkunstung: Artistic Models for the End of Art” (PhD diss., University College London, 2010).

131 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 149. Sholette borrows the idea of art activism as a glitch from an unpublished paper by Charnley; see Gregory Sholette, “The Courbet Coundrum: Back Stories of Contemporary Activist Art,” *First of the month*, 1 July 2021, https://www.firstofthemonth.org/the-courbet-conundrum-back-stories-of-contemporary-activist-art/#_edn2.

132 Charnley, *Sociopolitical Aesthetics*, 32. According to Charnley, Marxist analysis of institutional co-option no longer holds in our present. As he notes, “one might even go so far as to say that co-option, though it was once a powerful weapon of militant polemic, tends now to block attempts to situate art in the political currents of the present” (32). The reason for this, he argues, should be found in the crises of liberal democracies and what he described as a detachment of “the economic logic of neoliberalism” to “its formerly hegemonic ideological justification.” This creates, he argues, “an increasingly contested cultural space” (24). Charnley certainly provides one of the more interesting (Marxist) critiques of the potential shortcoming of a Marxist tool kit that has been prevalent (and highly effective) since the late 1960s or early 1970s. However, this critique could also be considered an invitation to reconsider (rather than reject) the analysis of co-option in the increasingly illiberal cultural terrain. Second, it needs to be noted that in the current conjunction the “contested cultural space” seems to be most effectively appropriated by reactionary forces.

133 I fully agree with John Roberts on this question: “Quite simply, the political struggle for autonomy in art should not be taken as an extension of a new collective politics itself. For such a politics is still to be determined at a collective level of struggle, far removed from the mutual flatteries of art-as-politics and politics-as-art.” Roberts, *Art and Emancipation*, 253.

134 Joshua Clover, *Red Epic* (Commune Editions, 2015), 12.

135 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (Verso, 2012), 23.

136 Bürger, *Nach der Avantgarde*, 15.

137 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 151.

138 Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, 7.

139 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 151.

140 Sholette, *Art of Activism*, 13.

141 The problems involved in the attempt to keep searching for a new avant-garde today are probably best captured by Léger—in particular, in his latest writings. Oscillating between materialist analysis—ideology critique and class analysis—and a wish to transgress the “prohibition of avant-garde radicality” and thus “shamelessly” reclaim the need for a new “vanguard,” Léger manifests the extent to which the very notion of the avant-garde is still heavily mediated—that is, made historically intelligible—by a revolutionary working-class subject intrinsic to the so-called era of “programmatism” as theorized by Théorie communiste. In this way, Léger could be seen as the art theoretical equivalent—relying on a kind of Zizekian-Badiouan-Bourdieusian schemata—to an affirmative notion of class and labor power—that is, a *class-first* politics underpinned by a surprising trust in capitalist-democratic institutions such as the party and the union—which has gained momentum in certain “democratic-socialist” milieus on the left, most prominent and influential, perhaps, in the case of the journal *Jacobin*. Alleged identity political and horizontalist

rejections of “vanguardism” here turn out to be nothing less than a “major symptom of today’s neoliberal hegemony,” whose remedy for Léger is to be found in a return to Leninist class struggle and, of course, “Marxism” (p. 26). Drawing on the work of the late Joshua Clover, we could call it the “affirmation trap”; see Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings* (Verso, 2016), 30. Rather than considering Marxism as a critical methodology in need of continuous self-critique and heterodox (and orthodox!) elaboration for grasping the historical specificity of the present, Léger views “Marxism” and the avant-garde as two sides of the same *lost* coin that he heroically aims to retrieve. He hereby escapes from a commitment to the constitutive feature of materialist analysis, namely *historical experience* as such. Reading Léger, one is often left with the impression that the only thing that hasn’t changed is “Marxism.” Ironically, the call for a vanguardia and a return to “class” thus essentially relies on a “Marxist” failure: an inability to self-critically grasp the historical transformation of the dialectics between capital and labor and thus also the potentials and constraints of revolutionary change.