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How to do things with pictures in the museum

Photography, montage and political space

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CONCLUSION

Looking Back to Look Forward

The conclusion of this study is a brief hiatus: a pause between looking *back* to the practices of artists of the 20th century and looking *forward* to the emergence of new forms of performativity. My focus has been to extend out from the domain of art history to suggest *how* art works can be speaking or acting subjects, and the role of beholders in performative spaces to engage with them. In this dissertation I have introduced a path from Austin's concept of the performative to the production, staging, and beholding of political art. The value of my research has been my proposal showing how Austin's concept of the transformative nature of speech can be expanded as a "toolbox" for thinking about political art generally, and the uses of montage as a rhetorical strategy in particular. In my examination of practices of photomontage and photo-based installation art, I have unsettled "settled" works and bring them to life again with a new lens. I have proposed new terms for performative strategies and through case studies distributed across six chapters, considered the role of artists, art institutions, curators and audiences as critical partners in the formation of meaning, not only of the transhistorical examples I have chosen, but also how this analysis can benefit cultural research going forward. I consider my approach to be a heuristic, the shaping and testing of new tools to aid the understanding of specific practices under the umbrella of political art.

Working from Austin's original classes of speech acts to develop new terms to apply to evolving concepts of critical practice, I have considered the roles of critical artists/collaborators in 20th century examples to shock, defamiliarize, make space for, call into community, declare one's existence and compel engagement, in the context of sites of performance, and audiences, usually museumgoers. I have largely focused on artists who were either from the generation of the first historical avant-garde, or later, near-contemporaries of mine, the generation of artists trained before the mid-1980s. From early in my career, I found them remarkable for the distinction of their art practices as being overtly political. In the writing of these case studies, it has been my intention to advance ways in which to consider how Austin's way of thinking can be helpful in the consideration of making, distributing, and beholding specific practices by artists working in "the political". For instance, Höch and Rosler take on, I have argued, the role of *interrogators* questioning both the construction and positioning of women, each in their

respective eras. They are also *integrators* who compel a new emancipatory framework. Through their appropriation of image fragments extracted from the modern “languages” of photojournalism and illustrated magazines, they are both consumers of visual representation and producers of it. By drawing upon widely disseminated and recognizable photographs of their time, their “re-arrangement” of iconic images assumes a legibility of both original and new contexts by contemporary viewers.

In addition to close readings of selected works, I have discussed in this study several ways of looking, of seeing, and of watching. A wide array of looking “positions” (modalities) have been identified: contemplating as a private, reflexive secular activity apart from utilitarian real world life (aesthetic judgement, from Winckelmann to Greenberg, as examples); being shocked with something unfamiliar or unexpected (Brecht, Shklovsky); invoking the consciousness (and subjective agency) of the visitor through the realm of senses (Rancière); spectating within a closed system (Adorno, Debord); empathetic “seeing feeling” where feeling is both imagined and regenerated through an encounter with the artwork (Bennett); looking together as a collective event (Kester, Sholette, Bourriaud); looking as an ethical stand-in for taking action (Roberts); presenting and looking at oneself (Deleuze); and encountering each other in a space of human relations exposed to each other in public as ethical appeal (Azoulay). All of these subject (and object) positions involve acts of “pointing to” through critical consideration: Kaja Silverman’s concept of productive looking is “to embed an image within a constant shifting matrix of unconscious memories”, a process which is fluid with respect to scope of associations and time frame.¹ The conditions of productive looking also invite the consideration of others beyond their representation in aesthetic content to recognize the condition of their otherness.²

I have also considered the role played by the encoding of photographic images from an array of practices, and the implications of repurposing these in yet new contexts. The modes by which I have examined the strategies of montage in this study—amassing/recombination of photographic fragments, factography, intersections of image origins (photojournalism, social documentary, instant snapshots, state evidence, commercial promotion, archival preservation,

¹ Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 3-4.

