

On Leaving the Building: Thoughts of the Outside

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What if, rather than speaking or dreaming of an absolute beginning, we speak of a leap? – Søren Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments (1846)

1.

A couple of months ago I was invited to the historic Polish port city of Gdańsk by the Wyspa Institute of Art, the city's leading contemporary art center, to participate in a conference on the work of locally-based artist Grzegorz Klaman – the founder, so it happens, of the art institute that was hosting both his retrospective and the accompanying conference in his honor (Klaman was sitting, imperturbably, on the first row of a makeshift auditorium throughout the proceedings). Apart from a mandatory visit to the house where Arthur Schopenhauer was born in 1788, I spent most of my time on the grounds of the Gdańsk Shipyard, formerly known as the Lenin Shipyard, which is now also home to the aforementioned art institute – and this is only one reason why Klaman's work is so closely bound up with both the history of the place and the life and times of the shipyard's most famous former employee, Lech Walesa.

One of Klaman's many "pieces" that traverse, or have inserted themselves (either physically or merely metaphorically) into this picturesque post-industrial wasteland is a project called Subjective Bus Line (2002/2011). It consists of a guided bus tour – which art buffs and "regular" tourists alike can sign up for at Wyspa or in one of the city's tourist information centers – around the docklands, courtesy of a small platoon of former and/or retired shipyard workers. As one of the announcements publicizing the artist's project puts it:

The first version of the project took place in 2002 within the framework of the International City Transformers Project and in a month it attracted more interested people than a small bus could hold, which clearly convinced us how great the need was to open the former shipyard to visitors. ... Lasting about 90 minutes, the tour of the shipyard begins at a special bus stop near Gate no. 1. The itinerary will include several selected important places connected with the history of Solidarity and the shipyard. The places and the events are selected jointly by the visitors and the "guide" escorting them on the day of the trip. The guides include selected former shipyard workers.1

When I signed up for the afternoon bus ride, the first thing I noticed was how popular these bus trips seem to have become: on that sunny, balmy Saturday in early September, many more people showed up to be trucked around the shipyard than was either possible or allowed. The second thing that struck me was the self-effacing subtlety (to put it mildly) of the project's much-touted artistic character: though I had no way of knowing what was being said by the guide (who spoke only Polish) or what was being talked about among the majority of passengers (who also spoke only Polish), it very quickly became clear that this wasn't exactly advertised (or experienced, for that matter) as an artistic event, authored by a local artist – and it took a very long time for the guide to even mention the words "artysta" (artist) or "sztuka" (art). In fact, Klaman's name was not uttered even once, nor was the topic of the subjective bus line's relationship to the nearby art institute ever broached (though the trip did conclude, somewhat dutifully and perfunctorily it seemed, with a visit to Wyspa, which seemed to confound most of the passengers). I'm not sure whether this meant that I had been unfortunate or singularly lucky instead, but I later found out that this particular tour guide enjoyed talking about art in somewhat disparaging, amusedly dumbfounded terms, which may or may not lead one to question the nature of the selection process referred to in the aforementioned leaflet. Not that this really mattered, of course. What did matter, I felt, was the absence of anything during my short time riding the Subjective Bus Line that pointed – however obliquely or opaquely – to the project's origin, status, and obvious efficiency as a work of art.

Now what does it mean to subject oneself to an art experience or art event that does not appear – I

admit that this is the crucial term – to want to have anything distinctly, self-consciously artistic about it? An art experience, the artistic quality of which seems to consist primarily of its desired disappearing as “art” as such, of its irreversible dissolution into something else – a something else or “other” that is probably a lot less interesting than art (mainly because so few things are more interesting than art)? “Art into life,” anno 2010: what exactly, I wonder, is still productive about this confusion, so deeply inscribed into the history of modernism (and thus also in its post-historical aftermath, postmodernism)? Not much, I would venture.² And if art has indeed succeeded in disappearing or dissolving (a critical triumph according to some voices in the art-theoretical establishment), where did it go? And what has come in its stead?

2.