² Juliane Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art*, translated by Daniel Hendrickson with Gerrit Jackson (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012 [2003]), 29.

arrested film still), conflation, adjacency, projection, and so on — re-arranges the ontology of the photographic image (*what can we know?*) and its affective potency (*how do we feel?*). This mutability of the photograph as knowledge, as object, and as event then forms exponential possibilities through the options in staging, as I have noted in my selected examples: anarchic cabaret, book jacket, magazine cover, museum display case, modern gallery, activist pamphlet, outdoor “happening” event. As theorized by Berrebi, Azoulay and others, the photograph is both an object that speaks to a *specific* moment of origination (the click of the camera’s shutter), and a substrate for an imagined future intersection of artist, work, curator, and audience member. I believe there is a powerful charge, an *explosante-fixe*, to use a Surrealist term, in all the works I have considered, created in the forming of new compositions from the conflation of and confrontation between modes of photographic representation, and modes of seeing.

The concept of a minor language advanced by Deleuze and Guattari, and its applicability to works of photography, as argued by Lerm Hayes and others, have been of enormous benefit. I have considered throughout the operations of montage in photography (and in film) as both spatial and semantic ruptures. More specifically, I have argued that photomontage has a distinctive character occupying a specific theoretical and technical position that reaches past the presentation of propositions to their interrogation. The very cutting and pasting of fragments, of layering and conflating across media modalities in the works I have selected, constitute interventions to the putative verisimilitude offered by photographic images; the recombinant result is innately critical, disrupting normativizing operations of both conventional pictorial systems, and of established social systems.

My study has considered art institutions and sites in the public sphere (such as monuments, public buildings, union halls, billboards, etc.) as stages for performance in the context of Austin’s total speech environment. In the example of Wodiczko’s *Bundeshaus* projection, this aspect of real-time and immateriality of the projected light recall Austin’s characterization of the speech act as a kind of fire, hovering between *thing* and *event*, a compelling dynamic performance.³ What has been witnessed by spectators/participants during the nocturnal event (and the subsequent discourse about it, such as media attention) also harkens to a future moment: what has been seen cannot be *unseen*. Once the projectors are shut off, the afterimage resides in the

³ J.L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, 8.

consciousness of individuals, and continues to haunt the site. In this sense, Wodiczko's event goes beyond Austin's present-tense total speech situation.

I have demonstrated through my case studies that the idea of the everyday is not only the addressivity of the works' utterance, but is also presented through the "ordinariness" of the sites where the works are staged or displayed: the union hall, the cabaret, the public square, the art gallery.⁴ Certeau reflects on the relationship between "place" and "space" and creates a parallel to *langue* and *parole*: place, like *langue*, is an ordering system in accordance which elements are in fixed relationships of co-existence—planned, regulated, order, stability. Space, like *parole*, is realized through dynamic, transitive practices, the act of interacting, the unpredictable, characterized as strolling through the city.⁵ The beholder, like Certeau's walker, and like Vertov's *kino-eye*, is in perpetual motion. Their pictorial experience consists then of what is noticed, that is, the fragmentary. I would reframe this concept of space in its context of human circulation through the museum. In her writing on the political performative in contemporary art, Bal considers the constitution of the gallery/space as particular aspect of performance via the concept *deixis*, a linguistic term to refer to the relationship between viewer and space. Bal contends that it is the *event* of sensory perception, *rather than the object of contemplation*, that awakens the awareness of the subject as a political being: "Presenting a space that is inhabited rather than empty, open for entering but not for occupying, for co-inhabiting but not for appropriating – a space within which the viewing subject is welcomed while simultaneously being transformed by it – is perhaps the most central aspect of the political force of [...] art."⁶ In the context of my discussions here, I have widened the concept of *deixis* as an intersection

⁴ For an excellent consideration of discursive approaches to the display of works, see *Exhibition*, edited by Lucy Steeds, in the *Whitechapel: Documents of Art* series (London and Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel and MIT Press, 2014).

⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 117. For considerations of de Certeau's theoretical concepts of space, see Nick Kaye, *Site Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), and Kanishka Goonewardena, "Marxism and Everyday Life. On Henri Lefebvre, Guy Debord, and some others," in *Space, Difference, Everyday Life: Reading Henri Lefebvre*, edited by Kanishka Goonewardena, Stefan Kipfer, Richard Milgrom, and Christian Schmid (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 117-133.

⁶ Bal, *Endless Andness: The Politics of Abstraction According to Ann Veronica Janssens* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 69.

between both the bodily experience of sensate, autonomous motion (dynamic, unpredictable strolling) *and* action (stopping, beholding, constructing meaning).

This conclusion of my study is also the advent of new lines of research for me, and, it is hoped, for others exploring future directions in post-Austinian scholarship on the performativity and politicity of art. There is, increasingly, interesting discourse about the inherent political nature of all art, new paradigms for creating political art spaces, the morphing of the roles of the museum into everyday life, and the expanding role of the visitor/spectator. Toward the conclusion of his 1955 Harvard lecture series, Austin argued that *all* utterances—fact-based statements (constatives) as well as his original grouping of illocutionary speech acts—are performative: “The truth or falsity of a statement depends not merely on the meanings of words but on what you were performing in what circumstances.”⁷ Austin’s concept of performativity in all language continues to inspire pathways for the consideration of the political aspects in historical and contemporary art. Just as Austin came to believe that every utterance has a reality-producing dimension, so, too, can we regard all works of art as inherently performative. In my discussions of specific works in the preceding pages, I have made references to the writing of Adorno, Azoulay, Rancière, Bal, Rockhill and others, who argue that it makes little sense to speak of a category of *political art*, because every artwork can be regarded as political in its way, and we cannot detach the political and the aesthetic from one another.

Concurrent with this position is the fact that a thriving *contestatory* artistic practice continues in theory and in practice, and emerging modes of practice suggest ever-expanding types of image acts.⁸ In Austin’s formulation, the speech act (subject to “felicitous” temporal and material conditions to produce a successful utterance) is a catalyst which produces altered states (before and after, cause and effect). While John Berger argued that political art as weapon could

⁷ *How to Do Things with Words*, 145.

⁸ Even in the case of presenting overtly political work: as in the 1990s, the trend toward politically-engaged exhibitions is still strong, for instance a recent major exhibition hosed by the Whitney Museum of American Art entitled *An Incomplete History of Protest: Selections from the Whitney’s Collection 1940-2017*. This exhibition and others highlighted in Andrea K. Scott, “Resistance Art to See in New York City,” *The New Yorker*, August 16, 2017, featuring “current shows in New York that find artists, fashion designers, activist and documentarians working with the conviction that resistance is its own form of beauty.” More recently, in 2019, the Hirshhorn Museum (Washington, DC) has organized the exhibition *Manifesto: Art x Agency*, a group exhibition that explores how artists used manifestos to engage with the political and social issues of their time and how contemporary practices still employ art as a tool in the making of history.

not be held to the standard of quantifiable effects of heavy artillery, he conceded that art, as a work of the imagination, operates within the field of subjective interactions, which cannot be quantified.⁹ What is the *doing* that art does? It does social things. The *declarative*, I have argued, asserts subjecthood and *makes space for* disenfranchised citizen segments. In the close reading of work by Condé and Beveridge, I have explored the mutability of display spaces in the “everyday” world, such as the street, the labour hall, and the archive, and how non-museal performative stages play a role in audience reception. Another example is the imperative of Gilbert and George which resides not only in the force of the cited graffiti words, and in the titles of the work themselves, but also in the pictorial proposition. As part of the *dramatic personae* of this stage, Gilbert and George hover between personas of themselves, or as Everyman, as viewers who, like the constructed grid, also do (*The Alcoholic*) or do not see (*Paki*). *Their* gesture of observing is also a lenticular oscillation, a doubling both mimics the *not-seeing*, a mirror reflecting back onto the eventual wealthy collectors who acquire their works and facilitates the *seeing* as a theoretical object for presented for analysis to viewers in the public museums.