Shortly after this enlightening Baltic adventure, I was once again invited to take part in a panel talk revolving around the work of one artist, or rather, around one artwork in particular – Renzo Martens’s much talked-about, opinion-dividing feature-length “art” film *Episode 3: Enjoy Poverty*. This is not the place to discuss the considerable merits (and many shortcomings) of a film that clearly does not need more press coverage anyway, but one thing that does beg for more substantial analysis is the problem of discussing Martens’s film, especially in public, and especially with the artist present.⁴ For if one of the film’s core themes is guilt (and, correspondingly, responsibility), the problem encountered by anyone seeking to challenge some of the project’s critical assumptions with regards to the cultural exploitation of guilt, is that Martens gladly and emphatically assumes all responsibility for it. That he admits to be guilty as charged of whatever we want to accuse him of (within the context of *Enjoy Poverty*, that is), and appears to derive a certain measure of enjoyment from these accusations too – enjoyment, after all, is another theme crucial enough to the film that it ended up in its title. A major part of the argument between Martens’s defenders and detractors, and all those intelligent enough to refrain from either defending and/or detracting a project that so clearly wants to move “beyond good and evil” (hence also beyond defense and detraction), concerns the twinned charge of implication and complicity, according to which we are all more or less implicated in the drama so chillingly “documented” on screen, and according to which each of us is necessarily complicit in this drama’s historical unfolding. We’re all more or less equally “guilty,” and all we can do – and this is what Martens seems to be doing, as well as urge us to be doing – is “celebrate,” ironically or not, the cathartic effects guaranteed by our acknowledgment and acceptance of this complicity, and turn our own being implicated into artistically sound (and therefore intellectually legitimate) spectacle.⁵ (The notion of implication used here is primarily an epistemological one.) We all have blood on our hands – in the Central-African context of *Enjoy Poverty* that means, among other things: we all eat chocolate, we all use Coltan-enhanced electronics, we all shrug our shoulders at the sight of yet another crying malnourished baby – and all (i.e., not just the least) we can do is hold those bloody hands up in front of the camera for all (but first and foremost ourselves) to see. And thus, with this overpowering image – a sea of bloody hands, a sea of grinning, nodding faces – art is produced, and an unrelentingly cynical artwork has been made that is impervious to critique in ways hard to conceive for earlier generations of viewers. Under the conditions outlined by *Enjoy Poverty*’s disturbing claims, the very idea of criticism appears both anachronistic and disingenuous, as it is built on an assumption of the possibility of distancing – critical distance – that can no longer be realized in the ruthless world of global capital Martens so cold-bloodedly portrays. Indeed, if ever the post-critical era in art (which most people seem to agree we inhabit) would need an inaugural, manifesto-like artwork, this could well be it. And what does the critic, writer, humble servant of Thoth, do? The scribe sits “there” and nods. Now if we all have blood on our hands – it is pretty much impossible to argue that we don’t, and this inevitably reduces the discussion to a rhetorical variation on an ancient logical paradox – it is not just because we are simply “caught” inside a totality, the totalizing character of which even the most totalitarian master narratives of modernity could not have hoped to match; it is because we accept that the terms under which we are caught inside that this totality can no longer be

negotiated.⁶ The crucial concept here is that of an all-encompassing – and in that sense solidly mythical – “inside”: one of my interlocutors in the aforementioned panel praised Renzo Martens’s work in particular for the merciless, refreshing radicality with which it drove home the point that (a) there exists no “outside,” and (b) even if such an illusory “outside” were to exist (you never know!), we could never hope to break through to it: we are all here to stay. Not only *est-ce qu’il n’y a pas de hors-texte*, there is also “no alternative.”⁷ The crux of the work’s perceived political import being: the “problem” cannot possibly be solved, so we’d better – once again, the Lacanian injunction to “enjoy your symptom” inevitably comes to mind – just accept that we’re all part of the problem, and one way of assuring that the problem is at least more clearly seen and more sharply articulated. This is apparently all we can do, at this point – and that appears to have become a form of critical consciousness too. I protested, of course, and expressed the hope – really a conviction – that an “outside” must exist; upon which my colleague sarcastically asked: “What do you mean? Do you believe in God?” If only I would have had the alacrity of mind to answer that I don’t necessarily believe in God, but that I do believe in theology! For nothing other than a theological frame of mind can really explain why my conviction that art must somehow be related to the possibility of such an outside – or at least to the possibility of an escape route to such an outside – remains fundamentally intact, if a little shaken. To find such art, this conviction now must look elsewhere: “outside.”

3.