Some recent examples point the way to new methods of performativity. For instance, cross-disciplinary gatherings such as the *Art + Activism* conference held in Leiden in December 2017 provide ways for theorists and practitioners to exchange ideas and germinate the seeds for exploring resilience techniques. As T.J. Demos remarked during his plenary session, the intersection of actors and actions from the domains of contemporary art with the anti-global capitalism movement, and with ecological activism, provides a framework by which to consider an ever-widening domain of beings (human, flora, fauna, biomes) requiring transformative justice.¹⁰ It is possible to consider this model of counterhegemonic transdisciplinarity as

⁹ Berger, “Political Uses”, 188.

¹⁰ See Demos’ published works *Decolonizing Nature. Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016) and *Against the Anthropocene. Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017). A recorded lecture for another conference on this same topic is found at <https://vimeo.com/251618816>. Here, I note a connection between the operations of genetic splicing/ mutation to cut-and-paste photomontage and digital manipulation. As Jeremy Rifkin, one of the earliest writers describing applications of biotechnology, notes, recombinant DNA projects, such as CRISPR editing, are possible because of technology that constitutes a “kind of biological sewing machine that can be used to stitch together the genetic fabric of unrelated organisms”. [*The Biotech Century. Harnessing the Gene and Remaking the World* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1998), 12] I consider this idea as connecting very readily to a concept of rhizomatic social mutation and the reception of art, a plant stem that grows horizontally under or along the ground and often sends out roots and shoots.

polyphonic, and as such, recall the political potential in crossing conventional borders explored in montage work.

Gregory Sholette observes, in the vein of Adorno, that while 20th century artists focused on the notion that “another world is possible”, 21st century artists seem to respond with “another art world is also possible”.¹¹ How are we to consider creative interventions going forward? He asks, “do we stay in our studio, do we go out on the barricade?”¹² Extending from my own study, the *interruptive or irruptive* could be proposed in view of Peter Weibel’s observation that “activism may be the first new art form of the twenty-first century.”¹³ Geert Lovink frames artist-led projects, actions and networks as *tactical* strategies that extend the framework of tactical media in new social movements: he situates political art as part of a *mille plateaux* cultural landscape of tweets, blogs, Instagram and Facebook postings: a fragmented public sphere far from a Habermasian concept of an arena where different opinions compete in a rational dialogue.¹⁴

Just as the framework for political art itself is mutating, so too the function of the museum continues to morph. Having operated as treasure chests, sanctuaries, schoolrooms and shopping malls, museums are increasingly playing host to foster connectivity, collaboration, participation, experimentation. Evolving conceptions of the museum, the role of technology, the intermediary role of the curator/expert, and new kinds of visitor experiences have prompted new questions and new practices. Charles Esche has questioned traditional museum functions: “What can you do with the museum in the 21st century? Can it be the source of social and political questions, which visitors can investigate through the exhibition, rather than a treasure chest where you just show some beautiful jewels.”¹⁵ During his tenure as director at the Rooseum (Malmo, 2000—2004),

¹¹ Sholette, “Delirium and Resistance after the Social Turn,” 120.

¹² “The Aesthetics of Resistance: Dread Scott and Gregory Sholette in Conversation,” e-flux.com May 1, 2017. Accessed January 30, 2018 <https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/aesthetics-of-resistance-dread-scott-and-gregory-sholette-in-conversation/6605>

¹³ Peter Weibel, *Global Activism: Art and Conflict in the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

¹⁴ Geert Lovink, “Overcoming Internet Disillusionment: On the Principles of Meme Design,” *e-flux.com* 83 (June 2017). Accessed June 7, 2018 <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/83/141287/overcoming-internet-disillusionment-on-the-principles-of-meme-design/>

¹⁵ Lucie Kolb and Gabriel Flückiger, “‘We were learning by doing’: An Interview with Charles Esche,” *on-curating.org* 21 (December 2013). Accessed June 11, 2018 http://www.on-curating.org/issue-21.html#.Wx52ly_MxAY

and subsequently at the Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven), he has experimented with ways for art institutions to function as a “space of action” allowing for shared, multi-voiced practice and the stimulation of new subjectivities: “I didn’t want to answer the usual expectations in a traditional way, where you basically wheel in the material from outside, put it into the room in a nice way and open the door. I wanted it to be a place of what we then called knowledge production.”¹⁶ Esche has looked to the interactive frameworks of social connection in other models, such as the community center, the library, the laboratory, and the church.¹⁷ In her study of new forms of visitor engagement, Emilie Sitzia describes the Van Abbemuseum’s program as a real space experiment that “invites visitors to look through the racks at original artworks, then select, manipulate and research them before laying them out on the walls in their own exhibition.”¹⁸

What do new paradigms mean for visitors/spectators? The first is centered on emancipation of the visitor. Art institutions can create conditions encouraging both the contemplation of and critical thinking about the artwork and its context.¹⁹ In addition to ever expanding collective modalities are offerings by museums to foster more personalization, more individual connection in real space and in digital space.²⁰ Visitors direct their own experience:

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid. Micaela Deiana identifies the shifts resulting from Esche’s heuristic approaches to programming: the organization of display is by and large able to escape from the established genres of art historical presentations (organized to present an artist, period, style, medium, retrospective, etc.); the visitor experience is marked by a disturbance in the authority of traditional art history discourse as if art history was totally apart from philosophy, politics, sociology and other fields, producing a renegotiation of the museum’s function as the locus of expertise and the space of the public that facilitates emancipation of the visitor as meaning-maker; the dismantling of boundaries between disciplines provides opportunities for changing roles, such as positioning the artist as curator, the curator as artist, visitors as participants; the interpretation of an artwork within historical sequences proposed by the curator has been rejected in favor of an individual experience of the artwork. “Handle with Care: The Influence of New Institutionalism on collection displays in Italian contemporary art museums,” *Stedelijk Studies* 5 (Fall 2017):1. Accessed June 3, 2018 <https://www.stedelijkstudies.com/journal/handle-care-influence-new-institutionalism-collection-displays-italian-contemporary-art-museums/>

¹⁸ Emilie Sitzia, “The ignorant art museum: beyond meaning-making,” *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 37:1 (2018), 79.

¹⁹ Charles Esche, *Plug In to Play* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum 2009).

²⁰ While this study has cited examples of artists as curators (Haacke, Wilson), it is worth mentioning just a few instances of museums providing new tools to enable visitors to perform as curators. At the Los Angeles County of Modern Art [LACMA], for example, one can create a customized catalogue, including dedication and introduction, from a personal selection of twenty-four works of art. At Cleveland’s Gallery One, visitors can create DIY exhibitions by selecting works from the collection via a mural-sized touchscreen, and also downloading their selection as a souvenir of the most engaging artworks. Museums such as the Rijksmuseum provides access to high-resolution digital images of collection works without restriction so that users may use these as the basis of creating

“observing, comparing, repeating, failing, trying, combining, and verifying allow the visitor to create new links between object and broad range of knowledge.²¹ While most visitors are not part of the art world, they *are* part of wider social fabrics and are able to acknowledge their individual agency as well as their existential separateness from others.²²

Visiting an exhibition is an event where one performs one’s self in relation to the performativity of the artworks, and where the political dimension of responses to the experience (affects) may take a variety of forms, ranging from the fear of difference that fuels phobic discourses, to indignation that drives recent anti-establishment movements, to feelings of belonging and joy that animate new collectivist projects.²³ New propositions are constructed by beholders’ individual acts of meaning-making replete with polysemic possibilities inviting activation from the assemblage of significations. Lefebvre, writing about Brecht and the everyday, observes “without being aware of it, and although everything is clearly happening in full view, the spectator becomes the living consciousness of the contradictions of the real”.²⁴ Fragmentation itself proclaims a plurality that is irreducible, and antithetical to the narrative of a singular, unified whole. In a similar vein, W.J.T. Mitchell points to this polysemic construction present in images—and in the connection between images and their beholders—a vitalistic