In a previous text published in *e-flux journal*, I spoke of the aesthetic of immersion – one of the defining features (not just formally or literally!) of much contemporary, post-1989 art – as the nebulous mirror image of the rise of a networked, reticular society.⁸ If we suppose that we should never be encouraged or enticed to break through to an “outside,” then, indeed, all our cultural efforts should be geared towards producing an “inside” so alluring and satisfyingly all-encompassing that any desire for an “outside” would naturally cease to exist. This is precisely why so much “immersive” art – it is perhaps worth remembering here that the Wagnerian theory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, complete with its overtones of mass ornament and mass hypnosis, marks the historical source of this powerful tradition – so quickly and easily acquires the affirmative tinge of officialdom, or can so easily be shown to be the art that best evokes the dominant concerns of our times: an artwork that can only be “experienced” – and the injunction to “experience” art, rather than stand opposite it, let alone critically reflect upon it, is of course entirely bound up with the immersive paradigm that by our being inside it, it reaffirms the basic premise of global capital’s non-negotiable totalizing character, as well as the implied impossibility (really a prohibition) of even thinking its outside. (And that, finally, is also why the symbolic language of art has been so singularly important in figuring the political imagination of the last two decades.)⁹ Come inside – and stay inside, truly a captive, immobilized audience (the network’s foundational illusion of a mercurial mobility only serves to mask the fact that we cannot possibly check out of the network). Inside the bus that drives around the Gdańsk Shipyard, itself no more than a minute cog in the monstrous machine of the globalized capitalist economy – and who would really be able to feign surprise should the rusty port of Gdańsk turn out to be Central-Northern Europe’s main gateway for the import of Congo’s blood-soaked columbite-tantalite, as Coltan, the basic ingredient of much mobile communications technology, is scientifically known?¹⁰ Perhaps I should not have taken that bus, but the other road, the one less traveled by instead: the Tao of standing still, somewhat to the side, on the brink of turning one’s back – we know already to what, but then turning one’s face towards what instead? If we agree that sometimes the proof of the thought is simply in its thinking, then how do we actually think the outside? Not an easy question, but one that must be asked nonetheless, and now – i.e., now that the long-dominant paradigm of immersion seems to be coming apart at the seams, challenged on all sides by those of us who are tired of being its “insiders” – with greater urgency than ever before. The Tao of extrication, of disentangling oneself from the mesh/mess of immersion, with its stifling grip on “experience” and its eternal perpetuation of a mythical “inside,” which we can check out of any time we like but can

never really leave (to paraphrase the Eagles' Hotel California): how do we, like Elvis did, leave the building – if the oppressive edifice of an ideologico-economic system so completely all-encompassing that the only possible critical stance towards it, we are told, is simply limited to guiltily accepting that we cannot do anything other than knowingly inhabit it (and thereby enjoy the guilty pleasure that comes with the realization that this acceptance is actually born from intellectual sophistication, that it can be paraded about as an instance of “criticality”), can still be called a building at all? Perhaps we can begin – for “begin” we must always begin anew – with a set of modest (yet nonetheless real) refusals, starting with the refusal of the intellectual pleasures of (indulging in) complicity, and continuing with the refusal of the pleasures of immersion – in short, refusing inclusion.

4.

Beginning, though not an absolute one: let us start moving toward a conclusion (not an inclusion, then) using another mode of transport, namely the train. Of this type of transportation, Michel de Certeau famously remarked, alluding to its association with a gnostic tradition of thought (which, in the theological scheme of things, is really a thought of the outside):¹¹

*The train generalizes Dürer's Melencolia I, a speculative experience of the world: being outside of these things that stay there, detached and absolute, that leave us without having anything to do with this departure themselves.*¹²

Now, over the years the angelic female figure in Melencolia I has been the subject of intense exegetic debate, but she does appear surrounded by the accoutrements of the writing trade (the Putto immediately to her right is actually taking – her? – notes). And this, in turn, may lead us to realign the art of writing with the art of leaving the building, with the aforementioned “thought of the outside” – it is no coincidence that this formula became the title of one of Michel Foucault's most influential treatises on the literature of his day, originally published in the aptly named French journal Critique in 1966 (one year later, Jacques Derrida would publish Of Grammatology, in which much is made of writing's fundamentally contingent relationship of exteriority to the system of language, the interior of which is called “speech”).¹³ Looking back at the half-legible handful of notes hastily jotted down while sat in the back of a creaking old bus in dire need of a suspension check, this relationship between writing and its necessary exteriority acquires the added depth of a lived experience, however futile: to write (i.e., think) clearly, it's probably better not to be part of anything. To remain immobilized; to see the bus depart without you.

Let us go back, finally, to Berlin, December 11, 2010, a night of great intellectual stimulation at the Hebbel am Ufer. Diedrich Diederichsen introduces the proceedings with a long and hard look at a well-known painting by (I'll say it) one of my favorite artists, Jörg Immendorff's 1973 *Wo stehst du mit deiner Kunst, Kollege?* It depicts a man – presumably Immendorff himself – standing in the middle of the painting, doorknob in hand, facing an anxious-looking artist- colleague seated at his easel inside the studio (to the left), and somewhat angrily jabbing his finger at the scene, outside the studio (to the right), of an orderly crowd on the march holding aloft German Communist Party banners and workers' slogans. “Where do you stand with your art, colleague, while out there the revolution is unfolding? What are you doing still inside, trying to master Pop Art, New Realism, Concept Art, Land Art, Op Art, etc.?” (Diederichsen referred to this incongruous listing of art isms on a piece of paper stuck against the studio wall, behind an as of yet empty canvas as the befuddled artist's to- do list.) The division between inside and outside seems clear here, yet one can only wonder whether Immendorff ever meant his depiction of the outside (or whatever else “draussen wartet”¹⁴), with its prospect of the artist's disappearance into a crowd of rowdy revolutionaries, to have any appeal or allure – the stark, gloomy interior of the artist's studio seems to be the real “outside” here. (But then again haven't the crowds of Tahrir Square proven us supremely wrong,

just recently?) Which is perhaps why both the door and its opening – and not the seated artist, nor the standing artist, nor the crowd – are the real protagonists in and of this picture: it is they who decide, after all, what constitutes both inside and outside. Perhaps a door is what we must be – always stationary, always moving, revolving even. No better place to be standing than in the doorway, doorknob in hand if need be: where the vacillating writer furtively scribbles his insights before resolutely disappearing into – well, where? That may not matter much in the end, but one thing we may be sure of: setting ourselves free, going outside and staying outside, will take a jump.

1 See <http://www.e-flux.com/shows/view/8397>.

2 In the main and over time, the dissolution of art into life, though an obviously necessary (and highly commendable) initiative in the history of art, has been a bad thing for both art and life, and far too much has been allowed to happen in the name of that confusion already. The late Paul de Man, in considering the problematic status of (all statements about) art in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, noted something similar with regard to the following well-known nugget of Nietzschean wisdom: “Only as an aesthetic phenomenon is existence and the world forever justified.” The famous quote, twice repeated in *The Birth of Tragedy*, should not be taken too serenely, for it is an indictment of existence rather than a panegyric of art.” Paul de Man, “Genesis and Genealogy in Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*,” in: *Diacritics* II, 4 (Winter 1972): 50. In other words: art is not necessarily more interesting than life because art in itself is such a great thing, but rather because life is such an awful thing.

3 A tentative answer, and not just in the spirit of provocation: artists have come in its stead. So what we have here is not so much “art without artists” but rather “artists without art” – and ironically or not, this speculative observation partly corroborates the controversial opening salvo of E. H. Gombrich’s *Story of Art*, according to which “there really is no such thing as art, there are only artists.” Slightly less polemically, and to take up an idea first explored in a previous essay published in *e-flux* journal, one could also venture that the art world has come in its stead (meaning: the community of artists and producers around which the communities of collectors, critics, curators, gallerists, and others circle). See my “What is Not Contemporary Art? The View From Jena,” <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/106>.

4 “The artist is present”: if I seem to be devoting too much attention to the artist’s persona or personality in the present discussion of *Enjoy Poverty*’s reception, it is in part because the work is undeniably also a kind of self-portrait, at its most effective when capturing our artist-hero caught in the vise of contemporary ethical conundrums. “The artist is present” is also a reference, of course, to Marina Abramovic’s 2010 retrospective at MoMA, which was not only the biggest performance art extravaganza ever set up by the museum in its venerable 80-year history, but also one of last year’s biggest box office hits in the Western world’s postwar art capital – a powerful sign of the general audience’s thirst for the artist’s “presence” in these personality-starved, yet celebrity-obsessed, times.

5 Hence the appeal this work holds to viewers immersed in Lacanian and post-Lacanian (i.e. Žižekian) reading habits: it enjoins us to “enjoy our symptom” – the symptom in case being a messy blend of real powerlessness, the guilty acceptance of such powerlessness, and the frisson of intellectual sophistication afforded by the supremely self-reflexive gesture of gleefully accepting our powerlessness.

6 On a related note, I would like to suggest that the “commodification of everything” only comes to pass if we allow everything to be commodified. I’d like to think – perhaps “believe” is the more operative term – that some “things,” by their very definition and nature (such as, precisely, thoughts), resist commodification, and merely thinking that such pockets of resistance continue to exist may well be enough to contest the fatalist, cynical thesis of pan-commodification (some overtones of which also echo in Martens’s *Enjoy Poverty*, with its sarcastic proposal of the commodification and marketing of indigenous suffering). Indeed, the proof of the thought is sometimes just in the very act of thinking, as in the following historical anecdote, recounted in

Hegel's History of Philosophy: "It is known how Diogenes of Sinope, the Cynic, quite simply refuted [the Eleatics'] arguments against movement; without speaking he rose and walked about, contradicting them by action."