new works; the Getty Museum has a similar initiative, encouraging users to post tweets about how the collection has facilitated their creativity. Other web-based interactive encourage playful adaptations from their collection, such as the Victoria and Albert Museum’s interactive allowing users to create whimsically preposterous images based on their collection of 18th-century wigs. As this dissertation “went to press”, the phenomenon of the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic inspired the Getty Museum to invite self-isolating art lovers to recreate a work from their collection using objects at hand and share the works via social media. A sampling can be found at Alaa Elassar, “Getty Museum asks for artwork recreations using random house objects, and this is what happened,” *CNN* April 2, 2020. Accessed April 5, 2020 <https://www.ctvnews.ca/lifestyle/getty-museum-asks-for-artwork-recreations-using-random-house-objects-and-this-is-what-happened-1.4873918?cache=yesclipId104062>

²¹ Emilie Sitzia, “The ignorant art museum”, 78.

²² Deiana emphasizes emancipation as central to the framing of visitor experience by both Esche and Rancière. “Handle with Care,” 3.

²³ See, for example, the workshop *How to do Things with Affect?* held in May 2019 at Netherlands Institute for Cultural Analysis (NICA), and forthcoming collection of essays co-edited by Ernst van Alphen and Tomáš Jirsa, *How to do Things with Affect? Affective Triggers in Aesthetic Forms and Cultural Practices* (Leiden: Brill, 2019) <https://www.nica-institute.com/how-to-do-things-with-affect/>

²⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life. Volume I: Introduction*, translated by John Moore with a preface by Michel Trebitsch (London and New York: Verso, 1991 [1947]), 21.

perspective characterized as a dialogic encounter with simultaneous, possibly contradictory, readings.²⁵

Irit Rogoff proposes *looking away* as an alternative to *looking at* works of art.²⁶ *Looking away* empowers the viewer's emancipation as a performing subject resisting the work's conscious, contrived connections, even those of contestatory ideological *détournement*: It may well be in the act of looking away from objects of our supposed study, in the shifting modalities of the attention we pay them, that we have a potential for a re-articulation of the relations between makers, objects and audiences.²⁷ For Rogoff, this experience approaches Giorgio Agamben's concept of an open-ended and undefined "whatever", that is, in individual and innovative avenues of personally constructed and unrestricted significance.²⁸

The areas for fertile study sketched above outline ways in which the performativity of political art is changing and arguably becoming more potent. In returning to Austin's conception of speech as a social activity that is also governed by conventions, there are also conditions in which performative acts may fail. While speech is accessible to (nearly) all, it is also governed by conventions or codes.²⁹ The success or failure of these is dependent on the

²⁵ W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Mitchell discusses Barbara Kruger's montage *Untitled [Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face]* (1981), and points to the flickering, alternating readings in which the inherent perspectives of the depicted statue, the photomontage itself, and the artist "whose labor of cutting and pasting is so conspicuously foregrounded", cohabit the pictorial space. (45)

²⁶ Irit Rogoff, "Looking Away: Participations in Visual Culture," in *After Criticism. New Responses to Art and Performance*, edited by Gavin Butt (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 117-134, and "Turning," in *Curating and the Educational Turn*, edited by Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson (London and Amsterdam: Open Editions/de Appel, 2010), 32-46.

²⁷ Irit Rogoff, "Looking Away: Participations in Visual Culture," 119.

²⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). The term "looking away" (and possibly the origin of Rogoff's usage) is also the title of a work by Gilbert and George from the 1971 publication *Side by Side*: as a bound publication, each open page of the book effectively creates a diptych, with printed text on the left page, and a single black-and-white photograph on the right. *Looking Away* occupies pages 61 and 62, featuring a photograph of the artists in their mode as suited living sculptures seated on a country gate, looking away from our gaze toward the pastoral view in the distance. The text on the facing page reads, in part: "We are looking a long way away—as far as our eye can see. We strain to see more. Our figures a complex arrangement with the gate and stick. A very unresolved piece. Oh future where are you we can still not see you."²⁸ In this sense, Gilbert and George present themselves "looking away" with a double meaning: averting connection with our gaze by turning their heads toward the distant view, and in the colloquial sense of "away" as unrestricted activity, as in "working away". They strain to look a "long way away" (distance) and to locate an elusive future (time).