7 "There is no alternative" is Thatcherite, of course, for the slightly more metaphysical- sounding (but really anti- metaphysical) "there is no outside." Margaret Thatcher most often used the phrase in connection with the presumed inevitability of the world's gradual evolution towards a globalized model of free-market economic liberalism – the philosophical essence of which can likewise be condensed to the absurd assertion that "there is no outside," that we are all shoppers shut inside the same exit-less supermall.

8 This historical qualification requires some clarification: 1989 is the year usually referred to as a landmark date in the recounting of recent political history, while the beginnings of contemporary art are customarily located in the early- to-mid sixties, in a politico- cultural climate that (in retrospect) appears light years away from that which became

the dominant trend after 1989. It is abundantly clear, however, that most of the characteristics usually called upon to define not just contemporary art but also the contemporary art world – the conclusive conflation of both spheres has played a crucial role in this regard – only really started to act in paradigmatic concert around the late eighties and early nineties, a moment in culture that witnessed a whole range of revolutions and transformations in the economic sphere first and foremost: in this sense, taking into account the meaning of the date "1989" for world economic history, "post- 1989" art is nothing other than "contemporary art market art."

9 On December 11, 2010, at a conference organized in Berlin on the occasion of Texte zur Kunst's twentieth anniversary last December, Italian political theorist Franco Berardi's engaging, temperamental oration stood out, among other reasons, because of its refusal of the pervasive tenor of gloom and resignation that animated much of the other presentations, optimistically stating that a new era had just announced itself in the form of the rising tide of student protests against the dramatic increase of university tuition fees in the UK (one can only wonder now what the popular ousting of Egypt's last pharaoh Hosni Mubarak would have led him to say). According to Berardi, this new spirit, not of capitalism this time, but of something a little more promising (Luc Boltanski was another speaker on Berardi's panel), was not just connected to a financial crisis that had brought about the unexpected rebirth of certain economic measures – such as state intervention in the saving of major banks – most commonly associated with socialism ("socialism for the banks, capitalism for the poor," as Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek put it in their preface to *The Idea of Communism*), but also with the exhaustion of what he called both "the rhetoric of integration" and the "matrix of inclusion as a new spectacle." Interestingly, he also noted how art had played a hugely influential role in the establishment of this exhausted, crisis-ridden paradigm, stating that one of the major socio- political problems of the last two decades had been the "pervasiveness of art," thus suggesting that the spectacular growth of the art world in the nineties and early 2000s was profoundly entwined with the crisis of popular political action and political consciousness more generally during those decades.

10 Coltan does not appear (at least not explicitly) in Renzo Martens's *Enjoy Poverty*, but it does figure prominently in another art film, Steve McQueen's *Gravesend* (2007) – a very different affair.

11 The Gnostic tradition refers to an unruly amalgam of early Christian belief systems, thoroughly influenced by various Neoplatonisms, that valued knowledge (gnosis) over faith (pistis), and, concomitantly, the individual experience of the divine as accessed by knowledge of self over the collective religious experience enabled by communal practices. Not surprisingly, gnosis was a big deal among the Desert Fathers and assorted hermits of the second and third century AD: the Gnostic is the quintessential outsider, ever suspicious of the "immersive" claims of a communal experience that does not believe such an "outside" can (or, much more importantly, should be allowed to) exist.

12 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 111. De Certeau's remarks on the metaphysics of train travel are especially relevant to the present discussion because of their investment in the dialectic of mobility and stasis, of dynamism

and immobilization. Earlier on in the book, the gnostic paradigm is more explicitly linked to the experience of taking the elevator to the 110th floor of New York's World Trade Center, "only the most monumental figure of Western urban development, the atopia-utopia of optical knowledge." Ibid., 93.

13 Of *Grammatology* is also the book in which Derrida famously stated that "il n'y a pas de hors-texte," so there seems to be a bit of a contradiction at work here. There is no outside-of-the-text, perhaps, but there can still exist such a thing as the text's external surface – and this may be an interesting place for the scribe to bide his or her time...

14 This is a reference to the title of the last Berlin Biennial, curated by Kathrin Rhomberg, the English translation of which was "what is waiting out there." The question of realism – which is also the question of Immendorff's manifesto-like painting – had been an important one in the run-up to the exhibition's actual realization, but opinion was ultimately divided as to whether this installment of the Biennial had succeeded in telling (or rather, teaching) us something new about art's relationship to "what is waiting outside."