²⁹ I refer here to the physical capacity to speak as Austin theorized verbal communication, to use language in an "everyday" way: he did not address the exclusion or adaptation of speech by differently-abled individuals, or the *literal/symbolic* silencing or overwriting of suppressed voices (for instance, in systems of patriarchy, racism,

possession of transactional conventions in order to avoid what Austin calls a “misfire” (failed communication). Critics of the expanding parameters of socially and politically motivated works of art noted above point to several risks, and we can consider these in the framework of Austin’s articulation of the potential “misfires” of speech acts:

1. The failure to deliver an aesthetic experience: this risk has been raised by Claire Bishop, the “artificial hells” across the political spectrum begin to expose some of the contradictions between intention and reception, agency and manipulation, that will become central problems in the contemporary discourse of participation. Critiques of participatory art have been offered by Bishop in her concern for maintaining aesthetic criteria and quality, and by Miwon Kwon who cautions that cultural action is at risk of being appropriated as urban boosterism, as well as the danger of curators overdetermining the construction of social partnerships.³⁰
2. The addressivity of the social proposition can be subsumed: Douglas Crimp cited the 1987 exhibition *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business* organized by the New Museum as an example where reception focused on the stature of the artist and his career over the political critique he had chosen to address.³¹
3. Impact as a call to action can be over-estimated: as Grant Kester warns, too much can be expected of the performativity of the work, and there is a danger in casting the artist in the role of “some sort of profound, revelatory change agent, an aesthetic evangelical.”³²

colonization, or social hierarchy). See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). 66-111.

³⁰ See Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (New York and London: Verso Books, 2012); and Kwon, *One Place after Another. Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2002).

³¹ Douglas Crimp, “Strategies of Public Address: Which Media, Which Publics?” in *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, edited by Hal Foster, (Seattle, OR: Bay Press, 1987), 31-37.

³² Grant Kester, “Aesthetic Evangelists: The Rhetoric of Empowerment and Conversion in Contemporary Community Art,” *Afterimage*, vol.22, no.6 (January 1995):5-11.

4. Inconsistent access to codes: the risk of a misfire is predicated the receiving subject's previous cultural competence and his/her ability and willingness to engage in reflection. For Pierre Bourdieu, writing in *The Field of Cultural Production*, a modicum of "cultural competence" is required for meaning-making, that is, accessibility to the codes that govern aesthetic experience: "a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code into which it is encoded."³³ The possession of these codes, for instance, to recognize parody or irony in the acts of appropriation in postmodern work, is fostered as a cultivated disposition through a specific set of social relations such as family inculcation, social norms and institutional pedagogy. Accessibility to these codes, as Bourdieu and others have argued, is limited to those spectators who have been taught to understand these codes. In the context of the production, display and reception of works of art, the understanding of the force of conventions, and the consequence of rupturing these conventions, is entirely dependent on *access* to these codes. Spectators must have agency in meaning-making, and the work of artists and curators is critical to provide pathways to make this possible.

5. Subsumed into spectacle: In his analysis of sculptural installations in the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, Wouter Davidts observes that a spectacular and memorable art experience does not necessarily constitute a significant or critical encounter between art space, artwork and audience.³⁴ Juliane Rebentisch argues that by beholding spectacle "we become guilty, specifically, because we let others act for us—because we, like voyeurs, observe their suffering without revealing our identity, and ultimately because we misconceive the specificity of our situation, our time, thereby failing to seize the possibility of active participation."³⁵ The erasure of art world conventions and embedding artistic practice within the framework of social movements also risks the disappearance of

³³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 2.

³⁴ Wouter Davidts, "A Grey Universe: Tate's Modern Turbine Hall and The Unilever Series," in *Sculpture and the Museum*, edited by Christopher R. Marshall (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 200.

³⁵ Juliane Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art*, translated by Daniel Hendrickson with Gerrit Jackson (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012 [2003]), 25.

the work itself, its distance from aesthetic conventions subverting art world systems of commodity, distribution, acquisition and display. Artists work in an open connective field, and Sholette provocatively asks if the deepening dissolution of the boundaries between art-making and social operations also changes our understanding of what it means to behold art: he asks “what if social practice art has already successfully inverted normative representational framing as art, flipping inside out our spectator-based distance from the world so that now *everything* is outside the frame and nothing remains inside?”³⁶ In my view, while there seems to be ever-expanding social agency that is shared and consumed on an instantaneous global scale³⁷, I do not see the framework of art staging as necessarily disintegrating. The complex network of funding bodies, sponsoring institutions, professional art networks, host venues and other systemic components continue to be evident and here I am in agreement with Rogoff in her view that artistic practices that are interconnected with social movements are not acts of *resistance to culture*, but constitutive forms of *taking part in culture*.³⁸

6. Proxy for political action: There is the risk that museumgoers use their visits as a proxy for political action. How do spectators interact with installations where the viewing of political art risks becoming a placebo for ethical action beyond the museum? It seems to me that this is a very real concern, and not just limited to artists and viewers, but also curators and museum workers. Commitment itself may amount to little more than a sense of concern. Conversely, there can be an inability for specific social justice issues to be served by a call to action for museums at large.³⁹

³⁶ Sholette, “Delirium and Resistance after the Social Turn,” *Field. A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism* 1 (2015):108.

³⁷ Established social media networks such as Instagram, Youtube and Twitter are already enabling this, but also lesser known apps such as Periscope enable live broadcasting from any smartphone anywhere in the world.

³⁸ Rogoff, “Looking Away: Participations in Visual Culture,” 119.

³⁹ Kayleigh Bryant-Greenwell writes about the limits of museums in activism with regard to a response to the separation of immigrant and refugee children from their families by the United States border patrol. “The Dangers of Superficial Activism,” MASS [Museum as a Site for Social Action] Action blog, July 17, 2018. Accessed July 18, 2018 <https://www.museumaction.org/massaction-blog/2018/7/13/the-dangers-of-superficial-activism>

In considering Austin's infelicitous or failed speech acts in the context of political art, there are many factors to consider, and the variables of each total speech environment will create unique, and at times unexpected, outcomes. For instance (as I have demonstrated), the projection work of Wodiczko steps outside the frame of a totally art institution environment into the public commons. His event-based work interpellates the collective body to the dual possibilities of a powerful contestation of the public sphere *and* an awakening to participate in it. There is therefore here, as in all acts of contemplation, a conscious deceleration that encourages both awareness of the present moment, and awareness of ourselves as perceptually present. This is what Bal points to as the political moment, the awareness of our own subjectivity and agency. As he unmasks presiding past mythologies, Wodiczko also seeks to provide a mechanism to encourage reconciliation and healing. In anticipating this future moment, it is possible to construe Wodiczko's strategy of projection as hopeful.

My investigation joins the many (sometimes forced) declarations of art's impact or efficacy at a time of defunding arts institutions and the humanities. It is hoped that the performativity of works such as those here studied also expands outward to the academic study and curatorial work carried out in its wake and furthers the evidence of the importance of art for and in society. The potentiality of political art as a kind of speech act, as framed by Heartfield and beyond, lies in the dynamic presence of art as an elastic, discursive and interactive event, beyond the confines of the static presentation of an object or in the position of popular and critical receptions. Austin's metaphor of the flickering flame, poised between material *thing* and temporal *event*, points to the nature of the operations of making, displaying and viewing art as enduring and precarious, but also as an essential part of our human experience of the world, and our relationships to each other.